

Chapter 167 - Verdict

My head was still swimming, most of my mental bandwidth dedicated to the very important task of not throwing up, so I barely registered anything around me—right up until a sharp, vicious stab hit my chest.

Liquid ice flooded through my veins, laced with fire, and my eyes flew open as my body snapped upright like it had been yanked by a wire.

The haze, the blur, the ringing—all of it shattered in a heartbeat.

I sucked in a deep, ragged breath, lungs burning as my vision scrambled to refocus.

Miss K knelt beside me, injector still in hand.

“Easy, Sera. Easy,” she said calmly, one hand bracing my shoulder as the other guided me back down. “Slow breaths. Deep ones. Don’t fight it. Let the surge pass through you—don’t try to move yet. I know it feels wrong *not* to move, but trust me on this. Come on.”

So I did.

Trusting Miss K had stopped being a conscious decision a while ago. Given everything she already knew about me—the System tidbits, the Anima, my reworked Body—it just made sense.

The fire-and-ice cocktail slowly burned itself out, just like she had pretty much said it would, the sensation ebbing into something far more manageable. I still felt extremely restless and wired. Like I’d slammed thirty-five cans of my favorite energy drink back-to-back and my body hadn’t quite decided whether to vibrate or sprint.

But it was definitely not the same kind of incessant *need* to move like my entire body had been suffused with overeager ants.

My heart was still hammering like it wanted out of my chest, no matter how much I focused on slowing my breathing, but honestly? That was a small price to pay for not actively fighting the urge to redecorate the mat with one of Mr. Shoris’ ramen bowls.

“What... what happened?” I finally asked, once I trusted my mouth to cooperate.

I wasn’t asking because I didn’t know what a concussion was, or because I’d forgotten getting headbutted straight into the fucking astral plane.

I just needed to hear a voice. Needed some kind of proof that my brain was still capable of processing words without straight melting through my skull—whatever was left of that one.

“I definitely owe you an apology, Sera,” Miss K said, and the genuine regret in her voice made my chest tighten a little. “I did not intend to hurt you like that. At all.”

That... actually made me feel worse. This whole situation was genuinely, squarely on me—no two ways about it.

But of course Miss K would feel bad about it anyway. She was the Grandmaster, and I was just a student. And she wasn't the kind of teacher who shrugged and blamed the student when something went wrong, even when it very clearly wasn't really her fault.

"You put me in a very difficult position there," she continued, then paused, a faint edge of pride slipping in. "Which—credit where it's due—was extremely well done. That was clever. Sneaky. You nearly had me there..."

I smiled faintly and looked up at her.

She smiled back—then her expression hardened.

"*But*," she continued flatly, "you are also a complete and utter moron."

My smile froze.

"You took an absurdly dangerous gamble and hoped I wouldn't be willing to hurt you to stop it," she went on. "That is *not* what I teach here. I've told the same thing to the rest of the class today as well. Kenzie, Jin, Tom. Each one went for risky moves to try and take you down, and I chastised all of them. Yet you still decided to do the same exact moronic thing by risking it all, simply throwing something out there without thinking about potential consequences. A concussion is a very small price to pay for that lesson, I would say."

She leaned in a little, her voice dropping into something quieter. "If you had tried that on a 'Borg, Sera. On someone who *actually* wanted you dead. You wouldn't be lying here embarrassed and dizzy—you *would* have been dead."

The quiet voice was honestly worse than if she had been yelling at me.

"They wouldn't have held back like I did," she continued evenly. "And their heads are a *lot* tougher than mine. Mine is just bone. Theirs are durasteel-reinforced titanium, with neck muscles built from triple-thickened synthweave and piston-hydraulics that make my head movement look like an old lady nodding off in a chair."

Her gaze didn't leave mine.

"You've seen and felt what Jin's arms can do. They're clean, well-made, and suited for his body—but they're still low-tier in the grand scheme of things. A similarly low-tier skull replacement and neck package would have completely *shattered* your entire head on impact and sent your brain splattering everywhere. Do you understand?"

