

Chapter 34 - Unexpected Deals

As I picked up the first deck, I examined it more intently, turning it over in my hands.

In my previous life, I had seen countless decks in various playthroughs, but holding one physically was an entirely new experience. The deck's weight and texture felt more substantial and real than any digital representation could ever possibly convey.

This particular deck was reminiscent of modern-day tablets, yet it possessed a distinct heft that spoke to its vastly enhanced capabilities compared to it. It was decidedly thicker, accommodating the powerful hardware needed for advanced netrunning tasks, far surpassing the capabilities of any contemporary tablet of my old life.

The deck's exterior boasted a sleek, matte black finish, lending it a look that was understated yet sophisticated. Measuring about 33cm diagonally, it provided a sizable workspace that was ample for efficient use without being overly large or difficult to conceal.

Its sides were further dotted with a variety of I/O ports, some familiar and others entirely alien to me. I noted several small openings and slots whose functions were beyond my current understanding, hinting at the deck's versatility and potentially avenues for further learning.

One feature that immediately caught my attention was the physical wire connection, something I definitely valued fairly highly.

There were quite a few situations where a wireless hack was impossible, so having the physical wire connection was a must-have, for any aspiring netrunner. While most netrunners had their own implants that provided this feature, I didn't have that luxury, so I'd have to resort to a deck with that capability instead.

With a gentle tug, I extended the thin, flexible cable from the deck. It retracted smoothly with a satisfying whirr as I let go of it after a brief inspection, clicking securely back into its housing on the right-hand side of the device. This self-retracting mechanism was both practical and elegant, ensuring the cable was always accessible yet never in the way.

The deck's screen was, naturally, touch-sensitive, responding promptly to the lightest tap or swipe. However, what truly set it apart from modern tablets or the more bulky laptops of the Neo Avalis life, was its ability to interface directly with a person's eye implants.

This feature allowed for stealthy operations where turning on the screen wasn't feasible, offering an alternative way to interact with the device discreetly.

As I delved into the process of comparing the first deck I picked with the array Misha had laid out, I continuously sought her insights for more detailed information about each model.

My focus was particularly on the materials used in their construction and the range of I/O options they offered. It was crucial for me to select a deck that was not only robust and durable but also capable of keeping pace with my evolving netrunning skills in the future.

Opting for a basic, inexpensive starter deck might suffice for the moment, given my current limitations in quick-hacks and netrunning proficiency.

However, I was very much aware that I would probably outgrow such a model quite quickly.

The G.E.M.A. System, which had become an integral part of my existence in this world ever since I had arrived here, had already demonstrated its capability to accelerate my Skill and Attribute development significantly. My progress in areas governed by the System was remarkably faster than what would otherwise be expected in this reality—or any reality, for that matter.

Given this rapid rate of advancement, I anticipated being able to craft my own quick-hacks in a matter of days or maybe weeks at most, a stark contrast to the months or even years it typically took a novice netrunner to grasp the complexities of Cyber and its practical applications in the real world with quick-hack development.

Therefore, investing in a more advanced, future-proof deck seemed not just economically sensible, but a logical choice considering my unique situation. This approach would ensure that the deck remained a valuable asset as my netrunning abilities advanced, rather than becoming a limitation I would soon need to address.

I couldn't exactly hope for Valeria to give me access to such a massive sum of Credits anytime soon again, after all. Moreover, I had no intention of using my birthday request on something as attainable as this with a bit of saving; it felt like a waste of a valuable opportunity.

My continued evaluation of the different models of decks lasted for about half an hour.

Throughout this time, Misha was a constant presence, responding to each of my inquiries with patience and attentiveness. Her expertise was invaluable, guiding me through the nuances of each model.

However, as I narrowed my choices down to two final models, a question about the store itself nagged at the back of my mind. I realised I hadn't encountered any other customers since entering Misha's shop.

'It's been well over an hour, and yet Misha has dedicated all her time to me. Is this store always so quiet? Are Gryplik-operated shops not popular?' I wondered, puzzled by the absence of other patrons.

I was tempted to voice these thoughts to Misha, but I hesitated. Inquiring about the apparent lack of customers seemed tactless and potentially uncomfortable. I really did not want to open that can of worms, especially when it appeared that Misha seemed to like my presence here to this degree.

