

Chapter 119 - Limit

Figuring out how to naturally incorporate *perfect control* into my fighting style was proving to be way harder than I'd expected.

If someone had asked me literally a day ago if I'd be able to come up with practical, real-time moves with full control over my muscles, I would've answered with an easy "*hell yeah*."

But standing here, mid-fight, trying to actually do it?

Yeah. Not so easy after all.

Didn't help that Jin and Tom had started swinging at Kenzie and me every chance they got, mixing their strikes into their own fight whenever an opening presented itself. I had dragged us closer to their brawl to distract Kenzie a bit more and keep her in check—which was working, sure—but I was also paying the price for it.

Every few seconds, I had to shift focus—dodging an incoming hit, blocking a stray strike, or dealing with somebody trying to third-party me. And in those brief moments between engagements, I was scrambling to figure out anything remotely useful to do with my control.

It was slow going.

But then again...

'If we weren't in the middle of a free-for-all like this—with all the pressure and unpredictability—would I even know if anything I came up with worked in a real fight?'

Probably not.

Anyone could sit around theorycrafting crazy, flashy moves when they had perfect control at their disposal. But moves that actually worked in a fight? In a life-or-death—or in this case, point-or-no-point—situation?

That was an entirely different challenge.

We were about two minutes into the final round now, and while I hadn't completely cracked the code, I had managed to snag a total of two points off Kenzie without giving up any myself. More importantly, I'd kept myself out of danger from Jin and Tom as well—resulting in a solid two points net gain overall.

Kenzie, though? She'd started playing the game differently.

Instead of just trading with me—and losing, as a result of her split focus—she had started hopping in and out of our engagements, taking quick third-party shots at Jin and Tom whenever she spotted an opportunity.

Something I hadn't even tried yet.

I was still too rigid, too mechanical.

I could feel it—those last remnants of control still holding my muscles in check, still preventing me from fully committing to bigger, looser movements by having everything be back on auto-pilot mode and only clamping down when I actually intended to do something.

But I knew I'd have to break past that. And Soon.

Because while I didn't really care about skipping muscle training—hell, I'd take any excuse for more Body and Reflex experience—I sure as fuck wasn't about to hand over the win without a fight.

Not after what Miss K had said earlier.

Not after that level of shade in front of the rest of the group.

But first, I had to figure out how to use [Elemental Balance].

As much as I wanted to shake off the lingering embarrassment of being dead last, getting this Perk under control—and actually making use of the so-called “perfect control” it provided—*had* to take priority.

I could always claw back my pride later.

But the Operator meeting? That was coming up fast. And I couldn't afford to go into it half-baked.

If the Operator expected me to show off somehow, I could not fumble. There weren't going to be second chances—Vega wasn't about to just hand me another free connection. And it's not like I had a backup plan.

The only other person I could even *consider* turning to was Mr. Stirling.

And that? Not a great option in my eyes.

He was tied too closely to Valeria, at least professionally.

Even if he maybe *wouldn't* intentionally rat me out, and that was a *big* maybe, I had no idea how much he would actually share with her—or worse, how much in general he noticed. The last thing I needed was him getting too curious about me and accidentally tipping her off that something was... *off* about me, by accidentally looking in areas where Valeria might catch him.

No. This was my best shot, and with the dojo session wrapping up after this round, I was almost out of time for trial and error.

I clenched my jaw. ‘*Guess I have no other choice...*’

I hadn't wanted to rely on the System for things like this. I'd told myself I'd keep it at arm's length, that I'd handle things my way for once. But as the saying went—beggars can't be choosers. If I was going to figure this out, I had to fully commit or risk being too late; *again*.

Slap!

I blocked another one of Kenzie's rapid strikes, feeling the impact ripple through my forearm. She was already darting away before I could even think about throwing a counter—classic Kenzie.

'Alright, now's as good a time as any, I guess...'

I took the half-second of breathing room to do what I really didn't want to—but had to.

I hesitated for just a moment, carefully piecing together the right wording. Then, finally, I flipped the mental lever I'd been avoiding like the plague since yesterday.

'Ego, find ways to use the "perfect control" from the Perk in a real fight like this—without seriously injuring or killing anyone in this group. Go as hard as you can, without crossing that line. And do not rip my body to shreds in the process.'

