

Chapter 54 - Mastery

Dragging ourselves back to the bench after the third round, Kenzie and I were practically on our last legs.

Miss K had been very clear that dialling back the intensity "just to save energy" was not going to be allowed, so we'd been unleashing everything we had, round after round.

My face and neck bore the brunt of it, covered in countless slashes that had oozed blood at various points. Miraculously, I dodged any life-altering injuries to vital areas like my eyes or throat, but every inch of me screamed in protest.

Kenzie wasn't faring much better; my counterattacks had left her with a fractured nose, a dislocated jaw—which had been fixed by Miss K already—and multiple fractures around her right eye.

To say we were battered would hardly cover it.

Sitting there, slathering on more Ether Labs miracle cream onto my scratched-up neck and the slice marks crisscrossing my face, I couldn't help but mumble, "I literally can't feel my face right now."

Kenzie immediately shot back with a mix of sarcasm and genuine annoyance, "Oh really? At least one of us still looks semi-human. Did you see me this morning? I was the very picture of cuteness! What am I supposed to tell any cute guys that stop by? *'Oh, sorry for looking like I just went ten rounds with a blender, but Sera here doesn't know the meaning of 'light sparring'?!'*"

Rolling my eyes, I retorted, "Well, maybe if you didn't insist on trying to use your face to try and break my foot, you'd still be 'cute'. You're the one who boasted about how tough you were. Besides, dodging is a thing, you know? No reason to just take it, time and time again."

The last round had ended much like the first one, with Kenzie trying to forcibly close the distance between us, only to be greeted face-first by my boot.

Miss K had commented on how Kenzie seemed very impatient as a fighter, when she had given me some 1-on-1 pointers to use against the girl. As such, much of my game plan consisted of trying not to bleed out too much before she lost her cool, which opened her up to some serious punishments whenever she overextended herself.

Miss K's insights were bang-on, not just about Kenzie's approach but mine as well.

Turns out, Kenzie got a few pro tips against my fighting style too, and she used them to turn up the heat in the recent rounds. I couldn't pin down exactly what Sensei whispered in her ear, but it was effective.

Suddenly, I had found myself on the receiving end of what felt like a barrage of sledgehammers, courtesy of Kenzie's killer legs, every time I let her dictate the pace.

To get away from her relentless kicks, I found myself choosing to face the wrath of her claws—a risky play, but it beat getting my legs turned into pulp.

With every round that passed, I was gambling, opting for quick, painful exchanges with her claws over being systematically dismantled by her powerful kicks.

It was a fine line I was walking, trading off immediate damage for the chance to fight another round. I knew if I let her keep landing those leg shots, I'd barely be able to stand, let alone throw punches, by the time we hit the final round.

It was a brutal calculus, deciding which hits to take and which to avoid, but it was the game that we were inevitably playing in Miss K's training session.

To say that the training was worthwhile, however, would be a similarly massive understatement.

Pulling up the condensed System Notifications from the last three bouts, I couldn't help but once again be flabbergasted by the incredible speed of experience acquisition I was experiencing.

[System]: *800xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.*

[System]: *[Martial Arts] has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

[System]: *Intuition has reached 4.*

Right before the end of the last round, I had gotten the first knowledge download for [Martial Arts], a victory that was nearly overshadowed by Kenzie's razor-sharp focus—literally.

The sudden flood of knowledge had thrown me off my game, sending me teetering on the edge of a disaster. Kenzie's claws had been a hair's breadth from turning my right eye into mincemeat—or whatever the equivalent was for the cybernetic ones that Sera's body had come with by default.

It was only thanks to Miss K's timely intervention, noticing the sudden shift in my stance, that had provided me with the breather I needed to complete the download knowledge and regain my focus.

Her sharp eyes had caught the telltale signs of the knowledge download's disorienting effect immediately, which caused her to pause the bout to check on me. Thanks to her, I bounced back, managing to eke out a win in a round that was as close to the wire as they come.

'*Why am I getting so much experience, though...?*' I couldn't help but ask myself, as I wasn't just absolutely flying through the [Skill] levels, but even the corresponding Attributes were gaining experience at a more rapid pace than I was used to.

