

Chapter 79 - Basics

Dashing towards Miss K and throwing a gauging kick felt thoroughly strange, but Kenzie and I were determined to try our very best right off the bat.

Our Sensei simply shifted slightly to the side, dodging both my horizontal kick aimed at her midsection and Kenzie's swipe aimed at her head in one smooth motion.

Not wanting to waste the momentum of the kick, I pivoted on my left leg and sent another kick sailing through the air towards Miss K, while Kenzie pushed off the ground to stop her momentum and leapt towards her, claws outstretched and clawing for Miss K's face.

The gentle, utterly unconcerned smile on Miss K's face told us all we needed to know about our chances of connecting.

A leisurely applied punch to Kenzie's shoulder sent her completely off course and careening onto the dojo floor. Miss K then used the same hand to simply rip my leg up into the air, killing my attack's momentum dead and sending me falling backward onto the ground with a thump.

The two of us groaned, dealing with the immediate after-effects of getting laid out.

Our "bravery" seemed to have jostled Tom and Jin into action, however, as the two boys started their own series of attacks.

Not even a second later, they joined us on the dojo floor with a series of groans.

"Don't look at me like that," Miss K offered with a grin. "I said I'd give you the *chance* to earn it, not that I was going to make it easy. Don't tell me you're already demoralised after just a single exchange or two?"

Naturally, none of us were.

As intimidating as it was to get laid out without your opponent even taking a step from where they started or even really trying, it was also an exceptionally worthwhile learning opportunity.

We wouldn't always be the top dogs in every situation we ran into, so it was just as important to learn what it was like to fight someone so unfathomably out of your league that it seemed like a joke, as it was to learn the basics and fundamentals—which Miss K still hadn't really gotten around to, I noted.

All four pairs of our eyes met as we tried to figure out what to do about the Grandmaster in our midst, but nobody seemed particularly willing to take the first shot at her.

Figuring that there really wasn't any use trying to wait for each other to start, since we were just as likely to get laid out now as we would be five seconds later, I slowly moved up—arms raised in a bit of a boxing stance, emulating Miss K's stance training from earlier that day.

If I could draw her attention for even just a moment, it might give the others enough time to sneak a hit in if they all attacked at the same time—or at least those were my thoughts at the moment.

I didn't actually believe any of it, but I needed to tell myself that in order to get my body to move into a position where Miss K could slap me silly.

I stopped paying attention to the others in my group and exclusively focused on Miss K, trying to discern if there was any opening she might have left for us to exploit.

I was under no illusion that we would ever be able to find one if she chose not to leave one, but I hadn't exactly pegged Miss K as someone that would be posing impossible challenges.

Not to mention she seemed utterly obsessed with fun.

She struck me as the kind of person who wouldn't do anything unless it promised a certain amount of entertainment in return, unless absolutely necessary.

And there was absolutely *no* fun to be had in a fight where you couldn't lose.

So it only followed that Miss K might be giving us a massive handicap of some sort that we could exploit to actually win this thing—it seemed very much in character for her.

Taking a deep breath, I continued to advance cautiously, keeping my stance tight and ready while keeping my eyes peeled for any such openings. With Miss K's amber eyes trained on me, the rest of the group seemed more willing to throw in their hats as Jin, Tom, and Kenzie approached the Grandmaster with careful steps as well.

None of us had any real idea how to work as a group, but we would need to in order to have any chance at making this a successful challenge.

Luckily, it seemed that Tom had a bit of a strategist's streak, as he started signalling the other two members of the group with simple hand gestures about how he thought they should try this.

It wasn't a full-on conversation in sign language nor anything as fancy as tactical signing used by Operators, law enforcement, or soldiers, but it seemed to get the job done as I saw Jin and Kenzie nod earnestly out of the corner of my eyes.

Miss K's eyes were still trained on me, which meant she shouldn't have been able to see their short planning session—definitely another concession on her part, as there was no way a trained combatant like her would simply leave three enemies out of her sight like this for any period of time.

