

Chapter 23 - Vega

I practically jabbed a finger in the man's direction, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice or my manners in check. "It's you!"

With a chuckle that came out smoother than I expected, he lounged comfortably, the worn leather embracing him like an old friend. "Indeed, it's me," he replied, the amusement clear in his voice, as if we were sharing a private joke between old pals.

My thoughts were in a tailspin. *'He had to have tailed me, right? Wasn't that too much of a coincidence?'* It dawned on me, this man was indeed the contact I was supposed to meet here. Had he deduced my purpose from our unexpected encounter and shadowed me to this very spot? Or had he already been following me since the moment I had left Mr. Shori's stall?

What did I have to lose at this juncture? I was already in too deep.

"Did... did you tail me?" I ventured, half-expecting to be met with a cryptic evasion, my voice stocking momentarily, betraying my anxiety.

He regarded me with an expression that was an open book for a moment, his eyes thoughtful, then with a gentle nod, he confirmed, "Yes. Briefly. After our earlier brush, it seemed prudent to monitor your progress, we were moving in the same direction, after all. You adapted to stealthing around the floor quite aptly as well. Colour me impressed. And then, spotting you here, in the heart of the Downpour? I simply couldn't resist extending an invitation. My apologies for being so forward."

His voice was a curious mix of gravitas and fluidity, disarmingly charming, yet laced with an undertone that suggested he missed little to nothing. It was the kind of voice that could probably recite the evening news and somehow make it sound like an invitation to an adventure.

Completely sideswiped by Vega's abrupt introduction into my already hectic day, I was left scrambling for a game plan. It all seemed like an elaborate ruse, but to what end? My mind raced with possibilities, none of them particularly comforting.

"Have a seat, will you?" Vega invited a hint of hospitality in his tone as he motioned to the seat I'd unwittingly vacated in my surprise. I quickly reclaimed my spot, feeling a blush bloom on my cheeks. *'Smooth move, Sera,'* I chided myself internally for the lapse in my attempted cool exterior.

"How about a drink on me?" he offered, his fingers drumming lightly on the tabletop. At his touch, a colourful array of drink options sprung up in a vibrant holographic display.

Caught off-guard, I blurted the first fact that seemed relevant to the situation. "Ehh... I'm 15?" The words tumbled out before I could rein them in, and I watched as a flicker of amusement—or was it surprise?—crossed Vega's features. He cast a cursory glance around us, and for a second, I wondered if he'd mistaken me for someone older.

'No way he thought I was anything but a kid, right?' The thought bounced around my mind as I took in his searching look.

Then Vega's response hit me like a rogue wave. "Oh, my bad. Just checking for anyone who might've cared about that," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "I thought I was offering a drink, not asking for your ID. Let's keep this on track, professional-like, agreed? We can get to know each other later. I just find your presence here intriguing, nothing more."

I sat there, a mix of irritation and admiration brewing inside. He'd just pulled a slick, real-life version *'who asked?'* without even breaking stride.

Touche, Vega, touche.

The worst part? I couldn't even blame Vega; his reaction was spot on for Neo Avalis, where the concept of a legal drinking age was as foreign as a quiet day in the city, so me being 15 really had just been a random fact that had no correlation to anything here, that I had simply blurted out in response to being asked what kind of drink I wanted.

'Sera, what the fuck are you doing? Can you get your shit together for just a single minute here?'

I quickly chose a random drink off the menu, unwilling to open my mouth for any additional stupid remarks. I wasn't a fan of alcohol and didn't intend on drinking any, but I definitely did not feel confident enough in my current self to actually articulate this stance to Vega.

As I settled back into my seat, trying to shrink my presence, Vega leaned in, the playful light in his eyes sharpening into something more piercing. "Now, you know who I am. How about a name for you? I can't keep calling you 'girl' like you're some common street rat," he said, his tone teetering between jest and a veiled warning.

