

Chapter 21 - Mr. Shori's Task

Mr. Shori's voice dropped to a hushed murmur, so faint that one might think the rustling of leaves outside could drown it. Of course, this was a cautious step rather than a foolproof measure—anyone fitted with a Tier 3 hearing implant could eavesdrop without strain, but that was not my place to point out.

With an intensity that made the ambient noises of the market seem distant, Mr. Shori leaned in, his eyes sharp with an earnestness Sera had never seen before.

"{Picture this: Here in Delta, the marketplace is like a shark tank, and we, the stall-keepers, are but small fishes. To survive, we 'invest' in a type of... shield—paying tribute for protection, if you will. It's been an age-old dance in this bazaar. We pay up, they stand guard, and the bullies stay clear. But times, they're changing},” he said with a heavy sigh, glancing around as if expecting shadows to pounce. “{The Red Snakes, my once-trusted protectors, have turned as unreliable as a mirage. And Delta? It's a den of four such groups of 'guardians.' The winds of change whisper to me; it's time to switch banners—to the Clawed Beasts}.”

Drawing a breath, as if steeling himself for what came next, he continued, “{They've made me an offer: Protection in exchange for the usual payment and, more precariously, a data-shard—a jackpot of dirt on the Red Snakes. Exceedingly tempting for them, similarly risky for me}.”

He glanced towards his stall, the heart of his livelihood.

"{Here's the snag: Stepping away, even for a heartbeat, would be like sending up a flare, alerting all. But you},” he pointed at Sera, his finger trembling just a bit, “{you're a ghost in this game. Nobody knows who you are. You're an unknown. You could glide by, slip the shard, and seal this pact without a ripple}.”

He continued, his voice grave yet pleading, “{But again, this isn't a directive. This is a *plea*. Dive into this mess for me or walk away—either way, I'm entrusting you with my secret. There's a gut feeling within me, maybe pure instinct or blind hope, that whispers you won't sell me out to the Snakes. In this shifting sand, I stand on a precipice, and I'm asking... might you be the hand that steadies me? I will, of course, reimburse you generously for your assistance in this matter, Sera}.”

The weight of Mr. Shori's gaze anchored me, the air between us thick with unspoken tension.

His plea was deafening in its silence, drowning out the usual market clamour. Being pulled into something of such magnitude was unfamiliar and unsettling; my mind raced, trying to grasp the full implications of his request.

I imagined the covert glances of the Red Snakes, the omnipresent, unseen observers of the marketplace's underworld. Getting involved felt like dancing on the edge of one of the knives I so carefully honed: One misstep and the consequences could be dire.

Could I really afford to delve into this, knowing the kind of world I had been placed in?

Neon Dragons wasn't a kind and forgiving place, after all. If the Red Snakes caught wind of my participation, I would be extremely lucky to get away with getting my legs broken in a million pieces—more than likely, they'd just straight up kill me.

But as his words sank in, clarity emerged as well. Mr. Shori was completely right—I was a shadow in this world. My day-long association with the stall was hardly substantial enough to draw any attention.

What had jolted me most was the absence of his usual moniker for me: "Stick-girl."

Hearing him address me as Sera—a deliberate shift from playful banter to solemn recognition—underscored the gravity of what he was entrusting to me. It wasn't just a name; it was an affirmation of my identity and the faith he was placing in me by laying bare his predicament.

With that single utterance, I had grasped the depth of the trust he was bestowing and the peril that accompanied it.

The notion that Mr. Shori had orchestrated this entire scenario from the outset insinuated itself into my thoughts with unnerving persistence.

'Did he offer me food and assistance only to assess my worthiness before casting me to the wolves like this?' I pondered this with a furrowed brow, the possibility looming like a hazy spectre in the dim alleyways of my mind.

In this harsh world, his generosity had indeed been an anomaly; most people didn't give without expecting something in return, especially not in the unforgiving world of Neon Dragons. The thought that his kindness was a mere prelude to some test of loyalty was both jarring and plausible in equal measure.

Yet, scepticism gnawed at me.

Would Mr. Shori truly contrive such a convoluted plan, pinning his hopes on a frail 15-year-old who had stumbled in, barely able to stand, let alone take on the role of a clandestine courier?

The idea seemed far-fetched when laid bare like this.

