

Chapter 138 - Future

It wasn't long after wrapping up the last of the downloads and locking in my Perks that I heard the front door's biometric lock beep, followed by the familiar hiss and click of it swinging open.

Still stretched out on the couch, I glanced toward the entryway and spotted Gabriel trudging in, looking like he'd just gone twelve rounds with a punch-clock. His expression was all kinds of drained—sleeves rolled up, collar loosened, a thin sheen of sweat clinging to his brow.

Classic post-shift exhaustion.

"Welcome home, Gabe," I called out, tossing him a relaxed smile from my cozy sprawl.

"Ah, hey, Sera. Thanks," he replied with a tired nod. His eyes flicked toward me, then squinted a little. "Huh. Very un-you to just be lounging like that. Or, I guess... not un-you if we're talking *old* you. You used to basically *live* on that couch anytime nobody else was around."

"Yeah, well, it's been a long-ass day," I said with a shrug. "Figured I'd steal some quiet before the chaos hits. Family dinner's looming over me like a damn corporate inquiry—I just needed a minute. Just me, the couch, and the sound of absolutely nothing. Old-me likely knew what she was doing."

"Fair enough," he chuckled, already veering off toward the bathroom. "Gonna rinse off real quick—don't think Mum would appreciate me bringing the scent of public transport and busted AC units to the table. Catch you after?"

"Uh-huh," I hummed, sinking deeper into the cushions as he disappeared behind the door.

For a few moments, the apartment was quiet again. But my thoughts weren't.

'I really should talk to him more...' I frowned at the ceiling. 'I mean, we live in the same apartment. Share a room. And I still barely know what the hell he does, outside of being a cashier at some kind of store, I guess. But beyond that? No clue. No idea what his dreams are, if he's got any. No idea what he even wants from life. Hell, we're supposed to be siblings. That's supposed to mean something, right?'

I sighed, dragging a hand over my face.

'Not that I'd know. But maybe it's time I started figuring it out...'

—

By the time Gabriel wrapped up his shower, dumped his work clothes into the washer-compartment of the closet, tossed on something casual, and finally trudged back into the living room looking marginally less dead inside, close to forty minutes had passed.

He didn't quite look ready to take on the world—but at least he didn't look like he was about to collapse face-first into the carpet anymore.

So... progress?

I tilted my head slightly at the sight of him.

Seeing Gabe without his usual faux-punk hairstyle was a bit jarring—his hair now flopped lazily to one side, still damp and clearly unbothered with existing.

Guess he hadn't bothered to re-spike it after the shower. Not that I blamed him.

At this point, even getting dressed deserved a small medal.

Shuffling to the far end of the couch, I kicked my legs up and made room for him. He sank down beside me with a groan that sounded like it came from the depths of his soul.

"Rough day?" I asked, trying to slide into what I imagined a '*supportive and approachable sister*' was supposed to sound like. Honestly, I was mostly winging it.

My only real reference points were sitcom siblings and anime characters, and most of those involved punchlines or melodramatic yelling.

Neither seemed particularly helpful in this situation.

"Understatement," Gabe muttered, leaning back into the cushions. "Got bumped up to customer-facing recently, right? I thought it'd be a promotion. And pay-wise, it technically is. But turns out, it's more of a downgrade than anything. I'd kill to be back in the storage unit, alphabetizing crates or checking inventory. Literally anything that doesn't involve talking to customers."

That, I could sympathize with—*hard*.

In my past life, I'd practically been a retail veteran. Grocery stores, fast food joints, the occasional nightmare-tier holiday gig at some mall pop-up shop...

Been there, *hated* that.

"I feel that," I said with genuine empathy, then caught myself. "I mean—I *think* I feel that."

Technically, Sera had never worked a day in her life, as far as I was aware.

And really, at fourteen—well, closer to seventeen-and-a-half by Earth-year standards—that wasn't exactly shocking. From what I'd pieced together, the old Sera hadn't even really *had* time to think about jobs. Between her home-studies, family stuff, and whatever her rebellious teenage years had done to her, punching a clock hadn't made it onto her radar.

Still.

It made me feel a little weird, remembering that while I *felt* the sympathy, Sera technically didn't have the resume to back it up.

We spent the next half hour or so catching up, bouncing the conversation between us like we were tossing a ball around.

It felt... *nice*.

