Chapter 221 - Unbeatable Technique

Miss K let her announcement settle over the crew for all of one second before she pivoted to the next part of the session, her full attention swinging over to Tom and Jin.

“Now—*originally*, today’s plan had more rounds in it. The teams were meant to shuffle around after every bout until each of you had fought alongside *and* against every other possible pairing. *Lovely* for my spreadsheets, *very* educational and all that other good stuff that comes with it.”

Her thumb jerked toward Kenzie and me without her eyes following it. “But then *these two* went and completely overdid it in the very first round, and now neither of them is in any shape to continue today’s session with real gusto before I’d have to step in for health and safety reasons… So that plan’s officially dead.”

Kenzie and I, in perfect synchronization, found something *deeply* fascinating to study on the floor between our feet.

There was no counter-argument to try and offer, really. We had, *in fact*, completely overdone it, just like Miss K said, and the visible evidence was sitting right here with us on the benches—Kenzie still breathing in rattling notes and my blood practically caking half the training and recovery area.

“So, here’s what I can offer instead,” Miss K continued, still addressing the boys. “You two go at it in one-on-one spars, and I give you direct, live feedback on every round—a luxury you don’t usually get with the four of you splitting my attention. Meanwhile, the walking calamities over here lick their wounds and reflect on the frankly massive amounts of data they have just finished generating for themselves.”

Jin was eagerly nodding before she’d even fully finished the sentence, already half-rising from the bench—but Miss K’s raised hand stopped him mid-motion.

“*Or*,” she added, “alternative option: I start the weapons training introduction *today*. There’s a chunk of theory at the front of that curriculum that involves more or less all of you sitting around doing mostly nothing but listening anyway, which makes *right now* a conveniently efficient slot for it, given that half the class is indisposed.”

Her eyes moved between the two boys, and her tone morphed into something firm.

“But let me be *crystal clear* with you—I have *zero qualms* either way. You two are owed a *full* session of real training, and I’m not compromising on that simply because the girls decided to speedrun their own demolition—as entertaining and educational as it was to watch. It’s purely your call. Both options are fully on the table here, no wrong answer.”

Jin’s and Tom’s eyes met each other then.

What followed was, as far as I could tell, an entire conversation conducted exclusively in head movements: Tom opened with a sideways nod—toward us, or maybe toward the mat, impossible to really say—then followed it with a single, deliberate downward nod. Jin

remained stoic for a long moment, then produced an opposite sideways nod, firm, clearly a rebuttal of some kind. Tom's eyebrow went up a precise few millimeters, holding there like a raised counterargument, while Jin stared back at him. He held for several seconds until, finally, Jin let out a heavy sigh through his nose, shoulders dropping a tiny amount, before giving a single downward nod of his own.

"We will take the weapons introduction, Ma'am," Tom said, *apparently* now authorized to speak for the both of them.

'*What the fuck?*' I stared at the two of them, genuinely baffled. '*How did he just talk Jin out of extra sparring with nothing but* ***nods****? Do they got some sort of psychic communication going on or something, what the shit was that?!*'

It was Jade and her sisters all over again—that whole silent shorthand they ran between each other—except now the boys apparently had their own dialect of secret nodding nonsense too. I hadn't even known that the two of them were this close, but apparently they were close enough to have some sort of secret language between them?

Once more, I found myself feeling personally betrayed by [Polyglot]. The Trait had clearly been developed by somebody who didn't understand what "language" meant.

'I want to understand ***all of the communication****, [Polyglot]! Not just when people speak or write, damnit!'*

Miss K, meanwhile, nodded with a smile that looked suspiciously pleased for somebody who had just finished *insisting* she didn't care about the outcome either way.

"Fantastic choice. Everyone back on the mat, then."

While we peeled ourselves off the bench—Kenzie moving slowly and with a severe limp, which I quickly helped bridge by acting as a crutch for her—Miss K headed for the far side of the dojo, grabbing one of the long, wooden swords from the racks there.

It was a wooden katana, to be precise—or rather, the *training version* of one. [Cultural Savant] helpfully surfaced the proper term before I'd even fully finished identifying it from a distance: It was called a *Shinai*.

