

Chapter 130 - Neo Avalis

There was absolutely no way my head *wasn't* going to be on a swivel the second the realization hit me—I was *in* Neo Avalis.

For real.

No loading screens, no in-game cutscenes, no playthrough video. The *actual* city.

The one I'd spent months obsessing over, pixel by pixel, map by map, trying to memorize routes and memorize factions and all the little tricks that might keep a baby Operator alive for more than five minutes.

And now? I was smack-dab in the middle of it.

I stuck close to Cryo's back, doing my best not to fall behind, but my eyes had other plans.

They darted *everywhere*—left and right, up and down, like they were trying to download the whole damn city at once.

The very first thing that really locked in my attention, though—more than the noise, the movement, or even the constant blaring of ads nearby—was the sunlight.

Or more accurately... The complete and total *lack* of it.

There was no clear sky above.

No sunbeams. No golden hour lighting gently washing over the city.

Just a thick, yellow-brown haze that clung to the skyline like a dirty sheet of gauze. A blanket of smog so dense and uniform that it turned everything the same kind of sickly sepia, like the whole world had been dunked in a vat of nicotine—with the burning sensation in the back of your throat to boot.

And yet... It was *warm*. Oppressively so.

Not the gentle kind of warmth you get from a spring day—this was the slow-bake, heat-lamp kind. Like the smog itself was trapping the sun's heat and pushing it down onto the street-level like a heated, weighted blanket dialed up about three levels too high for comfort.

Back inside Delta, the temperature had always been artificial—regulated, controlled, *uniform*. Always either perfectly livable, too cold or too hot depending on the floor you were on and how badly the HVAC was behaving that day.

Here, though? You moved a few feet into a patch of shade, and the temperature simply *dropped* like you'd walked through a wall: A sudden chill sliding across your skin, sharp and immediate.

I'd honestly never even *thought* about shadows being cold before. Not until now.

But of course, that wasn't the only thing that caught my eye.

As I turned my head for a second, checking on Pina and Mouse behind me—both still casually bickering as they followed, as they had been the entire time since we had left the Valedictorian on the fifth floor—my gaze inevitably drifted up at the looming shadow behind them, and that's when I first saw it.

'Holy fucking shit...'

The Megabuilding: Delta. My home.

And no, "saw" isn't even the right word. *Beheld*, maybe. Witnessed?

Like... A *presence* of truly unfathomable proportions.

It was a monolithic slab of god-knows-how-many layers of apartments, shops, offices, clinics, alleys, hidden dens, entire communities stacked atop each other like some kind of megastructure matryoshka doll.

Looking at it from the outside, from *street level*, was a whole different animal than simply traversing and living inside it.

From the inside, Delta felt like a city in itself. But out here?

It looked like some god-like entity had just slammed a square, brutalist spike into the very earth and called it a day.

A monolith of blackened durasteel, reinforced rockcrete, and whatever other nightmare alloys the eldritch architects had lying around—vanishing into the smog above like the sky itself had tried its best to contain it, but ultimately given up.

No attempt at style, no grace. Just brute presence.

Like someone had said "bigger" and forgot to say *when*.

What really got me, though, was that I couldn't even see the *edges*.

The face we were walking away from just kept stretching outward, swallowing my entire field of vision like a black hole made of durasteel and rockcrete.

It didn't matter how far I craned my neck or how many steps I took back with my eyes—there was no corner, no top, no frame. Just more Megabuilding. More Delta.

My brain kept trying to measure it, to *understand* it. And it just... Couldn't.

There were no proper words. No proper frames of reference to contextualize this... *Thing*.

Nothing in me even remotely had the bandwidth to process something *that* massive.

Trying to picture what kind of resources it took to build Delta in the first place—never mind keeping it *running*—felt like trying to picture myself being sucked into a black hole, to-scale and everything.

Just the logistics of power, food, water, maintenance, and keeping however many hundreds of thousands of people alive inside that thing made my brain want to do a hard reboot.

Yet, of course, my brain being the absolute champ that it was, tried *anyway*. Tried to comprehend it. Tried to grasp the impossible scale of it all—and that's when the vertigo hit.

Hard.

It came out of nowhere, like my whole sense of balance had decided to take a lunch break.

For a split second, I genuinely thought I was about to faceplant right there on the street and make myself into a complete laughing stock in front of the Operators.

But then—just as fast as it came—it was abruptly gone. Like it had never even existed in the first place.

'What the...?'

