

Chapter 17 - Surprises

Equipped with the newly acquired wisdom from the first level of my [Cooking] Skill, I took on Mr. Shori's culinary challenge.

My first step involved sampling the simmering broth laid before me, trying to identify what tweaks it needed to replicate the taste I'd relished just a short while ago.

However, the moment the spoonful of hot, golden liquid touched my tongue, I was thrown for a loop.

'What in the world—why is this so fucking intense?'

This broth was a far cry from the one I'd savoured earlier; it was markedly stronger, by perhaps 30 to 40 percent. Instead of offering a nuanced symphony of spices and flavours, it felt like an ambush on my tastebuds—an all-out barrage of clashing tastes.

'Could Mr. Shori have messed up with this particular batch?' I wondered. 'This isn't the broth containing the algae I prepped, so it has to be his own creation...'

Baffled, I ruminated over the perplexing situation before me, my curiosity piqued by the broth's startling potency. Just as I was starting to really mull it over, however, an epiphany burst forth from the depths of my consciousness, as if delivered by the knowledge bequeathed by my new Skill.

"It's lacking the elements that would soften its flavour profile—the algae and what we might as well dub 'vegetables,'" I muttered to myself, my smile broadening with a newfound sense of accomplishment.

This instantaneous knowledge transfer was so goddamn overpowered!

I no longer had to wrestle with problems like this; all I needed was to nudge my mind in the right direction, and it would autonomously unearth the solutions, guided by the amalgam of knowledge provided by the Skills, Perks, and Traits now at my disposal.

Now, the crux of the matter loomed: Had Mr. Shori intentionally left out ingredients to test me, or was he expecting me to season the broth in its current state? No sooner had the dilemma begun to percolate in my mind than the answer spontaneously materialised.

"I need to season it as-is; otherwise, the additional ingredients will overcook in the broth!" The words burst forth involuntarily, propelled by a giddy sort of clarity.

A spontaneous giggle of exhilaration bubbled out of me, prompted by the weird yet incredible sensation of having a vault of culinary wisdom readily accessible. The sound was enough to divert Mr. Shori's focus from his work.

"You done? No fun! Only work. Then fun," he directed, his ladle gesturing pointedly at the simmering pot before me. I couldn't help but notice the subtle tightening of the skin around his eyes as he spoke.

'This crafty old man is having the time of his life command me around!'

Well, so was I. So good for him!

With a mental nod to myself, I refocused, leaning over the pot to sort out the next steps for perfecting my broth. The lingering question, however, still nagged at me: I had no baseline for how the unadorned broth should taste.

'Well, there's a straightforward solution for this, isn't there?' I mused internally.

Slipping away from my station, I moved toward one of the pots Mr. Shori was actively using to prepare bowls for the impatient clientele.

As I passed behind him, he paused, pivoted slightly, and gave me a fleeting, narrowed-eyed glance before refocusing on the barrage of customer orders.

'Is that tacit approval?' I puzzled.

Mr. Shori's micro-expressions were difficult to interpret, but I reasoned that if my actions were really unacceptable, he would have either told me to go away or brandished his ladle as an improvised weapon—there was even a Skill for that!

Swiftly, so as not to obstruct Mr. Shori's culinary ballet, I deftly filled a spoon in each hand—my ambidexterity came in handy here in not dropping any of the valuable broth on the floor—and retreated to my simmering pot.

Taking the first spoonful to my lips, I concentrated on the taste, dissecting each flavour note, texture, and nuance. For the second spoonful, I preceded it by rinsing my mouth with water from a tap, the very one Mr. Shori used for cleaning bowls.

'Here's hoping it's not some kind of utility water... or worse,' I thought as I took a sip to cleanse my palate.

Then, with refreshed taste buds, I delved into the second spoonful, savouring it as I scoured my senses for any subtleties that might have eluded me the first time.

With renewed focus and a strong sense of purpose, I immediately reached for the trio of shakers that Mr. Shori had so deliberately highlighted—salt, pepper, and garlic. The wisdom imparted by the first level of my [Cooking] Skill guided me, reminding me that the subtleties of these basic ingredients were often underestimated.

First, I unscrewed the cap of the salt shaker, taking a cautious sniff before dabbing a bit on my tongue to taste it—yep, definitely salt. Even in this cyberpunk universe, salt was just salt.

