

Chapter 110 - Miscalculation

Letting out a sigh that felt like it had been festering in my soul for years, I dragged myself out of bed.

"Time to get going..." I muttered, pulling on the dojo clothing without much thought.

I was halfway to the door before I stopped short, my fingers tightening on the fabric of my sleeve.

The last twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind of tumultuous problems.

No—more than that. Tumultuous didn't even *begin* to cover it.

Confusing in ways I couldn't fully wrap my head around, and yet, one thing stood out with crystal clarity.

Carinola Valir was a major problem.

A dangerous one, at that. One that wasn't just going to disappear because I wished it so.

Sure, she had backed off—for *now*. But that wasn't because of me or anything I had done.

That was because Liliana and Citrina had talked her down, working within whatever twisted framework of gang laws they all seemingly operated under.

That so-called protection? Yeah, it didn't extend to me. Liliana had made that *very* clear.

If Jade wasn't around, there was a very real chance Valir might come for me again, except this time I wouldn't have Misha's high-tech gear to help me out, nor the gang-law protections.

And *that* was the real issue, wasn't it? What the hell could I actually do about it?

"I can't exactly ask Jade to follow me around every time I step off my floor, can I?" I mused aloud, pacing the length of my room.

It'd be suspicious as all hell if I suddenly called her up, asking for an escort to a martial arts dojo. As far as she knew, I should still be recovering—licking my wounds after the absolute beating I'd taken and the Ripper's super-invasive surgery.

Not just today, but for the next several days, *minimum*.

Even assuming I could sell her on the "*my mum's a super corpo lady, so she pumped me full of expensive drugs*" story that I was slowly weaving in my head to prepare for the inevitable "*coming-clean*" that I would have to do with Jade going forward, there were very few drugs that could cause a miraculous recovery like I had just gone through—if any.

So that was out.

Asking Jade would only lead to more questions, and I wasn't exactly in a position to answer them.

On the flipside, however, it was unlikely that Valir could track me down again this quickly, in theory, at least.

I had never even *mentioned* the Arkion Dojo, let alone visited it since the whole Damien fiasco.

There shouldn't be anything tying me to it.

And, if Liliana was right, Valir had just straight-up ignored orders from someone called the *High Talon*, which hopefully meant she was facing consequences of her own.

Maybe—just *maybe*—she was grounded long enough for me to breathe.

But that wasn't exactly a gamble I was willing to stake my entire damn *life* on.

"I guess there's no other choice, huh?" I muttered, turning back toward my dresser.

I grabbed my freshly made bomber jacket and threw it on, stuffing its pockets with throwing knives before securing my RaZ in an easily accessible holster on the inside.

It looked a little ridiculous—dojo outfit underneath, bomber jacket thrown over the top.

The mirror on the back of my door didn't lie. Not exactly the picture of combat readiness.

But if things went south, I'd rather have *some* kind of protection than nothing at all.

Even if, realistically speaking, a jacket wasn't going to do jack against someone like Valir.

Still, better than stepping out completely unprepared.

With that thin layer of security in place, I left my room and headed for the door—only for hesitation to creep back in, settling in the pit of my stomach.

'Is this really enough? I'm potentially gambling with my life here...'

I stopped again, fingers tightening at my sides as I mulled it over.

'If she's actively hunting me down, a jacket and a few knives aren't going to mean shit. If she just sends a couple of goons, though...' That was a different story.

I could probably handle a few low-level thugs—assuming they weren't vastly stronger than the last ones—or at the very least, escape them if I really put my back into it; I didn't need to worry about Jade being unable to keep up, this time around, after all.

So even something like [Wall Runner] was on the menu to get me out of dodge.

'So it really comes down to this: Is Valir still lurking around the megabuilding, or is she grounded?'

Strangely enough, the chaos of the past twenty-four hours had left me with a potential way to actually get that answer, for once.

Liliana's contact. And that weird "H" person who had tagged alongside it.

The problem? I really didn't want to owe them *anything*.

Reaching out, even just for information, felt like handing them leverage on a silver platter—an opening to twist the situation into some kind of favor I'd rather not have hanging over my head. Not that I had any weird sense of honor to uphold, like whatever bullshit code Valeria had been following when she dragged me into the mess with Mr. Stirling. But still.

