

Chapter 171 - Back to the OPN

Making my way through the perpetually overfilled lobby of Delta, I made sure to tug my scarf properly up around my mouth and nose. Partly to escape the combined stench of sweaty people, food stalls, and machine oil—and partly to brace myself for the Haze once I stepped outside.

After getting swept along by the crowd for a bit, I finally spilled out onto the street and immediately called for a driverless cab.

It turned out to be simple enough, just like it had been in the game. Pretty much every cybernetic link came preloaded with a whole stack of competing cab apps.

I picked one at random, not recognizing a single name.

'Either all of these go bankrupt before the game's timeline,' I mused, 'or they get bought out and renamed along the way... Wonder which it is. Probably both, statistically speaking.'

The wait didn't take long at all—Delta was basically a nonstop hotspot for people needing rides, for obvious reasons.

The cab rolled up smoothly at the curb, its matte-black chassis humming softly as it decelerated, neon trim along the sides pulsing once before settling into a steady, blue-ish glow. The doors slid open without a sound, panels retracting with a clean motion that screamed *well-maintained*, even if the model itself clearly wasn't top-of-the-line.

Inside, it was exactly what I'd expected—clean, comfortable, and perfectly *adequate*.

It leaned hard into utilitarian cyberpunk style.

Dark composite panels, softly glowing interface strips embedded along the doors, and seats made of that synthetic leather-substitute that somehow *always* felt the same temperature no matter the weather.

A narrow holo-display hovered between the front seats, cycling through route data and ambient ads at low opacity, while recessed speakers emitted a barely-there hum of white noise.

Even the floor mats looked freshly cleaned, free of dust or grime—like the cab had just rolled out of a service bay and not straight out of a city that breathed chaos.

It was one of those little things that really set Neon Dragons apart from my old life, where cabs had a nasty habit of being grimy or smelling vaguely wrong in ways you couldn't quite identify—not that you really ever *wanted* to identify the smells, either.

Here, everything looked freshly cleaned and borderline pristine, like maintenance was an actual priority. No plush luxury, no real flair, but nothing was broken, stained, or flickering.

When the display prompted me for a destination, I silently thanked Cryo for having an actual info package prepared for me this time.

Last time I had been outside Delta, on the gig with Cryo, Pina, and Mouse, I'd just followed along without the faintest clue where we were going. I'd only realized I had no idea where the OPN offices even were after I was already back at Delta, sore and decompressing from all the action.

But not this time.

"OPN Offices, Falmouth District, 7th Layer," I said clearly, then immediately flicked my eyes to the estimated price display.

The system took half a second to process, which felt like a damn eternity with only 13 Credits left to my name.

When the estimate finally popped up, I let out a long, relieved breath.

"Haaa... thank fuck."

Estimated fare: 11 Credits.

That would leave me with a grand total of 2 Credits afterward—just enough for a truly bottom-tier meal if things went sideways later and I got hungry for some nutrient slop.

I confirmed the destination and paid up front, earning myself a small, cheerful jingle from the front of the cab.

"We thank you for your patronage, dear customer!" a disembodied female voice chimed in a sing-song rhythm from the speakers. "May you relax and enjoy the fare!"

I leaned back into the seat, letting my shoulders finally drop as the cab pulled away from Delta. The massive structure slipped past the windows, looming over the surrounding cityscape with its unnaturally smooth, black exterior and a scale that always felt less *big* and more *cataclysmic* in nature.

I made a very conscious effort *not* to glance at any of the exterior camera feeds that still had Delta in frame.

'Learned that lesson the hard way already,' I thought back grimly to the first time I had left the Megabuilding with Cryo and the rest of the crew. *'Once was more than enough. Fucking freaky-ass Megabuildings.'*

The ride itself was mercifully uneventful.

It didn't take long for the cab to merge onto one of the multi-level highways, smoothly weaving between lanes before spiraling downward toward the seventh layer.

Neo Avalis blurred past the windows as we dropped deeper into the city, the air outside growing thicker and more industrial by the second.

Soon enough, the signage shifted, and Falmouth District announced itself in all its grime-and-function glory. A few more turns, a stretch along one of the larger thoroughfares, and the cab began to slow.