'No, that theory is absolutely riddled with holes,' I mused, the logic within me clawing its way to the forefront of my turbulent sea of thoughts. *'Without my System, I would have been unable to do any sort of task for him, any time soon. I was barely able to walk down here yesterday and Mr. Shori definitely saw the state I had been in. There is no shot he had this in mind when he offered me food. And the way he made it sound, this issue isn't something that can wait for a couple of months until I had recovered either.'*

I felt a pull toward trusting Mr. Shori, an instinct to believe in the good I hoped still existed within the grime-streaked walls of Neon Dragons.

Yet, as I teetered on the edge of decision, the harsh whisper of reality asked me whether trust was a luxury I could afford, whether it was worth the peril it invited.

The risk, though ostensibly slight, cast a long, menacing shadow.

Even if minuscule, it was the kind of shadow that could engulf and end my newfound life in an instant. Unprepared and ill-equipped as I was for any skirmish in this brutal new world, the thought of being unmasked was a chilling, yet very real prospect.

The conclusion crystallised in my mind with reluctant clarity, its edges sharp with sorrow. "{I'm sorry, Mr. Shori}," I began, my words heavy with the weight of the refusal I was about to issue. "{I cannot commit to your proposition. This secret will remain with me; your previous generosity has earned you that much, I assure you of that. But my life... I can't put it on the line, not when the threat of discovery, no matter how remote, hovers over me."}

My voice, usually steady and calm, frayed at the ends, betraying the internal turmoil of declining what felt like a heartfelt plea of assistance from a man who had shown me nothing but unexpected kindness.

It was a matter of survival, a silent vow to myself that I had to prioritise my own existence over everyone else. I still needed to grow, hone my Skills, bolster my Attributes, and arm myself with more than just a day's worth of experiences and a combat knife.

A month from now, perhaps, with more time to accustom myself to my resurrected limbs and more Skill levels, Attributes and Perks, I might have leapt at the chance for such a quest.

But as I stood there, barely having passed initial steps of relearning the rhythm of walking, the very idea of undertaking such a task seemed like an insurmountable leap.

Not yet—I was simply not ready.

However, the second I had finished my words, a System chime caught my attention.

'Huh? I shouldn't have gotten any experience from that just now, should I...?'

As I waited for Mr. Shori's answer, I rapidly opened the System's notification only to feel my muscles tense up as I read the first words in it.

'Ah, fuck.'

[Task Issued: **Mr. Shori's Request**]

[Description: *Follow Mr. Shori's directions to the Clawed Beasts' hideout and deliver the data-shard to the contact person.*]

[Reward: 250 Character Experience + 1 Skill Point]

[Are you sure you want to delete this Task? Yes / No]

[Warning: Denying the Task will delete the entry from the G.E.M.A. System and will make you unable to gain these rewards at a later time, even if the Task is successfully completed.]

A torrent of frustration surged within me, my inner monologue lashing out at the invisible circuits of my cerebral companion.

'You just had to play this card, didn't you?! Prey on my deepest weakness, my fear of missing out!' I raged silently at the System, feeling its silent presence mocking my predicament.

The moment stretched, a battlefield of indecision, before my resolve shifted, a sudden pivot born of an unspoken bond with the man before me, coupled with the tantalising rewards promised by the enigmatic System within my head.

With a voice softened by contemplation, edged with a newfound determination, I found myself capitulating to the unforeseen role of a reluctant hero.

"{Actually, Mr. Shori}," I started, the words surprising even me, "{I've reconsidered. There's a part of me that can't stand aside and watch you grapple with this danger alone. I'll agree to your request—on the condition that I can make a swift exit at the first hint of trouble. If I feel even remotely scared, I'll just up and book it, we clear? Oh, and let's not forget, I expect to be handsomely rewarded with an extra serving or two of that exceptional noodle bowl of yours. And those credits you promised, as well!}"

A faint smile played on my lips, a mixture of nerves and the thrill of a terrible decision having been made.

Mr. Shori's response was as immediate as it was disjointed, his words tripping over themselves in a rush of startled concern. "{It's quite alright, truly}," he stammered, his hands raised in a gesture of cessation, "{I can seek another—}"

But I cut him off, a firm resolve rooting my words to the spot, "{No, Mr. Shori. I've made up my mind. I'm in this now. No second thoughts}."

The air between us charged with a new energy, I saw a shimmer of something raw and unguarded flicker in Mr. Shori's eyes—a silent, grateful acknowledgement that spoke louder than words ever could.

"{Thank you, Sera}," he said, the timbre of his voice tinged with a relief so palpable it almost reached out and embraced me. He fumbled for a moment before composing himself and his eyes briefly flickering in a yellow-light, before my cerebral interface notified me of an attempt to transfer data.

