

## Chapter 194 - Leystream

I considered Kenzie's answer for a moment—her goals were loosely defined at best, but at least she had a rough idea of where she wanted to end up.

*'That's better than nothing, I guess.'*

I ultimately nodded. "That sounds like a decent enough goal to pursue. Bit vague around the edges, but we'll figure it out as we go. We'll refine it once we have something to actually work with."

That lit up Kenzie's amber eyes—clearly the right dialogue option, judging by the way her ears perked back up to full attention.

"So, for starters," I continued, "you obviously need to keep going through Miss K's shard. I'd be willing to bet she's already loaded it with a ton of information about what you specifically could be doing better—maybe even something about that style thing you're looking for. Anything like that ring a bell, from what you've gone through so far?"

She thought about it for a moment, head tilting slightly. "Yeah, actually. Toward the latter half of the shard, there's some bigger sections that are all about making more use of my genetic modifications. *Way* more than what I'm doing right now, at least."

Then she pouted, ears flicking back. "But I don't *want* to wait that long, though! Going through the whole shard is going to take *months!*"

I had to spend a not-insignificant amount of effort controlling my face, because the first thought that hit me was, *'Really? A couple of months is **too long** for you to become an absolute menace at martial arts? People spend their entire lives trying to get what Miss K is just handing out across a few months' worth of dojo sessions...'*

But then I had to remind myself, with a beat of internal honesty, that I wasn't exactly in any position to be casting *that* particular stone, considering the whole glass house situation surrounding me.

*'Well, well, well... Look who's talking. Miss Cheat-System over here, getting every Skill downloaded and muscle memory installed like a modular computer, sitting here judging another person for not appreciating just how privileged they are. Woe is me, truly. The patience of saints incarnate.'*

"It's just how progress works," I said with a shrug. "There's no real shortcut for getting good at this stuff—it takes the time it takes. But that doesn't mean we can't try to *accelerate* certain portions of it. Especially when it comes to dealing with the other members of the dojo."

Kenzie tilted her head, ears swiveling forward—and then, as if a thought had only just managed to break through the surface, she perked up.

"Wait—yeah! What *did* you have in mind, exactly?" She leaned forward, planting her elbows on the chabudai. "Back when we were talking about doing this whole extra-training thing in the first place, you said you might have some ways to help. But you never actually explained what they were!"

*'Honestly, kind of surprised it's taken her this long to ask,' I thought, smiling slightly. 'She's been all questions about everything else.'*

I considered it for a moment, weighing how specific I should get... Then decided there wasn't really any harm in being honest about this one in particular—at least not the basics of it.

Kenzie was already going to find out at the dojo eventually, given that Miss K had been integrating these revelations into our sessions in pieces here and there already. Better to get ahead of it now, in a controlled setting, than have it land sideways during a sparring round.

I pushed up from my spot at the chabudai and stepped into open space, slipping into my usual fighting stance.

Kenzie's whole body jolted—ears snapping flat, tail puffing—for a brief moment of pure alarm, before her brain caught up to the fact that I was not, in fact, about to attack her.

She let out a breath, ears slowly resettling. "Don't just *do* that—"

"Sorry. So." I straightened slightly, settling into the explanation. "I have an extreme level of muscular control. Even Miss K mentioned that she doesn't quite get to this level."

Kenzie's eyes went *wide*.

It wasn't as shocked-wide of before, but bigger.

Full-on saucer mode, her ears standing up straight up in alarm as well.

"I can control the muscles inside my body to a preternatural degree," I continued, "and in just about any fashion I can imagine. It might take me a few moments to figure out how, *exactly*, they need to move for a given motion—but once I've worked it out and done it once, I can repeat it perfectly. Every single time. No variance, no drift, nothing."

To actually illustrate the point—because words were one thing and a demonstration was another one entirely—I shifted into a sequence of movements from Miss K's shard.

The same ones I ran through every morning during my routines to grind out Attribute and Skill experience, the same ones I'd practiced so many times that my body executed them more reliably than most automated systems ever managed.

Strikes flowing into blocks flowing into pivots flowing into recoveries, each motion landing in exactly the same place every time, with exactly the same speed, exactly the same form.

Then I ran them again.

And again.