More than that, I hated the implication that their inability to leash their rabid attack dogs—decided plural by now—was somehow *my* problem to deal with.

But at the same time, what other option did I have?

If I didn't know where Valir was or what she was up to, every step off my floor was a potential death sentence.

Between the two contacts, there was a clear favorite when it came to this kind of deal.

With a quick mental flick, I pulled up my contact list and scrolled straight to the most recent addition—"H".

No hesitation. I opened a message and started mentally typing out the message.

["I need to know where Valir is and what she's doing. Provide me with this information whenever I request it for the next three months, and I'll agree to your terms of keeping the hijacking quiet regarding Liliana." -Ela]

My [Negotiation] skill had flagged three months as a solid starting point—something I could haggle down from. Realistically, I was aiming for about a month of easy access to information, but it never hurt to overshoot.

"H" had made a mistake—or maybe a deliberate choice—by immediately making it clear they didn't want Liliana knowing they had reached out to me.

That, in my mind, was leverage. Something I could twist to my advantage.

I wasn't expecting anything major from them, but Valir's whereabouts and objectives? That seemed like an easy win. After all, "H", much like Liliana, had only contacted me because of that lunatic's chaos in the first place.

Which meant, when it came down to it, they weren't exactly ride-or-die allies.

"Alright, I guess now I wait for—" I muttered, only to be cut off by a message arriving way too fast.

[“Deal. Valir got a stern talking-to from the High Talon. She’s sulking at home now. High Talon has made it very clear that you and yours are not to be fucked with for the time being, so you should be in the clear for the next little while [read: days, maybe week/s?].” -H]

A grin spread across my face before I could stop it.

The thought of that lunatic actually facing consequences for her actions was *deeply* satisfying. Though I had to wonder—was “a stern talking-to” supposed to be taken literally?

From what little I’d seen of the Golden Phoenix, they didn’t exactly seem like the “*stern lecture and timeout*” kind of crew when it came to punishment.

If their High Talon had put their foot down, I doubted it had been with just words.

Not that it mattered.

What *did* matter was how fast “H” had accepted my terms.

No counteroffer, no haggling, nothing. Just immediate acceptance.

I didn’t even need [Negotiation] to tell me I’d massively undersold my position here. If they’d agreed this easily, I *definitely* could’ve pushed for more.

But again—did it really matter?

I had gotten what I needed.

Valir wasn’t going to be an issue, at least for now.

I wasn’t about to blindly trust “H”’s words with my life, and I wasn’t going to get careless, but knowing I wasn’t actively being hunted took a *lot* of weight off my shoulders.

I’d still keep my time outside the restricted floors to a minimum when I could, but at least I wasn’t walking straight into a death sentence the instant I left the elevators.

With that beautiful news locked away in my “*happy memories*” folder—because Valir getting her proverbial ass beat, verbally or maybe even quite literally, absolutely deserved a spot there—I finally stepped out of my apartment and made my way toward the Arkion Dojo...

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My heart was pounding a little harder than I liked as I stepped over the threshold into the dojo, but the second I was inside, a rush of relief washed over me.

Safe.

At least, as safe as I could be in this city.

If anyone from the Golden Phoenix decided to start trouble, I had no doubt Miss K would back me up without hesitation.

Something about the way she tailored individualized training regimens for *every* student gave me strong *"I won't let anyone mess with my pupil"* energy.

That said, I had been *really* hoping to avoid testing that theory today.

And, thankfully, I had.

No sinister figures had been lurking by the nearest elevator, no Golden Phoenix members waiting in the shadows to catch me off guard. I had gone out of my way to use an elevator that got me as close to Arkion Dojo as possible without being *too* predictable—for once, I hadn't taken the one closest to my apartment.

On top of that, I'd fast-walked and [Stealth]'ed my way through the alleyways of the 45th floor, just to be extra sure I wasn't leading anyone straight here.

Whether that had actually helped or not, only the gods knew. But it didn't really matter now.

I had made it.

And I was more than ready to start getting some [Martial Arts] training under my belt.

