

## **Chapter 208 - Familiar Places**

With my business at the Emporium fully concluded and cookies now planned to be a recurring fixture in my life, the next order of the day was obvious: I needed to stop being Ela.

Rina was at four and my hair appointment came before that—a quick re-up before the meeting. And both of those were Sera's business, which meant it was high time to make the switch again.

The problem, as always, was doing it without being *seen*.

I could not risk blowing [Double Life] just like that, for simply being careless for no reason.

So I worked my way off the main thoroughfare and started hunting for a suitable spot, eventually finding what I needed: A narrow alley wedged between what seemed to be some sort of shuttered maintenance access and the rear of some kind of parts vendor, absolutely choke-full with debris—stacked crates, a dead cargo hauler, piles of packaging film and broken paneling.

*'Plenty of cover... Perfect!'*

But I didn't switch immediately upon nudging myself in there. Instead, I waited.

I had tucked myself behind the dead hauler and stayed still for a few minutes, watching the alley mouth, running my usual paranoia checklist.

Double-checked that *nobody* had followed me. Triple-checked, even.

I intently watched the foot traffic pass by the alley entrances—both sides—without a single person so much as glancing my way.

Only once I was *genuinely* satisfied that I was alone and unobserved did I finally move.

I stripped out of Ela's Operator gear quickly and efficiently, pulling the Sera outfit from my bag and swapping everything over, then stuffing the Ela clothing down into the bag in its place.

The whole process took maybe thirty seconds, it was well-earned muscle memory by now.

The only piece of Ela's kit I kept out was the Raz.

I slid it against the small of my back, underneath my shirt, adjusting it until it sat as flush and concealed as I could manage. Because I was *not* willing to fully disarm myself just because Sera was *statistically* less likely to get searched for than Ela was.

That kind of thinking—*"I probably won't need it, so why carry it"*—was exactly how people ended up dead in inconvenient alleys.

The mild inconvenience of a hidden blade against my spine was infinitely preferable to being caught completely unarmed if something went sideways.

That way lay unnecessary problems, and I had a self-set, strict quota on unnecessary problems that I'd already way blown through days and days ago.

Now for the actual identity-separation part.

I didn't just walk out of the alley the way I'd walked in. That would've been sloppy.

Instead, I dropped into a low stance, took a running start, and engaged [Wall Runner]—sprinting up the side of the parts vendor's rear wall, boots finding brief, physics-defying purchase against the vertical surface long enough to launch me up onto the low roof.

From there I rushed across the rooftops of the adjacent structures—once more thanking the strange architecture of the Megabuilding's interior to allow for something like this—keeping low, moving fast, putting real *physical* distance and multiple sightline breaks between where Ela had entered and where Sera was going to emerge.

I dropped down into a completely different alley two buildings over, rolled the landing clean—my freshly-upgraded [Acrobatics] making it effortless in a way it absolutely wouldn't have been a week or two ago—and then stepped out and rapidly integrated myself into the nearest thoroughfare's flowing mass of people.

*'There... Even if somebody **had** somehow been watching from a distance, that should be more than enough for [Double Life] to keep the two identities firmly separated. Ela walked into an alley, then Sera walked out of a crowd two buildings away with no clean visual line connecting them.'*

Satisfied with my work, I set course for Circuit Locks.

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The salon was *exactly* as I remembered it—that same charming collision of eras, chrome and vintage wood, cracked black-and-white checkered tiling underfoot, holographic styling interfaces flickering next to genuine antique scissors on the counters.

The receptionist greeted me with his usual bright, over-caFFEinated energy, and I asked, with a small flutter of hope, whether Zeria happened to be in.

They were.

I was genuinely, *disproportionately* delighted to hear it, which took me aback for a moment. I had not really considered Zeria a fixture of my life so far, but apparently, my subconscious was disagreeing with that initial assessment.

Now, I had to admit, there was something *very* reassuring about a familiar face—or, well, a familiar *artisan*—in a world where so few of my interactions came without *some* layer of performance attached.

With Zeria, at least, all I had to do was sit in a chair and let a professional work.

I'd barely settled in before Zeria came sweeping over, cybernetic scissor-hand clicking in that characteristic theatrical rhythm of theirs, and immediately clocked me with a raised brow of recognition.

