

Chapter 113 - Horribilis Cogitatio

The quiet hum of Miss K mulling over the Perk options filled the office, the faint scratch of her pen against paper the only other sound as I waited for her to give me some kind of feedback.

So far, she had done nothing but take notes and fire off clarifying questions about the exact wording and mechanics of the whole Perk situation—whether this had happened before, how these benefits manifested, whether they were gradual or instant. The kind of detailed, technical questions I should have expected but somehow hadn't fully prepared for.

Answering on the spot had been... a struggle.

I realised that I hadn't exactly thought this whole operation through ahead of time.

I figured I'd just get her general thoughts on the Perks, maybe some insight into which one would be best, and that would be that. Instead, she was dissecting everything, picking apart every detail like this was some kind of research paper.

To be fair, who would have expected Miss K to be *this* into it?

To make things easier, I ended up telling her I had gotten one of these choices before, for something unrelated to [Martial Arts]. That gave me a convenient excuse to explain how Perks functioned at a general level, emphasizing that they were completely different from the Knowledge and Muscle Memory downloads she already kind-of knew about.

Perks worked on a whole different level, however.

Where [Skills] or even Attribute upgrades usually came with some kind of instruction—whether that was knowledge on how to use them or an instinctive sense of what had improved—Perks didn't do that.

Perks just happened.

Like [Lightfoot], which had been the bane of my existence when it came to keeping the System a secret lately. The second I had chosen it, it had kicked in. No knowledge dump, no muscles being trained, no explanation of what it actually did.

Just an immediate, tangible effect. Which had already caused me a *lot* of issues.

If I had known [Lightfoot] erased even things like my own blood when I got injured ahead of time, I might have picked a different Perk entirely—at least for the early stages. Sure, it was undeniably powerful, but it had made keeping my story straight a goddamn nightmare.

Too many people had seen me practically bleed out, only for all the blood to just... vanish. No evidence, no trace. I had been forced to come up with so many different cover stories that it was getting hard to keep track of them all.

But Miss K had been especially interested in that part; the whole “how it worked” aspect.

The fact that there was no actual information transfer, nothing I consciously absorbed—just an instant, full-power effect the moment a Perk was chosen—it had taken a solid few minutes of back-and-forth to iron out all the details.

She kept asking follow-ups, making sure she understood exactly how it functioned, like she was trying to reverse-engineer the logic behind it.

Eventually, though, she put down her notes and looked back up at me over the table.

"This is all extremely fascinating. I honestly don't even know where to start with this..." She sighed, rubbing her temples before shooting me an almost wistful look. "I wish we had more time to go into this in detail, but we've already made the others wait long enough for our return."

There was actual regret in her expression, like it physically pained her to cut the conversation short.

She let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head. "Now, about your choices. While I'd love for you to take a closer look at all of them—because they sound more than just a *little* interesting—especially the whole thing about combining martial arts schools into something entirely new... By the Lords, what I'd give to get my hands on that knowledge..."

She trailed off briefly, clearly spiraling into a rabbit hole of pure martial arts obsession, before violently shaking her head to refocus.

"Anyway. As I was saying. Of the options you've got, I think we can both agree that [Ruthless Offense] is a no-go."

Her tone shifted slightly, more grounded.

"Considering your overall mental state and what we talked about earlier, I don't think we need more ways to feed into that part of yourself—quite the opposite. Right now, we're already trying to shackle that part, not encourage it. At least for the next little while."

I nodded vehemently, not wanting to go anywhere near that topic with a ten-foot pole anytime soon.

"As for the other two offensively-oriented options, there's [Brutal Mobility] and [Shadow Assault], both of which honestly seem right up your alley," Miss K continued, cupping her chin thoughtfully. "You're not quite as mobile as Miss Molida, but you're definitely in the upper reaches of what an unaugmented human at your age would normally be capable of. So you'd definitely benefit from [Brutal Mobility]."

She tapped her fingers against the table, clearly lost in thought.

"Especially the combination of Capoeira and Silat... that seems dangerously potent. I wonder just how much of each would truly merge into the new style being offered to you... but that's neither here nor there, unfortunately."

She waved off her own curiosity before shifting gears yet again.

"As for [Shadow Assault], I think that one would only really be viable for you if you were planning to take on a more Operator-like lifestyle. Everything it offers seems practically tailor-made for headhunting contracts, or maybe even Corpo Enforcer work, if that's more your speed."

My eyebrows shot up at that.

