

Chapter 48 - Aftermath

My brain was mired in a fog, stubbornly refusing to latch onto any semblance of rational thought as I fixated on the System Notification before me.

The clarity of the situation was stark, leaving no room for doubt or questioning. Those two lines conveyed a truth I couldn't deny to understand the implications of.

In Neon Dragons, the [Murder] Skill was a grim milestone, typically marking a player's first lethal encounter. It was a skill that could only be acquired through one means, and one means only: Taking another's life.

The game, in its design, nudged players towards this inevitability early on, introducing the basic mechanics through a tutorial that culminated in a defensive but fatal shot against a scav. This was a deliberate choice by the developers, a way to integrate a critical, albeit dark, aspect of the game's reality under the guise of self-defence, avoiding the outright promotion of senseless violence from the get-go.

Not that this stopped the murder hobo players from then taking it to the extreme in the name of experience gains, of course.

Originally, the naming of the [Murder] Skill had struck me as peculiar.

Why choose such a specific and ominous title, when something more neutral like [Killing] or even a more "cool" sounding term like [Manslaughter] might have sufficed? The rationale behind this choice, however, had very quickly become clear.

The game's developers, and subsequently the architects of the System I was now subject to, had a deliberate strategy in their naming conventions. They aimed to encapsulate the full essence and/or optimal practices of a [Skill] through its name alone.

In the case of [Murder], this was particularly evident.

Earning experience through the act of killing was one thing, but the game, and by extension the G.E.M.A. System, differentiated the experience based on the nature of the act.

Premeditated and carefully planned killings yielded more experience than impulsive or defensive actions. Hence, the skill was aptly named [Murder]—directly suggesting the most efficient way to accrue experience in that particular skill was through deliberate, calculated acts of murder.

As the words "[Murder] Skill Unlocked" hovered before my eyes, a chilling numbness had enveloped me. My mind, reeling in shock, struggled to comprehend the gravity of what those words implied.

I had killed someone.

The fact was stark, unyielding, yet my mind fervently sought any loophole, any possible error that might negate this horrifying truth.

*'No, this can't be right,' I argued internally, my thoughts spiralling into denial. 'It's a mistake. It has to be. I didn't kill anyone. I couldn't have. I just threw some random debris at them! They were all alive when I left, I know it! This **must** be a mistake! Recalculate your messages, System!'*

But as much as I tried to refute it, the reality was laid bare before me, unchangeable and absolute. The G.E.M.A. System refused to heed any of my requests to reconsider, to rethink, to recalculate—not for a lack of trying on my part.

The sensation I felt was akin to standing on the edge of an abyss, peering into an unfathomable darkness that threatened to swallow me whole. My heart raced, pounding against my chest as if trying to escape the inescapable truth that the System's notification had presented and refused to let go of.

Each attempt to rationalise it away felt feeble, desperate.

'I didn't kill anyone,' I repeated in my head, a mantra that seemed increasingly hollow with each repetition, with each attempt at trying to deny the System's objective telling of the truth.

A deep, unsettling dread began to take root, the kind that gnaws at the very core of your being, leaving you hollow and disoriented. In that moment, I was lost in a sea of confusion and denial, unable to accept the stark reality that I, inadvertently or not, had crossed a line from which there was no return.

"Please... I swear I didn't... It wasn't my intention..." I found myself whispering between sobs, the tears that had silently begun to flow at some unknown moment now fully acknowledged in my despair.

Deep in my heart, I had harboured the grim acceptance that this moment had to come at one point or another, ever since I awakened within the confines of Neon Dragons by whatever mysterious forces had consigned me to this fate.

In this cyberpunk dystopia, life's value had long plummeted to depths unfathomable to me hitherto.

The brutal actions of the guards on the 33rd floor had laid this truth bare, their reckless gunfire into innocent crowds while pursuing me and Aki a harrowing proof to the cheapness of existence here.

Gradually, I had been bracing myself for the inevitable moment when self-defence would morph into the necessity to take a life, or for the sake of an Operation, should I earnestly tread the path of an Operator.

Yet, the reality of it crashed down on me with a weight I was thoroughly unprepared to bear.

