

Chapter 15 - Exploring Delta

Before diving headlong into the unexplored world of Neo Avalis, I realised there was one crucial detail I needed to sort out: How to lock and unlock the apartment. The last thing I wanted was to find myself inadvertently locked out, forced to sit awkwardly in the hallway until Gabriel returned.

That would be a rather anticlimactic way to celebrate my newfound mobility!

With one foot strategically placed over the threshold to prevent the door from closing, I turned my attention to the biometric lock panel mounted on the wall beside it.

'Looks just like the game version,' I mused, staring at the familiar design. Tentatively, I placed my hand on the panel's sensor.

A muted beep punctuated the silence, and the LED display above the pad flickered to green, displaying the message "ACCESS GRANTED."

'That clears up that little mystery,' I thought, relieved. Confident now, I took my foot off the threshold and allowed the door to close behind me.

For the first time, I stood entirely outside the apartment, both feet firmly planted in a world that had previously been confined to my screen. It was a strange, exhilarating but also deeply anxiety inducing feeling. But I was way too excited to really feel the anxiety!

With newfound freedom in my steps, albeit tentative ones, I ventured deeper into the labyrinthine ecosystem that was the megabuilding.

These towering monoliths were self-contained cities, vast fortresses of rock-crete, steel, and neon that could shelter over 100,000 people. Everything from high-end shops to lowly food vendors, from corporate offices to grimy factories, could be found within these walls.

In the game, there was even a companion who had never left their home megabuilding; their introductory quests had been a crash course in adjusting to life outside this self-contained universe.

As I navigated through the sensory overload of trying to look at everything at the same time, I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between our floor and the chaotic, dishevelled layers I'd seen in the game.

Here, things were different—cleaner, more orderly, less congested.

Sure, the cyberpunk aesthetic was intact—glowing neon, grungy stalls, and all—but there was a relative calm that I found unsettling. A sense of managed anarchy, a chaos contained.

The air was fresher, the doors to each apartment seemed more upscale, and even the graffiti adorning the walls appeared more like commissioned art than the frenzied tags of rebels or gangs.

It dawned on me then that my family must be exceptionally fortunate.

Valeria's employment status likely granted us access to one of the building's more 'privileged' floors. It was a sobering thought, a sharp tug pulling me back from the euphoria of exploration.

In Neo Avalis, your social and economic standing was glaringly apparent right down to the specific floor you inhabited within these sprawling megabuildings—a vertical, labyrinthine representation of societal hierarchy.

After roughly ten minutes of navigating through the maze-like corridors of our floor, I arrived at the first elevator bay.

If the game's mechanics had any semblance of truth in this reality—and so far they seemed to—there would be hundreds of these elevators strategically positioned throughout the behemoth structure, designed to shuttle its teeming masses with some modicum of efficiency.

Hesitantly, I stepped into the elevator, immediately struck by the eclectic collage that adorned its interior. Graffiti in fluorescent hues screamed from the walls, creating a wild tapestry of street art that clashed boldly with the faded remnants of older, peeling stickers.

Amongst this cacophony were flyers—some worn and torn, others freshly pasted—advertising everything from room rentals to local dive bars. Digital ads flickered on embedded screens, hawking cybernetic implants and the latest stimulant drugs.

This visual chaos, however, halted abruptly at a giant TV screen that occupied the back wall. Encased in a thick layer of self-cleaning safety glass, the screen remained pristine, its luminous glow free from graffiti or stickers.

I tore my eyes away to check the digital readout above the elevator door.

Ah, 43rd floor of Megabulding Delta—home.

I scanned the extensive list of destinations on the elevator's touchscreen interface and, feeling a frisson of excitement, I impulsively chose a lower level marked by a universal shopping cart icon.

With surprising swiftness, the elevator descended, its motion so smooth it was nearly imperceptible. The door parted with a subtle hiss, immediately inundating my senses.