“Destination reached,” the female voice chimed in once more, pleasant and completely indifferent. “Please exit the cab at your earliest convenience, after verifying the safety of the surroundings with the cab’s camera system. Redline Loop takes no responsibility for customer safety after the fare has concluded and the customer has exited the vehicle.”

The cab came to a smooth stop.

I did as the disembodied voice had instructed and pulled up the camera system and did a full scan, then immediately did another whole sweep—front, back, sides, overhead, the full 360-degree spread. I took my time with it too, cycling through the feeds once, then again, then a third time for good measure.

Nothing.

Just the street outside the OPN offices: A few people coming and going with purpose, a small smattering of parked vehicles on the curbs, security cameras mounted a little too obviously to be decorative, and that low, ever-present hum of Neo Avalis’ infrastructure doing its thing.

No Scavs lurking in corners, no shady silhouettes pretending to check their comms, no one paying the cab any special attention.

Which was, quite frankly, *exactly* what I’d expected to see.

Nobody with even half a brain would try something right in front of the OPN offices.

That was a great way to get yourself very efficiently and very creatively splattered across several layers of the city. Operators tended to have zero chill when things smelled iffy in their immediate vicinity.

Still, I did do my check properly.

Not because I thought something would go wrong here—but because I wanted this to become muscle memory. The kind of habit you built *before* the one time you skipped it came back to bite you in the ass.

‘Present-Ela has to make sure Future-Ela doesn’t absolutely despise Past-Ela,’ I thought, nodding to myself.

Satisfied with the checks at last, I dismissed the camera feeds, reached for the door, and stepped out of the cab—and wasn’t immediately shot for doing so. *Success.*

I headed straight for the front entrance of the OPN offices, slipping inside through the wide glass doors and straight into that same oddly sterile, aggressively corporate lobby I remembered from last time.

Everything was still just as clean to the point of discomfort—polished floors, sharp lines, muted colors.

The strange weaponized silence hit me immediately as I entered.

Not a true silence—there were more than half a dozen customers inside, after all, all of them talking quietly with clerks at the front desk—but like a consistent white noise hammering into your head from all angles.

There were more people here than last time by a wide margin, and somehow that only made the space feel more intense.

My shoulders tightened without me really meaning to.

I picked up the pace, fast-walking across the open foyer while keeping my head down and my feet moving.

The sooner I was out of here, the better.

I scanned my OPN license at the checkpoint, the reader flashing green instantly before the barrier slid aside to let me through.

And then—*whiplash*.

The back-room hit me like it had the last time around as well, dumping me straight out of corporate purgatory and into something that felt closer to a bar than an office.

The air was thicker and heavier, saturated with alcohol, sweat, cheap cologne, and unbridled testosterone. Conversations overlapped loudly, someone laughed too hard somewhere to my left, and a battered table in the corner looked like it had seen more than one near-fight in the past day or two.

It took me a second to recalibrate.

Once I did, I made a beeline for the information area where I'd gotten my license last time, back when Cryo had been babysitting me through the process.

I glanced around out of habit, half-expecting to spot Almen—

'Nope.'

Apparently he wasn't around this time.

So instead, I stepped up to the first free clerk at the counter.

They were tall and lean, with a shock of vibrant yellow hair shaved on one side and worn long on the other, the exposed scalp patterned with thin, glowing circuit tattoos that pulsed faintly as they moved. One of their eyes was clearly synthetic—sleek chrome framing a softly glowing, blue iris that tracked me with unnerving precision as I moved closer.

Their name tag read simply: Jax.

I stopped at the counter and gave Jax a small nod.

“Ehh... Hi, there. Name’s Ela,” I said. “Fresh Operator with the OPN. Had a question about delivering—or rather holding, I guess—an item for another Operator to pick up later...?”

Jax’s expression lightened up.

They looked downright relieved it wasn’t something weird.

“Oh, yeah, that’s easy,” Jax said, already shifting posture like this was muscle memory. “The OPN offers that as a standard service—happens quite often, really. You can just leave the item with us. All we need is the other Operator’s handle and their OPN number, and they can pick it up whenever they’re around the next time.”