I had harboured a wish, very much knowing naively, that when the moment came to take someone else's life for the first time, it would carry significance, a twisted form of meaning.

Like those scavs who had targeted Gabe, the dregs of society who sought to snuff out a kindred spirit without a second thought.

Killing them would have carried a semblance of justice, a way for me to justify the act, to *gradually adapt* to the grim acceptance that life here was not held in the esteem I was accustomed to in my previous existence, where life was cherished above nearly everything else.

Yet, all my rationalisations and imagined scenarios crumbled under the weight of the System's irrevocable notification, a reminder of an action that couldn't be undone or pleaded away, leaving me engulfed in a turmoil of regret and confusion...

—

As I lay there, my mind slowly emerged from the haze of disbelief, transitioning into a chilling calm. The tears had dried up, but the weight of realisation remained heavy on my chest.

I began piecing together the probable series of events: *'One of them must have bled out... The debris was sharper than I had thought, and my throw had also been way more forceful than I ever thought possible... It's likely an artery was hit, or an organ damaged beyond quick repair.'*

The logic was cold, clinical and similarly undeniable as the notification still taking up the majority of my vision.

My mind, in its search for answers, fixated on the man who had been holding Aki. *'Was it him? He was my primary target... his arms, they were so badly damaged.'*

These thoughts echoed in my mind, a macabre attempt at making sense of the chaos.

With effort, I peeled myself off the cold bathroom floor.

Slowly, I got myself up from the ground, my whole body aching, shivering and freezing from the cold of the bathroom floor and the realisation of my actions having seeped deep into my very bones: My actions had irreversible consequences, a fact I was only now beginning to fully grasp.

There were no redos. No save points. No reloads.

I had killed somebody in my attempt to save Aki and there was nothing I could do about it now.

"Nothing I can do about it," I whispered to myself, the words feeling like a feeble attempt to ward off the creeping cold that had taken hold of my body.

After drying off and hastily throwing on something to wear, I trudged out of the bathroom, every step heavy with a sense of detachment. The urge to dismiss the notification was strong; I couldn't bear to face it any longer.

"Nothing I can do..." The words felt hollow, echoing in the silent hallway as I aimlessly moved towards the room I shared with Gabriel.

But then, a sudden lurch within my stomach broke through the fog encasing my thoughts, a physical revolt against the reality of my actions.

My body convulsed with an overwhelming urge to purge, and I succumbed to it, vomiting uncontrollably near our door. Each heave felt like an attempt to rid myself of the guilt that clung to my conscience, leaving me gasping and weak.

"Ugghh..." The sound of my own voice was distant, a reminder of the mess I'd have to face.

Yet, before I could muster the strength to clean, the nausea gripped me again, a relentless cycle that left me drained and sprawled helplessly on the floor amidst the chaos I had created.

Curiously, once the violent episode had passed, clarity began to seep back into my thoughts.

The mental fog and the numbing detachment that had shrouded my senses lifted noticeably, leaving behind a stark awareness of my surroundings and the gravity of my situation.

"Are we okay now, Sera?" I whispered to myself, a feeble attempt to rally my spirits as I painstakingly lifted myself from the cold embrace of the floor.

With a determined, albeit shaky, resolve, I returned to the bathroom. There, I methodically washed away the bile that clung to my skin, a grimy but very much necessary act of self-care. Afterward, I gathered the modest array of cleaning supplies from the bathroom cabinet, embarking on the task of erasing the physical evidence of my earlier distress.

As I scrubbed the floor, the repetitive motion offered an unexpected form of solace.

It was as if with each stroke, I was attempting to scrub away not just the remnants of my physical reaction but the deeper, more indelible marks left on my conscience by the day's events.

There was an absurdity in the notion that the act of cleaning could absolve me of my actions or the haunting reality that I had ended a life. Yet, for a fleeting moment, the simple, tangible act of cleaning provided a brief respite from the turmoil within.

However, the clarity that followed the storm of nausea was unyielding.

It stripped away any illusions of innocence or misunderstanding.

The stark reality was that I had taken a life, and no amount of physical cleansing could wash away that fact. It was a truth I had to confront head-on, accept, and learn to live with, I knew.