There it was—the switch flipped. The jovial, enigmatic contact had the undercurrent of something harder, something that spelled out 'no more games.' I felt the gravity of the conversation; one wrong word could tip the scales.

I was ready for this dance though. I'd rehearsed my steps on the way over, prepped for the inevitable probe into my backstory by whatever contact I had been bound to find here.

"The name's Ela," I responded, a little too sharply.

It wasn't a lie, not entirely. Ela was a fragment of my old gamer tag, a moniker that felt even more like a part of me than my real name—especially considering that I didn't even remember that one—and a heck of a lot safer to share. It was nondescript, it carried no baggage, and it wouldn't lead any curious cats back to my real-life doorstep.

A perfect alias to give to a ganger contact.

"Ela it is, then," Vega said with a nod, his voice easy but carrying an undertone that meant business. "Didn't expect to cross paths again so soon, especially not here at The Downpour. You looking to throw in with the Clawed Beasts?"

'Right to the heart of the issue, huh? This Vega character really is ruthless. I'm just a 15-year old girl, cut me some slack here!'

The thought of signing up for gang life was laughable. But hey, Neo Avalis played by different rules, and I got that. Gangs here weren't about dragging people into their ranks unwillingly—if they did, I wouldn't have accepted Mr. Shori's task in the first place.

Unlike the often ruthless and coercive gangs of old Earth, these ones harkened back to the original idea of gangs as close-knit communities, forged out of necessity in the harsh climate of this dystopian world.

In this city, where traditional law enforcement was as reliable as a paper umbrella in a typhoon, gangs carved out order in the chaos. They were the reluctant knights of the realm, offering a semblance of justice and security in territories the police seldom tread. That brand of justice might not always be by the book, but it was better than the complete anarchy that would likely reign without them.

However, throwing my lot in with them? That was a hard pass.

My independence was non-negotiable—at least, until the day came when it wasn't, of course. And even then, it'd take a hell of a pitch to get me to consider it.

"Join up? Oh, no thanks. Just passing through on a bit of business," I replied, keeping my tone light but my stance firm. No harm in being clear about where I stood—on my own two feet, thanks very much.

Vega's brows hitched upwards, clearly taken aback by my swift dismissal of gang life. His surprise etched a pause into our conversation, a moment of quiet that seemed to hang between us, slightly awkward as far as I was concerned.

This brief interlude was punctuated by the arrival of our drinks, the server deftly placing them on the table, breaking the silence without diminishing the weight of my refusal.

The drink that landed in front of me seemed to be a concoction straight out of a mad alchemist's dream. It was a layered cocktail, vibrant hues of neon green and electric blue swirling into a dance that defied the laws of liquid physics. Tiny bubbles fizzed from the bottom, carrying specks of gold leaf through the liquid, like shooting stars in a glass.

I watched, captivated by the miniature galaxy before me, the colours and sparkles a welcome distraction from the otherwise tense atmosphere.

A tiny, edible flower perched on the rim, its petals a bright, unnatural pink that caught the light and threw it back with a glimmer. I leaned in to sniff cautiously and was met with a scent that was both sweet and sharp, tickling my nose and making my head pull back a tad.

The aroma promised a taste of otherworldly delights or possibly a punch to the senses—I wasn't quite sure which.

Observing the drink in such detail, waiting for Vega to continue our conversation or dismiss my presence, I couldn't help but think, *'Wow, they really know how to put together a show for these drinks, holy fuck.'*

Despite my general aversion to alcohol, I couldn't help but take a miniature sip. Who could fault me for that, really? The thing looked incredible!

Taking a tentative sip, the cocktail was a symphony of flavours as complex and surprising as Neo Avalis itself.

Initially, the sweetness of the drink was almost overpowering, a sugary rush that hinted at exotic fruits—or rather: The idea of them. It was immediately apparent to me that there were no actual fruits involved, only the chemical mixtures that resembled whatever the inhabitants of this world thought fruits should taste like.