'Better to stay in her good graces. I intend on coming back here quite often in the future, so it would be best not to step into an obvious faux-pa,' I mused.

I quietly hoped that Misha hadn't gone to the extent of closing her shop just to assist me.

The idea that my extended shopping might negatively impact her daily business was troubling. I certainly didn't want to be the cause of any financial setback for her—I wasn't exactly a big spender by any means.

Among the final contenders, the MOD-IK v4 stood out with its specific features.

Measuring approximately 35cm diagonally, it was equipped with 8 units of RAM, a heat capacity of 4, and 4 units of storage.

These three components were crucial for any deck used in netrunning.

The deck's RAM was a key factor, as it dictated the complexity and reach of a quick-hack. It determined not just the sophistication of the quick-hacks you could use but also the number of objects or systems that could be simultaneously affected by a single one of your quick-hacks.

Heat capacity was another one of the critical aspects.

In the complex cyber landscape of Neon Dragons, hacking was intensely compute-heavy.

The sophisticated nature of Cyber as a language, especially its fourth layer, demanded substantial processing power, turning netrunning into an activity that generated considerable amounts of heat.

Lacking sufficient heat capacity or effective heat dissipation, a deck—or gods forbid, the netrunner themselves, especially those reliant on cybernetics alone, that didn't use decks at all—could dangerously overheat. In such scenarios, the risk wasn't *just* a malfunctioning deck but also the alarming possibility of the user suffering from severe thermal overloads, leading to potential injury, irreparable damage to their cybernetic implants or even death.

For my initial foray into netrunning, however, where I planned to use only basic quick-hacks, a heat capacity of at least 4 was more than enough. This minimum threshold would also provide enough leeway to handle more complex hacks in the future without immediate overheating concerns.

Storage, on the other hand, was the least critical of a given deck's attributes for my needs.

It primarily affected how many quick-hacks could be loaded on the deck at any given time.

Given that I didn't plan to carry an extensive library of quick-hack subroutines directly on the deck, this feature was of lower priority. My strategy was to store the bulk of them on the SPG-01 Shard as I wrote them, transferring them to the deck as and when needed.

Eventually, I planned to invest in external data-shards for additional quick-hack storage, making the onboard storage capacity of the deck less of a concern in the long run overall.

I set the MOD-IK aside and turned my attention to the second option before me, the model known as QHD-2IC. Due to its cumbersome name, Misha had informed me that most people simply called it the IC, as its predecessor was discontinued about a decade ago, minimising any chance of confusion.

The IC shared the MOD-IK's 35cm diagonal size, a dimension I had come to prefer after testing numerous decks over the past thirty minutes.

However, it differed in its specifications.

The IC boasted 7 units of RAM, barely meeting my minimum requirement, but compensated with a substantial heat capacity of 6, albeit offering only 2 units of storage. Apart from these attribute variations, the IC closely resembled the MOD-IK in most other aspects.

Both models included a physical wire connection, a feature that provided the versatility for direct interfacing with locked-off systems. They were equipped with all the input/output ports I could foresee needing in both my immediate and foreseeable netrunning endeavours.

Moreover, their matte-black exteriors were not just aesthetically pleasing but also practical for remaining stealthy, allowing them to be easily concealed in bags or, if necessary, even within my own clothing.

The crux of my decision hinged on a fundamental question: Did I prioritise the quality of my quick-hacks, or their quantity?

Pondering over the options, I weighed the pros and cons.

'The MOD-IK offers the capability for more intricate quick-hacks or impacting a larger number of targets simultaneously. On the other hand, the IC, with its superior heat capacity, would let me use quick-hacks more frequently,' I reasoned, trying to envision my future approach to netrunning.

Given my current situation, I doubted that I would initially have access to highly complex quick-hacks, nor did I see myself excessively using them. The IC, sacrificing just a single unit of RAM for a significant boost in heat capacity, however, seemed to offer a better trade-off in terms of critical features.

From a value standpoint, it appeared to be the more practical choice.

Seeking a second opinion, I turned to Misha.