The mental fog that had clouded my judgement was dissipating, allowing me to piece together a coherent understanding of the events that had led to this moment and the critical missteps I had taken while attempting to save Aki.

This newfound clarity was a double-edged sword.

It offered a path forward, a means to analyse and learn from my errors, but it also laid bare the full weight of my actions.

"I've got to dive deeper into understanding what I can *really* do," I mused, acknowledging that the true error lay not in my attempt to rescue Aki, but in my underestimation of my own skills—a consequence of never having tested them in-depth prior to such a critical, high-stakes situation.

The decision to utilise the [Sharpen] Perk in tandem with the [Blademaster's Throw] had seemed like the only viable option in the heat of the moment, a choice driven by necessity rather than experience.

Yet, this was a combination I had never practically implemented before.

It was a concept I had entertained in theory, certainly, but without any real-world application, I couldn't have anticipated the devastating outcome it would ultimately yield. This lack of foresight, this gap in my understanding of the powers that the System granted me access to, had inadvertently steered me onto the path of becoming a murderer—whether I had intended to become one or not.

With a newfound sense of determination, I set a firm goal for myself: "Tomorrow, I research."

It was clear that moving forward, I needed a comprehensive grasp of my capabilities to avoid any more unintended consequences. This wasn't just about honing my Skills anymore; it was about gaining the necessary control and insight to ensure I never found myself in a similar situation again.

With my shift at Mr. Shori's cancelled and no other obligations on my plate, the path was clear for some serious self-education.

"Long overdue," I admitted to myself, a tinge of regret in my voice.

If only I had taken the time to delve deeper into the G.E.M.A. System's intricacies sooner, perhaps I could have avoided the recent disastrous turn of events.

Just as I finished cleaning up and was about to turn and go to stow away the cleaning supplies, a familiar chime from my cerebral interface caught my attention.

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

A wry smile crossed my face at the irony.

"Might as well make a start now," I mused aloud.

With newfound resolve, I set about cleaning the entire apartment.

It was an ideal opportunity to explore just what exactly that elusive [Maid] Skill was all about in real-time. Tomorrow's deep dive into the System's offerings was crucial, but why not get a jump on it with something I was already engaged in and would have to do anyway?

It was time to understand every facet of my Abilities and Skills, starting with the seemingly mundane task of being a [Maid] for nobody but myself...

—

—

PoV: Vega

Inside the dimly lit office, Vega leaned back in his chair, his eyes scanning over a pile of documents strewn across his desk—he had always been someone to prefer the ease of destruction that good old fashioned paper provided over the risk of digital reports being able to be reconstructed. Each page in front of him was a complicated jigsaw puzzle of coded reports and undercover investigations, demanding his utmost attention.

He let out a weary sigh, feeling the weight of recent events, “Haaa....”

The Clawed Beasts had been riding a complete rollercoaster of challenges and triumphs in recent weeks, with the latter half being almost exclusively the second.

The key turning point had come unexpectedly from intel provided by Yan Shori, the owner of a modest yet popular food stall on the 16th floor. Shori’s cooperation had been a game-changer, providing them with surprisingly critical intelligence that had helped break the deadlock in their long-standing feud with the Red Snakes.

Thanks to this breakthrough, the Clawed Beasts had swiftly taken control of most protection rackets on the 16th floor. Their influence spread like wildfire, starting from Shori’s Noodles and rapidly engulfing other market stalls. Only a handful of businesses still remained under the Red Snakes' thumb, their loyalty cemented by familial connections within the gang itself.

As Vega pondered over the documents, he couldn't help but acknowledge the strategic advantage they had gained, all thanks to an unlikely alliance with a random food stall owner.

The battle was far from over, but these recent victories brought a rare glimmer of hope in their relentless struggle for dominance.

Vega leaned back in his chair, his gaze reminiscently fixed on the ceiling as he contemplated the remarkable progress they had made, a stark contrast to the stagnant period that had preceded it.

The catalyst for this sudden advancement was undeniably the unexpected yet astute intel from Yan Shori.

He couldn't help but wonder aloud, as he had many times before, "How the fuck did Shori even come across such critical information to begin with?"