I hadn't expected Miss K to so casually bring up becoming an Operator, much less a Corpo Enforcer. But in hindsight... I guess it made sense.

She had barely even blinked at my confession earlier, so of course, she wouldn't hesitate to talk about professions that involved, well... a lot of killing. If anything, she sounded like she was just listing off career paths, same as if she were talking about becoming a mechanic or a netrunner.

Still, it caught me off guard.

"But," she continued, either ignoring or just not acknowledging my surprise, "ultimately, both options are likely to reinforce your more offensive tendencies. And again, I don't think that's something we should really be risking right now, not until you get a lid on the whole situation. I don't think either one would blow things wide open, but I'd still caution you to stay on the safe side for now."

I nodded slowly. I could definitely see her point.

While [Shadow Assault] sounded incredibly cool—I mean, an actual real-life Cyberninja? Who wouldn't want that?—the reality was that I didn't have the Skill set or the gear to make proper use of it yet.

And besides, I wasn't exactly planning on diving into headhunting or bounty work anytime soon. Assuming I even managed to get a license at all, that was a whole other beast entirely.

"That leaves [Immovable Defense] and [Elemental Balance], which, personally, I think makes the choice really easy, no?" Miss K asked, tilting her head.

I could definitely see where she was coming from.

"I'm not exactly the most defense-oriented person, so [Immovable Defense] would definitely shore up one of my weaknesses. But at the same time, it doesn't really have any synergy with who I am as a fighter. Especially when you consider going up against vastly more borged-out people. Martial arts can only bridge the gap so much before raw weight and augments just take over... No offense!"

Miss K chuckled, waving off my half-hearted apology.

"You're not wrong. Aikido and Judo rely heavily on being able to unbalance your opponent, using their own momentum against them. But when they're weighing hundreds of kilos, or even a full ton or two, like some of the borgs I've met in my time? Trying to divert that kind of force isn't just ineffective—it's suicidal. You'd break your own spine before you ever managed to make them stumble."

She held up her hands in a placating gesture, as if to make sure I wasn't dismissing the option entirely.

"That said, if you are planning on getting chromed up anytime soon, then [Immovable Defense] would actually be your best bet. It could help immensely in bridging the physical gap. And if you're already heavier than your opponent?" She smirked. "Then it would make you downright invincible... you know, as long as no one shoots you or anything."

That pretty much left only one option on the table, given everything Miss K and I had just talked about.

"So [Elemental Balance] it is...?" I asked hesitantly, still not entirely sold. The Perk was too vague for my tastes, not really giving me a whole lot to work with.

Miss K nodded, her expression turning serious. "I get why you're unsure. The description isn't as direct as the others—no promises of insane power boosts or flashy combat abilities. But trust me, Sera, this is the kind of thing that'll keep you alive in ways you won't even *realize* until after you needed it."

She flipped back a few pages in her notebook, tapping the pen against the paper as she spoke. "From what it says, [Elemental Balance] pulls techniques from Tai Chi, Aikido, Zen Meditation, and Yoga. That alone tells me two things: One, it's not about power, it's about control. And two, it's built around adaptability. If you take this, you'll be able to move with absolute precision no matter where you are. That's not just some fancy footwork upgrade—that's battlefield supremacy in ways people normally don't even think about until it's far too late."

She leaned forward, resting her arms on the desk. "Ever fought on an uneven surface? In the rain? On slick metal catwalks? Ever had to move through rubble, or a collapsing building, or hell, even just a fight where the ground isn't stable? People don't think about these things until they're already on their asses from slipping, getting their skulls caved in."

I didn't respond immediately, but I couldn't argue with the logic.

Miss K saw the hesitation on my face and pushed further.

"And if that wasn't enough, this Perk isn't just about terrain adaptability—it's about body control as well. You'll be able to flow between movements perfectly, stay completely balanced no matter what's happening around you. It means you'll never be knocked off your feet unless someone physically *forces* you to be, and even then, you'll recover faster than they might expect. It means you won't be thrown off by a hit that should stagger you. It means you'll be able to fight just as efficiently on a narrow ledge as you would on solid ground. That's absolutely huge."

She paused for a beat, then shrugged. "And let's not forget the whole Zen Meditation aspect. I have no idea how much of that will actually come into play, but if it helps you even slightly in keeping your emotions in check, that alone makes it worth considering, I'd say."

I exhaled slowly, turning the idea over in my head.

It still wasn't the flashiest option, but I couldn't deny that Miss K made a damn strong case for it.

