

Chapter 96 - Old Friends

Gabriel's face scrunched up as he started to answer, then hesitated, a pained look flickering across his eyes. "Ah... I don't know if I should, Sera..." He trailed off, his mouth twisting slightly as he looked away. "Honestly, I'm just not sure it's a great idea."

I kept my gaze steady, the edges of a playful grin creeping in as I intensified the puppy-eye stare, waiting him out with just enough persistence to wear down his defences.

It only took a few more seconds before his resolve crumbled entirely, and he sighed, shaking his head with a resigned smile.

"Fine, fine—you're impossible, you know that?" he muttered, throwing his hands up in defeat.

"*But*," he pointed a finger at me with mock seriousness, "you *have* to promise you're not going to get upset if they don't sound... Well, flattering. This is just what I've heard, either from you back then, or from Mum and Dad whenever you weren't around, and... they might not be the most glowing reviews; or entirely accurate at all."

I crossed my heart, nodding solemnly. "Promise! Just curious, I swear."

I leaned in, my expression all eager and genuine, silently reassuring him he had nothing to worry about. Which was honestly true—I had no real connection to these people.

My curiosity was purely academic, a peek into who Sera had been before... well, before I took over. Besides, the circumstances around where she'd been found before she was rushed to the hospital had always made me wonder just what kind of life she'd been leading.

This was a chance to piece together a bit more of that puzzle.

Plus, if any of these "friends" turned out to be decent connections later down the line, maybe I'd even get something useful out of it as well!

And, let's be entirely real here, the fact that Valeria didn't like them whatsoever made me all the more interested. I was still *a bit sore* over that whole NeuroCorpse incident, so while I couldn't even think of outright defying her anytime soon, a touch of classic teenage rebellion by digging into the crowd she'd wanted out of original Sera's life to make Valeria's life even just a fraction more annoying? Yeah, that sounded *just* perfect in my mind.

Gabriel took a deep breath, still looking a little torn, but he seemed to decide to go for it. "Okay, so... I only really know of two people for sure, but I'm pretty positive there were more. You didn't really talk about the others much—probably the ones closest to you, honestly."

He paused, fidgeting with the edge of his sleeve, clearly debating how much he should really tell me. "The first was this guy named Luca. No last name or anything; you never mentioned it, and... well, I didn't exactly dig too deep either. I don't know where you met him, but I do know he was into some risky business. The guy dealt in unlicensed Deep-Dive Recordings."

He glanced over, gauging my reaction, maybe to see if I had any clue about what those even were. I kept my face blank, feigning ignorance for new-Sera's sake, though in reality, I was all too familiar.

Deep-Dive-Recordings, or DDRs, were like VR but on a completely different level—direct access to your nervous system. They allowed you to feel every sensory input from whatever scenario was in the recording, *everything* from the temperature, to tactile feelings to the very emotions of whomever's POV you were looking through.

For people living in a work-centric world like Neo Avalis, DDRs had become especially popular as a shortcut to experiences that were otherwise hard to come by—particularly porn; as one would expect from such a high-level technology.

Porn was, after all, *always* the first thing people used any tech advances for. And with 16+ hour work days being more the norm than a rarity, people got lonely fairly quickly around here.

The problem with unlicensed DDRs, though, was that you had no guarantee that the developers didn't simply skip any and all safety testing.

Letting software access your entire nervous system and link is a huge risk even with the trustworthy stuff; with the bootleg versions? It was plain russian-roulette.

A single bad line of code could cause anything from a seizure to a full-on heart attack or worse. And if you had any major Cybernetics chipped? Abrupt capacitor discharges weren't exactly a rarity with these things.

Anyone dealing in unlicensed DDRs was running a deadly game; either because they were selling things they knew were potentially lethal or because they were testing them first-hand in order to ratify the lack of lethality themselves—either way; pure insanity.

So, I *really* couldn't blame Gabriel for being uneasy about it; it made complete sense.

And yet, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of curiosity—old-Sera had been tight enough with this guy to ignore the obvious danger of being associated with him?