But quickly, it gave way to a tangy zing, sharp and refreshing, cutting through the sweetness like a neon light slicing through the city's smog. The effervescence of the tiny bubbles added a playful note, each one bursting on my tongue, somehow releasing bursts of flavour that were both spicy and cooling.

The strange, not-gold flakes added a luxurious texture, dissolving almost instantly as they met my palate.

The pink, edible flower, once consumed, lent an herbal aftertaste that grounded the drink's otherwise ethereal qualities, leaving a gentle, lingering note.

Honestly? I was straight up stunned.

This was by far the best drink I had ever tasted, in either life. Still not a fan of the alcoholic tang that could be found deep inside the flavour profile of the cosmic cocktail, but if I had to drink some alcohol? I'd probably choose this one.

Vega, nursing a drink that could only be described as 'spectacularly mundane' compared to my cosmic beverage, took a casual swig before shattering the silence.

"Shame, that. You struck me as a potential recruit with some real spark. But hey, what can you do?" He shrugged, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards in a half-smile. "If the winds change and you find yourself looking for a bit of camaraderie, just give me a shout. I'd be more than happy to vouch for you."

His generous proposition caught me off guard.

Our encounters hadn't exactly showcased me in the 'cool, calm, and collected' light. The first time he'd seen me, I was a hot mess—a puking, jittery mess at that. And yet, here he was, making offers as if I was some diamond in the rough.

It was... flattering? No, scratch that—it was as bizarre as a cat walking on its hind legs. Why the eagerness to recruit me? It was a puzzle wrapped in an enigma, sprinkled with a healthy dose of suspicion.

To probe or not to probe—that was the burning question.

I mean, Vega must've seen something in me, right? Some hidden gangster potential that was keeping me on the safe side of his intentions.

But what if he was wrong? What if asking him to spill the beans revealed that I was about as ready for gang life as a kitten is for a dogfight?

I really didn't fancy the idea of carving up anyone over a spat about gang colours or turf or... whatever else sparked the street chaos I'd seen earlier. Those glimpses of gang violence hadn't exactly been particularly instructional.

So I simply decided to play it cool, keeping my cards close to my chest. No need to tip him off that the most 'gang-ready' thing about me was apparently my ability to pick a random drink from a menu.

"Will do," I shot back, mustering a tone that was even and calm.

Vega let out a huff that straddled the line between amusement and exasperation.

"Alright then, Ela. Seems I've hijacked enough of your time," he said with a grin that suggested he knew more than he let on. "You came here on an errand, right? Since you're here at The Downpour and you're not signing up for the Clawed Beasts fan club, I figure you're here to finish your delivery. You're free to go. Just remember where to find me if you ever want to take me up on that offer."

Wait, that was it? I was free to go? No cryptic warnings, no veiled threats, or trying to entice me with tales of gang grandeur?

I was all geared up for a verbal tussle, ready to dodge recruitment pitches like they were laser beams. But here I was, being shown the door with no strings attached. It was like preparing for a boss battle and then finding out the boss was on vacation.

I couldn't help the mischievous spark that flickered to life within me, however. This was my shot, a golden ticket to flip the script on the mysterious, infuriatingly charismatic Vega. A chance to take the lead in this odd dance of ours for the first time.

I gave Vega a nod, thanking him for the drink that I'd barely sipped and the chat that had my head spinning more than any alcohol could. I stood, distancing myself by a mere step, then whirled around and reclaimed my seat with the flair of a stage performer at the climax of their act.

"Well, would you look at that? Fancy bumping into you here, Mr. Vega," I said, slapping on my best impression of a business deal going down in an old-timey flick, mixed with the usual air and voice I used for Valeria. "Ela's the name, and I've got a little something from Mr. Shori of the 16th. For your hands only, they said," I continued, my face a mask of earnest professionalism.

