

Chapter 116 - Perspectives

Holding my ribs, still feeling the sharp sting from Kenzie's ridiculous stunt, I watched Jin and Tom casually stroll over onto the mat, both looking annoyingly fresh and ready—Tom quite a lot more than Jin, but still.

'Miss K really isn't giving me any slack today, huh?' I thought, casting a quick glance her way. She simply stood with her arms crossed, watching us calmly, not showing any sign she was going to give me even the tiniest break.

Not only was this my first time actually going toe-to-toe against Jin and Tom, but also my first taste of a free-for-all in the dojo. Add that to the mess of trying to deal with this strange new Perk of mine, and today was officially a complete nightmare.

Honestly, it had never occurred to me that having 'absolute control' over my body might actually suck. Sure, I could easily silence the problematic urges trying to go for the throat, but the trade-off was steep—my flexibility and speed had plummeted, hard.

Every motion required deliberate thought, and trying to consciously manage every muscle wasn't exactly ideal for smooth, spontaneous reactions.

'Then again,' I thought, a rueful chuckle slipping out despite myself, *'I suppose Miss K actually went **really** easy on me.'*

Thinking back to her original warnings when we'd first joined the dojo—promises of hellfire for anyone stupid enough to risk serious injuries—I realized I'd definitely crossed that line with Kenzie earlier today.

Maybe getting my ass kicked was going to be exactly the right kind of wake-up call.

The current way I fought wasn't going to cut it—not by a long shot.

I needed to figure out how to mesh [Elemental Balance]'s perfect control into a fluid style that didn't completely neuter my speed. And honestly, a chaotic free-for-all was probably the fastest way to figure it out.

Rapid, iterative trial and error was the name of the game here and Miss K had provided the perfect setup for it.

'Now,' I thought, reluctantly getting back up onto my feet, rolling my shoulders and loosening up a bit, *'I just need to make sure Jin and Tom don't completely wipe the floor with me...'*

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PoV: Jin Mutsashi Hakanida

Stepping back onto the mat barely five minutes after finally getting to sit down definitely wasn't Jin's idea of a good time, but Master's word was absolute.

If she said move, he moved. End of discussion.

She was a Grandmaster-ranked Martial Artist, after all—meaning every word out of her mouth was basically law, at least if Jin ever hoped to surpass his two insufferably successful older brothers. If he was going to make a name for himself, he needed every scrap of guidance Master was willing to offer.

With a practiced, easy motion, Jin rolled his shoulders in full circles to quickly check his cybernetics for any odd feedback or signs of strain.

Everything felt good—no unusual stiffness, no lagging servos.

His cybernetic limbs hummed quietly, ready to deliver their full power, especially now that he didn't have to worry about holding back.

'Should make it way easier to land some hits now,' he thought with a lopsided grin, a fresh surge of confidence building inside him. He'd been itching for a chance to let loose, anyway.

His eyes then drifted over to the girl with the annoyingly bold hairstyle.

It wasn't that her hair looked bad—honestly, she rocked the VoniX-black look effortlessly—but having the sheer nerve to openly flaunt such a blatant corporate flex just irritated him.

Jin wished he could simply dismiss her as some inconsequential rich girl playing tough, but sadly, things were never that easy.

His contacts had come up completely empty trying to dig up any useful info on her mother, leaving the girl's corporate status frustratingly vague. But given that she was in this group together with himself and *the* Thomas Laken... She definitely couldn't be from a random no-name family, making his interactions with her fraught with potential pitfalls.

On top of that, she was easily the biggest unknown in their little dojo group in terms of combat as well, a wild card in every sense of the word.

'Kenzie's clearly genetically enhanced, I'm cybernetic, Tom's obviously bionic, but what about you...?' Jin wondered again, narrowing his eyes slightly as he watched her get back onto her feet, holding her ribs. *'Master wouldn't just toss some random natural kid into the mix—especially not one that weird. So what exactly makes you special enough to be here?'*

His gaze slid over to Tom next, who strolled onto the mat with his usual irritating calmness, as though he hadn't even broken a sweat today. Tom's composure always rubbed Jin the wrong way, but not because he hated the calmness—it was because Tom's composure was so *obviously* fake.

