

Chapter 197 - The Spare

We kept at it for around half an hour, until my muscles flat-out stopped cooperating with me.

My arms and legs were literally *shaking* from exertion by then.

Having been forced to repeatedly execute the same movements over and over again—with no variation whatsoever apart from the speed at which they moved—had taken a major toll on them.

Kind of unsurprising, in retrospect. Something that *probably* should have been an obvious limitation to this kind of specialized training from the start.

*'Really should've figured this would happen, actually,' I thought ruefully, flexing my fingers and feeling the tremor work its way through them. 'Makes a lot of sense that it would. I think I just... somehow assumed the System would bridge the gap there or something. Like [Elemental Balance] would magically reduce the muscular cost of repetition or something... It absolutely does **not** do that.'*

We were now sitting on the tatami—or, in Kenzie's case, lying flat on her back with her arms splayed out at her sides—sipping on something that I had to admit was *insanely* delicious.

Some kind of soft-drink analogue that I genuinely had no name for and absolutely zero frame of reference to identify by.

Kenzie had asked Tian to “*bring us something to refresh with,*” and damn if he hadn't delivered.

It was pale gold in color, with a slow, lazy effervescence that produced bubbles you could actually *feel* dissolving across your tongue rather than just popping the way normal carbonation did.

The flavor was layered in a way that felt almost cheating—opening with a clean, crisp burst of something citrus-adjacent but somehow smoother, mellowing through the middle into a soft, honey-tinged warmth, and finishing on a cool, faintly herbal note that lingered at the back of the throat like it was politely waiting to be invited back.

I was, frankly, *far* too afraid to even ask how much each glass of this ambrosia-tier substance actually *cost*.

It was by far the best-tasting drink I had ever had—past life *or* present, all factors included—and I was actively, *consciously* exerting self-control to not just tip the whole glass back in one go and ask Tian to please, *kindly*, bring me fourteen more.

"So!" Kenzie said, rolling onto her side on the tatami so she could look at me properly, propping her head up on one hand. Her tail swished idly behind her, ears flicking as she got comfortable. "I have to tell you, this was *incredible*. Like, seriously. I've picked up *so much* already, my brain feels like it's about to explode! Just—the weight distribution on the side-step alone, do you have any idea how much that's going to change my game? You're

absolutely getting your ass kicked next dojo session, by the way. I'm putting you on notice. Fair warning."

I let her have it. Took another careful, reverent sip of the soft-drink, then replied, "Big talk from someone who's gotten thoroughly schooled every single session so far."

"Oh, that's the *old* me." She waved a hand dismissively, claws catching the light. "The new me has *intel*. The new me has *footage*—mental footage. I've been watching you in slow-motion for half an hour, Sera! I have *received the knowledge*."

"Mhm."

"You'll see," she said, ears perking with theatrical confidence. "You'll see."

I just smiled into my glass and let her run with the trash talk, because honestly—I was drinking *liquid gold* on her dime right now and we'd just spent half an hour where I'd literally lain face-down on the floor at one point.

She'd earned this... for now.

She went quiet for a moment, then her brow furrowed thoughtfully and she added, more seriously, "But for real though—it's still completely insane, what you can do with your muscles. Like, *physically*. That doesn't even make any sense, Sera. I keep going over it and it just doesn't... Like, *how*?"

I shrugged, settling back against my heels. "I can't really explain it either. *I've tried*. Miss K had pretty much the same reaction the first time she figured it out."

Kenzie hummed thoughtfully at that, fingers idly tracing the rim of her glass.

After a beat, her ears swivelled forward and she asked, "What's your relationship with Sensei, anyway? She drags you into the office, like, *constantly*. I keep wanting to ask. Did you know her before the Arkion Dojo or something?"

I waved a hand dismissively. "I'm honestly just causing her *way* too much trouble. That's basically the long and short of it. Almost every time she's pulled me into the office, she's been about a hair's breadth from throwing me out of the dojo entirely."

Kenzie's eyes went wide and she abruptly sat up.

"*What?!*"

I shrugged again, giving her a slightly rueful smile. "Look, it's not like I've been behaving particularly *normal*, right? With all the strange shit happening with me recently—the muscle control, the changes, just... all of it, really. I can't exactly blame her for being more than a little suspicious about whatever's going on with me. *I wish* I had better explanations to give her, but I genuinely don't. So she gets to deal with whatever new weirdness shows up, and I get to sit in the office and look apologetic about it. That's just kinda how it works between us."

