

Chapter 209 - Relationship

The wait for my answer lasted exactly as long as it took Rina to slide into the seat across from me, plant both elbows on the table, and fix me with an unblinking stare.

She was fully prepared to wait me out.

"I've been working out," I said after taking a breath to steady myself. "Pretty much every single day since the incident."

"Working out doesn't do—*that*," she said, gesturing at the entirety of my upper body. "Not in a couple months. Sera, I've *tried* to get you to work out, remember? I dragged you to that gym exactly *once* and you complained for *three weeks*! You called it—and I quote—'*a torture dungeon for people who hate sitting*.'"

'Noted. Original Sera: Sedentary, pretty funny, apparently allergic to fitness. The pickle-jar thing was probably not an isolated series of incidents stemming from a manufacturing fault in the pickle-jar factory, I take it.'

"Yeah, well." I turned my glass slowly on the tabletop. "Things changed after the incident. Pretty drastically." I paused, deciding to lay the foundation properly. "You've heard I was in bad shape after. But I don't think you know just how bad it really was, do you? When I woke up, I was—*effectively disabled*, Rina. Couldn't walk. Couldn't even get out of the wheelchair on my own. Couldn't even take a shower without risking drowning myself."

Rina's face went through a sharp, involuntary flinch.

Her mouth opened—then closed again.

"So once I could move again, I started working out. *Every day*. First just to stand. Then to walk. Then everything after that." I shrugged, and let genuine truth carry the words, because every bit of that was real—the System's brutal early days, the endless grinding, the pain that had come with it. "Turns out when you start from literal zero, you get pretty damn serious about not being weak ever again... And—I've done a *lot* of work on myself since, as you can clearly see. I'm even learning martial arts now. At the Arkion Dojo. Gabe's there too."

Rina's entire face stopped.

"The—" Her mouth moved silently for a second. *The Arkion Dojo?! Then the sound caught up. "Like—the Arkion Dojo?! With the—the Grandmaster at the helm?! That Arkion Dojo?!"*

"That's the one."

"Fucking *how*?!" She was half out of her seat now, palms flat on the table. "How did this happen?! When?! *Why*?! Sera, that place is—people *kill* for a slot in there! That's nova-tier corpo-kid territory! That's not—we don't *know* people like that! *How*?!"

"*We don't know people like that.*" I filed that one away too—another small window into the life Original Sera had actually lived. Whatever her family's position on paper, her actual day-to-day world had apparently run *considerably* closer to Rina's altitude than to Kenzie's.

I shrugged again, keeping it simple. "It was my mother's idea. After Gabe got attacked... I mean, he almost died to a group of Scavs on his way to work. It made sense. She basically decided we both needed to be able to protect ourselves, and she had the connections to make it happen—I didn't bother to argue against it."

"**Gabe almost died?!**" Rina's eyes had gone cartoonishly wide, both hands flying up to her temples. "What the *fuck*?! When was—why didn't anyone—I *talked* to him! He messaged me! He said everything was fine! '*All good, Rina, Sera's recovering, don't worry*'—that little fucking *liar*, I'm going to wring his scrawny—"

She kept going, spiraling into an increasingly detailed itemization of what she intended to do to Gabriel upon their next meeting, and I sat there watching her with a slowly dawning realization.

'She doesn't know... Like, any of it. She's been kept almost entirely in the dark.'

I'd walked in here assuming Gabriel had given her at least the broad strokes—the incident's fallout, the recovery, the new family situation, *something*.

But it was becoming rapidly clear that whatever Gabriel had told her had been the absolute minimum required to stop her from storming the Megabuilding: "*Sera's alive. She's recovering. Don't worry.*"

Everything else—the memory loss, the disability, the attack, the dojo, all of it—was hitting her cold, right now, in real time.

Which meant I needed to slow down, dramatically.

I was lobbing world-shattering revelations at someone who didn't even have a baseline yet.

*'And there's one revelation that has to come before all the others... Rip the bandaid off, Sera. She deserves to hear it directly, not figure it out mid-conversation when you fail to recognize something you obviously **should**.'*

Because, technically, it was *already* happening.

Twice now she'd referenced something—the gym story, an offhand "*you remember, like with Denno's party*" buried somewhere in her ongoing Gabriel-rant—and both times I'd nodded along with a carefully neutral expression.

I was simply treading water in a conversation that I didn't have the context for.

It was [Deception] doing the work, and it would keep working right up until the moment it catastrophically *didn't*. Until she asked me a direct question about a shared memory and the silence stretched a beat too long, and she *saw* it.

Better it came from me, directly.