Stepping through the door into the overly spacious training room, I barely had a second to take in my surroundings before I spotted Kenzie's fluffy ears twitch. They perked up first, swiveling in my direction before the rest of her followed, her sharp eyes locking onto me.

She instantly brightened, jerking up from where she'd been stowing some of her stuff in a bag on the benches near Miss K's office. With a quick wave, she called out from the far end of the hall, her voice carrying effortlessly across the mostly empty space.

"Hey there, Sera!"

I glanced around as I jogged over, noting that today's class was nearly deserted—just one small group of students quietly working in the orange-colored zone.

Looked like we had the place to ourselves.

"Hiya, Kenzie," I greeted back, shrugging off my jacket as I reached her. I made sure to keep the motion smooth, careful not to let any of the knives flash into view.

No need to start unnecessary conversations about why I was walking around heavily armed.

"How are things?"

Kenzie's nose twitched as she sniffed the air around me—which was mildly concerning, if I thought too hard about it, considering the sheer amount of blood that I had been around in the past day—but she didn't comment, just grinning wide.

"Things are great! I've been looking forward to this session all week! I got some pointers from my big sis, so you better prepare yourself, Sera. I'm *not* going easy on you today!"

She lifted both hands into a combat-ready stance, claws slightly extending in an exaggerated, mock-menacing way. Then, as if just remembering something, she tilted her head and added, “Ehh... if we’re actually going up against each other again, that is. Not sure what the big boss has planned for us today.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Good point. I’ve got no idea what Miss K’s got in store either. I’ve never actually done any proper martial arts training before, so it’s all a bit of a mystery to me.” I hesitated for a second before adding, “Is fighting each other really the best way to learn? I mean, don’t get me wrong—I like the hands-on experience, but I still struggle with the basics. Like, actually throwing a proper punch with a full follow-through, without looking like a complete idiot.”

Before Kenzie could get a single word out—her mouth already halfway open, sharp canines glinting—Miss K’s smooth, deeper-set voice cut through our conversation like a well-placed strike.

“It is indeed not the best way to learn how to fight, if we’re being exact about things,” she said, answering my indirect question without hesitation. Heat rushed to my face at the sheer audacity of questioning her methods, even if accidentally.

“However,” she continued, completely unfazed, “it is the best way to learn what *I’m* teaching. Which, frankly, is all I care about. I am not here to teach my dearest pupils how to punch air or kick a damn training dummy—I’m here to teach you how to win. How to survive in the lawless mess that is Neo Avalis. And that?”

She let the question hang for a second before answering herself.

“That involves a lot of scrambling, ugly, inefficient, downright desperate fights. The kind that don’t come from technique but from instinct, and nothing but instinct.”

The dojo owner had only poked her head out of her office when she first spoke, but now she strode out in full, dressed in her usual attire with the upper half of her gi hanging loosely from her waist, just like always.

“I need to see how you instinctively move,” she said, stepping into the blue-colored training area. “How your very inexperienced bodies react to the pressure of a fight, and—more importantly—how you react to that reaction. Actions, reactions, and counter-reactions are the lifeblood of any fight. That is what I need to understand before I can teach you how to shape those instincts into something actually useful.”

She turned, gesturing toward the rest of our little group—Tom and Jin, who had been quietly talking further down the bench line.

Without needing to be told twice, they got up and made their way over.

“Sure, I could have you punching the air for hours or running through the same drills over and over again,” Miss K continued, casually rolling her shoulders. “But that’s the kind of thing you should be doing on your own time. You don’t need me standing over you yelling ‘*punch better.*’ You already know you’re screwing it up when you throw a hit and the enemy doesn’t go down.”

Her golden eyes scanned us.

“So while you’re here, I’d rather spend our time teaching you how to mold your own instincts. Your fighting style. Because this whole ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to combat that other dojos might try to sell you? Absolute fucking nonsense. Everyone fights differently. Everyone has their own way of dealing with things.”

She gestured for us to form a circle around her—just like last time, when she dangled that bonus growth drug in front of us like some divine reward.

“So,” she said, flashing a wide, toothy grin, “let’s kick things off the same way as we ended the last time around. You guys try to land a hit on me; same reward’s on the line.”

Her stance shifted, as she shopped from one leg to the other and back.