Along with the term itself came a small packet of context, as always—it was apparently a culturally significant object in sword-focused martial arts, Kendo being chief among them, and acted as the bridge between mere *training* and *live steel* for centuries of practitioners.

Miss K stepped back onto the blue mat, and her eyes met mine for exactly one instant.

Abruptly, the shinai was flying at me.

There had been no warning or wind-up I registered in her movements at all—just a spinning length of wood suddenly occupying the air between us at a genuinely dangerous velocity.

My body, however, simply… *handled* it.

My hand snapped up and snatched it clean out of its rotation, [[Perform]]'s muscle memory—specifically the deep-seated muscle memory of [Juggling] that had been carved into me all those many months ago, when socks had been my only real Body training option—waking from its long, *long* wintersleep like it had never left, immediately reading the spin and the intercept point without a fraction of a second of delay.

In the same breath as my hand grasped the handle out of the air, the sword-portion of [{Anima Razor}] flowed through my entire body and seated my grip properly around the hilt, fingers finding the proper spacing, weight distribution of my entire body already shifting into combat-mode—and I was halfway standing and into a proper katana-stance before my conscious brain caught up to what my body was visibly showcasing to the *entire room* like a damn neon sign.

I clamped down on [Elemental Balance] *hard*, the perfect muscle control slamming the brakes on every single one of those automatic answers mid-motion, freezing me into something I hoped would read more as "girl awkwardly jumping up to catch the stick suddenly thrown at her" rather than "girl with preternatural instincts, muscle memory and a magical blade Skill she'd *very much* prefer nobody ask about."

Miss K's grin widened at the sight, ever so slightly—as if she had just gotten some long-standing hypothesis confirmed in full.

'Oh, you absolute fuck—You sneaky Grandmaster, you...' I thought indignantly.

Thankfully, the rest of the crew seemed too busy being surprised that I'd caught the thing *at all* to have parsed any of the finer details—Kenzie's eyebrows were somewhere near her hairline, Jin was frowning at my hands, and Tom was simply staring at Miss K.

They were definitely surprised at the catch, nothing more.

Or so I *hoped*, anyway.

Thankfully, and without skipping a beat, Miss K gestured for me to follow her and moved to the center of the mat herself, which gave me a great excuse to start moving away from everyone else *and* for me to really be standing at all.

"The first and *most important* technique when it comes to facing somebody with a weapon," she began, pacing a slow half-circle in front of us, "is surprisingly simple, yet imperative to remember. This is a technique employed by literally *every single* capable practitioner in the martial arts world and I expect you to drill it until it's so deeply ingrained into your muscles, your bones, and your very blood, that you could execute it in the middle of the night, ripped straight out of your deepest slumber."

That definitely got my attention. Well… it got *everyone's* attention, really—Kenzie leaned forward despite her ribs' visibly expressed objections, Tom's eyes sparkled with barely hidden greed, and even Jin's perpetual frown lightened somewhat into a more focused one.

'*A technique that* ***everyone*** *uses? Everyone who knows what they're doing?*' My mind was already trying to get a grasp on the implications. *'I didn't know something like that could even exist in martial arts as a whole—everything else in this discipline is so violently individual...*

*Stances, styles, regiments, philosophy, all of it custom-fit per person, that's been Miss K's entire baseline from day one. How on earth is there a **universal** technique like this?'*

My excitement got doused pretty thoroughly, however, by what she said next.

"Sera." Miss K rolled her shoulders once and settled, facing me sternly from across the mat. "Attack me with that *sword*. Try to *kill me*—truly mean it."

The deliberate emphasis she'd put on the word "sword" landed like a gutshot: We should consider this as not a stick or a prop—as far as this demonstration was concerned, I was *armed*, and *she* would also be treating it accordingly; taking it seriously.

Which was precisely why my stomach had dropped somewhere into my ankles.