Naturally, I accepted and the detailed breakdown of the location and identity of Mr. Shori's contact person was added to my database.

As the gravity of my decision sank in, I felt the weight of the data-shard case as it was subtly slipped into one of my pockets—a smooth transfer unseen by the bustling world around us.

Mr. Shori continued to shower me with thanks, each one landing with an increasing sense of discomfort.

"{Please, that's enough}," I finally blurted, a flush of embarrassment warming my cheeks. "{Go handle some customers or cut some algae or something}," I suggested, with an awkward chuckle, hoping to deflect the intensity of his gratitude.

Internally, I grimaced at the reminder of my true motivation. I wasn't the altruistic hero he painted me to be. I'd literally rejected him, initially, and it was only the System's cruel twist on my fear of missing out that swayed my decision.

But what Mr. Shori didn't know wouldn't hurt him. As long as I got my hands on the promised rewards, I was content to play the part he needed.

Switching back to English, Mr. Shori gave me one of his typical thumbs-up gestures, "Thank you, Sera. Fast, quiet! Good Luck!"

I gave him a last, firm, nod before walking out of the stall's backdoor.

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Barely seconds had passed since I'd left the tentative sanctuary of Mr. Shori's stall, and already the bustling chaos of the street seemed to jeer at my hastily made decision. I mentally chastised myself with a fierce internal rebuke.

'What the actual fuck were you thinking, Sera?! Have you lost your damned mind?! You just lectured yourself on the sacred principle of self-preservation, and then, what? Some digital prompt flashes before your eyes and suddenly you're ready to throw all that caution to the wind? Brilliant, just brilliant. And for what? A smidgen of character experience and a measly single Skillpoint?! If you wind up dead, they're not worth a damn. They'll vanish like smoke, and you, you utter fool, you'll be dead!' My thoughts raged against my own impulsivity, branding me a complete idiot, playing at a game with stakes far beyond some XP and Skill points.

Weaving through the thick swarm of the marketplace's lifeblood, the myriad souls each ensnared in their daily hustle, I scrutinised the map and intelligence package that Mr. Shori had discreetly transmitted to me.

'So, floor 21 is the target,' I thought, *'and the rendezvous point is at "The Downpour"—sounds like a bar or something. Better not be a members-only kind of joint.'* I let this thought simmer in the back of my mind as I meandered by an eclectic array of stalls that spilled onto the street and brick-and-mortar establishments burrowed into the skeletal structure of the 16th floor.

To conceal my true intent, I adopted the guise of just another curious onlooker, a wanderer indulging in the vibrancy of one of the many mega building's markets. I deftly sidestepped hawkers peddling their wares and paused occasionally to feign interest, all while allowing the sea of bodies to wash over my presence, eroding any distinct trail I might leave behind.

As I drifted among the stalls, my gaze flitting from gaudy trinkets to practical wares, I also took the opportunity to familiarise myself with the peculiarities of the 16th floor's anatomy, committing to memory the arteries that coursed through the megastructure, knowing such knowledge could be a lifeline in a future unforeseen crisis.

Much to my surprise, I was greeted by a familiar sounding chime coming from the System.

[System]: *[Stealth] Skill unlocked.*

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

[System]: *100xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

'Oh wow, this counted for [Stealth]?!'

This wasn't just any skill—it was poised to become an indispensable part of my arsenal being an absolute S-tier Skill and the very first of my Edge Attribute Skills, carving open a path to hone each of my Attributes. The euphoria of this realisation surged through me like an electric current.

But the initial rush of excitement swiftly cooled into a sobering draught of realisation.

The gears of my mind churned uneasily. *'Wait a second, does the system clock [Stealth] experience only when I'm consciously dodging the prying eyes hunting for me? Or does it kick in whenever I slip by unnoticed, regardless of whether any observers are actually on the lookout for me?'* The distinction was crucial, laden with profound implications that could alter the course of my furtive endeavours.

With a renewed sense of urgency, I ducked my head lower, allowing the shadow of anonymity to cloak my figure more tightly among the throng.

My thoughts suddenly crystalline amidst the clamour of the street. *'Hold on, let's approach this with a cool dissection of logic. The System, would it actually throw me a bone and notify me passively if I'm being hunted? That seems a stretch—the System I know wouldn't be so generous, not without some specialised Perk or Trait explicitly designed for it.'* I cast my mind back, sifting through my knowledge of the [Stealth] Skill in the original Neon Dragons game.