The first time Vega had laid eyes on the detailed intel, hand-delivered by the enigmatic Operator known as "Ela," he had been beyond sceptical.

It had seemed too good to be true.

Yet, after exhaustive verification, the data had checked out, perfectly aligning with Shori's claims.

The Red Snakes, it turned out, were embroiled in an intense internal power struggle.

The recent death of their old boss had left a power vacuum, with the two potential heirs locked in a bitter feud over control of the gang. Remarkably, this internal discord had remained well-hidden, eluding even Vega's network of informants. To outsiders, it was simply the expected hand-off to the oldest heir, who went by the name of Ravis Alves, that had taken over the lead for the Red Snakes inside of Delta.

Yet reality was different.

His younger brother, Beltor Alves, had almost immediately tried to subsume his older brother's "rightful" inheritance. He was the more popular of the two, but tradition dictated that the lead over the gang went fully to Ravis, which had been the cause for the internal strife.

Things hadn't gotten heated enough for outsiders to get a glimpse at this struggle, but internally, this strife had become a major point of contention for all members.

It was only Yan Shori's unexpected intel that had shed light on the gang's well-hidden vulnerabilities, pinpointing specific locations where evidence of the turmoil could be found and exploited.

Vega couldn't help but feel a grudging respect for the unassuming stall owner who had managed to unearth such pivotal information, information that had eluded his own seasoned operatives for the past weeks.

He grudgingly had to acknowledge the Red Snakes' impressive ability to conceal their internal conflict. Despite his diligent efforts to unearth any leverage against them, the gang's internal strife had remained hidden until Yan Shori's intel had miraculously surfaced.

But in the ruthless world of gang politics, the endgame was what truly mattered.

And the endgame had been favourable for the Clawed Beasts.

The revelation of the Red Snakes' internal struggles had opened a golden opportunity, one they had swiftly capitalised on to expand their influence within Delta. Now, with the 16th floor predominantly under their control, they had gained a substantial increase in revenue and a strategic advantage in intelligence gathering.

This newfound control over a bustling market floor on one of the lower floors, a feat they had previously only dreamed of, had unexpectedly fallen into their lap. It was a significant win, one that promised to alter the dynamics of power within Delta and potentially beyond.

While higher floors were worth a lot more, in terms of capacity to make credits for the vendors and in-turn make credits for the gangs, the lower floors were where all the gossip happened. Where the opportunists and passer-bys decided to shop, if they came by Delta from the greater city at large.

This is where the Clawed Beasts would finally have a proper, secure foothold to expand their operations outside of Delta, with the intel they could gather on the 16th floor thanks to these rumours.

Vega, however, couldn't help but feel a mix of satisfaction and wariness at this sudden, massive shift in their fortunes. He simply couldn't shake the feeling that some unseen force had orchestrated their recent success.

The Clawed Beasts' takeover of the 16th floor had been executed with such ease and minimal sacrifice that it seemed almost too good to be true. No significant injuries on their side, no major obstacles; it was as if their path had been meticulously cleared by a masterful strategist with the surgical precision of a slicer, facilitating a smooth transition of power.

This eerie sense of an invisible guiding hand troubled Vega, keeping him awake at night as he pondered over the possible motives or entities behind this stroke of fortune. In his quest for answers, he had deployed numerous informants, scouring for any clue that could shed light on this mystery.

Yet, frustratingly, all efforts had yielded nothing—no leads, no hints, nothing that could explain the inexplicable ease of their expansion.

Naturally, he had also thoroughly investigated Yan Shori, but found absolutely nothing damning about him. Aside from being a seemingly successful businessman and chef, he was also a philanthropist at heart—one of the very few that Vega had ever seen with his own two eyes. They were a rare breed amongst the citizens of Neo Avalis; all too easily exploited.

Despite the lack of evidence, however, Vega vowed to remain vigilant and contemplative.

If his long experience in the treacherous world of Neo Avalis had taught him one crucial lesson, it was this: Nothing significant ever came without a price.

There was always a catch, a hidden cost lurking beneath the surface, especially when things seemed to proceed without any resistance. Vega understood that this unanticipated, frictionless victory on such a grand scale was bound to have repercussions, and he was determined to uncover them, whatever they might be.