"Well, well. The little lady *returns*," they said, circling my chair with a critical, appraising eye. "And *right on schedule*, too. The VoniX-black was *starting to whisper* about growing out, I see. Zeria could tell from *across the salon*. A trained eye *never* misses these things. *Nuh-uh*."

"That obvious, huh?"

"To *me*? Painfully. To *anyone* else?" They gave a dismissive flick of their non-scissor hand. "*They'd* never *notice*. But Zeria *does* not do *good enough*. Zeria *does flawless*."

They draped the cape over me with a flourish and spun the chair to face the mirror, which flickered to life with its array of interface elements. "Same style, I *presume*? The side-swept? Or has the little lady come to *finally* embrace the bolder look Zeria so *lovingly* saved for her?"

"Same style," I confirmed. "Just the re-up. Maybe the bold one another time, but not yet."

"*Mmm*." A theatrical, disappointed sigh—before they leaned in very close, their voice dropping to a near-whisper delivered directly beside my ear, in a way that sent frissons rippling across my entire body. "One *day*, little lady. One *day* you'll be *ready*. Zeria will keep it *warm* for you."

Then, abruptly, they were already at work before I could do or say anything, cybernetic fingers dancing across the interface, pulling up my saved profile. "*Until* then—let us restore you to your *rightful* glory."

The next stretch of time dissolved into that same hypnotic, comforting rhythm I remembered from last time.

The gentle clicks and clacks of Zeria's tools, the occasional muttered commentary under their breath, the mirror deliberately dimmed so the reveal would land properly...

It was, genuinely, one of the few reliably relaxing experiences I'd found in this world—a rare pocket of stillness where nobody was trying to kill me, required me to deceive them, or fed me insect larvae on the down-low.

I simply got to let my mind drift, my shoulders unknot and simply enjoy being fussed over by a competent professional for a while.

When Zeria finally leaned back with a satisfied sigh and reactivated the mirror for the reveal, the VoniX-black was crisp, deep and perfect again, the Skyless-cyan peeking through in that clean, striking contrast, in a way that I hadn't even realized had faded over the past weeks.

It looked genuinely really good, once again.

That same small jolt of "*is that really me...?*" still hit, though gentler now than the first overwhelming time.

"*Flawless*," Zeria pronounced, admiring their own work. "As *promised*."

"It really is. Thank you, Zeria!"

"Of *course* it is. What *else* would *you* expect?" The signature wink. "Now *off* with you, *little* lady. Zeria has *other* masterpieces waiting. Do come back when you're *brave* enough for the bob—or *need* another re-up *for* courage."

The receptionist rang me up with his usual enthusiasm, and the total came to 74 Credits.

I slotted the unrestricted shard Valeria had given me and processed the payment—and *this* time, armed with quite a bit more experience in this world and an understanding of exactly what Credits were worth in the broader economy of this world, the number *hurt* in a way it really quite hadn't the first time around.

*'Seventy-four Credits for a damn hair dye... And that's the re-up cost, aka. the cheapest option.'*

Because I now knew, with painful clarity, that seventy-four Credits was the better part of what an *entire lower-end Operator gig* might pay out. I was, quite literally, spending a whole job's worth of income on maintaining my hair color, and for one dizzying moment I genuinely wondered whether I had *lost my fucking mind* somewhere along the way.

*'...Okay, but...! Valeria's footing the bill, technically. This is coming out of her allowance, not my sixteen Credits. And it does look really, really good.'*

Which was, of course, the other side of the ledger.

The VoniX-black was obviously a bit of a liability on the deception-and-stealth front—everyone and their mother in Neo Avalis seemed to know that VoniX-black dye cost an absolute fortune, which made it a walking signifier of *this person has money*, and made "black-haired girl" a distinctly more memorable descriptor than it had any right to be.

But. *BUT*. It also looked *really* good.

*'Problem for future Sera,'* I decided, with the practiced ease of someone who had been filing a great many things under that heading lately. *'Present Sera has a bar to get to.'*

I thanked Zeria and the receptionist one final time, said my goodbyes, and stepped back out into the flow of the thoroughfare—freshly dyed, freshly Sera, and running on a clock.

