

Chapter 55 - Misstep

I felt myself being forcibly nudged towards the back room, stumbling my way across the training room towards it—the same place where our group had first congregated.

Navigating across the dojo, disoriented and drained, I couldn't help but feel a mix of dread and confusion about what had prompted such a stern response from our instructor.

Jin and Tom's puzzled looks mirrored my own apprehension as I trudged past them.

"Get yourself patched up, I'll be with you shortly," Miss K's voice floated to Kenzie. Then, as swiftly as she had appeared the first time around, Miss K showed up in front of me, silently ushering me into the office with a wave of her hand.

Once inside the office, the bustling noise of the dojo was immediately muted, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts and the daunting silence.

'*Did my hesitation to kick Kenzie again cause this...?*' I wondered, trying to pinpoint the misstep that had drawn Miss K's ire.

She made her way to her chair with a fluid grace, settling in before indicating the seat across the desk for me.

"*Sit.*"

Gratefully sinking into it, I braced myself for the impending confrontation.

Miss K cut straight to the chase, her tone direct and probing. "What the fuck is going on with you, Sera?" she demanded, brushing aside any possibility of vague excuses. "And don't give me some bullshit like "It's a dizzy spell" or something along those lines. I've seen and heard plenty of those. What's *actually* going on?"

Caught off guard by her perceptiveness, I scrambled for an explanation that wouldn't betray the System's influence, fully aware that any fabrication would crumble under her expert scrutiny. Lying to someone as experienced as Miss K seemed futile, and yet, admitting the truth felt equally risky.

"I... I'm not sure," was all I managed, opting for a semblance of honesty over concocting an unconvincing lie. Silence felt like a trap, yet speaking felt like stepping into unknown territory.

Under Miss K's intense gaze, I felt like a specimen under a microscope, unable to shift even an inch as her amber eyes bore into me like rail spikes, seeking answers.

"I see," she finally spoke, her voice carrying a note of finality.

For a brief moment, her eyes shimmered, transitioning from a deep blue to a vivid yellow, sending an unspoken signal before my cerebral interface buzzed with an incoming data transfer request.

Compelled more by the situation than choice, I accepted the request immediately, feeling the precariousness of my standing.

The file that opened before me bore my name.

"Seraphine Vildea, age 15, classified as human with no genetic or bionic modifications. Notable for cybernetic enhancements limited to ocular implants and a cerebral interface. Noteworthy for recently emerging from a comatose state," Miss K narrated selectively, her voice devoid of judgement yet rich with unasked questions.

"You don't have any background in martial arts, right? I made sure to look into it. Even double-checked, actually," she said, her annoyance creeping into her voice. "But then, during that final round, you bust out moves like you've been doing them your whole life? Those aren't natural instincts. Those aren't moves you just pull out of thin air."

Miss K stood up, circled the desk, and took a seat on its edge right in front of me. Her presence was overwhelming, like a storm cloud looming overhead, ready to burst.

"I've coached prodigies, scions of top families, all types of the very physical embodiments of 'quick learners' you can imagine. But I've never seen anyone just 'get' fighting the way you did in those last two rounds. Your file says you've got *no* enhancements, which was specifically part of why I let you train here at a discount..."

"Misrepresenting somebody in the paperwork submitted here isn't just a slap in the face to *me* but a *serious* violation against Ether Labs itself. The Arkion Dojo isn't just some gym; it's an integral *part* of Ether Labs. Any paperwork you hand in here is as serious as if you were dealing directly with the corporation. You get that, right?" Her tone was frosty, and under her steely gaze, I found it hard to even draw breath.

The thought of somebody discovering any discrepancies in Valeria's, undoubtedly, meticulously crafted documentation was a complete nightmare scenario. The mere idea sent shivers down my spine, knowing her wrath would be swift and unparalleled if my actions even as much as hinted at the possibility that she might have been untruthful.

"Yes! I understand completely! I assure you, the details listed are accurate..." My voice faltered, a realisation dawning on me that my claim might not hold under scrutiny, especially considering the peculiar nature of my day's injuries—or rather, the conspicuous absence of any residual blood evidence.

