

Chapter 195 - Mao

"Kenzie," the woman said, her voice gone cold enough to raise blisters, "who is *that*?"

Kenzie went rigid in her sister's arms at the sudden shift in atmosphere—the playful bear-hug from a few moments ago abandoned, replaced by something far more tense and watchful in the way her sister was now holding her.

I was more than just a little uncertain about what I was supposed to do here, but in fairness, I was struggling enough just staying upright. Both of my eyes were currently open and my brain was working overtime trying to consolidate the Anima Sight and my normal vision into a single coherent image—and failing, mostly.

The world kept shifting between layers, the kitsune flickering in and out of perception depending on which eye my brain happened to be prioritizing in any given instant, and the resulting vertigo was making me feel like the floor was politely suggesting I lie down on it for a while.

"Y—You mean Sera?" Kenzie stammered, clearly thrown by the sudden cold turn in her sister's behavior. "She's a friend? From the Arkion Dojo? I—I told you about her, Mao! I asked if I could use the dojo to train with a friend in—you said it was *fine*, you literally cleared out for us just now, what are you even—"

Mao didn't take her eyes off me for a single instant.

With one smooth, deliberate motion, she gently—but *firmly*—maneuvered Kenzie behind herself, sliding her sister out of the line between us.

"Kenzie," Mao said, voice still cold, her eyes never leaving mine. "Are you *absolutely* certain this is who she says she is?"

"*What?!*" Kenzie's confusion ramped straight into indignation, her face appearing briefly over Mao's shoulder before her sister maneuvered her back behind again. "*Mao!* What is *wrong* with you?! You are acting *seriously* weird right now and I really, *really* hope you have a good explanation for this—Yes! She is *one hundred percent* who she says she is! Nobody else is running around with VonIX-black dyed hair like that, *okay?*"

There was a small moment of silence, then her eyes darted to me, slightly wide, and she added quickly, "I didn't mean that as an insult, by the way—it looks really cool, Sera. *Seriously!* I totally love it! Never seen it in person before until you showed up at the dojo and I've thought about getting some myself like a hundred times since then—"

I managed a small nod in her direction—just barely, without losing my balance.

My brain was slowly, *slowly* starting to acclimate to the double-vision, the two images stuttering less and overlapping more cleanly with every passing second.

I could have just shut the Anima Sight off entirely, of course.

That would have solved the vertigo problem in about half a second flat.

But there was a literal Spirit Companion the size of a damn *tiger* crouched in front of me, looking like it was one wrong twitch away from launching across the room and removing my throat from its current position on my body, and I wasn't particularly inclined to voluntarily blind myself to its movements at this exact moment in my life.

My entire body had quietly coiled tight the second Mao's eyes had met mine, instinctively—not into a stance or anything, but into a low background readiness that I could feel in my shoulders and the backs of my knees.

Adrenaline was pouring through me in a steady, controlled trickle as well.

I didn't actually rate my chances highly if either Mao or her kitsune decided to come for me, to be fair. I had no illusions about that.

'Given that Kenzie's already a handful to deal with, her big sister is bound to be able to tear me apart in a heartbeat... Not to mention the damn kitsune on top of that, too.'

But either way, I wasn't going to be standing flat-footed when it happened, either.

The tension stretched.

Three seconds. Maybe four. Long enough that I felt every individual heartbeat thudding against my ribcage, my muscles ready to react in any direction the situation demanded.

Then—without any warning at all—Mao's entire demeanor abruptly shifted.

The cold went out of her eyes like someone had flipped a switch. Her shoulders dropped by a fraction of a degree, the predator-stillness easing back into something fluid and composed.

And in the same instant, her kitsune—which had been one heartbeat away from launching itself across the room and ending my entire afternoon—simply *folded* down onto the floor beside her, settling into a relaxed, sprawled position. It raised one massive paw and began calmly licking it, three tails curling around itself in unbothered, lazy arcs, as though the last ten seconds of barely-contained violence had been someone else's problem entirely.

