

Chapter 118 - Break

Our breaths came hot and heavy, each inhale feeling like it barely did anything.

We'd been at it for a solid fifteen, maybe twenty minutes now, with barely a second to breathe between engagements. Honestly, it was a miracle we were all still on our feet, considering the sheer insanity of what we'd just put our bodies through. Even top-tier athletes back in my old life would've been gassed by now.

The only one still holding it together—somehow, but also fairly predictably—was Tom.

But even he wasn't untouched.

His breaths had grown heavier, and sweat dripped from his brow, soaking into his gi. If even *he* was feeling it, that meant we were way past the point of pushing limits.

Finally, mercifully, Miss K's voice rang through the training hall.

"Alright, everyone, great work. Let's all take five."

A collective sigh rippled through the group as we all started dragging our battered bodies toward the nearest row of benches, collapsing onto them like we'd just survived a war.

No one questioned it. No one tried to act tough.

Water bottles were cracked open, and Miss K's signature blend of medicine was pulled out—because of course she had a custom remedy for bruises and claw marks.

Surprisingly, nobody had taken any real damage beyond a few scratches from Kenzie's claws and some gnarly bruises. The sheer chaos of the free-for-all had actually prevented us from hitting each other too hard—nobody could fully commit to an attack without immediately opening themselves up to a counter from at least one of the other three people.

More than that, the fight had forced all of us into a heightened state of awareness as well.

The format had demanded constant checks on everyone's movements at all times, which meant none of us had eaten any truly devastating blows.

Ironically, despite being the wildest spar so far, it had ended up being the least damaging.

Even Miss K looked mildly surprised at how little she'd had to step in. She'd only interfered twice—and neither of those times had been because of me.

That fact alone?

Yeah. I was way more excited about that than I probably should've been.

But could anyone really blame me?

Barely an hour ago, I'd almost seriously messed up—nearly taking Kenzie's head off because I hadn't known how to hold back. And now? Now I was somehow one of the best in the class when it came to restraint.

That was one hell of a jump.

Still, I wasn't entirely happy with my overall progress.

Yeah, I'd made huge strides toward getting the whole "absolute control" thing under wraps, but I was still a long way from actually benefiting from it in any meaningful way—well, outside of the whole not accidentally maiming people anymore thing, which, to be fair, was kind of a big deal in it's own right; but still.

I gulped down my water like I'd just crawled out of the damn desert, already thinking ahead.

I needed more of this. More sparring. More chances to push myself.

'Just a little longer...'

Miss K let out an amused chuckle, watching as we all drowned ourselves in our bottles like half-dead animals at an oasis.

"You guys are lucky I get the good shit for you," she said, shaking her head. "If you were at some bottom-tier dojo, they'd just throw low-grade hydration at you, and the way you're chugging that down? You'd either wreck yourselves or straight-up die."

She let that sink in for half a second before adding, "So do me a favor and rehydrate responsibly, you absolute blanks, or I swear I'll start tiering down your bottles just to teach you a lesson."

The second Miss K mentioned tiering down our water supply, every single one of us visibly slowed our intake.

Jin, who had been practically chugging his like a competitive eater, hesitated mid-gulp before setting his bottle down like he'd *totally* meant to stop there anyway.

Tom simply adjusted his pace without breaking stride, continuing to down the bottle albeit at a markedly reduced pace.

Kenzie, ears twitching, shot Miss K an outraged side-eye before dramatically sipping her water like a refined noble—Valeria would be proud.

And lastly, me. I eased up immediately as well—no way in hell I was risking whatever *low-tier hydration* meant in this place.

I hadn't exactly been deep-diving into the hyper-detailed wiki entries about water supplies or post-workout hydration in my past life. Not that I wasn't at least a little curious, but those kinds of niche mechanics had never come up naturally in any of the playthroughs I'd watched.

'Stupid self-set rules...!'

If I'd just let myself look things up back then, maybe I wouldn't be as much in the dark right now... Not that the other's reactions didn't already speak volumes about the difference in quality.

Miss K smirked at our rapid, collective compliance, nodding in approval. "Good. You learn fast."

With that out of the way, she shifted gears. "Alright, while you lot recover, let's go over some pointers. Tom, you're up first—seeing as you're the only one here not about thirty seconds away from collapse."