They tapped a few things into their terminal as they spoke.

“There’s no upfront fee for it or anything,” Jax continued casually. “Only caveat is a holding fee if nobody picks it up within a week, or if you decide that you want it returned instead. Mostly just there to stop people from using the OPN as long-term storage, you know? Doesn’t come up often, though.”

They glanced up at me, synthetic eye whirring softly as it refocused.

“And just so it’s said out loud,” Jax added, tone still friendly but noticeably firmer, “*any* mishaps with the item are on you. If it blows up, leaks something nasty, or otherwise hurts staff or Operators while it’s under OPN control, accountability stays with the person who handed it over. So... I *really* recommend no explosives or similar—not actually a rule, but just some personal advice there.”

“That’s perfect,” I replied immediately, nodding profusely. “And absolutely fine. No explosives, I promise! It’s just a blip for a fellow runner. Something we agreed on exchanging for a code review.”

That, *technically*, wasn’t even a lie.

Mouse really did want to review my code—just not in the typical sense of the word.

Jax waved a hand dismissively. “That’s definitely not a problem, then. A blip takes up little space, so even the holding fee, should it have to be returned or your fellow Operator does not pick it up within the week, is only going to be around five Credits.”

I passed over Mouse’s handle and OPN number, then handed across the blip with the updated [Venombite] loaded onto it.

Jax took it, ran a quick verification scan, and set it aside with practiced ease.

“You’re all set. I’ll bring it back into the drawers once we’re done here,” they said. “Mouse can pick it up whenever.”

“Thank you for your assistance,” I said genuinely, bowing slightly as I did, already feeling one task slide cleanly off my mental load.

With that done, I turned away from the counter and headed back into the open bar area of the back offices, eyes already scanning the room as I started looking for Higgins and whatever crew he’d brought along.

Thanks to Cryo’s information package, it didn’t take long for me to find the guy.

I spotted Higgins tucked into one of the alcoves along the edge of the bar area, seated at a table with a small cluster of other Operators.

They were mid-conversation, colourful and various empty drinks scattered across the tabletop, posture loose in that way people only managed when they were half-working and fully comfortable in a space.

The reason he’d stood out so quickly was simple: Cryo had included both a picture and a note about where Higgins usually tried to claim a seat.

It wasn’t the exact alcove Cryo had mentioned, but it *was* the one right next to it.

‘Close enough.’

Before moving in, I did a quick internal check—didn’t want to run up looking like a complete newbie, even if I was one.

The DuraPack sat right where it should, snug against my back.

I subtly shifted my shoulders, confirming nothing had been jostled loose when I’d pulled the blip earlier. Knives were also still exactly where I wanted them.

Satisfied, I headed over.

As I closed the distance, one of the Operators at the table—a middle-aged man—looked up, semi-casually scanning the crowd and immediately clocked me through the mass of people as I approached them directly.

Our eyes met.

I flinched internally, a brief spike of surprise at being noticed that fast.

‘Holy fuck... Well, at least I won’t have to worry about anyone getting the jump on us, huh?’ I couldn’t help but think. *‘Then again, I hadn’t exactly tried to be subtle here.’*

I kept walking towards them despite the man staring me down, posture relaxed, pace steady—I was Ela right now, and Ela was outwardly confident whenever possible.

The man leaned slightly toward Higgins over the table and nudged him with two fingers, murmuring something I couldn’t hear over the ambient noise.

When I reached the table, I got a quick snapshot of the group.

The first thing that jumped out at me was that they were all Nighon—or at least half-Nighon.

There was that familiar, old-world Japanese-yakuza edge to them that I recognized from my past life's movies and shows, carried in posture and presence more than clothes, then sharpened and modernized by the classic cyberpunk touches.

The man who'd spotted me first fit that image perfectly.

He looked late forties, maybe early fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a short, practical knot. A thin scar ran diagonally across his cheek, old and clean, the kind that you'd expect on a yakuza member that handled blades quite frequently. His dark brown eyes were meeting mine as I quickly scanned him over, evidently missing absolutely nothing.