Her response was tentative yet thoughtful, "Ela certainly seems more knowledgeable in this area than Misha... But if Ela is finding it difficult to choose, Misha will do Misha's best to help!"

She appeared apologetic, yet earnest in her attempt to assist. "Misha thinks that unless Ela plans to pursue a job as a full-time netrunner soon, the high heat capacity of the IC might be underutilised. However, as a hobbyist, any inefficiency in Ela's own quick-hack coding might render them more complex, necessitating more RAM. Therefore, Misha would suggest the MOD-IK for its greater RAM capacity. But Misha must emphasise once again that Misha is not an expert in netrunning. Ultimately, the choice is Ela's."

A brief pause followed but I sensed that Misha had more to say.

My intuition proved right, but her next words still caught me off guard. "Should Ela later regret Ela's choice, Misha is willing to exchange the chosen model for the other, asking only a modest fee in return. Perhaps this offer might simplify Ela's decision-making process?"

Her suggestion was unexpected, yet it once again underscored her commitment to customer satisfaction.

Overwhelmed with appreciation for the Gryplik's continuous commitment to making my experience as easy and pleasant as possible, I found myself momentarily lost in the gaze of Misha's large, red eyes.

A thought struck me, *'Misha is truly exceptional... It's astonishing that her store isn't constantly swarmed with customers snapping up her inventory!'*

Determined to honour Misha's generosity and insightful advice, I carefully placed the IC back into its case and placed it back on the pile of other armoured cases.

My decision made, I picked up the MOD-IK along with its case, feeling a sense of resolve. This was the last significant item I needed to complete my initial netrunning setup.

Now, it was time to discuss the final details of the purchase.

With the MOD-IK in hand, I turned to Misha, ready to finalise my choice.

"Ela has decided on the MOD-IK v4. How much will it cost Ela?" I asked, prepared for one last round of negotiation, eager to wrap up what had been a thoroughly informative and pleasant shopping experience.

As I waited for Misha's response, she once again began her characteristic muttering in Gryplik, a habit I had come to see as an endearing trait of hers. It was clear to me now that this was Misha's way of working through her thoughts.

"Hmm, what price is fair for Ela, Misha wonders..." she murmured, her voice a soft hum of contemplation mixed with the typical melodic clicks of the Gryplik language.

"Ela trusts Misha, even though Misha is not an expert in netrunning gear. That's rare... trust like that is rarely given to one such as Misha. Misha feels a connection with this young human. Ela honoured Misha's advice not only on the MOD-IK but all the other pieces Misha has sought for Ela as well..."

I tried to maintain a neutral expression, but inside, I was touched by her words.

It was clear that Misha was genuinely considering not just the business aspect but also the budding relationship we were forming. "Maybe a bit less than the standard price... Yes, that feels right. Ela has shown trust in Misha. Misha should honour that trust," she continued, her tone reflecting a mix of business acumen and personal regard.

Feeling the warmth of Misha's considerations was both unusual and touching. Yet, as I listened to her mutterings, a pang of guilt washed over me.

'I'm somewhat betraying her trust by keeping my understanding of Gryplik a secret, hearing her private thoughts without her knowledge, am I not?' I reflected.

However, revealing my ability to understand her at this juncture seemed impractical, possibly even damaging to the rapport we had established. Reluctantly, I decided to keep this secret to myself for now, choosing to remain silent and allow Misha to complete her, surprisingly open, thought process.

Soon after, Misha turned to me, her expression one of confident generosity. "Misha will offer the MOD-IK v4 to Ela for 163 credits as a token of appreciation for Ela's substantial amount of purchases today. Misha believes Ela will be pleased with this price."

My surprise was evident as I heard the figure she quoted. '163 credits? That's incredibly low, easily worth over 200 credits! I was mentally prepared to haggle up to my last credit at 185, yet here she is, offering it for so much less.'

I found myself enveloped in a mix of emotions—deep appreciation for Misha's generosity, surprise at the unexpected discount, and a slight apprehension. *'Am I right to accept such a significant reduction? I don't want to seem like I'm exploiting her kindness.'* Misha's genuine demeanour and the heartfelt nature of her offer, however, resonated strongly with me.

