

Chapter 117 - Free-For-All

Seeing Tom shift back toward the center of the mat, I took the chance to step back a few paces, catching my breath.

Jin had been throwing some serious punches ever since landing that brutal hit on Tom earlier in the round, and keeping up with him had been more of a challenge than I'd expected.

His speed wasn't anything crazy, but the sheer weight behind each punch made dodging them a pain in the ass.

That said, I was *finally* starting to get a handle on this whole muscle control thing.

I'd already figured out against Kenzie that trying to actively control every damn muscle in my body was not the move. It was slowing me down, forcing me to consciously think through movements that should've been instinctive.

And not only was that slower, but it was also mentally exhausting.

It was like suddenly realizing I had a new limb—one I'd always had but had never paid attention to. And now that I could control it, I had to constantly manage it, or it'd just get in the way.

But then it had also hit me—this wasn't actually anything *new*.

This whole "absolute control" thing? My body had already been doing it, just subconsciously.

That was the entire point of muscle memory and the subconscious mind, after all.

The Perk hadn't technically added anything—it had just revealed that part of my subconscious and handed me the wheel.

I just hadn't figured out how to let go of that wheel yet.

Still, I was getting there, slowly.

Getting my ass handed to me in real time was a pretty good motivator for figuring things out faster than I would've probably liked, but at just the right speed that I knew I needed to.

I'd already given up at least three or four points to Jin just from reacting too slowly—every time I got tagged, it became painfully obvious which muscle groups I was still gripping onto too tightly. But once I recognized them, I could release them, letting them go back to working automatically.

That was my whole strategy right now: Let everything go, then take back control over the things I actually needed.

The problem? The Perk, as usual, hadn't come with a manual.

It had just dumped all these invisible control levers in my lap, slapped me on the back, and said “*Good luck, sucker.*”

And unfortunately, it wasn’t as easy as just thinking “stop controlling all muscles.”

I had to pinpoint *exactly* where in my mind those controls were before I could let them go. And so far? The only way I’d found to do that was good old-fashioned trial and error.

Which meant I had a lot more punches to eat before I got this figured out.

But it wasn’t *all* bad.

Sure, getting my ass handed to me was never fun, but the whole process of reverse-engineering my own muscle control was actually giving me a pretty solid mental map of how my body worked in a fight. I could feel the way different muscle groups interacted, how shifts in weight distribution affected my balance, how every little movement played into the next.

And that? That was something I could definitely use to my advantage later—assuming I got some free time to experiment.

Particularly when it came to the [Martial Arts] Skill and its muscle memory downloads. If I could engage with those movements *consciously* instead of just letting them run on autopilot, maybe I could learn from them in a way that most people couldn’t.

That was my initial theory so far, at least.

But all that was for later.

Right now? I just needed to make it through this damn sparring session without getting absolutely *bodied*. I had to remain at least functional for tomorrow’s Operator meeting or all the stress I had put myself through over the past weeks would’ve been for nothing.

Luckily, it looked like Tom had decided I wasn’t worth his time anymore—or maybe he was just pissed about Jin landing that hit on him earlier. Either way, he was going straight for Jin now, laser-focused on returning the favor.

With the two of them fully engaged in their own little slugfest, I took the opportunity to *not* be the center of attention for once.

Sticking to the edges of their fight, I moved carefully, looking for openings to sneak in a hit or two without drawing too much focus. The absolute last thing I needed right now was to make either of them think I was targeting them specifically.

That was the kind of mistake that would immediately put a massive target on my back.

Jin was fighting aggressively, as expected, but compared to when he had been throwing those massive haymakers at me, he looked way sharper against Tom. His footwork was tighter, more controlled—none of that full-weight, planted-foot bullshit that left him vulnerable after a missed punch.

Now, he was moving light on his feet, shifting smoothly between steps, his dodges looking a lot less like brute-force leaning and a lot more like actual technique.

It was clear he respected Tom a hell of a lot more than he respected me, at least when it came to combat—not that I could blame him for that, but it still stung.

