

### Chapter 33 - Bargains

Misha's smile widened in response to my query, her green teeth catching the neon glow from above in a way that was almost startling, "Ah, the price—always the critical detail. For the entire selection, Misha asks for 184 Credits. Misha insists on selling the set as a whole! Ela *must* have the complete ensemble to truly shine, so no piece by piece transactions!" Her tone held a firmness that surprised me, suggesting there was no room for negotiation.

*'Great. I'm precisely 24 Credits short, thanks to my earlier attempts to make myself feel better... And yet, 184 Credits for all these items is nothing short of a steal, especially since the scarf and jacket alone qualify as T1 gear. In-game these two alone would easily go for 200 creds. There's no chance I'll stumble upon anything of comparable quality at a lower price elsewhere,'* I mulled over my predicament, my mind racing for a solution.

With the shortfall in mind, I had to think creatively.

The thought of passing up the gear Misha had masterfully curated was not an option, yet the idea of alerting Valeria to my acquisitions was equally unacceptable. Sure, the attire itself might not spark undue interest from her, but I wasn't willing to take that gamble.

Frankly, I didn't quite know *why* I didn't want her to be aware of my clothing purchases..

It wasn't as if she bore any visible animosity towards Operators, but then again, my acquaintance with her was limited at best. The extent of my knowledge was that she was extremely frightening, someone who expressed her discontent in ways that defied my wildest notions, as I had witnessed first-hand during that last unsettling family dinner.

My immediate goal was to assemble a basic Operator's kit, robust enough to tackle straightforward assignments from Mr. Stirling without falling victim to the first scavenger lying in wait. Given that Mr. Stirling had approached Valeria for debt settlement, I doubted he'd have me performing trivial tasks like household chores.

I was bracing myself for assignments akin to the one I undertook for Mr. Shori—tasks that demanded a certain level of readiness, hence the need for appropriate gear. While Valeria might appreciate my earnest approach to these responsibilities, I had no desire for her to pore over my clothing choices.

It would be far less problematic to have her evaluate a knife or a cyberdeck than to justify my apparel preferences—especially since I had grown quite fond of the outfit Misha had put together for me.

Weighing these considerations, a single course of action crystallised in my mind. *'Time to channel the art of negotiation,'* I thought resolutely.

"Misha, Ela has but 160 credits to offer now," I proposed, my voice steady, yet imbued with the earnestness of my predicament. "In return, Ela pledges to purchase further pieces right away and in the future as well, investing exclusively in Misha's fine selection whenever possible.

Ela knows this is a considerable request, yet Ela's funds are finite, and there's still a need for further equipment beyond the clothing," I asserted, matching Misha's toothy grin with a confident smile of my own.

Misha's expression turned inward as she pondered my counter-offer.

She began to mutter to herself in Gryplik, the language a series of rolling rumbles and sharp clicks that filled the air with its strange melody. To an unfamiliar ear, it would have sounded almost like an alien song, but thanks to my [Polyglot] Trait, I understood her musings perfectly.

"Can Misha trust this Ela?" she mused, her voice a low, rhythmic hum punctuated by soft clacks of her tongue. "Ela offered Ela's name freely, mirrored Misha's speech to improve communication. These are signs of respect and trustworthiness, for sure. But it might be a trap?"

Her murmurs continued, a contemplative cadence, "Ela *seems* sincere, but business is business. Misha must be wise. Yet, a returning customer is valuable. This Ela could be a good ally, maybe even a friend to Misha's Emporium. Ela is young, too. Barely hatched, even. Ela could be a long-lasting customer for Misha. Misha would very much like that. But for that to happen, Ela is not allowed to die soon. To make sure of that, Ela needs equipment..."

Her language, though foreign, had a pattern and a flow that was almost hypnotic.

The clicks and hums, the rise and fall of her tones, all conveyed her internal debate clearly to me. It was fascinating to hear my own fate being deliberated in such an exotic tongue, knowing that each utterance and pause was a step closer to her decision.