Smoothly, like I was pulling a rabbit out of a hat, I produced the data-shard case from my jacket and set it down on the table with a flourish. Leaning back, I gestured grandly towards

it, the universal sign for 'the ball's in your court'. My internal monologue was having a field day with this one. *'And for my next trick, I'll disappear without joining your gang.'*

Vega's reaction to my impromptu performance was a beat of pure, unfiltered confusion. His eyes widened a fraction, a perfect picture of a man who thought he'd seen all the tricks only to find a new one up my sleeve.

Then came the moment—the reveal of the data-shard case and the name-drop of Mr. Shori. It was like watching the dawn of understanding break across his face, followed by a sudden, boisterous laugh that bounced off the walls of the Downpour. He threw his head back, his mirth genuine and unrestrained, the tension melting away like ice in the neon glow.

"Ha! That's quite the act, Ela," he managed between chuckles, shaking his head in disbelief. "I've got to hand it to you. I didn't see *that* coming. And here I was, worried Mr. Shori might leave me hanging... Yet, at the end of the day, I was already talking to Mr. Shori's proxy all along. Fantastic."

The sound of his laughter was infectious, and despite my best efforts, a grin found its way onto my face. It felt good, ridiculously so, like I'd managed to win a round of chess against a grandmaster. Seeing Vega—a guy who probably played the game of shadows better than most—laughing at a twist I'd thrown? Priceless.

It was a small victory, sure, but hey, against a ganger of Vega's apparent calibre, I'd take what I could get.

"Yeah, I believe that's the intel on our friends with a penchant for crimson, I assume?" Vega confirmed with a hint of intrigue as he took the case into his hands.

"I believe so," I simply replied with a nod.

"Shori kept it close to the chest then? Just the bare bones, huh?" His tone suggested he was no stranger to operating on a need-to-know basis.

"That's about the gist of it," I concurred, watching as Vega's gaze intensified, his eyes briefly flaring a warning shade of red—a telltale sign of cybernetic activity, specifically one that generated a lot of heat. He was likely scanning the contents, verifying its authenticity or searching for hidden traps with some Quick-Hacks.

As his tech worked its silent magic, he threw a question my way, "How'd you get roped into this high-stakes delivery game anyway? You're not one of Shori's regulars at the shop, and you don't strike me as family. What's your angle here?"

I could tell he was piecing together his own mental profile of me. I filed away the tidbit that he and Shori were more than just acquaintances for later contemplation. *'Vega's probably one to keep tabs on everyone and everything,'* I mused inwardly, already anticipating our paths crossing again in the future.

"Oh, you know, just the way the world turns," I responded with a casual shrug, giving him the ol' quid pro quo spiel. "Mr. Shori threw me a solid, so I'm returning the favour—scratch my back, I scratch yours, and all that jazz."

The words came out smooth and practised because, in essence, they were the truth. Tacking on "and he pays me," felt like sprinkling a bit of street-wise seasoning on the tale. Because in Neon Dragons, free lunches were about as common as unicorns, and debts were always tallied with interest. It wasn't a deception, just a savvy addition to solidify my cover story.

"Yeah, you got that right," Vega agreed with a chuckle that rumbled from his chest, the sound rich with the wisdom of the streets. He popped the shard into his data-slot with the ease of someone who's done it a thousand times, his expression betraying nothing until the data passed muster.

In the lull that followed, as Vega combed through the shard's secrets, his face cracked into a grin that spoke volumes. Whatever he saw there, it was the sort of jackpot that could turn any ganger's head.

Then, with a theatrical clap that echoed over the murmur of the bar, he removed the shard, his jubilation palpable. "You've hit the motherlode for us, Ela," he announced, his usual cool demeanour washed away by a wave of excitement. "This little gem is a game changer. Shori's gonna get what's due, no doubt about it. You've knocked this one out of the park! Consider your delivery mission a full-blooded success!"

