

Chapter 193 - Goals

Kenzie's wide-eyed stare slowly resolved itself into one of genuine, aching sympathy, her ears drooping low against her head.

"I—I'm so sorry for your loss, Sera..." she said quietly, her voice smaller than I'd ever heard it.

I was momentarily taken aback—nobody had actually died, after all—but given what I'd let her infer from the white lie, the reaction made complete sense. *Of course* she'd land there.

That was the whole point of leaving the sentence hanging the way I had.

It *still* felt deeply uncomfortable, though, accepting condolences for something that hadn't *actually* happened.

So I waved it off.

"Ah, it's alright. Didn't really know them. Just met them for the first time for this gig—still sucks, obviously, but it is what it is. I've had worse."

I regretted the phrasing *immediately* as it left my mouth, because Kenzie's eyes shot wide all over again, the sympathy on her face instantly overwritten by stark alarm.

"You've had *worse*?! Worse *how*?! People *died* and you look—you look like *that*!" She gestured frantically at my scarred torso, tail bristling. "What, exactly, are you even doing out there that you run into life-or-death situations like that so commonly?!"

'*Yeah... could've phrased that one a bit better.*' I resisted the urge to visibly wince—definitely did so internally, however. '*Damn you, Social Skills. Why do none of you just do [Casual Communication] or something? Why are you all locked to [Negotiation] or [Deception]-specific tasks? Where the hell is my [How To Not Step In It] Skill, huh? That's the one I actually need.*'

Before I could even begin to assemble an answer that wouldn't dig the hole deeper, Kenzie barreled right on ahead.

"And—and how does your family even allow this?!" she demanded, leaning across the chabudai. "If I came home with that level of bruising—with injuries like—" her eyes roamed over my torso again, briefly, before her face went beet-red all over again and she physically jolted, one hand flying up. "C-Can you—can you please put your shirt back on first?!"

I bit back a smile at the sputtering and pulled my shirt back over my head while she very pointedly stared at a spot on the wall to my left.

Once I was decent again, she shook her head and continued, the alarm flooding right back in now that the distraction had been removed. "If I ever came home looking *like that*, I'd probably never be allowed to leave the floor again. Like, *ever*! They'd have me under house arrest until I was forty. So how is your family just—letting you do this?"

I took a few moments to think about that, slowly making my way back to my spot across the chabudai from her and settling down. And after weighing it for a second, I decided to go with a bit of honesty for once.

I didn't particularly enjoy lying to Kenzie. The white lie about the gig had been necessary, in my eyes, but I didn't want to keep stacking them if I didn't *have* to.

"They don't know," I said simply.

Kenzie blinked.

"My brother and father are... currently indisposed," I continued, choosing the words carefully—no reason to inform her that both of them are effectively half-dead, on top of everything else that I had already made her deal with. "And my mother is basically always working. So there's nobody at home to even notice I'm gone. I can be away for days at a time and it doesn't necessarily register with anyone."

That answer surprised her just as much as the last one had, apparently—but in a noticeably different way. Her face cycled through a complicated series of expressions, surprise and something almost envious and then, underneath it, a quiet thread of sadness, all of them chasing each other across her features before she finally landed somewhere in the middle.

"That's..." She trailed off, ears tilting. "That's so *strange*. I can't even imagine what that must be like. Nobody... noticing?"

Then she tilted her head, and asked the single most rich-kid question I had ever heard in either of my lives *combined*.

"But—don't your butlers tell your parents?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it.

"I mean," she went on, already getting in over her head, "I've been trying to build a good rapport with Tian for *years*, right? And he's lovely, he really is, but I genuinely don't think he'd keep something like that from my father or mother. Or my big sister, if she asked him directly. He's loyal to *them*, not me, at the end of the day."

She leaned forward, amber eyes wide and earnest. "So... how did you do it? How'd you get your butlers to be loyal enough to you that they'd cover for you being gone for *days*? Maybe I can try that with Tian and finally get him to drop the whole "Miss" bit, at the very least!"

I had to actively, *physically* stop myself from groaning out loud or putting my face directly into my palm.