'Always gotta act like you're perfectly chill, huh?' Jin scoffed internally, barely managing not to roll his eyes. *'Give me a break, you fake-ass blank.'*

There was just no way Tom was actually as unbothered as he pretended to be, especially given his background.

Being the second son of the Butcher of Oldtown wasn't exactly conducive to a calm and peaceful childhood. Jin was more than certain there were plenty of issues hiding beneath Tom's carefully constructed mask.

Either way, he had to deal with both of them—and the fox-girl too, of course.

He could grumble all he wanted, but Master had put this lineup together for a reason.

And questioning a Grandmaster about her own dojo's group composition? That was a level of complete and utter blankness Jin had no interest in reaching.

So, he focused up, instead.

Master was just about to give the signal, and his eyes landed on Sera.

Something was thoroughly weird with her.

He had noticed it the moment she stepped onto the mat earlier. She'd been ridiculously slow against Kenzie earlier—far slower than usual. Not clumsy, exactly, but strangely... calculated, mechanical. Almost like she was running on a script instead of instinct.

'What exactly happened to her since the last session...?'

Jin analyzed her as quickly as possible, running through every bit of information he had.

He already knew how Tom operated, but Sera? She was a complete unknown as they had never faced each other. He should be able to overpower her physically, but compared to Tom and Kenzie, she actually had some bulk to her.

His eyes flicked to her abs as she briefly lifted her uniform to check for bruising on her side before letting the fabric fall back into place—easily visible, well-defined.

'Yeah... those definitely aren't just for show.'

And then there was her brain.

She had been the reason they even got close to landing a hit on Master during that growth-drug challenge at the end of the last session.

Quick on her feet, sharp as hell, and way too good at reading people.

That made her dangerous in a way neither Tom nor Kenzie quite were.

Tom probably had the stronger strategic mind overall, but Sera had this unpredictable edge—thinking outside the box in ways that caught people off guard.

Jin had seen it firsthand.

When Tom's rigid, step-by-step planning fell apart against Master again and again, it had been Sera's instinctive improvisation that gave them a real shot. She adapted, adjusted, and moved forward without hesitation, something neither of the other two did quite as naturally.

'She's got bits of all of us,' Jin realized. 'Tom's cool-headed and strategic thinking, Kenzie's speed and agility, my power and follow-through. She's not the best at any one thing, but she's got a bit of everything...'

His stance shifted instinctively as Master raised her hands, about to start the round. He dropped his center of gravity just a bit, stepping his left foot back to prepare for movement.

His stance wasn't fancy—just a refined, no-nonsense boxing form.

It worked well with his cybernetic arms, allowing him to maximize his speed and strength in a dojo setting. Sure, in a real fight, this particular boxing stance wasn't exactly ideal—one knife or gun and all of it would mean jack shit—but here? It was good enough.

'Simple plan,' he told himself, flexing his artificial fingers slightly. *'Get a read on Sera's movements first. Take easy points where I can. Keep it adaptable—no plan survives first contact anyway...'*

The moment Master's hands clapped together, Jin moved.

Not recklessly, not explosively—just a controlled step forward, keeping his stance tight, his center of gravity low, and his eyes locked onto his targets.

A good fight always started with establishing proper distance.

Rush in too fast, and you'd eat a fist before even getting to throw a punch. Stay too far back, and you'd lose control of the engagement before it even started.

Sera was an unknown variable in this fight, and Jin didn't like unknowns.

He wanted to figure her out before committing to anything serious. So instead of going straight for her, he started off light—probing, watching.

Tom, on the other hand, made his intentions crystal clear from the get-go.

He was locked onto Sera, completely ignoring Jin as if he wasn't even a factor. It wasn't arrogance—Tom wasn't stupid—but it was an opening.

Jin grinned.

'Alright, Tommy-boy, if you're just gonna hand me points like this, who am I to refuse?'

Jin kept moving, staying on the outer edge of the fight, using his footwork to glide in and out of range. His stance was pure boxing—lead foot forward, back foot ready to push off, hands up, elbows tight. He hovered just outside of striking distance, keeping his weight balanced and ready to explode forward at any second.

Sera and Tom clashed first.