And I also had to break the news to her that Gabe was... in bad shape, too.

'But that one can probably wait... At least until I know more, myself.'

"Rina." I said quietly, but something in my tone cut clean through her rant. She stopped mid-sentence, attention snapping back to me. "Before you continue to plan Gabe's murder—there's something I need to tell you first... About the incident."

She went still, clearly picking up on the seriousness. "...Okay?"

I took a deep breath.

"I still don't actually know *what* actually happened that day. Nobody's been able to tell me, and I can't tell them, because..." I met her eyes and made myself say it plainly. "When I woke up afterward, I woke up with *serious* memory loss. I remember basically *nothing* from before the incident. My childhood, my life, the people in it..."

"... *You*."

Rina just—sank. Slowly, back into the seat across from me, all of that kinetic, overflowing energy from earlier draining out of her frame at once, like someone had pulled the plug.

Her eyes stayed on my face the entire way down. Darting across it—my eyes, my mouth, the lines of my expression—searching, with increasing urgency, for *something*.

A tell. A twitch. The suppressed corner-smile of a bad-taste joke about to break.

Any indication at all that this was Sera messing with her, that the punchline was coming, that in three seconds I'd crack and laugh and say "*gotcha*" with a pair of fingersguns aimed at her and she'd throw a coaster at my head and everything would be normal.

I made damn sure she didn't find it.

I *watched* her not find it—watched the hope drain out of the search in real time, her synthetic neon-blue eyes flicking faster and then slower, then finally stopping altogether, settling into stillness on mine.

"...You're not joking," she said, barely above a whisper.

"I'm not joking."

"You don't—" Her voice caught.

She swallowed hard, then tried again. "You don't remember me at all. *Anything?*"

"I know your name," I said, as gently as I could. "I know you were trying to reach me—Gabe told me that much, and my mother gave me your contact ID two days ago, after I'd asked her for it. I know you're a friend of mine—a good one. And I know I was with you on the day of the incident. That's part of why I messaged you."

I paused, and then gave her the whole of it, because I figured that half-measures would genuinely be crueler at this point.

"But the you sitting in front of me right now? As far as I'm concerned, this is the first time I've ever seen your face or heard your voice."

For a long moment, Rina just stared at me... Before she abruptly surged forward again, elbows back on the table.

"Okay... Okay, but—memory's weird, right? It's not all-or-nothing. Gaps have *edges*." Her hands started moving quickly as she talked. "The beach trip. Two summers ago—well, the *fake* beach, the hydro-park on the 8th, but we *called* it the beach trip, at the very least. You got so sunburned under the UV array that you *glowed*, Sera. We had to slather you in three tubes of derm-gel and you whined the *entire* night. That's—nobody forgets *that*. That's core memory material, yeah?"

I held her eyes, and gently shook my head. "Nothing."

"*Denno's party*, then." She spoke even faster now. "You *have* to—you got up on the table, Sera! You, miss *never-draws-attention*, got up on an actual *table* and sang—terribly! You sang *terribly* and you were so proud! I have *footage*—I can show you, hold on, I've got it saved—"

Her eyes flickered with the telltale shimmer of someone diving into their cerebral interface.

"Rina."

"—it's here somewhere... just wait a second, it's literally right—"

"*Rina*."

Her eyes abruptly refocused on me, the interface-shimmer fading.

"You can show me. And I'll watch it. But I'm going to be honest with you about what'll happen: I'll see a video of a stranger who looks somewhat like me, singing at a party I've never been to. It won't unlock anything. It doesn't work like that... I've *tried*."

Her mouth stayed open for a second, then closed again.

"...The pickle thing," she said, very quietly, and it wasn't really a question anymore. "Earlier... When I talked about it... You didn't laugh because you *remembered*. You laughed because it was simply *funny*."

"Yeah," I admitted with a nod. "I'm sorry."

She sat back, leaning heavily against the seat.

The silence between us stretched—filled only by the ambient noise of the bar beyond our divider, the muffled laughter of the Operator crews around us, the clink of glasses—while Rina visibly recalibrated her entire understanding of everything.

I could see her replaying the conversation, finding every spot where I'd nodded along, every in-joke that had sailed past me, every moment she'd been talking to a stranger without knowing it...

"Does your family—" she started, then shook her head, realizing that it was a dumb question to ask, then started again, regrouped. "How are they dealing with it? Gabe, your dad, your... your mother," she sneered visibly at mentioning Valeria, "—they just, what, they've been living with a..."

She trailed off before finishing the sentence, but the unspoken word hung there anyway, "A *stranger*."