The clamour of human voices mingled with the discordant melodies of street musicians. A medley of smells—fried food, the tangy scent of hot metal, the alluring aroma of exotic spices—filled the air, tempting and overwhelming in equal measure.

For a moment, I was frozen at the threshold, my senses trying to assimilate this kaleidoscopic burst of new impressions.

Then, taking a deep breath and steadying my still-fragile legs, I stepped out of the elevator, leaving behind the relative sanctuary of the 43rd floor to plunge into the vibrant chaos of one of the megabuilding's underbellies—the 16th floor.

Neon signs blazed overhead, flickering advertisements for every conceivable product, service, or vice. Vivid holograms pirouetted in the air, their ethereal forms almost colliding with the gritty reality of the people below.

Pungent aromas from food vendors filled the air—everything from synthetic meats to algae-based treats, with scents that were simultaneously alluring and off-putting.

Every corner was bustling with activity: A merchant hawking mechanical parts, children running through narrow spaces between kiosks, street—or in this case, hallway—musicians eliciting chiptune melodies from makeshift electronic devices. There was a ceaseless hum of chatter, machinery, and electronic music—a cacophonous symphony of life in the cybernetic age.

A grin unfurled across my face, so wide it almost hurt; this was the living, breathing epitome of "Cyberpunk" I had always fantasised about. It was as if someone had ripped the fantastical scenes right out of the books I'd devoured and slapped them into reality. Standing there, amidst the neon glow and cacophonous sounds, was surreal but invigorating.

However, that heady sensation was abruptly shattered by a grating voice that slashed through my reverie. "Hey, you cripple-ass bitch, get the fuck outta the way! You're clogging up the elevator, you stupid fucking blank bitch."

My eyes widened in disbelief at the woman's acid-laced words.

I staggered back, stumbling a bit on my still-unsteady legs.

Into the elevator stepped a lanky woman, her physique so thin it was almost skeletal. Chrome enhancements glinted all over her frame, giving her an aura of synthetic menace. Without missing a beat, she flipped me off with a meticulously painted and, frankly, quite striking, chromed middle finger just as the elevator doors slid shut between us.

'Well then,' I thought, still reeling a bit. 'Note to self: I'm not the protagonist in everyone else's life story. This world is full of real, unpredictable people, and they sure aren't all friendly.'

With my initial enthusiasm abruptly chilled, as if dunked into an icy vat of reality, I resumed my exploratory journey—this time with a heightened sense of awareness.

I meandered without a particular endgame, no targeted destination; my primary motive was to flex these newly empowered legs and soak in the immersive tapestry of this new world.

Indeed, there was a colossal chasm between observing something through the lens of a video game—no matter how meticulous Neon Dragons had been in capturing the quotidian lives of its NPCs—and physically navigating the labyrinthine hallways under the propulsion of your own two feet.

My eyes caught nuanced details that would've easily slipped past my notice if I were merely commandeering a digital avatar: The accumulations of garbage heaped haphazardly in overlooked corners, the frenetic gait of some pedestrians who looked as if they were either fleeing from some unseen terror or racing against time, the laid-back swagger of some of the chromed-up citizens who mingled in the throngs, and the overwhelming, awe-inducingly massive architecture of the megabuilding itself.

Each step revealed another facet of this sprawling, neon-lit landscape—it was like a Disneyland for cyberpunk aficionados, offering a fresh spectacle at every twist and turn.

One aspect that immediately captured my attention, as I wandered the corridors of the 16th floor, was the startling difference in spatial design compared to my home on the 43rd.

In my mind's eye, the hallways of the 43rd floor had always paralleled those of upscale hotels I'd encountered in my previous life—elegant yet efficient passageways bathed in thoughtfully curated lighting. While it never quite achieved the opulence of those hotels, the architectural language was undoubtedly in the same lexicon.

Yet, comparing it to the 16th floor was like juxtaposing two entirely different universes.

Here, the hallways metamorphosed into pedestrian boulevards. The central avenue was a sprawling two-lane thoroughfare that accommodated the ceaseless flux of humanity streaming in and out. On either flank of this central artery, the pavements were transformed into bustling marketplaces, complete with street vendors and makeshift stores, which had clearly once been residential apartments.