I had been bleeding all over the place this entire day, yet if anyone were to actually pay attention, they'd realise I had left no blood behind anywhere.

At all.

None, nothing, nada.

"In my blood, there's... a sort of experimental tech. It causes my blood to disintegrate when it's separated from me... I don't know if it's cybernetic, bionic or genetic in nature; it probably doesn't really fall under any of them, as it doesn't do anything past disintegrate my blood..."

But that's the full extent of it, *I promise!*" I rushed to explain, striving to convey sincerity and hoping my gaze held enough conviction to match the earnestness in my voice.

Technically, I wasn't being deceptive either.

The System, as far as my understanding went, wasn't a traditional enhancement of any sort. It didn't fit neatly into categories like cybernetics, genetics, or bionics.

So, in a roundabout way, I was speaking my truth, sticking to the facts regarding the enhancements—or the lack thereof—that Valeria had initially disclosed.

The silence that settled between us was suffocating, far more intense than of the awkward dinners featuring Valeria. I teetered on the brink of utter despair, the idea of Miss K doubting the veracity of my documents—and consequently, Valeria being notified—filled me with unspeakable dread.

Cold sweat trickled down my spine, yet I remained immobile, ensnared by Miss K's penetrating and evaluating gaze.

After what felt like an eternity, a period so drawn out it seemed to shave weeks off my lifespan, Miss K exhaled a weary sigh.

"If that's the case," she began, her tone softening slightly, "then explain these "dizzy spells" and the subsequent improvements you've been having. Be honest with me. I'm not your enemy; I'm here to help. But I need to enforce the rules. If I start making exceptions, I might as well open the doors wide to the whole fucking city for discounts."

Drawing in a much-needed breath—a breath I hadn't realised I was holding—allowed a slice of tension to slip away from me. It appeared I'd navigated through the initial storm of scrutiny, as evidenced by the thaw in Miss K's demeanour, which now bordered on something akin to approachable warmth.

The upcoming explanation required a delicate balance; I needed to maintain this newfound goodwill without minimising or outright fabricating the truth. Miss K's future vigilance was already guaranteed, making the stakes of my forthcoming words especially high.

'Damn it, System... Why couldn't you just give me a choice when to accept the knowledge and muscle memory downloads?!' I thought in frustration as I hastily threw together an explanation that I hoped would pass scrutiny.

"This is something that nobody else knows; not even my family, so I'd appreciate it if it stayed between us," I started, both because I genuinely didn't want what I was going to say next to come out, as well as farm some sympathy points from Miss K, "There's this... unique connection in my brain that speeds up my acquisition of specific skills dramatically. It's like getting instant downloads of knowledge and muscle memory at certain intervals... Whenever it happens, I'm momentarily disoriented. That's ultimately where the dizzy spells come from... It's neither cybernetic or bionic in nature, nor am I genetically modified; that much I can assure you! My mom would be all over this if she knew..."

My words started veering too close to personal fears and doubts, but I managed to reel myself back in time. Sharing about the System felt like stepping out on a limb, but concealing it from Miss K, especially regarding my sudden prowess in [Martial Arts], seemed futile and perhaps even more dangerous in the long run, than injecting some truth into it.

Having just kicked off a schedule packed with sessions at this dojo, pretending I had some extra-curricular magic up my sleeve to justify my swift advancement in skills was out of the question—it'd be way too transparent.

My gut was telling me Miss K was in it for the love of martial arts and the genuine progress of her students, not the corporate chess game, but laying my cards on the table like this was risky—especially since my gut hadn't been particularly accurate in the recent days whatsoever, considering the whole Aki issue...

'If I catch even a hint she might betray my trust, it's probably time to hit the road...' I contemplated, the thought bitter in my mind.

The idea of leaving the newfound family with Gabe pained me deeply, yet the prospect of becoming Ether Labs' next big project, or any corporations' for that matter, forced my hand.

Escaping the lab table was, regretfully, going to *have* to be at the top of my agenda; no matter what.