I had never really considered how much of a problem terrain could be in a real fight. But the way she talked about it, it wasn't just an edge case—it was something that happened. *A lot*.

And the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Most of my experience with combat came from games, shows, or movies, and none of those ever really modeled realistic fighting conditions unless it served the plot.

If characters fought on a metal catwalk, it was usually because someone was about to get thrown off of it. But those catwalks were always weirdly huge, like full walkways instead of the narrow maintenance rails they were probably meant to be.

Thinking about it now, that had never really made much sense to me in the first place.

Why would they be that wide and sturdy when they were designed for maintenance work?

You didn't need two burly guys standing shoulder-to-shoulder to check on a ventilation system, and you definitely didn't need space for two people to be throwing each other into the railings over and over.

The real world wouldn't be so convenient.

Real fights would happen in tight, unstable spaces.

There wouldn't be solid footing, perfectly level ground, or carefully choreographed movement.

"Yeah... I guess you're right," I finally admitted, making my decision. "I'll go with [Elemental Balance] as my choice, then."

I bowed my head deeply. "Thank you, Miss K. I had nobody else to ask about this, and your honest thoughts helped me a lot. Probably saved me from making a huge mistake by just picking what sounded best. Sincerely, thank you."

Miss K waved me off with an easy grin. "No, *thank you* for bringing this to me. This has been the most interesting series of information I've received in... Lords know how long. However," she trailed off, her expression shifting, eyes turning sharp and *hungry* with curiosity, "if you really *want* to repay me..."

I immediately had a bad feeling.

"I would *love* to watch you make the decision." Her grin widened just slightly, like a cat about to pounce. "I wonder if there'll be any visual tells when the choice settles. Even though you said you don't *feel* anything, maybe there'll be something else—maybe even something Anima-related? There's got to be some kind of stuff happening to you, right?"

My eyes widened.

I hadn't even *considered* that possibility.

Up until now, I had assumed that the System was just... there. An internal process, something only I could interact with. But if it existed as part of the world, rather than just being locked to me, then it had to follow some kind of fundamental laws.

And the only thing that even remotely lined up with what the System was doing—rewriting reality, altering physical Attributes, even creating physical objects—was Anima.

Specifically, the thing that came to my mind was [Manifestation].

A sudden, electric thought shot through my brain.

'Wait... is the System just a super highly advanced version of [Manifestation]...?!'

My mind started racing, piecing things together. If that was the case, then that could *also* explain how it was generating loot drops in the real world.

*'Kill Joy **did** mention that, given enough knowledge and power, [Manifestation] could be used in the real world, not just the digital one...!'*

Was that how the System was creating things? Was I just... interfacing with something bigger, something that already existed in the world? Or was the System itself a kind of hyper-advanced form of Anima manipulation, created by somebody?

The implications hit like a freight train, and suddenly, I wasn't sure if I *wanted* Miss K to watch what happened next. Because if *she* noticed something, then that meant it was *real*.

And if it was real... then who else might be able to see it?

That was the part that really started to sink in.

If there was *actually* something physical, something tangible happening when I interacted with the System, then that changed *everything*. Because up until now, I had been operating under the assumption that even if a Corporation *did* get their hands on me, they wouldn't actually *find* anything.

That was the thought that had been keeping me sane.

Sure, my body was weird. My blood disappeared.

But that alone wasn't enough to justify keeping me locked away forever—not when corpos had bigger, more profitable things to chase. At worst, I'd just be some weird biological anomaly, a curiosity, a footnote in some research file.

But if there was something *real* inside my head—something a Corpo lab could *actually detect*—then all bets were off.

And suddenly, Miss K's offer to watch didn't just seem like a risk. It seemed like an opportunity.

*'If there **is** something she can see, then I'll know to be more careful in the future. If there's some kind of visible reaction, then I'll have to start planning around it—downloads, Perk choices, everything.'*

It was still a massive gamble, however. No matter how I sliced it. I still didn't know exactly where Miss K stood on all of this—whether she was truly and fully trustworthy.

But at this point? She already knew so much that even if I didn't let her watch, she had more than enough information to sell me out to the highest bidder if she wanted to.

That wasn't a comforting thought. But it was a pragmatic one.

"Alright, sure," I finally said, nodding—maybe a little harder than necessary. Like I was trying to convince myself this was a good idea.