Tom straightened slightly, rolling his shoulders as he stepped forward.

Miss K wasted no time, running through his usual strengths—his patience, his ability to read opponents, how he consistently forced people into his tempo rather than reacting to theirs.

But she also pointed out that he relied too much on that control, sometimes missing opportunities in favor of playing it safe. "You've got a solid foundation," she told him, "but don't be afraid to push a little. You feel when someone is breaking—capitalize on it."

She leaned in close, murmuring something too low for the rest of us to catch. Whatever it was, it made Tom stiffen for a split second before she gave him a playful but firm clap on the back.

Whatever she'd said, it stuck.

Tom processed it with a thoughtful nod, his expression shifting into something more introspective as he stepped back towards us and took a seat on the bench, making room for Miss K to turn her attention to Jin.

"Jin," she sighed, giving him a once-over like she was already bracing herself. "You need to stop treating every fight like a damn warzone."

Jin scoffed. "It *is* a warzone."

Miss K arched a brow. "And yet, despite that, you're still getting checked by both of them."

She gestured to Tom and Kenzie. "You can't just brute force your way through everything, kid. You've got power—stupid levels of power—but until you learn to control that strength more adequately, someone's always gonna find a way around you."

Jin grumbled something under his breath but didn't push back—too much.

Miss K stepped in closer, murmuring something low into his ear. Whatever it was, it made his brow twitch, but he kept his mouth shut. With a final nod, she gestured for Kenzie to step up next.

"Kenzie," she said, crossing her arms with a sigh, "you're a menace."

Kenzie's ears perked up, clearly taking it as a compliment.

Miss K let out a sigh. "Your speed is insane, your footwork's absurd, and you're damn near impossible to pin down. But you get far too cocky. You go for flashy moves when a simple one would do. You're not invincible, Kenzie—if someone clips you mid-dash, you're done for. The only reason you're not getting your ass handed to you in these spars is because the others aren't quite there yet. But they will be. And soon."

Kenzie's ears twitched, but Miss K wasn't done.

"So stop trying to one-up yourself with even flashier, even riskier moves. Focus on refining what you already have—sharpening it—because when they *do* catch up, all the style in the world won't save you."

Kenzie pouted, arms crossed, but the slight flattening of her ears told me she was actually taking it to heart.

Then Miss K leaned in and whispered something just for her. Kenzie's pout instantly flipped into a mischievous smirk.

I had no idea what she'd just been told, but judging by that look, it probably wasn't good for the rest of us.

Miss K, unfazed, finally turned to me.

"Come on, Sera. Walk with me," she said, nodding toward the far-side of the training hall.

I followed her, trying not to look too exhausted as we stepped away from the others.

Miss K gave me a quick once-over before nodding to herself. "Alright, first things first—you're improving. No doubt about that."

I felt a small bit of pride swell in my chest.

"But," she continued, eyes narrowing slightly, "I still need to ask—how's the whole restraint thing going? You look like you've got it under control, but I'd rather hear it from you."

I hesitated for half a second before nodding. "Yeah. It's... still something I have to think about, but I've got a handle on it. It's getting easier and easier, for sure."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, a visible sigh of relief leaving her. And then, just for a moment—a real smile.

Not the amused smirk or the teasing grin she usually wore, but something genuine.

Something in my chest fluttered at the sight.

'Stupid fucking teenager hormones...!'

She either didn't notice or didn't comment, instead moving straight into the next lesson.

“Alright, listen. You need to start figuring out how to *use* this control of yours. Right now, you’re still treating it like something to *fix* instead of something to *refine*.”

I frowned slightly, thinking back to how much I’d been struggling to let go of all the control the Perk had dumped on me. “Isn’t that the point?”

Miss K sighed, shaking her head. “No. Look, I don’t know a single martial artist who wouldn’t *kill* for the kind of fine-tuned muscle control you have access to. You’re insulting the entire martial arts community by trying to just turn it off like it’s some kind of rogue AI.”

I blinked. “That’s... harsh.”

“Harsh? No, harsh is me watching you waste a golden ticket and not saying anything.” Her expression softened just a bit. “I get *why* you’re doing it. You need to move naturally, and that’s fine. But don’t be afraid to test things out. That dodge you pulled earlier? Tom’s kick?”

I nodded, already somewhat knowing where she was going with this.