What intrigued me further was the ingenuity of the local merchants.

I noticed a considerable number of establishments that had expanded their retail footprint by annexing adjacent apartments. The separating walls were unceremoniously knocked down, allowing these entrepreneurial spirits to enlarge their commercial space—a pragmatic and evidently widespread approach to real estate management within this bustling megabuilding.

As I continued to meander through this sprawling microcosm, I was struck by how my prior experiences with Neon Dragons had offered merely a microscopic glimpse into the reality of life in a megabuilding.

The Let's Plays and playthroughs I'd vicariously lived through focused mainly on questing and seldom dived deep into the complex world inside these towering structures. I suddenly understood how Devali, the in-game companion whose introductory quests had seemed so laborious, could spend his entire life within the boundaries of a single megabuilding.

If I were to meticulously explore every nook and cranny of just this 16th floor, I was confident that I'd find every imaginable aspect of average cyberpunk existence—right here in this teeming mini-city.

What really staggered my comprehension was the sheer scale of it all, however.

According to the elevator's floor selection, this megabuilding had over three hundred levels!

Granted, the higher I'd go, the less gritty and more exclusive the environment would become, but still, the first couple hundred floors were likely to be as bustling and dynamic as this one, if only out of sheer necessity.

Take street food vendors as a case in point; they were the lifeblood of any cyberpunk world—Neon Dragons was no exception to this rule.

The concept of cooking one's own meals was virtually obsolete—grocery stores being nearly as rare as unicorns and similarly expensive to use. Most residents ventured out at least twice a day to snag their preferred eats from local vendors.

Given that over 100,000 souls inhabited this single building, no one floor, no matter how capacious, could possibly cater to the culinary demands of that many people. Consequently, it was a given that clusters of food stalls must appear at regular intervals on multiple floors.

And that was just the food! The economic and logistical puzzle that underpinned the existence of a megabuilding was far too intricate for me to even begin untangling. This was the sort of subject matter so deep and complex that if someone had managed to write a doctoral thesis on it in my past life, they would have earned a Ph.D. with flying colours!

Ultimately, my wide-eyed wanderlust and cyberpunk-induced daydreaming came to an abrupt standstill when an unexpected, yet oddly familiar, chime resonated from the System.

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

'Interesting,' I mused with a smile, 'so even this laborious shuffle with these poor excuses for legs qualifies as exercise. Score!'

As if on cue, I became acutely conscious of the sweat slicking my forehead and the laboured breathing that had somehow slipped past my awareness during my frenzied exploration of the 16th floor.

Navigating through the crowd with shaky steps, I zeroed in on the nearest semblance of a seat I could find. The floor was clearly not an option unless I wanted to marinate in who-knows-what.

Lowering myself onto the seat should have produced a resounding thud given my fatigue, but instead, it was more like a gentle tap—a testament to my startling lack of mass.

I didn't have a scale to confirm, but if I had to make an educated guess, I'd say my weight was hovering around 35-40 kilograms. That was way past venturing into dangerous territory—downright anorexia, actually.

Panting as I tried to regain some semblance of stamina, my ears picked up on the fragmented English of an elderly man directed toward me.

"You buy food?"

Pulled back into the moment by his inquiry, my eyes scanned the surroundings and I soon realised that I had unwittingly parked myself at a street food vendor, distinctly labelled "Shori Noodles."

It dawned on me that my understanding of the name came courtesy of my [Polyglot] trait—it was scripted in Japanese on the neon-blue coloured sign above me.

In retrospect, it made complete sense that most available seats would be tethered to food stalls, but in my near-delirious state, this practicality hadn't crossed my mind. I was too engrossed in my own exhaustion, feeling as if I was on the verge of collapsing.

The dilemma was straightforward: I was flat broke, not a single credit to my name.

Still, I needed a few more moments to gather my wits and energy before I dared to stand, lest I keel over halfway back to my family's floor.