Strangely familiar, almost—even if a bit of guilt lingered underneath because I couldn't exactly be truthful about everything going on.

Instead of the whole Operator gig and gang drama, I talked about my recent stints at Mr. Shori's stall. I mentioned the new recipes he'd been showing me, how much I was starting to enjoy the rhythm of cooking, and even cracked a joke about how much the old customers loved having me around—earning a satisfying laugh from Gabe.

Then the conversation drifted to Miss K's dojo, and I asked him how he was holding up with training.

Gabe grimaced, rubbing his neck like he could already feel the soreness setting in. "I'm alive. Barely. But between pulling extra shifts at work to cover for the downtime after getting injured and Miss K running us ragged every session... Man, I'm lucky if I'm still standing by the end of it."

I chuckled sympathetically, nodding along. "Yeah, she's not exactly the type to let you slack off. But hey—if you ever want to practice together, or if there's something specific you need to work on, just let me know. I'm actually doing pretty well over there, surprisingly enough."

Gabe shot me an appreciative smile, the tiredness lifting from his eyes just a bit. "Seriously? That... Would actually be great, to be entirely honest. I'd hate to end up as *"that guy"* in every session that gets singled out for messing up everything. Thanks, Sera. And hey, for what it's worth, I'm really glad you're doing so well at the dojo. Seeing you get excited about something safe for a change is honestly a huge relief."

I rolled my eyes dramatically at the mention of "safe," even though I definitely couldn't blame him for thinking like that.

After all, considering all the Operator and gang-related chaos I very deliberately *hadn't* mentioned, Gabe wasn't exactly wrong.

But still—dojo training wasn't exactly a walk in the park either.

"I mean, I don't know if I'd call anything involving Miss K *'safe'*," I retorted, grinning as Gabe laughed. "But yeah, it's nice having something... steady, I guess."

He nodded warmly, sinking deeper into the couch like just sitting there was healing his bones. "Exactly. Steady is good. We could use more steady."

Couldn't really blame him for leaning so hard into that word.

With everything that had happened lately—Sera's "death," the whole amnesia mess, him getting stabbed and nearly bleeding out on the floor—it was kind of a miracle either of us were even functioning, let alone casually chatting on the couch like nothing ever happened.

Didn't take a licensed shrink to spot the trauma radiating off him like heat from a busted vent.

'Wish I knew what to say to actually help him here... Why isn't there a [Psychologist] Skill or something? Come on, System. Help me out here.'

We let the silence stretch for a bit after that.

One of those comfortable ones, though. No pressure.

Just the two of us sharing space without needing to fill it with noise.

Eventually though, Gabe shifted, turning toward me again with that thoughtful look he always got when he was about to drop something heavier than expected.

"Say, what are your plans, Sera? Like... long-term? You gonna keep working for Mr. Shori? Make a career out of it?"

The question caught me a little off guard—wasn't expecting the deep-life-direction conversation to pop off in the middle of lazy couch time—but I recovered quick enough.

"Honestly... I'm not really sure yet," I admitted, scratching the back of my neck. "I like helping out at the stall, don't get me wrong. Mr. Shori's great, and the customers are super chill. But it's not like I dream of becoming the next noodle overlord or anything, y'know?"

"Fair," he muttered, nodding slowly. "Probably still better than a lotta places, though..."

"Yeah, probably. But I've actually been *really* enjoying the programming stuff lately, too," I added. "Thanks again for the shard, by the way. That thing's been a blast and a half."

"Right!" His eyebrows went up slightly, like he'd almost forgotten about it. "Yeah, I mean, programming's definitely a solid choice. Could make some serious Creds doing that, as long as you don't wander into anything shady. Honestly wish I had the patience for that kinda work myself."

And there it was again—another perfectly reasonable, steady and safe path for my life, said with warmth and encouragement, that I *absolutely* was going to take in the most roundabout and chaotic way possible. The kind of way that involved shady contracts, back-alley deals, and maybe a sprinkle of gang warfare on the weekends.

Hell, just to underscore it all, my very next programming-related gig was selling [Venombite] to an absolutely unhinged lunatic who was *definitely* planning to zap himself halfway to cardiac arrest just to see what it felt like.

I cringed inwardly at the mounting list of truths I wasn't telling him.

If this was a game of two truths and a lie, I was working on three lies and a nervous smile.

