

Chapter 22 - The Downpour

Scrubbing at my lips to erase the trace of bile, I finally tore my gaze from the chilling tableau of violence. This situation had spiralled into a realm of insanity far beyond what I'd ever anticipated.

'Fuck. This is fucked. This is so fucking fucked!'

My psyche was in upheaval, thoughts whirling in a tempest as I struggled to make sense of the butchery before me. My Ego Attribute was working overtime, enforcing a brittle veneer of composure over the swell of panic that threatened to engulf me.

It was as a battle raging within me, a clash between the cold serenity imposed by my Ego and the primal urge to flee that screamed in my veins.

The mission was supposed to be straightforward—a simple courier job, nothing more.

I hadn't signed on for witnessing a bloodbath, hadn't braced for the reality of watching teenagers barely older than myself snuff out each other's lives with a brutality that chilled the soul. This was a gross deviation from the plan.

Despite my non-involvement, danger had grazed me too closely; a stray bullet had no name, and mine could have easily been called in that moment of random violence.

The harshness of this world, the sheer precipitous nature of mortality here, had blindsided me entirely. I had imagined, perhaps naively, that I would have time to adapt, to come to terms with the prospect of death—both witnessing it and, later on, likely having to deal it.

Yet here I was, confronted with this conflict at a point when I was still utterly unprepared, both mentally and physically, to face it.

"Hey, you okay there?" A voice, jarringly close, broke through my haze of shock.

The sudden intrusion, given my already frayed nerves, sent adrenaline surging through me.

An involuntary yelp escaped my lips as I reflexively jumped back from the source of the sound. Almost instinctively, my hand snatched the combat knife at my side. The [Knives] Skill embedded within me took over, stabilising my trembling hands.

The acquired muscle memory from the Skill assured a firm, practised grip on the blade, positioning it defensively in front of me, poised to strike if necessary.

The figure before me maintained a disarming casualness, their hands still raised in a non-threatening manner, and their voice laced with an accent that seemed out of place in the dingy, blood-stained corridor.

"No trouble here, I just saw you ducking in and thought you could use some help," they said, their gaze softening. "Around these parts, you learn to spot who's a local and who's not, and you, girl, you're definitely not."

My heart pounded in my chest as I struggled to fabricate some semblance of a story that could explain my presence. Yet, the tremble in my voice and the lingering nausea made it clear that any excuse would fall flat against the backdrop of my earlier display.

Puking, jumping at shadows, flinching at loud noises—none of these were the hallmarks of someone accustomed to the savagery of gangland disputes.

With a reluctant exhale, I allowed the knife to droop slightly, signalling my surrender to the truth. A careful sweep of my eyes over their attire confirmed the absence of gang colours or symbols. The neutral tones they wore seemed almost deliberately chosen to avoid allegiance or provocation.

“Alright,” I conceded, my voice steadier now as I accepted my vulnerability. “I’m just here on a delivery. I’m not... I’m not part of all this,” I gestured limply to the chaos behind me, the reality of the scene making me feel even more out of my depth.

The stranger's expression eased into a look of understanding, tinged with a hint of respect. “Coming to the 21st just for a delivery? That’s quite the errand you chose. I could help you out, keep an eye on you and get you where you need to be, how about it? I’m always looking to earn some extra creds.”

As the stranger spoke, he reached up, drawing back his hood in a slow, deliberate motion, revealing the full landscape of his face.

It was the visage of a man who had seen the rough edges of the world, yet had refused to let it defeat him. His skin was a tanned canvas, speckled with patches of lighter tones, like old leather exposed to the sun for too long.

His jet-black hair, cut short and showing traces of premature greying, added to his rugged demeanour. But it was his eyes, clearly cybernetic, that struck me the most. They were pools of amber with a neon-violet skull chosen as the iris.

However, as arresting as his appearance was, I felt an internal tug, reminding me of the perils of my surroundings and the inherent dangers of trusting strangers in this world.

His offer was tempting, and I could instinctively tell he wasn’t lying about his ability to navigate the hazards of the undercity. But I was also acutely aware of the consequences of aligning myself with the wrong person. The memory of the violence I had just witnessed served as a potent and chilling reminder thereof.

Taking a deep breath, I met his gaze with determination. “Thank you for the offer, but I’ll pass.” I said, my voice steady, albeit tinged with a hint of regret that I couldn’t manage to swallow entirely. It would have been nice to have someone around that can lead me through this gang-infested floor, but I had no way of knowing whether the skull-irised man was going to be true to his words.

He raised an eyebrow, the corners of his mouth tilting in an amused half-smile.