“I won’t bother asking if you’ve followed the regimens I made for you over the last few days. I will be able to tell—just from how you act here and now. Show me what you’ve learned since our last session, dearest pupils.”

And with that, she settled deeper into her stance, weight balanced, eyes sharp—waiting.

Daring us to try and land a hit.

My gaze flicked to the rest of the group, meeting their eyes as they instinctively did the same.

‘Alright... right back into the action, huh?’ A grin tugged at the corner of my lips.

There was something refreshing about being back in the dojo. No life-or-death stakes, no back-alley ambushes—just a challenge I could throw myself into without worrying about getting actually murdered.

I shifted into my own stance, makeshift as it was, while keeping a close eye on Tom.

He was already working, hands moving in quick, deliberate motions, setting up an attack plan without a single word. Miss K, ever the generous opponent, kept her gaze locked onto me and Kenzie, deliberately leaving Tom and Jin in her blind spot so they could strategize.

‘Alright, last time around, the blue shard’s moves were the trick,’ I reminded myself.

I’d put in work since then—hours spent at home trying to imitate and refine those techniques. I wasn’t delusional enough to think I’d mastered them, but I was decidedly better at them than before.

And really, how hard could this be?

‘All we have to do is hit her once. Just once. She is even giving us a massive handicap. Surely we could pull this off today...’

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught Tom’s hand flashing the “all-go” signal—the same one we’d used last time.

No hesitation.

Trusting that the others would play their part, I pushed off the ground and rushed in, throwing my full weight into an all-out punch; just like the blue shard had taught me.

I closed the distance fast, fist rocketing toward her with everything I had.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kenzie dart in from the side, claws extending just slightly.

Jin moved in from the opposite flank, keeping his stance tight, ready to pivot if needed.

Tom lagged behind for just a moment, likely waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Miss K didn't flinch.

With an almost lazy grace, she sidestepped Kenzie's swipe and, in the same motion, hooked an arm under her and flipped her straight over her shoulder.

Kenzie barely had time to yelp before she was airborne.

Jin adjusted, shifting his approach mid-step, trying to capitalize on the opening, but Miss K had already twisted toward him, her foot sweeping low. Jin didn't even see it coming—one second he was upright, the next he was mid-fall, his feet taken out from under him like she'd flicked a switch.

I saw all of this happen in a blink—barely enough time to register it before my fist was nearly at her.

And for the slightest moment, I swore I saw a flicker of surprise cross Miss K's face.

Just the tiniest fraction of a second. Barely anything. A shift of the brow, a faint widening of the eyes—before her body reacted faster than my brain could process.

The world *flipped*.

A sharp tug on my arm, a shift in weight—then suddenly, the floor wasn't below me anymore, but above.

'*Shit!*'

I barely had time to exhale before I hit the mat, flat on my back.

A moment later, something thudded down beside me—Kenzie, landing with a groan.

Before I could even turn my head, another body crashed a little further away onto my other side—Jin.

Then, half a second later, Tom's familiar voice let out a winded grunt as he hit the mat just beyond us.

Four bodies. Laid out. Effortlessly.

Miss K hadn't just dodged and countered us—she had read us like an open book.

Controlled the fight like she was orchestrating a dance, positioning us exactly where she wanted before shutting us down completely.

And she hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Interesting," she murmured, a flicker of genuine curiosity in her voice. "Go again."

That was all the encouragement we needed.

The competitive fire in all of us reignited instantly, and without hesitation, we scrambled back to our feet, shaking off the bruises and reclaiming our positions.

This time, Tom made a quick adjustment, gesturing for Kenzie and me to shift in closer.

He was clearly aiming for a more focused approach—tightening our formation rather than spreading out like before.

Honestly?

'Works for me.'

I wasn't here to craft the perfect strategy in the first few minutes of the session.

I just wanted to burn off some of the stress, the unspent energy, the unresolved frustration that had been simmering beneath the surface for *days*. If that meant getting slammed into the mat a few more times, so be it.

Tom gave the signal—sharp, decisive.

No hesitation, once again.

Kenzie and I surged forward together, a unified force, ready to throw ourselves at the challenge once more. We closed in fast, our movements synced, ready to overwhelm Miss K with sheer speed and pressure.