She straightened slightly, backing off from the close, intense messaging of her words.

"Don't *ever* do that again, Sera."

"Yes, Miss K... I'm sorry, Miss K," I answered sheepishly, finally dropping my gaze because there was absolutely no way I was winning that staring contest.

“Alright,” she said, already shifting gears like a switch had flipped. “Let’s get you back on your feet and run a few basic checks to make sure the booster actually did what it was supposed to.”

The sudden return to calm, professional instructor mode gave me a bit of mental whiplash, but honestly? That was just Miss K.

She scolded hard, then fixed the problem just as fast.

I took her outstretched hand and got hauled up with embarrassing ease. Only then did I really look around and register the three sets of eyes on me—concerned, curious, and just a little unsettled.

“Hey... uh... sorry about that,” I offered awkwardly, rubbing the back of my neck. “I might’ve gone a bit overboard.”

“That was fucking *awesome*,” Kenzie blurted out immediately.

Miss K shot her a look cold enough to flash-freeze the mat.

Kenzie flinched and backpedaled instantly. “Ahhh—*Assuming* you’ll be more careful in the future! Obviously! Don’t ever do that again! Like the Grandmaster said. Definitely listen to her...!”

The silence that followed was thick enough I could practically *hear* Miss K rolling her eyes.

Jin saved us all.

“Crazy move,” he said simply, giving me a short nod. The look on his face said more than the words—equal parts impressed and cautious. Not “*she’s utterly unhinged*” cautious, but “*there’s more going on here than I thought*” cautious.

Tom, meanwhile, just stared at me with narrowed eyes, jaw tight, brain clearly running at full tilt. Whatever conclusions he was drawing, he didn’t look particularly thrilled about them.

And that made me not particularly thrilled either—I did not want to get on Tom’s bad side.

“Alright,” Miss K said, snapping my attention back to her. “Let’s get you sorted. Follow my lead.”

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Five minutes later—after a frankly ridiculous assortment of stretches, balance checks, movements I didn’t have names for, and something that felt suspiciously like a drunk-driver sobriety test, capped off with a bit of light sparring to make sure my limbs still listened to my brain—Miss K finally gave me the green light.

“It looks like you’re back up and running,” she said, nodding once. “That’s good. Very good.”

Then she raised her voice, shifting gears as she addressed the rest of the group.

“Now,” she continued, “let’s talk about the obvious question you’re all thinking about right now: Did Sera win the challenge?”

That immediately snapped everyone’s attention to her—mine included.

“Kenzie,” Miss K said, turning to the foxgirl. “Your take?”

Kenzie’s ears shot straight up as she blinked, clearly not expecting to be put on the spot first like this.

“Uh—yeah, I think she probably deserves some recognition, at least?” she said after a beat. “I mean, she did *technically* get a hit in, Miss. Not one that actually did any damage, sure, but that wasn’t part of the rules. A hit’s a hit... at least in my opinion...”

Miss K nodded once, then shifted her gaze down the line. “Jin?”

Jin folded his arms, the ever-present seriousness etched onto his face.

“Getting hit isn’t the same as hitting, Master,” he said. “Sera tried hard—closer than any of us have ever gotten, as much as it pains to admit—but you could have killed her for that. As you said yourself. That doesn’t count as a hit to me. Otherwise, every time you block, parry, or redirect our strikes, those would count too. This was fist against fist. Not a clean hit.”

It might have been the longest I’d ever heard him speak in one go—and I couldn’t really argue with his logic.

I hadn’t *actually* landed anything.

I’d gone in for the headbutt, and she’d simply... headbutted me back. Just like she always met our fists with palms or twisted away at the last second. It hadn’t been a clean connection.

If anything, *she* had been the one doing the hitting.

Miss K nodded again, then turned to the last person. “Thomas?”

Tom had his hand cupped under his chin, clearly having thought this through while the others spoke.

He straightened slightly before answering.