“Suit yourself,” he replied, his tone nonchalant but not without a touch of disdain. “Your funeral. Good luck, little girl.”

With a final nod, his gaze lingered on me for a moment longer, as if trying to convey a silent message. "Never say I didn't offer."

With that, he turned and melded into the shadows of a nearby alleyway, leaving me alone, my heart pounding against my ribcage, the weight of my choices and their potential repercussions heavy on my shoulders.

'It's not like I even have any credits to offer anyway...' I mused, as I tried regaining my composure. *'There's no way I can trust anyone around here. Who knows if that person had even helped me out and wouldn't have just led me down some dark alleyway to kill me.'*

With my combat knife tucked back into its sheath, I once again began to navigate towards the Downpour's known location. The haunting echoes of the wounded gang members reverberated in my ears as I passed by—pleas for assistance, the harrowing sounds of pain and distress.

Disturbingly, a swarm of emaciated children had, seemingly out of nowhere, already begun to descend upon the lifeless forms, rapidly stripping them of clothing, gear, and any valuables, their actions reminiscent of a pack of rats finding a fresh feast.

'Just keep moving, Sera. Don't fixate, don't engage. Just keep moving,' I chanted internally, using it as a mantra to shield myself from the sights around me. I did my utmost to blend in, maintaining a steady pace down the hallway, which bore an uncanny resemblance to a dystopian street.

Guided by the map in my cerebral interface, I focused intently on my objective, willing myself to stay on course and ignore everything else around me.

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At last, shortly after navigating one of the 21st floor's bustling crossroads, maintaining a low profile with swift, purposeful strides, the anticipated System Notification flashed before my eyes.

[System]: *100xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.*

[System]: *[Stealth] Skill has reached Level 1.*

Immediately, the G.E.M.A. System's influx of data surged through my neural pathways like an electric current, overlaying my perception with a cascade of new knowledge.

The [Stealth] Skill's foundational level was meticulously detailed, providing a comprehensive guide on the art of remaining unseen, similar to the inaugural level of [Cooking]. I barely made it in time to reach the closest wall, before I lost my balance and had to lean heavily against it, to not simply topple over.

Key principles of stealth, from leveraging shadows to understanding the acoustics of varying environments, were broken down for me in vivid detail. Techniques on maintaining a low profile in both urban and natural settings, pinpointing hidden routes that avoided common sightlines, and recognizing the telltale signs of someone being observant flooded my consciousness.

Beyond that, instructions on proper breathing to minimise sound, adjusting one's weight distribution to decrease footstep noise, and even the most efficient ways to clamber over obstacles without drawing attention were presented.

As this torrent of knowledge integrated into my mind, I could physically feel the difference in how my body began to move as well, as the artificial muscle memory provided by the Skill was integrated.

The awkward shuffle I had adopted in my previous attempt at stealth was replaced with a fluid, cat-like grace. Each footstep was softer, calculated, making minimal sound on the rough concrete of the 21st floor. My posture adjusted subtly, hunching in a way that made me less noticeable while also optimising my mobility.

The newfound muscle memory was astonishing in its efficiency, instantly highlighting the glaring inadequacies of my earlier attempts to remain hidden.

'Fuck me, these first levels are brutal... but I'd trade them for nothing in the world. Holy shit this is amazing,' I thought to myself as my vision and balance returned, the Skill's knowledge downloading trickled to a stop as it had granted me all the knowledge it could provide for the moment.

I quickly detached myself from the wall I'd been leaning against, keen to avoid drawing any prolonged attention. Immediately, I was struck by the newfound finesse with which I moved.

While I was no ninja, at least not yet, the proficiency with which I now navigated was remarkable. Despite the sparse cover offered by the drab neon and concrete streets of the 21st floor, I felt a newfound confidence in my ability to blend seamlessly with the bustling crowd and tread vastly more silently with every step.

The confidence with which I moved suffused my entire being, as the earlier missteps seemed to rapidly disappear in the metaphorical rear-view mirror.

'This Skill will be invaluable going forward. I wonder if I can train [Stealth] during my morning routine...?' I pondered with an internal hum of excitement. *'Maybe couple it with [Athletics]? Can I train [Stealth] while running around the 43rd floor? Definitely worth a try!'*

Continuing to make my way through the 21st floor, I passed by quite a few larger dive-bars, stores and brothels, especially when compared to the ones I had seen earlier on the floor, as I seemed to be nearing something like a central-square of sorts.