Miss K blinked. "Wait, what? *Really?*"

"Yeah." I exhaled, forcing some confidence into my tone. "It'd be good to know if there's actually something happening when I make a choice—and if so, what that something is. I'd love to hear what you find."

I leaned forward slightly, meeting her gaze. "So how about a deal, Miss K? I let you watch, and you break down your observations for me. I don't know much about Anima and all that stuff, so it'd actually help to have someone who *does* take a look."

I made sure to sound more sure about this than I actually felt. Because at the end of the day, I was already in deep with her—I just had to make sure I didn't let her drown me.

"Deal!" Miss K replied immediately, her voice practically vibrating with excitement.

The sheer eagerness in her tone was almost startling, like I had just handed her the golden ticket to the most interesting puzzle of her life. She flipped her journal open in an instant, ready to take notes, and then—just *stared* at me.

Wide-eyed. Intense. Unblinking.

To say I felt like a lab rat would probably be unnecessary, but... yeah.

I *really* felt like a lab rat.

I exhaled slowly, closing my eyes as I pulled up the System Interface, navigating to the Perk Selection for [Martial Arts]. [Elemental Balance] was already highlighted, waiting.

The confirmation prompt sat in front of me like a locked door.

[System]: *Do you want to spend 1x [Martial Arts] Perk Point to acquire [Elemental Balance] Perk?* Y/N

'Well... here goes nothing, I guess...?'

I took a deep breath, though I wasn't really sure why. Perk selection had never felt threatening before, nor did it ever end up actually doing anything to me.

But today? Today, it felt thoroughly nerve-racking.

With a simple mental command, I confirmed the input and—

[System]: *[Elemental Balance] (Martial Arts) Perk **acquired**.*

—nothing happened.

No sudden surge of knowledge. No muscle spasms. No strange sense of power shifting through my body.

According to the System, I was now capable of incredible feats—Tai Chi, Aikido, Zen Meditation, Yoga were now all part of my repertoire to some unspecified degree. I had perfect adaptability to any environment, an inhuman level of balance, complete control over my movements, no matter the conditions around me.

And yet, I *felt* exactly the same as I had three seconds ago.

But I knew that wasn't the whole truth almost *immediately*.

Because the instant I opened my eyes, I saw Miss K.

Her expression was so shocked, so blown wide open, that for a second, I was actually worried her cybernetic eyeballs were going to pop out of her skull.

Her antique pen had slipped from her fingers and clattered to the ground, utterly forgotten.

She was staring—not at me, but through me. Around me. Like she was tracking something invisible, something massive, something no one else but her could see.

Like she was watching a veritable world-ending storm raging in a space that should have been empty.

'Fuck...!'

The implications slammed into me all at once.

Whatever the System *was*, whatever it *did*—it was undeniably Anima-related; and it wasn't just a small connection.

That much was crystal clear, just from Miss K's reaction.

And not just that—Miss K, the unshakable, utterly composed Grandmaster of Martial Arts, looked completely and utterly shaken to the very core.

That alone told me *everything*.

She wasn't just some martial arts prodigy—she clearly had a solid grasp on Anima, at least to a half-decent degree, as far as I could tell. And yet, whatever she had just seen happening to me? It had left her speechless.

That could only mean one thing: Whatever the System was doing wasn't just Anima fuckery.

It was something *way* beyond normal Anima fuckery.

'The System is an Anima construct of frightening scale...' The realization settled in my gut like a lead weight. *'The real question now is... Where the fuck did it come from? And how does that even make sense? How did I end up with this thing?!'*

A flood of questions slammed into me, each one more disorienting than the last.

This revelation changed absolutely *everything*.

I had assumed—hoped, even—that the System was some weird isekai-level nonsense, something otherworldly, something disconnected from the reality of Neon Dragons and uniquely mine.

But this? This wasn't some foreign, untouchable thing that only I could interact with.

This was something *real*.

Something detectable.

Something that existed within the confines, laws and rules of this world, as a tangible, interactable entity of some sort.

And that put me in an *unimaginable* amount of danger.

If anyone caught wind of this—anyone with even the slightest interest in Anima, [Manifestation], or hell, just power in general—I was completely fucking screwed.

No. Beyond screwed.

Not just screwed. Not just erased.

Crumbs. No—*atoms*. Maybe. If I was lucky.

I felt myself spiraling, my brain tripping over itself in its rush to piece this all together, and before I could sink any deeper into that mental abyss, I did the only thing I could do.

I flipped my Ego on, telling it to help me figure this out.

The effect was *immediate*.