'Why the fuck had she been hanging out with someone like that? And where had she even met him in the first place...?'

Gabriel seemed to mistake my silence for denial, and he let out a soft sigh of relief before continuing. "I really wasn't a fan of you hanging around someone dealing in that stuff. Those recordings—they're not just illegal for some technicality or patent reason. They're *actually* fucking dangerous. Getting involved with unlicensed DDRs, even just as an acquaintance of a dealer, can be... Well, let's just say, they're called 'death dives' for a reason."

He trailed off, his gaze dropping to the floor, looking torn between guilt and uncertainty.

This had clearly been eating at him, the endless "what ifs" spinning in his mind. "... I don't know if it had anything to do with what happened to you," he murmured, almost as if he was

talking to himself, “but looking back, I feel like I should’ve done more to keep you safe. I tried to talk you out of it a few times, but you were always so damned *stubborn*...”

I could see how much this was weighing on him, and for a moment, I was totally and completely lost.

I hadn’t wanted to drag him into some emotional minefield by asking questions about my old life—I’d just been curious about it all. But here he was, running his hand through his hair and looking like he carried every “what-if” and “could’ve been” on his shoulders.

“Hey, Gabe,” I started, keeping my voice soft, “it really wasn’t your fault. You tried, right? You did what you could. And... I mean, come on. This stubborn streak? You could’ve tried to lecture me a thousand times and it probably wouldn’t have done much good.” I threw in a half-smile, hoping he’d bite.

He looked at me, uncertain at first, then cracked a faint smile. “I don’t know, Sera. I just feel like... I should’ve pushed harder. If I did, maybe it wouldn’t have ended this way, y’know? Maybe been more adamant about the dangers that come with being around guys like Luca or something...”

I shook my head, meeting his gaze. “I’m sure you did your best, Gabe. If the you I know now is the way you’ve always been, then I have no doubts that you tried; tried hard. And trust me, if my stubbornness survived even all of *this nonsense*”—I waved a hand in front of my own face like some kind of magician, indicating my general post-coma amnesia—“then I think you really didn’t stand much of a chance.”

That finally earned me a small laugh. He chuckled, shaking his head. “Yeah, I guess some things don’t change, huh? Stubbornness *has* always been your thing... Drove Mum and Dad completely mad...”

I grinned, relieved to see the tension lift a little. “Exactly. So it’s not on you, Gabe. Really. I made my own choices, you gave me some contra on it, but I still decided on it. And that is, if Luca or the unlicensed DDR business even had anything to do with it at all—could be entirely unrelated for all we know, right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” He sighed, this time a little more relaxed, as if he’d let go of a bit of the guilt. “I just... I worry, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know.” I leaned back, giving him a reassuring smile. “Now, enough about Luca and the DDR-stuff. You mentioned another friend?” I nudged him, hoping this new topic might ease things up even more, while also giving me some more intel to work with.

Gabriel scratched the back of his neck, visibly hesitant. “The other one... well, her name was Rina. I... I guess you could say she was... a JOI-girl.”

I blinked, the term hanging in the air as I processed.

JOI-girl.

My two closest friends had been an unlicensed DDR dealer and a prostitute? Gabriel looked even more uncomfortable, shifting in his seat like he was bracing for me to explode or maybe question my life choices all at once.

“So... A JOI-girl,” I said, slowly, trying to keep my tone light. “Alright. I mean, was she...?”

“Nice?” he finished, sighing. “Yeah, honestly, she was. Rina was... polite, mostly. Very, uh, bubbly, I guess? Which I guess would have made her very popular in her line of work.” He let out a small, humourless laugh, his fingers drumming on the table. “But still... Sera, she was... You know. Just... Not exactly what you’d call a safe influence, either... I guess.”

I could tell he was watching my reaction closely, so I kept it neutral.

I didn’t know how to feel about this yet, honestly.

“She sounds... interesting?” I offered, shrugging. “I mean, at least she seemed friendly. Not a bad trait to have in a friend, right?”

