

Chapter 156 - Improvements

I slowly came back to consciousness a couple hours later, drifting up out of a heavy, dreamless haze instead of snapping awake the way the Rest Function usually forced me to.

It threw me off more than I wanted to admit.

Beds, for me, had mostly been glorified rest-pods for the Rest Function, not something I used the normal way barring exceptional circumstances.

The first thing I noticed, once my brain stopped sloshing around and actually settled into place, was that my body had finally calmed down.

The Sprites had stopped whatever hyperfocused surgery spree they'd been running.

The burning hotness that had assaulted my entire body for hours on end had faded almost entirely. What lingered now was the familiar, dull ache of a long, hard workout—unpleasant, sure, but definitely manageable.

When my eyes opened properly and my vision adjusted to the light, the second thing hit me.

Valeria had actually kept her word.

Which... *Of course* she had.

If there was one truth I had learned about her since arriving in this world, it was that she valued her word like it was a binding contract etched into her bones. If she said she'd stay, then she *would* stay—even if it made absolutely no sense for her own health.

She still sat in the chair she'd dragged over, her posture impeccable even as she slept, her head tilted just slightly to the side. A few strands of ebony hair had slipped out of place, brushing her cheek.

Even asleep, her expression held that weird mix of sternness and elegance that only someone like her could manage. Her overall exhaustion was obvious now that she wasn't actively holding herself together too; the whole right side of her body still hanging lifeless, her arm resting awkwardly against the chair like a forgotten piece of clothing.

And, of course, she was sleeping on a chair. Again.

For the second time in two days.

Because of me.

I cringed inwardly, guilt crawling up my spine like a cold fingertip.

'Seriously... She should've just gone to the couch after confirming I wasn't about to explode. What are you doing, Valeria? You can't keep falling apart like this...'

That faint pang of pity settled into my chest before I could stop it, and it felt bizarre—completely backwards.

This was the woman I'd pegged as a final boss the moment I'd woken up in her world.

The kind of monster you didn't simply fight—you prepared for extensively before even facing them to begin with. The kind who would poison her own children with a torture-grade neurotoxin just to make a point, just to remove a weakness.

But that view had twisted itself into something else entirely, hadn't it? Something thoroughly weird, something I couldn't put clean words to yet, no matter how I tried.

I blinked the last of the fog out of my mind and pulled up the cerebral interface to check the time. Three and a half hours had passed. Just before Midday.

Which meant I'd basically been in this bed for what... twenty-eight hours? Give or take?

No wonder my stomach let out a pathetic, drawn-out groan loud enough to echo in the quiet room, that made me worry for a moment it would wake up Valeria—it didn't seem to.

A sharp hunger pang followed it a second later, like my body was reminding me I hadn't put anything in it since... Well, since the dinner when everything had gone to shit, really.

And, to make matters worse, nature was calling with the subtlety of a demolition charge.

I sighed, already tired again, and started fighting my way out of my restraints—also known as the soft, traitorous blanket that immediately tried to drag me back under the moment I shifted even a little.

Without the Rest Function snapping me awake at full power, getting out of bed was stupidly hard, it turned out—I had forgotten just how pathetic we humans really were when it came to comfortable blankets and mattresses, huh?

"Come on... let me go," I muttered quietly at the blanket, like that would somehow help.

Little by little, I managed to peel myself free, each movement sluggish and half-hearted as the comfort tugged at me. But hunger beat comfort, and bladder beat both, so I forced myself upright—wincing all the while as the last threads of muscle-ache reminded me they were very much still there—and swung my legs over the edge of the bed.

My careful movements were still more than enough to wake Valeria—apparently she slept lighter than a damn tripwire—because the second I had shifted my weight even slightly, her eyes had snapped open and tracked me like she hadn't slept at all.

"Good. The Sprites have concluded their work, and I am not detecting any lingering activity," she said, voice low and slightly rough-edged from sleep but still carrying that smooth corpo cadence I had come to expect from her.

She straightened in the chair, spine pulling taut despite the dead weight of her right side, and swept a hand through her hair in one practiced motion before gesturing loosely toward the

doorway. "There is food on the table. It is acceptable cold, but the reheater is at your disposal if you want it at temperature."

I threw her a quick nod and a grateful, "Thank you," before making a break for the bathroom, because *priorities*.

A blissful few minutes later, I found myself slumping into one of the dining chairs like a starved animal, a reheated noodle pack steaming in front of me. The very first bite hit like salvation, and any lingering pretense of dignity evaporated as I tore into the food with single-minded, borderline feral focus.

Valeria limped out of the bedroom a moment later, the movement uneven but still somehow carrying that same old corporate poise—like even gravity itself had to file a request before daring to make her stumble.

She crossed the living room with that stiff, half-ruined stride of hers and eased herself into the chair across from me just as I kept inhaling noodles like a starved sewer-rat.