The chaos in my mind stilled, like the eye of a hurricane settling into place in an instant. My thoughts untangled, my breathing evened out, and a cold, clinical clarity replaced the panic clawing at my chest.

I knew what to do now. Ego had packed away all of my panic, tied it up into a complicated—somewhat kinky—knot, and tossed it into a corner.

Now it was time to figure out what the *hell* I was actually dealing with here.

I lifted my gaze back to Miss K, my voice smooth, controlled, giving nothing away.

"So... based on your reaction, I assume you saw something, Miss K?"

Miss K didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes were still locked onto something I couldn't see, tracking invisible shapes with a laser focus that was almost unnerving. Her pupils darted from one spot to another, like she was trying to keep up with something moving—something that wasn't supposed to be there.

Her mouth opened slightly, her lips forming the beginning of a word that never came.

Instead, a whisper slipped out, barely audible. "...*impossible*."

That was not something I ever expected to hear from *her*.

My fingers twitched, but I kept myself steady. "Miss K?"

She didn't respond.

Didn't even seem to *register* me. Her focus was still glued to the air around me, like she was watching a storm roll in, except I was sitting right in the middle of it.

"...so many..." she muttered, almost to herself.

I narrowed my eyes. "So many *what*?"

That seemed to snap her back just enough to try and explain, but her brain was clearly lagging behind her words. "I... it's... There's so *many*—I don't—I've never seen—It shouldn't even be possible..."

She stumbled over her own thoughts, shaking her head as if trying to force them into some kind of order.

"Sprites," she finally managed to spit out, though it sounded like the words were barely scratching the surface of whatever was rattling around in her head.

That didn't tell me nearly enough.

Her lips moved again, trying to find the rest of the explanation, but all I got were half-formed phrases. "...no way this should... not even I could... how are they all just *there*?"

I felt my patience thinning, not because I was irritated, but because I needed her to say something that actually made some fucking sense.

My Ego agreed.

Before I had even fully formed the idea, my hand had already snapped forward and slammed on top of the desk.

Bang!

The sharp, violent crack of the impact shattered the trance she had been caught in.

She jolted upright, blinking rapidly as if I had just yanked her out of deep water. Her eyes snapped to mine, finally focused, finally *here*.

I normally wouldn't have done something so blunt. So *rude*.

But my Ego didn't care about manners. My Ego cared about *answers*.

"Are... are you *okay*?" Miss K asked hesitantly, pushing herself up from her chair. She took a slow, careful step toward me—like she was afraid of getting too close. "You're not... in pain or anything?"

I raised an eyebrow. "No. Should I be?"

She just shook her head, slow and deliberate. "I... I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before. I honestly don't know what you should feel. Or even *could* feel, really."

There was something deeply unsettling about hearing *her* say that.

She exhaled, rubbing her forehead before finally continuing. "The amount of Sprites that suddenly appeared... It was unreal. Ehhh... Anima Sprites, I mean. Like the ones in the dojo—the ones on your eyes that keep you from seeing them all, remember?"

I nodded, silently urging her to keep going.

"The second you did... whatever it is you just did, so, so many of them appeared out of thin air and then..." She hesitated, her lips pressing into a thin line before she finally forced the words out. "They entered your head, Sera. Just phased straight through your skull and disappeared inside. All of them."

Miss K wasn't one to lose her cool, but right now? Right now, she looked like she was struggling to process this in real time.

"I... I genuinely don't know what to say," she admitted, running a hand through her hair. "I wasn't even aware that something like this was *possible*—not at this scale; or at all. It's not just something I haven't *seen* before. I've never even *conceived* of it. I've never *heard* of anything remotely close to this..."

Her voice carried the kind of disbelief that only came from someone who had spent years thinking they understood something—only to suddenly be proven horribly, irrevocably wrong.

And honestly? I couldn't blame her.

Because if what she was saying was true... then the System wasn't just Anima-related. It was so thoroughly advanced in its manipulation of Anima that even an experienced practitioner like Miss K couldn't even begin to wrap her head around the very *idea* of it.

And that wasn't even the worst part.

The worst part was the singular thought that kept slipping through my Ego's grasp. The one that refused to be buried, no matter how much control I tried to exert over it.

The singular thought that was so pervasive in its nature of dread that it was causing, that even my 5 Ego could not chain it down.

'If this thing was created by somebody... if it exists within this world's rules and laws...'

Then there was only one logical conclusion.

'I am not guaranteed to be the only one with access to the System...'