I didn't actually need to address the Ego so directly, but saying it in my head made it feel more concrete. More intentional. It made it easier to form the correct kind of command, when phrased like an order like this—at least I thought so.

With the order locked in, I flipped the switch and activated my Ego.

Instantly, my mind stilled.

It was like someone had pumped liquid ice through my veins.

The lingering burn of exhaustion? Gone.

The dull ache from an hour of getting smacked around the mat? Nonexistent.

Everything snapped into focus—sharper, cleaner, controlled.

It was my first time really engaging my Ego for something serious since its upgrade to rank five. The brief activation earlier in Miss K's office barely counted—it hadn't had much to do there. But now? Now I felt the difference.

It was somehow *heavier*.

Like the dial had been cranked up another 10~, maybe 20%.

The suppression of wandering thoughts was more iron-clad than before.

The clarity of my surroundings had also gotten a noticeable upgrade, allowing for me to notice things around me far more effortlessly than before.

The crystal-clear, mechanical efficiency of my thoughts and the plans it was creating at a rapid-pace was similarly noticeably improved.

It was impressive, to say the least.

And it was also terrifying, just how much the simple flick of the lever on my Ego affected me by now. But I didn't have time to sit with that realization, because before I could even process and truly internalize it, Ego was already moving.

It had a job to do. And it wasn't wasting a single second.

Just like that, I wasn't just *reacting* anymore—I was analyzing. Refining. Testing.

It started immediately by filtering through potential plans at blistering speed, running micro-adjustments through my movements before I even had time to fully process them.

My foot placement, the angle of my weight shifts, the minutiae of my strikes and dodges—everything was getting optimized, broken down and rebuilt in real-time.

And Kenzie noticed almost immediately.

Her ears flicked sharply as she lunged at me again, but this time—I met her head-on.

No more just reaction on instinct.

I pressed into her attacks, my movements honed down to a frightening precision—Ego making the perfect control work on my legwork, I could tell. Every dodge was smoother, tighter—every counter sharper, aimed with precise intent rather than just scrambling to throw out a punch on instinct.

Kenzie's eyes widened just a fraction before she was forced to twist mid-air, barely avoiding a counter-strike she hadn't expected me to throw.

She landed lightly, eyes locking onto mine with something that wasn't just surprise—it was *recognition*. She knew something had changed now.

And she wasn't the only one to notice.

Jin and Tom were still caught in their own fight, but as they had done every so often, one of them would break off just long enough to test me.

Jin was the first to come barreling in shortly after Kenzie's attempt, a quick, crushing hook meant to pressure me into a bad spot and potentially snag a point.

Ego barely gave me time to register the attack before my body was already reacting.

I didn't just dodge like I normally would have done and easily been able to—it wasn't that dangerous of a hit. Instead, I didn't move at all and then abruptly shifted my weight at the exact right moment, stretching the timing of my dodge to its absolute limit.

The perfect muscle control from [Elemental Balance] let my Ego hold that moment far longer than should have been possible, baiting Jin into overcommitting just slightly at the thought of potentially having caught me off-guard.

His own momentum betrayed him—his balance faltering for just a fraction of a second, his stance thrown just enough off-kilter.

But before I could even think about capitalizing on the tiny opening—

Kenzie was already there.

She had seen Jin's opening and pounced on it instantly. Before I even finished registering it, she had whipped in, landing a precise strike to his shoulder—tagging him cleanly for another point.

But she wasn't done there.

In the very same fluid movement, her momentum shifted, pivoting sharply on one foot as she threw a brutal kick straight at my chest—keeping me back, denying me the same opening she'd just stolen mid-move.

My Ego forced my muscles into an unnatural yet flawless back-arch, my body barely dipping out of range just as the vicious swipe of her leg grazed harmlessly past me.

She'd scored a point on Jin and completely denied me mine—all in a single blink of an eye.

Kenzie darted back again, a sly, sharp-toothed grin flashing across her face just as Jin recovered enough to swing at her, only for his fist to hit empty air.

“Fucking stand still—!” He cursed under his breath, irritation clear in his eyes that were trying to burn Kenzie and I to a crisp.

I barely had time to process his frustrations, however, before Tom suddenly appeared on my left, firing off a tight, efficient jab aimed directly at my jaw.