Because it was time to go meet Rina.

The venue had been the easy part, in the end: The Valedictorian, on the 5th floor.

It was the only bar on the lower floors I actually knew of, so it had been the natural default—and it worked out cleanly, since Rina didn't have access permissions to any floors above the single digits anyway. So the single digits were where we'd landed.

The 5th floor it was.

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The Valedictorian, much like Circuit Locks earlier, also looked exactly the way I remembered it—which was to say, almost suspiciously clean for the 5th floor, its multi-hued neon sign buzzing steadily above the heavy metal door without a single dead letter or errant spark.

A small island of reliability in a floor that otherwise ran on improvisation and duct tape.

The familiar smell hit me the moment I stepped inside—that thick, heavy blanket of alcohol that instantly drowned out the sensory chaos of the thoroughfare behind me.

Cheap synth-alc, home-distilled liquor, and the sweeter notes of the vibrantly colored cocktails scattered across nearly every table, all of it mixing into that universal, strangely comforting *bar smell* that apparently transcended worlds.

The lone jukebox flickered softly near the old-school karaoke stage by the emergency exit, currently unoccupied—apparently nobody had gotten drunk enough yet this afternoon to brave the microphone...

*'Small mercies.'*

I made my way to the booths along the back wall and secured a private one—one of the recessed ones with an actual sliding divider, the same exact kind Cryo had led me to during that fateful first meeting.

It cost a small booking fee that I paid without complaint—especially given that I had pocketed the remaining 24 from Valeria's hair-cut budget—because privacy was the entire point of this particular conversation.

Settled in, I fired off a quick message.

*["Got us a private booth at the Valedictorian—back wall, left side from the entrance, third divider."]*

*["OMW!! 10 mins!!"]* came the reply, almost instantly.

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

Which, it turned out, was its own particular kind of torture.

The nerves crept in almost immediately, settling low in my stomach and refusing to be reasoned with. Because this wasn't a normal meeting.

This wasn't Kenzie, or Misha, or even Valeria—people who had already somewhat accepted or only ever known *me*, the current occupant, whatever amalgam of old-world memories and new-world experiences I'd become.

This was someone who had known *Original Sera* intimately and was not privy to the full, ugly recovery process that had come after an *accident* like that.

Someone who carried a complete mental model of a girl I had never met, whose body I was currently wearing, whose face was going to smile at her across this table while a stranger operated it from the inside.

*'The usurper in her friend's body,'* I thought, turning my complimentary glass of water slowly on the tabletop. *'Trying to spin a plausible tale about what's happened since they last saw each other... There's no version of this that isn't going to be awkward. No two ways about it.'*

But it was also something I genuinely *had* to do.

Because for all the chaos of the last weeks—the gigs, the injuries, the System, the endless firefighting of immediate problems—there was a foundational question sitting underneath everything that I had never stopped quietly carrying: ***How did I get here?***

I hadn't just accepted the whole isekai arrangement at face value. I *couldn't*.

This world was very clearly more than just a videogame—the people in it were *real*, in every way I could measure. Misha's loneliness was real. Kenzie's need to find a purpose was real. Jade's desire to be trusted was real. Even Mr. Shori's disappointed-grandpa face was *devastatingly* real.

Which meant there had to be more to my arrival than random cosmic coincidence. A mechanism. A reason. A *how*, at the very least, even if the *why* might end up staying forever out of reach.

And Original Sera had gone missing—had *died*, or something close enough to it that I'd woken up in the aftermath—on a night when Rina had been there.

Rina was, quite possibly, the only person alive who could shed any light on those hours.

On who Sera had actually been. On what had *actually* happened that day.

So: Awkward or not, this conversation was happening.

I let my attention drift across the bar while I waited, doing the automatic threat-assessment sweep that had long since become background process.

The early afternoon crowd was moderate—a few tables of what were unmistakably Operators, gear worn openly the way it always was down here.

One crew of four near the bar, laughing too loudly over a round of something toxic-green, their chromed arms clicking against the glassware. A pair of quieter types in a corner booth, heads together over a datapad, doing what looked like actual gig planning.