Tom, for his part, was his usual calculated self.

Every movement was intentional, every punch measured—he wasn't throwing out attacks just for the hell of it. His strikes weren't as heavy as Jin's, but they were placed perfectly to disrupt momentum and exploit any weaknesses in Jin's stance.

Every time Jin committed too hard to an attack, Tom was already one step ahead, moving into a counter before the cybernetic brute could even think about recovery.

The problem that I was dealing with, as always, was me.

I knew my body could move faster than this. I knew I was capable of reacting better, dodging quicker, doing more—but I still couldn't quite make it happen.

Every time I tried to move the way I used to, my body hesitated for a split second too long, like it was second-guessing itself. Like there were too many moving parts and I was trying to control all of them at once.

I was still holding too many damn reins.

But that didn't mean I was out of the fight.

I kept moving, probing for an opening, forcing myself to let go of control where I could, trusting my instincts in places that felt safe to do so. I threw out a few exploratory jabs at both of them, testing reactions, keeping myself in the mix without overcommitting.

Most of them were dodged or blocked without much effort, but that was fine—I wasn't looking to win this fight.

I was just trying to figure my body out.

One thing that had been *seriously* useful throughout this whole dojo session, however?

[Elemental Balance] completely shutting down any subconscious targeting.

That other part of me—the one that had almost gotten me into serious trouble earlier—was buried under the sheer amount of manual control I had to exert just to move properly.

Nothing happened unless I gave myself the explicit go-ahead.

And the best part? The more I fought, the less I had to fight that side of me.

When I was sparring with Kenzie, I had to double-check every single punch, making sure that part of me wasn't trying to break my promise to Miss K.

I had to manually adjust the force behind my strikes, making sure I wasn't putting too much weight into anything dangerous. But now? That internal battle was rapidly fading.

At this point, I barely had to override those impulses anymore.

One in every five or six attacks, maybe, I'd catch my muscles trying to act on their own. But even then, shutting it down was getting easier too, more automatic, the more often I did it.

Every exchange, every dodge, every blow—it was like I was grinding that instinct down, forcing it to retreat back into the depths of whatever hell it had come from.

Jin fired off another hasty punch, and I backed off once more.

I wasn't trying to go toe-to-toe with either of them—I was still biding my time, letting them clash while I studied their movements, searching for openings, adjusting to my own body.

But then, finally, I saw it: An opening, large enough for my current self.

Tom swung a tight side-hook, aimed right for my ribs. I knew I could dodge it. I felt the window of movement open up in my mind.

But my body still lagged behind, just slightly. That hesitation, that half-second of delay.

I could move faster. I knew I could.

But that slight delay, as I realised that there was still a group of muscles not in automatic mode, would ruin everything.

So I made a split-second decision.

Instead of forcing the perfect dodge too late, I instead opted for a full-on tilt dodge, leaning hard into the movement. I let my body stagger as the hook barely missed me, stumbling just slightly—*just enough* to make it seem like I had lost my balance.

Except I hadn't.

[Elemental Balance] didn't allow me to.

My footing was still perfect, my weight distributed exactly as I wanted, even if it looked like I was stumbling uncontrollably away from the hit.

It was a complete feint—one that Jin clearly fell for.

Seeing me stumble, he immediately shifted his focus, thinking Tom had just knocked me out of position. He adjusted his stance ever so slightly, preparing to pivot towards Tom to take advantage of the hit he had thrown against me.

And in that exact moment, I struck.

Abruptly snapping forward, fixing my stumbling movement back into a perfectly composed stance, I drove my fist straight into Jin's exposed ribs—solid, clean, and completely unexpected.

A satisfying *thud* rang out as my punch connected, Jin's eyes widening in realization a half-second too late.

A rush of exhilaration flooded through me.

'Fucking finally!'

I had planned something mid-fight, executed it exactly as I intended, and it actually worked.

No weird lag this time, no body hesitating against my will.

Just a clean, calculated move landing because I *made* it happen.

I couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face as Jin staggered back, looking at me like I'd just grown a second head. Even Tom, ever composed, had a flicker of surprise cross his face—but only for a split second.

But then, just like that, he snapped right back into action.

He was on me immediately, throwing a rapid barrage of punches and kicks that I struggled to keep up with. My hands moved to block, my feet danced to evade—but I felt the struggle, the gap between what my brain knew I could do and what my body was actually executing.

But the difference to earlier was—I wasn't getting hit or stumbling completely out of rhythm.

I wasn't failing to dodge. I wasn't mistiming my blocks. I wasn't flailing.

My movements weren't fluent yet, but they were working.

The knowledge from [Martial Arts] Skill's third level was there, buried deep in my muscles, and my control was finally loosening to the point where I could actually instinctively apply it, instead of having to try and order it consciously.

I was getting there.

Abruptly—Jin's chrome-coated fist came racing toward Tom's ribs from seemingly nowhere.

Tom barely caught it in time, twisting at the last second to block the punch, but the sheer force still sent him stumbling back, away from both myself and Jin.

'Now is my chance!'

I flipped straight into offense, diving low against Jin while he was still focused on Tom.

My leg swept out in a wide arc, aiming to take his out from under him—but this time, he was already expecting it. With a sharp **crack**, our shins collided, his limb stopping my kick dead in its tracks.

But I wasn't done.

Instead of backing off like I had the entire fight, I instead rushed him, flipping the script entirely. Jin's stance shifted ever so slightly towards Tom—he had anticipated me retreating again.

'Bad call, Jin!'

I threw a full-on haymaker, exactly the way Miss K's blue shard had demonstrated, driving my fist straight into his hastily thrown-up cybernetic arms with a sharp slap of flesh meeting reinforced metal.

Jin stumbled back from the sheer impact, his footing momentarily thrown off.

That was when I heard it—Tom's breathing. Heavy. Labored.

He was starting to get winded.

Instinct flared. I spun on the spot, already forcing my muscles to drop me low into a crouch—assuming he was about to throw a punch at my head or upper-midsection.

As my head spun around to get a look at him, my eyes widened—I had miscalculated.

His foot was already racing straight toward my lowered face.

My mind scrambled, searching desperately for an out—some trick, some counter, *anything*.

But the kick was already there, too close, too fast.

No time. No finesse.

I frantically yanked at every control I had over my body, throwing every muscle that might be useful into action all at once, not bothering to make any distinctions aside from “will this make me move?”.

A full-body explosion of instinct, desperation, and sheer dumb luck.

The result? Absolute chaos.

My limbs flailed wildly, contorting into something that could barely be called a dodge.

I twisted mid-air, an uncoordinated mess of reflex and panic, and somehow—*somehow*—the kick only grazed past my cheek instead of sending me into next week. My body, still caught in the violent overcorrection, slammed hard into the mat, bouncing off the impact in an awkward, rolling skid. My hands slapped against the floor as I tried—failed—to immediately regain control, only to awkwardly stagger upright, stumbling a few steps from the momentum, panting, arms snapping into a frantic guard.

I braced for the next attack.

But... nothing came.

Blinking, I forced my attention back on Jin and Tom—both of them rooted in place, staring at me like I'd just broken the laws of physics.

"...What?" I muttered, trying to steady my rapid breathing.

From the sidelines, Miss K let out an amused, almost reluctant, "Huh... Well... that definitely was *something*."

Kenzie, standing next to Miss K now, a little quieter but just as incredulous, muttered, "What the fuck...?"

"Okay... What just happened?" I asked hesitantly, still locked in a defensive stance.

My eyes flicked between them, trying to gauge whether I'd just pulled off something impressive or completely humiliated myself. "I just threw everything I had into dodging that kick."

Tom chuckled, shaking his head. "Yeah, no kidding. That much was obvious."

His lips quirked up in something between amusement and respect. "What's not obvious is how in the world you did it. That kick should've landed. I was sure it *was* landing. I was already halfway through thinking how to get you to the bench afterwards. There was no time left to react unless—"

He trailed off, watching me carefully.

