

Chapter 165 - Technique

PoV: Thomas Erius Laken

“Jin, this kind of outcome is *exactly* why your shard has such a large portion devoted to ground fighting,” the Grandmaster said flatly. “So you don’t have to rely on me to bail you out every time things don’t go your way.”

Jin grimaced, still breathing hard, while Tom flinched internally at the sharpness of her tone.

‘Ms. Kanis is absolutely out for blood today...’ he thought. *‘I really need to make sure not to embarrass myself when it’s my turn...’*

As if summoned by the thought alone, Ms. Kanis turned her attention toward the enigma next.

“And Sera,” she continued, eyes narrowing just slightly, “I don’t even know where to begin with you. What possessed you to go for a takedown on an opponent with superior physicality? Are you suicidal?”

Sera opened her mouth to answer, but Ms. Kanis lifted a hand, cutting her off immediately.

“You might *think* you know that Jin isn’t good on the ground—yet—but that doesn’t excuse this kind of decision-making. What if he’d spent the last few weeks fixing that exact weakness? Hm?” Her voice sharpened. “That choice might have won you this bout, but the amount of danger you put yourself in was completely irresponsible. You had more than a dozen safer ways to end that fight.”

She took a step closer, moving towards the girl standing atop the coloured mat.

“You can’t just rely on me to stop the round because you assume I won’t let either of you get hurt. If I hadn’t stepped in, both of you *would* have walked away injured, I guarantee it. You’re both still at the very bottom when it comes to ground fighting.”

Sera visibly deflated, shoulders slumping as she stared at the mat, still sucking in air through heavy breaths. “Yes, Miss K... I’m sorry, Miss K...”

“Don’t be sorry,” the Grandmaster snapped. “Be better.”

She waved Jin off with a sharp gesture. “Go get some water. Check yourself for scrapes and deal with them.”

Then her gaze slid back to Sera. “You good for the last round if I give you five minutes?”

Tom already knew the answer. If he’d learned anything about the strange girl that was Sera Vildea at this point, it was that she was borderline *obsessed* with fighting inside the dojo.

Sure enough, she nodded without hesitation.

“Good. Get water. Recover,” Ms. Kanis said, already turning away. Then her eyes landed squarely on Tom. “You’re up next. You’ve watched two bouts now. I expect you not to fuck this up needlessly and provide some interesting data for me to work with.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied instantly, the weight of expectation snapping his focus into place.

His eyes tracked Sera as she headed toward the bench where Kenzie was already waiting for her—the two girls of the group already having formed some kind of understanding by now, if not quite a friendship then at least a friendly rivalry.

The way Sera moved as she walked still sent an uncomfortable shiver down his spine.

‘She’s dangerous...’ Tom thought. *‘Not just her, exactly—but whatever the fuck was done to her to make her like this. This is insane.’*

The thought lingered longer than he liked.

‘I’ll need to tell my father about this... won’t I?’

His eyes flicked back to Ms. Kanis, who had stepped into the center of the arena again.

She was doing... *something*.

Tom couldn’t quite place it, but he’d noticed the pattern before—every bout, every reset, she always stepped in like this.

‘Data retrieval, maybe?’ he reasoned. *‘Sensors in the mat. Telemetrics. That’s probably how she’s so freakishly accurate with her predictions and shard feedback.’*

It was the best explanation he’d managed to come up with so far, and even that felt flimsy.

‘Ms. Kanis is going to hate me even thinking about telling my father about Sera’s change, but... can I really keep this quiet?’ The thought gnawed at him. *‘This isn’t natural. And we’re the damn bionics experts! Whatever was done to her... even our most cutting-edge experimental rigs wouldn’t give a teenage girl this kind of impossible jump without **something** showing.’*

He chewed on his lower lip, stress building as he brushed right up against the only real rule Ms. Kanis ever enforced that wasn’t directly relevant to the mat.

‘If I could just figure out who the fuck her mother actually is—and who she works for...’

His thoughts spiraled.

*‘It has to be one of the Big Four. It **has** to be. This level of performance boost, this fast, with no visible downsides and not even a single surgery scar? That doesn’t just happen. This has to be black-box tech. Experimental. Off-ledger or deep R&D. But fucking whose?!’*

He wasn’t as deeply plugged into corporate portfolios as his brothers or his father—not yet—but even he knew that none of the majors were *publicly* trading in anything that came remotely close to what he was observing with Sera.