Next to him sat a woman with cropped black hair and luminous, faintly iridescent eyes—clearly deliberately augmented as such.

Subtle chrome filigree traced along her jawline before vanishing beneath her collar. She lounged back in her chair with one boot hooked over a rung, posture relaxed but coiled, like she could move the second she needed to. And she, too, was eyeing me suspiciously as if she could somehow get a read on my entire personality just by getting a proper look at me.

'Damn, that chrome filigree looks so fucking cool,' I thought, before I ripped my eyes from her jawline and moved on the next person.

On Higgins' other side was a more heavy-set man, shoulders thick, long dark hair braided tight and threaded through with small metal rings. One forearm was fully cybernetic—matte black and unapologetically industrial—resting on the table.

'Probably quite a bit more powerful than Jin's, but definitely less well designed...' I analyzed the chrome instinctively. *'Might be a target for enemy Runners if they're good. Doesn't look like it would have much EM shielding on it.'*

And then, finally, there was Higgins.

He was unmistakable.

Tall, solid, with that distinctly Nighon bouncer-type build that blended compact strength with an almost effortless confidence underneath a well-tailored suit.

What really made him stand out, however, was his hair.

It was a thoroughly vibrant neon-red, tied back loosely with a few strands slipping free to frame a face marked by old laugh lines and newer stress. One eye was natural—or about as natural as it got in Neo Avalis, meaning it was a standard-issue cybernetic one—the other replaced with a low-profile optic implant that glowed faintly amber as it focused on me.

He turned fully in his seat when I stopped at the edge of the table, his attention settling on me with open interest.

Just as I was about to open my mouth and introduce myself the normal way, [Cultural Savant] pinged me—and might as well have smacked me upside the head for good measure.

‘Right. Nighon clientele,’ I remembered at the last second.

I adjusted course immediately.

I offered a proper bow toward Higgins, then a slightly shallower one to the rest of the crew before straightening again.

Only then did I speak, keeping my tone easy but deliberate—or at least that’s what I was aiming for. Whether I succeeded or not would be theirs to tell.

“Name’s Ela,” I said, directing it to Higgins. “Cryo referred me to you—said you had a gig coming up that needed a Runner for something?”

If nothing else, [Cultural Savant] had at least saved me from tripping over my own mouth right out of the gate.

They picked up on it immediately.

The woman with the cool chrome tracing her jaw leaned in a little closer over the table—I had clearly caught her full attention now. Her eyes flicked over my posture, my expression, the way I’d bowed, analyzing every little detail.

“{Would you look at that... the girl’s got proper manners, huh?}” the heavy-set man beside Higgins muttered in Japanese.

That earned a soft chuckle from the woman and a quiet huff of amusement from the middle-aged man, who exhaled through his nose like he found the comment mildly entertaining. He didn’t actually look amused, though, which made it pretty clear he was humoring the other man more than finding it funny himself.

I was half-tempted to respond in Japanese right then and there, just to watch the reactions ripple across their faces—but I kept my mouth shut.

For now, it felt smarter to keep that particular card tucked away.

Having access to conversations they *assumed* I couldn’t understand was exactly the kind of quiet advantage Cryo would’ve approved of. It was prudent and thoroughly tinged with the kind of self-preservation he had preached the moment he had introduced me to the OPN.

‘Well-meaning advice is hard to come by,’ I reminded myself. *‘So it’s best to stick to it when you get some. I can always pull out the Japanese later—if they prove trustworthy—and enjoy the reactions then. Patience, Ela.’*

“Ahh, Ela-san. Yes,” Higgins said at last. “Cryo-san mentioned you were interested in the gig and would be meeting us here. I’m glad to see you made it.”

His tone was light, genuinely welcoming, as he gestured toward the two empty seats at the table. “Please, sit. Let me introduce everyone properly, and then we’ll go over the plan, yes?”

I picked the chair closer to Higgins.

Before sitting, I gave it a subtle once-over—nothing obvious, nothing out of place—then slipped out of my DuraPack and set it beside me where I could keep an eye on it.

Once seated, I nodded to Higgins to show I was good to go.

He took that as his cue and began running through the introductions for today’s crew...