I paused, considering briefly whether to talk about it, then added, "She's also helping me come to terms with the changes, in her own way. She's probably sick and tired of having to rework my shard practically every week. So I'll probably keep getting pulled into office meetings going forward, too. Just so you're warned."

Kenzie groaned dramatically, flopping back onto the tatami with all the theatrical despair of someone whose worst-case scenario had just been confirmed.

"*Don't* get yourself kicked out, Sera. I'm serious." She rolled her head sideways to look at me, ears flat. "I don't want to be stuck in there alone with Jin and Tom. That would be so *bad*. Not that I hate them or whatever—but they're not, like... you know, *out here*. Helping me learn. The way you are."

She gestured vaguely at the dojo around us, tail giving a small, lazy flick.

"It just wouldn't be the same."

I nodded, taking another slow sip of the soft-drink and letting it sit on my tongue for a few moments—savoring the layered, impossible flavor of it to its absolute limit before swallowing.

"I'll do my best," I said. "No promises though. Strange stuff just has a way of finding me, for some reason..."

The silence settled over us after that, comfortable in a way I hadn't expected it to be.

Just the two of us, lying on the tatami of a stupidly wealthy family's private dojo, drinking impossibly expensive soft-drinks, the dojo's quiet ambient stillness wrapping around us like a blanket.

And I realized, somewhere in the middle of that quiet, that I was *genuinely* enjoying this.

The time. The company. The casual, unguardedness of the moment.

I'd never really had a friend like this before. Not that I could recall, anyway.

The friends I could even vaguely remember from my previous life had all been online—voices in headsets, names on screens, people I knew through games and forums and long, late-night chats.

Real and undeniably important to me in their own way, of course, but never *this*.

Never the physical, mundane closeness of just being in the same room as another person. Ribbing each other. Lying on the floor together after exhausting ourselves with stupid, half-baked training experiments.

Sharing a soft-drink in companionable silence.

It was honestly really, *really* nice.

And I decided, sitting with that realization, that I wanted to know more about her.

"Hey, Kenzie," I said, breaking the quiet. "Can I ask you something?"

She rolled her head sideways to look at me, ears twitching slightly. "Mm. Sure."

"Why do you actually want to train so hard? Like—I get the competitive thing, you obviously love every second of it, you want to get better at the dojo stuff. But what's *actually* driving it for you? What's the endgame here for you?"

She was quiet for a long beat afterwards.

Until, finally, she let out a heavy sigh.

She remained silent for a while after that, visibly working through whatever she wanted to share—ears flicking back and forth, fingers turning the now half-empty glass slowly between her hands.

Then she sighed again, settling something internally, and finally spoke up.

"I mean... you've met Mao now."

The words came out simple, without any particular weight attached to them, but I could already tell just how heavy they really were for her without needing the rest of the conversation.

"She's the *golden child* of the family," Kenzie continued, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Firstborn. Beautiful. Insanely smart. Gifted with *everything* a Molida is *supposed* to be gifted with. Amazing compatibility with the Geneseed too—like, off the charts, apparently. She's the whole package. Everything you could wish for, as a parent."

There was a brief pause after that, before she continued.

"And I'm—kind of just a *spare*? In case something happens to Mao." She let out a quiet, mirthless little laugh. "I'm not—I don't *really* matter. Not in the same way she does. Not that my parents don't love me or anything, don't get me wrong, they *absolutely* do. But I don't really have a *purpose*. I just... *exist*."

She sighed again.

I immediately wanted to strongly refute about four different things she'd just said—but I could tell she wasn't finished, so I bit them all back and let her keep going.

After a few more seconds, she did.

"Mum got me into the Arkion Dojo... *That particular group in specific*, I mean. To get some kind of intel on the people in there... Tom primarily, Jin secondary." Her ears flicked sideways, a small, embarrassed twitch. "We didn't know about *you*. Which, honestly, given everything I've learned about you so far, kind of tracks, I guess."

I snorted softly at that.