I had to acknowledge that I'd woefully overplayed my hand on this inaugural outing, and the universe was making me pay for it in spades. Yet, admitting to my mistake didn't magically solve the immediate problem.

"Ahhh, sorry, sir! I don't have any creds. I just needed to catch my breath for a sec," I managed to stammer out, each word punctuated by laboured inhales and exhales. I sounded less like an energetic 15-year-old and more like someone with a chronic respiratory issue.

The elderly Asian man's eyes narrowed to scrutinising slits, his head bobbing in thoughtful assessment of my forlorn state. I braced myself for the imminent eviction from his seating area, but what came next defied all my gloomy expectations.

"No, no. You eat. You stick. Will die. I give food, you eat. Then you help. Say... Two hour, yes?" The man's voice filled the air once more, his hands animatedly emphasising each point as if trying to bridge any language barrier that might exist.

His unexpected kindness caught me off guard, contradicting everything I'd come to expect from the typically cutthroat ethos of the cyberpunk universe. The genre had always painted a picture of a harsh, unforgiving world, disdainful of human fragility at every turn.

Therefore, the straightforward offer of a meal in exchange for some labour, simply because I appeared malnourished, was a curveball I hadn't anticipated.

Misinterpreting my hesitation as reluctance, the old man promptly set a steaming bowl of noodles in front of me. At a glance, they resembled ramen but were made from pasta strands tinted in unusual colours.

"Listen. Eat. No work, okay? Just eat. No die, you young. Old help young. Okay?" His words carried the genuine warmth of someone genuinely wanting to make a difference, however small.

Did I really look that wretched? Enough to evoke such deep-felt compassion from this elderly stranger? Evidently, I did.

"Thank you, sir. Truly, I appreciate it," I responded in flawless Japanese, a linguistic feat made possible by my [Polyglot] Trait. I could have probably fumbled my way through a basic 'thank you' even without the Trait's knowledge, thanks to my years of weebdom, but why risk embarrassing myself when I was so easily capable of perfection?

Upon hearing my impeccable Japanese, the old man's eyes widened in unmistakable surprise. He was a quintessential elderly Japanese figure—slightly hunched back, an apron stained from years of hard work, and a headband soaked in a combination of sweat and oil, marking the years he'd dedicated to his craft.

He replied in an equally flawless Japanese, albeit tinged with a distinctive accent that I could immediately place as originating from the Korishama district of Neo Avalis. The realisation surprised me, but I attributed it to the comprehensive package of information bundled with my [Polyglot] Trait.

"Don't mention it," he began, his eyes softened by years of both joy and struggle. "It pains me to see young ones like you suffer in this world. I can't do much, but I do what I can. My adoptive mother always told me the old should help the young; they are our future, after all."

Finishing his sentimental words, he curiously asked, "How did you learn Japanese so well?"

"Ah, I just picked it up, you know, being around the area," I replied vaguely.

He gave me a scrutinising look, as if he was weighing the validity of my statement. "Well, if you don't want to share, that's alright. Eat up, young one."

"By the way," he added, introducing himself formally, "I'm Yan Shori, the owner of Shori Noodles. I've been running this stall for the past twenty years. And please, speak English with me in the future. My old brain takes a long, long time to adjust to new things, including languages, so I'm still trying my best to learn!"

As he turned to attend to another customer who had just approached his bustling noodle stand, I was left alone with my bowl of peculiarly-coloured but aromatic noodles, contemplating the enigmatic kindness of Yan Shori in a world that often seemed devoid of it.

The instant the first spoonful of savoury broth and noodles touched my taste buds, I'd already mapped out my immediate future: I would work to repay Mr. Shori for his kindness.

Living in a world steeped in grim realities, brimming with suffering and untimely ends, his unyielding compassion struck a chord in me. I resolved that it was a flame worth shielding, a rarity worth nurturing. Although my abilities were limited at that point, I planned to give my all in assisting him for the day.