With Intuition reaching rank 4, I now had all three governing Attributes of [Martial Arts] at the same level, meaning that I would be able to get it up as high as Level 4 without having to invest any time specifically grinding any Attributes.

[Martial Arts], of course, was my second “rare” [Skill] as well, which only made me more excited for getting it higher, as I was bound to get a new Ability at a specific breakpoint. While [Appraise] got its Ability already at Level 1, [Martial Arts] got its Ability at level 3, together with the usual Perk point.

When it came to the knowledge download for [Martial Arts], it had ended up being a surprisingly condensed primer on hand-to-hand combat, rather than a super broad introduction to the four hundred different types of martial arts that undoubtedly existed somewhere in this world.

Ultimately, that made a lot of sense, however, as the Perks for the [Skill] were where most of the more in-depth knowledge about specific martial arts came from. The [Martial Arts] Skill itself was more broad in nature, providing more fundamental-level knowledge about unarmed combat than explaining specific nuances of each martial arts style.

The muscle memory that had come along with it, had definitely helped me clinch out the last round though, as I immediately recognized that my previous stance, the mish-mash of [Knives] and my Body and Reflex Attributes that I had used before, had left me quite open for a variety of attacks that Kenzie liked to throw my way.

With the instinctive knowledge that I had gained from the download though, I had immediately fixed up that hole, causing Kenzie to lose her temper quicker and allowing me to capitalise on her ill-fated attempt to wrestle me to the ground.

Mulling over how I've levelled up so much lately, it hit me that it's all thanks to a two-fold strategy.

On one end, there was Miss K dishing out pro tips and wisdom, filling in the blanks where I'm stumbling in the dark. On the other, Kenzie was like the ultimate sparring partner—always on my level, pushing me to outpace her own learning curve and to adapt to her moves.

'It's a bit like my lessons with the digital Kill Joy, or the early days with Mr. Shori, except even more intense in nature... I wonder if the System has an innate bonus of sorts for having somebody actively teach you?' I pondered as I compared the experience gains from today's [Martial Arts] sessions with previous experience gains.

The instant I did so, however, I was startled by a completely new chime ringing out from the System; one that I had never heard before.

[System]: *Mechanic explanation unlocked: [Mentor Bonus]*

[System]: *[Mentor Bonus] - When actively taught by a >Master< in their field, experience threshold requirements are reduced by 25%.*

Stunned, I took a moment to process the notification before it clicked, *'So, there is actually a mentor bonus built into the System... Go figure.'*

But what really threw me for a loop wasn't just the existence of such a bonus—it was its specificity.

It mentioned >Master<, a title you could snag in the original game for hitting certain milestones with your [Skills]. This meant I couldn't just rope in any pal for a quick lesson and expect a bonus.

'What's the deal here? Who thought to include this feature? And why?' These questions were swirling in my head when Kenzie snapped me back to the present.

"You're picking up on this stuff way too quick, Sera," she half-complained, a mix of admiration and frustration in her tone. "I just can't seem to keep up with you after Miss K's tips. It's like you've got a sixth sense for dodging me towards the end. How do you do it? Give me some tips, will ya?"

I had to tread carefully whenever discussing my swift advancements, often attributed to the System's influence, to not raise too many eyebrows. So, when Kenzie probed for insights, I wasn't entirely thrown off, as it was something I was continuously thinking about how to explain away.

After mulling over her question for a brief moment, I finally responded, "You know, I think the key issue might be your impatience. I haven't had to be overly aggressive because I could count on you making the first move once you got frustrated. Miss K pointed out something similar. By the last round, it dawned on me that I didn't have to overthink my approach whatsoever; waiting for you to close the distance was enough. That's been the major game-changer for me."

Kenzie silently absorbed my feedback with a furrowed brow, her frustration giving way to contemplation.

As we made our way back to the blue-tiled area, a silence hung between us—a mixture of exhaustion and newfound respect for each other's capabilities. Our attention was abruptly captured by the climax of Jin and Tom's bout.

Tom, in a desperate attempt to block one of Jin's cybernetic punches that was followed by a bone-chilling crack, ended up with his arm bending in an unnatural angle, clearly broken.