'Am I actually that much of a thrillseeker...? What the hell is wrong with me...?' I thought, watching my brother unknowingly outline all the safe, normal, functional versions of my life that I was *not* choosing.

Not really wanting to stare too hard into that particular mirror, I tossed the question right back at him—anything to dodge a round of self-actualization.

“What about you, Gabe? Doesn’t sound like you’re all that thrilled with where you’re at right now... You thinking about trying something else?”

He let out a long, tired sigh. “Haaa... Y’know, I *knew* it was gonna go this way. That’s just how conversations work. I ask you something, you bounce it back at me. You ask me something, I bounce it back at you... But damn, I was kinda hoping maybe this time, *just this once*, it wouldn’t.”

God, I *felt* that in my bones.

The amount of times I’d been in the exact same spot in my past life? Too many to count.

Just sitting there, getting called out by the natural rhythm of conversation.

“It’s fine, we really don’t have to talk about it,” I said quickly, knowing that gnawing feeling way too well—the dread of being asked about future plans when all you’ve got is a hot ball of nothing and a bunch of aspirations and dreams that will never come to pass.

But he shook his head. “Nah... I think I asked for a reason, y’know? Maybe I wanted someone to make me say it out loud. If my baby sister asks me what I’m doing with my life, I can’t exactly just shrug and go ‘*No clue*,’ right? Kinda forces the question.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, rubbing at his face with both hands like he could scrub the thoughts away.

“I just... I don’t know, Sera. I always wanted to carve out something for myself. Not ‘Valeria’s first born son,’ not ‘Oliver’s child,’ just... *me*. Something that was *mine* and nobody else’s. And now I’m working a horrible job I can’t stand—and this is with one of the *good* bosses, if you can believe that—barely holding on to what few perks I get from being Mum’s kid, like the dojo. And even *that’s* slipping away from me lately. I just feel like I’m... *drifting*. No direction. No grip. No grand plans or anything...”

I didn’t have anything to say to that.

Because... yeah. I’d been there. I’d *lived* there.

That suffocating feeling of time slipping by, while you kept running on autopilot, waiting for something to click that never came.

The endless, sleepless nights of insomnia, that made you toss and turn in bed, wondering where it had all gone wrong—where *you* had all gone wrong.

Wondering if, maybe, had things been different in this instance or that one, you would be living an entirely different life. One free of all the stress, the struggle, the uncertainty.

That, maybe, if you had actually applied yourself to the things you had wanted to pursue and dreamed about earlier in your life, before obligations, taxes and rent payments came a-knocking, you'd be living a life that you could actually be *proud* of.

And in those late-night moments, you'd make a deal with yourself.

That tomorrow, *maybe* you'd change things. You'd actually *try* for once. You absolutely knew you had what it took, how to get where you *wanted* to be.

You'd just have to try, for one, single time.

But tomorrow always came with an alarm clock and a schedule and a hundred little things that shoved all those big thoughts into a dusty mental drawer labeled "dead dreams and discarded ambitions."

Until the next sleepless night came around to dust them off again.

And truth was, I never figured out how to fix any of that.

I had just... died.

And then woke up here—taking over Sera's life, in Neon Dragons.

Whole new world. Whole new problems. And none of the chains I used to drag around.

I got lucky. Crazy, cosmic-lottery-type lucky. One in a quintillion, if not more.

Anyone else? They didn't get that second shot, as far as I knew.

Just me.

So... I didn't have anything to say that would magically help.

No perfect words to drop some life-changing epiphany on my brother.

Just the quiet echo of everything he'd said bouncing around in my chest. And the raw, honest truth that I still remembered *exactly* how it felt.

Gabriel's voice pulled me back from the edge of that mental spiral as he spoke up again, his tone heavy, "I think... I might ask Mum or Dad for a referral. Try out the corpo-life. As much as I don't think it's for me at all..."

I blinked. That caught me completely off guard.

I just stared at him, my mind blank—no words forming, nothing coherent rising to the surface.

He let out another one of those long, tired sighs—the kind that seemed to deflate his whole being. "I was already thinking about it like two months ago, honestly. My job's a dead-end. I'm barely scraping together enough Creds to do anything beyond survive, let alone plan ahead. Corpo-life, though? For all the bad talk it gets, it's *stable*. You put in the work, you get

the rewards. You put in extra work? You climb. There's structure. Predictability. No guesswork."

I didn't interrupt.