Tom's plan relied on tight coordination—forcing her attention between multiple angles, leaving a gap we could exploit.

Or at least, that was the *idea*.

Kenzie barely got a foot forward before Miss K moved; uncharacteristically of her.

There was no warning, no shift in stance, no tell.

One second, Kenzie was charging in beside me, and the next—*gone*.

A sharp, efficient movement.

A flick of Miss K's wrist, a perfectly timed redirection of kinetic energy—Kenzie's momentum betrayed her, sending her sprawling before she even had time to throw a single strike.

I barely had time to register the thud of her body hitting the mat before Miss K's steel-hard gaze snapped to me.

Focused. Calculated. Extra-close attention.

She was reading everything: My foot placement. My trajectory. The angle of my strike.

It felt like she was dissecting my every move in real time, actively studying me in a way she hadn't before. That moment—that split second—stretched longer than it should have, tension crackling between us.

Then the world *flipped*.

A shift, a tug, a seamless counter—and suddenly, gravity betrayed me once more. The ceiling spun, and before I could even blink, I was on the mat, staring up at the dojo lights.

Kenzie lay beside me, quietly muttering, "Why am I getting picked on...?"

Before I could answer, *slap—slap*. Two more bodies hit the ground almost simultaneously.

Jin. Tom.

All four of us, flattened. Again.

Miss K exhaled, rolling her shoulders like she'd just wrapped up a warm-up rather than effortlessly wiping the floor with all four of us. Tilting her head, she gave us a knowing smirk.

Yeah. We weren't landing a hit on her today.

Then her gaze flicked to mine, and something changed. Her smirk sharpened, losing its teasing edge—turning harder.

'Huh? Did I do something wrong...?'

A flicker of worry crept up my spine. I had trained the move *every single day*.

There was no way I was behind the others in practice—right?

Before I could dwell on it too much, Miss K clapped her hands once, drawing everyone's attention.

"Alright, I think I've seen enough for now," she announced, catching all of us off guard.

Tom was already halfway into an objection when she simply lifted a hand, cutting him off without a word. He immediately shut his mouth, though he didn't look happy about it.

"You'll be going up against each other in pairs," she continued. "I need to see some longer engagements. Me laying you out teaches all of us only so much. You'll get your chance at the reward towards the end of the session again."

With that, she stepped out of the blue-colored zone, gesturing for us to take our positions.

Kenzie with me. Jin with Tom.

Same matchups as our first day.

Kenzie practically vibrated with energy, her earlier words about getting pointers from her big sister bouncing around in my head as we squared up.

'Alright, Sera. Remember how to fight Kenzie.' It felt like it had been months since we last faced off, but in reality, it had only been a few days. No excuse to forget how she fought.

Kenzie was fast. Agile as hell, with brutal kicks and claws that weren't just for show.

'Keep the claws away from your face, kick her legs to slow her down, and don't let her get above you.' With that game plan locked in, I nodded to myself. Confident. Ready.

Except, this wasn't the same fight as last time.

I'd changed. A lot.

Since our last match, I'd leveled up [Martial Arts] and [CQC], stacking real combat experience on top of dojo practice. My [Intuition] and [Ego] had both ranked up today as well, meaning I could probably handle Kenzie's unpredictable movements without panicking like before.

I rolled my shoulders and settled into my makeshift stance, ready for the signal.

But when my gaze flicked over to Miss K, looking for the go-ahead, I caught her already watching me intently.

*'Okay, I **definitely** did something. But what...?'*

Before I could even begin to figure out what had set her off, Miss K clapped her hands together—sharp, ear-shattering, no-nonsense.

Kenzie wasted no time.

The moment the sound echoed through the hall, she was already on me, moving with the kind of agility that would've thrown me completely off my game just a few days ago. She had somehow gotten even faster than the last time around.

But this time? I was ready.

I stuck to the plan—keeping her at bay, forcing her to work for every inch of space.

As I had hoped, my [Ego] and [Intuition] were putting in the work.

Even as Kenzie's rapid-fire movements tested my reaction time, my mind stayed cool.

No overcorrections, no wild flailing—just calculated responses.