Seeing that the rest of the group was ready to strike, I threw a quick feint, following up immediately with a low jab aimed at her midsection. As expected, she simply deflected the quick punch to the side before sending me to the floor by hooking one of her feet around my own in a lightning-fast motion and pulling.

The brief moment it took her to lay me out opened up a window for the others.

Jin and Kenzie lunged forward simultaneously, their attacks surprisingly coordinated to force Miss K to divide her attention.

In a blur of motion, she parried Jin's punch similarly to how she had mine while sidestepping Kenzie's swipe, effortlessly maintaining that playful smile. Meanwhile, Tom seized the opportunity and dashed in, aiming a swift kick at her legs.

Miss K, however, seemed to be downright toying with us.

She simply hopped without even looking in Tom's direction, stepping over his kick with such ease it almost seemed like she had eyes in the back of her head. With a flurry of motion, she grabbed an arm of both Jin and Kenzie before throwing them to the ground in the same full-body movement that allowed her to kick at Tom's legs as well, the instant she landed.

All three of them sprawled onto the floor simultaneously, their combined thumps and groans almost making me laugh. It was like one of those terrible anime moments that showed just how powerful a newly introduced character was—except we were the mooks used to show it.

Despite the failed attempts, there was a sense of progress.

We had managed a somewhat coordinated attack without really having talked about it beforehand. And, most importantly of all, Miss K had actually briefly left the position she had started fighting us in.

'No "You won't get me to move from this spot" today, huh?' I thought to myself with a grin that I didn't realise I had on my face until just now.

This was strangely fun, like fighting an impossibly difficult boss and dying to them over and over again while trying to learn their moveset. Much like in those games, we only needed to get it right *once*—Miss K had to be perfect every single time.

It seemed that I wasn't the only one with similar thoughts as the rest of the group was similarly pumped up rather than discouraged, which only seemed to fire up our Sensei even further.

"Come on, don't keep me waiting like this. It's rude!" she taunted with a toothy smile, her arms wide and goading us to take a stab at her.

The next ten minutes were spent with us trying different avenues of approach, with different people playing the bait or even none of us being bait at all and simply attacking at the same time. Each and every attempt ended in the exact same fashion: With us on the floor, groaning about some new bruises being added to the old ones.

By the twelfth attempt, we were all sweating buckets, panting heavily, but our determination was unwavering. The floor had become a patchwork of wet spots that were seeping into the mats where each of us had fallen, only to rise and try again.

We were once again standing in a circle around Miss K, but none of us had any idea what to do next—our attempts weren't getting any closer to hitting her, and we were fresh out of strategies.

I had spent the entire session trying to find any sort of opening, but I was just as clueless as when we started. Well not quite as clueless—I had the beginnings of an idea.

Finding boss patterns had always been my thing in video games, so it didn't take long for me to notice the massive difference in how Miss K reacted to my punches compared to my kicks.

'Every time I punch her, she simply deflects it,' I thought, using our recovery time to brainstorm. *'But when I kick, she doesn't even bother looking my way and just lays me out immediately; with my punches, she at least gives me another shot about half the time...'*

It was clear that Miss K was goading me into using my punches more, but I couldn't tell whether it was because they were easier for her to defend against or if there was something else going on.

Ultimately, I had to bite the bullet and make an educated guess. Doing the same thing over and over wouldn't get us anywhere, after all.

With a new idea in mind, I readied myself into my newly learned boxing stance and slowly crept up, visually confirming the readiness of the rest of the group.

We had taken turns being bait and even come up with some simple non-verbal signs to indicate if one of us wanted to try something different. When Miss K briefly looked around to size us up, I gave the rest of the group the signal that I needed them to buy me a moment.

Jin and Tom reacted immediately, giving almost imperceptible nods my way as they moved closer to each other, like a two-man tag team about to execute a wrestling move.

That managed to draw Miss K's attention, giving me a precious moment out of her sight to prepare my next move.

My punches were too easily deflected, but Miss K seemed to encourage more of them.

It only followed that I needed to put more power behind them, making them harder to deflect as effortlessly.

Running through the motions in my head, muscle-by-muscle, I readied myself for a full-body punch—the very thing the blue shard had taught me earlier in the session.