"It's the first time I've ever been given a real... *role* to play, you know? In what my family does. Like, an *actual* job. Something I can contribute to." She shrugged, the motion small against the tatami. "And it's something I can actually *do*. I can fight people. I'm not great at it like Mao, but I'm not *bad* at it either. And I don't have anything else to really put my effort behind, so—this is as good as anything, really. Better than nothing."

She paused, then added, almost as a side note, "It's also why I was asking about your mother back then."

She quickly raised a hand, eyes flicking to me.

"I'm obviously *not* asking again, by the way! Just to be clear. I get that you don't want to talk about her, and that's totally fair. I won't push it. I promise." Her voice softened slightly. "I'm not—I'm not inviting you over to learn about your family. *Not anymore*. Originally? Yeah, I definitely would have. But not since—not since that time you told me off. This is just... you. *Just us*."

She let out another small breath.

"Tom and Jin, though..." She side-eyed me, the look almost apologetic. "I don't want this to sound bad. But they're—they're more important. On the whole *Corporation* side of things. So my family actually has expectations of me now. For the first time. Ever, really. And I just..."

Her ears flattened slightly.

"I don't want to go back to just being the spare, if that makes sense? I want to *actually* be part of something. Matter to them more than just being the leftover child. Be something other than the *backup plan*."

She went quiet after that.

Her eyes drifted away from mine, fixing on some non-specific point on the far wall of the dojo—purposefully not looking at me. Like she'd said too much and wanted to give herself permission to disappear into the silence for a while.

I sat with it for a moment.

The brutal, genuine honesty of what she'd just handed me.

There was a knee-jerk reaction that wanted to launch itself out of my mouth—something quick and reassuring, the conversational equivalent of throwing a blanket full of holes over a fire and hoping it went out.

"You matter, Kenzie. You're not just a spare. Don't talk about yourself like that."

All the things you said to a friend when they put themselves down in front of you—the whole script.

And I almost did it—almost.

But I stopped myself, because the script wasn't what she actually needed right now.

Because I had been on the receiving end of that more times than I could count in my past life. *The script* was called the script because it came up again and again.

Essentially regardless of the actual context of what a person required.

Kenzie wasn't looking for some kind of weak, outside validation that she mattered to her parents—that was an *internal* thing, fire and foremost, and nothing I said about it was going to land in any way that fixed it. The hurt she was describing wasn't really about whether her family loved her or valued her—she'd already said herself that they did.

The hurt was about intrinsic *purpose*.

About being the second one. About being given a role for the first time in her life and being *terrified* that if she dropped it, she'd just dissolve back into the background of her own family.

That wasn't something a feel-good speech was going to touch.

She needed something... more from the heart.

So I took a slow breath, set my empty glass aside, and shifted on the tatami so I was facing her more directly—even though she still wasn't looking at me.

"Hey," I said quietly. "Kenzie."

She didn't move.

I kept my voice level, but making sure that it wasn't soft nor pitying—I had always hated that kind of tone in the voices that had spoken to me. I went for a direct approach instead.

"You're not simply a random spare."

That got a small flick of her ears.

"And I don't mean that in the cheap, encouraging way," I continued. "I mean it as an actual *factual* observation. I've watched you for weeks now. In the dojo. In sparring. Just now, watching me work through movements you'd never seen before and *actively* picking apart the weak points in real-time. That's not the behaviour of a person who's just *existing*."

Her eyes flicked toward me, briefly, then away again. But she was listening.

"The thing your family is asking of you?" I went on. "Reading Tom. Reading Jin. Operating inside their orbit and getting useful information back to them... That's not actually a martial arts job. That's a *people* job. And from where I'm sitting, you're actually *really* good at the whole people part. Maybe even better than you realize.

"You read *me* almost immediately, the first time we sparred—you instantly knew that I was *off* in some way you couldn't quite name and you've been the first to notice whenever something changed about me ever since. You backed off the family questions the *first* time I made it clear I didn't want to answer, and you've *never once* tried to circle back to them by

accident or on purpose, which most people would have. You spotted my ribs were a problem in our spar before I'd even admitted it out loud—and you were actually right during that time, too. We *should* have stopped when you said we should have."

I shrugged.