Instead I just sat there. Simply staring. Blinking at her for several *long*, silent seconds while my brain tried to figure out where to even *begin* with that.

The silence stretched long enough that Kenzie started to squirm, her ears flattening slightly, clearly growing uncomfortable that I hadn't said anything yet.

"...Sera?"

"Kenzie," I said, very slowly, "believe it or not—but... not everyone has an entire estate full of butlers."

Her head tilted.

"My family, for example, doesn't have butlers. *At all*. Not a single one."

I watched her eyes start to widen.

"We also don't have an estate. We live in an *apartment*."

Wider.

"And I *share* my room with my older brother."

With every sentence, her eyes got bigger and bigger, her ears perking straight up and then folding partway back in what looked like genuine, deep-seated disbelief, like I'd just calmly informed her that water wasn't wet and the sky was optional—which... to be fair, she might actually believe, given that she'd never even seen the *actual* sky.

Kenzie's mouth dropped open, and for a second she just stared at me, processing.

Then she quickly scrambled to recover. "I mean—I *know* not everyone has butlers and estates! Obviously! I'm not—I've *seen* some of the lower floors, I know how people live—"

'Floor 40-plus is not "*the lower floors*," Kenzie,' I thought, with as much fondness as exasperation. '*That's not a thing anyone outside this estate would ever call them. You little sheltered fluffball.*'

"—but I just kind of assumed your family had similar means, you know?" she continued, hands gesturing as she tried to dig herself out. "Because we're in the same dojo class! Miss K's classes aren't exactly cheap, and Jin and Tom definitely come from money, so I figured —"

She nodded vigorously, as though confirming her own logic to herself.

"Jin and Tom *absolutely* have estates. And butlers! I'd bet my tail on it."

I simply shrugged. "Miss K's got a bit of a soft spot for underdogs, apparently. From what I understand, she took me on as some kind of favor toward my mother. So..." I spread my hands. "Here I am."

Kenzie's lips pressed into a pout, and she muttered, just barely audible, "Pfft. *Underdog*. Yeah, sure."

She clearly wasn't buying the framing, but she let it go.

For a moment, anyway.

"So, um." She started and wasn't quite meeting my eyes anymore. "If—if you're having, like... debt issues, or money stuff? I could—I mean, I'd be *happy* to—"

She cut herself off, then started again.

"I don't want you risking your life out there. Like, that's—that's not okay, what happened to you. So if it's about Credits, I could just—and I *know* that sounds weird, me just *offering*, but —" She took a breath, visibly forcing the words out. "I could pay you? For the training help, I mean. Like an actual arrangement or something. So it's not—so it doesn't feel like I'm just *handing* you money or anything. It'd be a fair trade, right? You help me get better, I pay you for your time. That's—that's normal, right? And you wouldn't—might be safer?"

I just looked at her for a moment.

I was genuinely, *deeply* surprised by how much she seemed to care, considering we'd known each other for all of a handful of dojo sessions.

This didn't particularly feel like a calculated offer. There was no angle to it that my [Negotiation] or [Deception] could detect, no leverage being established.

She'd watched me strip down to show her a body full of scars and her immediate instinct had been to try and fix it, to find some way to make it stop.

And I was, simultaneously, *extremely* torn.

Because the honest truth was that I could really, *really* use the Credits.

'You can never have enough Credits in a Cyberpunk world,' I thought, the practical part of my brain immediately running the numbers. *'Especially not in Neon Dragons. I'm sitting at sixteen Credits and a debt to Mr. Shori. A steady income stream from training someone I'd be training anyway? That's—that's exactly the kind of thing I should be jumping on right away...'*

And yet.

*'But what I actually want—what I'd genuinely **prefer**...'* I almost cringed at the thought even as it formed. *'God, this sounds so stupid in my own head. But I'd prefer to just... have a friend? An **actual** one?'*

Because that was the thing, wasn't it.

Kenzie was the *first person* I'd met in this entire world who just *was* a person—someone I'd run into, gotten along with, and who seemed to genuinely, uncomplicatedly want to be around me.