Finally, Misha's muttering slowed, and she fixed her four beady eyes on me.

The alien sounds ceased, replaced by the palpable anticipation that hung between us. Her thoughtful frown eased into a more neutral expression, a sign she had reached a conclusion, but didn't want to show her hand too early.

I was already privy to Misha's decision, having understood her Gryplik mutterings perfectly. Nonetheless, I maintained a suitably eager facade, not wanting to spoil the suspense of her announcement.

"Misha agrees to Ela's proposal. 160 credits for the ensemble. But Ela must commit to future purchases right away and come back for more later as well," she declared, her eyes scanning my face for a reaction.

Her decision was met with my sincere gratitude.

There was no need to feign my relief and thankfulness; I was genuinely appreciative of her willingness to accept my offer, especially given the initial bargain price of the gear.

"Thank Misha! Ela is truly grateful and will ensure to come back for more. Ela will transfer the credits now and then discuss additional equipment needs, if Misha agrees?" I responded with heartfelt enthusiasm.

Misha's grin widened, her green teeth glinting in the neon light, as she nodded eagerly at the prospect of another equipment hunt. I quickly accessed my cerebral interface, transferring all my available personal credits to Misha's Emporium.

[You have transferred {c}160 to "Misha's Emporium" account with the note: "Ela thanks Misha for the kindness."]

As I completed the transaction, I noticed a subtle change in the two red eyes on Misha's left side, briefly flickering to yellow.

*'So, the demi-humans do use specialised cybernetics. I've always wondered about that,'* I thought, observing her eyes more closely. *'Makes sense, especially for Gryplik. Enhancing their limited physical abilities with cybernetics is bound to be a massive upgrade. I wonder what other augmentations Misha has?'* This insight into Gryplik physiology and their adaptation to technology piqued my curiosity even further.

"Misha thanks Ela for the patronage! Now, what else does Ela require? Ela mentioned a knife of some sort?" The Gryplik inquired, eager to get into the next section of their dealings.

Eager to capitalise on Misha's own eagerness to assist, I promptly began detailing my requirements for a knife. "I'm in need of a combat knife, small enough to conceal easily. It should fit comfortably in my hands, but with enough weight to ensure it can serve as a reliable defence tool in the event I'm forced to use it. Durability is key—I'm looking for a blade that can maintain a sharp edge for an extended period, even if that makes it more challenging to sharpen initially."

This preference was born from my experience with the knife Gabriel had procured for me.

The blade I had received from Gabriel was serviceable, yet it fell short of my unique needs and wasn't quite in harmony with my [Sharpen] Perk. Its softer material meant it lost its edge faster than I preferred, clearly designed for frequent sharpening to maintain sharpness, rather than preserving a sharp edge over time.

This design is typical for a self-defence knife, where a slightly softer metal reduces the risk of chipping or breaking. In dire situations, it's better to have a blade that might dull or get minor nicks, which can be easily rectified, than to end up with a fractured knife when you need it most.

However, my requirements were different.

I wasn't anticipating frequent use of the knife.

My objective was to have a blade consistently at peak sharpness for those rare moments when it would be necessary. I wasn't planning on turning into a strange type of vigilante, taking down all the scavs on this side of the Red Wasteland.

The [Sharpen] Perk did a fantastic job at bringing a blade to its sharpest state, but it didn't maintain that level of sharpness over time. Therefore, a blade that inherently held its edge was more valuable to me than one that was simply easier to sharpen, as the perk eliminated the need for regular maintenance.

My stint at Mr. Shori's had been quite educational in understanding the longevity of sharpness in different types of knives, which had ultimately led me to formulate this particular requirement.

For example, his general-purpose knife retained its edge for a longer duration compared to his more specialised blades. This experience helped me appreciate the superiority of harder blades in maintaining sharpness. Mr. Shori himself had expressed admiration for my ability to sharpen the harder knives, which he had found challenging to perfect himself.