I pinched a small amount of the white minerals between my fingers and gently let it rain down over the steaming surface of the broth, stirring it thoroughly afterward. I didn't want to overwhelm the natural flavours but rather enhance them, adding just enough to make the other ingredients pop, or so I hoped.

Next, I picked up the pepper shaker, forgoing the sniff test to avoid an ill-timed sneeze into the broth—I was fairly certain that sneezing into the food wasn't Mr. Shori's secret culinary technique; at least I hoped so. Upon tasting, I found it to be a rather typical white pepper, albeit with a slight acidic undertone.

My newly acquired [Cooking] Skill chimed in, advising me that a judicious application could lend a nuanced spiciness to the dish, but overdoing it would be catastrophic—the only fix would be dilution through additional ingredients.

With deliberate intent, I gave the shaker a few calculated shakes over the pot, visualising the minute granules scattering into the broth, imbuing it with their complex warmth as if I was an alchemist creating a complex elixir.

Finally, it was the garlic's turn.

Garlic had the potential to provide both a pungent kick and a mellowness when cooked down. I opened the shaker and released a controlled dash into the mix after tasting it and reminding my brain what garlic tasted like. My mind replayed Mr. Shori's prepared broth, recalling the nuanced way garlic had woven itself through it.

Stirring the pot once more, I allowed the seasonings to mingle and meld.

I scooped up a spoonful of the amended broth, savouring its aroma before tasting it. The flavours were instantly more rounded, layered, and deep.

The salt had served to amplify the broth's inherent flavours, the pepper had introduced a nuanced zest, and the garlic had woven in a layer of aromatic depth. Yet the brew wasn't quite where it needed to be.

So, in a meticulous dance of seasoning, I added more of each element incrementally. I tasted and stirred after each addition, ever so cautiously edging towards that elusive perfect blend.

Finally, after an intense five minutes marked by ceaseless tasting and iterative adjustments, a sense of satisfaction washed over me. Every component had made its mark without overpowering the others. I had achieved a culinary equilibrium that many recipes aspired to reach but rarely did—a feat I had never managed to accomplish in my previous life.

The pleasure of this small achievement washed over me.

I felt like an alchemist who had just transmuted ordinary metals into gold.

As if on-cue, a satisfying chime sounded in my head as well, informing me of my much deserved gains.

[System]: *300xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. (First time recipe bonus.)*

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

Fueled by this massive dose of dopamine, I seized the first available moment to signal Mr. Shori that I had successfully accomplished the task he'd assigned me.

As Mr. Shori made his way toward the pot, his steps were measured and deliberate, each one seemingly calculated to tell me, "This is serious business." The air grew thick with anticipation as he picked up a ladle.

He was a seasoned veteran in the world of flavours, and that ladle was his weapon of choice.

Dipping it into the broth, he brought the liquid up to his nose first, sniffing it critically. Then, he tasted it, rolling it around his mouth before swallowing.

His face was an inscrutable mask; not a single emotion leaked through to give me even the slightest clue. I felt a coil of anxiety winding tighter within me, the seconds stretching into minutes in my mind.

Finally, Mr. Shori looked at me.

It was a subtle thing, but his eyes softened just a smidgen, and he gave me the tiniest of nods—a single, minuscule motion that only an old Asian man could make feel like the greatest stamp of approval. A tiny whoop of excitement escaped my lips.

His eyes twinkled with amusement even as he playfully chided, "Quiet! Work, no fun."

And then, shifting into teacher mode, he moved over to a shelf and pulled down four to-go boxes. The boxes were unlike any typical food container. Sleek and dark, they bore the stall's name in neon-luminescent characters that seemed to pulse softly.

I noticed a small interface on the side—a touchscreen, perhaps?—and it became clear these were no ordinary containers. They looked like they had their own power source, likely designed to keep the food at the optimal temperature.

As he began to fill each box with the necessary ingredients and then poured in my carefully seasoned broth, he made sure I was watching every move he made. Finally, he closed the lids securely, and the boxes seemed to hum softly, as if coming to life.

While the technology was undeniably cool, a thought occurred to me.

In a world where a large percentage of the population couldn't even afford to eat properly, the existence of such high-tech food containers felt like an obscene form of extravagance. This was one of the things about cyberpunk worlds I had always found intriguing—the glaring inequities, the overabundant technology amidst the decay. But now that I was living in such a world, I found it increasingly hard to romanticise.