“That’s quite the revelation,” Miss K responded, her expression a mix of intrigue and a barrage of unasked questions. “And it’s neither cybernetic, bionic, nor genetically in nature, you say...?”

“Absolutely, Ma’am! I’m open to any examination to confirm it, ideally something on the less painful side,” I suggested, feeling a glimmer of hope at her intrigued demeanour.

Leaning back, Miss K interlaced her fingers behind her head, stretching in a dramatic display of resignation and let out a long, thoughtful sigh, her gaze drifting momentarily as if pondering a complex puzzle.

I quickly averted my gaze, feeling a bit flustered at the abruptness of her abs suddenly being pushed practically right into my face—which only ended up making me more irritated, as this was *not* the time to get flustered at all—, just as she smoothly pushed herself up from the desk and strolled to the door.

“So, we have a deal then, Sera. Your secret’s safe with me, but I’m expecting you to share any fascinating insights from this... let’s call it, “unique learning method”, of yours,” Miss K proposed, her tone light yet carrying an underlying firmness.

She offered her hand in agreement, standing by the door. The gesture left no room for doubt or denial, not that I was inclined to reject her offer anyway.

I managed to stand up, albeit with a bit of a wobble, feeling the weight of the day's ordeals and the conversation's stress lift off my shoulders as if shedding an invisible heavy cloak.

Her grip on my hand was unexpectedly firm, bordering on painful, emphasising the seriousness of her next question, delivered with a chilling undertone, “Just to be clear, you have some measure of control over this, right? We're not dealing with some rogue entity wreaking havoc through your neural interface?”

The gravity of her inquiry hit me hard.

The underlying message was clear: If I couldn't assure her of my control over this phenomenon, she wouldn't just refuse to keep my secret; the consequences could be far more dire.

“I swear, it's under control! It's all about learning—knowledge and muscle memory, mostly. Nothing untoward or unmanageable, I promise!” I rushed to convince her, desperate for her to ease the ironclad grip that seemed to threaten the integrity of every bone in my hand.

The grip on my hand briefly became excruciating, silently gauging my honesty, before finally relaxing, the residual ache serving as a poignant reminder of the gravity of our pact. As the grip eased, Miss K released me, leaving me gasping, tears edging my vision.

"Alright, we've struck a deal then. Don't forget your part of it, though," she noted, her smile a mix of warmth and a hint of a warning, as she motioned me towards the door.

"And about those abs: We'll have you working towards them sooner than you think," she added, her wink sending a wave of embarrassment washing over me.

I inwardly groaned, '*She noticed that, huh?*' realising my not-so-covert glance, that I really didn't have much of a hand in, hadn't gone unnoticed after all.

Making my way out, eager to leave the embarrassment behind, her low mutter caught my ear, "*...some form of spirit connection...?*"

The question instantly piqued my interest to sky-high levels, urging me to turn back and inquire further, but I just managed to hold back.

'*Not now, Sera. Don't push it...*' I told myself, continuing to walk and doing my best to pretend that I hadn't just heard her mutter that. Pushing my luck further than what I had seemed like a bad idea after navigating through that absolute minefield of revelations and agreements.

I hastened towards the bench where Kenzie was already busy applying a plethora of medical supplies to her battle-worn self. Her fox-ears perked up and swivelled my way, signalling she'd noticed me before I even got close.

“Sera!” she exclaimed with a vigour that her battered state belied, attempting to rise too swiftly and wincing as she did. “Ouch...! Did... did Sensei give you a hard time? Was it because you pulled your punches again...?”

Her query was tinged with a mix of concern and self-consciousness, clearly worried her own performance in the last round might've put me in a tight spot.

“Ah, no, no! It's all good,” I hastened to reassure her, hands up as if to physically push her worries away. “We just talked about those dizzy spells I've been having. Miss K wanted to make sure I was okay, handed me something to help with it. You didn't cause any trouble, Kenzie, really.”

Her tension visibly ebbed away, replaced by a sheepish, grateful expression. “Thanks anyway... For not... you know. Causing me some serious brain damage, or whatever...”