Sure, there were outfits like ApexWave Synthetics that *might* be cooking something spicy on the side. As a subsidiary of OmniPresentia, they had the funding, the labs, the political insulation for it. And their portfolio already covered both bionics and cybernetics—even some dips into genetics here and there.

But that theory fell apart the moment it touched reality.

Sera was obviously *clean*. Completely unaugmented.

‘And Ms. Kanis only accepted her because she’s baseline-human, so it’s impossible,’ he thought grimly. *‘Unless the Grandmaster herself is compromised...’*

That idea also barely lasted a heartbeat before he dismissed it as pure nonsense.

If there was *one thing* everyone in the city agreed on, it was that Selene Kanis was incorruptible. Creds didn’t move her. Threats didn’t scare her. Promises didn’t tempt her.

If the Grandmaster of the Arkion Dojo didn’t want something, then it simply didn’t happen.

‘Even Sobirashu had to learn that the hard way...’

It was practically a city legend at this point.

About six years back, one of Sobirashu’s major shareholders had tried to strong-arm private lessons for his first-born son.

Ms. Kanis had refused outright. No explanation. No negotiation.

What followed had been months of back-and-forth that escalated from polite requests, to veiled threats, to very real ones.

Eventually, Ms. Kanis had laid it out in plain terms.

“Everyone trains as part of a group,” she had said. “If I *decide* someone deserves more, *then* they get private instruction. I choose my own students, nobody else.”

She hadn’t budged.

The shareholder hadn’t taken it well. A handful of dead corporate agents later—sent to “negotiate”—and a furious internal crackdown from Sobirashu’s other shareholders, up to and including the company’s CTO, had finally put an end to the mess.

And, as always, Ms. Kanis had gotten her way without so much as a scratch to show for it.

‘So Sera’s still unaugmented,’ Tom thought grimly, *‘or Ms. Kanis’ standards for keeping her in the group have shifted somehow.’*

Neither option sat well with him. *‘But if she really is clean, then what the actual fuck is going on here...? A new drug? Some kind of enhancer like the one the Grandmaster dangles in front of us for landing a hit on her each session, just cranked up to eleven... no, thirteen?’*

It had already been unsettling watching Sera's earlier growth since their group had begun tutelage under the Grandmaster.

She'd rapidly gone from getting casually bodied by just about everyone in the group to nearly taking them all on at once—right after that strange mental break that had almost ended with Kenzie seriously hurt.

That alone had been beyond freakish.

But this?

'The last jump at least made some kind of sense,' he reasoned. 'That was technique. Like she'd been holding back, or finally figured out how to use the body she already had.'

His jaw tightened. *'But this decidedly isn't that. Her technique's actually sloppier, if anything. Less refined. But her speed and strength are on a completely different level now...'*

That was the part that truly frightened him.

Just how—

"Tom. Sera. You're up," Ms. Kanis called, cutting straight through his spiral. "Hurry it along. I don't want this initial exploration eating the entire session."

"Yes, Ma'am," Tom answered immediately, snapping out of it as he jogged onto the mat. He shoved the circular thoughts aside—they clearly weren't getting him anywhere right now.

Instead, he focused on the enigma herself, watching Sera jog over to meet him.

The unease in his gut only grew.

'Yeah...' he thought, eyes tracking her movements carefully. *'She even moves differently now. Even when she's just casually jogging. It's like she's not using the same muscles she had a week ago.'*

She settled into her stance—subtly different than before, but different all the same—and he mirrored her a heartbeat later by assuming his own stance.

Tom's mind snapped straight into strategy mode as they waited for Ms. Kanis' hands to come together.

'I've still got stamina on my side, thanks to my bionics,' he assessed quickly. *'Probably a slight edge in raw power too.'*

His eyes tracked her weight distribution, the way she shifted on her feet. *'But speed? She blows me out of the water now. She already had an advantage there from sparring Kenzie all the time, but now... she completely bodies me in that department, no doubt.'*

But speed wasn't everything.

Tom's gaze sharpened as he kept breaking her down piece by piece.