My adventures and skill-grinding in the labyrinthine corridors of the Magabuilding and Neo Avalis as a whole could wait; for now, repayment and gratitude took centre stage in my priorities.

After I had finished eating, of course.

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With a deep, contented exhale, I set down the now-empty bowl before me.

It had been generously laden with aromatic broth and those oddly-hued "noodles," which, upon reflection, I'd become pretty certain were not traditional noodles at all. But I consciously set aside any inquiries into their true nature; I wanted to savour the moment and the dish for its undeniable deliciousness.

Gripping the well-worn wooden chopsticks and cradling the bowl in my other hand, I rose from the somewhat rickety seat. I navigated my way around the counter and into the intimate, bustling space that was Mr. Shori's cherished noodle stall.

As I stepped into the cosy confines of Mr. Shori's stall, the old man looked up from a steaming pot and eyed me with a warm, somewhat quizzical expression. "Ah, stick girl! Good food, yes? Full, yes? You go. Stay health," he said, his face breaking into a genial smile.

Shaking my head gently, I replied, "I want to help you out. Repay you for the kindness. I really appreciate it. Also, my name's Sera."

He paused, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully for a split second. Almost as if he had been expecting this, he reached down and tossed me a smaller-sized apron that he had seemingly at the ready. My face broke into an uncontrollable grin, a sentiment he mirrored with a casual shrug, as if to say, "Don't hate the player."

"Cut, yes? No cut Sera. Only cut food. Yes?" He gestured toward a stack of ingredients near a well-worn cutting board. Upon closer inspection, the 'ingredients' resembled some sort of exotic algae.

With a resolute nod, I headed over to the designated area, slipping the apron over my head and cinching it at the waist. I also pulled my hair back and secured it with a matching headband that was hanging near the cutting board.

As I geared up, I took the opportunity to absorb my surroundings. The stall exuded a strangely authentic Japanese ramen-shop aura, as I would have seen in my old world.

From the bamboo accents to the small Shinto shrine tucked in one corner, the place seemed like a tiny oasis of tradition in a world of cybernetic chaos. Steam rose invitingly from various pots, diffusing the air with the mouth-watering aroma of broths and spices.

Stools lined the counter, which was adorned with condiment containers, porcelain spoons, and stacks of laminated menus that promised a variety of ramen bowls. Worn wooden signs, scribbled with daily specials in chalk, swayed gently above the counter.

Despite its modest dimensions, the stall struck me as a bona fide sanctuary; a haven of warmth and comfort set against the sterile steel backdrop of the towering megabuilding.

Oddly enough, its authenticity—so reminiscent of the ramen shops I'd known in my previous life—made it feel even more like home than the cramped apartment that had confined me for the past week.

With a smile warming my face, I reached for the first bundle of the unusual, algae-like ingredients and took hold of the knife resting on the cutting board. My [Knives] Skill kicked in instantly, helping me grip the knife as if it were an extension of myself—the heft perfectly balanced in my smaller hands, as though I'd been wielding it since infancy.

Before I began slicing into the alien algae, there was one crucial matter I needed to sort out, now that a knife was in my grasp—I definitely hadn't forgotten about testing this until this very moment, no sir: How exactly did the [Sharpen] perk function?

I focused intently on the knife, a robust, square-ish blade typical for these tasks, and navigated through my System interface. Try as I might, I found no relevant options.

'How in the world do I activate this perk?' I pondered, casting another look at the blade.

A lightbulb moment came to me: I had used an intangible System ability once before. The day I began my [Juggling] grind and was caught off guard by Gabriel, I'd subconsciously triggered [Blademaster's Throw] using a sock ball. All I had done was focus my thoughts on throwing it as quickly as I could, and the skill activated autonomously.

'Could it be...?' I mused, channelling my focus onto the blade's edge and willing it to sharpen.

Almost on cue, a faint, ethereal sound of sharpening reverberated in my mind, and I watched as the knife's edge slimmed down ever so slightly.

