

Chapter 112 - Shackles

A deep sigh wasn't exactly the reaction I expected from Miss K after my confession, yet that's exactly what I got.

"Thank the Lords..." she muttered, sounding genuinely *relieved*, of all things.

I blinked, thrown completely off balance. That was not how I thought this conversation would go and it definitely didn't help with my complete and utter confusion.

"I was worried I might've done all this work on your new training regimen for nothing," she went on, casually moving to her usual spot—half-sitting, half-leaning against her desk like we were just chatting about the weather. "But turns out you've just had a very typical Neo Avalis welcome, huh?"

She chuckled to herself, shaking her head, like this was all just some normal rite of passage. Then her tone shifted, the amusement slipping away.

"Listen, Sera. And I mean really listen, okay?"

Her gaze locked onto mine. She didn't continue until I gave a small nod of understanding.

Only then did she press forward.

"What you're feeling right now? That's good. The fact that you're not feeling guilt? *That's good.*" Her voice was firm, like she was hammering the words into place. "Guilt has no place in a city like this. It's a luxury we *cannot* afford."

She leaned in slightly.

"Between the gangs, the Corps that wouldn't bat an eye if you got disappeared, sliced up or Lords-knows-what as long as their numbers stayed in the green, the scavs that don't even see you as a person—just a pile of spare parts and easy Creds—and everything else lurking in the shadows? You don't have time for guilt. You don't get to hesitate or second-guess your decisions like that."

Before I even realized what was happening, she cupped my face in both hands.

Her grip was surprisingly gentle, yet there was no mistaking the weight behind it. If I hadn't been as emotionally confused and focused on the words she was uttering, it would definitely not have made me feel anything.

Nothing whatsoever.

"You've got the wrong kind of morality for this city," she continued, her voice quieter now, like she was mourning the loss of something, but no less intense. "Growing up in Delta? You were protected. Shielded from the worst of what this city—what this whole damn world—really is. But you can't stay cooped up in Delta forever. You can't keep hiding behind restricted floors and safe zones for the rest of your life."

Her thumbs brushed gently against my cheekbones, her golden eyes locked onto mine.

"Because if you do? You'll never make *anything* out of yourself."

Her eyes turned sharp, the warmth from before hardening into something unyielding.

"And that would be a damn shame. You have incredible *potential*, Sera."

She let the words settle for a moment before continuing. "What you're feeling right now? That's misplaced guilt. You feel guilty for *not* feeling guilty. That's a whole rabbit hole you shouldn't try to delve down. It's common for first-timers, downright guaranteed even, for people who've never really dealt with *killing* before. There's a difference between accidents and killing, after all. Accidents happen all the time, and yeah, it's okay to feel guilt over those. But killing? You should *never* feel guilty for that. Not in this city."

Her gaze stayed locked on mine.

"It slows your reactions. Blunts your hits. Puts your life at risk. And in a place like Neo Avalis? You can't afford to let something like that hold you back. Don't put a limiter on yourself when it's not even something you're inherently wired to feel."

She finally let go of my face, her hands dropping away as she leaned back against the desk, crossing her arms.

"There aren't many people who naturally don't feel guilt for taking a life, Sera. That much is true. But don't see it as a flaw. You're special in that way. See it as an *advantage*."

She let that sink in for a beat, then exhaled. "You joined this dojo to learn how to defend yourself. And that's exactly what I'll teach you. But don't make the mistake of thinking that just because my martial arts will make you *safer*, that you are *safe*. Neo Avalis isn't the kind of city where *safe* exists. Not out there, not here in Delta, not even on the restricted floors."

Her fingers tapped once against the desk, like a final punctuation mark.

"There are always ways for the wrong kind of people to get the wrong kind of access. To ruin your life. You don't have to be on edge all the time, but you should always throw a glance over your shoulder every once in a while. It'll save your life, I guarantee it."

She pushed off the desk slightly, eyes meeting mine directly once more.

"You don't know what to do about this? You don't know what to feel as a result?" She tilted her head slightly, her expression unreadable. Then, her voice dropped just a fraction. "Let me flip the question for you then, Sera—would you have done the same if you could go back and do it all over again?"

My breath felt steady, *too steady* for the storm raging in my head.

'Would I have done the same...? If I could rewind time, step back into that moment with the Enforcers—would I still have killed them...?'

The logical side of me went to work immediately, breaking it down piece by piece.

I could have won without killing them, I knew this now. I could have disarmed them, taken out their weapons, left them writhing on the ground before slipping away to another floor.

Find another way to deal with the mess instead of leaving bodies behind.

It was a cleaner solution. It left no unnecessary complications behind, no strange feelings of wondering why I wasn't feeling any guilt over it all.

And yet, the thought of it felt wrong.