I was still trying to process the idea of *Gabriel*—my hoodie-wearing, punk-rock, but kind-hearted, older brother—willingly throwing himself into the corporate grinder.

He glanced at me then, something raw behind his eyes. "And then everything that happened to you... I felt *useless*, Sera. Totally, utterly useless. What good is a store clerk, when his sister nearly dies, huh? What can a cashier even *do* in that situation? But Mum? Dad? They had real means; power. Mum's insurance covered the hospital and all kinds of crazy doctors to take a look at you. Dad pulled every string he could to get you the best meds and equipment as well. And me? I just stood there. Couldn't do anything but hope you'd get better..."

I swallowed hard, but the lump in my throat wasn't going anywhere.

He wasn't *supposed* to carry that weight. That kind of burden didn't belong to him.

He was my brother—not a parent, not a provider.

But I could see how deep that helplessness had sunk its claws into him.

His hands were back on his face, fingers laced through his hair, elbows digging into his knees. Exhaustion clung to him like smoke—emotional, physical, all of it piling on.

"And then, when I got stabbed... I'm *scared*, Sera. Genuinely *scared*. It hurt so, so much... More than anything I've ever felt. That knife just... split me open from the inside, ripping everything out that made me, *me*. I still get flashes of it. Nightmares. Sometimes I wake up feeling like it's *still* there."

His hands dropped slightly, and he looked back at me.

No mask, no walls.

Just raw, aching honesty.

"If I'd been a corpo? With a jacket that screamed '*don't touch me*'? With a *badge* on my chest? Those scavs wouldn't've come near me. They'd never, ever risk it. Even the most psychotic of them would know not to get close."

He held my gaze, something desperate and quiet in his voice. "Is it wrong to want that kind of safety, Sera? The kind of stability, that means I don't have to worry whether walking to-or-from home is going to get me killed for no *fucking* reason...?"

That was when it hit me.

It was the first time I'd ever heard Gabriel swear.

And somehow, *that* was the detail that stuck.

Out of all the heavy stuff he just unloaded... it was that one cracked syllable that drove the point home.

I just sat there for a second, my mind scrambling, stuck somewhere between guilt and disbelief.

'How the hell did I miss all this...?'

He had been bleeding, screaming on the inside, trying to hold himself together with tape and sheer will, and I hadn't even noticed.

Too wrapped up in my own maze of Operator meetings, Skill grinding, dojo sessions, code reviews, near-death experiences, and whatever else I'd decided to throw on the ever-growing pile of chaos that made up my life now.

Gabriel had been drowning right next to me, every single night, and I hadn't even looked over to check if he could still breathe.

My stomach twisted *hard*.

Before I could even really think it through, my body just moved on instinct.

I shuffled over, crawled across the couch, and wrapped my arms around him—tight.

Like I was trying to hold all the broken pieces of him together by sheer force alone.

I didn't say anything. There weren't any words that would've made it better, not really.

No tears fell, either. It wasn't that kind of hug.

Just... solid.

The kind of hug that said *I'm here*, without making a whole speech out of it.

He didn't react much at first—his shoulders tense under my arms—but after a moment, I felt him shift slightly, letting out a breath he probably hadn't even realized he was holding.

We stayed like that for a while. Ten, twenty minutes, maybe.

Long enough for the apartment to feel less heavy.

Eventually, I finally found my voice. "I don't think it's wrong at all, Gabe."

My words felt small, but genuine. "If that's what you truly want—if that's what makes you feel safe, stable...then the corpo life might honestly be your best shot."

He shifted slightly, his breath hitching, but stayed silent.

"There's a good reason why Oliver and Valeria went that route. Fuck, why so many people across this whole damn city choose corpo life, really. It's not a failure of you as a person; it's just another path. You might give up some freedoms going that route, yeah...but if it gives

you security, gives you a life where you don't have to worry constantly about surviving another day—that's its own kind of freedom, y'know?"

I tightened my grip around him, squeezing him just a little harder as though I could somehow force my sincerity through sheer physical contact alone. "And it doesn't mean you're not your own person anymore. You're still you, Gabe, no matter where you work or what you do. Always."

Gabriel shifted slightly under my arms, leaning back just enough to look at me, his face heavy with doubt.

"It's not that simple, Sera," he said, his voice low. "Once you go corpo... *that's it*. You don't just walk away from it. It's like stepping onto a road with no exits—you keep going until the road decides to swallow you whole. And I don't know if I want that for myself. For *us*."