Miss K called the fight in Jin's favour and assessed the injury with a practised eye, swiftly directing Tom towards the medical supplies without a hint of coddling.

"One more round to go," she reminded the two boys as they dragged their battered and beaten bodies to the bench, her tone brooking no argument.

Kenzie and I exchanged glances, a silent agreement passing between us.

'There's no way out of this training session, even with a clearly broken arm, huh?'

As we prepared for another round, the dojo's floor swiftly cleaning itself of the boys' previous endeavours, Miss K approached with her usual pre-bout ritual.

She shared a moment with Kenzie, who seemed to soak up her words like a sponge, her face lighting up with a mix of determination and excitement. This, naturally, sent a wave of apprehension through me, anticipating the challenge she would present next.

Then it was my turn.

Miss K's close counsel felt like a secret strategy session. "Liked the change-up last round," she said, a hint of approval in her voice that felt as good as any victory. "Your adaptability's extremely impressive, but don't get complacent. Kenzie's catching on, so it's time to switch tactics. Use your kicks to keep her at bay, tire her out. She's quick, but you've got the edge in strength. If you can corner her, keep her from moving around so much and make her fight on *your* terms, you've got this." Her advice was a blend of encouragement and strategy, tailoring her wisdom to our individual needs yet pushing us to break out of our comfort zones.

Kenzie's eager bounce back to the starting line was a clear signal she was ready to bring everything Miss K had suggested, whatever that might be.

Taking a deep breath, I centred myself, keen on exploring the depth of the newly integrated muscle memory from the [Martial Arts] Skill. The knowledge was fresh, barely scratched in the heat of our previous exchanges, and now was the perfect opportunity to truly test its boundaries.

Miss K's clap, a sound now familiar and anticipatory, sliced through the air of the spacious training hall, signalling the beginning of our fourth bout.

As I assumed my stance, I immediately felt the new muscle memory kick in and subtly adjust what I had been doing before, closing up some of my more clear openings—which I only now realised I even had with my cobbled together one—while providing more ease of movement at the same time.

Kenzie, on the other hand, wasted absolutely no time in closing the distance, her intent clear as daylight—to rake her claws across my face again. Usually, she would have prodded me with her powerful kicks first, but whatever Miss K had revealed to her, seemed to only have heightened her aggressiveness.

Caught off-guard by Kenzie's sudden surge in aggression, I found myself struggling to keep up.

Her rapid movements were a blur, each advance a concerted effort to corner me and utilise her razor-sharp claws. Despite the smoother, more refined movements granted by my recent [Martial Arts] Skill upgrade, integrating this newfound muscle memory with my previous, more improvised combat style was like trying to blend oil with water.

My defences, while improved in some regards, were not yet instinctual nor cohesive, causing hesitations that Kenzie exploited mercilessly, her claws finding their mark time and again, leaving a series of stinging reminders across my neck and arms.

I thankfully managed to avoid any further damage to my face for now, although the dojo's robes were definitely going to require some serious stitching work after today's training was done.

In a desperate attempt to regain control, I employed a series of basic punches and kicks, trying to create distance between us. Yet, Kenzie's agility and determination saw her weave through my defences with alarming ease.

Each of her movements was purposeful and precise, aimed at overwhelming me and breaking through whatever guard I managed to put up, almost as if she was banking on exploiting my newly found muscle memory not quite meshing with my previous efforts.

'This has to be Miss K's doing,' I couldn't help but think as I threw out another frantic couple of kicks to keep Kenzie momentarily at bay to take a deep breath. *'I have to figure something out or Kenzie will run me over...!'*

As the bout continued, I finally managed to land a few solid kicks, as I slowly learned to utilise the enhanced power and control from my [Martial Arts] Skill. One particularly well-timed side kick caught Kenzie off-balance, providing a brief respite from her relentless assault.

However, her recovery was swift, barely giving me a moment to adjust before she was on me again, her claws swiping dangerously close to my face in a renewed flurry of strikes.

In the next moment, however, Kenzie transitioned into a high kick, likely aiming for my head.

I instinctively ducked under her leg as my improved Intuition blared alarm-bells in my head an instant before the kick could connect and countered with an uppercut courtesy of my newly gained muscle memory, hoping to use my physical strength and the System's guidance to my advantage.