Jin watched them closely as they engaged—Tom moving with his usual precision, controlled and deliberate, while Sera... well, she was weird. Her stance was too perfect, her movements too precise, yet she was slower than she should be.

Tom should've had an easy time punishing that slowness, but something about the clean way she moved made it hard to land an actual hit. She wasn't dodging so much as subtly redirecting her weight, slipping out of the way just enough to avoid taking a full hit but without any real counterplay.

Like she was being controlled by somebody that knew the correct answers, but first had to translate them into commands that she could follow.

'That's so weird... But not my problem. Yet.'

Tom was hyper-focused, so Jin made him pay for it.

He slid in behind Tom's blind spot, testing the waters with a quick, measured jab.

Not a full-power strike, just enough to score a point if it landed clean.

Tom barely reacted, shifting just enough to avoid a direct hit, but it cost him. In the split-second it took to adjust, Sera slipped past him, forcing Tom to reposition, losing his carefully curated spot in the centre of the mat.

Jin kept pressing.

Tom had to deal with Sera up front while Jin chipped away from behind, forcing him to split his focus.

Jin didn't go all-in—he wasn't stupid.

Tom was still faster and smarter than him when it came to fighting, and if he turned his full attention to Jin, it'd turn into an all-out brawl between the two, which wasn't what he wanted.

No, the best play was to keep Tom distracted, keep poking, force him into mistakes that could score Jin easy points while letting Sera take up the bulk of his attention.

A quick jab here, a feint there, a sharp step inside Tom's range before backing out just as fast—it was all about control. Every move Jin made was deliberate, designed to keep Tom on edge without committing to a full exchange.

And Sera?

Jin threw a couple of testing jabs her way whenever they got close to each other, more out of curiosity than any real intent to hit her. Each time, she reacted the same—perfect form, flawless technique, but just a little too slow to really capitalize on anything she was doing.

She wasn't dodging out of instinct; she was reacting like she had to think about it first.

Jin had seen this kind of thing before—countless times, in fact—back when he was still just another kid getting his ass handed to him in boxing lessons.

It was that awkward phase every fighter went through when they were trying to implement something new, something they weren't used to yet.

Whenever a coach drilled a specific habit into a newbie—like keeping their guard tight or shifting their weight properly—there was always this transition period where their entire style took a hit.

They got slower, more rigid, more deliberate.

It was like they had to manually remind themselves to keep their arm up or reposition their feet, and in the meantime, everything else suffered. That mental overhead always dragged down their fighting ability for a while, but once it settled into muscle memory, once it became second nature, they'd come out the other side way better for it.

But this? This was something else entirely.

It wasn't just one or two things that Sera was adjusting to—it was seemingly *everything*.

Every movement, every reaction, every shift in stance looked like it was going through some internal checklist before she committed to it. It was like her entire body had been reset, and now she was trying to relearn how to fight from scratch.

'Did Master do something to you in there...? Or is this some side-effect of whatever special thing you got going on...?'

Jin narrowed his eyes slightly, keeping his distance for now, still testing.

If Sera was really stuck in this weird adjustment phase, then that meant two things: One, she wasn't going to be nearly as much of a threat as she otherwise would have been, and two...

She was probably going to come out the other side of this absolutely terrifying.

But he didn't have time to dwell on it, there were points to be scored.

Tom was finally starting to realize he couldn't just ignore Jin, shifting slightly to account for his presence, but it was already too late.

Jin pushed forward before Tom could fully recover from another one of his exploratory attacks on Sera, feinting a quick jab to his ribs. The moment Tom reacted, shifting his arms to block, Jin pivoted on his heel and fired a real punch at the exact same spot.

Tom barely managed to brace in time, absorbing the hit without letting it stagger him too much.

'Yeah, alright, he's getting serious with me now.'

But Jin wasn't done yet.

He wasn't going to let Tom settle into a rhythm. The moment Tom steadied himself, Jin went for another strike, testing his reactions—until his peripheral vision caught movement.

Sera.

For the first time in the match, she actually committed to an action.

Jin immediately pulled back, giving himself just enough distance to keep her and Tom both in view. Tom had thrown his kick at her, a sharp, fast strike aimed center-mass, and Sera had blocked it. But unlike before, where she had simply stood there like an odd training dummy, she went for a counter—a slow, if perfectly placed and executed one.