A faint, almost amused curl tugged at one corner of her mouth, but she thankfully didn't say anything. Just unlocked one of her datapads, flicked through what looked like a mountain of reports, and let me eat in peace.

Only when my bowl was scraped clean did she set the device aside and level her steely-grey eyes at me fully.

"How are you feeling, Seraphine?" she asked. "Do you notice any changes? Anything unusual in your proprioception, balance, fine control? Sensory drift? The Sprites enacted an extensive restructuring, I would not be surprised to hear about changes."

I paused, chopsticks still in my hand, and actually let myself think about it.

The walk to the bathroom, the return trip, even just chewing and swallowing... it had all felt *normal*.

Like my body hadn't really changed at all.

No sudden bursts of speed. No twitchy over-corrections. Nothing of the sort.

"Not really," I finally said. "Everything feels... exactly like it did before."

But even as I said it, I could tell there was a thin veil overlaying everything—like I was holding myself back without meaning to.

A sort of subconscious limiter.

I was moving the way I *remembered* moving, not the way my body probably *could* move now.

Before the second Rank-up, after Reflex had hit six, I'd fumbled pretty obviously with the sudden boost in precision and speed. My fingers had moved too sharply; my centre of gravity had felt wrong the entire time, even while laying down.

This time, though, everything was smoothed out.

Almost suspiciously so.

I sat with my thoughts for a moment, weighing whether saying anything more could potentially backfire, but honestly, I couldn't find a single reason to stay quiet on this front.

Valeria had clearly bought the "I don't know where this comes from" angle so far, and I *genuinely* didn't understand the System's enhancement mechanics well enough to accidentally expose anything about it in the first place.

"It... Is kind of weird, actually," I ultimately admitted. "It's like... there's a limiter on me now? I can tell my body's different, somehow. Like it's stronger and faster, even more precise, but I'm not tapping into it. Almost like I'm matching... what I used to be? I think I might be able to force it?"

I moved my arm a bit, clenching my fingers in front of my face, searching for the right wording. "There's this... full-body *pressure*, too. Kind of like when you're clenching every muscle without meaning to?"

I grimaced as the words came out, because they sounded even more disjointed aloud than they had in my head.

Valeria didn't seem bothered by my clumsy explanation.

If anything, her attention sharpened the second the words left my mouth. She leaned forward just slightly—barely a shift, but enough to signal that whatever I'd said had tripped some internal alarm bell in that sharp mind of hers.

She hummed once, low and thoughtful, then put away her datapad fully and rose from her chair.

With a flick of her fingers, she gestured for me to follow.

"Come. We will run a few tests, Seraphine," she said, already moving toward the most open stretch of floor in the apartment. Her tone had shifted into that casual-corporate cadence she always used when she was being perfectly polite while brooking absolutely *zero* contra.

"Allowing you to step outside without an accurate picture of your current capabilities would be beyond churlish a move. I will *not* entertain objections on this matter."

I didn't bother trying any.

For one, I wasn't stupid enough to pick a fight I didn't even need to win in the first place.

And two, she was absolutely right—the idea of walking back into the dangerous world outside the apartment blind to whatever upgrades the System had rammed into my body sounded like a recipe for yet another disaster.

So I just nodded and fell into step behind her.

If Valeria wanted to run tests, then tests we would run.

And honestly? I wanted the answers just as badly as she did, if not more.

Valeria shifted her stance—barely a change, just the faintest alignment of her shoulders and hips—and raised one hand between us, palm open; but it was enough to send a jolt of adrenaline through me.

“For the baseline,” she said. “Do not attempt to push through whatever internal limiter you described. React only with what feels natural to you right now. We need a reference point before we evaluate the divergence.”

I nodded. There was nothing to argue about; it made sense.

She had no real workable pre-Sprite data on me—just scattered impressions from the chaos of yesterday at best—so this was the fastest method to get anything workable.

Not scientifically accurate or anything, but useful for what we wanted.

“Square up,” she added. “Miss Kanis did drill that much into you, did she not?”

“She did,” I confirmed, already shifting into a basic stance.

Feet planted, shoulders loose, hands up.

Nothing fancy. Just stable and open for a variety of reactions.

Valeria stepped in closer, lifting her hand again, palm hovering at chest height. “When my hand moves toward you, you are to slap it aside. Do not worry about being too forceful, simply move as fast as you can. I will evaluate reaction time, arm speed, and hand-eye coordination based off of those results.”

I nodded, focusing.

Locked onto her arm, her fingers, the tension in her shoulder... Waiting.

And then—A shock hit my nerves.

Her hand was *already* moving.

Already almost *on me*.

I hadn’t even seen the transition.

No wind-up. No tell. Just a blur as my vision caught up.