Mao smiled at me.

It was undeniably a *lovely, gorgeous* smile.

She extended a hand toward me.

"Mao. Kenzie's older sister. A pleasure to finally meet you, Sera—Kenzie's mentioned you quite a few times. Don't mind my suspicions—she doesn't watch out for herself enough, so I usually have to do it for her."

I hesitated in taking it, just for a second.

Because that demeanor was *absolutely* fake.

She'd been a hairsbreadth from siccing a tiger-sized Spirit Companion on me about two seconds ago, and now she was offering pleasantries like we'd run into each other at a corporate mixer.

And yet—even actively knowing it, even with [Deception] running in the background trying to flag anything off about her presentation—I couldn't detect a *single thing* wrong.

The smile reached her eyes. Her body language was open. Her tone was warm.

It was completely, unnervingly seamless.

*'Yeah. [Deception] needs **significantly** more work before I'm having conversations with actual Scions or High-Corpo individuals,'* I thought, with the kind of humility that came from getting one's depth quietly and definitively measured. *'Mao isn't even really **trying** to deceive me here, and she's still completely unreadable. Cool... Good to know where I sit on the food chain.'*

I took her hand and shook it, doing my best to match her energy with a smile of my own.

"Seraphine. But Sera, mostly. It's nice to meet you."

She held my hand for a single beat longer than was strictly necessary—just enough for me to register that the moment had been deliberate—before releasing me with the same smooth, unhurried motion as everything else she did.

Then she turned toward Kenzie, her smile shifting into something more familial and warm.

"Zizi, I'll stick around for a bit. Just to make sure the two of you don't accidentally maim each other in here." She held up a hand before Kenzie could protest. "I'll stay out of your business, promise. I have a book I've been meaning to finish, so I'll just be reading in the corner. You won't even notice me."

Kenzie looked just about ready to launch into a full little-sister-protest—ears flicking back, lips parting around what was almost certainly going to be a *Mao, no!*—but Mao was already moving, gliding across the polished floor toward the far end of the dojo with the unhurried grace of someone who didn't care to entertain backtalk and had communicated as much.

A row of sitting mats was arranged at the back wall beneath a series of mounted martial arts weapons, and she settled onto one of them with an easy, graceful motion. Her kitsune followed after her in a similarly fluid motion, draping itself across the floor beside her like an enormous, three-tailed throw rug, its head resting on its paws.

I let out the breath I'd been holding ever since I'd first walked through the dojo doors—long and slow, doing my best not to make it obvious—and quietly commanded the Sprites in front of my left eye to slide back into place, covering it once again. They obeyed easily enough this time, the layered Sprite-vision dissolving cleanly and returning my perception to normal.

The kitsune, where Mao had moved to settle in the corner of the dojo, disappeared from my view entirely.

The world snapped back into single-image reality and I could finally stand straight again without feeling like the floor was making inviting suggestions.

Kenzie and I moved further into the center of the dojo together, the firm floor giving slightly underfoot—somewhat cool through my socks, springier than I'd expected, with that distinctive smooth-but-grippy quality that came from properly maintained dojo flooring.

As we walked, she sidled in close to me and leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper that probably wouldn't carry across the room—though I had my doubts about how effective that was going to be to keep things from Mao.

"I'm *so* sorry about her," Kenzie muttered, ears flicking back. "Mao's always been a bit overprotective, but she's never—like, she's *never* acted like that before." Her eyes darted toward me, genuinely concerned. "Do you have *any* idea what that was about?"

I considered it for a moment.

It was already obvious that Mao knew I could use Anima.

There was no getting around that—she'd literally *watched* me stare at her and her Spirit Companion with my Anima Sight, the Blue Sprite shift in my eyes about as subtle as a flare gun if you knew what to look for.

There was no scenario in which I successfully hid that from her—not that I had even tried, honestly.