“Not a clean hit,” he said. “But still a hit. Probably not enough to count as clearing the challenge outright. That said—” He hesitated for a brief moment, then continued. “The fact that she managed to catch *you* off-guard enough to make you use a combat-grade booster on her? No offense intended, Ma’am, but that feels... significant enough to be mentioned. You broke from your usual intent. That definitely has to count for something.”

That finally drew the faintest hint of a smile from Miss K, who waved off his concern with a small, dismissive gesture.

Then she turned back to me, one eyebrow raised as she vaguely gestured my way.

“Well?” she asked. “What do *you* think, Sera? Did you get a hit on me?”

I blinked, a little caught off-guard by the question. I honestly hadn’t expected to be asked, considering that this was a question *about* me—in a way.

Now, on one hand, Jin was absolutely right.

I’d gotten my ass handed to me in record time, earned a concussion for my trouble, and then gotten very thoroughly—and probably very deservedly—chewed out for it. No amount of mental gymnastics was going to change that.

I hadn’t landed a clean hit. Not even close.

On the other hand...

‘Tom and Kenzie aren’t exactly wrong either now, are they...?’

I wasn’t really a vain person, or at least I liked to think I wasn’t, but I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a tiny, smug little spark in my chest at the idea that I’d managed to make Miss K—the Miss K—do something she hadn’t initially planned nor wanted to do.

Even if it had been for only a fraction of a second.

Even if it had ended with her headbutting my damn soul out of me.

I took a slow breath, buying myself a bit of courage, then spoke.

“I think... I agree with Tom the most,” I said carefully. “It *wasn’t* a clean hit. And I’m very aware now just how stupidly dangerous that was. But... I *did* manage to surprise you. That probably doesn’t really count for anything—but I... Ehh... I just wanted to say it out loud, I guess.”

Miss K stared at me for a second, completely unimpressed with my answer.

Then she rolled her eyes and let out a long, tired sigh.

“Ultimately,” she said, “I agree with all of you.”

She turned slightly toward Jin first. “Primarily with Jin. That was not a hit as I’d consider it for the challenge’s rules. Me headbutting you is not the same as you headbutting me—and I did have more momentum, better structure, and a stronger follow-through. That makes it my win on the contact and my headbutt, not yours. End of discussion on that front.”

Then her gaze flicked to Kenzie and Tom. “That said... The two of you are not wrong either. Sera *did* surprise me.”

She crossed her arms, but not looking displeased in the slightest. “I don’t approve of holding back during sparring. Not normally. But given the one-trick nature of what she was attempting... I’m not particularly angry about it. Tricks, hidden techniques, and conditional plays are part of any real fight. You *never* truly know what an opponent is capable of—and that’s something I should have accounted for more thoroughly in this instance.”

Her eyes met mine again. “That one’s on me. I clearly underestimated my student.”

That sent a strange little jolt through my chest and I had to clamp down on my muscles to not have a full-body shudder.

“So,” she continued, “you do not get the reward for the challenge itself, Sera. No injector.”

She paused for a beat, letting the tension hang, then added, “But I *will* have something else prepared for you by the next session. Seems fair to me. Call it recognition for the attempt—and for reminding me that even new students can still surprise an old lady like myself.”

One eyebrow lifted. “That sound fair to all of you?”

I nodded enthusiastically. This was way more than I had hoped for, so no complaints here!

A quick glance around told me I wasn’t alone either—everyone else was nodding as well, each in their own way.

Kenzie looked downright ecstatic, practically vibrating in place as she nodded as well.

Tom accepted it with a measured dip of his head, already filing it away as data or whatever was happening inside that big brain of his.

Jin, meanwhile, wore the expression of someone who’d just bitten into a lemon—clearly unhappy about the bending of the rules, but still giving a reluctant nod all the same.

“Wonderful. Then that’s settled,” Miss K declared, clapping her hands once, the sound echoing through the dojo and making all of us instinctively straighten up. “Now get yourselves dried off, rehydrate, and then get out of my dojo. Session’s over.”