Sure, she'd poked around at first, trying to learn about my family—about Valeria specifically—clearly hoping to improve her own standing within her household.

But the moment I'd made it clear I wasn't interested in sharing, she'd dropped it.

No pushing, no needling, no quiet resentment about it. She'd never brought it up again either.

Just—*okay, that's fine*, and a pivot to the next thing.

That was a world of difference from someone like Jade, for example.

And I *liked* Jade, I really did—but I was still quietly a bit salty about how she'd lied to me at the start, and friendship with her would *always* be building on top of that foundation.

Repairable, sure. Probably worth pursuing even.

But a different starting position entirely than Kenzie, who hadn't lied to me about anything—as far as I could tell—who'd just shown up as exactly who she was—an excitable, sheltered, ridiculously wealthy orange fox girl who badgered her own butler for years just to be on a first-name basis with him.

I could *really* use a friend like that.

'And if I let a financial thing sit between us,' I thought, 'it becomes the same thing I've got going with Misha. The debt, the favors, the constant low-grade awareness of who owes who what... I don't want that with friends. I've got enough relationships in my life that run on transactions. I don't need to turn this one into another ledger...'

I sat with the offer for a moment longer, turning it over, fully aware that the practical, Credit-hungry part of me was *screaming* that I was an idiot for even hesitating.

"That's—really kind of you, Kenzie," I said, and I genuinely meant it. "Seriously. Thank you. But I'm going to have to decline."

Her ears immediately drooped, so I pressed on before she could protest.

"It's just something I have to do," I said. "The gigs. As painful and dangerous as they are, the experience I'm getting out of them is going to be incredibly valuable down the line. Having an actual, ground-level understanding of how Neo Avalis works—across all the different layers, not just what the inside of a Megabuilding looks like—that's the kind of thing you can't fake. And it's going to be downright invaluable when I start looking for *positions* later on."

I cringed, just slightly, internally.

'That's a borderline lie and you know it,' I thought. 'You have exactly zero intention of ever chasing a corpo position.'

But it also wasn't *quite* a lie, technically, if I squinted—because I *would* always be looking for *some* kind of position for myself, in the broader sense, in the world at large.

A thin line. A very thin line.

But it wasn't like I could exactly tell Kenzie the truth, which was that I was already a working Operator and the "gig" had been a contract. That was a whole other level of problematic in trying to explain.

Kenzie grumbled at that, ears flicking, clearly not thrilled.

But—surprisingly—she ultimately seemed to accept the reasoning without much pushback.

"*Fine*," she huffed, then jabbed a clawed finger in my direction. "But you *have* to promise me you'll be *extra* careful going forward. Okay? Because I will be so mad—like, genuinely, *unreasonably* mad—if something happens to you out there just because you were too stubborn to ask me for a few Credits."

Her tail gave an emphatic, agitated swish.

"I *mean* it, Sera!"

It warmed something in my chest to see her this worked up over it.

The genuine concern, with nothing underneath it but the concern itself.

"I promise," I said, and held up a hand. "If I ever get into the kind of life-or-death trouble that Kenzie-Credits could actually solve—I'll let you know. Deal?"

That seemed to finally mollify her. Her ears settled, her tail slowed, and she nodded with the satisfied air of someone who'd extracted an acceptable concession.

It was, undoubtedly, a thoroughly strange feeling for me, having someone *this* concerned about my wellbeing. Strange—but not unpleasant. I couldn't honestly say I disliked it at all.

Especially because Kenzie was, objectively, *really* cute.

And *that*—

That brought with it a whole other can of worms.

One I'd *very deliberately* tried to stay far, far away from ever since arriving in this world, and which was becoming progressively harder to keep sealed the longer I spent here.

The question of *who*, fundamentally, I actually *was*.

Not in the way it had come up during the talk with Valeria—not the question of identity and persona and which name I answered to. This was more basic than that.

Even more *foundational*.

'*Am I the almost-thirty-year-old woman I was in my past life,*' I thought, '*or am I Seraphine Vildea?*'

The body I was walking around in was a little over fifteen years old.