Which meant that the *Kenzie* part of the equation—the part where Kenzie didn't know about *any* of this whole Anima thing—was on borrowed time. Because Mao knew. And Mao would, sooner or later, talk to her family.

And eventually, inevitably, it would reach Kenzie.

So lying now wouldn't really do anyone any good.

But Mao had clearly stuck around for a reason—to make sure I wasn't doing anything she'd disapprove of, whatever specifically *that* meant. And given that Kenzie didn't know about Anima yet, openly *telling* her would almost certainly fall under exactly the category Mao was watching for.

A middle-ground answer, then.

"She probably saw the residual changes my body's gone through," I said, keeping my voice low to match hers. "From what Miss K could tell, it's somewhat Spirit-related... Or so she thinks. Given that your sister presumably has a *lot* more experience with that kind of thing than you do, she'd be able to spot it at a glance. It's probably not something most people walk around with—a Spirit-enhanced body or whatever."

Kenzie's eyes widened slightly. Her ears perked.

"You have a *Spirit-enhanced body*?!" she whispered, voice climbing into a higher pitch before she remembered to drop it back down. "I—I mean, I could tell you'd gone through *something* major, obviously, but is *that* what it is? I figured it was something your family did. Did—did your parents help you? With—"

I gave her *the look*.

The "family secrets" look. The same one that had worked wonders every time so far.

And once again, Kenzie's questions died on her tongue with admirable efficiency. Her ears drooped a fraction in defeat, the curiosity visibly warring with the polite-rich-kid reflex of "*I am not supposed to push on these things*," until the reflex won out.

"Fiiine," she huffed quietly, ears flattening for emphasis. "I guess I'll just learn more about it eventually..."

A pause, and then she perked back up, visibly redirecting herself out of the topic with a small shake of her head.

"Anyway! What are we actually doing *first*, now that we're here?"

"Light spar," I said. "Just to warm up—nothing close to a knockout or anything intense. Just to get a feel for each other. Then we can get into the experimental training parts."

"Oh, yes. Yes, let's do it." Her tail swished eagerly behind her—then she glanced down at her own outfit, and her ears flicked sideways in a sudden bout of sheepishness. "Um. I should probably—I'm not exactly dressed for—"

"We'll change first, obviously," I said, tapping the bag I'd brought all the way up here. "I brought my gi."

I walked over to the nearest wall and started pulling my shirt off.

Kenzie *sputtered*.

"S-Sera—Sera, stop! There are—there are *paper dividers*—at the *sides*! You don't just—you can't just *strip* in the middle of the dojo, what is *wrong* with you—"

The last part wasn't even really directed at me.

I let out a quiet chuckle as I redirected, ambling toward the rapidly designated "changing rooms" she'd pointed me to.

I wasn't, fundamentally, the kind of person who stripped freely in front of others.

Past life or present, that wasn't my thing at all—and even with the Sera body's slightly different sensibilities, and vastly superior looks by now—no doubt, modesty was still mostly a default I operated by.

But watching Kenzie short-circuit every single time I made even the slightest move toward changing in front of her was, I had to admit, becoming a small recurring pleasure that I was finding genuinely difficult to give up already.

There was something *deeply* funny about it.

The poor girl had probably lived her entire life behind paper dividers and changing screens.

Although in this specific instance, getting partially undressed in the middle of the dojo had also been quite deliberate on my part—not just to enjoy the Kenzie-panic.

I wanted to make sure *Mao* got a proper look at the bruises and scars across my torso.

Because the easier it was to file me under *not a threat* in her head—and being clearly injured and visibly not a ‘Borg would do wonders for that—the better my odds were of her not deciding to spend the entire session sitting in the corner watching us like a hawk with a Spirit Companion.

I was hoping she'd get bored, or antsy, or both, and simply leave us to it.

As I walked toward the paper divider, I caught Mao's eyes tracking my movement out of the corner of my own—sharp and evaluating eyes, with a smile still in place but the *attention* underneath it all *absolutely* on me.