As I watched Jin and Tom spin through the air towards the floor once again, I was already mid-movement.

I threw my right fist toward Miss K's midsection with everything I had, twisting my body, stepping forward slightly, and pushing my full bodyweight behind the punch just as the shard had instructed.

A loud slap rang out as my fist connected with Miss K's open palm, briefly pushing against it before she redirected it to the side, unbalancing me and following up with a quick kick that sent me to the floor.

My eyes were wide with surprise.

This reaction was *entirely* different from what she had done to my punches so far.

When Kenzie's attack came in, Miss K sidestepped just in time to lay her out as well, but I noticed she had moved ever-so-slightly later than usual.

Having to defend against my punch had put just enough strain on her to allow Kenzie's attack to pile on, rather than Miss K simply deflecting and twirling through us like smoke through a grate.

'That's gotta be it, then,' I realised with a smile. *'The initial moves she taught us at the start of the session; lesson one on the shard. They're the key to getting her to show an opening, aren't they?'*

I was all too aware that I might be grasping at straws, but I couldn't believe that someone like Miss K, a Grandmaster of Martial Arts, would ever let coincidences or freak events impact her actions.

In my mind, she operated on a level that far transcended humanity.

Any "coincidences" I noticed had to be deliberately created by her to teach us something.

Just to confirm my suspicions one more time, I signalled the rest of the group to go again and provide me with another opening.

Seconds later, our groans marked another failed attempt, but I had a massive grin on my face: Miss K had reacted in the same way as last time—it was not a freak event.

When we all got back up on our feet for what felt like the four hundredth time today, I gestured for them all to get close enough for a quick huddle.

"I think I figured out a way for us to get a hit in," I started, gathering a row of eyebrow raises at my assertion. Turning towards my sparring partner, I asked, "Kenzie, what was the first lesson on your blue shard today?"

"Ehh... A drill on how to throw proper kicks. I'm more claw-based so it's not really that useful, but in a pinch, I can definitely see where they might come in handy," she elaborated with a shrug, her confusion evident.

"Jin, what about you?" I asked the cybernetically enhanced boy.

"Feints," he simply replied, not going into detail at first. Our combined stares prompted a sigh and a bit more information. "I always use the same arm for attacks since it's my strong one. Miss K wants me to learn how to use that to create feints and hit with my other arm instead."

Tom, catching on quickly, offered intel on his own lesson unprompted. “It was a drill about using my arms and legs more equally. Since I’m a bit of an all-rounder, she wanted me to really dial up the amount of mix-ups that I use; I generally just tend to default to one or two different patterns.”

Turning his attention squarely towards me, he followed up, “Where are you going with this, Sera? It’s all just basic stuff that she wants us to learn. How does this play into the challenge?”

“They are the *key*,” I simply stated with a grin, which earned me confused looks all around.

Miss K was right, stating things that nobody else knew what the hell they meant really *was* fun.

Kenzie narrowed her eyes after a quick roll of them. “Care to elaborate on that, mystery girl?”

“Alright, here’s the deal,” I began. “Let me ask you this: Do any of you honestly believe we stand a chance at hitting her, even if we try to use 100% of our best moves? We’re not trained fighters, but each of us has a natural style, right? Do you really think we’ll hit her if we just keep trying what we’re comfortable with?”

A row of immediate headshakes was the answer.

We were stubborn and determined, but we weren’t dumb. It was clear we’d never succeed, no matter what we did.

“Exactly,” I continued. “So the question is: *Why* is Miss K putting this challenge in front of us then? If there was no way to win, it wouldn’t be fun for her either; I don’t think she’d be the type to enjoy just throwing us to the ground over and over again.”

Taking a deep breath, I elaborated further. “So here’s what I think: She wants us to use the basics from the first lesson. It’s an extended training session, not *actually* a challenge about whether we can hit her or not.”

Disbelieving looks all around, but I had expected that.

“Just pay close attention, alright? Look at how she reacts to each of my punches. I’ll show you. The full-body punch is the one from the shard; watch exactly how she leaves herself more open when I throw it.”

