

Chapter 210 - Rina Yonikana

I simply sat there and watched her cry. I could do absolutely *nothing* about it.

Every instinct I had was pulling in the same direction—'*hug her, comfort her, say something, do literally **anything**.*' It was the natural response. The human response.

The woman beside me was breaking apart in real time, quiet sobs shaking through her entire frame, tears streaking down her perfect cheeks and smearing the tastefully applied makeup—that I hadn't even realized was there until it started running just now—and every empathetic fiber in my body was *screaming* at me to close the distance and offer some kind of comfort.

But I couldn't.

Because it *wasn't* that simple. Not for me, *specifically*.

If I had been basically anyone else—a stranger, a bartender, a random patron who'd stumbled into this booth, or even another friend entirely—reaching out would have been the obvious, kind and correct thing to do.

Offering a shoulder, an arm, or simply a quiet '*Hey, I'm here.*'

But I *wasn't* anyone else.

I was the *reason*.

I was the very *incarnation* of the grief currently wracking her—the walking, breathing, talking *evidence* of her best friend's "death," wearing that best friend's face, sitting close enough to touch.

Every word out of my mouth would come out in *Sera's* voice.

Every comforting gesture would come from *Sera's* hands.

The very thing she was grieving and the thing offering comfort would be the *exact same* object, which meant that there was no version of me reaching out that wouldn't forcibly *grind* salt and lemon juice *directly* into the wound of her soul.

Me speaking would hurt her. Me holding her would hurt her worse. Me even simply existing next to her, in a way that she could actively recognize, would hurt her.

So I just sat there, hating my very existence in this world on my own terms, in a way I had never truly done before.

*'This really isn't fair... What did Sera ever do to deserve being replaced by me like this...? She had a loving brother who cared for her. She had Rina. Even her parents, in their own questionably **unique** ways... Probably a whole web of other people I don't even know about yet. And still she simply... died—and got swapped out for me like a spent fuse. Where's the*

*fairness in that, Universe? She had so much more to live for than old me **ever** did! Yet now I'm here. And she's not.'*

I knew by now, of course, that the Universe didn't do fairness—it never had.

It wasn't built for it, didn't care for it, and probably didn't know the word existed in the first place. Nobody ever *earned* what they got.

Everyone simply *got* what they got, and that was that.

Which left me with nothing to do but allow my heart to quietly break for Rina, hands folded uselessly in my lap, doing the only thing that was actually within my power to give: Time.

And time, I gave.

Rina cried beside me for several long minutes—quietly and contained, the sobs never rising above the ambient hum of the bar beyond our divider.

Horrendous grief with the volume all the way turned down, out of consideration for a public space, which somehow made it even more heartbreaking to witness. Yet slowly and gradually, I could see time allow the catharsis to begin to do its work—the shaking easing by degrees, the breaths stretching longer, the tide going back out.

Through all of it, I did my best to walk an impossible line: Projecting '*open and approachable, here if you need anything*' with one half of my posture, while simultaneously and demonstrably *not watching*, giving her the privacy of the moment with the other half.

My body angled slightly toward her but eyes fixed on some indistinct point across the booth.

I was almost *certainly* failing terribly at it. It was not a line that could *actually* be walked—least of all by somebody as utterly inexperienced with this sort of stuff as me.

But I tried and I liked to believe that that fact, at least, counted for *something*.

Finally, however, Rina dried her tears.

And I had to actively suppress a reaction, because the process was genuinely, and thoroughly unexpectedly, *fascinating*—she pressed her fingertips briefly beneath her eyes, and her synthetic skin simply... *reabsorbed* everything.

The tear-streaks, the puffiness, the blotchy redness that should have taken at least twenty minutes to fade—even the smeared makeup that, by all rights, should have ruined her face until she found a mirror somewhere to patch herself up—all of it simply smoothed away in the span of a literal heartbeat.

Her face reset from *complete wreck* to *flawless composure* like a display refreshing.

'JOI-girl professional feature, probably. Can't have crying—or streaked tears and makeup for other reasons—ruin a whole shift.' The thought arrived with an uncomfortable pang. *'I wonder how often she's needed it...'*

Rina suddenly got up, walked back around the table on slightly unsteady legs, and sat down across from me again—taking several deep, deliberate breaths along the way, and another after settling.

Then she looked up, searched for my eyes, found them—

—and choked up again *immediately*, her composure buckling for one dangerous second.

But she powered through.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said, voice rough but steady.