Instinct fired before thought did.

My hand snapped up and slapped hers aside with a sharp crack that echoed off the apartment walls.

Valeria didn't flinch. Didn't comment. She simply nodded once, a clinical little dip of her chin, and brought her hand back to center like nothing had happened.

'Okay, serious-mode. Got it. No fucking around. Focus up, Sera.'

I tightened my stance, breath steadying, eyes locked on Valeria's hand like it was the only thing in the world that mattered...

—

I slapped her hand away ten more times before Valeria finally lowered it, giving me a moment to catch my breath. Sweat clung to my forehead—not from physical exertion, but from the iron-fisted focus it took just to track her movements.

Trying to catch a corpo-trained monster like her on the draw was... *intense*.

"Your average reaction time in these tests hovers around 166 milliseconds as it stands," she said, tone smooth and matter-of-fact, but edged with a faint approval. "That is quite good for pure visual reactions. I am pleased."

A weird pulse of pride crawled up my chest at that, warm and annoying, and I shoved it down. I didn't *need* her praise. *Definitely* didn't want it. Nope.

"Your hand-eye coordination is already more than adequate for someone your age," she continued, all corporate assessment and sharp angles again. "No doubt Miss Kanis' training has contributed significantly to this. Close-quarters work practically breeds advancements on this front. As for your overall speed-to-contact, you are markedly above average as well—but that was to be expected. Weeks under Miss Kanis will always outstrip the training of others your age."

Her expression hardened as she raised her hand again.

I automatically squared up in response.

"Now," she said, voice cutting clean, "push past that limitation you described earlier. Give it your all, Seraphine. I want to see the extent of what the Sprites have made of you. Hold nothing back."

I nodded, jaw tightening. My focus tunneled inward as I tried to feel out the limiter I'd mentioned—the strange, subconscious tension that kept my body operating at its pre-upgrade baseline.

It was there. Faint, but very much real.

A pressure threading through my musculature, like invisible clamps holding everything just shy of full output.

'Alright, Sera... let's see what happens when you break the damn thing open.'

It took another few moments to figure out how to tease my muscles into full output, but the moment I did, I knew that I had it.

It felt like a lead blanket slipped clean off my back.

One second I was bracing against that invisible pressure—like I'd been walking around in wet clothes without realizing it—and the next, all that drag just... vanished.

My muscles didn't tighten or flare up or shudder; they just *clicked* into place, every fiber suddenly awake and eager, as if they'd been politely waiting for me to stop babying them.

My fingers tingled. My shoulders loosened. Even my stance shifted without conscious thought, knees bending a hair lower, weight settling in a way that felt aggressively more natural—like this was how I was *supposed* to move.

'Oh. Oh, that's new,' I thought, pulse picking up. *'Alright, Sera... limiter's off.'*

I met Valeria's eyes, and gave her the smallest, sharpest nod—permission and confirmation wrapped together.

Her hand twitched a moment later—barely a suggestion of movement, more like the idea of motion than the real thing.

I moved before the thought even formed.

A sharp crack rang out, louder and cleaner than anything from the earlier tests, snapping through the living room as my palm smacked hers aside like it weighed nothing.

I froze, staring at my own hand with my mouth half open, wide-eyed and frankly a little horrified at how different that strike had felt.

There'd been no delay, no wind-up, no conscious decision—just pure instinct firing through a body that wasn't playing by the same rules anymore.

"Again," Valeria commanded before my brain even caught back up.

That snapped me right back into neutral, feet shifting automatically to reset, muscles humming with that barely-contained power as I locked onto Valeria's hand like it was the only thing in the world...

—

Ten more times, the living room snapped with that same sharp crack.

By the end of it, when Valeria finally lowered her hand for real, I was sweating like I'd just run laps around the entire floor.

My muscles, though, barely felt it.

They were warm—pleasantly warm, even—like I'd been doing a light warm-up instead of playing reaction-chess against a corporate monster.

The lingering soreness from earlier, however, that dull full-body ache I'd woken up with, had vanished entirely. It genuinely felt as if actually pushing the muscles to their new limits had shaken out whatever stiffness the Sprites had left behind.

Valeria, on the other hand, was giving me a look I had never seen from her before.

Fascination, threaded with confusion—and beneath both, a thin, unmistakable line of concern.

She didn't allow the silence to linger.

"Your improvement across every metric is... remarkable. Concerning, even," she said matter-of-factly. "This level of progression is not something that should be feasible in such a short timeframe. I find myself... uncertain of the implications."

My eyes widened just a touch, a silent curse catching in the back of my throat.

Maybe agreeing to this kind of testing hadn't been the smartest of things—if anything, this was bound to crank her interest in me up even more, which was exactly what I *didn't* want to have happen.