With those words, I immediately broke out of the huddle and ran at Miss K, throwing a normal jab. A raised eyebrow met the attempt and half a second later, I was splayed out on the ground as expected, after she had simply deflected the punch again.

Getting up and going for another punch, I put my all behind it. Miss K’s eyes sparkled with recognition and mirth—she understood what I was going for. As if to help me make my point, she let my fist connect with her open palm for a fraction of a second longer than usual before laying me out again.

Dusting myself off and limping back to the huddle, the combined bruises of all my falls slowly starting to take their toll, I was greeted with wide eyes.

“See?” I panted. “That full-body punch made her react differently. She had to adjust, even if just a little. That’s what we need to focus on—the basics she’s been drilling into us. They aren’t just random lessons and this isn’t just a random challenge; the moves tools to create openings. If we can string them together right, we might actually land a hit.”

Kenzie was the first to speak, her energetic and excited voice filling our tiny circle. “Fuck, that was... You’re right! Is that why my attack a few tries back seemed to get closer than ever before? It was your punch keeping her in place?!”

I nodded, unable to hide a grin. It felt undeniably awesome to have my theory proven right and to see the others excited about it.

“That’s... Great work, Sera. I did not catch that at all, despite trying to figure out where the trick was...” Tom replied in a more solemn way. He seemed a bit upset that he hadn’t figured it out himself, but his determined grin showed he was genuinely impressed and raring to try.

Jin simply grunted and nodded, throwing a few mock-punches in the air that seemed more focused on feinting than anything else.

“So we’re all in agreement to try and use the first-lesson basics for our next tries, then? Miss K is clearly trying to get us to use them, and I genuinely think it’s our only chance to make it,” I asked, wanting to verbally confirm that we were all on the same page.

A round of nods and determined, toothy grins followed as we broke the huddle and arrayed ourselves around Miss K once again.

“So, done with your little strategy session then?” She said with a mocking tone, but the glint in her eyes as she looked at me told me more than anything she could have said—we were on the right track...

—

Pushing ourselves up from the ground once again, we heard Miss K’s voice waft leisurely over the arena, “Last attempt on this next one, your half hour’s nearly up.”

Using the basic moves had proven a lot more effective than I had hoped for, but we still hadn’t managed to lay a single finger on Miss K. We simply weren’t coordinated nor good enough at using them to truly wow Miss K into giving us the win.

But we had gotten close quite a number of times—as close as you could realistically get when the enemy was essentially omnipotent and could stop you from actually connecting at any given moment.

Morale had been high after our strategy session, and it still was a lot higher than before it, but almost thirty minutes of constantly being laid out on the ground in various positions and having to rattle ourselves to get back up and try again was definitely starting to leave its mark on all of us.

Miss K's reminder that this was the last try we had, however, gave us another burst of energy as was evident in the way that everyone around me seemed to lock the fuck in.

'Alright, Sera. Last try; it's not just about the punch, but also the timing and the location of where you aim—don't focus too hard on the kinematics of it all, it's basically muscle memory at this point. Just aim properly,' I told myself mentally, my internal voice helping me calm and centre myself as we took position around the Grandmaster one last time.

Jin and Tom exchanged a quick nod, their eyes fierce with determination. Kenzie cracked her knuckles and adjusted her stance briefly before giving us all a nod.

This time, much like the last few attempts, we didn't rush in blindly.

We circled Miss K, each of us watching for the tiniest opening created by one of the others.

Jin was the first to go in, feinting to the left and drawing Miss K's attention for a split second.

Tom seized the opportunity, dashing forward with a high kick aimed at her shoulder.

Miss K deflected it easily, but Tom's follow-up punch—one he had been perfecting over the last few tries—was enough to shift her balance slightly as she needed to deflect yet another hit from him.

Kenzie came in low, aiming one of her lightning-fast kicks at the Sensei's legs. Miss K dodged again, but her movement was off, strangely more deliberate, like she was starting to take us more seriously now.

I took a deep breath, feeling the adrenaline surge through my veins, and launched myself into the fray as well. I aimed a jab at Miss K that was quickly deflected, but unlike all the earlier attempts, Miss K didn't have time to lay me out fully in response, as she was still recovering from the other attacks.