With a clear understanding of what I needed, I looked to Misha, trusting she would comprehend the intricacies of my request and aid in choosing the ideal knife.

To my great satisfaction, she sprang into action, her enthusiasm palpable as she navigated towards the array of knife racks scattered across her shop. Her movements were quick and precise, showing off a level of understanding of her own store's interiors that was impressive, to say the least.

Misha meticulously examined each knife, her slender, triple-jointed arms reaching for one blade after another. She held them up to the light, her keen eyes assessing their form and craftsmanship to a level I couldn't possibly comprehend. She was undoubtedly using her micro-focus eyes to check for imperfections in the knife's blades and similar.

She tested their flexibility, applying gentle pressure to gauge their give and resilience, ensuring they weren't too brittle or prone to snapping. Her scrutiny wasn't limited to just bending the knives either; she also tested their edge on various scraps of fabric she picked up from her eclectic collection.

She sliced through thick denim, delicate silk, and tough leather, evaluating how each blade interacted with different materials. This wasn't just about sharpness; it was about understanding the blade's behaviour under practical conditions.

The knives themselves were a diverse lot as well—some were sleek and straight, designed for precision and speed. Others were broader and curved, offering more heft and power behind each cut. Their handles varied too, from simple, utilitarian grips to more ornate designs that seemed to meld into Misha's hands.

As Misha sifted through her collection, I watched on in fascination. Her expertise was evident in the way she handled each knife, considering its weight, balance, and blade length.

She seemed determined to find not just a good knife, but the *perfect* one that matched my unique requirements. Her dedication to this task was similarly as enthusiastic and focused as she had been with my outfit, which gave me certainty that she would find the exact knife I required.

In a matter of minutes, Misha returned, but this time, her demeanour was tinged with uncertainty. It was a stark contrast to her earlier vibrancy when she had successfully assembled my outfit.

“Misha is here,” she stated, her usual exuberance noticeably subdued. A crease of concern furrowed her brow, causing me to brace for potential disappointment.

*‘Has she not found a knife meeting my criteria?’* I wondered, feeling a twinge of concern as my optimism began to wane.

With a hint of apology in her tone, Misha revealed, “Misha must confess, finding the perfect knife for Ela proved challenging. Misha found two that might suit, but couldn’t decide which is the best. Misha is sorry for this, but Ela will need to make the final choice.”

She extended her arms, presenting two distinct knives for my consideration.

Surprisingly, Misha seemed genuinely distressed, which caught me off guard.

I had expected her to be more pleased, having found not one, but two potential matches for my requirements. Normally, such a situation would be a reason to celebrate. Yet, Misha appeared almost apologetic, troubled by her inability to narrow it down to a single, ideal option that she was confident would appeal to me.

Her commitment to meeting my needs exactly was both endearing and impressive.

As Misha extended the two knives towards me, I took a moment to carefully examine each one, intrigued by their distinct characteristics yet how both aligned with my initial request. Misha simultaneously gave me all the information that I couldn’t ascertain from a quick glance, such as the composition of the metals and their creation.

The first knife had a more traditional design, its blade straight and sleek, eerily similar to the combat knife that Gabriel had gotten me. Its metal gleamed under the store’s neon lights, easily showcasing its fine, razor-sharp edge.

It was about 18cm long, the same size that Gabriel’s knife had been and a size that promised ease of concealment.

The handle was wrapped in a non-slip material—some kind of rope, offering a very firm grip when I tried it out. This knife was balanced, its weight distributed evenly between the blade and the handle, suggesting it would be comfortable to use in various situations. The knife didn’t boast any flashy attributes; instead, it exuded a sense of understated efficiency. It was an ordinary-looking blade, yet its design and build promised of a reliable and capable tool.

The second knife, in contrast, had a subtle curve to its blade, giving it a more aggressive appearance.