"They adjusted," I simply said, fighting the urge to shrug. "It was... hard, at the start. Gabe took it the hardest, I think. He kept waiting for me to come back... Kept testing me with little things—references, old jokes—hoping something would land." That part was pure extrapolation, but from everything I knew of Gabriel, it was almost *certainly* accurate to his personality. "Eventually he stopped testing and just... started getting to know me again. As I am now."

Rina nodded along mechanically, but I could see the next question building behind her neon-blue eyes.

She was visibly afraid to ask.

"But... it can come back. *Right?*" Her brittle voice pitched up at the end. "Memory stuff—there's like treatments and stuff... neural therapy, there's—you're *rich* now apparently? Like Arkion Dojo access rich. Or at least your mother's willing to provide some stuff? So there's *gotta* be options! It *could* still come back. Like any day. That's a thing that happens *all the time*. People wake up one morning and it's all just *there* again—"

"That's why Gabe didn't tell you," I interrupted quietly.

She stopped, simply looking at me, a flicker of hope still in her eyes.

"At the start, nobody was sure. The doctors couldn't rule out recovery. So I think he didn't want to tell you "*your best friend forgot you exist*" while there was still a real chance it would reverse itself and the whole conversation would've been for nothing except hurting you."

I turned my glass slowly, choosing every word with care. "But it's been *months* now, Rina. Months of *nothing* coming back... Not a face, not a moment, not a *feeling*. Nothing. I'm not going to say it's outright impossible, because rarely anything is... But it's looking more unlikely with every week that passes, and I..."

I made myself hold her eyes, despite the knot in my chest.

"I don't think it's kind to let you plan around it happening, when it's almost guaranteed not to."

"Right," she nodded rapidly. "No. Yeah. That's—that's smart. That's the smart, mature way to look at it, for sure."

The delivery was decidedly hollow.

"But hey—" and there came the rally, the big-sister energy hauling itself upright one more time, her smile snapping back into place with visible effort, "—okay, so, worst case, we just start over, right? Clean slate! Honestly, *preem* opportunity if you squint at it the right way—I get to retell *all* my best stories to a fresh audience, and this time nobody can fact-check me—" the laugh that followed came out about thirty percent convincing, "—and you clearly still *like* me, or at least you haven't run away yet, so the *fundamentals* are there, and I'm—I'm a *great* first impression. Quite literally my whole job, after all. Everyone says so, really—"

"Rina."

"—and honestly the old stories were getting somewhat stale anyway, this is basically a remaster, a—a fresh install, and—"

"*Rina.*"

She stopped. And I watched, with a slow, quiet ache spreading through my chest, as the performance finally ran out of fuel for good.

It happened in stages—the smile faltering at the corners first, then thinning, then failing entirely.

Her shoulders, held so deliberately bright and square through the whole rally, sagged by several degrees. The animated hands went completely still on the table. The glowing magenta strands in her hair, which I now realized had been shifting subtly with her mood the entire conversation, dimmed to a muted, low-power flicker.

She fully deflated.

All that magnificent, overwhelming energy just—disappeared.

"You're gone," Rina whispered. It was barely even directed at me. Her eyes had dropped to the tabletop or some unknown location well through and below it. "I waited *months*... I—I messaged that dead ID every week like an absolute *blank*, and I told myself—when you finally answer, when I finally see you, it'll all have been worth it, there'll be an explanation, and we'll get drinks and you'll do the *thing* where she pretends my stories are exaggerated when you *know* they're damn true, and—"

Her voice cracked.

She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth for a second, *hard*.

"And you *did* finally messaged," she continued, muffled, "and I ran the whole way here. And yet you're—" a wet, broken little laugh, "—you were never coming, were you. The person I was running to meet has been gone since that fucking day..."

There was nothing I could say to that. She was completely right.

All of her efforts had simply turned out to be a notification of death, delivered in person by the deceased's own face and voice.

That would punch *anyone* square in the chest.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, because it was all I had to give. "I know it's not worth much coming from me. But for what it's worth—I'm genuinely sorry, Rina."

She didn't answer.

She just sat there across from me, in our private booth in the Valedictorian, staring down at the table—a beautiful, chrome-perfect girl with dimmed fiber-optic hair, quietly grieving a best friend whose funeral had just been held in the middle of an afternoon bar, months after the fact, with no body, no warning, and the deceased sitting a mere three feet away holding the ceremony.

I felt like absolute shit. Breaking the news to Rina like this hurt a lot.

Less than whatever Rina was feeling right now, obviously, by orders of magnitude.

But it hurt all the same.

This wasn't what I'd wanted from this meeting.