I blinked, disoriented, instinctively glancing down to check if my legs were still doing leg things. They were. Walking just fine. Nothing weird. I hadn't tripped. I hadn't stumbled.

So why the hell had I felt like the ground had just tried to flip upside down?

My eyes darted from Cryo's back to Pina and Mouse trailing behind me, searching for any sign that they'd noticed me wobbling like a drunk for half a second.

Nothing. Nobody had said a word or looked at me funny.

I kept walking, but the confusion lingered like an itch at the back of my skull.

'What the fuck was that...?'

Took my brain another few seconds to finish its forced reboot and finally hand me the obvious answer: *[Elemental Balance]*.

'Right...'

The Perk literally gave me perfect balance—so vertigo? Yeah, not exactly compatible. Something trying to screw with my equilibrium? That was probably the equivalent of tossing a pebble at a tank and expecting it to flinch.

'Huh. That's... actually kind of cool. Didn't even think about that part,' I thought, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smirk. Not the kind of feature I ever would've guessed, but I wasn't gonna complain. Stability in situations like *this*? I'd take every little bit of it.

Still, I made a mental note to avoid thinking too hard about Delta or any of the other Megabuildings for a while—unless I wanted to risk my brain short-circuiting all over again.

That shit wasn't worth the mental gymnastics.

So I zoned back in on the present, locking my attention on Cryo's footsteps as he cut a slow path through the thinning crowd, the rest of us trailing in his wake.

The further we got from Delta, the thinner the crowd became, but the smog didn't let up one bit. If anything the lack of other people around us and their shadows darting through the sepia haze made it seem like it was getting worse.

From the game, I remembered this stretch around the Megabuildings had some of the nastiest concentration of it too. NPCs in the city had called it "*The Haze*"—a nickname that felt almost too casual, considering long exposure to it could trigger full-blown hallucinations or psychotic breaks if you weren't careful.

Players on the forums used to joke about seeing angels or monsters in the haze. Sometimes both. But I hadn't really seen any of that in the playthroughs I had watched, so I couldn't exactly tell whether those were just hyperboles or actual truths.

I was, however, *really* hoping we wouldn't be hanging around long enough to start finding out which was true.

After another full minute of navigating through the area—though it was more like swimming through a slow-moving soup of half-visible figures—I was getting more antsy than I was comfortable with

"Where are we heading?" I asked, finally breaking the silence, feeling like we were just looping through the same few meters of sepia soup and shadows.

The haze was so thick I couldn't make out *anything* in front of us.

The only landmark I could even register was the Megabuilding behind us, and that thing was so damn massive it *broke* any sense of perspective. It might as well have been wallpaper stapled onto my retinas, whenever I turned around to see if we had moved away from it or not. There was no depth to it, no edges, no start or finish—just an ever-present wall of *existence* looming behind us, making it impossible to tell how far we'd even walked.

"To the car," Cryo muttered from up ahead, barely half-turning his head so the words carried over without him needing to raise his voice.

That made my eyebrows tick up.

'A car?!'

I'd honestly forgotten those were a thing.

Living inside Delta for the past month—where your biggest transportation options were narrow walkways, cargo lifts, and the occasional janky-ass mobility scooter or maybe a bicycle here and there—I hadn't exactly had to worry about four-wheeled anything.

The whole idea of cars had just... faded into the background noise.

Like, sure, they existed. Duh. But I hadn't *thought* about them in so long that hearing the word now hit like a weird bit of retro trivia.

Which made the whole thing kind of hilarious, in hindsight.

I mean, for starters, Oliver had literally brought me to Delta *in* a car. Granted, I'd been so out of it from the hospital drugs that the memory was fogged up like the smog we were slogging through now, but I still recalled sitting in something vaguely car-shaped.

And more importantly—how the hell had I forgotten about vehicles when *Neon Dragons* had one of the most detailed vehicle-loot systems of any game I'd ever seen?

They weren't just background props or collectibles.

They were full-blown *assets*—customizable, modifiable, swappable, tradeable. From one-seaters with barely a shell to armored beasts that could tank RPGs.

Some ran on actual fuel, others on electric cells, a few on straight-up plasma cores if you had the creds and the unlocks.

Hell, there were entire guides dedicated to nothing *but* vehicle builds: Speed builds. Combat builds. Smuggling builds. You name it.

And, of course, since vehicles were technically classified as loot, the mythical rarity ones—stuff that half the community still wasn't convinced actually existed, even months after launch.