I was floored. Whatever was encoded on that shard must have been the equivalent of a winning lottery ticket in the gang world. *'Shori trusted me, a near-stranger, with this kind of power play? That's... a level of confidence I'm not sure I deserve. Or is in any way prudent to begin with. I need to talk some sense into Mr. Shori, for sure...'*

Vega leaned in, his next words icing the proverbial cake. "With the edge this gives us, you've got the Clawed Beasts in your corner. Need a favour? Some intel or muscle? You call me. We definitely owe you one for this. Could've easily sold out Shori and made bank if you brought this to the other side." His eyes sparked yellow, and suddenly, his contact was nestled among my list like a VIP pass to the underbelly of Neo Avalis.

There I was, a nobody from the upper floors, and now I'd somehow snagged myself a heavyweight contact in the Clawed Beasts. Talk about levelling up! This morning's agenda definitely didn't include becoming a made woman in gangland politics.

My Ego Attribute, bless its digital heart, didn't miss a beat. It steadied the whirlwind of emotions that threatened to knock me off my game, keeping me laser-focused on Vega and the potentially life-altering dialogue unfolding between us.

"Hey, I'm not one to leave a tab open," I quipped with a smirk. "Tempting as it was to cash in the shard for a quick buck, it wouldn't have squared with Shori. You've got to stand by some principles, right?" There was no backing down now, not when I was this deep in. Honestly, I hadn't had a clue about the shard's value, but betraying Mr. Shori? Not my style.

I've always put stock in the whole 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' philosophy. It was a big deal in my previous life, and I wasn't about to toss it aside just because Neo Avalis played fast and loose with the concept of honour.

Maybe it was old-fashioned, but some things were worth hanging on to—at least in my eyes.

"I highly respect that attitude. I really do. It's rare, and it'd serve you well with us," Vega said, his admiration ringing clear as a bell in his tone. It looked like I'd managed to snag a sliver of respect from him. "You sure you won't reconsider? Someone with your principles is a rare find in the Beasts' den."

But I was resolute, ready to parry his offer once more. "I'm flattered, really, but I'm not cut out for the gang life," I countered, my refusal firm but friendly. This was the kind of lasers I had prepared myself to dodge earlier—the boss had finally arrived!

"Alright then, if that's how you want it," he conceded, a touch of disappointment lacing his words, though it was quickly overshadowed by the buzz from his recent data-shard jackpot.

"Guess it's time for you to head on back up the elevator shaft, Ela. You've completed your mission. I'll give Shori the good news the old-fashioned way. And as for me?" He grinned, a twinkle of mischief in his eye. "Let's just say my schedule just unexpectedly filled up."

With that, Vega downed his drink in one smooth motion, slapped a credstick on the table for the tab, and offered a casual three-fingered salute. He sauntered away, leaving me alone with the remains of my fizzy, galaxy-in-a-glass drink, and a head full of 'what-just-happened?' thoughts.

So, that was that.

With a final, contemplative sip of the, mercifully small, cosmic concoction—because let's face it, ditching a drink that's been settled for is practically criminal in Neo Avalis—I stood up. The drink wasn't half bad, and the novelty of it was a perk, but my heart still lay with a good ol' glass of water.

Pushing back from the table, I navigated my way through the throng of the Downpour and out into the comparative quiet of the square, aiming for the nearest elevator.

True to the Clawed Beasts' style, the way to the elevators was clearly marked with their unmistakable insignia—a touch of organisational flair that other floors could definitely take note of.

Choosing the 32nd floor as my next stop was a random shot in the dark, a little detour to throw off any would-be tails. The relief of leaving the 21st floor behind was like a physical weight off my shoulders, and I let out a long, heavy sigh as the elevator doors closed—a breath I didn't realise I'd been holding.

The exhaustion hit me then, a tidal wave of fatigue. The adrenaline of dodging gang scuffles and navigating underworld politics with Vega had kept me running. Now, the day's events started to take their toll. The combination of the fear, the walking—so much walking—and the high-stakes meetup had drained my batteries to the last dregs.

I was running on empty, and the comfy confines of home couldn't come soon enough...