'Her technique's sloppier,' he realized. 'Not bad—just quite a lot worse than it used to be.'

The precision she'd had back after that breakdown, the razor-tight control and ruthless efficiency, wasn't there right now.

She was clearly experimenting.

Testing the edges of her new body instead of fighting optimally.

That meant she wouldn't immediately go for the safest or most efficient answers.

She'd try things. Push limits. Take risks she wouldn't normally take.

And risks naturally meant openings.

If she still fought the way she had back then—perfectly controlled, minimal wasteage—and had this body on top of it? He didn't kid himself. Even with him, Jin and Kenzie working perfectly in sync, they'd probably get folded unless everything went *exactly* right.

But this? This was just raw physical supremacy.

And that was something he understood.

He'd spent years fighting people who were stronger, faster or more augmented than him.

That was the whole point of his training—weathering the storm, absorbing the pressure, dragging the fight into deep water, and letting stamina, technique and fundamentals grind the other side down.

'I don't need to beat her straight-up,' he told himself. 'I just need to survive long enough to make her tire herself out and overcommit...'

Ms. Kanis' hands came together in the typically loud, echoing clap—then, nothing.

Neither of them rushed each other.

Tom stayed light on his feet, shoulders relaxed, hands up but not tight, giving nothing away.

His eyes never left Sera—not her face, but her hips, her shoulders, the way her weight shifted with each step.

He catalogued everything: Distance. Rhythm. Timing. Breathing.

He'd always fought like this, building a mental model of his opponent piece by piece before committing to anything real.

Sera, on the other hand, started edging forward almost casually, testing space with small steps, getting just close enough to threaten but not close enough to commit.

Tom recognized it right away—she'd done the same thing to Jin once they'd entered mid-range. To bait reactions and fish for habits.

This, in a way, was the most dangerous part about Sera that Tom had identified after their first few sessions inside the dojo together.

'She's like all three of us put together... Even more so now than before. Kenzie's speed, Jin's aggression when she sees an opening and my strategy. A jack of all trades, except now she's starting to beat each of us in our own damn field...!'

So he tried to not give her anything to work with.

A lazy jab here. A half-hearted kick toward her lead leg there.

Nothing with weight behind it, nothing she could punish hard.

Just enough to see how she reacted... And her reactions were *terrifying*.

She slipped the jab like it was nothing, barely even acknowledging it, feet adjusting with absurd smoothness, her body simply dancing past it like it was nothing. The kick barely had time to exist before she'd shifted out of its line, her balance never wavering even a fraction.

This is another piece of the enigmatic puzzle that made no sense to him.

'Her balance is simply too good. It's like her core is somehow glued to the ground. I could understand if she had a gyro-implant or similar but she's fucking unaugmented...! How?!'

He kept probing anyway, because that was his job.

Because panic wouldn't help—thinking would.

She didn't overreact to any of his moves. Didn't even flinch. Neither bit hard on any of it.

She just kept closing, inch by inch, pressure building without her ever fully committing, and every time she moved, Tom saw it—the definition in her muscles beneath her gi, the way her body carried even more power now.

It wasn't obvious bulk, but more like everything unnecessary parts had been stripped away; like she had somehow been refined at a full-body level.

Stamina-wise, he at least knew he had the edge, which made him breathe a little lighter.

He had honestly not been sure before the fight, but seeing her close the distance now, still breathing slightly harder than would otherwise be expected from a fresh opponent, he was certain now.

This was, after all, her third bout in a row, and even with whatever freakish changes she had going on, fatigue would eventually set in.

It *had* to.

The problem was just, that if she decided to rush him? To really turn it on?

'I'm not sure I could stop her...'

Her speed alone made that obvious. A speed that could rival Kenzie's outside of her most impressive techniques. Add in the fact that she was sturdier now—*way* sturdier—and suddenly the margin for error shrank to something uncomfortably thin.

Yet the strangest part wasn't even any of that.

It was that Ms. Kanis was letting all of this happen without as much of a word.

If all of this really were some kind of performance enhancing drugs—*real* drugs, the kind Tom knew—there was no way the Grandmaster would've allowed it.

High-end combat stims came with tells. Side effects. Severe instability.