'This should be King's Square, according to the map Mr. Shori gave me. That means that the Downpour is closeby. Time to deliver this fucking data-shard and get the hell out of this accursed floor, Sera!' The resolve in my thoughts echoed with urgency and a dash of impatience to conclude my errand, wanting nothing more than to collect the System rewards and head back home.

As I ventured further into King's Square, my map became less of a guide and more of a suggestion. The sprawling street-bazaar unfurled before me like a tapestry woven from chaos and commerce.

Canopies of stalls clashed with the harsh neon glow above, casting a kaleidoscope of shadows over the dense crowd. The air thrummed with the cacophony of barter and banter, underpinned by the incessant hum of generator units powering the stalls.

Everywhere I looked, the visage of the Clawed Beasts glared back at me. Their emblem, an ambiguous snarl of a creature with features hinting at a bear, or perhaps some breed of feral canine, was a riddle in itself.

The image was stark, set against a canvas of deep blues and vibrant yellows, creating a visual clamour that demanded attention as much as the shouting vendors and the crush of the crowd. The colours adorning practically every stall were not just a warning but a declaration of dominance.

The Clawed Beasts had sunk their claws deep into the fabric of King's Square, and they wanted everyone to know it.

Vendors hawked questionable goods and contraband tech with the same breath, their pitches vying for attention over the growl of punk music blasting from unseen speakers. Gang members, marked with tattoos that snaked up their necks and disappeared beneath tattered jackets, prowled the square, their eyes sharp and assessing, searching for either opportunity or trouble—I couldn't quite tell.

Taking a deep breath, I melded into the stream of humanity, my [Stealth] Skill subtly shifting my posture and gait to blend in seamlessly. I ducked under awnings crammed with electronic trinkets and sidestepped street food vendors pushing carts laden with sizzling concoctions that filled the air with exotic, sometimes acrid, scents.

My eyes scanned above the sea of heads, searching for any signage or landmark that hinted at the Downpour's location. Here, beneath the omnipresent watch of the Clawed Beasts' symbols, I was just another lowly denizen among many.

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After what felt like a zany, over-the-top trek straight out of some cyberpunk noir, I stumbled upon a neon-sign, bathed in a soothing light-blue. It was a cityscape, but here's the kicker: The whole thing was drenched in cascading animated, holographic rain.

And there it was, plain as day, "The Downpour" written in flashy letters below.

Honestly, that sign? Absolute chef's kiss.

It was like a breath of fresh, albeit neon-lit, air amidst all the chaos.

My first assumption had been that I'd be walking into some sketchy hand-off in a dimly lit alley, but seeing such pzazz in their branding? Well, maybe, *just maybe*, if the Clawed Beasts splashed out this much on their signage, there was a glimmer of hope I wouldn't vanish in some gloomy nook.

Worst case scenario? A dramatic exit via bullet, blade, or an overly tight hug in some ritzy cyberpunk setting.

'*Silver linings and all that jazz*,' I chuckled to myself, the irony not lost on me. I tried to wash away some of my jitters with a sprinkle of that dark humour as I neared the place where the whole handoff was supposedly set to go down.

I seriously hoped that Mr. Shori hadn't just sent me to die. *Very much* hoped so.

Parking myself in front of The Downpour, I feigned interest in the neighbouring market stall, all the while my side-eye game was strong, scoping out the entrance. I had to gather some more intel before I decided to step into the maw of the beast.

Hovering near the entrance, I kept a vigilant eye on the massive double-doors, the only visible gateway to whatever thrived inside The Downpour.

The building's entrance was smartly set back into the structure itself, creating a covered alcove that functioned as a makeshift lobby, making an additional door redundant. Two behemoths of men—more machine than flesh—stood as living sentinels, their selected weapons, heavy-duty rods with a sheen that caught the flickering lights from above, rested in their hands, an overt display of power and control.

At the reception, a woman perched like a bird of paradise, her beauty no accident but a cleverly crafted lure. Her role was clear: To charm and disarm any incoming clientele. Her smile was the bait, and the establishment behind her, the trap.

As I pretended to inspect the nearby stall's oddities—shoddy trinkets and broken tech that spoke of the 21st floor's nature—I was patient. I knew a break in the facade would come, and sure enough, it very much did. The double-doors swung open as three heavily inebriated patrons stumbled out, their laughter and slurred words a momentary soundtrack to the scene.

In the scant seconds before the doors swung shut, my eyes pierced the interior's veil.

The Downpour was a den of neon-lit debauchery, true to its name. The scent of torrents of cheap synth-alc and the unmistakable thumps of bass bled into the open air. Inside, dim lighting played off the gloss of polished surfaces and the leather of well-worn seats, casting a soft glow on faces lost in the night's embrace.