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- PoV: Vega -

No sooner had Vega's silhouette merged with the shadows than he was on his cerebral interface, pulling up a contact with practised ease. A familiar grunt greeted him, the kind that spoke of youth not quite spent on the grindstone of life.

"Jade, I need eyes on the ground. Get over here," he commanded, his voice all business.

"Whoa, take a breather, boss. On my way," came Jade's unruffled response. "Who's gotten under your skin?"

"Ela, or so she claims. That's the name you're looking for. She's an enigma wrapped in a riddle, and it's bugging me. She's still at The Downpour. Deets incoming. You know why you're the one for the job, right?" Vega's voice was steady, but the undercurrent of urgency was unlikely to be lost on Jade.

A pause stretched out, filled only by the digital whisper of data transfer.

"Got it. Not thrilled about tailing a kid, but I see the point. And boss, are you telling me this street urchin's got *you* turning in circles? That's a new one," Jade quipped, her tone a mix of scepticism and reluctant respect.

Vega was the Clawed Beasts' own human lie detector, a skill that had carved him a niche within the gang. His knack for deciphering motives and predicting actions was legendary, saving the gang more trouble than anyone cared to admit.

That a seemingly ordinary girl had slipped past his radar was enough to make even Jade, with all her street-hardened cynicism, take note.

Vega was no stranger to the oddities of human behaviour, but this girl, Ela, was truly a puzzle that resisted solving.

Initially, he had pegged her for just another sheltered flower from the upper floors, especially after witnessing her gut reaction to street skirmishes. But then she had flashed that combat knife with a poise that spoke of training and nerve, a stark contrast to the girl who had looked like she was about to pass out over her own vomit.

Their first exchange was riddled with incongruities as well. She had seemed like a deer caught in headlights, yet she'd stubbornly declined his aid, plunging deeper into the den of the 21st floor with a determination that hinted at more than just naiveté.

The moment that really threw him, though, was at the crossroads.

One second she was there, a beacon of awkwardness, and the next, after a momentary distraction on his part, she'd vanished like a ghost. Up until then, her attempts at staying under the radar had been clumsy at best, downright comical—or so he had believed.

But she must have been watching him, somehow, mirroring his vigilance, biding her time to throw off her fake act and evade his continued surveillance with the proficiency of a master.

That skill, that moment of her disappearing act, it was a move he'd only seen from seasoned Operators with a capital 'O'. It seemed this Ela was playing at a level he hadn't expected, and it was that realisation that had him calling Jade.

If anyone could unravel this mystery, it was her.

Vega's instincts were rarely off, and everything about his interaction with Ela at The Downpour had set them tingling. Everything about her screamed that she was playing a part. It was a part she played well, but not well enough to fool an old hand like Vega.

She was an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, and cloaked in a hoodie of mystery.

Dangerous? Possibly. Intriguing? Absolutely.

"Jade, treat her like she's as dangerous as I am. Don't underestimate her, and whatever you do, don't let her spot you," he instructed with a seriousness that underscored the gravity he placed on this task. He needed Jade to be thorough, discreet, and above all, cautious.

"Your level, Vega?! Fuck me... Are you sure I'm the right person for this?" The uncertainty in Jade's voice was as clear as daylight. The prospect of tailing someone who might be as adept as Vega himself at the cloak-and-dagger stuff was clearly daunting, even for a prodigy like Jade.

"I'm certain. You're the one for the job," Vega reassured her. Ruby had been a solid choice as well, but she wouldn't blend in—too old. Jade, with her youth and wit, was the perfect candidate. "You've got this. I'm counting on you," He said with finality, before ending the call.

As the call ended, Vega was left with the silence of his own contemplation.

He didn't doubt Jade's capabilities; her track record spoke volumes about her proficiency.

She was his eyes and ears now, and if there was anything to unearth about Ela, Jade would dig it up. Vega was certain of it.

Jade would unravel the mystery of Ela, and he would be waiting, ready to act on whatever she discovered...