Tom easily evaded it as a result of its mechanical nature, but the abrupt change in her behavior caused him to flail ever so slightly more than usual.

And that was all the opening Jin needed.

He stepped in without hesitation, his cybernetic arm cocked back as he drove a full-power punch straight toward Tom's exposed back. He had clearly anticipated something like this—his body shifted mid-motion, twisting just enough to throw up a partial guard as Jin's punch came in.

But this wasn't like the last match.

This time, Master had given them the go-ahead for a full-contact spar.

And that meant Jin wasn't holding back.

The moment his fist connected, a loud slap echoed through the dojo, followed immediately by the sharp *crack* of impact. Tom's guard shattered under the force, Jin's fist breaking through and slamming square into his chest.

The blue uniform flared neon, absorbing some of the force, but it wasn't enough to stop Tom from stumbling backward, clutching his chest and doubling over.

Jin straightened, rolling his shoulders with a grin.

"That's a three-pointer, yeah?" he asked, eyes flicking to Master.

Master gave him a small nod.

First points of the match. And a triple, no less. Jin couldn't have asked for a better start.

But he had no time to enjoy it—points were still up for grabs and Tom was not going to let this one slide.

Just as Jin had expected, Tom's stance immediately shifted, no longer fully fixated on Sera as he finally acknowledged Jin as the real threat.

But that was fine—Jin had already forced him to play catch-up.

And now it was time to push the advantage...

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PoV: Thomas Erius Laken

Tom inhaled sharply through his teeth, biting back a curse as he steadied himself.

‘You fucking moron, Jin. What the actual fuck are you doing?!’ The thought burned through his mind as he clenched his jaw, irritation bubbling up. *‘It’s our first time going up against Sera because Sensei wants us to help her figure out whatever new weirdness she’s dealing with—and you’re out here swinging like a full-on psycho-borg?! Blank-ass idiot.’*

Tom had come into this match with a plan.

He had planned to get on Sensei’s good side by helping out her favorite student—not that he liked admitting it, but Sera was *definitely* the Grandmaster’s top pick right now. If he could help her work through whatever weird issues she was dealing with *and* get a better read on what her strange fighting style was evolving into, it’d be a massive win-win.

But now, thanks to Jin and his utter lack of restraint, he had to play defense instead of actually paying attention.

Grinding his teeth, Tom adjusted his stance, knowing he had to change tactics before this turned into a one-sided beatdown. Letting Jin wail on him while he focused on Sera wasn’t going to do him any favors. Sensei didn’t care about suck-ups—she cared about progress.

Getting his ass kicked in the name of *helping* Sera wouldn’t impress her one bit.

And worse? He’d lose this golden opportunity.

This was the perfect setup—not just to get into Sensei’s good graces but also to earn some points with Sera. Jin, on the other hand, was absolutely squandering all of it.

‘Unfortunately for all of us, part of the cybernetic arm installation process apparently includes a hemispherectomy,’ Tom thought bitterly, barely restraining an eye-roll. *‘If he’d just stop to think things through for a single fucking second...’*

Sera was the biggest unknown in their group.

Kenzie was a known factor—her family was too distinct, too genetically unique to hide in a city that practically worshipped chrome and bionics. Jin and Tom were easy to dig up info on, given their families’ high-ranking positions in their respective corps.

But Sera?

Her name should’ve come with a pedigree, a reputation, some kind of corporate baggage.

Yet every time Jin or Kenzie had tried to dig into Valeria Vildea—Sera’s mother—they came up with next to nothing. That kind of deliberate obscurity didn’t happen by accident.

Someone had *made* sure her background stayed buried.

And now, instead of gathering anything useful or positioning himself to gather this valuable intel, Jin was out here throwing haymakers like an idiot, wasting *everyone's* time.

Tom exhaled slowly, keeping his footwork light as he circled both Sera and Jin, his mind working through the implications of what he *did* know—which, frankly, wasn't much.

For someone in his position, that alone was a red flag.

Being second in line to inherit the main seat of Laken Industries gave him *options*.