This wasn't a plot device or a world-building element anymore; this was real life for people, and it was far from fair.

"Here. Take," Mr. Shori abruptly cut through my train of thought, handing me a bag that contained the four high-tech boxes. The bag itself was surprisingly sturdy, crafted from a durable synth-plastic designed to withstand the weight—unlike those terrible, carry-handle plastic bags from my old world, that fell apart the second you looked at them.

'A delivery mission? Easy peasy!' My mind raced with anticipation, but as I hefted the surprisingly heavy, neon-luminescent containers within the bag—which, at second look, each resembled a kind of bento box that had been reimagined by a cyberpunk enthusiast—I had to recalibrate my initial excitement.

'Let's just hope this isn't a marathon delivery. My arms and legs aren't built for long-haul cargo. Yet. Not built for that, yet.'

Meeting Mr. Shori's gaze, I awaited further instructions, but he just stared back.

A pregnant pause hung in the air, both of us seemingly locked in a standoff of unspoken expectations. My limited stamina ticking away like a silent clock, I finally broke the silence.

"So, where should I deliver these, Mr. Shori?"

The mere arching of one of his brows was a language unto itself, immediately informing me that I was missing some crucial piece of the puzzle. His subsequent words corroborated my feeling of cluelessness. "No delivery. Stick food. So Stick become Sera. You go now. Come back tomorrow, yes? You help, I give food. You help lots, I give food and creds, yes?"

Stunned, I looked at Mr. Shori, my mouth opening and closing like a malfunctioning mechanical door.

Did he seriously offer me all this food for free and even credits for potential future work?

I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't find the right words, a torrent of gratitude, surprise, and genuine happiness jumbling together in my mind but refusing to translate into coherent speech.

Mr. Shori seemed to sense my emotional disarray.

With an eye-roll so miniscule it could have been mistaken for a twitch, he made a shooing gesture, embodying that peculiar blend of annoyance and affection that only an elder could pull off.

"Go, go," he muttered, playfully nudging me out of the stall with the neon-luminescent food boxes shining through the plastic bag in my hands.

As I made my way back to the elevator, the ambient neon lights casting their multicoloured glow on my path, my mind kept circling back to Mr. Shori. Underneath that stern, no-nonsense exterior was a man of surprising kindness and generosity.

At that moment, I revised one of my prior mental notes with some additional notes.

I would definitely be coming back tomorrow, integrating Mr. Shori's stall into my newfound daily routine of hustles and grinds. After all, it wasn't just about the food, experience or even the very inciting offer of creds anymore; it was about belonging somewhere. And maybe, just maybe, learning a thing or two from a seasoned soul who seemed to understand life's complex recipe better than most in this strange, cyberpunk world.

Before I realised it, I found myself back at the elevator that had initially delivered me to floor 16. I waited for its arrival, feeling distinctly aware of the penetrating glances from a handful of dubious characters who hovered in the vicinity.

When the elevator doors finally hissed open, I weaved through the exiting passengers with surprising agility—thank goodness my Reflex stat was at a 3 and not languishing at a 1 like my Body stat, otherwise, I would've inevitably collided with several people.

Once safely inside the elevator's confines, I let out an inconspicuous sigh of relief, glad to be out of the eyeline of those unsettling individuals.

'Don't let your guard down like that, Sera. Mr. Shori's kindness may have lulled you into a false sense of security, but this world is anything but nice. Keep your fucking head in the game! You can't afford to get aced just like that,' I internally admonished myself, reaffirming my commitment to remain vigilant until I was securely back at home.

However, as the elevator began its ascent, a new problem dawned on me: How, exactly, was I going to reach floor 43?

Although my biometrics granted me access to that restricted level, the elevator would bypass it if even one occupant lacked the necessary biomarker or access shard for clearance.

'Damn it, what's the plan now?' I thought, anxiety knotting my stomach as the elevator numbers incrementally climbed. *'How am I supposed to get home?'*

Pondering my dilemma, my mind raced through a litany of potential solutions.

The idea of seeking out a staircase flashed across my thoughts, but was almost immediately dismissed. Given the considerable distance I had already travelled from Mr. Shori's stall to the elevator, the mere thought of locating a staircase—assuming one even existed that allowed public access to restricted floors—and then climbing up or down even a single level was a physical impossibility.

Especially while lugging around Mr. Shori's generous serving of food.