My glimpse revealed quick flashes of the clientele, a motley crew bound by the desire to escape reality. Cyber-augmented hustlers shared drinks with out-of-towners looking for a taste of the infamous floor's nightlife.

In the heart of it all, the bar stood as a bastion of sin, manned by a burly looking bartender whose cybernetic limbs danced a bartender's ballet, pouring, shaking, serving, all with the cold efficiency of a machine.

As the door heaved back into place, sealing the raucous laughter and the fragmented beats behind it, a smirk tugged at my lips. This was exactly the kind of joint I had hoped it would be.

'A typical ganger club. I can work with this. I've seen quite literally hundreds of hours of different creators spend their time in these. They all share the same basic rules—respect the

gang, respect the gangers and might makes right. As long as I don't step on anybody's toes, I should be able to get in, do the drop, get out. Easy peasy,' I internally hyped myself up.

I paused momentarily to ensure the name of my elusive contact was etched firmly in my memory, inhaling a deep, steadying breath before stepping from the seclusion of the throng.

My strides toward The Downpour's entrance were deliberate, no longer shrouded in the subtlety of stealth—it was time to face the music, quite literally.

I braced myself as I neared the entrance, fully expecting to be intercepted by the towering guards. To my bewilderment, they remained statuesque, granting me unobstructed passage. A raised eyebrow was my only acknowledgment of their indifference.

'Well, that was anticlimactically easy,' I mused, the notion floating through my mind as I drew closer to the receptionist, whose allure was only amplified up close. The neon-crimson sheen of her techweave hair provided a stark contrast to her alabaster skin, making her a radiant beacon in the shadowy ambience.

'Let's tackle the true test, then,' I silently prepped myself.

As if on cue, the receptionist greeted me with a cordiality that seemed to stretch from her lips to her poised posture. "Hello there. Welcome to 'The Downpour'," she began, her voice a melodic chime that somehow cut through the background cacophony.

"Since it appears you're new here, take a moment to acquaint yourself with our guidelines. We'd hate for you to stumble into misfortune simply from a lack of awareness. And should you be carrying any weaponry of Tier 3 or above, I'll kindly ask you to entrust them to my care. They'll be securely stored, for your well-being and that of all our patrons," she continued, her smile unwavering, her eyes a mirror to the establishment's dual nature—welcoming yet watchful.

"Should you need further assistance, please, let me be your guide," she concluded, gesturing gracefully to the rules displayed nearby.

"Ah... great. Thanks a bunch," I managed, my voice carrying a note of surprise at the breezy admission protocol. Was my youthful appearance rendering me invisible to the usual scrutiny? Or was the establishment's policy to wave everyone through without much fuss?

Shrugging off the ambiguity, I sauntered over to the guidelines, skimming through them with a practised eye. *'No offing folks indoors, disputes to be settled outside, and the gang's word is law—pretty standard protocol for a place like this,'* I assessed mentally, giving a nod of acknowledgement to the receptionist.

"Got it, all rules accounted for."

"Wonderful," the receptionist replied, her smile remaining as steadfast as if it were part of her job description. I hung there for a beat or two, expecting some further exchange, an invitation perhaps, but nada. She just stood there, the picture of professional amiability.

A bit perplexed, I ventured, "Uh... so, I just head on in? Or...? Is there anything else to take care of?" My own question felt as clunky as the massive doors I was about to traverse, and I could feel my cheeks flame with a sudden self-conscious flush.

The receptionist merely gestured towards the doors, her poise unbroken. "Should you desire entry, please proceed," she said, her arm sweeping in a welcoming arc towards the entrance.

"Right-o, good to know!" I shot back, mustering every scrap of my rapidly waning suaveness as I made a beeline for the beckoning doors. My once-cool composure had frayed, leaving me feeling as smooth as a rookie on their first gig as I pushed open one of the doors and entered into the Downpour's belly.

As the door swung open with a weight that suggested solid metal, I stepped into the Downpour, a world away from the cacophony of King's Square.

The atmosphere hit me first—a cocktail of synthetic tobacco, the tang of spilled neon-coloured cocktails, and a subtle undercurrent of engine grease that spoke of the clientele's potential day jobs.

My senses were immediately ensnared by the pervasive hum of conversation peppered with gruff laughter, the kind that's seen its share of smoke-filled rooms and late nights.