A lot of them.

He had access to resources, intelligence networks, and the kind of quiet corporate leverage that Jin and Kenzie could only dream of. And yet, despite all of that, despite weeks of discreet digging—hell, since *before* their first official dojo session had even occurred—he had still come up with very little on Valeria Vildea.

Which meant that whatever the answer was, it was something people didn't *want* him knowing.

There were only two types of reports you *never* wanted to get back when running an investigation on a high-ranking corpo figure.

The first was the standard worst-case scenario: Finding out they massively outranked you.

That was the position Jin and Kenzie were in compared to him. Tom had the corporate weight to push them around if he *really* wanted to—he hadn't needed to and wasn't planning on ever using it, but the leverage was always there.

It made sure they followed his lead, even when they didn't necessarily want to.

The second?

Tom's eyes flicked toward Sera again, drawn—as always—to that ridiculous VoniX-black hair. It was an absurdly obvious flex, the kind of look that only someone with *absolute* confidence in their security team would even consider flaunting.

'Which she definitely can be...'

No, the second type of report—the *real* worst-case scenario—was the one he'd actually received.

Or rather, the *lack* of a report.

The corporate agents had never returned.

When their bodies were recovered, their cerebral interfaces had been *scrubbed*. Completely wiped—no logs, no recorded last moments, not even the mandatory black box implant data that all Laken Industries agents were mandated to possess.

All except for six words.

[I would appreciate some more decorum.]

Nothing else.

Not a name, not a warning, not even a threat. Just a polite, measured and thoroughly ridiculous statement.

It wasn't that the corporate agents had been exceptionally skilled or high-ranking, quite the opposite. They weren't the kind of heavy hitters that could shake the boardroom with a glance, nor were they some elite black ops team.

No, they were standard corpo intelligence agents—good, competent, but ultimately thoroughly *replaceable*. Any mid-level Operator could have taken them out if they had the right incentives.

That *wasn't* the issue.

The issue was that whoever Valeria Vildea was, she had done it without a second thought.

No hesitation, no fear of crossing a line with *Laken Industries*.

That was what sent a chill down Tom's spine.

She hadn't even *tried* to cover her tracks—not really.

Sure, the agents' deaths had been ruled as natural causes, but everyone knew how flimsy that excuse was in corpo warfare. If Laken Industries had wanted to retaliate, that wouldn't even have been the slightest bit of a deterrent.

The way it had happened had practically been a straight up invitation to challenge her.

And yet, nothing from that woman's side.

No warnings. No concessions. No polite corporate overtures to smooth things over.

Just six simple words, a handful of dead operatives, and the unspoken message that if Laken wanted to push further, they were more than welcome to *try*.

Tom still hadn't told his father. And honestly? He wasn't sure he ever would.

His old man was a *very* particular kind of problem.

'He'd probably lose his shit if I told him...' Tom thought grimly, lips twitching in a grimace.

When his father got angry, it wasn't just a bad day for him. It was a bad day for everyone. And the fallout *always* landed on Tom's shoulders in one way or another.

'Corpo agents die all the time...' He exhaled, rolling his shoulders. *'No one's going to notice a few more missing bodies.'*

That thought alone was enough to shove the whole mess to the back of his mind—for now, at least. He had other priorities right now.

Namely, the two idiots currently circling each other in front of him.

Jin and Sera had been feeling each other out for the past couple of minutes—trading probing jabs, testing reactions, trying to gauge what the other would do next.

Tom had deliberately stayed back, recovering from that painful punch Jin had saddled him with, giving them space. Watching.

But it was time to move.

‘Alright, time to get back to work. Better get myself a few points to make sure Sensei doesn’t think I’m insulting her, then back to helping Sera get her shit together...’ He thought.

‘Hopefully the girl will appreciate my efforts. I really need to get to know her better... And figure out what’s going on with that mother of hers...’

Cracking his neck and shaking out his arms, Tom stepped forward, casually making his way toward the center of the mat.

He didn’t rush. Didn’t need to.

The moment he moved, both Jin and Sera’s eyes *immediately* snapped to him, their postures shifting in preparation.

‘Good,’ he grinned.

This was about to go *exactly* the way he had planned...