

Chapter 192 - Adventure

We entered the main building—after I took off my shoes at the entrance—through a set of sliding panels that the butler opened with a smooth, practiced motion, and the interior was—predictably, at this point—*exactly* as immaculate as the exterior had promised.

Dark hardwood floors, polished to a warm luster, stretched through wide hallways lined with recessed alcoves that held minimalist flower arrangements and the occasional piece of ceramicware that looked old enough—and *delicate* enough—to make me instinctively give them a wide berth. The lighting throughout was soft and indirect, emanating from unseen strips hidden along the junction of wall and ceiling.

The butler led me through the hallways at the same measured pace as before—one turn, then another, then a longer stretch that opened briefly onto a view of an interior courtyard through a wall of floor-to-ceiling panels before narrowing again into a quieter wing of the house.

The place was large enough that the walk took a genuine minute and a half.

*'Thank god that I have a guide... I would've gotten lost in the first thirty seconds in this place, what the fuck. This is just how Kenzie **lives**?'*

He stopped in front of a closed partition—dark wood frame, traditional paper paneling—and knocked twice against the frame with a precise, restrained motion.

"Miss Kenzie, your guest has arrived."

Immediately, from somewhere beyond the partition, there was a clatter.

Then a loud **thump**.

Followed by *considerably* more clattering, the unmistakable sound of multiple objects falling over in rapid succession, and ultimately punctuated by what might have been a chair being knocked sideways and over.

My eyebrows climbed steadily throughout, reaching somewhere in the vicinity of my hairline by the time the noise stopped.

I looked at the butler, wondering if we should be concerned—or at least acknowledge that it sounded like a small localized disaster had just occurred on the other side of a very thin wall.

He looked back at me with the same polite, composed smile he'd been wearing since the gate. Not a single muscle in his face moved. Not a twitch, not a flicker, not the faintest suggestion that anything out of the ordinary had just happened.

'This man is a goddamn professional, sheesh...'

A few moments of complete silence followed, before a slightly muffled voice drifted through the partition:

"Ouch..."

Finally, the partition slid open.

Kenzie stood on the other side, one hand on the frame, the other rubbing at the small of her back with the specific wince of someone who had just made aggressive contact with a piece of furniture.

Her room behind her was—well, I caught a glimpse of what had previously been a somewhat organized space and was now *considerably* less so, a toppled stack of something that looked dangerously like books—*actual books?!—*and a displaced chair telling most of the story.

The moment she saw me, however, her concerns about her mild bruising evaporated.

Her ears went straight up—both of them, simultaneously, snapping from their slightly flattened resting position to fully upright. Her tail, that big, fluffy orange-and-cream thing, shot rigid behind her for a brief moment before it started swishing with an enthusiasm that was doing nothing to hide her excitement. Her golden-amber eyes locked onto me and a wide, sharp-toothed grin split across her freckled face.

"Sera! You made it!"

She was dressed casually—or at least Kenzie's version of casual, which turned out to be an oversized cropped pink sweater with a high collar and a diamond-shaped cutout at the throat, layered over a white crop top that left her midriff bare.

Black short-shorts sat low on her hips, connected by dark garter straps to wide-legged pink pants that started at mid-thigh, leaving a deliberate gap of bare skin between the two—showcasing her substantial thighs.

The last thing I noticed—with a slight double-take—was what appeared to be a tiny orange chibi-plush creature of some kind tucked into one of her shorts pockets, peeking out with a face that bore a *suspicious* resemblance to its owner.

Her dark, claw-like nails caught the light as she waved me in, still grinning like I'd just made her entire week by simply showing up.

Refocusing my attention on Kenzie's face, I hit her with a casual smile. "Hi there. Your place is... quite something. Like, seriously. *Wow.*"

One of her ears went slightly slack as she tilted her head at me, the motion so naturally fox-like that I had to actively remind myself she wasn't doing it on purpose. "My place...?"

Then her eyes widened, as if she had to genuinely take a second to work out what I could possibly be referring to.

"*Oh! My place!* Yes, I guess it is fairly decent," she said, nodding with a shrug that carried the easy, unbothered energy of someone who had grown up with a personal wolf-man butler and a damn personal gravel garden, so it genuinely did not register as remarkable at all.