Without a single variation. Without the tiniest micro-corrections that any other person—even a Grandmaster like Miss K—would naturally introduce here or there. The *same exact* movements, executed perfectly *identically*, on a loop, like a piece of choreography played from a recording on repeat.

Kenzie just *stared*.

Her ears were stiff and straight, her tail gone rigid. Her jaw had quietly slackened at some point and she didn't seem to have noticed. She was watching my arms, my legs, my hips, her gaze darting between joints and limbs as I cycled through the sequence yet another time, her brain visibly trying to process what she was seeing and failing.

"Wha—*what?*" she finally got out, voice cracking slightly. "H—*how* are you even doing that, Sera?! How is that even *possible?*!"

She practically stumbled getting up from the chabudai—nearly tripping over the edge of it in her hurry—and came around to my side, crouching slightly to get a closer look at the way my muscles were actually moving under my skin. Her eyes were locked onto my arms and legs with the kind of fierce, hungry focus I usually only saw from her during sparring.

I had to admit—it felt *really good* to be showing off like this.

I didn't get a lot of opportunities to actually demonstrate what the System had made me capable of. After all, most of the time, I was actively *hiding* everything—softening my edges, faking variance, deliberately forgoing the muscle control of [Elemental Balance] to introduce small imperfections to look like a normal, talented student instead of whatever I was *actually* capable of.

Getting to just... let it loose, in front of someone whose reaction was this level of pure, uncomplicated wonder?

Yeah. That felt *really good* for once.

"Honestly?" I said, finally easing out of the sequence and letting my arms drop back to my sides. "I'm not *entirely* sure myself."

Kenzie squinted at me, ears flicking. "No shot."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry—not *no shot*, no shot, I just—Sera, I'm *positive* you weren't like this a few weeks ago," she said, gesturing emphatically. "Like, when we *started* the dojo sessions together. You were good, sure. But also extremely clumsy and more *normal*. You weren't... *this*. You weren't whatever *this* is. I would've noticed right away."

"Yeah," I admitted, because there was no real point in denying that part. "I've made some pretty drastic improvements over the last few weeks. Like something just... *clicked*. I don't have a great explanation for it beyond that."

She gave me a long, deeply suspicious look—one that made it very clear she was not buying my answer in even the smallest part.

But then she just sighed, ears dipping, and gave a small nod of acceptance.

"Yeah, alright. Family secrets and all." She waved it off with a vague motion. "It's not like mine doesn't have a million of them too. I get it."

I felt a small wash of relief at that and made a mental note, again, that Kenzie was rapidly proving herself to be a *remarkably* easy person to be around. The way she just *let things go* when they weren't hers to push on—it made her the ideal person for someone with my amount of secrets to be around.

"Anyway—the point I was *trying* to make," I said, redirecting before she could circle back around to it, "is that with the muscle control thing in play, I can actually help you iterate on your own movements way faster than you'd be able to do alone. I can demo something at full speed, then break it down to slow-motion. I can show you *exactly* which muscle groups are firing at which moments. I can pull a movement apart down to the individual joint and put it back together however you need."

Her ears were perking back up again as I talked, attention re-engaging.

"And I can show you a lot of my own stuff too. Not because you'll necessarily need or want to use any of what Miss K's been having me work on, or any of the way I actually fight—that's pretty specific to me, and probably wouldn't fit your style anyway. But knowing exactly how it works? How long the transitions take and how they work? What the limitations are, where the weak points are, where the openings sit?" I shrugged. "That's a *lot* of usable information. It's the kind of thing you can take apart and find pieces of for your own style, going forward. Anti-patterns, counter-options, that whole deal. I figured that would be a good point to start with, especially as I'm a fairly traditional fighter—if more refined than most people you'll meet will likely be able to perform. But the basic gist of the movements should be the same."

Kenzie was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet by the end of that, tail swishing rapidly, ears flicking with barely contained excitement. She looked like she was about three seconds away from physically launching herself toward the door.

"Yes—yes, okay—okay, we *have* to start *now*," she said, her eyes flashing yellow for a brief, distinctive moment as she fired off a message through her cerebral link. "Just messaged my sister. She's clearing out of the dojo. We're good to go!"

I blinked.