Gabriel gave a half-smile, though his face was still lined with worry. “Yeah, I guess. Rina was actually pretty protective of you, from what I could tell. And she wasn’t like... Well, she didn’t flaunt her work around you or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. If anything, she seemed like she wanted to keep that part away from you. But it... it just bothered me, y’know? The whole... situation as a whole, I guess.”

I nodded slowly, realising how tough it must have been for him to handle old-me hanging around with people like Luca and Rina. “I get it, Gabe. Sounds like you just wanted me to have friends who were... more normal? But it seems like, all things considered, Rina was a good friend.”

He exhaled slowly, maybe relieved that I wasn’t freaking out. “Yeah. I mean, she was. Just... not what I’d expected...” He trailed off for a moment, before quickly adding, “Ehh, for you, I mean!”

That definitely didn’t sound like what he had initially intended to say.

I tilted my head, now curious. “Wait, so... Did you ever actually meet Rina?”

Gabriel’s face turned a shade darker, and he let out a reluctant sigh. “Yeah... I did, actually. A few times.” He cleared his throat, looking a bit flustered. “She’d sometimes drop by the shop, usually when she couldn’t get a hold of you. I don’t know if it was just to make sure you were alright or to chat or what, but... yeah.”

I couldn’t hold back a knowing grin. “Sounds like she made an *impression*.”

He rolled his eyes, a faint blush creeping up his cheeks. “Listen! She was... *different* from what I’d expected, alright? Really charming, actually. And I don’t mean that in the... ‘professional’ sense,” he quickly added, trying to make himself clear. “She just had this way of making you feel like you were the only person in the room. It was... *nice*.”

I watched him closely, amused. “So... You liked her, huh?”

Gabriel's face turned a shade redder. "Look, I just... *respected* her, alright? Despite... well everything. Respect, Sera! Nothing more."

He ran a hand over his face, groaning. "And I guess... I guess she was kind of sweet, okay? Didn't seem to want you involved in any of the darker stuff. I guess... I guess I could see why the two of you were close."

I leaned back, still grinning. "So, let me get this straight—my best friends were an unlicensed DDR dealer and a JOI-girl? And you've also been secretly crushing on one of them?"

Gabriel threw up his hands, shaking his head in exasperation, though an involuntary smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Alright, alright, laugh it up. But yeah, Rina was... I don't know. *Good-hearted*, maybe. She had this thing where, despite her line of work, she didn't seem... Well, *jaded*? It was like she wanted something better for you, even if she wasn't living that herself—like she was treating you as her little sister, of sorts. I respected that."

I took that in, my curiosity growing. "That's... honestly not quite what I expected."

He shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "Me neither. Guess I just figured, well... Maybe she was the kind of friend you needed back then. Somebody not related to you, that would still look out for you, y'know?"

He paused, giving me a serious look. "But just... Be careful if you do end up reconnecting with people like that. Rina was good to you, sure, but... People like Luca? Your other friends that I don't know much about? Maybe not so much."

I gave him a reassuring smile. "I get it, Gabe. It's good advice. But... Thanks for telling me. Really."

He softened a bit, visibly relieved, and I could tell he was finally more at ease with the whole rundown. "Anytime, Sera. Just... Remember that you're different now. Better, maybe...?"

I shot him a playful look. "*Better*? 'Cause I don't cause as much trouble with Valeria?"

Gabriel's face immediately shifted to one of mild panic as he realised what he'd just let slip. "Ah, no, that's not what I meant! I just... y'know... you're just... easier to talk to, maybe? A bit more..." He trailed off, clearly scrambling for words.

"*Normal*," he finished, wincing slightly.

I smirked, raising an eyebrow. "Normal, huh? You're really laying on the compliments here, Gabe."

He shook his head, clearly embarrassed. "Look, I didn't mean it in a bad way. It's just... old you was great, don't get me wrong! You were just... always running headfirst into stuff; dangerous stuff. You had this rebellious streak—hanging around with risky people, always challenging Mum and even Dad sometimes. It was like you just *had* to push against everything, like you were looking for a fight at every turn. And... Well, I worried about you."

I stayed quiet for a second, letting his words settle.