She'd shut it down immediately—but she *hadn't*.

'Which means whatever is going on with her isn't as simple...'

And that thought lingered in Tom's mind as he kept circling, jabbing, testing—watching her close the distance with that same calm, predatory patience, waiting to see when she'd finally decide to turn the pressure into something he might not be able to walk away from.

He ultimately decided that allowing her to feel him out had gone on long enough.

If he really did have the edge in stamina and technique—and he was pretty damn sure he did—then the worst thing he could do was let her dictate the pace.

She had raw speed, maybe raw power too. He still couldn't quite tell if she was actually matching his bionically enhanced strength or just getting close enough to make the difference uncomfortable.

But one thing was certain: She was human, unaugmented. And humans *gassed*.

So he turned the heat up.

He stepped in harder, started forcing exchanges instead of waiting for them.

Jabs came sharper now, kicks snapped with intent, angles shifting constantly as he tested her reactions again and again.

Each follow-up was adjusted on the fly—if she slipped left, he cut right next time.

If she ducked, he went high next to mix it up and catch her off-guard.

If she dodged back, he chased space instead of the strike.

It was controlled pressure, the kind he'd trained for years to apply, designed to make an opponent move more than they wanted to.

And she moved.

Lords, did she *move*.

The enigma responded to everything, not with refined counters or clever traps, but with pure, overwhelming physicality.

She darted in and out, answered his strikes with sudden bursts of speed, heavy kicks, sharp punches that came in at odd angles simply because she could get there in time. There was no subtlety to it—just acceleration and force layered on top of frightening coordination.

It should've worked in his favor. And *technically*, it did.

Tom deflected what he could, rolled with what he couldn't, trusted his bionics to soak the rest.

A kick slammed into his thigh and he felt it—*really* felt it—but his reinforced musculature took the worst of it. A punch clipped his shoulder, another glanced off his ribs.

Hard hits, sure, but not Jin-levels of hard; they were still manageable.

He stayed composed, breathing steady, letting the damage distribute instead of stack.

What bothered him was that, despite how hard he was pushing her, he never *once* managed to actually catch her off-balance.

Not a single stumble—not even a hitch in her footing.

Every time he thought he'd forced a bad angle or overextended her reach, she simply... handled it, *somehow*. Or she simply danced out of the way, immediately going into a recovery and resetting, ready to move again.

It was like trying to shove someone standing on perfect footing atop a ball—no matter how much force he applied, she never lost her footing for even a second.

More of that prior unease continued to creep in.

She was replying to his offense with nothing but speed and strength, no real technique behind it, and yet it was *working*.

Not enough to overwhelm him—*yet*—but enough to keep him honest.

'She should've slipped by now,' he thought grimly. 'That's how you gas someone out—you knock them off balance, force them into big, ugly recoveries, make every reset cost them more than it should. But there's just no unbalancing her...!'

Tom started to feel it before he fully understood it over the next few exchanges—his pressure stopped doing what it was supposed to do.

The rhythm he'd been forcing, the little micro-advantages he'd been stacking, started slipping through his fingers as Sera's movement started to tighten.

Her footwork got cleaner.

Her recoveries—if one could even call them that—shrank even further.

The wild, exploratory edges of her earlier bouts began smoothing out into something calculated and deliberate, and Tom's eyes widened as the realization hit him like a punch to the gut.

'Shit. No—no, don't you dare figure it out that fast...!'

But she was. Undeniably.

He could see it in the way she stopped overextending, in how her weight settled just right before each movement, in the way her reactions stopped being purely reactive and started being anticipatory again.

That freaky, post-breakdown technique was already starting to creep back in, piece by piece, and it scared the shit out of him.

She wasn't completely burning herself out anymore just to test her body, and while she was starting to breathe fairly heavily, he could tell that she was adapting faster than his plan could work.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck!' Tom swore internally and immediately cranked things up.

If gassing her out wasn't happening, then he needed to force an ending.

He started throwing real shots now—full-weight punches, heavy kicks meant to bruise and slow, not just probe. He lunged in harder, tried to crowd her space, even dipped low for a few desperate grappling attempts.

If he could drag her to the ground, even once, he could probably end it there.