I remembered watching a streamer once nearly *cry* when he pulled a Mythic-class off a dead fixer's private garage. Looked like a monster had swallowed a drag racer and vomited it back out as a piece of statement art.

'*So what the hell does Cryo drive...?*' I mused as we walked.

The guy struck me as practical. Tough. Efficient.

Probably something big, armored, maybe even a bit loud just for intimidation's sake.

But then again...

'*Wouldn't it be fucking hilarious if he rolled up in a goddamn ice cream truck or something...?*'

The thought almost made me snort, and I let it spiral a bit in my head, letting it take the wheel away from the mind-bending thoughts about the Megabuildings from earlier.

If the devs *had* put in a legendary combat-van disguised as a sweet-tooth mobile, Cryo would probably be the exact kind of guy to use it *specifically* because no one would take it seriously until it was too late.

Still smiling a little at the mental image, I kept my head down and followed him, letting the thick smog and city sounds blur together as the minutes passed...

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About ten minutes later—which felt more like a full-blown hike through purgatory thanks to the smog making it *impossible* to tell if we’d actually moved at all—Cryo abruptly veered off into what looked like a solid wall, only for it to reveal itself as an alleyway a heartbeat later. The thing had practically materialized out of the haze in one fell swoop, like some hidden door in a stealth game being revealed by the right button presses.

He led us down a set of narrow, rust-bitten stairs that snaked downward in slow, uneven spirals until we landed in a subterranean carpark, several levels below ground.

Now, car parks weren’t exactly known for their fresh air—usually stale, recycled exhaust and dust—but compared to the Haze outside? This place might as well have been an alpine resort. I sucked in a deep breath and actually *felt* my lungs unclench for the first time in what felt like forever.

“The Haze’s quite something, huh, Megadweller?” Pina teased with a half-laugh, giving me a surprisingly friendly pat on the back that almost knocked the rest of the air out of me.

“It’s honestly quite charming,” Mouse chimed in behind us, his tone far too chipper for someone still twitching at random intervals, and I could swear his voice had turned slightly less raggedy after the trip through the Haze. “Sometimes I bottle it up. Just a single good whiff during long coding sessions—it *really* helps you focus. Clears the brain. *Total* clarity.”

I turned to give him a look, half skeptical and half ‘*what the actual fuck*’. Pina mirrored the expression so hard it could’ve been copy-pasted from my face onto hers—or vice versa.

But that just encouraged him.

“No, *really*!” Mouse continued, gesturing like he was trying to paint the beauty of it. “You know when you hit that point where your code just loops into spaghetti? One deep whiff of Haze, and boom—instant reboot. Brain’s back online.”

Pina rolled her eyes. I rolled mine harder.

But before we could offer any follow-up commentary on how that was probably a fantastic way to *fry* your brain, Cryo’s voice cut through the moment like a vibro-knife.

“Get in. And hurry up, we ain’t got all day.”

The command made my head snap around—and only *then* did I realize we’d walked right up to his car while distracted by Mouse’s Haze evangelism.

I blinked at the vehicle. Then blinked again.

After all the insane ideas I’d cooked up in my head—armored transport, neon-drenched muscle car, maybe even a repurposed riot van—I deflated a little.

Because what stood before me... was a Kar-Y3.

The most aggressively average vehicle on the damn planet.

Boxy chassis. Matte black paint, unpolished and utterly forgettable.

If there was a car that screamed “bland utility with zero personality, gets the job done and nothing else,” this was it.

It looked like the rice cracker of automobiles—barely a flavor, but it’d fill you up in a pinch.

The sort of ride designed to blend in so hard it practically became part of the background.

And in a place like Neo Avalis? That was probably a tactical advantage.

Still. I couldn’t help the twinge of disappointment after all the wild mental images I’d cooked up during our walk. After all that buildup, Cryo didn’t roll up in a war-rig or an ice cream truck with missile racks—just a Kar-Y3.

Practical. Sensible. Efficient. Cryo to a tee.

The car itself was decently taken care of—not showroom-clean, but clearly maintained.

Bits of dirt and dust clung to the sides and undercarriage like any city car would pick up after a few days of street duty in Neo Avalis’ smog, but nothing that screamed neglect at any level.

No rust. No mismatched panels. No piles of fast food trash visible through the windows in the backseat.

Just clean enough to say “*I care*,” and dirty enough to say “*but I’ve got better things to do*.”

Honestly? It was exactly what I should’ve expected from someone like Cryo.