'Good,' I thought, quietly satisfied. '*She got a proper look.*'

I changed behind the divider, quickly slipping into my gi.

The fabric settled across my shoulders in its familiar weight, and I tied the belt by feel alone, doing a quick mental check of my joints and the still-tender areas across my torso as I worked.

'The ribs are going to be a damn problem...'

That much was a given.

The Ripper's work had held up well, all things considered, and Mr. Shori's injection earlier allowing for a subsequent multi-hour Rest had taken the edge off most of the lingering damage—but cracked ribs didn't just *heal* in a couple of days, no matter how good the medical intervention or Rest provided.

'Without a full 8-hour Rest cycle, this isn't getting fixed anytime soon. Gotta make sure I can get one tonight. This fucking sucks.'

The deep ache when I twisted my torso, the sharp protest when I expanded my chest too quickly, the catch in certain movements that involved rotation through the core—all of that was still very much present, just barely dialed down enough that I could function through it.

Function being the key word.

There was a massive difference between being *functional* and being able to *perform*, and I was fairly certain I was about to be reminded of it very soon.

I stepped back out, walked to the center of the dojo, and waited.

Kenzie, predictably, took considerably longer.

Her outfit had a lot more *layers* to it than mine had—the cropped pink sweater, the white top underneath, the garter straps connecting her shorts to the wide-leg pants, and the various little accents that completed the look.

The little orange plush creature in her pocket apparently also had to be carefully relocated.

I could hear the muffled sound of her muttering to it from behind the divider, which was endearing enough that I almost said something teasing—and then decided against it, because I was already on thin ice with her after the changing incident earlier.

When she finally emerged, she was in her own gi—a clean, well-maintained one that looked practically fresh out of the washer—and she padded over to her position with the easy, ready confidence she always carried into a sparring match.

She settled into her stance a few meters away from me, the same starting distance Miss K used at the Arkion Dojo, and met my eyes.

"This is just warm-up," I reminded her, teasingly. "So no scratching."

I got the full, magnificent, deeply-put-upon *eye-roll* I'd been hoping for, for my comment.

"Then *you're* not allowed to kick my face in either," she retorted, ears flicking forward. "I happen to like my face and the amount of times you do it in the dojo is annoying."

I almost flinched, my eyes darting briefly toward Mao at the back of the dojo—but she was still seated on her mat, her attention fixed on a book in her lap, the kitsune sprawled beside her with its eyes half-closed. She wasn't listening.

Or at least she was making a very good show of not listening.

I returned my focus to Kenzie.

"Three," I said.

She rolled her shoulders, weight shifting forward.

"Two."

Her tail flicked, ears angling.

"One."

She *moved*.

Kenzie came in fast—faster than she usually opened with at the dojo, actually, like she was using the fact that I had to hold back a bit to go for even more reckless speed.

She closed the distance in three quick steps, weight low, claws sheathed but the threat of them implicit in the way her hands moved.

Her first strike was a probing jab toward my left shoulder—not committed to anything major, just a feeler, looking for my reaction speed and where my guard naturally settled when prompted at this speed.

I caught it on a redirect, sliding the strike past my body with a small, economical rotation—

And *immediately* felt the *twinge*.

It was *sharp* and along the lower ribs on my right side, where the Ripper's work had been heaviest—the kind of pain that didn't disable but did *very firmly* inform me that the rotation I'd just done was not in the catalogue of approved movements for at least another few days.

My breath hitched briefly. I covered the reaction by sliding back a step, keeping my distance.

Kenzie didn't miss the hitch.

Her ears perked, the focus in her eyes sharpening. "Sera—?"

"*Light*. Spar," I reminded her through a slightly tight jaw. "Keep going."

She hesitated for half a second—visibly torn between her usual competitive drive and the same protective concern that had spilled out of her earlier—and then her training instinct won out. She came back in, but a touch more controlled, watching my movements with renewed attention.

The second exchange went better.