*'Shit, that's right. The game worked **exactly** like that. It granted [Stealth] experience solely in the presence of adversaries, a built-in safeguard against the exploitation of its mechanics—you couldn't just shadow-dance in a secured zone and script your way to mastering [Stealth]...'*

But I had also already confirmed that this world was not bound by the static rules of the game. Things had changed, evolved. The landscape of Skills had expanded into uncharted territory, leaving me to navigate its nuances without a map, without any prior knowledge.

With caution as my guide, I resolved to linger in the fray of the marketplace, to blend into the tapestry of faces and voices for another hour, maybe two. Then I'd seek out the solemn quiet of the restricted elevators, weaving through different floors and possibly switching lifts.

A paranoid overkill? Perhaps.

But in a world where certainty was as elusive as shadows at dusk, paranoia could very well be the thread that kept the fickle fabric of my existence alive.

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After about an hour and a half, wandering aimlessly among countless shops and stalls—none of which held any allure for my specific needs—I finally stepped into the muted calm of a restricted elevator.

I deliberately avoided the one I typically used, choosing instead a lesser-known alternative I had found during my random strolling. Recognizing the subtle features of these concealed lifts was becoming second nature to me—so much for their secretive charm.

Once inside, I was somewhat constrained by the limited options; I could only journey to and from the designated restricted floors. Though I would have preferred to obfuscate my movements further by selecting an entirely different destination, my choices were limited, and I found myself reluctantly keying in the 43rd floor.

As the elevator made its ascent, I sifted through the slew of notifications that had popped up during my ruse.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Edge Attribute.

'I'm edging closer to that initial knowledge infusion... It'd be a boon if I could achieve it before stepping into "The Downpour"—whatever that establishment might be,' I pondered.

I continued to muse as the elevator rose up, thinking about my earlier deductions, *'at least I feel a lot more certain that my initial thoughts about the [Stealth] Skill are accurate. I seriously doubt I had anyone actively follow me for the entire duration since I left Mr. Shori's stall, yet I kept getting experience drops pretty consistently. Still: I won't let down my guard quite yet. Not worth it.'*

Arriving on the 43rd floor, the hush of the sparsely populated corridors was my only greeting.

With the intricate web of routes Oliver had furnished me with only a day past, I was confident I wouldn't find myself turned around in these labyrinthine passageways. My pace was swift, each step purposeful as I navigated through the quietude of the residential floor that I called home.

The elevators lay ahead, and I zeroed in on the standard one—a calculated choice to muddy any tracks I might be leaving behind. Using the restricted lifts at both ends of my journey would be tantamount to laying breadcrumbs straight to my doorstep for any potential followers, even normal gangers would be smart enough to figure this out.

Subtlety was key.

The wait for the elevator was interminable—fifteen minutes of thumb-twiddling while the system diligently ensured the absence of unregistered entities, an inconvenience of high-security living. At last, the doors parted with a hushed whoosh, and I stepped into the cabin, issuing the command to descend to the 21st floor on the nearby display.

I muttered a pep talk under my breath, a litany meant to steel my nerves.

"This is it, Sera. Just blend in. You're on a casual visit to 'The Downpour,' an innocent foray, nothing more." The drumbeat of my heartbeat was a stark counterpoint to my feigned calm, thrumming loud in my ears as the elevator commenced its descent.

The doors of the elevator parted with their usual merry tone, a stark contradiction to the atmosphere that awaited outside. As I stepped onto the 21st floor of the megabuilding, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I had crossed into an alien realm.

The "street" before me was a far cry from the cleaner corridors I was accustomed to; it was a vision of neglect and despair, as if the very essence of dreariness had settled into the concrete.

Half-broken neon signs flickered spasmodically, giving off a sickly glow that cast long, ominous shadows across the hallway. They advertised a slew of establishments, from pawn shops peddling questionable electronics to bars that seemed too sordid to promise anything but trouble.

The main hallway I had found myself in branched off into several side passages, reminiscent of backstreets, each with its own character. Brightly lit alleyways shouted promises of cheap thrills and bargains, luring in passersby with a facade of cheerfulness that couldn't quite reach their depths. In stark contrast were the darker paths, void of any welcoming light, where the absence of signs was a sign in itself — no good awaited there.

Instinctively, I gave these areas a wide berth, my steps unconsciously quickening as I passed them.

The people were as varied as the stores Sera passed by.