'Fairly fucking decent my ass, girl!'

She turned toward the butler and said, "Thank you, Tian. You can leave us. We'll call if we need anything."

He bowed deeply with a smooth, "As you wish, Miss Kenzie," and then turned and walked off into the depths of the maze-castle, or whatever Kenzie actually called the building she apparently lived in.

I stepped inside as she slid the partition closed behind us, the wooden frame clicking softly back into place.

Kenzie let out a sigh that carried the weight of a long-running, thoroughly lost battle.

"I've been trying to get Tian to just call me Kenzie for years now," she said, her tail swishing in mild frustration behind her. "*Just* Kenzie. That's it. But he insists on the 'Miss' every single time, no matter how many times I ask. I've tried everything. Polite requests, direct orders, begging—nothing works."

I wasn't entirely sure what to say to that, given that the whole butler-master dynamic was so *far* removed from anything I had any frame of reference for—in this life *or* my last, for that matter—that I didn't even have the vocabulary to offer useful input.

"Some people just are like that, I guess," I offered, which was about as non-committal as it got.

It was apparently the right dialogue option, because Kenzie turned toward me with her ears perked and nodded with an enthusiasm that made her whole upper body move with it. "I know, right?!"

With that potential crisis of social navigation behind me, I took the opportunity to actually look at the room she'd invited me into—and realized right away that this wasn't her personal room at all.

There was practically nothing in here that felt lived-in *or* personal whatsoever.

The space was large, clean and minimally furnished in the same traditional-meets-cyberpunk style as the rest of the house.

A low chabudai table sat in the center of the room on a tatami-style mat, its surface dark and polished. A large datascreen dominated one wall, currently in standby mode, its surface blending almost seamlessly into the paneling around it.

Near the window—which offered a view of the inner-courtyard garden that I was actively choosing not to stare at because I'd never get anything done—a chair lay toppled on its side next to a smaller writing desk.

On the desk, an open book was waiting for attention.

An actual, physical, paper-and-binding *book*.

In Neo Avalis.

Kenzie followed my gaze, seemed to register the state of the room for the first time since opening the partition, and went through a rapid sequence of expressions that started at mild surprise and ended at visible panic.

"Oh—the state of this—I'm so sorry, I was just—" She was already moving, tail low and ears flattened in embarrassment as she scrambled to right the toppled chair, scoop up something that had fallen behind the desk, and generally try to restore order to a space that honestly wasn't even that messy. "I didn't think you'd be here so fast, I was going to clean up before—sorry, just give me a second—I'll just—"

"No worries," I said, and meant it, because I was not paying the slightest bit of attention to the state of the room's tidiness. "You're fine, Kenzie."

I was, instead, staring at the books—plural.

They were all over the place.

A small stack sat on the floor beside the chabudai, another two were propped against the wall near the datascreen, and one more lay face-down on the windowsill, its pages fanned open where it had been left mid-read.

The sheer wealth on display was staggering.

Books in Neo Avalis were *expensive*.

And that was putting it mildly, actually—they were *obscenely* expensive.

Paper just wasn't something that got produced anymore, not at any kind of scale.

The handful of bespoke operations that still made it were clustered out near the city's edge, where proximity to the Burning Highways that crisscrossed the Wastelands beyond the city's borders gave them marginally easier access to the imported tooling and raw materials the process required. Synthetic paper was relatively easy enough to get, of course—still fairly expensive compared to just using digital notes, but perfectly adequate for anything you'd actually need physical text for.

But these *definitely* weren't synthetic.

These were proper books. Real paper, real binding, real weight in the hand.

They looked like they could have been plugged straight out of my past life and I would not have thought twice about it.

Here though, each one probably cost more than half my Operator outfit combined.

I had to actively fight the urge to reach out and touch one—just to confirm they were real, to feel *actual* paper under my fingertips again after what felt like a lifetime of screens and holos and projected text.

But I kept my hands to myself.

I could not, however, stop my eyes from reading the titles on the spines that were turned toward me, and when I did, I had to blink several times to make sure I was actually seeing what I thought I was seeing.

"The Resonant Bond: A Historical Survey of Spirits."