A chorus of “Yes, Miss K,” “Yes, Ma’am,” and “Yes, Master,” rang out immediately, and we wasted no time doing exactly as told...

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By the time we finally left the dojo, I was completely wiped.

Whatever injector Miss K had jabbed me with had very clearly run its course, and the ridiculous, crackling energy it had pumped into me was now calling in its debt with interest.

The crash hit *hard*.

My limbs felt heavy, my head fuzzy, and my thoughts a half-second behind where they should’ve been. So out of it, in fact, that I completely missed Tom stopping just outside the entrance. Everyone else halted with him—and I walked straight into Kenzie’s back.

“H—Hey! Watch where you’re walking, you oaf,” Kenzie protested, more startled than angry.

“Ah, shit—sorry,” I blurted out immediately, stumbling back a step or two. “I’m a bit... yeah. Kind of woozy. Whatever Miss K hit me with is definitely wearing off. My bad...”

Kenzie waved it off with an exaggerated wink. “Relax, Sera. I’m messing with you. No harm done.”

Then she tilted her head slightly. “You need any help getting home?”

My first instinct was to brush it off, but I paused instead and actually thought about it.

‘*Do I need help...*?’ I didn’t feel so exhausted that I couldn’t walk, and I wasn’t exactly in danger—assuming Valeria was right about the whole corpo thing.

So no bodyguard needed necessarily.

But... just walking home with someone? Even part of the way?

That... Did sound kind of nice.

Kenzie probably couldn’t access my floor anyway, but walking together to the elevator didn’t seem like an impossibility at all.

“Honestly,” I said after a moment, giving her a slightly crooked smile, “that’d be great. You probably can’t come all the way, but at least to the nearest elevator? I’d really appreciate it. Thanks, Kenzie.”

It felt... weirdly awkward to say out loud.

I really should’ve been more comfortable with this than I was.

Between this life and my past one, I was probably almost twice her age—not that I felt it at all in this body. But I probably should’ve had this stuff down by now—casual conversations, easy friendships, someone offering to walk with me without it feeling like a big deal.

The truth was... I’d never really *had* that before.

So yeah. In a way, this was kind of a first. And it felt awkward.

But definitely not in a bad way.

“I got you,” Kenzie said, scooting in closer and looping my arm around her shoulders to help me walk. I wasn’t quite in *that* bad of a state, but I definitely didn’t complain.

The support was appreciated more than I wanted to admit.

“We should do that get-together,” Tom suddenly said and made both Kenzie and me look over at him in surprise. “Like we talked about. Extra training. Outside the dojo.”

‘*Right... we **did** talk about that,*’ I thought, dredging the memory up.

First day of the dojo.

Back when everything had still felt a lot... simpler.

Somehow that already felt like ages ago.

“We—or, well, Sera at least—got really close to beating the challenge today,” Tom continued, meeting our eyes one by one. “Not that I think we’ll get anywhere near that again anytime soon. But it makes me want to push harder. I can’t be the only one, right?”

Jin didn’t even hesitate. “Yes. More training,” he said flatly. “I am in.”

Kenzie nodded immediately. “Same. I’m down.”

I nodded along with them, still riding that lingering, fizzy high from earlier.

I’d managed to catch *Miss K* off-guard. A Grandmaster.

That alone was going to keep my brain happily buzzing for weeks.

“Yeah,” I added. “Same here.”

Tom’s gaze lingered on me a second longer than the others. “Good. Especially you, Sera. It’s... confusing how fast you’ve improved. You’ll be a great sparring partner for all of us.”

I could feel a whole mountain of unspoken meaning packed into that sentence, but I didn’t have the time—or the mental bandwidth, honestly—to pick it apart before Jin jumped in.

“I am upset,” he said bluntly after stepping up to me. “You did not take our fight seriously. You held back—whatever you did to get that close to Master.”

I met his stare, unsure what the right response even was.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to find one.

He looked away first.