While I stood there giving it a once-over, Pina made her move.

She bolted forward with zero hesitation, elbowed past a just-too-slow Mouse, and yanked open the passenger side door with the grace of someone who’d done this dance a hundred times.

“Shotgun!” she barked triumphantly as she hopped in and slammed the door behind her.

Mouse let out the deepest, most theatrical sigh I’d heard all day and physically wilted in front of me like a guy who’d just watched his dessert fall face-down in the dirt.

‘*What are they, twelve?*’ I thought, amused despite myself.

I caught my reflection in one of the side mirrors as I walked up—smiling.

It was such a thoroughly strange dynamic.

Pina, the loud gremlin daughter with anger issues. Mouse, the chaos-coded middle child who might’ve licked a battery too many times.

And, of course, Cryo, the stone-faced tactician dad, leading these two chaos gremlins around like some long-suffering father on a never-ending school trip.

I felt like the new kid who got stuck tagging along for the ride, still figuring out where I fit in the family picture.

And truth be told? I didn't mind it at all.

After weeks of hyper-serious focus, mysterious mentors, existential dread and constant edge-of-my-seat tension, having this strange little squad actually banter like real people was... extremely refreshing. And grounding, in a weird way.

Even if the mood was temporary—and yeah, I had zero illusions about it lasting, not with the kind of Task we were heading into—it still gave me this weird, little pocket of calm. Like the universe had pressed pause just long enough for me to catch my breath.

I slid into the backseat beside Mouse, settling in behind Pina, while Mouse took the spot behind Cryo. No one said anything—Cryo just keyed the ignition, the engine rumbled to life with a lot more punch than I expected, and off we went, slipping out of the dim, stained concrete of the carpark and into the veins of the city.

Didn't take long for things to start changing.

First big difference? The air inside the car.

It was clean, cool and most importantly, filtered.

It hit my lungs like some five-star luxury I didn't know I'd been missing. After the heavy, throat-coating Haze we'd been walking through, it felt like getting a taste of civilization again.

I took another deep breath just to be sure I wasn't imagining it.

Second? The view.

Once Cryo merged onto the second layer of one of the stacked multi-lane highways, the whole elevation game changed. We climbed fast, past support struts and looming steel skeletons, until we were somewhere around fifth-story height of a normal building inside the city—or maybe even higher, given how uneven everything in Neo Avalis was.

It didn't matter though.

What *did* matter was what came next.

We took a bend around some faceless corporate tower, just another mirrored slab in a city full of them—and then the skyline abruptly opened up like a curtain being pulled back.

And *fuck*.

My jaw didn't just drop—it practically unhinged.

Neo Avalis hit me all at once, like a punch straight to the centre of my soul.

The sepia-stained fog peeled away and stuck to the ground just enough to reveal the sprawl beyond—layers upon layers of twisting metal, tangled roads, flickering signs, vertical arcologies rising like teeth from the bones of the city.

It was alive and utterly gargantuan in a way nothing digital could ever capture.

Cryo guided the car through another curve, the low growl of the engine reverberating off steel supports and underside girders as we climbed yet slightly higher again.

Two more layers of highway hovered above us—each one held up by impossibly thick support columns that vanished into the mist like artificial trees feeding some metal forest canopy. But even with *those* hanging overhead and several below us, I already knew we weren't on the biggest highway ring by a long shot.

Deeper toward the heart of Neo Avalis, the main artery of the city had *ten* layers stacked on top of each other. Eleven, if you counted the ultra-exclusive VIP track that supposedly floated just above the highest one—pristine, quiet, sealed off from the rest of the world like a whispered secret only corpo execs got to tell.

But even here, on the third-highest level of *this* highway? The ground was so far down that people looked like ants. If it wasn't for the frantic movement of them shuffling around, I would have definitely mistaken them for nothing but debris.

The smog had all but vanished behind us, finally letting the city reveal itself without that dirty yellow filter—just Neo Avalis in all its twisted, brilliant chaos.

Skyscrapers *dominated* the view, where there weren't any of the Megabuildings blotting out the sun.

Not just the vertical kind, but the *weird* ones too—crooked angles, cantilevered floors jutting out like someone had stacked several buildings wrong and just went with it.

Some shimmered with massive ad-displays or flowing neon art, others blinked with rows of smart-windows adjusting tint in real-time. Dozens of skybridges crisscrossed between them, like arteries feeding glass and steel organs.