But then again... Thinking about it for a second longer, after she'd watched uncountable Sprites crawl all over and into my damn body and rearrange me on a fundamental level, I doubted she could've gotten *more* interested if she tried.

Whatever questions she had, they had probably already hit maximum saturation the moment I started glowing like a broken neon sign earlier today.

'Probably no additional harm done then...' I decided, even if the knot in my stomach refused to fully settle. *'And maybe it isn't the worst thing in the world...? If anyone can dig up something about what the System is doing to me, it's her, not me poking around blind for the next five years.'*

Valeria, still in full analyst-mode, carried on without missing a beat. "As for your reaction speed... your average was approximately 128 milliseconds in these tests. For an unaugmented human, this is starting to push the upper boundary of what is realistically achievable through purely visual reaction... It is, in every sense, extraordinary."

My brain tried to catch up, but the numbers just sort of clattered around uselessly.

She inhaled slowly before continuing. "Your hand-eye coordination lagged initially—expected, given your sudden spike in available speed—but self-corrected quickly. Toward the end, I would estimate a functional increase of around... forty-six percent in speed-to-contact. That includes your recovery and precision adjustments. In layman's terms:

You have become considerably faster and more precise than you were, Seraphine. Remarkably so.”

I nodded, somewhat numb.

Hearing it out loud made it sound even more illegal than I had feared.

Several years of specialized, targeted training bootstrapped into my body in under a day—no wonder my limbs still felt a little alien.

*‘Kenzie is going to be furious... absolutely **livid**,’* I thought, heat prickling under my skin at the mental image of her stunned, offended expression. *‘And Jin... yeah, good luck landing another punch on me, boxer boy.’*

Assuming neither of them had magically undergone life-changing upgrades overnight—which, given the nature of cybernetics, bionics and genetics as a whole, was not happening anytime soon.

Valeria let her gaze drift unfocused for a long, heavy moment before exhaling sharply. “I see no *practical* downside in all of this. While the... methodology remains entirely opaque to me, the results are unequivocally in your favor. I will conduct a deeper inquiry into why the World chose to intervene in this manner—and what, exactly, it might have done—but in the meantime, I see no justification in keeping you confined any longer.”

The capital W rattled around in my head again.

She lifted her good hand, halting any sudden enthusiasm I might have had. “Do not let the rush deceive you. These are *capabilities*, not shields. You are not invincible, and I will not have you behave as though you are. I expect responsibility and restraint, as you have shown thus far. As I must manage the remainder of this disaster’s fallout. Do not add needlessly to my plate. Understood?”

“Yes,” I said, steady. “I’ll stay out of trouble. Promise.”

For once, the promise didn’t even feel like a lie.

I had no intention of getting into any dangerous situations for at least a few days, minimum.

Valeria gave a single, firm nod. “Good. I will be resting for some time; actual rest, this time, hopefully. Should anything urgent arise however, contact me immediately. If I am not present when you return from your errands, do not concern yourself. Simply proceed as usual. I have a considerable backlog to address the moment I am once again fit to handle it.”

And just like that, she turned and walked into the bedroom I’d sprinted out of earlier.

A moment later, the door cracked open again and she reappeared—only long enough to set my DuraPack and neatly folded clothes beside the entryway.

No words, no lingering stare.

Just a quiet, exhausted efficiency before she closed the door behind her and vanished into the dim room.

“Huh...” I muttered, suddenly very aware of how empty the apartment felt without her presence looming in the background.

So much had happened in such a ridiculously short span of time that my brain felt like it was still buffering through the backlog.

Trying to make sense of all of it now was like trying to assemble a puzzle mid-fall—pieces everywhere, nothing staying in place long enough to matter.

Still, one thing lodged itself firmly enough to act on: I needed to get out of here for a bit.

Get some distance from Valeria, from the tests, from the Upgrades, from all the capital-W World nonsense she'd hinted at.

Let my thoughts breathe in something else before they suffocated me.

I scooped up my things and dumped them on the couch, taking a moment to double-check everything out of habit—knives, check; spare clothes, check; DuraPack, check; mental stability, *debatable* but potentially workable.

It felt like ages since I'd last seen Mr. Shori, but the memory of warm broth and actual human interaction hit me like a beacon. And honestly? After twenty-eight hours of missed meals and being reconstructed at the cellular level several times... some additional food sounded like salvation.

The noodles Valeria had left me were fine, sure. But “fine” didn't replenish all of *that*.

So I slipped into my Ela outfit, tightened the straps on every knife, and rolled my shoulders once to feel the new strength and finesse settle in with the outfit.

The limiter was still off—and I'd probably leave it that way unless I figured out it somehow became a problem. I was quietly hoping that I would get used to this new “normal” rather quickly, as the speed, control and power it granted was truly exhilarating.

But it was time to go.

*‘I could **really** go for some ramen right about now...’*