A solitary woman at the bar with cable-dreadlocks and a sniper's patience, nursing a single beer and watching the room in the mirror behind the bottles—which was exactly what I would like to have thought I would have been doing in her position, if I was cool like that.

Nobody I recognized.

Which wasn't surprising, given that I knew exactly *two* crews of Operators in the *entire world*.

Then the wait abruptly ended.

The bar's entrance swung open, and a young woman stepped through—and the moment her eyes swept the room and landed on me through the gap of my half-open booth divider, they went *wide*. Full-on saucer, cartoon-level-wide.

**"SERA?!"**

And then she was *sprinting*.

Across the entire bar, weaving between tables with the reckless disregard of someone who had completely stopped processing her surroundings, drawing the amused glances of half the patrons—before she practically jump-tackled me into a hug that knocked the air out of my lungs and *nearly* toppled us both over the booth's table if it hadn't been for my Body of 6.

"Oh fuck, oh *fuck*, it's really you, it's actually really you—!" She was babbling directly into my shoulder, arms locked around me with crushing enthusiasm, words tumbling over each other faster than I could process them.

I held her a bit awkwardly, one arm around her back, genuinely hoping this was actually Rina and not some *other* person from Original Sera's life I knew nothing about who had just happened to walk into this bar at the same time—cosmically low chance, but you never knew.

"I thought—when Gabe said you were alive I didn't—where have you *been*?! What *happened*?! Are you okay?! You look—fuck, you didn't answer *anything*, I sent you like a *hundred* messages, I thought you were—I thought—"

She suddenly stopped dead. Mid-sentence.

She pushed herself back to arm's length, hands gripping my shoulders—and then her hands started *moving*, flowing down over my shoulders, along my upper arms, squeezing lightly, then tighter, as her expression morphed from tearful joy into pure, unfiltered bafflement.

"What the actual *fuck*...?" she said slowly. "What's—What's with these damn *weapons* right here, Sera?! How... when... *what*?! How the fuck did *this* happen?!"

She was, evidently, talking about my muscles.

Which—okay. Fair reaction, honestly.

If Original Sera's body at the moment of my arrival was anything to go by—the soft, sedentary frame of a girl who had never trained *a day* in her life—then the toned, combat-conditioned architecture currently sitting under her hands represented a transformation that no amount of "*I've been working out*" could *possibly* explain within the timeframe.

And it was only then, with her held at arm's length and my brain finally catching up to the moment, that I actually got my first proper look at the woman I presumed—and truly, *very much* hoped—to be Rina.

She was young—early twenties at most—and built along sleek, deliberate lines.

Clearly someone whose appearance was her profession.

Her hair was a cascading fall of deep violet shot through with luminous magenta strands that genuinely *glowed*, shifting subtly in intensity as she moved—and it was very obviously not natural hair at all.

The strands caught the light with a faint fiber-optic sheen, the whole arrangement almost certainly a full cybernetic replacement, programmable and photoreactive.

Her face was drop-dead beautiful in a way that was very clearly *too* perfect to be normal—symmetrical past the point where genetics usually bothered, skin flawless and poreless with a soft, almost pearlescent finish.

And once I knew to look, I could see it all: The faint, hair-thin seam lines of cybernetic plating tracing across her cheekbones, along her forehead, down the line of her jaw.

*'Synthetic dermal architecture... Damn.'*

Her very skin itself was cybernetic—probably full-sensory synth-derm, undoubtedly the kind that could adjust tone and temperature and texture on command.

Which made complete sense, given her line of work.

JOI-girls lived and died—oftentimes quite literally—by presentation, sensation, and the ability to be *exactly* what a client wanted to see, feel and touch. Her *entire body* was her storefront, and she'd clearly invested in it accordingly—or someone on her behalf, at the very least.

Finally, her eyes—a striking synthetic neon-blue with visibly augmented irises, the aperture rings faintly geometric when the light caught them—were currently *boring* into me, darting between my arms and my face, demanding answers.

"Well?!" she pressed, squeezing my bicep again for emphasis, achieving very little give.

"Sera! *Words!* You have *words*, use them! Since when are you—*swole*?! You couldn't open a fucking nutri-pack without help! I've *seen* you lose a fight against a jar of pickles—*several times!*"

It was high-time to get this conversation on the road...