"Unless you knew it was coming *before I did*."

I frowned. "Huh?"

He nodded to himself, his eyes sharpening into something more analytical. "You read it, didn't you? You saw I was going to go for a kick before I did. Then you—what? Leaned into it just enough to make me hesitate? Just enough to slow me down so you could escape...?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it again.

That... that was an absolutely insane train of thought.

'What kind of blank would do something like that?'

Tom shot me a nod, approval clear in his eyes. "That was *ingenious*."

Jin, still staring at us like we'd just started speaking in riddles, scoffed. "Man, fuck this... Elaborate plans mid-fight are bullshit."

None of this made any damn sense.

I had flailed, hard. That was it.

I had thrown every muscle I could think of into action, and by some cosmic joke, it had actually worked.

There hadn't been a single second where I'd consciously planned *any* of that.

'But... at least they aren't questioning anything System-related,' I thought. *'Yeah. Probably better to let them think I had some wild tactical epiphany than try to explain whatever the hell actually just happened...'*

I rolled my shoulders, forcing the tension out.

"Well," I said, shrugging like I totally meant to pull all of that off, "are we gonna gawk about it all day, or do you boys want to try getting a few more points?"

Jin's face split into a wide, almost feral grin.

He barely even gave a response before flexing his shoulders and launching himself at Tom.

Tom spared me a last glance—one I couldn't quite read—before turning to meet Jin head-on. His arms snapped up, redirecting the brunt of the incoming attack without taking the full force.

Some things never changed.

'Offer a couple of guys a free pass to punch each other in the face, and they'll take it ten times out of ten,' I chuckled at the thought and started making my way back toward them.

The mat wasn't huge—I was only a few steps away—but in a fight, even those few steps often felt like they stretched far, far further.

Before I could even get close, Miss K's voice cut in from the side. "Looks like Miss Molida wants in. So, I say we reset points and make this a four-way free-for-all. Never really done that before in my dojo, but honestly?"

She let out an amused huff. "Kinda enjoying the chaos."

Tom, Jin, and I all turned toward her, only to spot Kenzie already warming up—bouncing lightly from foot to foot, rolling her shoulders like she was ready to go.

"As for the previous rounds' points..." Miss K continued with a smug little shrug. "Let's just say they were warm-ups. Whoever racks up the most points this time gets out of muscle training next session."

That made all of us pause.

Kenzie stopped stretching. Jin squinted. Tom tilted his head slightly.

"...Uh," Jin finally voiced what we were all thinking, "we've never had muscle training at the dojo."

He wasn't wrong. The Arkion Dojo didn't even have a single piece of equipment for it. As far as I knew, conditioning wasn't even on the curriculum.

Miss K tapped her chin, tilting her head in mock contemplation. “Huh. Well, would you look at that? Guess I just spoiled something for you all! Woopsie!”

Silence.

Our gazes met, the same unspoken thought flashing between us: *Was she joking?*

Miss K didn’t clarify.

Slowly, our expressions shifted, eyes narrowing, turning far more calculating.

“Well then,” she chuckled, “show me something fun, my darlings!”

And with a sharp **clap** of her hands—the universal start signal of the dojo—the match was on.

The instant Miss K’s hands clapped together, everything exploded into motion.

Jin lunged straight for Tom, predictably trying to overpower right from the get-go, while Kenzie—*holy shit*—just straight up *vanished*. One second she was bouncing on her heels, the next she was practically inside my guard, her foot already driving toward my ribs.

I barely saw it coming, having been focused too much on the two boys.

I twisted, but not fast enough.

Her kick slammed into my side, sending me stumbling straight into Jin’s reach.

‘Fuck...!’

His fist clipped my shoulder before I even had a chance to recover, sending me lurching forward—right into Tom, who capitalized with a quick, calculated strike to my ribs, adding yet another point to the overall tally.

I was getting farmed like a fucking pinball!

Bad. Really bad.