Ego reacted instantly, the crystal-clear order of operations it provided slicing through the chaos like a blade. It didn't just make me dodge the hit—it calculated the jab's trajectory, determined optimal counters, and redirected every muscle fiber with pinpoint precision to that exact outcome.

My head tilted slightly aside, just enough for Tom's fist to skim past harmlessly.

But this time, Ego wasn't content with mere evasion and returning to the status-quo.

It refined my style further, pushing me *into* the chaos, making use of [Elemental Balance]'s benefit of both perfect muscle control and absolute balance to pivot, arch and slide seamlessly into counterattacks and positioning advantages.

Each adjustment was tiny—almost unnoticeable, despite my best efforts to mentally chart what it was doing for my own purposes in the future—yet their cumulative effects cascaded through all of my movements, amplifying my precision and effectiveness with every passing second.

And suddenly, without quite knowing how, I found myself right at the heart of the melee.

Tom on my left, carefully maneuvering for another angle; Jin directly ahead, fists up and eyes burning with annoyance; and Kenzie flitting unpredictably around us all, a constant threat.

We'd shifted from our earlier setup of two semi-controlled duels into a full-blown, chaotic four-way brawl; with me right at the centre.

And being right at the center meant I'd become the *prime* target.

Hits flew at me from every side, easily a solid twenty-to-thirty percent more frequently than anyone else was dealing with.

Tom swung in from my blind spots, Jin came repeatedly barreling head-on with brute force, and Kenzie darted in and out of range with lightning-quick strikes, harassing me relentlessly.

But that was *exactly* what my Ego had wanted to achieve.

Every incoming strike was more data, more chances to test, adjust, and push my new-found limits. At first, it only tweaked my stance, timing each dodge by holding until the absolute last second—baiting out overcommitments from my attackers. I moved fluidly, weaving and pivoting just slightly closer or farther, subtly manipulating the tempo to my advantage and trying to create openings where previously there hadn't been any.

But as the data points stacked up, Ego grew more and more daring.

My defensive pivots sharpened into precise counterattacks, heavily borrowing from Miss K's blue shard demonstrations.

And while I was nowhere near trained in them... I didn't need to be.

Not anymore.

I had *felt* the muscle movements before through the shard—experienced them firsthand through my cybernetic interface. A few repetitions of that feeling was enough now.

I didn't have to go through the slow, painstaking process of committing them to muscle memory. Not anymore. Now, I could simply mirror the exact movements once I understood them, replicating them flawlessly with the sheer control [Elemental Balance] provided.

And thus, Ego pushed further, tapping into the other dormant parts of my hard-earned three levels in [Martial Arts], stitching everything together into something dangerously seamless—rapid-fire jabs snapped forward like vipers, powerful kicks lashed out, cracking through the air with a seriously satisfying weight and impact behind them.

Jin grunted in surprise as one of my perfectly timed kicks struck his guard hard enough to knock him briefly off balance, his eyes widening in surprise, while Tom's calm composure briefly faltered when a reactionary jab of mine slipped past his usually impeccable guard and managed to glance his jawline.

The aggression and precision kept ramping up as I got more and more comfortable with the situation, my movements growing bolder still as my Ego finally started incorporating something entirely new—small grapples and throws.

I slid into Jin's incoming charge, redirecting his massive momentum with a simple, effortless twist of my hips and shoulders, sending him stumbling right into Tom's path who had tried to repay my earlier grazing hit.

Kenzie lunged forward with claws extended, only to find herself caught mid-stride as I neatly guided her own momentum forward, dropping her briefly to the mat before she rebounded and recovered with a startled hiss before I could take advantage of it.

Each success fueled Ego's hypothesis engine, every small victory turning into larger experiments, which in-turn, lead to even larger experiments.

The previously careful adjustments gave way to calculated aggression, testing bigger and bolder moves, turning the melee into my own personal laboratory.

It wasn't perfect yet, of course—each grapple or throw still had some rough edges as I could rarely follow-up on them in time to collect a point before my attention was needed on defending against another attack—but each iteration *tightened*, becoming smoother and increasingly intuitive with each use.

Slowly, steadily, Ego reshaped my fighting style, synthesizing the perfect balance and flawless muscle control from [Elemental Balance] with my hard-earned martial arts fundamentals, shifting from pure reaction to controlled, proactive aggression.