'I don't want to fucking attack Miss K for real?!' The protest brust through my entire skull immediately. *'If I actually commit all the way, she'll have to respond in kind, and then I'm getting laid out, fucking **hard**. I **just** got a new gi, Miss K!'*

I had every confidence she could keep it safe—she was a Grandmaster, after all, not to mention that she'd literally caught a full-momentum Kenzie out of the air one-handed less than twenty minutes ago—but there was still a dangerously large gap between "safe" and "*comfortable*," and the very idea of swinging a sword at my own teacher's throat, knowing full well the demonstration was absolutely going to end with me getting smacked in the mouth in some educational fashion, sat in a category that I wasn't all too excited about.

But I quickly got a grip on myself, took a deep breath and shoved the anxiety down where it belonged. Fully trusting Miss K was the *only* logical play here, same as it had always been.

So I braced myself—preparing for the inevitable pain and disorientation of whatever insane counter-technique she had prepared, the exact same way you'd brace before ripping off a particularly stuck bandage—and focused down on the sword in my hand.

I arranged myself into a purposefully amateurish stance that made [{Anima Razor}] and [Martial Arts] alike cry tears of blood: Feet too square, grip far too hard and weapon raised too far to be effectively moved around. I was aiming for the exact picture of somebody who had seen a form in a video once and was doing their best—if horrible—impression of it.

I met Miss K's eyes for one brief moment and she gave the smallest of nods.

I took a deep breath, then *kicked* off the ground with as much energy as I could muster and charged at her, sword swinging for her throat, letting [{Anima Razor}] take the wheel to make it land true—or as true as it was going to get before I got laid out, at least.

I was bracing hard for the impact, the nonchalant redirect, the inevitable mat rushing up to greet me—

—when Miss K kicked off in front of me and sprinted *directly* away from me.

It took me a brief moment to realize that this wasn't a dodge, a sidestep or any other form of attempt to outmaneuver me, but rather a full, committed, arms-pumping sprint, several *times*

faster than my sword-raised charge, carrying her easily off the blue mat, across the dojo floor, and all the way to the benches before I'd even fully processed what was happening.

She obviously hadn't been going all-out.

I knew that much, given how often the woman simply *appeared* out of nowhere whenever she was truly needed—that sprint had been nothing but a light jog for her, if even that.

I stumbled to a halt after the first half-second of pursuit, sword still raised and ready to swing for a throat that was no longer there, simply *staring* at my far-away teacher—and behind me, the entire crew was doing the exact same thing, all four of our faces locked in identical dumbstruck silence.

Miss K simply stood by the benches now, hands loosely on her hips, with a massively smug smile on her face. She let the dumbfounded silence do its work for a few more moments—letting us properly marinate in the image of a *Grandmaster of Martial Arts* fleeing at a dead sprint from a girl with a wooden stick—before she began strolling back over, unhurried as ever, and gave me a small, flat-palmed hand signal on the way.

I lowered the shinai at her behest, still not entirely sure what I had even just participated in, as she started talking as she walked back towards us.

"*That*, dearest pupils, was the single most important and most universal technique in existence when facing somebody with a weapon: You *run*." She said it without a single, miniscule shred of irony or embarrassment, stepping back onto the blue mat with us.

"Everyone uses it—absolutely *everyone*. Grandmasters use it. Masters use it. Any random person with *actual* brainmatter between their shoulders uses it… It is the only *unbeatable technique* in existence when you're unarmed and somebody pulls a weapon on you, and is thus also the one I recommend using in *one hundred percent* of cases. There are no exceptions to this."

She came to a dead stop in front of us, and the usual lazy amusement in her voice drained away as she spoke, her demeanor settling into something distinctly serious that I'd only ever heard from her a rare few handful of times.

"Do *not*—under any circumstances—engage in close quarters combat with somebody wielding a weapon while you're unarmed. And even if you *are* armed yourself: If the option to run exists, *take it*. You do *not* have to fight. When weapons are involved, you *will* get injured. Seriously listen to me on this: It has *nothing* to do with how good you are, how brave you are, or any other such nonsense. It comes down to the simple fact that weapons are purpose-built tools, and the sole purpose they are built for is *injuring and killing you*. That's literally all they're made for, and they are very, *very* good at it."

Her eyes slowly moved across each of us in turn, making sure we were listening attentively.