“I am ashamed,” he went on, jaw tight. “That I was not even worthy of seeing your full capabilities. I will not allow this humiliation to happen again. Mark my words, Seraphine.”

I almost flinched at the full name.

I wasn’t even sure he’d ever actually *said* my name before—and definitely not the full version. He was dead serious.

So I met him where he stood.

“I’ll hold you to that, Jin,” I said evenly. “And for what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have used that technique on you anyway. Even if you’d pushed me harder. I was saving it for Miss K, no matter what. You don’t get many chances to try and surprise her—and I wasn’t giving that up for a normal bout.”

I rubbed at my arms and added with a crooked smile, “Besides, I’ll be feeling your punches tomorrow either way. You definitely left a mark—or like *twenty*.”

That part was mostly to smooth things over.

The Rest Function was going to wipe those aches clean like they'd never existed.

But Jin didn't need to know that.

And it seemed to work, because the tight edge in his expression eased a little at the idea that he'd managed to leave some lasting pain behind—which... Yeah. That *probably* should've come with a therapist and a long talk. But this was Neo Avalis.

For a teenager like him, that was sadly considered healthy behavior.

"I'll message all of you soon, then," Tom said, smoothly taking control of the conversation again. "Once I clear it with my family. We can use our dojo for the extra training—it won't be a problem. Give me a day or two, and I'll send you the time and date. If anything comes up, let me know as soon as possible so we can adjust."

We all agreed, more or less in unison, and then started peeling off in our own directions.

Jin and Tom headed out together, while Kenzie stayed with me and helped me toward the nearest elevator.

On the way, I noticed she was quieter than usual.

Less banter, less confidence, her ears flicking around uneasily instead of their usual energetic twitching. I didn't really know how to address it—we weren't exactly close enough for me to start poking at whatever was going on in her head—and I also didn't want to make things awkward by forcing it.

'Really wish I was a bit more of a social savant here... How do you even approach a situation like this, damnit?!'

But apparently it was my lucky day, because Kenzie managed to work through it on her own and started opening up a few minutes into our walk.

At some point, she let out a slow breath and slowed us down a bit.

"I know you probably can't say much," she started, glancing sideways at me, "but your progress is... really, *really* crazy."

I stayed quiet, letting her talk.

"I—if you have any pointers," she continued, words coming a little faster now, "anything you can tell me at all, I'd *really* appreciate it. I'm not the best fighter, and even with all the time I put into this, it just feels like I'm only falling further and further behind..."

She hesitated, ears drooping just a bit. "My next Gene-Session isn't for a few months, so I'm not going to get any big boosts until then. And I just... I don't want to be dead weight, Sera."

That hit harder than I'd expected, mostly because it echoed exactly what Jade had hinted at yesterday and had clearly been wrestling with since... Well, basically since the moment I'd met her.

Everyone around me seemed to be scrambling just to keep up—always chasing the next step, the next upgrade, the next edge, being utterly terrified of falling behind.

'If that isn't the distilled emotion of Cyberpunk, I don't know what is,' I thought, a tight knot forming in my chest. Especially knowing that, in my past life, I'd consumed worlds and stories like this for pure entertainment.

Watched people struggle from a safe distance. Found it cool. Stylish.

Even funny, at times.

Now I was standing right in the middle of it, looking at real people—Jade, Kenzie—doing everything they could just to stay afloat. Trying not to get swept away by the current, only to still feel it dragging at their legs no matter how hard they kicked.

They were so very *desperate*.

And if I was being honest with myself... so was I.

'I've been doing nothing but grinding the damn System since I got here,' I admitted inwardly, *'and I still feel like I'm fucking drowning the whole time.'*

And the absolute worst part of it all, was that I didn't actually have any advice for Kenzie.

I couldn't tell her about the System. I couldn't even really tell her about Anima—not when I barely understood it myself. And just dropping that kind of knowledge on her, without any way to help her use it, would've done nothing but paint a target on her back.

So I was just there, walking beside her, turning the problem over and over in my head.

What the hell was I even supposed to say to her...?