*'Damn. That was fast.'*

I'd barely gotten the explanation out and she'd already triggered the next step. I was, frankly, a little impressed at how quickly Kenzie was capable of moving things along when she actually had a clear direction to chase.

*'Don't make any tail-chasing jokes, Sera... She's not a dog,'* I reminded myself.

"Alright," I said, allowing a smile to tug at the corner of my mouth. "I guess... Lead the way?"

She practically lit up at that, spun on the spot, and headed for the partition with her tail flicking energetically behind her.

I followed right behind, letting her guide me back out into the maze-like corridors of the estate—and, presumably, toward wherever the Molida family kept their personal dojo.

Kenzie led the way through the corridors with a familiarity that came from having lived in this maze her entire life—turning corners left and right I would never have figured out on my own, weaving us past sliding panels and adjoining rooms that I caught only brief glimpses of as we passed.

"So once we get to the dojo," she was saying, half-turning to keep me in the conversation as we walked, "what do you want to start with? Should we just spar first to get a baseline? Or do you want to go straight into the showing-me-things part?"

"I'd say some light sparring first—but we'll have to be careful with no Miss K around," I said, glancing at a particularly impressive piece of calligraphy mounted in one of the alcoves we passed. "If only because I want to get a sense of where you're at right now before I start dumping information on you. Otherwise I'll just be guessing at what's actually useful."

"Smart, smart." She nodded vigorously, tail flicking. "Okay, but—if we have time—I definitely want to see that thing you did in class. When you almost hit Sensei? I want to see that again. Up close. So I can actually *watch* it this time instead of just somewhat catching it mid-fall."

"Deal," I said, smiling.

The corridors opened up after another turn or two, revealing a wide set of sliding panels that stood ajar—and through them, the interior garden.

I had thought the exterior approach to the estate had been impressive.

The interior garden made it look like a damn warm-up at best.

The space was *massive*—open to a vaulted ceiling several stories overhead, its supports styled to mimic exposed wooden beams while almost certainly being load-bearing structural elements integrated into the building proper.

The light coming down was the same softly-simulated sunlight from the rest of the floor, falling through artfully placed gaps in the canopy of carefully maintained trees that grew throughout the garden—*actual* trees, fully-grown, their roots somehow accommodated by whatever engineering miracles existed beneath the floor's surface.

Stone pathways wound through carefully manicured beds of moss and low-growing flora, past a smaller pond that mirrored the koi pond out front, and beneath the trailing branches of a willow that swept low enough to brush the gravel as we walked beneath it.

"Hey—you want to see the jump kick again? The one my sister showed me?" Kenzie said over her shoulder. "Sensei keeps telling me not to do it but it's so *satisfying*—"

I didn't respond immediately.

Because the moment we'd stepped fully into the interior garden, I'd felt *it*.

Sprites.

They were absolutely *suffusing* the air. I could register them without even actively focusing on them—that low, ambient pressure of Anima density that I'd only ever felt in one other place before, which had been the interior of Miss K's dojo.

The whole garden was thoroughly alive with it.

'Huh,' I thought, slowing my pace slightly without making it obvious. *'That's... interesting. Very interesting.'*

I considered, very briefly, whether using Anima Sight this soon after the injection was a good idea.

*'Network's still healing... Mr. Shori was pretty clear about heavy use being off the table for at least two weeks. But this is just Anima Sight. And the Attribute Rank-Up earlier didn't blow me up, even though that pulled **significantly** more juice than this should. So I'm probably—probably—fine. Just for a quick look.'*

I waited until Kenzie was mid-sentence again, attention focused ahead—something about a particular kick variant she'd been working on—and quietly commanded the Blue Sprites in my left eye to recede.

The world *shifted*.

And I almost lost my footing entirely.

The garden was truly *saturated*.

Sprites of every color drifted through the air around us in dense, slow-moving currents—far thicker than anything I'd ever seen even in Miss K's dojo, layers upon layers of them, flowing through the leaves and curling around the trunks of the trees, pooling in slow eddies near the pond, accumulating in soft drifts along the borders of the pathways like the cherry blossom petals outside.

The volume was simply *staggering*, and the sheer informational overload of trying to take it all in at once was enough to make my vision swim and my balance go briefly sideways—

A pair of clawed hands caught my arm immediately, steadying me before I could properly stumble.