“*That* was a perfect example of how you can use it. You made a downright impossible move happen and turned it into an escape. That’s the kind of stuff you should be aiming for—more of that. Not just trying to claw back what you had before.”

She crossed her arms, her voice firm but not unkind. “That choice you made? It’d be a complete waste if you didn’t start working active control into your style *now*. You’ve been treating it like something you need to erase before even considering how to use it. But why not do both at the same time?”

She tilted her head slightly. “You’re making this harder on yourself by taking it one step at a time. If you let go of control now, only to realize later you actually need it, then what was the point? You’d just be wasting time fighting against something that could’ve been an advantage from the start.”

She exhaled, her tone softening just a bit. “Look, I know it’s easier said than done. But at least think about it a little more carefully, yeah?”

I nodded, albeit a bit hesitantly.

What she was asking wasn’t going to be easy—not by a long shot.

But it *did* make logical sense.

Then, with a small smirk, she said, “Oh, and next time someone tries to kick you in the face?”

Her eyes glinted with amusement. “Maybe plan for it *before* you’re about to get clocked. Although...” A brief hesitation, before she added, “Actually, that weird, splayed-out jump move you pulled to dodge the kick? Utterly hilarious. Honestly, maybe it’s better if you *don’t* plan for anything, if that’s the kind of stuff I get to see when you don’t.”

Heat crept up my neck as the memory of that ridiculous, frog-like sprawl slammed back into my mind.

'Shit.'

Yeah, no. That was definitely embarrassing.

But just as I felt my expression twitch, I caught myself.

'Wait. I don't have to show my embarrassment like this anymore...!'

Immediately taking full control of my facial muscles, I locked down any reaction and hit Miss K with the most unimpressed, deadpan stare I could manage—like her teasing hadn't touched me at all.

Her smirk only widened even further at that.

'Fuck...!'

Completely unfazed, she simply gestured for me to return to the rest of the group before calling out loud enough for everyone to hear. "Alright, listen up. Originally, I was planning to give you all another shot at me for the reward. But honestly?"

She glanced between us, nodding to herself. "I'm really damn impressed with how good that free-for-all was for your initial assessments. The rapid, iterative learning? The adaptability? You're all picking things up fast. Honestly way faster than I think my usual go-to would do for all of us."

Her gaze flicked over to Kenzie, Tom, and Jin. "Props to you three for coming up with the idea on the spot, by the way. I really fucking like it. Might even add this ruleset to some of the other classes in the future..."

A murmur of approval went through the group before she clapped her hands together again. "So, instead of changing things up, we're keeping the same format for the rest of the session today. Back on the mat, same point totals as before. Only this time—" Her eyes sharpened. "I expect you to focus on the shit I just told each of you. Use what we just went over."

The four of us locked eyes.

No words were exchanged, but the message was loud and clear.

"I don't mind at all... but holy shit, I'm exhausted."

Still, even with our bodies screaming at us, there was an undeniable energy buzzing between us—something about the direct head-to-head competition was seriously igniting our drive.

Add in the fact that Miss K had put an actual reward on the line for the highest point total?

Yeah. We were going to go hard again.

Miss K smirked at our expressions. “You’ve got five minutes to breathe, regain some energy, rehydrate—*responsibly*,” she added, throwing us a pointed look, “and then you’re back on the mat.”

With those words, she strolled off into her office for a moment, leaving us four to our own devices—primarily grabbing another bottle of whatever “high-tier hydration” Miss K had provided for us.

We wasted no time.

The second Miss K disappeared into her office, the four of us descended on the water bottles like a pack of starved animals—though, notably, at a much more measured pace this time.

No one was about to risk a tier-down, even with Miss K out of the room.

Not after that warning earlier.

Especially not after we’d found out she’d somehow been aware of the entire free-for-all while she was inside her office with me. That little revelation had put the fear of god in all of us—who knew how the hell she was keeping tabs on all of us like that?

But even as I took slow, controlled sips, something else nagged at my focus.

This was the moment.

The first real five minutes of downtime we’d had since the incident with Kenzie earlier. And if I was going to make things right with her, this was my shot.

A lump formed in my throat at the thought.

I didn’t even know where to start.

Apologies had never been my strong suit, and the idea of hashing this out in front of everyone only made it worse. But five minutes wasn’t a lot of time, so I couldn’t afford to hesitate.