I tilted my head at him for that, but stayed quiet, letting him talk.

"I'd be working all the time," he continued, his jaw tightening. "Every single day, locked into whatever project they threw at me, grinding out hours until I'm too tired to do anything else. Barely time for dojo sessions, no time for... for even this," he gestured between us.

"I'd lose any chance of actually living, y'know? And..." He hesitated, his eyes flicking to me with a faint shadow of guilt. "I don't want you to feel like you have to follow me. Or Mum. Or Dad. If I go corpo and everyone else already is, and you're not... it's gonna feel like you're the black sheep of the family. I don't want to put that on you."

That last part hit me like a sucker punch. I hadn't even considered it from that angle.

Gabriel was talking about his future, his survival, and he was still worrying about how it might affect *me*? It was both thoroughly infuriating and... deeply touching.

I took a breath, leaning back slightly to meet his gaze, my tone firmer now. "Gabe... this isn't *about* me. It's *your* life. If going corpo is what you need to feel safe, to feel like you've got a shot at something solid, then you should take it. Don't let me—or anyone else—be the reason you don't."

He looked ready to argue, but I didn't let him. "Yeah, maybe it *is* a road with no exits. But not every road needs an exit. Some roads just get you where you need to go. And if that's what you think will work for you, if that's where you can build something that's *yours* and something you're proud of... Then screw the rest of it. You don't need my permission, and you don't need to worry about me following in your footsteps."

I gave his shoulder a squeeze, softening my tone even more. "I'm not gonna suddenly be the black sheep just 'cause I'm not wearing a shiny corpo badge, Gabe. I'm still me. And you're still you. You don't need to carry my choices on your back like some kind of martyr. This is *your* decision. *Just* yours. And no matter what you decide, I've got your back. Always."

I paused, then grinned. "If you wanna ask Mum for a referral and need me to grovel at her feet to sweeten the deal, I will. No shame. I'll throw my pride straight into the trash for you, no hesitation."

His eyes widened, caught somewhere between confusion and disbelief.

"I'm serious," I continued, pressing a hand dramatically to my chest. "I'll kiss the ground she walks on if it'll help you get that referral. You're not the only sibling who knows how to be dramatic, y'know? I can make it all about me too. Selfless sacrifice for the greater Gabriel good. I'll do it all of tonight, even!"

That did it.

He laughed—really laughed—and for a moment, it actually looked like the weight on his shoulders got a little lighter.

"That's something I'd have to record," he said through his grin. "A once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece. *You*, begging at Mum's feet? I'd sell tickets."

"Absolutely not," I shot back, scandalized. "I'd rather die than let that be caught on film."

We shared a brief, comfortable silence—one that didn't need to be filled.

Then he nodded, a bit of steel returning to his eyes. "Thanks, Sera. I think... yeah, I think I'll ask Mum tonight. Just get a read on what kind of offer the handlers would even throw at me. Dad might've been a better option, but with the OriginTech mess still eating up all his bandwidth, I doubt he's got time to worry about what I'm doing. EtherLabs is a heavy hitter anyway. Should be plenty of ways to move up if I commit to it."

He looked steadier now.

Not all the way sure—but at least not crumbling under the weight of indecision.

"If there's anything I can do to help, say the word," I said with a nod. "Oh... And probably ask for your referral before I ask for my favour from Mum. I have a feeling mine's going to be a bit less likely to go over well..."

Gabriel blinked, then smirked. "That's probably the better order, yeah... Let's go with that, then."

His eyes flicked over to the TV, which had defaulted to its idle-mode clock. "Speaking of which... we should probably start getting ready. Mum and Dad'll be back any minute, and you *know* Mum's not gonna waste time before launching straight into dinner mode. So, uh... Let's get spruced up while we still got some time to spare?"

I gave him a mock salute. "Aye aye, captain. And don't forget—tonight only, limited-time offer: Full-service feet grovelling, for your benefits."

He flashed me a wide, toothy grin—no words needed—as he pushed himself off the couch and headed for our room. I followed close behind, already mentally bracing myself.

'Time to throw the dress back on, smile like I've got no ulterior motives, and pretend to be the picture-perfect corpo daughter Valeria wants me to be... All while planning to ask for the exact thing she really doesn't want to give me: A link to old-Sera's past life...'