Punkers sporting neon hair and cybernetic enhancements leaned against the walls, eyeing the crowd with a mix of disdain and opportunism while clearly gripping some concealed heat in the hands that weren't throwing back another bottle.

Drunken businessmen staggered out of dive bars, their ties loosened and eyes unfocused, too absorbed in their own decline to notice the world around them. And then there were the Vir-Girls, the Neon Dragons' answer to society's oldest profession.

They lounged at nearly every corner, their bodies on display in a manner that bordered on artifice, their synthetic beauty both alluring and unsettling. They were a stark contrast to my own preferences for attire and demeanour—their exposed skin and provocative postures seemed as much a part of the commerce of the streets as the neon signs and hawker cries.

'I'm extremely out of place here, aren't I,' I thought to myself as I tried to keep myself as inconspicuous as possible. However, not long after I had that thought, I spotted a group of teenagers around my age stumbling out of a nearby dive-bar.

They wore their youth like a badge of honour, a stark contrast to the weathered facade of the street, but there was an unmistakable edge to them. Their grey-leather jackets were emblazoned with a symbol that spoke of their allegiance—a snarling cybernetic wolf, its electric blue eyes glaring menacingly from the dark fabric.

Their demeanour was brash and unyielding, a youthful arrogance that only the ignorance of adolescence could furnish. Laughter and rough banter bounced amongst them, a bubble of bravado that seemed to shield them from the grim realities of the street.

Across the way, their apparent antagonists bore a starkly different emblem—a crimson phoenix rising from a circuitry nest, wings ablaze with digital flames. Their colours were a deep red and gold, hues that shone like a warning light in the dusky corridor.

The teenagers exuded a rowdy energy, their movements loose and reckless, while the group of more adult-looking gangers carried themselves with a disciplined tension, each movement deliberate, almost like a dance of controlled power.

As the two groups clashed, the air between them crackled with the electricity of impending conflict. Insults were traded with increasing venom, and what began as a war of words quickly threatened to devolve into a more physical confrontation as one of the teenagers pulled a serious looking combat knife from a holster at their waist.

I ducked into the shadows of a nearby store's overhang, its flickering sign providing a canopy of dim light and anonymity. My heart pounded against my ribcage, not in fear, but in the anxious understanding of the volatility of the situation.

Other pedestrians, too, seemed to sense the brewing storm; their steps quickened, their heads turned away, as if the act of seeing could somehow draw them into the fray.

Here in the depths of Neo Avalis, the life I had once known was replaced with the shadow play of survival, where allegiances were marked by symbols and colours, and where even the uninvolved could become unwitting pawns in the territorial fights of gangers.

Nestled within the shadowed alcove, I grappled with the complex web of Neo Avalis gang politics. Though I had taken refuge to remain unnoticed, my innate curiosity had its claws deep within me.

What had sparked this confrontation?

Was it just the usual turf squabbles, or had something more significant occurred?

Knowledge, after all, was the lifeblood of any city's underbelly. Understanding the intricate relationships and power struggles of the gangs that roamed the corridors of the megabuilding was vital. If I aimed to be more than just another face in the crowd, if I aspired to not just eke out an existence but to truly thrive at some point, I had to be in the know.

What better time to start gathering information than right now?

I edged closer, my ears hungry for every scrap of dialogue.

Amid the cacophony of shouting and jeers, a distinct voice rang out, laden with youthful bravado, yet carrying an undeniable weight of authority. "So you GoldChickens think you can just waltz up here? Did you actually believe the Byte Wolves would just stand by and watch? You're delusional. The Clawed Beasts are our sworn brethren, and you've crossed into their territory. I suggest you rethink your move and fuck off, or we'll make you regret it."

The voice, confident yet tinged with the rawness of youth, stood out.

It wasn't just the words but the tone—assertive and, in a way, protective. It was evident that he held some stature within the Byte Wolves, likely born into the gang or adopted into its ranks very early on.

My mind began connecting the dots, attempting to weave together a narrative from the fragments of information I had gleaned. *'Is he the leader of this younger group? And the Byte Wolves, are they just fledgling upstarts or a branch of a larger, more formidable gang network...? Golden Chickens are probably the older guys, although I seriously doubt that's their actual gang's name...'*

The verbal sparring escalated, the air crackling with tension as the reply sliced through the hubbub. Sharp, scornful, laced with a mix of contempt and irritation, the retort cut a clear path to my eavesdropping ears.