It caught me completely off-guard. "You—*what*? Rina, you have nothing to—"

"No, I *do*. Let me finish." She held up a hand, took another breath. "I'm aware I'm being unfair here. You're sitting *right in front of me*—alive, healthy, apparently fucking thriving like I've never seen before—and I just spent ten minutes crying bitter tears about you being *dead*."

A short, wet laugh escaped her.

"Which is... somewhat, kind-of, what happened? And it's *still* such a shit thing to do to you. *You're* the actual victim in all of this. You're the one who lost an entire *life*—every memory, every person, *everything* you ever were. And your welcome back to the world of the living, your attempt at reconnecting with what you've lost, is me sobbing over the *corpse of your memory* while you awkwardly sit there... I get how messed up that is. So, yeah, I'm genuinely sorry. It's not fair to you. It's not fair to me either, of course, but you're not at fault. You shouldn't be punished for it like this."

I opened my mouth, found nothing adequate to say, and just... closed it again.

Rina took another deep breath, visibly working through the lump in her throat.

"I don't quite know how to handle all of this yet," she admitted. "I'm not going to bother pretending that I do. But... I've decided I'm going to make it work, so—okay. Ground rules. For my own sanity."

She gestured vaguely at the air between us.

"The Sera I knew—I'll just call her *she*. *Her*. To keep her separate from *you*. Because all evidence suggests you're an *entirely* different person, and pretending otherwise is just going to keep hurting both of us unnecessarily."

I inwardly cringed—*hard*—while keeping my face carefully arranged with [Elemental Balance] thinking, '*You have no idea how much more right you are than you could **possibly** know, Rina...*'

"Because, here's the thing," Rina continued, and now something new was kindling behind those neon-blue eyes, pushing up through the grief. "*She* would be *furious* with me if I just buried her, cried my eyes out, and walked away from her. Just because she lost the

memories? Just abandoning her to figure out a whole life alone?" She shook her head firmly. "That's not fair at all. That's not what she'd *expect* from me. What she'd want. And fucking frankly, it's not what I want either."

Her earnest eyes came up and met mine directly again sparkling now with serious determination—the deflated, hollow woman from mere minutes ago nowhere in sight.

"So I'll simply make the new you *my* little Sera too." She stated, like a judge speaking a verdict. "It's just that simple. She's owed that much, at least. And so are you."

She simply held my gaze, like she was trying to impart the last sentence she'd spoken with all her might onto my very being, before she continued.

"It'll be damn hard, I'm not *completely* delusional about that part... I'm going to miss so many of your—*her* old blank-ass habits... Honestly, the pickle-jar rage, especially. But also the hiding-behind-the-hair thing... Shit was so adorable, all the time! But—*hey*."

The corner of her mouth curled upward, a cheeky, lopsided grin fighting its way back onto her face, still fragile at the edges but now infinitely more *real* than the first time it had come around.

"Like I said earlier: Fresh audience. Every single one of my stories gets to *hit* again, and she ain't here to fact-check me on them. That's a pretty preem-ass deal, when you think about it."

A surprised huff of laughter escaped me before I could stop it.

"*And*," she added, the grin tilting further as her eyes flicked briefly, appraisingly, over my shoulders and arms, "for the record—I'm not exactly *opposed* to the new, swole, physical edition of Sera either. Nova-fucking upgrade, honestly. Ten out of ten patch notes!"

I was once again... at a complete loss for words.

Because I had no idea how to even approach *half* of that.

The offer, the grace of it, the teasing flirtation stapled cheerfully onto the end—but more than anything, the sheer *strength* of what I'd just watched happen.

Rina had gone from total, wrecked, grieving collapse to sitting up straight and extending an open hand toward what was effectively a *stranger* wearing her dead friend's face—in the span of mere *minutes*.

She'd somehow compartmentalised an entire bereavement in real time, not simply to bury and forget about it, but to make room next to it for something *new* to grow from the loss.

'*She's incredible*,' I thought, openly staring at her. '*Mentally, she might genuinely be the single strongest person I've ever met in either of my lives...*'

Although—the more I turned it over, the more I realized it wasn't entirely *unprecedented* as an idea, of course. This was, in its fundamental shape, the same thing families of dementia or Alzheimer's patients went through, every single day, in my past life.

People didn't simply *abandon* their loved ones when the memories went—even when the loss often felt *exactly* like a death, even when the person in front of them had forgotten *everything* that made the connection work in the first place.

They grieved the person who was gone and *chose*, deliberately, to love the person who remained. Both at the same exact time, every single day.