As Vega's mind swirled with these unresolved questions, an abrupt, unexpected noise from outside his office window abruptly snapped him back to the present.

Without hesitation, his instincts kicked in, and he swiftly drew his Gandiv, a weapon he trusted implicitly for self-defence. Without a moment's hesitation, he reached for his Gandiv, a move as instinctive as breathing for him.

The Gandiv, a Tier 2 pistol, was his preferred choice for self-defence; compact enough to be easily hidden yet packing a considerable punch with its fully automatic capability and a rate of fire exceeding 2,000 rounds per minute. Vega had invested heavily in this piece from FelArms, and every moment of its service had validated that decision, despite the hefty price.

Maintaining an appearance of calm, he continued to seem engrossed in his documents. Yet, under the guise of casualness, he discreetly stashed the most critical reports into a hidden compartment beneath his desk.

This compartment was rigged to incinerate its contents upon a simple neural command, ensuring that sensitive information would never fall into the wrong hands.

Another loud bang resonated, the sound unmistakably coming from the metal staircase just outside his window. This staircase, which provided exclusive access to the building's roof, was now the apparent route of whatever—or whoever—was approaching.

Vega noted that the intruder made no effort to conceal their presence, the heavy impacts against the staircase echoing with a severe lack of subtlety. This blatant disregard for stealth indicated either a profound confidence or a complete ignorance of the dangers they were courting by approaching his domain so audaciously.

The commotion outside had fully captured Vega's attention.

With a quiet, practised grace, he rose from his seat, Gandiv securely in hand, though hidden from view. A series of sounds from outside suddenly sent a chill through his veins.

The rhythm of footsteps was familiar, yet alarmingly *off*.

Without hesitation, Vega flung the window open, peering up the staircase that snaked down from the roof to his office. This was a route known and accessible to only a select few, and despite his instincts screaming otherwise, he clung to a faint hope that his worst fears were unfounded.

But as his gaze locked with Jade's, that hope shattered.

Her eyes, usually sharp and alert, were now clouded with delirium.

"Jade!" His voice, a blend of alarm and urgency, cut through the stillness as he leapt through the window onto the staircase, closing the distance between them rapidly.

Her voice, feeble and apologetic, barely reached him. "Sorry, boss. I messed up bad," she murmured, her legs buckling under her own weight.

In a swift motion, Vega vaulted the last steps, catching her before she could fall.

With a mix of fear, care, and anger, he cradled her in his arms, quickly retreating back into his office. He shut the window and activated the armoured shutters with a neural command, ensuring their privacy and safety.

He then laid Jade down on his desk with a mix of tenderness and underlying frustration.

The emergency message he dispatched was terse but laden with urgency: ["My office. Now. Jade is hurt."]

Such brevity in his communication was uncharacteristic of Vega but spoke volumes of the gravity of the situation. Known for his precision in words, Vega's succinct message underscored the critical state Jade was in.

As Vega gently examined Jade, his hands moved with the precision of a seasoned field medic, despite his primary role being as far removed from any field-duty as possible.

The sight before him was grim: Jade's attire was saturated with blood, hinting at the severity of her injuries, while her skin bore the pallor of significant blood loss. Her clothes were torn in several places, revealing more about the struggle she faced than words ever could.

Vega's thorough inspection revealed a bullet wound in the lower region of her left back.

The bullet had mercifully spared her vital organs, a small piece of fortune amid the dire circumstances. He noted the makeshift bandages wrapped around her arms and hands, now thoroughly drenched in blood, indicating severe lacerations or puncture wounds beneath.

Additionally, her left leg presented a through-and-through bullet wound, the entry and exit points clean but the damage done was clearly significant, as evidenced by the blood that had filled her boot, creating a macabre reservoir of her spent life force.

This preliminary assessment painted a stark picture of the ordeal Jade had faced, and Vega's concern deepened with each new discovery. The immediate priority was stabilising her condition, but the undercurrent of his thoughts was dominated by questions about what had led to this moment and who was responsible for Jade's state.