Not because it wouldn't have worked, but because I knew exactly what would have happened if I had hesitated.

The way they looked at me. The way they spoke. The way they moved.

The weight behind their threats, the certainty in their voices that they owned the situation; that nothing could touch them as long as they stayed on Valir's good side. That I was just another nobody in their way. Another body they could shove aside if I made things too difficult for them.

I had seen that kind of certainty before.

A different place. A different *him*.

Same feeling. Same tone of voice. Same behaviour.

Same cruel patience, waiting for me to make the wrong move.

I remembered the way he looked at me, the way he had *known* he was in control, because I hadn't stopped him before. Because I had waited too long, had tried ineffective measures.

Hesitation had cost me before.

And it had once again nearly cost me and Jade our lives.

A cold, razor-sharp thought abruptly sliced through the noise.

'Why am I even thinking about this?'

Who the hell was I even trying to fool? Nobody could hear my damn thoughts. Nobody was here inside my head. So why was I *pretending* like I was struggling with this question?

The second Miss K had asked the question, I had *already known* the answer.

I wouldn't have done anything differently.

*'No, that's not quite right. I would have killed them **sooner**.'*

The only mistake I had made was not ending them fast enough. Just like before.

Meeting Miss K's gaze again, I shook my head. "I wouldn't have. I would still have killed them, because if I didn't, they'd come for me again. Maybe not immediately. Maybe not for a while. Maybe not even them directly, but their friends, their family—whoever decided to pick up where they left off. Killing them doesn't make that an impossibility, of course, but it sends a clearer message: Don't fuck with me."

Miss K's lips curled into a grin as she nodded, clearly pleased with my answer. "Correct. So there's no real point in beating yourself up over not feeling guilty if you would've done the same thing anyway now, is there?"

I shook my head immediately.

She was right.

There wasn't a point to any of this if I'd do the exact same thing all over again.

"Then let me give you some additional advice, Sera," she continued. "When it comes to killing someone, there are only three things you really need to consider. One—can I kill them more easily than not? Two—will killing them lead to more problems or fewer? And three—will I be the one stuck cleaning up the mess?"

I processed the first two without much issue, but when my brain hit the last one, I couldn't help but chuckle.

Miss K winked. "That last one was half a joke, cause things were getting a little *too* serious for my tastes. But it's also damn true. *Never* kill somebody in your own home, that shit is a complete fucking mess, let me tell you."

She shifted slightly, her expression slipping back into something more serious.

"I was worried you had lost it, Sera," she admitted, watching me closely. "You told me about your strange... condition. Promised me you had it under control. But with how little I know about it, and how little *you* seem to understand it, either, I was worried that whatever happened had made you lose control. But that's not what happened, is it?"

She tilted her head, continuing before I even had a chance to answer.

"Instead, you've just realized that a certain part of yourself is more efficient when it's unrestrained. You've already loosened shackles you didn't even know you were wearing, and now your mind is struggling to reconcile that. Your body, your instincts—they've already adjusted, already moving without those restraints. But your conscious mind? It hasn't caught up yet."

She drummed her fingers against the desk, silent for a few moments as she thought.

Then, with a nod, she refocused on me again.

"We're going to fix this. You need to learn how to put those shackles back on when you're sparring or training. Because sparring isn't about survival—it's about learning, about testing new things. And right now? You're a useless sparring partner if you can't match the intensity

of the person you're training with. For Miss Molida today, you were *worthless*. That can't happen again."

Her voice was stern, but there was no malice behind it. Just fact.

"I need you and everyone else in my classes to have the freedom to try things out, to push themselves without constantly worrying about getting their throats crushed, their necks snapped, or their hearts ripped out. That's the whole reason this dojo exists in the first place. If people could learn to fight just by throwing themselves at scavs, there are tens of thousands of them out there waiting. But that's not how martial arts work. That's not how learning how to fight works."

She shook her head, exhaling sharply.

"You need a safe environment to make mistakes. To *learn* from them. And yeah, knowing how to act in life-or-death situations is just as important—if not more—but that's not something we're diving into in the first few months of training here."

Then, with a slight bounce off the desk, she stepped closer, leaning down so her eyes were level with mine again.

"So let's try shackling you up again. Step by step. Temporary restraints that you can take off when you *need* to. It's going to blunt you a little, no question. But otherwise?" Her gaze didn't waver. "You're going to turn into something neither of us want you to be."

She let that sit for a second before delivering the final blow.

"Killing is a *tool*, Sera. Not a lifestyle. Never forget that."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had expected *something* else—maybe an attempt at justification, some kind of moral framework to reconcile what I had said. Something about ethics, about the weight of taking a life, about what it meant in the grand scheme of things.

That was how these kinds of conversations usually went, right? Someone would try to make sense of it all, put it in a box that made it easier to swallow.