This curvature was not just aesthetic but also very functional, designed to increase cutting efficiency and leverage in a combat scenario. The blade was slightly shorter, around 15cm, but it was decidedly thicker, indicating a robustness that would withstand rigorous use.

Its handle was ergonomically shaped, moulded to fit comfortably in the palm, and made of a durable, textured rubber-like material that provided a secure grip even in adverse conditions.

Both knives boasted a high-grade durasteel composition, indicating they were capable of retaining a sharp edge over time. Unlike the more commonly used plasteel alloys—as there was no way I could afford a pure plasteel knife at this stage, durasteel boasted a lot more durability, while losing out on the overall sharpness.

The materials of these knives were precisely what I had been searching for, but without Misha's expertise, locating the ideal type would have been incredibly challenging.

Both blades exhibited full tang construction, with the metal extending seamlessly into the handle for increased strength and reliability, a stark contrast to handles simply bolted onto blades, which were more susceptible to breaking.

Each knife held its unique advantages—the first with its classic, all-purpose design, and the second with its more specialised, curved blade. Misha's dilemma in choosing between them was understandable; both were outstanding in their own right, perfectly aligning with my specifications in different ways.

As I weighed the knives in my hands, I pondered over my options.

My [Knives] Skill hinted that the straight blade would be easier to handle, yet the curved one promised greater damage potential with proper mastery. Additionally, the straight knife's symmetrical design made it better suited for throwing, a technique I didn't plan on utilising often, but still a factor to consider in rare, extreme situations.

The decision was as tough for me as it had been for Misha, albeit for reasons she couldn't possibly know, given my unique circumstances with the G.E.M.A. System and my specific requirements for a knife.

After a few more minutes of careful consideration and a barrage of questions about their make and type, I finally settled on the RaZ Mk. 2, the straight blade. Its suitability for potential throwing emerged as the deciding factor, an edge I couldn't quite find in the curved blade despite my best efforts to justify it.

Both knives were exceptional, and part of me longed to acquire both, lured by their cool factor. However, practicality and financial constraints, not to mention the prospect of having to justify such purchases to Valeria under the pretence of "self-protection," quickly quashed that desire.

With a small sigh of hesitation, I made my decision, opting for the RaZ Mk. 2.

Its design and capabilities felt right for what I envisioned, "Ela will choose the RaZ Mk. 2, Misha. It seems like the perfect fit for Ela's needs. Thank you. Misha has excelled once more. How much will the RaZ cost Ela?" I inquired, my voice tinged with anticipatory curiosity.

Internally, I was already calculating the potential dent in my finances.

Unlike the more budget-friendly knife Gabriel had procured for me, this one was crafted from durasteel, a material renowned for its durability and, consequently, its higher price point than regular steel.

Gabriel's knife had cost 96 credits, leading me to brace for at least double that figure for the superior RaZ. That would dip significantly into my restricted shard, potentially leaving me with just short of 150 credits or so.

*'I might need to put my haggling hat on once again,'* I mused, *'A deck that's worth its weight and cost for 150 credits seems like a tall order.'*

As Misha deliberated over the price, she unconsciously slipped into her native Gryplik, her mutterings revealing her thought process. She seemed to be thinking out loud, under the assumption that I, just like any other customer, couldn't understand her.

"Ela probably isn't flush with credits... Ela's quite young, after all. And Ela needs more gear... Maybe it's best to offer a reasonable deal on the knife, to encourage Ela to spend all of Ela's credits here. If the price is too steep, Ela might not have enough left for the other equipment Ela needs. Worse, Ela might turn to another store for the rest... Misha can't risk that!"

Her words were laced with a blend of business strategy and consideration for my financial situation. Misha was weighing her pricing not just to make a sale, but to ensure I could afford everything I needed from her store. It was a delicate balance of trying to secure her business interests while being mindful of my potential budget constraints.