‘Fuck it.’

I shifted on the bench, scooting over toward Kenzie before my stupid, anxiety-prone brain could somehow convince me to put it off.

She glanced at me, one ear twitching slightly in acknowledgment, but didn’t say anything.

I hesitated for half a second—then pushed through.

‘No dancing around it. Just be straight.’

“Listen, about earlier,” I started, voice a little rough, “I was way too hard on you in that spar. I wasn’t thinking, and if Miss K hadn’t stepped in—” I exhaled, shaking my head. “I could’ve seriously hurt you.”

Kenzie didn't react much—just took another sip of her bottle, watching me.

"I know that's not an excuse," I continued, forcing myself to keep going. "I just—I hope you can forgive me for it. It won't ever happen again, I swear. I was—"

Before I could even get halfway through the rest, she cut me off.

"I don't care."

I blinked. "Huh?"

She shrugged. "I don't care." Her tone wasn't angry, just matter-of-fact.

"Honestly? It was kinda nice seeing where I'm lacking in a real fight." She rolled her shoulders, her usual smirk creeping back in. "If anything, I hope that kind of stuff becomes part of training here. Actually, that's basically a guarantee, isn't it? No way Miss K lets us off this easy forever."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Kenzie just kept going.

"Besides," she said, tilting her head slightly, "I could smell something was different about you. That spike of raw testosterone and adrenaline the second you stepped into the dojo? Should've tipped me off earlier... That's definitely on me." She huffed, shaking her head.

"Didn't really click until just now. But yeah—makes sense."

I frowned, trying to interject, trying to explain why I'd been like that—because at this point, I was fully committed to at least telling her that something had messed with my head, that I wasn't in the right state of mind.

But the second I opened my mouth, she raised a hand, shutting me down.

"Don't care."

I stared at her. "Kenzie—"

"I don't care *why* it happened or whatever," she repeated, locking eyes with me. "You already said it won't happen again. So why would I worry about why it happened once?"

Her expression didn't waver. "It doesn't change anything. At least not in my eyes."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, but she wasn't finished.

Her gaze sharpened, ears flicking slightly as she leaned in just a bit. "And another thing—"

There was no teasing in her voice now.

"I'm not as weak as you seem to think I am."

I stiffened. "That's—"

"I can handle myself just fine," she cut in, shutting me down again. "I don't need to be babied with apologies or whatever guilt trip you're putting yourself through. You're acting like I was some helpless rookie who got steamrolled. I wasn't. I got overrun because I misread the situation. It happens."

Her gaze sharpened, her pupils abruptly contracting into full feline slits for the first time since I'd known her. It was jarring, a sudden and visceral reminder that she was not just some regular person.

"If it *does* happen again despite your promise, however," she continued, voice dropping lower, "I'll stop going easy too."

There was no bravado in her tone. Just a simple, unshakable fact.

"And I'll show you *exactly* how much I need your babying—with my claws. You understand me?"

She took another slow sip of her water, letting that sink in.

Then, in an almost casual tone, she finished, "So stop acting like I'm fragile. Otherwise I'll kick the shit out of you in this next round. It pisses me off."

Her words hit hard—a weird mix of relief and embarrassment settling in my chest all at once.

I'd braced for frustration, maybe even some lingering resentment. But instead? Kenzie hadn't even thought twice about it.

Meanwhile, I'd been losing my damn mind over it this entire time.

'I really did underestimate her, huh?'

Miss K's voice echoed in my head. "*You're underestimating Kenzie.*"

I clenched my jaw, cursing her internally. Again.

Why the hell was she *always* right?

Kenzie really wasn't this fragile.

She hadn't been stewing over this, replaying it in her head, or picking it apart from every angle. She'd already moved on, and here I was, still acting like I needed to fix something that wasn't even broken.

Before I could sink too far into my own thoughts, Miss K thankfully reemerged from her office already, clapping her hands together with sharp finality.

"Alright, break's over! Back on the mat!"

The four of us instinctively straightened, dragging ourselves up from the benches. Whatever tangled mess of thoughts had been thrashing around in my head got cut off immediately as my brain switched gears.

'How do I let go of control... but also use the control to my advantage...?'

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders as we stepped back onto the mat for the final round.