But to watch someone make that entire journey—stark grief, reluctant acceptance, into reconciliation and then making *the choice*—compressed into fifteen minutes in a bar booth... And *especially* at her young age, which couldn't *possibly* have been even close to my old self had been pre-isekai...

Rina was truly amazing.

"Okay," Rina said then, straightening in her seat and squaring her shoulders. "So. If we're doing this properly, we're doing this *properly* properly. Introductions. From scratch."

She stuck out her hand across the table.

"Rina Yonikana. Nineteen years old. JOI-girl, and *damn* good at it."

There was no hedging in that last part.

She said it the way someone announced a hard-won doctorate.

I took her hand and shook it. "Seraphine Vildea. Sera. Apparently fifteen now, though the paperwork and I have an *ongoing* disagreement about that."

'*Nineteen*,' I thought, adjusting internally. That put her somewhere north of twenty-two by my old life's reckoning... Still so damn young.

"Actually... Do you even know what a JOI-girl *is*?" Rina asked, tilting her head. "Because if I have to explain all of that, that'll be interesting."

"No, I'm good. I know what that is."

Her brows shot up. "*How*?"

"I remember it," I said with a small shrug. "The memory loss took people and events, not—general knowledge, I guess. I know what a Ripper is. I know what an Operator is and does. I know the OPN exists. Corpsos exist and are scum. All of that stayed. It's just everything that actually *happened to me* that's gone."

Which, conveniently, wasn't even a lie.

That knowledge *was* from my old life—absorbed across hundreds of hours of Neon Dragons playthroughs, wiki dives and lore videos—and it had transposed over intact along with everything else.

JOI-girls occupied the mid-to-high end of the sex work spectrum in this world, the name a deliberate double entendre that whoever had coined it had clearly been *extremely* pleased with.

Their entire profession centered on giving clients *precisely* the experience they were dreaming of—which was exactly why Rina's body was so heavily augmented with cybernetics and synth-flesh. Programmable skin tone and texture. Photoreactive fiber-optic hair. Adjustable facial structure within a certain tolerance.

The whole package provided near-limitless capacity for visual and tactile customization.

Almost entirely aesthetic in nature. *Almost*.

Because the game's lore had made a point of it: Some JOI-girls packed a genuinely *serious* punch. The logic was simple enough—once you were already replacing *that much* of your body, tacking on some Sinuira-weave muscle fiber, or reinforced Densilat skeletal lattice, or a subdermal Ceralon impact layer wasn't a huge additional ask from a surgical standpoint.

It only ever applied to the more experienced, older girls, though, because the aesthetic work alone was already *exorbitantly* expensive.

Combat augmentation came later, *if* it came at all.

Which led me, somewhat awkwardly, to my first real question.

I hesitated.

It felt... extremely invasive—but it also fed directly into something I *needed* to understand, both for Gabriel's eventual return to the family and, frankly, for myself.

"Can I ask you something?" I began. "It might be a bit—I don't know where the lines are yet..."

"Ask," Rina said easily, then added with a stupidly photogenic wink. "Lines are for people who don't know each other."

"How long did it take you? To get like this, I mean." I gestured vaguely at her. "When did you start? How long have you been doing this? And with replacements *this* extensive—" I chose the next words carefully, "—weren't you ever worried about *Psychosis*?"

Rina's radiant smile changed. It softened into something sad and aged, an expression that had clearly been worn many times before.

"No," she shook her head. "I never worried about it. Because I didn't *know* it was a thing when I started getting replacements."

My eyes widened before I could even bother to control the reaction.

Because *every child* in this world knew what Psychosis was.

It was in public safety campaigns. It was in schools. It was on the news *constantly*.

Not even *knowing* it existed meant—

"I was sold to a Scav band by my biological parents," Rina said, conversationally, as if reporting the weather. "When I was about five, I think. Hard to really get an exact date, I tried—trust me. But, anyway, my *loving* parents owed the band money, and I was the only collateral the band would accept.

"*Except...* They never changed. They kept borrowing more, kept not repaying." She turned her own complimentary glass of water idly on the tabletop. "So when I turned seven, the band got tired of it. They brought me along when they went to execute my parents for the outstanding debt..."

She shrugged as she said the next words, "And that's when I got my first implants. My father's eyes. My mother's cerebral implant."

I stared at her, slack-jawed, something cold and awful crawling up my spine as pure rage suffused my heart. They'd killed her parents in front of her and then forcibly installed the salvage taken from them into her seven-year-old body...!

Rina kept going, entirely nonchalant, like she was recounting a slightly annoying commute.