This inner dialogue showcased her astuteness in business and her understanding of customer loyalty—she was aiming to make a sale that was beneficial for both of us.

As I considered the entire interaction, a wave of gratitude washed over me.

*'Mr. Shori really did me a solid by recommending Misha's place. She's been nothing short of ideal for what I needed, and my [Polyglot] Trait has proven to be incredibly advantageous in navigating this deal as well!'* I thought, mentally extending a heartfelt 'thank you' to Mr. Shori through my imaginary psychic link.

My silent gratitude was interrupted when Misha, snapping me back to the present, stated, "Misha will offer the RaZ Mk. 2 to Ela for 148 Credits. Misha thinks this is a good deal and believes Ela will find it agreeable as well."

*'148 Credits? That's a ridiculously good deal!'* I realised, thoroughly surprised.

The price was significantly lower than what I had braced for, considering Gabriel's previous purchase and the general pricing trends I remembered from the game. Misha's offer was not just reasonable; it was an outright steal.

*'I can't possibly haggle down from here without disrespecting her generosity,'* I thought, acknowledging the value of her offer.

"Ela gratefully accepts and deeply appreciates Misha's generosity!" I responded enthusiastically, my smile reflecting my genuine appreciation.

Misha handed me the RaZ Mk. 2 with her elongated, graceful limbs.

After completing the exchange, she turned and stretched her tall, slender form toward the knife rack, skillfully manoeuvring her body to return the curved knife to its place. Her ease and fluidity in movement, despite her towering stature, were a fascinating sight.

I carefully inserted the blood-red Restricted Shard into my neck-slot, a familiar interface immediately springing to life before my eyes. This interface was something I had seen numerous times during the let's plays and game playthroughs I had watched.

In the game, Restricted Shards were given by quest-givers to players for purchasing essential gear and equipment for specific missions. The developers had ingeniously designed this mechanism to prevent players from simply hoarding the funds without a certain level of challenge. Now, faced with this interface in reality, I braced myself for the next step.

[Please scan your intended purchases. Provide a detailed 3D-scan of each item, along with a concise description and its intended uses. This data will be directly sent to the Shard-Lender for approval.]

I held the RaZ knife in my right hand, my eyes serving as scanners for the Shard's embedded program. The process was surprisingly efficient; within seconds of beginning the scan, the interface prompted me to rotate the knife for a comprehensive view.

*'I'm glad this isn't as cumbersome as it was in the game,'* I thought with relief.

In Neon Dragons, using Restricted Shards for purchases was often frustrating due to the scanning feature's sensitivity to angles and lighting. This complication stemmed from the game's intricate crafting system, which allowed players to create and modify their own items, including run-time alterations to the 3D models. It was a core feature of the game, integral to its appeal and too complex to be simplified by the developers.

Fortunately, the real-life version was more user-friendly.

I was free to move and rotate my hand naturally, without the constraints of the game's coded animations. The absence of any clipping issues with my clothing or the knife was a noticeable and welcome improvement, making the whole process smoother and more intuitive.

In just a few seconds, I input all the relevant details into the interface: The knife's model name, the materials it was made out of—which I had received previously from Misha, its precise dimensions, and my purpose for it, which I claimed was self-defence.

*'Hopefully Valeria doesn't feel—'* before I could finish the thought, the shard's interface popped up in my field of vision again.

[Shard-Lender has approved the transaction of 148 Credits to "Misha's Emporium" for the purchase of "RaZ Mk. 2 - Combat Knife".]

I let out an involuntary "Huh," caught off guard by Valeria's swift approval.



I had half-expected some delay, considering she was likely busy with her own work. I had even planned a strategy to keep the conversation going with Misha while awaiting confirmation, but that was now unnecessary.

[You have transferred {c}148 to “Misha’s Emporium” account from the Restricted Shard with the note: “Ela thanks Misha for the kindness, once again.”]