"Even a gun, at these ranges, is less dangerous to you than a sword in the hands of somebody with middling training. A gun threatens you along one *narrow* line—there are angles, there's a geometry you can potentially work with, slim as it is. A sword, however, cuts across its *entire length*. There is no narrowly slipping a blade the way you might

manage to *just* slip past a barrel if you're lucky. There is *no* technique in existence—none, nowhere, from no school—that lets you reliably out-hand-to-hand a person holding a bladed weapon, unless they are *vastly* below you in experience and talent."

She punctuated that with a beat of silence, before continuing.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that simply because you trained here—because you're at the *Arkion Dojo*, because you've learned to fight each other in-and-out and because of all the lessons I'm still going to hammer into you—that *any of it* makes you invincible. Blades are the single most dangerous thing that can ever be brandished at a skilled martial artist, precisely *because* we are all—every one of us, myself included—hard-wired to overestimate ourselves as a result of our long years of training.

"The exact years you spend simply to master miniscule portions of yourself and your body, is the exact thing that will whisper that you're the *exception*. You are *not* the exception. You never *will be* the exception. *Hubris* is what actually kills most people, more so than any other thing in the world—so *don't* let it kill you, or I will *personally* make sure you regret that decision."

While I wasn't quite following the logic behind that threat, I had absolutely zero doubts that Miss K would somehow manage to make it become reality and rapidly noted 'no hubris' on the list of "ways Sera should not die" inside my head.

"So, once more: Somebody has a weapon? *Run*. Do *not* fight them. If you're ever *forced* to fight—because they're faster than you, you got surrounded or let yourself get pushed into a corner—then you *never, ever* let any part of that blade out of your sight. Not for a quarter of a second."

Her voice dropped one further note. "If somebody punches you *ten times*, odds are you'll still be able to recover in a hospital somewhere or with a good Ripper. If somebody cuts you in the wrong place even *once*, you *will* die in seconds—and there is absolutely nothing that anybody, me included, can do about it then."

The dojo was fully silent now.

Kenzie's ears were flat against her head. Jin's jaw muscles were set hard, and even Tom's usual composure had thinned into something pale and attentive.

I, meanwhile, just stood there with the shinai in my hand, uncomfortably aware of exactly how many of her hypotheticals I'd already miraculously lived through—likely with a certain amount of hubris at my back to even be in that situation, too.

In the span of the next breath, however, the grimness lifted off her like it had never existed, and the familiar, teasing grin came back out.

"Now! All of that said—" she rolled one shoulder, "—*if* you happen to be *vastly* superior to your armed opponent, then yes, you absolutely can fight somebody holding a weapon. As Sera will now happily demonstrate, no doubt."

It took about half a second for the sentence to finish parsing.

Then I grimaced as it all clicked into place—who was holding the *sword*, who was going to be the vastly superior party in this particular demonstration, and which role that left *me* playing.

'Oh, come on… I'm the middling-knowledge sword person in this demonstration, huh? Fantastic... Love that for me.'

Miss K beckoned me with two fingers, settling into a stance so relaxed it barely qualified as one—weight distributed easily, hands low and open, like the posture of a woman waiting for a bus, rather than readying for hypothetically mortal combat.

"Same as before, Sera, if you would. *Mean it*."

I exhaled slowly, resigned myself to my fate, then reset my grip, and focused on my approach as I kicked off.

I came in fast and committed, the shinai whipping around in a flat, precise arc for her throat, every bit of Body, Reflex and [{Anima Razor}]'s knowledge I owned behind the cut—

—and I suddenly wasn't holding a sword anymore.

There was no intermediate experience to speak of.

One instant the shinai was in my hands, slicing through the air towards Miss K; the next, my hands were distinctly empty and both of my wrists ached with a sharp, ringing soreness, like I'd somehow tried to swing a bat into a rockcrete wall—and something wooden and firm was resting with feather-light precision against the side of my throat.

It took me another half-moment to recognize what it was.

It was the shinai, held up lazily against my neck with Miss K's left hand, the ever-relaxed and inviting smile of hers sitting on her face.

I hadn't even seen her move…