"Yes!" I couldn't help but blurt out, drawing a sidelong glance from Mr. Shori, which I purposefully ignored.

Emboldened by a freshly honed knife, I felt truly prepared to repay my debt.

Positioning the algae on the cutting board, I set to work chopping them down to roughly match the size of those in the ramen I'd savoured earlier. My [Ambidexterity] Perk proved invaluable, bolstering my confidence as I navigated the large knife through the mysterious ingredients.

In my previous life, I'd been a certifiable klutz, so the newfound sure-handedness, granted by my Reflex Attribute, [Knives] Skill, and [Ambidexterity] Perk, felt absolutely liberating.

That burst of confidence rapidly turned into a moment of utter dread when the keen blade carved a deep groove into the solid wooden cutting board on my first, light cut.

'Holy shit, this thing is way sharper than I thought!' I mentally panicked, silently praying Mr. Shori hadn't noticed my faux pas.

The realisation hit me like a bolt: The Perk had specified "maximum sharpness," but it seemed I'd never *actually* handled a blade honed to such an extreme level before. The disparity between what I had previously considered "maximum sharpness" and this newly acquired edge was, evidently, vast and complete worlds apart.

As I held the knife, its blade glinting under the soft light of the food stall, I found myself captivated by its razor-like edge—no, worlds *beyond* razor-like.

I had the urge to gently pass my thumb over it—careful not to actually cut myself—but refrained from doing so, as just getting close to the edge created an almost magnetic pull, a sort of raw, latent power emanating from the blade.

It was as if the knife itself was beckoning to slice through something, anything, with an efficiency that defied my previous understanding of what might be possible.

In my past experience, a sharp knife would cut cleanly and effortlessly, sure, but this was something else entirely. This knife felt like it could separate individual atoms, sliding through the air itself with an eerie absence of resistance. I could almost imagine it effortlessly gliding through steel as if it were warm butter, leaving a polished, mirror-like cut in its wake.

The idea that a mere knife could possess such lethal finesomeness left me in awe and utter disbelief.

The heavy-set, square-ish blade that had once seemed so commonplace in shops like these had been transformed. It was no longer just a tool; it was an embodiment of precision, a surgical instrument that could redefine what I considered possible in a culinary context—or any context, for that matter.

The difference was so profound, it felt like I was holding an entirely different instrument, one that demanded a new level of respect and careful handling.

I realised then that I would need to recalibrate my *entire* approach to cutting the ingredients, to accommodate this newfound level of sharpness that I had so nonchalantly invoked. It was like I had opened the Pandora's Box of sharpness.

Handling the knife with the delicacy one would afford a surgical scalpel, I carefully positioned the first piece of the algae onto the cutting board. With a sense of both trepidation and exhilaration, I lowered the blade towards the unusual, stringy ingredient.

The moment the knife made contact, it was as if reality itself conceded defeat.

The algae parted almost magically, offering zero resistance, as if they had never been a singular, coherent entity to begin with. Each cut felt like a whisper, a silent example of the blade's unbelievable sharpness.

The experience was mesmerising, almost meditative.

The knife slid through the gummy-like material with an ease that made me forget I was even exerting effort. It was like cutting through a dream—effortless and unreal.

I continued this way, enthralled, each slice a minor revelation, each cut deepening my appreciation for this extraordinary tool. So engrossed was I in the rhythm of the knife meeting the algae, that I almost didn't hear Mr. Shori's voice breaking through my reverie.

"Sera, stop. Way enough cut. Now cook," he called out, pulling me back to the here and now.

I looked down at the cutting board and realised I had processed a small mountain of the algae, each piece sliced to near-perfect uniformity.

With a slight, sheepish smile, I set the knife down, feeling an odd sense of both fulfilment and reluctance as I stepped away from the cutting board to join Mr. Shori at the cooking station.

It was time to switch gears, but the allure of that blade—transformed into something almost mythical by my [Sharpen] Perk—lingered in my mind as I prepared to take the next step in repaying my debt to this kind-hearted man...