And as the chaotic brawl continued to rage around me, I suddenly realized that I wasn't just surviving at its center anymore—I was starting to *dominate* the mat.

Sweat poured off me, my body long past any reasonable threshold of exhaustion. I had pushed myself to the absolute limit—probably beyond it. But the sheer rush of rapid progress, of feeling myself evolve in real-time, was exhilarating in a way I couldn't ignore.

Even with Ego's suppression dulling the high, the thrill of it still bled through.

A downright manic grin spread across my face as I locked eyes with Kenzie—just as sweat-drenched, just as exhausted, but grinning back with sharp teeth flashing.

Even Jin and Tom, despite their usually contrasting opinions, were clearly enjoying themselves—the fire in their eyes, the sharp edges of their smiles, all proof that this fight had turned into something more than just a spar.

And just like that, the brief moment of shared understanding passed, and we launched back into the chaos again.

Points flew absolutely everywhere.

Most of them came from quick opportunistic strikes—Jin hammering into Tom as he dodged away from Kenzie, Tom sniping me as I shifted my weight around Jin's relentless swings, and Kenzie darting through openings we'd created, her speed utterly overwhelming and downright unfair with how many points she managed to snag that weren't really hers to take.

Jin remained the singular exception to the opportunistic trend, bulldozing his way into points whenever he managed to find just enough breathing room to commit fully to one of his brutal punches.

Each time he smashed through someone's guard, the sheer force behind it cracked our postures wide open, making us reel, netting him opportunities for clean points with a quick follow-up jab—provided Kenzie didn't intercept at the last second and steal the reward out from under him, a frequent enough occurrence that I had caught Jin openly growling in frustration more than just a handful of times by now.

But Ego pushed me even harder, constantly driving me to exploit the relentless pressure, refining my style into sharper, bolder, more ambitious experiments.

Each attack against me became fuel—another hypothesis to test, another move to refine.

And at some point, it seemed like something had finally *clicked* into place.

Jin came at me again, fury and Kenzie-bound frustration building behind a heavy, winding punch—a familiar, destructive blow he'd already thrown dozens of times today.

But this time, Ego had not just an acceptable, but a good answer.

Instead of dodging, I moved into it at the last moment, twisting my body in almost unnatural ways, fluidly guiding the immense momentum he brought with a twist of my hips and shoulders, before grabbing his arm and *pulling*.

Jin's face flashed surprise, his entire body flipping over mine as I sent him crashing into the mat with a loud, satisfying **thud**.

Before I even had a chance to savor it however, Kenzie rushed me again, her claws flicking toward my side.

My Ego reacted instantly—pivoting and shifting my stance into an evasive pirouette with impossible precision.

Her claws missed by mere millimeters despite the really well-timed attack.

As she darted away, I caught Tom trying to go in for an attack on the escaping Kenzie.

My mind was liquid ice, despite the rapidly moving room and images from the pirouette's movement, allowing me to capitalize immediately by sending out a pinpoint kick mid-spin to clip Tom's ankle, sending him stumbling awkwardly to the ground.

Kenzie hesitated for the first time, her breathing labored, eyes widening slightly as she registered Tom's fall—and my subsequent shift towards her.

I had realised by now that if I didn't bring her down or get her out of the picture first, I would not be able to capitalize on any of these points.

She tried to dart back, but exhaustion had finally started to blunt her blinding speed, even if just slightly. But that was enough.

My Ego sensed it—this was the moment.

My muscles tensed in perfect obedience, every fiber coordinated as I lunged forward, smoothly covering the short distance between us with a rapid dash.

Kenzie twisted in panic, trying desperately to evade, but it was too late—I tagged her back with a kick just hard enough to throw off her balance, sending her tumbling to the ground.

She rolled deftly and sprang back to her feet with a startled hiss, breathing heavily, ears pinned back, her earlier confidence giving way to a wary stare.

In that brief moment of quiet, everyone froze.

Jin pushed himself slowly off the mat, face red with exhaustion and frustration.

Tom steadied himself back upright, breathing hard, eyeing me warily.

Kenzie, still panting, narrowed her eyes sharply, recognizing something had fundamentally changed.