"Whoa—Sera! Are you okay?!" Kenzie's worry was instant and total, her ears flattening, her face inches from mine as she scanned me for whatever had just happened. "What's wrong? Do you need to sit down? Is it the injuries—"

I quickly forced my left eye shut to stop the informational overload and managed an embarrassed laugh—which, honestly, didn't even require *any* acting on my part.

"I'm fine, I'm fine—sorry! Just slipped a little." I gestured vaguely at my socked feet. "Not used to walking around without shoes on. Lost my footing for a second."

A beat of silence followed, before a slow, deeply unimpressed expression spread across Kenzie's face. Her tail gave a single, lazy flick. And a sharp-toothed, *thoroughly* smug smile pulled across her freckled features as she released my arm.

"Miss Perfect-Muscle-Control," she said, drawing the words out with deliberate, delighted relish, "*tripped*. Because she's not used to walking on *socks*..."

"That's not—"

"I'm *absolutely* writing this down." She pulled an imaginary pad from thin air and pretended to scribble on it with theatrical seriousness, ears perked in triumph. "*A weakness has successfully been identified. The legendary Sera has finally been countered. Strategy: Remove her shoes before sparring. This is huge intel.*"

I groaned and started walking again, deliberately leaving her behind—even though I had no real idea where I was going beyond “away from her antics”.

"I am going to *destroy* you in this sparring match, you know that, right?"

"You sure you'll even be able to?" she teased, hurrying to catch up, the grin audible in her voice. "Mum doesn't allow shoes in the dojo, you know?"

I shot her a scathing side-glance, which had her immediately throwing both hands up in defensive surrender, ears flicking back.

"Just kidding! Just kidding, Sera, really—no need to go all death-glare on me, *damn*."

The next minute or so passed at the same easy pace, Kenzie leading me along while I quietly worked on adjusting to seeing the world exclusively through my left eye.

I'd closed the right one entirely—keeping both open had given me two competing viewpoints at once, normal vision overlaid against the Sprite-flooded version, and I was nowhere near ready to process that level of double-vision in any kind of useful way.

Slow acclimation first. The combined view could wait a little longer to be figured out.

Walking through the rest of the estate with the Sprite vision active made one assumption I'd been quietly developing since the last Anima download considerably more likely.

The Sprites that weren't visibly bound or tethered to anything—the free-floating ones—were all moving in the same general direction. A slow, steady current of them, drifting through the air, through walls, through whatever happened to be in the way, all heading toward the same approximate point on the far side of the estate.

The flow wasn't fast but definitely it *was* consistent, and even more importantly: Directional.

'A *ley-stream*,' I thought, watching another lazy current of Greens and Yellows pass through a wooden partition like it wasn't even there. '*Either passing directly through this floor or running right alongside it. That would explain a lot.*'

It would explain why this floor specifically had received the kind of massively high-end architectural treatment that most of the Megabuilding could only dream about.

I wouldn't have been surprised if you went up another ten floors—assuming the ley-stream didn't extend that high—and found the apartments shrank back down to something less opulent and elaborate, despite being technically *higher* in the building.

Real estate value in Neo Avalis was a multi-dimensional problem, and apparently *proximity to ambient Anima flows* was a factor I hadn't even known to consider until a few hours ago.

Working theory only. But it fit so far.

My Anima-related musings came to an end, however, as we reached the large double doors of the dojo. Heavy wood once again, dark and polished as ever, with carved iron fittings that matched the aesthetic of every other door in the estate.

Kenzie knocked twice on the frame.

"*Can we come in?*" she half-yelled into the wood, though I was fairly sure the volume was *completely* unnecessary given how utterly serene the rest of the floor and estate had been up to this point.

"One moment," came a slightly lower, and considerably more reasonably volumed, voice from inside.

Kenzie shot me a look and rolled her eyes with the patented expression of a younger sibling—or at least the ones I had seen in movies and anime from my past life. Having been an only child, I had no idea what that actually looked like for real.

I smiled back.

"Come in!"

Kenzie pushed the doors open and stepped inside, with me trailing behind her.

She didn't even make it three steps before a blur of motion launched itself across the floor and tackled her into a full-body bear hug.