I even caught sight of some of the multi-tiered walkways layered over one another—some filled with pedestrians, others clearly designed for service drones or micro-transit pods zipping back and forth like manic insects.

The city's design made verticality feel like an obsession.

There *wasn't* one "ground floor"—there were *dozens* of them, stacked, staggered, overlapped like someone had shuffled the entire blueprint deck and slammed it into real life.

What was a sidewalk on one level became a rooftop plaza for the next.

Walkways snaked along the sides of buildings, ducking into open-air market zones or climbing steep mechanical stairs to disappear behind scaffolded barriers.

And there was a constant, pervasive contrast *everywhere*.

Grime and glamour stood shoulder to shoulder, like the city had decided long ago it wasn't going to pick a side and just slammed both together into something uniquely its own.

The lower layers—when I caught glimpses of them between gaps in the structure—were dark, cluttered and oily. Flickering signs, steam vents, neon grime soaked in rain-stained rust. Street vendors crammed under sheltering beams, hawking noodles or knockoff cyberware from stalls held together with duct tape and desperation.

But then, just a few stories up?

Clean walkways. Manicured green zones with artificial grass. Designer storefronts with polished chrome facades and augmented reality displays floating overhead like halos.

Security drones hovered lazily in place, scanning passersby with bored efficiency.

Even the lights changed—up there, they glowed cool and calculated, while down below, it was all sickly yellows and reds, like the undercity couldn't decide if it was burning or just straight up sick.

Neo Avalis wasn't simply a city. It wasn't even a mega-city, in how the term would have sometimes been used in my old world.

It was a fucking entire *ecosystem* in itself.

Layered, pulsing, barely held together with tech, ambition, and the raw weight of too many people stacked in one place trying not to get swallowed by the machine that churned in perpetuity.

I honestly couldn't tell where the buildings ended and the infrastructure began—or if there was even a line anymore. Everything bled into everything else.

A giant, living circuit board of humanity—wired for survival, soaked in neon, and squeezed dry for profit by the corporations that loomed over it all like vultures in polished suits.

And even with all that noise—even with another one of Delta's siblings peeking out through the gaps between skyscrapers up ahead, rising like some half-forgotten god of theirs stretching skyward—there was something else entirely that grabbed hold of my attention and refused to let go.

Something so impossibly vast that it made even the Megabuildings look like prefab housing blocks.

Not because it was taller—but because of the sheer *scope* of it.

The sheer presence it possessed.

I stopped blinking for a good minute or two, just staring out the rear window like I'd been slapped across the soul.

The Wall.

There *should've* been a horizon, right? I mean, we were high up. Elevated several floors.

The kind of height that made you expect the world to bow a little, to show off that gentle curvature of the planet beneath the skyline.

But there was nothing like that. No soft bend. No fade into atmospheric blur.

Just the city, sprawling endlessly... and then the Wall.

It rose like a goddamn mountain range had been copy-pasted onto the world, but made of no stone anyone had ever seen before. Some impossibly smooth material, dark and ever-so-slightly reflective, stretching from one side of my vision to the other.

It *dwarfed* the tallest things I'd ever seen—even in this city where skyscrapers were as abundant as sand on the beach and Megabuildings punched into the sky like middle fingers to nature itself.

But this? This wasn't just big. It was utterly *wrong*.

And the worst part? I *knew* things about it.

If I'd grown up in Neo Avalis—if I were just another citizen choking on the Haze and grinding out rep for scraps—I probably would've written it off.

Some old-world relic. Some corporate relic or national defense thing no one ever bothered explaining because people stopped asking generations ago.

But I wasn't from here. Not really. And I didn't have the luxury of this ignorance.

The Wall wasn't the city's barrier, like many citizens would no doubt believe.

It wasn't even *near* Neo Avalis.

Hell, it was hundreds—maybe thousands—of kilometers away, far beyond the city's last support pillar, out past the badlands and whatever hellscape counted for wilderness in this world.

And yet I could see it *now*.

Because it wasn't just tall—it was downright apocalyptic in scale.

From what I remembered, it circled the entire known world. Encompassed it.

Like some kind of planetary scar, locking the whole of humanity inside a cage so massive, most people forgot it was even there.

But I hadn't forgotten.

And some part of me... The part that still clung to the questions of my past life with teeth and refused to let go... Knew that one day, I'd have to reach it. Climb it.

And find out what the hell was on the other side.

Because if something *needed* a wall that big to be kept out—or worse, required *us* to be kept *in*—then whatever was waiting beyond it *had* to be worth the climb...