Meanwhile, I stood firmly planted at the center of the mat, adrenaline surging, heart hammering in my chest, Ego in absolute control as the rest of the group toward me as the main target.

“Very nice, very nice,” Miss K’s voice echoed through the hall, cutting through the tension. We all flicked our attention her way—a head tilt here, Kenzie’s ears flicking towards here there—but not for a second did we break eye contact with one another.

The standoff held, the fragile balance teetering on the edge of something explosive.

“We’re almost done for today, and it looks like our dear Sera has *finally* decided to join the rest of you on the mat.” Miss K’s teasing lilt carried through the room, smug amusement layered thick in her tone. “Nice to have you be part of the session, Sera. Maybe next time you could join us *earlier* rather than waiting until the final stretch, but hey... Better late than never, right?”

A slow grin pulled at my lips, only growing wider as I caught the unmistakable hint of excitement and relief beneath her words.

She could tell.

She might not know about the how—my Ego—but she saw exactly what she had been waiting for: I was getting the hang of this.

“As for the points...” Miss K continued, shifting gears. “Tom is still in the lead, but only two points ahead of Kenzie now. Sera clawed her way back, just two behind Kenzie, and Jin’s sitting last with only one point separating him from Sera. The field is tightening up—as it should be.”

Then she dropped the bomb.

“That said, since Sera seems awake now, let’s make sure she stays awake: Any hit on Sera awards double points going forward. Any hit Sera lands is also double points, of course.”

My breath hitched.

“There are three minutes left until the session ends, so…” Miss K clapped her hands together, the sound snapping through the air like a gunshot.

Clap!

The moment the sound rang out, the stalemate shattered.

We had already been conditioned to move the second that clap hit. Pavlov’d into immediate action.

Nobody hesitated. Nobody wasted even a fraction of a second.

All three of them—Tom, Jin, Kenzie—rushed me at once.

I had no time to think. No time to process Miss K’s insane game-changer.

All I could do—was act.

Chaos descended instantly.

Fists, claws, and kicks hurtled toward me from every direction, giving my Ego barely a fraction of a second to react, pushing it into complete overdrive. My body twisted instinctively, muscle groups snapping into precise positions as my Ego desperately crunched through dozens of potential counters and evasions at once.

But even with all that perfect calculation, the sheer intensity forced me back into raw instinct more often than not, falling back on familiar patterns and muscle memory.

Kenzie slashed at me, her claws narrowly grazing past as I threw up a last-second block.

Before I could retaliate, Jin barreled in from my left, his massive fist swinging at my ribs. I surged forward, shifting Jin’s momentum just enough to send him crashing into Tom instead, buying me a heartbeat of breathing room.

But Kenzie was relentless—already leaping back in, claws flashing.

My arms snapped up defensively, absorbing her blows in quick succession, the sharp slap and crunch of contact filling the dojo, alongside our gasping, labored breaths.

The spar turned into a complete blur of motion, sound, and pure instinct.

Slaps, crunches, and smacks echoed again and again as we circled and lunged, everyone locked in a singular pace: Full tilt.

Occasionally, one of them would briefly peel off to snag an easy point off someone else, but their focus always snapped right back to me—too tempting a target for those double points

and, maybe even more importantly, keeping me from scoring double as well. A solid ninety percent of their pressure stayed trained on me, relentlessly pushing me into the defensive.

Despite my Ego's best efforts, hits kept landing.

One after another—Tom's precise strikes slipped through gaps in my guard, Kenzie's blindingly quick attacks left scratches and stinging bruises, and Jin's crushing punches forced my footing to falter repeatedly.

Every blow felt like it drained away another sliver of my already depleted reserves.

But I wasn't *completely* defenseless.

Kenzie darted a fraction too close, and my Ego made me capitalise instantly, sending a snapping kick straight into her side—earning two crucial points.

Jin overextended one of his punches; my Ego smoothly redirected his momentum and sent him stumbling forward, landing a swift, tight jab for another two.

Even Tom, usually meticulous in his defense, made the rare mistake of moving slightly off rhythm. In that split second of vulnerability, my Ego saw the opening and surged once more, breaking through Tom's perfectly crafted guard with rapid-fire strikes to claim even more points.

The clock wound down, seconds stretching into frantic eternities as the relentless 3v1 kept on.