Sera was still terrible on the mat—they all were. Jin had his cybernetics that he could get lucky with on the ground, but Kenzie was the only real exception to that rule thanks to her claws and genetic instincts, even if she still wasn't exactly a prodigee.

But Sera? Ground work was her *glaring* weakness by now.

Except she never let him get there.

Every grab slipped through his fingers. Every clinch dissolved before it could form.

She twisted out, stepped off-line, redirected with speed that made his stomach sink.

If he hadn't been running on bionics, hadn't been propped up by artificial stamina and reinforced joints and musculature, he would've been sucking air already.

And then she started pushing back.

Clean hits began sneaking through his guard.

A punch to the ribs that made him grunt and gasp.

A kick that landed harder than it had any right to, making the muscles deep in his leg burn.

Each impact carried more weight than before, more intent, and Tom felt the hurt start to stack up in a way he hadn't planned for; not this fast, at least.

'How the fuck do I win this...?' he thought wildly, barely ducking under one of her high kicks as it screamed past his head, the displaced air tugging at his hair. That one felt like it would've taken his jaw. 'She's faster. Her power's at least on par with mine. And her technique—fuck—it's snapping back into that impossible control she had before. Is there anything left I can do...?'

And the worst part was—yeah. There was. There always was.

In close-quarters combat, when size and weight weren't overwhelmingly stacked against you, there was one ugly, fairly-reliable way to force an ending.

One option that didn't care about power, finesse or style—just raw commitment.

He grimaced internally.

Ms. Kanis was absolutely going to tear him apart for it.

'Unless it's my only shot,' he argued with himself, deflecting a snap punch by a hair's breadth and stumbling back as a follow-up kick slammed toward his already bruised ribs, forcing him to retreat even further. 'And unless I suddenly spot some fatal flaw in her movement pattern—'

Another kick whistled past his guard, straight into his other side, making him grunt.

'Yeah. That's not happening. Fuck.'

With his back nearly to the wall, decision made whether he liked it or not, Tom sucked in a deep breath and waited.

'Let her commit. Let her throw again...'

On the next kick, he *lunged*.

There was one surefire way to end a fight like this: Throw your entire body into the opponent, drive them down with you, and finish it on the ground.

No defense on your end. No elegance. No half-measures.

The problem was that it was brutally dangerous for the one initiating it.

A faster opponent could sidestep it, if mistimed. A stronger one could stuff the attempt and turn it around. But if you timed it right—if you threw everything you had into it, at the exact moment they couldn't disengage—

Then it stopped being as much of a gamble.

Her kick landed square in his chest just as he surged forward.

The impact was brutal—bone-deep—knocking the breath clean out of him in a harsh, involuntary wheeze, but his momentum didn't stop.

It couldn't, at this point.

He slammed into her—hard, shoulder and torso crashing into Sera's chest with enough force to stagger and topple them both, her sharp, surprised cry tearing out as they went down together in a messy tangle of limbs.

Tom wrapped his arms around her, locking them tight around her torso, crushingly close, refusing to give her even an inch of space. Pain flared everywhere—his ribs, his lungs screaming for air—but he forced his focus to stay glued to the fight.

'Just hold. Just drag her down. Just don't let go...!'

In the space of a heartbeat, however, somehow everything went wrong as Sera *twisted*.

It wasn't some kind of strategic movement, nor a raw contest of strength or flexibility.

It was just... *wrong*.

Her body contorted and rotated in a way that made no sense, one heel still barely grazing the mat as she morphed like something boneless, slipping through his grip before his arms could close fully around her.

His hands suddenly grasped empty air.

She hit the ground first—just as he'd planned—but not beneath him. Instead, because she had slipped free at the last second, she had landed slightly to the side of him.

And she didn't stay there.

Using the momentum of the fall, she rolled backward in a smooth, almost lazy-looking recovery, spine curving as her boots skimmed the mat once before she flopped straight back onto her feet.

Tom had hit the mat a split second later than she had, but he hadn't moved.

He simply lay there on his stomach, chest heaving, lungs burning, staring up at her with wide, disbelieving eyes as she settled into a ready stance above him.

'This is impossible...!'

Miss K's voice cracked through the moment. "That's enough! Bout's over."

And Tom didn't even bother arguing, he just kept staring up at the monster in front of him...