It wasn't hard to see that Gabe had spent a lot of time thinking about old-Sera and the kind of trouble she'd been drawn to. I could sense some of the relief in his voice, even if he was trying not to come across too strong about it.

"Hey," I said gently, reaching across the table to give his hand a quick squeeze, "you don't have to feel guilty about *any* of that. I get it. Maybe the coma actually knocked some sense into me, you know?" I shrugged, hoping to lighten the mood, even if the whole thing felt pretty damn twisted.

For all I knew, old-Sera had actually straight-up died, and here I was, commandeering her meat suit, occupying her life and talking about how I might be the "better version" of her.

The whole thought felt decidedly fucking grim, so I pushed it aside for now.

'Sorry, Sera... if you're out there somewhere. I don't mean it that way, honest,' I thought, hoping her spirit—or whatever—would cut me some slack for how I had phrased it.

"And let's be real here," I added with a grin. "I may be a little calmer now, but I'm still as stubborn as ever."

That brought a reluctant smile to his face. "True. You still know how to push my buttons like nobody else."

I leaned back, giving him a mock-serious nod. "And I intend to keep it that way."

He chuckled, finally looking more at ease as the tension of the whole conversation started to ease off. "Alright, alright. Just promise me, if you do go digging into any old leads... maybe keep me in the loop?"

"Promise." I gave him a reassuring smile, which quickly turned into a mischievous grin. "Wouldn't want to keep my brother from his long-lost crush, after all."

He groaned and rolled his eyes, but I could tell he wasn't as annoyed as he pretended to be. "Oh, great. That's the *last thing* I need right now."

"Speaking of being stubborn," I jumped in, keeping the conversation light, "I actually got something for you."

With a swift mental command, I sent exactly 570 credits to Gabriel's account.

His eyes flashed yellow as the notification lit up in his interface, and he froze, staring at me with a mix of shock and something that edged close to worry.

"Sera..." His voice was half a whisper, as if he wasn't sure he'd seen it right. "Where did you... How did you get this?" He looked downright serious now, not at all ready to brush it off. "You're not doing anything risky, right? You know you don't need to pay me back like this..."

I laughed, trying to play it cool, though I hadn't quite expected this reaction—even though I probably should have. I hadn't quite thought about how to explain how I had gotten my

hands on all the Credits from the deal with Vega; but at this point, it was a bit too late to worry about that. “Relax, Gabe. I told you I’d pay you back for the SPG-01 shard, didn’t I? You don’t think I’d back out of my own promise, right?”

He still didn’t look convinced, his eyes darting between me and the notification as if it might disappear. “Sera, I mean it—if you’re getting mixed up in anything shady, you don’t have to do that. I don’t need the creds back right now; I told you, it’s completely fine.” He frowned, the concern clear in his voice. “I just don’t want you putting yourself in any kind of danger... *again*.”

I sighed, leaning forward to reassure him. “Gabriel, look at me. I’m fine. No shady business, no sketchy jobs.” I gave him a soft smile, hoping it would settle him down.

“I got this legit, I swear.”

It was technically the truth, too: There really *was* no law that said I couldn’t take the illegal—if technically registered and whitelisted—gun of an illegal gang member and sell it to another illegal gang.

His brows knit together, and he shook his head in disbelief. “But... *how*? You’ve barely been walking for what—a few weeks? A month, max? Sera, 570 Credits is... That’s more than most people make in months; much less able to save...!”

He looked like he was ready to march off and figure out who I’d hustled, convinced there was some poor old man out there missing his life savings.

“Gabe... *Gabriel!*” I called his name a bit more forcefully, snapping him out of his spiral as he reluctantly sank back into his seat.

‘Note to self: don’t surprise him like this again,’ I thought as he finally met my eyes.

I took a deep breath, quickly crafting an explanation that might sit better with him. “Alright, so Mr. Shori gave me a big bonus, since the shop’s been doing really well. You know, the ramen place where I get dinner?”

I added for emphasis, hoping the “more details means more believable” approach would work here. “I’m not just in the back anymore; I’ve been helping out front too. Apparently, the regulars like having me around, and Mr. Shori noticed, so... tips have been better than usual. All his words!”