But Miss K hadn't done any of that.

She had just... accepted it.

No judgment. No hesitation. No talk of right or wrong, good or bad.

Just a simple, matter-of-fact acknowledgment.

"*You don't mind killing? Perfect. That makes you special, but a bit unhinged. Let's fix that.*"

That was it.

And for some reason, that was *strangely* reassuring.

She hadn't consoled me. She hadn't comforted me.

She hadn't even really *accepted* me, not in the way most people would think of it.

She had just taken the information, processed it, and immediately started working on how to make it more efficient. No wasted time, no unnecessary emotional weight—just a practical problem with a practical solution.

Why did that feel so... *right*? Was this really okay...?

Before I could dig too deep into that thought, Miss K was already moving toward the door, her voice cutting through the haze in my mind.

"Alright, we should get going on that shackling sooner rather than later. And we're going to need Miss Molida for that."

She reached for the door handle, fully intending to leave.

But before she could take another step, the words were out of my mouth.

"Wait—There's... There's something else I need to talk about!"

It came out louder than I had intended, sharp enough to stop her in her tracks.

She turned back to me, raising an eyebrow, waiting.

Suddenly, I felt incredibly self-conscious.

A minute ago, I had been talking about murder like it was just another logistical issue to solve, and now? Now I was struggling to get the words out again.

'I'm a fucking mess...' I realized, but I shoved that thought aside.

No point dwelling on it.

I was probably going to be an emotional yo-yo for a while—swinging between extremes as I tried to follow Miss K's advice and figure out how to shackle things down.

But right now, there was still something important I needed to take care of.

"I... I need some advice on something," I said, forcing the words out. "It's related to the thing in my head. The strange connection. You said I should tell you when things progressed, and... they did."

The shift in Miss K's demeanor was immediate.

She moved back toward me, leaning against the desk, arms loosely crossed as she gestured for me to continue.

It felt thoroughly weird to openly talk about my System like this, even veiled behind whatever interpretation Miss K had built up in her head. If I remembered right, she had called it a spirit connection last time we spoke about it.

I still wasn't sure if I could fully trust her.

Even after everything I had just told her—even after the conversation we just had—there was a difference between talking about murder and emotional trauma in a place like Neo Avalis and talking about something *truly* unique.

One was an everyday reality here. The other? A corporation's wet dream.

That distinction wasn't lost on me.

"Your promise from last time still holds true, right?" I asked, my voice a little tighter than I wanted it to be. Not that her answer would really change anything.

If she was lying, I wouldn't exactly be able to tell just from her response.

"Of course," she said with an easy nod. "I won't disclose anything you tell me about this whole strangeness going on in your head. I'm mostly just interested in it for personal reasons."

That should have put me at ease. It didn't.

But what other choice did I really have?

She already knew something was going on. And I needed input on the [Martial Arts] Perk that had been sitting there, waiting for me to make a decision. Maybe the Perk could have even saved my ass during the Valir situation, if I had already had it unlocked.

"Not to mention," Miss K continued, interrupting my thoughts and pulling me back into the conversation, "you're literally my client. For as long as these dojo sessions continue. So even legally speaking, you're completely covered."

My eyebrows shot up. That was news to me.

"I'm your client...?" I repeated, trying to process what she was saying.

As far as I knew, Valeria was the one footing the bill for all of this, so how did that make *me* the client in legal terms?

"Yes, you are," Miss K confirmed, nodding. "Unlike the rest of the class, whose contracts list their guardians as the official clients, your mother was very particular about only covering the cost. She made sure *your* name was entered as the client instead."

That made me pause.

My thoroughly confused expression was apparently enough to prompt an even further explanation by Miss K, "She asked me what would be the best way to make sure you learned as efficiently and effectively as possible, and I recommended this—just like I do to anyone who asks. Having a bit of a student-sensei confidentiality clause, supported by contracts and legal protections, has proven to be *very* effective. It makes sure students can

get the help they need when they need it, without having to worry about their guardians or anyone else breathing down their necks."

She smirked slightly.

"Frankly, I was pretty surprised to see Mrs. Vildea immediately agree to it. Corps usually aren't too keen on handing over unrestricted access to potential secrets. As is evidenced by literally the entire rest of the class. All of their contracts list the guardians as clients, with the students simply being the object of the contract. But she was *adamant* that you got the best and most effective training I could offer, so she signed away the entire contract."

Miss K shrugged like this was just another piece of casual trivia, but my mind was already working overtime.

Valeria agreeing to something like this without a fight? Straight up agreeing immediately? Making sure I had full client privileges instead of keeping herself in the loop?

That... that was beyond odd.

'What is she thinking...?'

There was no way this wasn't some kind of ploy.

Valeria never did anything without a reason.