"After that they '*raised*' me. I didn't know any other life—that band was just... the world, as far as I understood it. At eight I got both arms replaced, and one leg." She tapped her forearm absently. "And then... By ten some of them had decided I was too pretty to be a simple porter. Some of the higher-ranking members had put together a birthday party for me—a first, really. It was wonderful, with lots of delicious food, drinks and a whole celebration. I'd never seen anything like it."

Her eyes met mine then and I could see the cold, dead hatred in them, underneath the mask of nonchalance. "They had drugged everything they gave me. That day, I stopped being a porter and became a pleasure toy. I can't really remember all that happened to me that day—thankfully, honestly—but I do remember it taking the whole day and night. I think there were ten of them? Maybe eleven...? Either way, I was a toy for them after that. The kind where it didn't matter much if the tool broke, because tools could be repaired."

I could feel the molars at the back of my jaw creak from the pressure that my jaws applied to them. My Edge, Ego and [Elemental Balance] were fighting tooth and nail—literally, in this case—to keep my composure... And only barely holding on.

Rina, however, continued with the same nonchalance as before, "That went on a bit over three years. Disposable object for the upper rungs. Parts swapped out when they broke, or when someone saw a prettier set and decided they wanted to look at it on me instead... I learned rapidly how to please them well, so each individual encounter was over as quickly as possible... It was my way of fighting back, I guess."

She shrugged. "Then one day the band fucked around in the wrong part of the city and found out—immediately. They tried to hit an OmniaPresentia transport without realizing whose it was. The rapid response team wiped them out inside of four minutes. *Everyone* died."

"H—How did you—"

"Cages." She simply offered. "Me and a handful of others survived because we were literally locked in cages. That's where we lived."

A small, humorless huff. "The response team from OmniaPresentia opened them. That was it. That was the whole '*rescue*.' They opened the cages and left, and I found myself standing on the streets of Neo Avalis at the tender age of thirteen with nothing to my name except several years of experience in pleasing men and women alike—drugged or not."

She met my eyes.

"So that's what I did. Offered my services. Whatever the request, whoever it was, in exchange for a place to sleep and something to eat. And you can imagine the *quality* of person willing to take a chance on a filthy thirteen-year-old who might just be a Scav fishing for an easy mark."

Her jaw tightened, briefly. "Not many choices. And not the well-adjusted kind either."

The silence sat heavy between us for a moment, as Rina took a deep breath and my entire body still kept fighting itself—I was a mere hair's breadth away from simply singing up with a random Operator crew in this very bar, right here, right now, to go hunt some fucking Scavs to *extinction*.

"Eventually I ran out of energy. Got tired," she said, quieter now. "Broken all the way through, in every way that might have ever mattered—physically and mentally. I tried just—ending it."

My chest *ached*.

"But by pure random chance, I'd wound up in the *one part* of this whole city that actually gave a shit." Her expression shifted again, the sadness receding beneath something intimately warmer. "A JOI-girl from the Velvet Halo found me. Took me in. Fed me, cleaned me up, and then... She *taught* me how to live. Took the thing I'd only ever done to survive and showed me how to turn it into something I could genuinely *enjoy* doing. How to *willingly* provide an experience for someone, with a genuine skill and craft behind it. That I could *choose* my clients. And, most importantly, how to *choose* my own life's path."

She gestured down at herself with unmistakable pride.

"That's how all this started. The Halo's upgraded me piece by piece over the years—every augment you're looking at right now was *earned*. I've been working there ever since, and I'm *good* at what I do, and I'd fight anyone who says otherwise."

Then she leaned forward slightly, and something entirely new came into her face.

"And then, about three years ago," she said, "I was on break, walking an alley near the Halo, and I found a young girl down on her luck. Filthy. Injured—she'd had a run-in with Scavs and somehow, *miraculously*, walked away from it. She told me later she'd run away from home."

Her neon-blue eyes came up and met mine, and the warmth that flooded into them was so utterly, impossibly at odds with everything she had just calmly recounted that it stole every other emotion inside me.

It reached into the burning, helpless fury that had been building in my chest through the entire story and simply—*quenched* it like a torrential downpour.

"That was you, my little Sera," she said softly. "You reminded me so much of myself... So I took you in. Cleaned you up. Made sure you *always* had somewhere to come when things got troublesome."

A small, warm huff escaped her.

"*And* made sure you had protection whenever you were out in the city. Whether you ever knew it was there or not."

Then her face fell, and the warmth folded back into grief briefly.

She shook her head slowly.

"If only it had been *enough*..."