No more overthinking. Time to figure this out.

My last real shot at making progress before the Operator meeting. If I was gonna get this whole *control vs. letting go* thing sorted, it had to be *now*.

We all took our spots on the mat, shifting into ready stances, waiting for Miss K's signal.

Our eyes met in turn, silent calculations passing between us.

Who's going for who first?

What's the play this round?

How the hell do we deal with this chaotic mess of a free-for-all?

Miss K's voice cut through the quiet, but it didn't break the tension—it just sharpened it.

"Tom's in the lead by five points," she announced, clearly enjoying herself. "Kenzie's right behind, two points ahead of Jin. And Sera..."

I braced as best I could.

"...Dead last. Eight points behind."

Hearing it laid out like that really made me cringe. I could practically feel the heat rising in my face. But Miss K wasn't done.

She didn't hold back at all. "Sera, could you please stop embarrassing me like this? You're making it look like I added you to this group for my own amusement, not because you have any real merit. Get it together already."

'Miss K, I swear to fucking god—!'

My eyes darted to the ground as everyone's focus *immediately* snapped to me. I saw Kenzie's ears flick toward me out of the corner of my eyes, a little twitch of "*Wow, that's something, huh?*" without a word.

I wanted to disappear, to just *not be here* right now.

But Miss K—seemingly thoroughly enjoying my discomfort—dragged out the silence, stretching it *way* longer than necessary. It was like she was getting a kick out of my embarrassment.

And knowing her, that was *exactly* what was happening right now.

I was praying she'd just give the damn start signal.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of awkwardness, Miss K brought her hands together over her head.

Clap!

The game was back on.

And immediately, all hell broke loose.

Kenzie launched off the ground, her stupidly strong legs rocketing her across the mat like a missile—claws extended, locked on me.

At the same time, I caught movement from the opposite side—Tom, closing in fast.

‘Oh, come on...!’

Apparently, I was the prime target for this opening volley.

Luckily, Jin disagreed.

He’d taken a few steps toward me at first, but at the last second, he veered off, cutting across the mat to intercept Tom. The two clashed hard in the middle, Jin’s sheer weight and aggression slamming into Tom’s more methodical footwork, forcing him to deal with the human freight train instead of gunning for me.

Good. That was one problem off my plate.

Now I just had to deal with the other, heavily-clawed one.

Kenzie was already on me, her relentless speed and agility forcing me to react immediately.

She came at me with rapid-fire strikes, her claws flicking out just enough to force me into tighter and tighter defensive movements. Her footwork was insane, bouncing her in and out of range before I could even think about throwing a counter.

I was so damn glad I’d gotten my “absolute control” dialed back enough that my intuitive responses weren’t completely stiff garbage anymore. If I was still fighting my own body as much as I had been earlier, I’d be hemorrhaging points left and right.

Miss K wouldn’t just be embarrassed—she’d probably disown me.

But still, I was stuck.

I needed to figure out how to use the absolute control my Perk had granted me to my advantage, like Miss K had said. But with Kenzie on me like this, I barely had time to breathe, let alone plan or think through anything out.

So, I moved.

I let Kenzie’s own aggression guide me, shifting, sidestepping, letting her momentum push us closer and closer toward the ongoing clash between Jin and Tom.

If I could get her into their orbit, maybe—*maybe*—I could force an opening.

Kenzie must've realized I was maneuvering her, because she suddenly switched gears—opting for something riskier. She abruptly lunged in deeper, her footwork shifting from quick, darting movements to something with way more speed; way more commitment.

I could immediately read it.

The third Level of my [Martial Arts] knowledge was finally coming in handy, now that my brain had the space to allow it to unfold a little bit, pointing out to me that this was going to be a bigger move that could potentially be punished.

And just as the System's knowledge told me, a split-second window opened.

I twisted at the last moment, dodging just past her extended strike—and before she could fully disengage, I threw out a retaliatory snap kick.

Slap!

I clipped her mid-dodge, catching her square in the ribs before she could escape.

Kenzie hissed in frustration, her ears flicking back as she bounced off of the mat and rebounded away, landing lightly a few feet back, holding her side.

One point without giving one up in turn and without being overly lucky. Finally.

And with the extra space, I also had a few moments to think about how to potentially include the “absolute control” into my current moveset...