"*Zizi!* You never spar with me anymore!" the woman lamented, audibly distressed, as she pressed Kenzie's entire face into her chest and nuzzled her like a particularly affectionate animal handling its favorite cub. "That damn *Arkion Dojo* is stealing you away from me! I'm being *replaced!*"

The woman was—well, *striking* was the simplest and most polite word for it.



She was tall, considerably more so than Kenzie, with a poised, almost statuesque build that carried the kind of refined composure that came from a lifetime of being looked at and not minding it in the slightest.

The same animal heritage, or genetic manipulation, was clear on her as well—with pointed ears sitting atop her head, the same freckles scattered across her nose and cheekbones—but everything about her had been turned up several notches in the maturity and presentation department.

Her hair was a soft honey-blonde instead of Kenzie's orange, swept up into an elegant half-updo with strands artfully framing her face, decorative gold chains and pearl pins threaded through the styling.

Bright blue eyes, where Kenzie's were golden—different parent on the eye color, maybe.

The outfit didn't help matters at all in terms of *making myself feel thoroughly underdressed and out of place*.

A long, formal robe-dress in black silk with intricate gold filigree patterning embroidered across every visible surface—swirling clouds, ornamental waves, abstract designs—accented at the collar and hem with vivid red.

A thick red obi-style sash was tied at her waist in a deliberate, sculpted knot.

Gold jewelry adorned her throat, wrists and ears.

The black platform geta-style sandals I'd seen just outside the dojo were likely hers, which made perfect sense as they'd complete the look.

She was, all in all, dressed like she was attending a formal tea ceremony, rather than simply lounging around her family's home dojo.

Old-money scion elegance, broadcast at full volume.

The high-floor Megabuilding equivalent of casual wear, apparently, when your family had a damn koi pond and a ley-stream running through the property.

Kenzie, meanwhile, was thrashing against her sister's chest, trying valiantly to escape with both hands flailing—but my attention had already gone entirely elsewhere.

Because off to one side of the woman holding Kenzie hostage, there was a damn *kitsune*!

A giant, three-tailed kitsune, white-and-cream-and-light-brown fur shimmering faintly along the edges of its form, standing easily as large as a fully-grown tiger. Its three voluminous tails fanned out behind it in a slow, deliberate spread, each one nearly as long as its body.

Ceremonial markings adorned it—black-and-red striped wrappings, just like the woman's in scheme and design, around two of the tails with small gold bells attached and a matching wrap around the muzzle with a single golden bell hanging at the center of its forehead.

Its eyes were a piercing, intelligent gold.

It was, by far, the single most beautiful and terrifying thing I had ever seen.

And it was *right there*. Just... Standing in the dojo, casual as anything.

I actively, physically recoiled as my brain caught up with what I was seeing.

I was so caught off guard that, without thinking, I'd snapped my right eye open as well and my brain immediately got flooded with the double-image input again. The dual viewpoint slammed back into place and gave me a moment of disorienting vertigo, but it also delivered one *extremely* important piece of information.

The kitsune wasn't *actually* there.

Not in my right eye—in normal vision. Through that eye, there was just empty space beside the woman—nothing but the polished wooden floor of the dojo and the soft ambient lighting.

It was an Anima entity. Visible only through the Sprite-shifted view of my left eye.

And it was *glaring* at me.

It had dropped into a low, predatory crouch the instant our eyes met, body pressed close to the floor, weight shifted forward onto its front paws, three tails lashing slowly behind it in the unmistakable body language of something about to spring.

Its lips peeled back to reveal a row of teeth that I really, *really* did not want to be on the receiving end of—fangs longer than my fingers, pearl-white and impossibly sharp—and a low, vibrating growl started building somewhere deep in its chest.

The growl immediately got the woman's attention.

Her head snapped around toward the kitsune.

Her eyes flicked over its posture, registered the threat-stance, and then instantly darted toward me—toward whatever it was looking at, which was the most direct way to figure out what had set it off in the first place.

Her eyes widened.

And then I watched, through my left eye, as a sudden, sharp evacuation of Blue Sprites flooded out of her eyes—a discharge so fast and so visible that I almost missed the moment it happened—as she switched into her own Anima Sight.

Then her eyes grew *even wider* as hers met mine...