In the same moment, Jin's real attack, following his initial feint, came flying in and seemed to almost take Miss K by surprise as she contorted and twisted her body in downright impossible ways to avoid it.

Tom, Kenzie, and I saw our chances and threw everything we had into our best shots.

Tom threw mix-up after mix-up—sometimes multiple punches in a row, then kicks, then interspersed almost randomly—keeping Miss K stumbling backward while Kenzie prepared.

Kenzie ducked low and coiled herself up before catapulting herself at Miss K with her claws outstretched, using the same move she had learned today and used against me.

Meanwhile, I was biding my time, my muscles practically aching from restraining them from acting immediately. I needed to make sure this punch hit. I didn't have the speed of Kenzie, the strength of Jin, or the versatility of Tom, so I had to rely on the only thing that might give me an edge: my sense of timing when it came to boss fights.

As Kenzie sailed through the air, I felt a twinge in my chest telling me to act.

Putting my all into the strongest punch I could muster, I aimed at the left side of Miss K's torso, purposefully aiming to almost miss, hoping that Kenzie's attack would make Miss K dodge slightly, moving her further into my trajectory.

The Grandmaster laid out Jin as a result of his attack, kicking his legs out from under him after he ended up slightly unbalanced by her previous deflection. Tom's mix-ups, no longer supported by any of our attacks since we were just slightly off-timing, were caught, and he was flipped 180 degrees and smashed to the ground just as Kenzie's claws reached Miss K.

Twirling on the spot, our Sensei grabbed Kenzie's outstretched arms and simply spun her around before throwing her a good ten metres away onto the mat.

Kenzie's final attempt at clawing at the Grandmaster, despite being caught in her grasp, however, caused Miss K to have to make one extra step to balance herself before the throw—right into my punch's trajectory.

With a dull, resounding thud of meat-on-meat, my fist landed squarely in Miss K's palm.

Pushing as hard as I could, with all the power my Body 5, the proper punching technique the shard had taught me, and my [Martial Arts] Skill of 2 giving me, I let out a scream of exertion.

The instant my fist slipped from her grasp, the sweat on her palms and my fingers creating enough of a film to provide just the right amount of missing friction for my angle of attack to slip past, I saw her crack into a genuine, proud smile.

I felt relief, but before it could fully manifest, my fist landed in the folds of Miss K's dojo outfit and sailed right past the left side of her stomach by less than a centimetre, the fabric ripping as my fist got caught on it and went wide.

Unbalanced by my powerful punch missing, I stumbled forward, and a quick kick to the back of my legs brought me down to the ground as well.

I spun around and looked up at the triumphant Miss K standing above the four of us with a gentle smile on her face, looking down at her dojo uniform that now bore a tiny rip.

"Well... You got close—very close," she said as her eyes met ours. "Impressively close, really. I wasn't expecting you all to work this well together without any prior training on the matter, or even considering it to begin with, considering that there's only one dose of the injector. But well... This ain't a hit."

She pulled up the ripped part of the uniform for all of us to see.

Disbelief, despair, and exhaustion overcame all four of us, as we simply slumped back onto the ground. I couldn't believe my eyes—after everything, I had only managed to rip a tiny portion of her clothing rather than landing even a glancing hit.

"But," with a toothy, wide grin, she added, pulling us all back from the brink, "it is one of only two times I've had to change my uniform after an introductory class' attempt at this challenge. That, in itself, is a massive achievement that none of you should deem lightly."

She walked around and pulled us up one by one, gently dusting us off as she did so.

“Now, go get yourselves fixed up. You’ve done exceedingly well and far exceeded my expectations—I doubt this will happen often, so take the win today.”

With those words, she simply sauntered off towards her office, whistling an upbeat tune as she did and leaving the four of us behind.

I looked at my teammates, their expressions a mix of exhaustion, disappointment and pride.

We had given it our all and come closer than anyone expected. Despite the aches and bruises, there was a sense of accomplishment that couldn’t be denied.

We all shared a single thought, even without the need to talk: Next time, we *would* get her...