No, my body was already screaming from the day's exertions. The muscles in my arms and legs quivered, teetering on the edge of outright rebellion.

I realised the best—though far from ideal—course of action would be to linger at the back of the elevator, unobtrusive and inconspicuous, waiting for that elusive moment when I would be its sole occupant. Only then could I access floor 43 without triggering any security protocols.

'Note to self: ask Gabriel how he manages this. There's got to be a better way,' I mentally bookmarked.

In the game world, as far as I could discern from the streamers and content creators I used to follow, elevators were almost perpetually empty—a convenient coding decision, presumably, to avoid this very complication from occurring to the players.

It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was the only one that my exhausted body and mind could conjure at the moment. So, I settled in a corner, my senses still keenly alert, as I awaited the chance to continue my journey homeward.

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After enduring more than thirty gruelling minutes relegated to the back of the elevator, feeling like a dollar-store version of Sadako from a second-rate horror film, my moment finally arrived: The elevator was empty but for me.

Wasting no time, I jabbed the button for the 43rd floor on the touch-panel console.

A sense of profound relief washed over me as the screen flashed a green "ACCESS GRANTED," confirming that my biometrics had passed the requisite security check.

"This is fucking absurd. How the hell does Gabriel get through this? Valeria would never stand for such nonsense either," I mumbled under my breath. My frustration had long since reached a boiling point, threatening to erupt in a tempest of expletives.

The slender thread that had saved me from a total emotional breakdown was a lone notification that appeared around the 20-minute mark.

[System]: 100xp gained for Body Attribute.

'Well, at least I'm not suffering entirely in vain,' I'd repeated to myself like a mantra, clutching that scant burst of dopamine as if it were a lifeline, sustaining me through the interminable wait.

As the elevator's doors finally parted with a subdued hiss upon reaching the 43rd floor, I darted out, acutely aware that lingering could risk the elevator imprisoning me once more by sealing its doors and whisking away to some other destination. The moment my feet touched the plush carpeting of my home floor, the contrast hit me like a tidal wave.

Before descending to the chaotic labyrinth of the 16th floor, I had mentally noted the disparity between the two worlds. But pondering inequality was one thing; feeling the tactile reality was another beast entirely.

Despite being separated by a mere elevator ride, the 43rd floor felt like a sanctuary—an oasis of calm and affluence that stood in stark, unnerving contrast to the cacophonous jungle just 27 floors below.

Walking through the spacious corridor toward my apartment, each step felt like a mini-vacation compared to the taxing trek on the 16th floor.

The air here was palpably different—crisper, cleaner, infused with a subtle, calming fragrance that contrasted sharply with the acrid odours I had encountered below. I hadn't even realised the extent to which my muscles had tensed up during my time away until they began to unwind, unravelling a knot of stress I hadn't been fully aware of.

My shoulders dropped, my clenched jaw relaxed, and my breathing deepened.

I felt enveloped by an invisible shroud of security that had been conspicuously absent on the 16th floor, where the atmosphere had been imbued with an unspoken, yet palpable, undercurrent of threat.

Another detail struck me—the relative emptiness.

Here, on this sprawling, comparatively luxurious, level, I saw maybe three or four people sauntering down the long, art-adorned hallways. They moved with an unhurried grace. It was a stark contrast to the teeming masses I'd manoeuvred through on the 16th floor.

Thousands of people had been crammed into that chaotic labyrinth of humanity, each one a potential collision, a possible conflict. Up here, the absence of that incessant pressure was like lifting a weight off my chest.

The experience of descending to the 16th and then returning to my own exclusive domain was surreal—like passing between separate dimensions that coexisted in cruel juxtaposition.

It was as if I'd gone from a teeming bazaar in some overpopulated megalopolis to a serene, manicured suburban enclave in the span of an elevator ride. It was both disconcerting and deeply illuminating.

I had an abode here, a sanctuary of peace and privacy, and I never wanted to take that for granted again.

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After carefully setting down the cyberpunk'd bento boxes—Mr. Shori's generous gift—on the kitchen table, I sank into one of our old, slightly worn-out chairs. A random thought flitted through my mind: This was the first time I'd actually sat in that chair since arriving in this world.

Every fibre of my being ached, as if I'd been subjected to a full-body workout courtesy of a seriously sadistic gym instructor. Muscles I didn't even know I had were vociferously protesting, yet a wave of elation washed over me, drowning out the physical discomfort.