"Symbiosis and Sovereignty: The Ethics of Spirit Binding."

"On Communion With the Unseen: Practical Frameworks for Spirit Identification"

Every single one of them had some form of "Spirit" in the title.

Kenzie had been researching Spirits, just before I'd arrived!

My eyes lingered on the book spines for another moment before I managed to pull them away and aim for something that sounded casual.

"So," I said non-chalantly, nodding toward the stack by the chabudai, "light reading?"

Kenzie, who had just finished righting the chair and was in the process of smoothing out her sweater, trying to pretend the last thirty seconds hadn't happened at all, followed my gaze and immediately went slightly pink across the bridge of her nose—the blush visible even through the freckles.

"Oh—*those*. Yeah..." Her ears did a complicated little dance between flattened embarrassment and tentative excitement, before the excitement apparently won out, because they perked back up and she turned to face me fully. "It's for my coming-of-age ceremony. It's in about a month—a little over, actually—and after that I'll finally be allowed to get properly tutored on the whole..."

She waved a hand vaguely.

"The family stuff. Spirits. How it all works. The whole thing."

She crossed the room and dropped into a cross-legged sit beside the chabudai with the boneless ease of someone who'd spent a lot of hours in exactly that position.

Her tail curled around one side, the tip flicking idly against the tatami.

"My parents said the books were fair game for *now*, though. Like, I can't get actual instruction yet, but reading up on my own is fine. So I figured, why not get a head start, you know?"

She paused, and something slightly sheepish crept into her expression.

"And, honestly? After watching you just—somehow blow past all of us at the dojo like that?" She let out a short, self-conscious laugh, one ear flicking sideways. "I kind of threw myself into it. Like, *hard*. Because if you are going to keep improving at that speed, I need to have something going on too, or I am going to get *completely* left behind."

"You're... not getting left behind, Kenzie," I said instinctively, but cringed internally at how hollow that sounded right away.

"Thanks, Sera. You're very sweet, but you *absolutely* are lapping me—and Tom and Jin, too, honestly—right now and we both know it," she said, with a grin that was more self-aware than self-pitying. "But it's fine! I'm working on it! The reading is just..."

She glanced at the open book on the desk and her face scrunched up.

"Really dry. Like, really, *really* dry. Even my sister said so, and she's read all of them cover to cover. When your older sister—who literally wanted nothing more than to work with Spirits since she was like *four*—tells you '*yeah, those are pretty rough,*' you just know it's damn bad."

I couldn't help but smile at that, vaguely remembering some parts of my past life where I had ended up having to read through some very dry documentation as well—not because I wanted to, but because I knew it would be good for me.

Raising an eyebrow at her, I asked, "How far have you gotten? Anything interesting?"

"About halfway through the first one," she admitted, tail drooping slightly. "I've been at it for... like the whole damn week. I'm not—I'm not really a reader, honestly. I can do it, of course, but it takes me *forever* and I keep losing track of where I was..."

She brightened almost immediately. "*But* I'm learning stuff! Like, I didn't know Spirit Companions used to be *way* more common before the Big Five started—well, doing Big Five things to everything inside the city and around it. *That* whole part was super interesting. Reading about the Scorching—or at least the Spirit-related bits—is also always pretty cool. Not sure if any of that stuff is even accurate though... Like how would we even know, right?"

"That *does* sound interesting," I said, and it wasn't even a lie. I was *more* than just a bit interested in this whole conversation—which made it all the more horrifying when Kenzie simply continued talking before I could ask a follow-up.

"But enough about my boring reading homework, I guess," Kenzie said, shifting forward with the unmistakable energy of someone pivoting to the part of the conversation they were *actually* excited about. "What about you? What have you been up to? You said you were busy with work stuff?"

'*Shit,*' I thought, realizing that getting the conversation back toward the Spirit books was going to be considerably harder now that we'd veered off into different territory. '*I can't just ask her directly—she's not even supposed to be talking about this stuff with me. That's what she said at the dojo, the one time it came up, at least. If I push too hard, she's going to remember that she isn't meant to be sharing any of this and clam up completely...*'

"Yeah," I said, finally deciding to settle into a spot across from her at the chabudai and setting my bag down beside me. "I actually went outside Delta for a bit."