I caught her opening combo on my forearms, shifted my weight away from a hip-led counter and instead used a small, lateral footwork pattern to circle out of her angle.

The trick, I was rapidly figuring out, was to keep my torso movement to an absolute minimum—rotation through the core was the problem, sharp expansion of the ribcage was the problem, anything that pulled or compressed across the healing fractures was the problem.

Which meant a *lot* of my usual repertoire was suddenly completely off the table.

No body kicks generating power from a full hip rotation. No sharp pivot-counters where I redirected an opponent's force by twisting hard through the trunk. No deep duck-and-weave defensive sequences that involved compressing my chest into tight defensive shapes.

No spinning techniques *at all*, really.

What I had left was footwork, arm work, and very careful, very linear power generation.

'Wait... That basically makes me into a bad version of Jin now, no? He uses the least amount of body rotation out of anyone in the dojo—though his big, follow-through punches definitely use them as well.'

My thoughts were quickly interrupted, as Kenzie pressed in again, and this time her combo was far more confident than before—a quick three-strike sequence that flowed into a low sweep aimed at my front leg.

I caught the first two strikes on a solid guard, stepped back from the third to avoid eating it directly, and then sidestepped the sweep—but couldn't follow up properly, because my usual counter would have involved a rotational hip-throw that I absolutely *could not* execute right now.

I had to settle for a simple disengagement instead, breaking distance and resetting.

She noticed *immediately*.

Her eyes narrowed, ears pricked forward, and I could see the gears turning underneath them—the recognition that I wasn't responding the way I normally did, that my usual fluid counter-strikes weren't coming, that something was *off* with the way I was moving.

The competitive part of her brain lit up at the realization, and her next combination came in with *notably* more aggression.

Three quick jabs to occupy my guard, a feint toward my midsection that drew my arms down—and then she pivoted into a fast roundhouse aimed at exactly the spot where my ribs had been the worst.

She wasn't going to actually connect with it. I knew that, even as my body locked up.

'Light spar. She's going to pull it at the last second...'

But pulling it didn't help me, because the *evasion* was the problem.

To get out of the kick's line, I'd normally have rolled my torso back and away with a sharp pivot through the hips. That was the textbook response, I instinctively knew from [Martial Arts] and the actual real-life experience I had from fighting Kenzie, Jin and Tom for many rounds.

I'd done it dozens of times... But I couldn't do it right now.

So instead, I stepped back.

Just a clean, linear backstep, accepting the loss of position to avoid the rotation entirely.

The kick passed through empty air about three centimeters in front of me, Kenzie easily pulling her foot at the apex with the expert-level control of someone who'd been training kicks like this her whole life.

She landed lightly, set her feet, and looked at me with an expression that was equal parts concern and outraged suspicion.

"Oh, you're *not* okay," she said, ears swiveling forward. "Sera, you're *hurt*! You're *actually* *really* hurt right now."

"I'm fine."

"You haven't done a single rotation since we started! You're moving like—" she gestured at my torso, her face working through the realization "—like *that's* all still healing. You were not kidding earlier about the injuries, were you? We should stop."

I rolled my shoulders, ignoring the way the motion pulled across the lower ribs. "I said I was *fine*, Kenzie. Light spar. Keep going. I can work around it."

She gave me a look.

'Is it really that much to ask for her to just ignore my limitations for a bit, so I can limit-test what I can actually do with cracked ribs...?' I thought, irritation flaring up—without me really knowing why I felt irritated about it in the first place.

This was a natural response from someone who considered me a friend.

By her own words, no less.

So why was it annoying me so much? I genuinely couldn't tell.

But what I *did* know, very clearly, was that I didn't want a pity party.

The ribs were a problem and I needed to figure out how to fight around them in case it happened again in the future.

Sitting back and being coddled was the opposite of useful, considering that I could not get back into this state on-demand anytime soon; unless I started cracking my own ribs recreationally in the future, which I didn't really intend on doing.

So I pushed forward, dropping my defensive posture and engaging the fight on my own terms instead...