'Does she think I have nothing to hide...? No shot. She's definitely noticed I'm completely different from the old Sera. So why wouldn't she keep the contract in her name and just ask Miss K about my progress? That way, she could force her to answer truthfully or risk serious legal consequences...'

No matter how I looked at it, it didn't add up.

It was convenient for me, however.

Having my name on the contract meant a lot more privacy, which was a relief considering my situation. While I still wouldn't stand a chance if a major Corporation got wind of the System, at least I had some actual legal protection here.

That alone made it far less likely that Miss K would casually spill my secrets.

If she wanted to break confidentiality, she'd have to *really* think it through first.

Even in a world as cutthroat as Neon Dragons, Corporate Contracts still carried serious weight. Sure, things were lawless in plenty of ways compared to my old world, but Corps?

They took legal agreements *very* seriously. For obvious reasons.

After all, if *everything* was lawless, there wouldn't be any profits to be made.

Something or someone had to keep the whole thing from burning down, and in this world, contracts were one of the only real tools that gave the average person any leverage or protections.

"Alright then... So... about this whole connection thing," I started, taking it slow.

I couldn't afford to slip up on my words here. Every sentence had to be double-checked before it left my mouth.

"I recently had another one of those strange moments where my mind was flooded with memories, and I learned new things. Just like the first time we talked about this, when you asked me what had happened," I continued, watching as Miss K nodded along, her interest growing by the second. "But unlike last time, something *else* happened."

I hesitated, not sure how to put this next part into words. It wasn't something easy to explain, and I had a feeling Miss K would be the type to fill in the gaps herself anyway.

"I was presented with... A choice, I guess? Or maybe it was more like the memories, or the voice, or... I don't even know how to describe it."

"Understanding?" Miss K jumped in immediately. "Like you just *know* something, without knowing why?"

I latched onto that instantly. "Yeah! Exactly like that! It was like I just *understood* that I could choose one of five different... choices? Paths? I'm not sure. But there were descriptions for them." I exhaled, forcing myself to push forward. "I don't know which one to choose, so I wanted to ask... for... help..."

My words trailed off as I noticed Miss K had been gradually leaning in closer and closer, her eyes practically burning with curiosity. By the time I realized just how close she had gotten, she was only centimeters away, and my eyes had already gone cross-eyed trying to keep her in focus.

"YES!" she practically exploded, her entire body snapping to attention. "Tell me, tell me! Don't leave anything out!"

Before I could even react, she darted backwards two steps toward the desk, rolled over it in an impressive display of acrobatics, landed on the opposite side, and—without hesitation—unlocked and ripped open a locked drawer.

I blinked.

Then blinked again.

She pulled out what looked like... a *paper-bound journal*.

A real, actual, bona fide physical book.

My brain short-circuited for a second.

Miss K, in all her physically imposing, muscle-bound and toned, no-nonsense glory, was now sitting in her chair, *pen in hand*, flipping the journal open like some eager scholar about to take notes in an ancient archive.

I stared.

Because not only had I never seen *anyone* use an actual journal before, but she looked *completely* serious about writing in it.

In a world where digital records were everything, where information was stored on implants, terminals, or encrypted drives, Miss K had a literal paper-based notebook—an absolute *antiquity*—and she was about to write in it like this was completely normal with yet another antiquity in itself—a mechanical pen.

I blinked a few more times, trying to process what I was seeing, trying to reconcile *this* version of Miss K with the one I had in my head.

I failed.

Regardless, Miss K seemed way too eager to jump into this, so I didn't bother holding anything back.

"So, as I mentioned, there were five different ones: [Immovable Defense], [Ruthless Offense], [Shadow Assault], [Brutal Mobility], and [Elemental Balance]," I started, listing them off one by one.

I made sure to include the exact descriptions as they had been presented to me—carefully filtering out anything that might hint at the System's existence. Fortunately, these specific Perks had been worded in a way that didn't mention Abilities, Skills, Attributes, or Levels.

That made my job a *lot* easier.

It took me about fifteen minutes to go through them all in detail, occasionally pausing to pull up the System again whenever I needed to double-check something.

I played it off by rubbing my temples or covering my eyes with my hands—hopefully making it seem like I was just trying to recall the wording from memory.

Meanwhile, Miss K fired off occasional clarifying questions, her pen scratching across the pages of her journal at a steady pace.

What really surprised me, though, was how little she reacted overall.

No big emotional response, no awe, no immediate opinion. Just calm, focused note-taking.

I had half-expected her to start theorizing out loud or at least show some sort of personal investment, but she was treating this like a scientist gathering data.

Pure curiosity, nothing else.

"...and that's basically all of it," I finally concluded, exhaling as I leaned back slightly. "I really don't know which one to choose, so I figured asking you would be the best idea. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, Miss K..."