Then, with newfound determination lacing her voice, she vowed, “I'll step up my game from here on out. Won't make you hold back again like that, promise!”

I simply grunted a reply, acknowledging her commitment as I began applying the green ointment that had inadvertently become my facial cosmetic of the day. The analgesic properties of the ointment had rendered most of my face numb, thanks to Kenzie's continuously eager work at re-sculpting the very flesh of my face into nothing more than loose strips.

“Was that ‘*Spirit Connection*’ stuff about your dizzy spells then?” Kenzie's sudden inquiry jolted me, prompting an instant pivot towards her, marked by my surprise.

Without waiting for my verbal cue, she gestured towards her twitching fox-ears atop her head, offering an explanation before I could ask. “These aren't just for decoration, you know?”

With a heavy sigh, I sat down on the bench, my weary and thoroughly exhausted body screaming in joy as they finally got to rest for a moment, before answering, “I honestly have no idea what she was talking about. I'm guessing it was about them, yeah, but I have no clue what that means. You have any idea, by chance?”

“Nope,” came the immediate answer. “Figured I'd ask since it sounded neat. I've only ever heard very few things about Spirits from my big sister, even though she wasn't really supposed to share anything... But even that stuff was super vague, at best,” Kenzie answered with a shrug.

I tried my best to school my face, as the mention of “Spirits” was something entirely unknown and thoroughly exciting to me. Neon Dragons hadn't featured any such thing, as far as I was aware.

Sure, there had been mythologies, rumours and legends in the world, just like ours, some of which included things that could likely be considered “Spirits”, but this didn't sound anywhere similar to that, if Kenzie's big sister and Miss K were not just aware, but seemingly somehow in-the-know about them.

‘Spirits... Definitely something I should look into at some stage. I really need to find a shard-library of some sort; sooner rather than later. The amount of questions I have and things I need to learn just keep stacking up, rather than decrease,’ I thought to myself, reiterating the need to ask Mr. Shori for any advice on the matter.

Slumped on the bench, Kenzie and I were practically clinging to whatever energy we had left, nursing our wounds from the day's grueling sessions. As we braced ourselves for the

boys' final showdown, Miss K's voice, strong and clear, began prepping them for their last match, and her words resonated with us too.

"Look, I know you're beat up, drained, and in pain," she began, her tone initially soft before swiftly sharpening. "This setup was intentional. I kept you in the dark about the multiple rounds at the start to push you to your limits from the get-go and maintain that intensity. You might be wondering, 'How can we possibly learn martial arts in this state?' But let me flip that on its head, instead: 'How could you possibly learn martial arts *without* being pushed to your limits?'"

She let the question hang for a moment, with each of the students trying to decipher what she was trying to say, before she continued. "Martial arts are nothing more than a codified system of combat practices, if you want to break it down to its very basics. Most of them are designed for self-defence, others for discipline, and again others for inflicting as much damage as possible to the opponent. The styles differ wildly in complexity, execution and difficulty but there is one thing they all share: They are meant to be useful in combat."

I watched with rapt attention as Miss K showed off some different poses and stances, likely part of different martial arts styles she was confident in, her body moving in an impressively controlled manner, like every single fibre of her muscles was fully under her control.

"When it comes to combat, however, one thing is equally and universally true: More often than not, you don't get to choose when it happens."

With astonishing speed, she thrust her fists towards Jin and Tom, halting just shy of making contact.

Their delayed flinch spoke volumes of the vast skill gap between them; Miss K had already resumed her casual stance before they even managed to react. This vivid demonstration of skill and speed underscored the profound divide in experience and training she had on us.

"Don't stress, hitting my students isn't my style," she reassured with a softer tone, easing the tension for Jin and Tom as they cautiously returned to their initial positions.

"Still, the lesson remains," she continued, her voice carrying the weight of undeniable truth.