My Ego was pulling every trick it had, muscle fibers screaming from exhaustion, movements growing desperate.

Another frantic exchange broke out: Kenzie lunged at me, and Ego reacted instantly, gripping her arm mid-lunge and hurling her body into Tom, sending them both sprawling onto the mat. Jin charged in at the same time, one of his brutal punches roaring toward me—my Ego redirected his fist harmlessly into thin air.

In that moment, I saw my chance.

With Kenzie and Tom out of the picture and Jin unbalanced, it was the perfect—and likely only—chance to get a six-pointer.

I planted my foot, winding up a massive, heavy punch straight from Miss K's blue shard demonstration, throwing everything left into a devastating counterattack—

—but the instant my muscles surged forward, something inside me ***snapped***.

All at once, my legs buckled.

My vision exploded into dizzying spirals, the world tilting sideways.

Pain, exhaustion, and dizziness overwhelmed me simultaneously, and I crashed onto my knees before collapsing face-down onto the mat. Everything spun wildly, my vision blurred, and the sounds around me dulled into muffled echoes.

I lay there, struggling to catch my breath as darkness crowded the edges of my vision.

'What... What the hell just happened?'

My sluggish brain tried desperately to piece things together, but my body simply wouldn't respond. Darkness crept into the edges of my vision, rapidly pulling me toward unconsciousness.

'Wha—'

Before I could start forming the thought, a rush of pure oxygen abruptly flooded into my lungs, jolting my eyes wide open as my brain got the long-overdue hit it had been desperately screaming for.

Miss K knelt beside me, a small cylindrical device in her hand, its nozzle disappearing between my lips.

Slowly—then all at once—feeling surged back into my limbs.

Pain, exhaustion, and the unmistakable, fiery burn of having utterly obliterated my body far beyond any safe measure. But that wasn't what grabbed my attention most.

What really hit me was the fact that I felt all these sensations completely *raw*, totally unfiltered.

'My Ego turned off...?' The realization hit with a mixture of curiosity and concern. *'How...?'*

I reached mentally for the lever controlling it. Still intact. I nudged it lightly, as if to reactivate Ego, and felt only a gentle resistance—nothing permanently damaged, at least.

'Does Ego have a limit, after all, then?'

I'd pushed it harder than I ever had before. Even the madness of the Valir incident hadn't demanded as much raw calculation and rapid-fire reaction as the relentless bombardment of data it had just sifted through in the last few minutes alone.

Honestly, the idea that Ego had an energy ceiling—some sort of finite resource that could actually run out—was way more comforting than I'd ever admit out loud.

I couldn't really put it into words why either, but it definitely was.

Before I could delve any deeper, Miss K's strong arms slipped under me, effortlessly scooping me up off the mat like I weighed nothing. For a split second, I considered wrestling free and insisting I walk on my own... but considering every muscle in my body currently felt like jelly mixed with broken glass, I quickly dismissed the idea.

'Better not.'

She carried me to the benches and gently propped me against the wall before shoving an open bottle into my hands. "Drink this."

I took the bottle, my shaky hands barely cooperating and requiring both of my arms to work together, and lifted it slowly to my lips. The moment I tasted it, I recognized Miss K's "high-tier hydration," and immediately started chugging it down—responsibly.

Miss K watched me carefully, arms crossed loosely.

"Looks like we finally found your limit, huh?" she asked with a lopsided grin, though the faint crease between her brows betrayed her genuine concern. "You feeling alright?"

I hesitated for a second.

Was I? I had just collapsed hardcore in the middle of a spar—literally face-planted into the mat. But then again... I had deliberately pushed myself beyond any reasonable boundary.

My Ego had taken me to the absolute brink, fully testing the limits without ever crossing the lines I'd laid out for it—no torn muscles, no permanent injuries, nothing that would require the Rest Function, or worse, to fix.

It had, however, also seemingly calculated Miss K's presence into its little equation. It had known damn well she wouldn't let me leave the dojo as a complete wreck, so it had confidently pushed me way past what I'd initially wanted.

Which was partially on me, really.

But either way, I couldn't deny the results: Ego had done some seriously good work getting me solid data on the whole [Elemental Balance] situation.

So I nodded slowly.

I was definitely feeling alright with this...