“Golden Chicken, that's the best you've got? Recycling old taunts like it's going to score you points, Forn. I honestly expected something a bit more original from you. Or have your wits dulled along with your gang's reputation? Listen up, let me educate you and your ragtag band of wannabes—Golden Phoenix doesn't concern itself with the opinions of petty upstarts like Byte Wolves. You claim this is the domain of the Clawed Beasts? Then fetch me one that can actually bite and not just bark, pup. I have no time to parley with mongrels.”

As the taunt hung heavy in the air, a small smirk played upon my lips. My earlier surmises didn't seem so far off now. *'Golden Phoenix, Byte Wolves, Red Snakes, Clawed Beasts. Are those the four gangs Mr. Shori had mentioned? Or are the Byte Wolves and Golden Phoenix separate entities altogether, uninvolved in the whole protection racket that Mr. Shori had gotten involved in? In a sprawling megabuilding like this, teeming with over a hundred thousand souls, it doesn't seem particularly likely for only four gangs to hold sway... So probably uninvolved. Or, at the very least, not directly responsible. Either way, they're blocking my path towards "The Downpour", so I'll just have to—'*

Before I could finish the thought, I instinctively ducked, nearly throwing myself flat on the floor as the tell-tale sound of a handgun went off. A brief moment of shocked silence followed, before the once tense, but still relatively calm scene erupted into sheer chaos.

Steel glinted under the dim neon lights as knives and blades of all kinds flashed between members of both gangs. But amidst the whirlwind of swinging weapons and grunts, Forn, with his dishevelled hair and wild, yellow eyes, stood distinct.

He held an old, rusty handgun, somewhat reminiscent of an M1911 from my past-life, its smoky barrel pointing at the fallen leader of the Golden Phoenix. The man lay motionless, a growing pool of blood around him telling the tale of where Forn's first bullet had lodged.

The clash that ensued was barbaric and frenzied. Gangers slashed and stabbed with a rabid intensity, each blow meant to wound or kill. Every so often, punctuating the cacophony of grunts and shrieks, was the sharp report of Forn's gun. Each bullet found a target, each shot further tilting the scales in favour of the Byte Wolves.

To me, watching this horrifying violence unfold, time seemed to elongate. Every cut, every scream, every drop of blood that splattered on the metallic floor played out in grotesque detail. Yet, in reality, the entire skirmish spanned mere seconds.

As suddenly as it had started, it began winding down.

The Byte Wolves emerged as the dominant force. Many of the Golden Phoenix lay either dead or writhing in pain, clutching their wounds. Only a few managed to escape the onslaught, fleeing into the shadows of the alleyways. Two of the Golden Phoenix, seemingly of some importance, or maybe just because they were the least injured at first glance, were seized by the Byte Wolves.

Forn, now with a macabre grin, stepped towards the fallen leader of his rivals.

Without hesitation, he shot him in the head, an act of finality and dominance. Spitting on the corpse, he seemed to savour this moment of victory as he seemed to say something to the body that I was too frightened and too far away to hear. The Byte Wolves then hastily retreated, dragging their own wounded and the two captured Phoenix members with them.

The corridor, once buzzing with energy, now lay eerily silent, save for the occasional whimper of the injured and dying. I slowly emerged from my hiding spot, taking shallow breaths, every fibre of my being shaken by the raw brutality I had just witnessed.

The harrowing truth of Neo Avalis and its intricate gang politics, which I had always been aware of but never truly felt in my bones, only having watched it unfold on screens in my past life, had brutally unfolded before my very eyes.

My mind was fully numbed by the shock, unable to process what had just happened in front of me. I had never seen a person die before, much less in such a brutal, senseless way.

I'd always thought I understood the brutal nature of the cyberpunk genre—its unrelenting cruelty, its stark darkness, its perverse disregard for the sanctity of life.

But witnessing a massacre, with over a dozen victims sprawled just metres from where I stood, their lifeblood pulsating out in a gruesome rhythm, was an experience far removed from mere understanding. Among them, shockingly young faces, perhaps even my age or younger, stared vacantly back.

There, amid the carnage, a young girl caught my attention.

She wore a faded grey-leather jacket, its back emblazoned with a cybernetic wolf. The once brilliantly neon-blue eyes of the wolf were now tainted crimson, mirroring the fresh blood pooling around her. Her own eyes, vacant and still, spoke of the sheer terror and pain she must've felt as a blade tore into her, ending her short-lived existence.

Confronted with this grim reality, her lifeless eyes serving as a chilling reminder of the true underlying rules of this new world I found myself in, I couldn't hold back any longer—my breakfast made a violent reappearance...