Kenzie's reaction was immediate and more than just a little dramatic.

Both ears snapped to full attention. Her tail went rigid. Her eyes widened to a degree that, on a baseline human, would have looked cartoonish but on her just looked like genuine, undiluted shock.

"You went *outside*?!" she said, leaning forward so fast I thought she was going to tip over the chabudai. "*Outside* outside? Like, *outside the Megabuilding* outside?!"

"Yeah, I had some work-related stuff to take care of in the city proper, so—"

"What's it like?!" The words came out in a rush, her hands gripping the edge of the table, tail now swishing with an intensity that was making the air move behind her. "I've never—my parents won't let me leave the upper floors! I've never been outside... I've never even been below the 40th floor! What's it like down there? What's it like outside? Is it really as crazy as people say?!"

I blinked at her, needing a second to process the sheer velocity of questions that had just been launched at my face.

"It's... a lot," I said, carefully. "Like, genuinely a lot. Neo Avalis is—it's huge in a way that's hard to describe if you haven't seen it. The verticality alone is something else, too. Buildings stacked on buildings, walkways layered over other walkways, and everything kind of bleeds into everything else... There's no real line between where one thing ends and another starts." I thought about it for a moment. "And the contrast is *intense*. You go up a few stories and everything's clean, polished, manicured. Drop down a few and it's a completely different world—honestly, kind of like in here, in a way."

Kenzie was hanging on every word, ears angled forward, eyes wide. "Like the lower floors? Inside Delta? How so?"

"I've only been to about half a dozen myself," I admitted. "But the ones I've seen—they're rougher than the upper floors you're used to. Like a *lot* rougher. The further down you go, the less anyone's maintaining anything. The air's different, the people are different, the whole energy of the place shifts towards more... desperation and trying to make ends meet."

I paused, trying to find the right framing for someone who'd spent her entire life above the 40th floor, without making it sound all too terrible—because, really, it wasn't. "It's not all bad, really. There's life down there—markets, food stalls, people just... making it work with what they have. It's messier, but it's not completely lawless or anything. That's more for the lower layers of the actual city-proper."

"That sounds *amazing*," Kenzie breathed, and I could tell she meant it completely, in the uncomplicated way of someone who had never had to *actually* live in any of those conditions.

Like the romanticized version of an adventurer's life in a fantasy novel—it always sounded so glamorous until you realized you'd actually have to consistently be in life-or-death battles or starve.

"I want to go so badly. I keep asking my parents and they keep saying '*when you're older*' but I'm already almost—" She cut herself off with a frustrated huff, ears flattening. "Anyway. It's not happening anytime soon..."

"You're not missing as much as you think on the lower floors," I said, which was both true and not true, depending on which parts I was really talking about. "But the city itself...? Honestly, that's worth seeing, when you get the chance. At least the upper layers."

Her tail resumed its excited swishing. "You'll have to take me someday, then! When my parents finally let me off the leash."

"Deal," I said, and found, much to my own surprise, that I *genuinely* meant it too.

Something about the idea of having someone to walk around Neo Avalis with—someone who'd actually want to be there, who'd get excited about the neon and the noise and the sheer overwhelming scale of it all—had me thinking...

'Yeah... That really could be damn fun.'

But I also immediately held up a finger, because simply promising something like that without a caveat was a terrible idea. Neo Avalis wasn't a tourist destination, no matter which layer you were on—Neo Avalis was Neo Avalis.

"Under *one* condition. You make serious progress on the Spirit stuff you were talking about—or make massive strides on Miss K's shard. Enough that you can reliably defend yourself out there. Miss K gets to be the judge."

Kenzie's ears perked and she tilted her head. "But I can already—"

"I almost died out there yesterday, Kenzie," I said, cutting her off, and the look on my face was dead serious.

Her eyes instantly went wide. She practically launched upright, both hands slamming onto the chabudai hard enough to rattle it, tail whipping behind her in sharp, agitated strokes. "*What?! When?! What happened?!*"

I hadn't planned on telling her any of this. Not really.

I'd intended to keep the details of the gig as far from this conversation as possible—especially considering my still-bruised ribs and the fact that we'd come here to train together, not to swap war stories.