"You can't pick the moment trouble decides to come knocking—whether it's a ganger, a scav, a corporate agent, an Operator or any of the myriad dangers lurking out there. Martial arts training is about being prepared in any condition—fully charged, somewhat weary, barely hanging on, or even on the brink of collapse. Understanding your limits, knowing how far you can push yourself while still managing to defend what's yours is crucial. What good are your cybernetic arms, your bionic veins, your cute fox-ears or your honed physique if you can't protect yourself from those willing to take them, simply because you're tired?"

As she cast her gaze upon each of us, mentioning the potential valuables we each had in the eyes of scavengers, I felt a cold shiver; I was involuntarily reminded of the harrowing experience with Gabriel, seeing him pleading for my help, bleeding profusely...

Her gaze lingered on me last, intensifying the message: No one was exempt from danger and we didn't get a choice in when and where.

"So, for this finale, I'm pushing you to your limits and beyond. Go all out—attack, defend, keep moving. Don't halt until your body physically can't continue, and then push some more," Miss K charged us with her command, her tone more fierce than before.

"Demonstrate your sheer willpower, your burning *desire* to thrive in this world. Challenge every natural limit of your being, bend your physical constraints through sheer force of will. Don't worry about the aftermath; I've got your recovery covered. Just immerse yourself in the now, exceed what you perceive as your boundaries."

With that, she nudged Jin and Tom towards their marks, ready for the last clash.

A similar spark ignited within them, a reflection of the determination that I felt surging within me, too, stoked by our instructor's words.

'I'll have to be sure to thank Valeria at some stage, to get me in here. I don't think I could have asked for a better teacher in these matters, like at all,' I absent-mindedly thought to myself as I anxiously waited for the final round to commence...

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My breaths came ragged and heavy, each one laborious and seemingly impossible as I struggled to stay on my feet.

Kenzie and I had been at it for what felt like hours, as we slugged away at each other; her claws slicing and cutting deep; my punches and kicks leaving ugly bruises all over her body in return.

Jin and Tom's final round had been a similar slug-fest towards the end, with both students having completely used up their energy, yet neither wanting to yield first.

Tom had ultimately won the endurance match, thanks to his bionic enhancements granting him a bit more leeway in terms of recovery, but they both had to be carried out of the ring by Miss K, as neither had been able to move by the time she called for a stop.

As the realisation dawned that our bout might also be drawing to a similar close, my thoughts sluggishly pieced together, hindered by the lack of oxygen and the blood loss that was now acutely apparent.

My face, neck, and arms bore countless injuries, surpassing even the carnage of that ill-fated data collection mission just a few days ago, yet I remained upright.

Kenzie stood opposite me, equally battered.

My attacks had left her with multiple broken ribs, a fractured nose, and one eye swollen shut, bleeding unrelentingly. Additionally, one of her arms, now visibly dislocated and broken, hung limply by her side, a reminder of one of her missteps of our earlier skirmishes in this round.

Describing our condition as merely "rough" would be putting it mildly.

In my hazy, half-delirious state, it dawned on me—the sheer brilliance of Miss K's initial assessment strategy.

She had cunningly pushed us to our limits, causing us to repeatedly exhaust ourselves and accrue injuries, all in the name of building our endurance and pain tolerance.

The thought of enduring, and especially inflicting, such levels of pain on somebody else would have seemed unimaginable to me before, yet there I was, determined not to be the first to give in.

The frequent application of medical ointment between each round, heavily imbued with painkillers, had subtly numbed us to discomfort as well, allowing us to push beyond our preconceived boundaries more and more with each round.

This method was ingeniously crafted to acclimate us to combat's raw edge, teaching us to fight despite the odds. As I pieced together Miss K's deliberate orchestration of these trials, my resolve only hardened—I was intent on being the last one standing, acknowledging her method's effectiveness even as it pushed me to the brink.

Kenzie's once lively fox-ears, a constant symbol of her alertness and insane levels of energy, had long sagged, mirroring the depth of our shared fatigue.

Still, we relentlessly exchanged kicks, punches, and claw swipes, each of us stubbornly refusing to be the first to fold. Words and even grunts were luxuries we couldn't afford, a stark contrast to Jin and Tom's bout, which had been punctuated with verbal jabs and taunts until their energy had completely drained away.