[Restricted Shard Balance Update: {c} 333 -> {c} 185]

*'Okay, that leaves me with just enough for a beginner-level deck, assuming Misha stocks them and assuming I can get a slight discount on it, as well,'* I thought, mentally celebrating my small victory.

Misha’s melodious voice pulled me back to the present. “Misha is grateful for Ela’s business. Now, did Ela need another item? Misha is ready to assist.”

Emboldened by her willingness to help, I dove right in, “Yes, Ela would be grateful! Ela is in need of a beginner-level deck for netrunning. It should have at least 7 units of RAM and a heat capacity of at least 4. If possible, a physical wire connection would be ideal, though it’s not a deal-breaker. Storage capacity is mostly irrelevant, as long as it’s not below 2 units. Does Misha have something like this?”

Misha, who until now had been confidently navigating through her store’s inventory to find exactly what I needed, paused for the first time since my arrival. A hint of hesitation flickered across her face, an unusual expression for the usually decisive Gryplik.

“Misha must admit,” she began slowly, “Misha is not very knowledgeable about decks or netrunning. While Misha could select something based on Ela’s specifications, it might be better for Ela to look at the options and try them out?”

She explained that while she could easily pick out a device that matched my technical requirements, her lack of expertise in netrunning gear meant she couldn’t confidently recommend the perfect fit for my needs.

Her honesty was refreshing, and I appreciated her suggesting that a hands-on approach might yield a better result.

Misha then added, “Misha also has a couple of crowns in stock, in case Ela is interested...?”

Before she could elaborate, I quickly interjected, “Ela greatly appreciates the offer, but a crown is far beyond Ela’s budget for now. Ela will keep it in mind for future upgrades, however.”

The allure of owning a crown was undoubtedly strong, yet given my current budgetary constraints, such a luxury was more a fantasy than a realistic goal.

Crowns represented the pinnacle of netrunning equipment, combining form and function in a downright majestic manner. Most crowns resembled headbands or tiaras, their design often evocative of regal crowns, complete with an array of electronic components protruding

outward, mimicking the intricate embellishments of mediaeval royal headpieces, hence the name.

These devices were a hybrid of advanced decks and cutting-edge netrunning cybernetics, yet remarkably lightweight and adaptable. Their modularity was a key feature; they weren't restricted to being worn on the head.

You could hold them in your hands or wear them as traditional headgear, and they still offered all the capabilities of integrated netrunning cybernetics.

Crowns were technological masterpieces, the ultimate aspirational gear-choice for any serious netrunner. They provided unparalleled advantages, and there were only a handful of scenarios where traditional decks or cybernetics might be more suitable.

But for the time being, my focus had to remain on acquiring the essentials within my financial reach. As much as I desired the advanced capabilities of a crown, pragmatic considerations had to take precedence.

Resolving to explore the decks myself, I followed Misha to where she stored her netrunning equipment. Her guidance had been invaluable thus far, and even in this instance, her candid admission helped me make a more informed decision.

Misha led me towards a collection of robust armoured cases—the same kind that I had seen earlier when I had first entered the back room.

With practised ease, she opened them one after the other, unveiling an impressive assortment of decks. Each case revealed devices of various sizes and models, catering to a range of netrunning needs.

“Misha hopes Ela finds what Ela needs here,” she said, motioning towards the array of decks now spread out in front of me. “These meet the specifications Ela described. Please, Ela should feel free to examine them as thoroughly as necessary. Misha will be nearby, ready to assist or answer any queries Ela might have.”

Gratefully, I flashed her a broad smile and nodded to convey my thanks and understanding.

Then, I crouched down beside the cases, my attention captured by the diverse selection.

I reached out, selecting the first deck at random, its weight and texture immediately registering in my hands. This was the moment to choose a tool that would kickstart my journey into the world of netrunning.

The perfect deck for me was undoubtedly *somewhere* in this collection, and I was determined to find it...