But the words had come out before I'd had a chance to stop them, pulled straight from some part of me that had watched Kenzie's face *light up* at the idea of visiting Neo Avalis like it was a field trip, and had reacted on pure instinct.

Because if there was *one thing* I would never allow anyone I cared about to do—and Kenzie was rapidly, stubbornly worming her way into that small, exclusive group of people, if she wasn't already firmly planted there—it was underestimate what was *out there*.

The whole reason I had stayed with Valeria, even after the NeuroCorpse incident, even before the conversation that had followed the Nyxstalker situation, had been because a bit of neurotoxin in my system was still better odds than trying to survive Neo Avalis alone.

That calculus had been obvious to me from the start, and I'd made my peace with it, ugly as it had been at the time—still was, in some ways.

But Kenzie had absolutely *no* frame of reference for any of that.

She'd never been below the 40th floor. She'd never set foot outside the Megabuilding.

She was about as sheltered a rich kid as probably existed in this world, and the gap between the life she knew and the reality I'd just barely scraped through was so vast that words alone weren't going to bridge it.

I considered the situation for a moment.

Then I simply stood up and slowly, gingerly pulled my shirt off.

Kenzie sputtered.

Her face went red in about half a second, ears flattening sideways, hands flying up in front of her face as she physically recoiled on the spot. "W—W—What are you *doing*, Sera?!"

I ignored the question.

"I ended up having to go down to a lower layer of the city for a delivery," I said, keeping my voice level as I folded the shirt and set it on the chabudai. "Wrong place, wrong time. Ran into a group of Scavs that weren't interested in letting me leave."

I moved around towards her, then stood there around a meter away from her in my sports bra, arms at my sides, and met her eyes.

"*Look at me*, Kenzie."

She lowered her hands slowly, the blush still burning across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose—and then her eyes dropped to my torso and everything else left her face at once.

The color drained out of her so fast I could literally *watch it* do so.

One scar ran the full length of my chest, a clean, deliberate line where the Ripper had opened me up to get at whatever had been broken underneath. Two more sat underneath each arm, shorter but no less visible, marking the spots where my ribs had been put back together on each side.

The bruising around them had faded from the deep purples and blacks of the first hours to yellowed greens and muted browns—thanks to the few hours of rest the Rest Function had provided—but the discoloration *still* covered enough of my torso to paint a *very* specific picture.

Kenzie's mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again, but nothing came out except a few fragmented sounds that might have been the beginnings of questions she couldn't finish.

"This is *after* a Ripper put me back together," I said, the next lie coming easily. "I'll be fine in a few days—my mother's already arranged medical supervision for the recovery."

I held her gaze. "But I *need* you to understand something, Kenzie: Neo Avalis is not a safe place. Even the higher layers have their problems—they're safer by comparison, sure, but compared to Delta? Compared to floors 40 and above, the ones you've actually seen?"

I shook my head. "It's a bloodbath out there. I'm not exaggerating on this."

Her eyes were still completely fixed on the scars.

Her tail had gone dead still behind her—the first time I'd ever seen it do that.

"I will not take you out there, *ever*," I continued, "unless Miss K personally signs off on it. Because this—" I pointed at the long scar down my chest, then the ones along my sides, tracing the path the Ripper's work had left, "—this is what happened to me when I was *fighting for my life*. Giving a hundred and ten percent of everything I had, pulling out all the stops and fighting as dirty as I could."

I let my hand drop. "And *I* only made it out—unconscious and bleeding out—because I wasn't alone. I was *carried out* by somebody else, when all was said and done."

I held her eyes for a beat.

"Two of the people I was with..."

I left the rest unspoken.

The silence that followed was extremely heavy, and I could see *exactly* what it was doing behind Kenzie's wide, horrified eyes—her imagination filling in the blank I'd left with something worse than what had actually happened, building its own version of an ending I hadn't provided.

The white lie was necessary.

It was a small, deliberate cruelty in service of making *absolutely certain* that the girl sitting in front of me—in her family estate on the 101st floor, surrounded by books and koi ponds and a butler named Tian—*never, ever* walked out into Neo Avalis thinking it was nothing but a fun, exciting adventure...