And [Intuition]? That one was doing some seriously heavy lifting. Her feints, her bursts of speed, the way she twisted her body before striking—I could see them coming more clearly than before, just subtle enough to give me a fraction of a second's advantage.

Which, against someone like Kenzie, was *everything*.

She darted in, claws twitching but never fully extending—she was thankfully keeping things clean for now, but that didn't mean her strikes were soft.

A quick jab at my midsection.

I stepped back, redirecting her momentum with a careful deflection, just enough to send her past me before she could follow up.

Another attack from the side—her foot whipping out in a sharp kick toward my ribs.

I twisted, barely avoiding it, and flicked out a quick, testing counterstrike in return—nothing with weight behind it, just enough to remind her that I could hit back if I wanted to; if she left me an opening.

I let her run the fight for the first minute, staying on the defensive, letting myself get back into the rhythm of fighting her. Kenzie was as aggressive, unpredictable, and relentless as ever—but I wasn't the same fighter she'd faced last time.

My [Martial Arts] and [CQC] muscle memory were thrumming beneath the surface, ready to strike back the second an opening presented itself. But I held back, only throwing light counterattacks, keeping things exploratory.

But after about a minute of this back-and-forth, I decided I'd seen enough.

I could keep playing keep-away, dancing just out of her reach, testing her attacks and defenses indefinitely. But why would I? I felt my muscles coil, practically begging to move, to push back—and I decided to give in to that instinct.

After all, Miss K had wanted to see our instincts and how we fought using them, right?

A sharp, electric thrill ran through me as I shifted gears.

'Time to go on the offensive.'

And as I surged forward, surprising Kenzie mid-movement, a very specific, deeply satisfied part of me *rejoiced* in finally having an outlet for all my pent-up frustrations.

No more testing. No more holding back.

I threw myself into the offensive, launching a brutal haymaker straight at Kenzie's center.

She barely twisted away in time, her ears flicking back in alarm.

I didn't let up.

The moment she dodged, my foot came up in a devastating kick aimed at her side. She managed to leap backward, but I was already stepping in, pressing the attack, keeping her constantly on the retreat.

Kenzie had the speed advantage—there was no question about that—but speed didn't mean shit if she couldn't create space. And I wasn't letting her.

I pummeled into her defenses, hit after hit, overwhelming her with sheer relentlessness.

Each time she tried to reposition, I was already cutting off her escape route. Every block she threw up, I hammered into it until her arms trembled with the effort of keeping me at bay.

And that's when I realized something was *off*.

Kenzie's counters—normally calculated, snappy, precise—felt almost... desperate. Flailing.

That wasn't the Kenzie I remembered.

Last time we fought, she had been annoying to deal with, slipping through my attacks with ease, keeping me chasing her shadow, every step of the way.

But now? Now it felt like she was barely hanging on.

A flicker of hesitation passed through my mind.

'What's going on here...?'

But ultimately, it didn't really matter.

I couldn't sit back and think, lest I'd give her time to recover and overwhelm me, instead.

Instead, I pressed forward again, my next strike slamming through her raised guard and knocking her balance off completely. She stumbled, and that was all I needed to see.

I swept my leg out, hooking behind her ankle and yanking.

Kenzie hit the mat hard, her breath escaping in a sharp wheeze.

My body reacted before my mind could catch up. Momentum carried me forward, and my fist—still coiled with energy, still rearing to finish the job—came down.

But before I could even process what was happening—before my knuckles could land—the world *flipped*.

A blur of movement. A sharp pull. A moment of absolute weightlessness.

And then—impact.

I hit the mat with an unceremonious, powerful *thud*, the impact pushing all the air out of my lungs in a painful gasp.

I found myself lying beside Kenzie instead of standing over her, staring up at the ceiling, blinking at the sheer *whiplash* of what had just happened.

Miss K stood above me, unreadable.

I opened my mouth to ask *what the hell just*—She didn't wait.

Before a single word left my lips, her hand *fisted* in my collar, yanking me up like I weighed absolutely nothing at all.

"My office. *Now*," she said, her voice hitting me across the face like a whip.

Then she tossed me—*literally tossed me*—toward the office door, leaving absolutely zero room for argument...