I'd come here with questions—about Original Sera, about the incident, about the how and why of my own impossible existence. Maybe even ask for advice on how to handle it all—given that a JOI-girl was about as close to my own situation as you could get in this world.

And instead, the first thing I'd had to do was sit across from a hopeful, overjoyed big-sister like woman and methodically dismantle the very reason she'd been excited to come.

It was something that *had* to happen before anything else could, but that didn't make it feel any less like downright cruelty.

And the worst part was that I couldn't even properly relate to *what* I'd just taken from her.

From what fragments I could remember of my past life, I had never *once* been as close to another human being as Rina had clearly been with Original Sera.

I'd had online friends. Good ones, sure. But ultimately still voices in headsets.

Nothing remotely like what Rina was going through right now.

I couldn't even *imagine* what losing that felt like.

I *genuinely* couldn't, despite my best efforts.

And watching this bright, energetic, overflowing woman deflate into the hollow-eyed stillness currently sitting across from me was testing my composure far more than I'd expected it to.

My throat was tight. My eyes stung faintly at the edges. [Elemental Balance], Edge and Ego were quietly doing load-bearing work across my entire body throughout it all.

We sat in that awkward, aching silence for several minutes.

Finally, however, Rina took a deep breath. Then another. Then a third—each one visibly more deliberate than the last, someone manually rebooting themselves piece by piece.

"Can I..." She stopped, swallowed, then started again, her voice small in a way that sounded fundamentally wrong coming from her. "Can I try one last thing?"

"Yes," I said immediately, with zero hesitation or qualifiers. I had nothing to lose.

And if it helped her—in any way, by any measure—it was the absolute *least* I could do.

Rina got up from her seat.

She walked around the table, slowly, and slid into the booth on my side instead.

She was close now. Then came even closer—turning toward me, one knee coming up onto the seat, her body angling into my space with a deliberate intent that I couldn't yet read.

I held myself still, unsure of what exactly she was doing, but unwilling to flinch away from whatever it was. That lasted right up until she was mere *centimeters* from my face.

*'Oh. ...Ooh. Original Sera had **that** kind of a relationship with Rina?!'*

My brain assembled the picture with all the speed and grace of a dial-up connection while Rina came in for what had to be the slowest kiss in recorded history.

Everything narrowed down to details.

The warmth of her breath, tickling faintly against my lips with each slow exhale—synth-mint and something sweeter underneath. Her perfume suffusing absolutely everything at this range—something layered that smelled like warm amber over synthetic florals.

The soft, electric-blue glow of her eyes at close range, aperture rings catching the booth's low light as they flickered—down to my lips, up to my eyes, back down again—reading me, *asking me*, giving me every possible moment to pull away.

Her hand slid into my hair at the back of my head—gentle, yet firm.

Fingers threading through the VoniX-black, cradling my skull, slowly—so slowly—guiding my mouth into position with the practiced, confident ease of someone who did this sort of stuff for a living and genuinely enjoyed it.

I didn't pull back. Rina *needed* this.

Whatever this was—a test, a goodbye, a desperate last experiment—she needed it, and I'd agreed, and I wasn't going to yank it away from her now.

And, if I was being fully honest with myself in the strange, suspended stillness of that moment—I... I was a little curious too, as much as I was embarrassed and disgusted at myself to admit.

Millimeters.

Our lips were millimeters apart, I instinctively opened mine a bit wider, her breath and mine mingling in the space between—her eyes darted up to mine once more.

And then stopped.

Something in them shifted, the soft neon-blue suddenly wide and searching, *pleading*, scanning my eyes frantically for something, some specific *thing*, some certain reaction—

—and not finding it.

The panic bloomed across her whole face in an instant. Her breath hitched.

And then the tears came—welling up fast and spilling over before she could stop them, streaking down those flawless synthetic cheeks—and her hand released my hair as she pushed me away, weakly. The push of someone whose strength had just *entirely* left her.

"You—" Her voice broke apart around a soft, hitching sob. "*She's* really dead..."

She curled inward on the seat beside me, one hand pressed over her mouth, shoulders shaking violently.

"She—she would have never let me get even a tenth as close," she cried softly, the words tumbling out wet and cracked between her fingers. "Not without going red as a hydrant. Not without shoving me and calling me a menace and—and hiding behind her hair for an hour—"

A shuddering breath. "You just... You just *fucking sat there!* You just... *calmly*—she—she would have never..."

Her hand dropped away from her face and her dimmed eyes found mine, as the last of the hope in them died, replaced by raw, wrecked grief.

"My little Sera's dead..."