Gabriel’s expression softened a little as he slowly processed this. “You’re good with the regulars?” He looked sceptical but seemed a bit more relaxed.

“Better than you’d think,” I replied, grinning. “*Plus*, I think they just like the mystery of the random new girl. And who knows, maybe it was the stubborn streak kicking in and me working a bit extra recently that got me the bonus...? I just *really* needed to make this up to you.”

He let out a long sigh, finally accepting it. "Alright, *fine*... But just... Don't go overboard. And don't work yourself to the bone for my sake, okay? If I didn't have the creds to buy you that thing, then I wouldn't have done it—so don't worry about it; alright?"

Gabriel paused, his expression softening even more. "Still... That's not a bad amount of Credits, sis. I didn't expect you'd be making so much."

He rubbed the back of his neck, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I'm glad to see you're doing well for yourself. Honestly, when I first heard you were helping out at a food stall, I was just really relieved you weren't getting into trouble and that you were getting out of the apartment at all, after... Well, *everything*. But if it's paying well too?" He shrugged, looking genuinely pleased. "Sounds like a career worth sticking to, especially since it's here in the megabuilding. It's safe."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes, smirking as I started gathering up the dishes. "Gee, thanks for the career advice, Dad. You planning to get me a food stall Skill Shard too? Make sure I really got all the advantages for my high-rise career?"

He laughed with a shrug, his face finally free of the lingering worry. "Hey, just saying! I wouldn't mind seeing you as our local ramen queen."

I gave him a playful nudge as I carried the plates to the sink, and he shot me an exaggerated look of offence before breaking into an even wider grin.

As I started on the dishes, I realised something—it felt good, all of this.

Familiar, easy, even *right*.

This kind of connection, this back-and-forth with a sibling...? I'd never really had it before, but somehow, it was *exactly* the kind of thing I'd been missing without even knowing.

We bantered for a few more minutes, chatting about nothing in particular, until Gabriel stretched with a yawn. "Alright, I think I'm gonna crash early tonight. Dojo tomorrow, and I don't want to show up exhausted. Miss K's been coming down on us hard the last time; hoping I won't end up a complete mess like last time."

"Can't blame you there," I said, stacking the dishes in the sink for a quick wash. "Good luck surviving without too many bruises."

"Yeah, thanks," He chuckled, shaking his head. "Night, Sera."

"Night, Gabe," I called after him as he headed to his room, relieved our talk had ended on an easy note.

With the apartment wrapped in a cosy silence, I returned to the dishes, letting my thoughts drift to everything I'd learned over dinner and what it all might mean for me moving forward.

'Luca and Rina, huh...?'

Two contacts that had been close to the old Sera, both somewhere out there in the city, but completely unreachable unless I somehow managed to get Valeria to hand over Sera's old link data... Something about as likely as me learning to fly overnight.

Still, there had to be another way to get in touch, especially with Rina, if I could just figure out how to go about it.

With Luca, it was probably best to leave things alone for now.

Whatever Sera had been up to with him and his unlicensed DDR dealings, I needed more context before I went digging into any of that.

But Rina sounded like someone it might actually be worth reconnecting with.

Sure, JOI-girls weren't exactly rubbing elbows with high society, but Sera's body had been found near Selfour Plaza—the heart of Neo Avalis's entertainment district and noticeably close to multiple JOI establishments. Rina might know something about Sera's last night there, maybe even something that could help explain how she'd ended up the way that she—or I—had.

I wasn't rushing to uncover the whole mystery of what happened to old Sera, of course. I had way more things to worry about than that right now.

But if there was even a chance someone out there had been involved in her last moments or was looking for her... or *me*, now—then it was worth being prepared.

With the Operator business coming up and more Data-Collection Tasks, I'd be bound to have to travel outside the Megabuilding more, and the last thing I needed was a run-in with enemies I didn't even know about.

Rina seemed like the best starting point for all of this, but there was still one huge problem.

'How the hell do I possibly get Valeria to give me Rina's contact ID...?'