The blow connected with a violent thud that sent shivers down my spine, but the victory was short-lived as Kenzie somehow managed to twist mid-air, like a cat, simultaneously landing a spinning elbow that caught me squarely in the ribs, knocking the wind out of me and sending me stumbling backwards.

We were both breathing and panting heavily, mere metres away from each other, but both biding our time to recoup some of the spent energy and to consider our next moves carefully.

'Kenzie is crazy,' I thought as I tried to get my beating heart under control, while nursing the ribs on my right side, checking for any permanent injuries. *'Whatever Miss K told her made her turn it up to 11. I can barely keep up, even with the System at my side...'*

I realised that if I wanted to get out of this training without some serious injuries, I'd have to similarly up the ante in our next exchange, as Kenzie was winning our trades quite handily the way it currently stood.

With a new, hastily thrown together game plan in mind, I inched forward and started throwing kicks, aimed at Kenzie's thighs.

'If I can keep her from moving so much, I have a chance,' I reminded myself of Miss K's advice, focusing down keeping her away from me as much as possible, while continuously chipping away at her legs, hoping that the continued pain would stack up quickly enough to make a difference in her mobility.

As the fight progressed, my plan seemed to be bearing fruit as her movements became slower and slower, the more I kept hitting her legs with kicks that she wasn't prepared for.

I found a rhythm, melding the lessons learned in previous clashes with the fresh insights my [Martial Arts] Skill had provided, crafting a stance that kept me mostly beyond Kenzie's grasp.

While she occasionally broke through with a forceful kick or a slashing attack, I clearly held the upper hand, steadily eroding her legs' strength and her patience with each precisely calculated attack.

Just as I anticipated Kenzie's impending reckless charge, a consequence of her mounting frustration which had become a predictable pattern, another novel alert chime from the System abruptly derailed my focus.

Caught off guard by this unexpected interruption, my thoughts scrambled.

'*What the fuck is this now?!*' I wondered, momentarily distracted, realising the critical timing of this distraction could potentially shift the dynamic of our bout.

[System] *Task reward collection timer has reached 00:00:00 for Task: [Mr. Stirling's Request (Second Data Collection)]*

[System]: *Beginning automatic reward collection for Task: [Mr. Stirling's Request (Second Data Collection)]*

[System]: *You have gained 100 Character Experience.*

[System]: *You have gained 1 General Skill Point.*

[System]: *Automatically spending General Skill Point gained from Task.*

[System]: *[Martial Arts] selected as most relevant Skill for current activity.*

[System]: *800xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.*

[System]: *[Martial Arts] has reached Level 2.*

As I stood there, trying to catch my breath, the realisation hit me like a freight train—I had completely spaced on claiming the task rewards, the very reason I had pushed myself to the brink in the first place.

'*Damn it! I fucking forgot about the task rewards!*' In the whirlwind of trying to keep my mind off that chaotic day, the idea of claiming and utilising the Skill Point had slipped entirely through the cracks.

Caught in this moment of regret, the world around me began to blur as the knowledge download initiated, my focus on the immediate surroundings rapidly diminishing.

Struggling to maintain my balance, the sight of Kenzie's sharpened claws aiming for my face became the last clear image before the onslaught of new muscle memory from the System download jolted me, throwing my already off-balance body further off kilter.

As the second level of [Martial Arts] Skill began to download into my consciousness, it expanded upon the foundational knowledge of hand-to-hand combat that I had previously received.

This new layer of information included more nuanced principles like the importance of shifting weight for maximising the power behind strikes and the critical timing of breathing to enhance physical exertion and recovery during a fight.

For instance, I learned the optimal moment to exhale sharply upon delivering a punch to concentrate force, and how to pivot my feet and hips in unison to lend additional momentum to my kicks, making them not just swift but also substantially more potent.

Amid this flood of intricate knowledge, I found myself caught in a peculiar dance of survival.

My body would lock up as new torrents of muscle memory were forcibly infused, leaving me vulnerable for split seconds that felt like an eternity. In these brief pauses, I resorted to throwing out blind punches and kicks, guided only by instinct and the fragments of information that managed to embed themselves between the overwhelming waves of the download.