"That's not something a simple "*spare*" would be capable of. That kind of instinctual understanding is actually really, *really* hard. Most people don't have that; not even a little bit. Tom doesn't have it—he's all calculations and smarts, but no heart. And Jin *definitely* doesn't have it—that boy could not read a room with a manual. Yet you *just do*. Practically without effort. And you're combining it with martial arts training from someone like Miss K, which makes you *significantly* more dangerous—and useful—than people are going to give you credit for, because they're going to write you off the way they always have."

I paused briefly, hoping to draw her attention to me with it, and her ears did—her face did not. Not yet.

"Listen... That's a *huge* advantage you have there. And I bet something that Mao doesn't have, either. *Nobody* is ever going to underestimate the Molida family's firstborn golden child now, are they? But I bet she doesn't have nearly as much of a people-focused viewpoint as you do. She'd *never* be able to do the same things you do."

She finally turned her head and actually looked at me, ears half-perked, expression somewhere between guarded and uncertain.

"And the other thing," I added, before she could deflect or protest, "is that purpose isn't actually a thing your family gives you. Even when they think they are. Even when *you* think they are. They handed you an *assignment*. That's a *job*. That's not the same as a *purpose*. Jobs run out. Roles shift. Every Corporation has a different opinion next quarter than the one preceding it and suddenly the thing that was *supposed* to make you matter doesn't anymore."

I held her eyes.

"Purpose is what *you decide* to do with the time you have. That's it. That's the *whole* formula. If the only thing keeping you upright is whether or not your parents have given you a role to play, that's a position you don't want to be in long-term. Because the day they take it back, or it gets reassigned, or Mao does something to make it unnecessary, or whatever might happen—you're back to square one, feeling like a spare again, with no internal foundation to stand on."

Her eyes dropped slightly, but she didn't look away.

"You want to fight? Then fight because *you* want to fight. Because it's fun to compete with people your own age. Not because they need an *asset*. Because *you* like getting better at this. Because *you* like watching me run through a punch eighty times and figuring out where the windup has its weakspot. The way you lit up when you spotted the back-foot loading earlier, that wasn't *for them*. That was one-hundred-percent *for you*. *You* loved that. I watched it happen."

I let that sit for a moment, then went a little softer.

"And—for what it's worth—you're already mattering to *me*. Like, just to actually say that out loud. I'm not someone with a lot of friends, Kenzie. My situation is—extremely complicated, in ways I can't really explain to you. But you've been one of the easiest people to be around in my entire life, and that's a fucking *gift*. I'm not saying that to make you feel better either. I'm saying it because it's just *true*. Today was the most relaxed I've been in weeks, if not *months*. Not despite you—*because* of you."

That earned me a small, fragile smile.

"So yeah. Fight for the family thing if you want. Earn whatever standing you want to earn there. That's fine, and the skills you build doing it will be yours either way. But don't make your sense of self dependent on it. Build something underneath it that's just *yours*. Something the family doesn't get to take credit for, or take *away*. Find the joy in doing the work, rather than considering the work to be the joy."

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she let out a slow, shaky breath—half laugh, half something else—and rolled her head to look at the ceiling again.

"You know," she said, voice slightly thick, "you give *weirdly* good advice for someone who keeps showing up half-dead or strangely changed by whatever things you can't explain that day."

I snorted.

"Years of practice. Mostly telling myself to do better, then never doing it."

"It shows."

"Wow. Rude."

She laughed—a small, real one this time, ears twitching alongside her laughter—and dragged the back of her hand across her eyes in a quick, casual swipe that she absolutely thought I wasn't going to notice.

I gave her the courtesy of indeed not noticing a thing.

We sat with it for another minute in complete silence.

Then Kenzie exhaled, sat up properly, and rolled her shoulders.

"Okay," she said, ears perking back into their usual cheerful tilt. "I think I've absorbed about as much soul-baring as I can handle in a single afternoon. Back to training. *Please*. Like... Immediately. Before I actually start crying for real."

"Deal," I said, and started carefully levering myself off the tatami, my ribs filing their fresh round of complaints. "You have anything specific in mind to train?"

Her grin came back, sharp-toothed and gleaming, ears swiveling forward.

"Yes! I want to see how Jin's boxing works. His fists hurt so much, I'd love to just rip his damn arms off sometimes... So show me the boxing stuff again."

"You got it."

We moved back to the center of the dojo together, the soft give of the tatami familiar under our feet now, and got back to work...