My strategy had been to needle Kenzie into losing her cool, as I had managed to do in our previous encounters. Yet, whatever pearls of wisdom Miss K imparted to her before this final round seemed to anchor her composure, preventing the usual rise to bait.

Fleeting moments of frustration flashed across Kenzie's face, only to dissolve as swiftly as they appeared, helping her maintain her agility and steer clear of the desperate, fight-ending manoeuvres I had taken advantage of so far.

This resilience turned the final round into an endurance marathon.

My attacks on her thighs, relentless as they were, seemed to become more taxing on me than on her; she appeared increasingly impervious to the pain, while my legs felt on the brink of rebellion, threatening to detach from my body with each kick landed.

Similarly, our concern for appearances had long vanished, replaced by the raw survival instinct, as we gasped for air, faces smeared with blood and, for Kenzie, remnants of a previous punch-induced nausea.

Embodying Miss K's admonition to push ourselves beyond our limits, we were a live illustration of determination, though every rare glance I threw her way found her deeply absorbed in our duel, her gaze tracking our every move.

It dawned on me that our relentless effort was not in vain; the unwavering attention from our teacher signalled our adherence to her expectations. Despite the toll it was taking, she hadn't called for a halt, a silent affirmation that we were, indeed, on the right track.

My sight grew increasingly foggy, a progression that had been claiming my clarity over the past several minutes, signalling the imminent conclusion of our clash. I had prematurely anticipated this moment several times before, yet this instance felt distinctly final.

'I suspect she senses it as well,' I mused, eyeing Kenzie's lingering agility with a mix of envy and awe. Her legs, defying the exhaustive toll of our prolonged engagement, carried her still, whereas I had resigned to a static defence, emblematic of a beleaguered prey making its final stand against an encroaching hunter.

Crossing beyond our thresholds of endurance, we both recognized that the forthcoming sequences—perhaps the next alone—would decisively conclude our standoff.

Thus, we hesitated, each vigilant for any hint of faltering in the other.

My strategy had been to exploit her legs, relentlessly targeted since our second round. Yet, astonishingly, she still navigated the ring with an agility that belied the cumulative impact of my efforts.

'You have to start feeling it now, Kenzie. Just a single misstep, come on,' I silently implored, desperate for the slightest opening to resolve our bout and surrender to the floor's beckoning embrace.

The moment my sight vanished into darkness, it wasn't just a blink—it was a chasm, swallowing me whole into a brief abyss of disorientation.

That moment, however fleeting, did not slip by unnoticed.

In an instant, Kenzie, propelled by her battered yet defiant legs, surged toward me.

Her remaining clawed hand, a blur of raw instinct, aimed a swipe with lethal precision directly towards my face. My vision snapped back just in time to witness the impending strike.

'I can't block this...' The realisation hit me as hard as I knew her claws would. With no defence left to me, I reverted to my only remaining option.

My fist, driven by desperation and the momentum of Kenzie's charge, flew towards her in a desperate haymaker, banking on the combined force of our movements to bring her down.

The swipe was going to land, but if I could remain on my feet, perhaps victory could still be mine.

Then, agony like no other tore through me as her claws carved a grievous path across the bridge of my nose, continued into my right eye socket, and grotesquely liberated my eye from its berth.

It was flung onto the floor with a sickening combination of liquidy, meaty sounds and the crunch of shattered metal.

Our collision had another brutal finality, however.

The sounds of breaking, things that were never meant to break, accompanied my own punch's impact. No triumph came with the hit, only an overwhelming torrent of pain that dwarfed any previous experience.

The sensation of being shot just days ago paled in comparison to the present torment enveloping my face, my missing eye, and my aching hand.

Collapsing to my knees, I witnessed Kenzie's form also succumb to gravity beside me.

Miss K's command of "Enough!" barely reached my ears as the world around me dimmed, consciousness slipping away just as I felt myself being hoisted from the floor...