The interior was an homage to typical 90s cyberpunk aesthetic—neon signs in lurid greens and pinks clashed with the ambient blue lighting that seemed to seep out from every corner, casting everyone in a hue that made the place feel underwater. The air was laced with the soft thrum of bass from the background music, a fusion of electronic beats and the occasional string of a cyber-synth, pulsing through the place like a heartbeat.

I navigated through the clusters of patrons—hackers, runners, and the muscle for hire—mingling with the off-duty gangers sporting the Clawed Beasts insignia with a mix of pride and challenge. The club wasn't cramped, but it buzzed with the energy of a hive.

There was an undercurrent of tension, sure, but it was the kind that said 'we're all here to relax, just don't step on any toes.'

The tables were well-spaced, crafted from what looked to be repurposed industrial parts, their surfaces etched with the scars of countless previous encounters. Overhead, fans whirled lazily, pushing around the heavy air, laden with the scent of fried street food that made my stomach rumble in unexpected appreciation.

I felt the floor vibrate slightly under my boots, the pulse of the city's underground lifeblood—a mix of music and machinery—a reminder that this club was more than a drinking hole; it was a sanctuary for those who lived in the shadows.

Taking a deep breath, I let the club's ambiance wash over me, a strange sense of calm settling in my chest. It was a well-oiled retreat, the kind of place where a deal could be made over a drink, or a feud settled with a handshake or a shot—whichever made the most sense at the time. Something that I greatly preferred to the myriad of alternatives that could have awaited me inside the club, considering the nature of the mission I had been sent on.

With a 'let's get this over with' huff, I tried to channel my inner James Bond.

'Alright, so I didn't get a secret code or a mysterious, shadowy corner to meet in, but c'mon, how hard could it be to spot one person in a bar?' I mused, propping myself against a pillar that seemed like it had seen better days. A lone wolf in a sea of predators, that was me. Just with a lot less growling and way more awkward fumbling.

I'd been given the ol' "you'll recognize them when you see them" spiel based on the lack of information I had, complete with a vague description that could match half the joint's patrons.

Not exactly top-tier spycraft. I mean, what was I supposed to do? Go around whispering code words? Flash an exaggerated wink and hope they got the memo?

Weighing the pros and cons, wandering around aimlessly seemed a good way to get my non-existent drink spiked—or worse. But asking outright? It was like holding a neon sign screaming, *'Hey, I'm the clueless outsider!'*

But, as luck would have it, the universe seemed keen on intervening.

The bartender, all shiny chrome arms and a "don't mess with me" vibe, flagged me down. I did the classic 'who, me?' routine, half-expecting to find some celeb or VIP behind me.

But nope, just a wall and the undeniable truth that I stood out like a fish in a tree.

'Goddammit, Sera. Play it cool,' I silently pep-talked myself, trying to stroll up to the bar without tripping over my own feet. The warm blush on my cheeks? Definitely the lighting, not embarrassment. Not at all.

I arched a brow, my intrigue piqued, as the bartender leaned in.

"Vega's waiting for ya," he said, nodding toward the shadow-draped back of the bar where mystery and possibly, my contact, lingered.

Talk about a twist; I hadn't even dropped the name yet, and here he was, mentioning Vega like it was on the daily specials board. Had Mr. Shori beat me to the punch with a heads-up? Either way, the breadcrumb trail had just become a cake walk, as that was the exact name mentioned in the intel that Mr. Shori had given me.

"Thanks, mate!" I tossed a grateful grin at the bartender, who was already in the midst of a circus act with a myriad of bottles. My fingers itched with the memory of my own juggling prowess—one of the Skills now collecting dust in the 'unused talent' section of my brain.

At least for now. *'Next time,'* I vowed silently.

So off I sauntered, weaving through clusters of patrons with the finesse of a cat burglar—or so I told myself—, keeping my eyes peeled for this Vega character. Most of the crowd parted like I had an invisible shield around me—thank you, personal space bubble!

Just when I thought I'd have to start tapping shoulders, a hand with fingerless gloves appeared out of nowhere, flicking in my direction like I was being summoned to the world's most clandestine book club. Without a word, I was ushered into a secluded alcove, cosily insulated from the buzz of the bar and the rush of the crowd.

"So this is Vega's den, huh?" I mumbled under my breath, sliding into the seat with a curiosity that could give a cat a run for its money. I sized up my new surroundings - low light, privacy, and the kind of vibe that screamed 'top secret talks happen here.'

Perfect. Just what I was hoping for.

The moment my gaze connected with Vega's, however, I froze dead in my tracks and my blood ran cold.

A broad grin carved its way across the man's face, while two glowing neon-violet skulls, floating in a warm amber ocean, stared back at me...