They weren’t holding back anymore, like they had been in the previous free for all, cause now there was something useful on the line—if Miss K’s were to be believed.

I barely regained my balance from the last stumble before Kenzie was on me again, her movements practically liquid, twisting and rebounding off the floor in ways that seemed completely impossible for anyone but her.

I saw her foot snap toward me again, but this time, I braced—*wrongly*.

My arms came up too stiff, too slow.

The moment her insanely powerful kick connected, I was sent tumbling backward, barely rolling out of the way before Jin came barreling past, chasing Tom across the mat like a human battering ram.

I grit my teeth.

'This isn't fucking working... My body is still off, too rigid, too damn controlled...!'

I forced myself to focus. To shift.

The next time Kenzie lunged at me, I stopped *trying* to react and just decided to *move*.

Her claws raked the air where my shoulder had just been, but instead of dodging back, I stepped in, pivoting off my heel and flowing with her momentum. My hands brushed her arm—light, fluid—just enough to redirect her force instead of absorbing it.

Kenzie let out a surprised “Hah!” as she suddenly veered to the side, her own momentum carrying her past me.

It wasn't perfect, but it was *better*.

Suddenly Tom was back in my space, already shifting for another hit—but this time, I didn't let it land.

My body moved, more instinctively, absorbing his attack with a soft parry before twisting his wrist just enough to break his form.

Not a full redirection, but it was *something*.

Jin slammed into my field of vision next, and this time, I saw the attack coming.

Instead of trying to match force, I dipped low, flowing with his momentum, just like I *knew* it would work—[Elemental Balance]'s other aspects finally coming in handy.

His arm grazed past my face, his forward force overextending him just slightly—I pushed.

Jin grunted as he stumbled a step, but before I could capitalize on his broken form, Kenzie flicked her foot out from nowhere, tagging me on the shin hard before flipping away, landing effortlessly a few feet back.

“C'mon, Sera,” she teased, ears twitching. “You gotta at least make it a bit harder for me!”

I exhaled sharply, shaking off the sting, but I couldn't help the small grin tugging at my lips.

I was getting farmed less.

And every hit, every dodge, every redirection—I was getting better.

I could feel it.

It was exhilarating.

Just like fighting a boss over and over again, learning one more move in their moveset with every attempt, I was adjusting, improving, unlocking more and more of what I knew I had access to but couldn't quite fit in yet.

This was working.

'Just a tiny bit more...!'

The fight blurred into a chaotic, shifting dance of counters, feints, and lightning-fast exchanges.

Tom was as methodical as ever, constantly baiting, waiting for the perfect openings to strike—never overcommitting, always forcing mistakes instead of making them.

Jin, on the other hand, was pure brute force, plowing through the chaos like a wrecking ball, locking down whoever was unlucky enough to be in front of him. His attacks didn't just hurt, even when blocked—they smothered, leaving no room to breathe, no space to counter at all. The only way to break free was for a third party to crash the fight and force him off.

And then there was Kenzie.

She wove through the battlefield like a live wire, striking sharp, fast, and with just enough unpredictability to keep everyone on edge.

Her legs weren't just strong—they were *terrifying*.

The extended size of the larger mat let her cut angles and gain speeds she couldn't in normal spars, giving her the space to launch herself in and out of engagements at velocities that felt straight-up unreal for a human being to reach.

And now that she had the room to move?

Yeah. Her agility on top of that was absolutely a massive problem to deal with.

And me?

I was *adapting*. I was finally *moving*.

The rigidity that had bogged me down at the start was melting faster and faster, my body flowing smoother with every exchange. Where before I had been a step behind, now I was right there, dodging before I even consciously realized the attack was coming.

My instinctive reactions were slowly coming back as I continued to relinquish control.

I still had the lowest points—no doubt about that—but I was now earning what I got.

And judging by the way Tom's expression had slowly shifted into something just a little more wary, Jin's barreling onto me had become less frequent, and the way Kenzie's ears twitched when I countered her last strike, I could tell—

They'd noticed too...