My movements were erratic, a pale imitation of the competence I had started to exhibit before the download began. Kenzie, seizing the openings created by my compromised state, hesitated only when our eyes met, searching for some sign of recognition or strategy.

It was only after she caught a subtle nod from Miss K, signalling her to proceed, that she resumed her relentless assault, her claws finding their mark time and again.

Despite the chaos, I somehow managed to stay upright, bolstered by the sporadic yet effective use of the newly downloaded techniques. Each successful defence or counter, no matter how blindly executed, was proof of the depth and utility of the foundational yet increasingly complex knowledge being ingrained into my muscle memory by the System.

However, the disparity between my flailing attempts at applying this freshly acquired knowledge and Kenzie's focused aggression was evident. The moments of lucidity, where the new techniques shone through, were brief highlights in an otherwise disorienting and painful ordeal.

By the time the download finally stopped and I managed to stumble far enough away from Kenzie's rapid-fire attacks to catch a momentary breather, I had lost vision on my right eye and could barely move my left arm, as both were absolutely strewn with cuts and bruises, blood pooling out of a myriad of wounds left by her vicious claws.

The glimpse of concern in Kenzie's vulpine eyes sparked a resolve in me, prompting a nod that I aimed to be brimming with confidence despite the waves of pain coursing through my body.

The new knowledge had been foundational, just like the 1st Level download, but also more complex and advanced, as one would expect. My muscle memory had seen a similarly incremental upgrade and I found myself able to implement a lot more quickly than the first time around, as I had already started on the journey of refining my cobbled-together initial stance, with the previous 1st Level muscle memory.

As the bout resumed, a newfound steadiness underpinned my movements.

The advanced knowledge seemed to slot into place atop the existing foundation with surprising ease, enhancing my ability to adapt on the fly. With Kenzie bearing down on me once again, I discovered a newfound composure amidst the fray.

Each step I took was more calculated, my body's movements more economised to conserve energy, and, for the first time, my deflections did more than just redirect her relentless attacks to other areas of my body; they thwarted them, redirecting them into the air entirely, providing tangible proof of my evolving capabilities.

'*This is crazy,*' I couldn't help but think as my mind started being freed up from the constant thinking process of having to adjust to her moves, to becoming more instinctive in nature as a result of the new Level of the [Skill].

'I guess I should thank the System for putting the point into something more immediately useful like [Martial Arts] rather than something dumb like [Maid]... Even if the Perks it would offer later on are great. At least [Martial Arts] will come in handy right away,' I had to admit amidst the frantic fighting that was starting to drastically slow down.

Harnessing the fresh wave of muscle memory and the strategic insights from my recent [Martial Arts] Skill upgrade, I swiftly reclaimed control of the battle, despite my compromised state. My vision was blurred, and my left arm was nearly out of commission, yet my legs remained a powerful tool, delivering relentless kicks to Kenzie.

As the fight wore on, I observed Kenzie's mounting frustration as she struggled to bridge the gap between us.

Anticipating her predictable move, I braced for her charge, planning to deploy the same decisive kick that had served me well in prior rounds.

However, a spike of fear halted me mid-motion.

The realisation dawned on me that the power surge from my Skill upgrade's knowledge input, that had given me a better understanding of how to properly convert my kinetic motion into direct application, coupled with Kenzie's forward momentum, might result in grave injury rather than a mere end to the confrontation.

In a split second, I tried to redirect my energy, pivoting on my supporting leg to execute an impromptu elbow strike. Guided by instinct, my elbow connected just below Kenzie's shoulder blade, sending her crashing to the mat with a heavy thud, while I stumbled and fell from the sheer force of my exertion.

"Enough!" Miss K's voice cut through the tension, marking the close of a fiercely contested round that tested the limits of both of our resilience and adaptability.

Relief washed over me as I collapsed next to Kenzie, both of us gasping for air, wincing from our injuries. But before I could even process the pain, Miss K was upon us.

She hoisted me to my feet with an unexpected firmness, her expression unreadable, yet intense.

"To my office. *Now*," she instructed, her voice leaving no room for debate...