Which, if I converted it to my old life's framework—with Neon Dragon's around two-months longer years—landed somewhere around seventeen, maybe seventeen and a half.

I hadn't actually sat down and done the exact math properly, mostly because I'd been actively, deliberately *not* trying to think about it.

But it wasn't just the body that was the problem here, of course.

My memories of my past life had been almost entirely wiped clean when I'd arrived—scrubbed down to a handful of lasting traumas and whatever fragments happened to be relevant to surviving in Neon Dragons.

Everything else, the actual texture of nearly three decades of living, was just *gone*.

Which meant that, by raw percentage, something like eighty percent of every memory I currently possessed was something I'd experienced *here*, in Sera's body, as Seraphine Vildea.

'So which is it? Am I almost thirty? Or almost eighteen...?'

I genuinely didn't have an answer.

And it wasn't a purely academic question, either, because I could not deny that this body's hormones played some *serious* tricks on me on certain days.

Especially around Miss K—who was the *one* non-guilty pleasure I'd allowed myself to semi-indulge in so far, precisely *because* she was fair game age-wise no matter which interpretation of myself I went with. A grown woman finding another grown woman attractive was uncomplicated, after all. Nothing to untangle there.

Kenzie, though?

'As my old self, feeling anything like attraction toward her would be... somewhat questionable,' I thought, with a faint twist of discomfort. 'She's a *kid* by that measure. Full stop.'

But being around her—hearing how openly she cared, watching her get flustered and protective in equal measure—it made my actual, physical, biological body feel... happy. And a little bothered. In a way I'd been pushing down as hard as I could manage, and would *absolutely* keep pushing down until I had this whole thing figured out.

But I'd *have* to figure this whole thing out eventually. One of these days.

Because if I left it unresolved, it was going to get complicated down the line in ways I really didn't want to deal with.

'Why is this whole *isekai* shit so damn complicated...?' I thought, with a flat sort of despair. 'Couldn't you have just given me a similarly-aged body, System? Just—fixed up nice, same as this one, no backpain, no chronic injuries, but, like... mine? My actual age? Would that have been so hard? Why *this* body specifically? Why am I in *this one*...?'

The System, naturally, did not answer.

It never did when it actually mattered.

Ripping myself out of the spiral of existential considerations before it could drag me any deeper, I cleared my throat and steered the conversation back toward the actual reason I'd come here in the first place.

"*Ahem...* So. We wanted to do some training, right?" I said, sitting up a little straighter. "What did you want to try first? I did some thinking since we talked about it back after the dojo session, and there's a few different ways I think we could approach this."

I watched her attention level fully onto me—ears perked, tail going still, the whole of her visibly engaging—and I continued with a bit more gusto.

"First thing—I don't know how much we're really going to learn just by bashing each other's heads in. We already do plenty of that at the dojo. So more of the same isn't likely to move the needle much for either of us—especially because we won't have Miss K's supervision to point out mistakes we're making or keep us from accidentally hurting each other."

She nodded slowly, following along.

"So with that in mind, I think there's a few smarter ways we could train together to help you actually hit your goals—which, by the way, we kind of need to *define* before we get started. So..." I met her eyes directly. "What *exactly* are you hoping to get out of this? What's the goal here?"

Kenzie blinked, visibly surprised by how seriously I was taking the whole thing.

Then, almost reflexively, she sat up straighter herself and locked in, matching my energy.

"I want to make sure I don't fall behind in the classes," she said, the answer coming out with more conviction the longer she spoke. "I want to beat Jin and Tom. And *you*, too... And if I *can't* beat all of you—then at least I want to be able to hold my own. I want my own *style*. Something that makes me *dangerous* when people underestimate me. Something that turns me into an actual threat instead of just... the easy one to deal with."

'I don't think anyone's thinking of you like that, Kenzie...' I couldn't help but think.

I did not interrupt her, however.

She tilted her head briefly, paused, and nodded to herself as something else occurred to her.

"And I want to be able to defend myself," she added, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Like you said. So you can take me outside and show me the city...!"