My first foray outside the apartment had yielded far more than I could have ever anticipated.

I had not only unlocked a brand-new Skill but a crafting Skill at that—one with experience points already trickling in. I'd also established a rapport with Mr. Shori, a local with seemingly vast amounts of reach via his stall, and secured what amounted to an apprenticeship and a part-time job rolled into one.

The richness of the day's accomplishments played in stark contrast to my initial physical limitations, making the victory all the sweeter. If this series of achievements didn't constitute a monumental win in the game of life, then I shuddered to think what would.

By my own personal scorecard, this day was indisputably marked with a giant, neon-glowing 'W'.

For the moment, though, my body was demanding some well-deserved pampering. It was high time for my first authentic shower in this world!

You see, being confined to a wheelchair didn't lend itself to what I'd consider a 'real' shower—just sitting there while water did most of the work simply wasn't the same.

So with barely-contained enthusiasm, I shucked off my clothes and practically vaulted into the shower stall. I cranked the heat up to borderline scalding levels, relishing the sensation of the near-blistering water coursing over my fatigued muscles.

The water not only cleansed but also seemed to knead the tension right out of me.

I luxuriated in the steaming cascade for well over half an hour.

When I finally stepped out, my skin had taken on the flushed hue of a boiled lobster.

'Okay, maybe I overindulged just a smidgeon... but fuck it, I needed this! And I deserved it, too!' I mused to myself as I donned fresh clothes and hustled back to the living room.

A message from Gabriel had popped up on my interface, notifying me he was en route home.

Time was of the essence; I had finishing touches to put in place to round off this big 'W' of a day with the cherry on top!

With a newfound sense of purpose, I began to set the stage for the ultimate surprise.

First, I cleared the pathway from the entrance to the living room, ensuring there were no obstacles that could ruin the grand reveal. I pushed the tiny coffee table aside, creating an open space right in front of the couch where I'd make my "stand." Literally.

My eyes darted to the kitchen table where I had placed Mr. Shori's boxed gifts.

'Should I integrate those into the surprise?' I pondered briefly before deciding against it. Today had its own triumphs; the incredible generosity of Mr. Shori could be its own revelation later on.

Refocusing my energy on the living room, I deliberately settled myself into my wheelchair for what I hoped would be the final time.

With my feet planted firmly on the ground, I positioned the chair at an angle that would give Gabriel a clear line of sight to me right from the door. I leaned slightly forward, my muscles taut and ready, poised for the act of standing up.

My heart started to race as I went over the game plan in my head.

I imagined Gabriel walking through the door, his eyes scanning the room and landing on me, sitting casually on the couch. But then, I'd push myself up, steady my legs, and stand. His face would shift from curiosity to disbelief and then, hopefully, to joy.

I sat there, every muscle primed for action, every nerve tingling with anticipation.

'This is it, the moment of truth,' I thought, my fingers fidgeting nervously on my lap. *'I can't wait to see the look on his face when he realises I can walk now.'*

As the minutes ticked by, I found myself running through the motions in my head, rehearsing my movements so they'd be as fluid as possible.

'No stumbles, no hesitations; this has to go perfectly,' I silently urged myself.

I felt like a coiled spring, my body poised to unspool in a spectacular display. This was going to be the cherry on top of an already extraordinary day, and I could hardly contain my excitement.

Then, at last, the moment I'd been eagerly awaiting arrived.

The sound of the biometric sensor beeping echoed through the room, followed closely by the distinct mechanical click of the door unlocking.

It slid open with a soft whoosh, heralding Gabriel's entrance.

"Welcome home, Gabe!" I called out, my voice tinged with a hint of overzealous enthusiasm, as I sat strategically in the living room. My eyes locked onto the slowly opening door, ready for the revelation that was about to unfold.

Just as I was revelling in the anticipation of Gabriel's reaction to my miraculous feat, my plan shattered into a million fragmented pieces.

Instead of the casual, nonchalant entrance I had expected, Gabriel stumbled into the apartment, clutching the right side of his abdomen with both hands. The colour had drained from his face, and a dark, crimson stain spread across the fabric of his shirt.

His other hand was leaving smears of blood on the nearby kitchen wall as he used it to steady himself.

"Help," he managed to utter in my direction, his voice weak and tinged with desperation...