The sound of hurried footsteps rapidly approaching Vega's office broke the tense silence, heralding the arrival of much-needed assistance. With a forceful push, the door flung open, crashing against the wall with a resounding thud that echoed through the room.

"What's going on?!" demanded a voice, sharp and tinged with urgency and an undercurrent of hostility, belonging to the figure that stormed into the room.

This was a woman Vega recognized immediately, her presence marked by the hefty leather bag she carried, bulging with medical supplies and equipment—a veritable portable clinic she brought with her wherever she went.

Vega stepped aside, granting her unimpeded access to Jade, who lay motionless on his desk.

"She's got lacerations mainly on her arms and hands, and two bullet wounds that luckily aren't critical," he explained quickly, each word laced with concern yet aimed at providing a clear picture of Jade's condition for Sapphira's benefit. "She's lost a significant amount of blood from those injuries. On top of that, her hands seem to have suffered from puncture wounds of some kind, that make up a pretty big chunk of her bleeding as well. Those are taken care of somewhat haphazardly, but not by Jade. Somebody helped her."

He paused, his gaze shifting between Jade and Sapphira, the weight of the situation pressing down on him.

"She just appeared on the staircase, barely conscious, saying she 'messed up'... I have some ideas about what might have led to this, but nothing solid. Not yet..." Vega's voice trailed off, the uncertainty evident as he watched Sapphira spring into action, preparing to tend to Jade's wounds with the expertise and urgency that the situation demanded.

The response from Sapphira sent a shiver down Vega's spine, her tone as icy as the look in her deep-blue eyes, which never wavered from the task at hand—meticulously cleaning Jade's wounds, searching for any foreign objects, and securing fresh bandages around the injured areas.

"You will figure out who did this, Vega. I won't let them get away with hurting my Jade, you hear me?" She declared with a steely resolve that left no room for doubt. "And if this mess ties back to that 'Ela,' you're so fixated on, hurting her, you'd better believe me: I will *end you*, Vega. I told you time and time again that Jade wasn't ready for this kind of solo-op yet!"

Sapphira's vehement reaction was not unexpected.

Vega had indeed brought them together—Jade, Ruby, Sapphira, and the others—forming a tight-knit but fragile bond among them. And while Vega was the linchpin of their assembly, the dynamic and connection shared among the girls themselves was both their greatest strength and most acute vulnerability.

Witnessing Jade in such a state ignited even a fury within Vega as well, a protective rage for his young prodigy who had been thrust too soon into such peril's path.

As Vega stood there, his mind racing, he couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease.

How had things escalated to this dire state?

The last update he had from Jade was routine: She had been shadowing the Operator named Ela, who had been frequenting Shori's Noodles, working as a chef, and then vanishing into the megabuilding's restricted areas.

Nothing out of the ordinary had been reported until recently.

The latest intelligence had painted a slightly more complex picture, but nothing to be concerned about. Ela had become aware of Jade's surveillance, yet there hadn't been any overt hostility on her part.

Moreover, with the Clawed Beasts' newfound dominance over the 16th floor, Jade had an abundance of safe havens and allies at her disposal. It was hard to fathom how she could have found herself in such a perilous situation without any apparent reason or warning.

Vega's thoughts were shrouded in confusion as he tried to unravel the mystery with the scant information at hand.

"What could have transpired to leave Jade in this condition...?" he pondered aloud, his voice tinged with frustration and concern.

He knew he needed answers, and he needed them fast.

Determination setting in, Vega decided it was time to confront the situation head-on and discover the truth behind the events that had unfolded.

With a sense of urgency, he dispatched a flurry of messages to his top investigators, those who weren't currently entangled in the ongoing skirmish with the Red Snakes.

He instructed them to abandon their current assignments and prioritise uncovering the events leading to Jade's current condition. Vega was prepared to take a direct approach as well, planning to question Jade herself the moment she regained consciousness.

But until that moment arrived, he was adamant about piecing together the narrative from the outside. He demanded swift and thorough investigations, knowing that every moment counted.

Vega was resolute: He would sift through the confusion of the moment, find the answers he sought, understand exactly how Jade had found herself in such a dire state and subsequently rectify those issues, personally...