My mind briefly flickered back to Mr. Stirling's initially well-intended seeming gesture, which had ultimately led to an unpleasant and intimate encounter with NeuroCorpse. *'Surely, accepting Misha's offer won't have similar repercussions...?'*

Despite my reservations, I recognized the necessity of this deck for my future endeavours. Without any viable alternatives and trusting in Misha's good faith, I decided to accept her offer.

Silently invoking the cybergods for their blessing, I nodded with genuine enthusiasm and expressed my heartfelt gratitude to Misha. "Ela is immensely thankful to Misha! This is an incredibly fair deal. Thank you, Misha! Ela will certainly return for more purchases in the future, to honour this kindness!"

My words were filled with sincerity and a promise of loyalty, acknowledging the special bond that had formed between us in this short span.

Misha's smile widened, a mix of magnanimity and joy, as she acknowledged my decision. "Misha is pleased to conclude another one of Ela's requests to Ela's satisfaction! Is there anything else Ela needs from Misha's collection?"

I responded by once again thanking her and denying her question. I had gotten everything I needed—and more—already, as my fingers swiftly entered the deck's details into the Restricted Shard's interface.

Hitting the confirm button, I silently hoped Valeria would understand the importance of this deck. My anxiety was palpable; the uncertainty of whether Valeria was aware of the SPG-01 Shard, previously acquired from Gabriel, added an extra layer of worry.

'I just hope she doesn't perceive this as throwing her money away... If she doesn't know about the shard, then it's likely she'd be very confused about me wanting a deck,' I pondered, feeling a knot of tension as I awaited the shard's response.

The seconds ticked by more slowly this time, stretching into almost a full minute of anticipation. Finally, the interface chimed back to life with a notification.

[Shard-Lender has approved the transaction of 163 Credits to "Misha's Emporium" for the purchase of "MOD-IK v4 - Netrunning Deck".]

A wave of relief washed over me as I saw the approval.

Without hesitation, I completed the transaction, sending the credits to Misha.

[You have transferred {c}163 to "Misha's Emporium" account from the Restricted Shard with the note: "Ela deeply appreciates Misha's exceptional insights and delightful shopping experience. Ela eagerly looks forward to future visits!"]

[Restricted Shard Balance Update: {c} 185 -> {c} 22]

As I confirmed the transfer, I felt a sense of accomplishment and gratitude, not only for the equipment I had acquired but also for the bond I had formed with Misha. Her kindness and understanding had transformed a simple transaction into an enriching experience, one that I very much looked forward to revisiting in the future.

Misha's soft, excited mutterings in Gryplik reached my ears as the transaction was confirmed. "Misha has done it! A happy and content customer who plans to return in the future!" Her voice held a triumphant note. "They doubted Misha's ability to attract customers, but look now! This will show them!"

Hearing her private celebration was utterly charming, and it took every ounce of my willpower to suppress a smile or chuckle. I could even feel my Ego Attribute working in overdrive to maintain my composure, as I definitely was unable to do so myself. *'She's too damn cute! What the hell?! She looks like something out of a children's nightmare, yet she's so damn adorable and nice!'*

As Misha turned to face me again, she offered a respectful bow, which I instinctively mirrored. "Misha extends her deepest thanks for Ela's business. Misha eagerly anticipates Ela's future visits for any additional needs or maintenance of Ela's equipment," she expressed with heartfelt sincerity.

I reassured her once more of the excellent service and experience I had at Misha's Emporium. As she escorted me to the exit, I carried my new gear with a sense of satisfaction and anticipation for its use.

Just as the door closed behind me, a sudden, high-pitched shriek pierced the air, startling me momentarily until I realised it was a manifestation of Misha's joy—a Gryplik's unique way of expressing delight.

'*Too fucking cute,*' I thought, a genuine smile spreading across my face as I navigated my way through the bustling streets of the 31st floor, my thoughts lingering on the exceptional encounter I had just had with Misha.

The successful shopping trip left me with a feeling of unexpected ease, almost too good to be true. It reminded me of the day Mr. Shori had taken me in, a day that had ended with a harrowing experience involving my brother.

This memory brought a surge of anxiety, a relic of my past life's habit of expecting good times to be swiftly followed by bad ones.

'*No, Sera, don't let this happen again,*' I firmly reminded myself, echoing the advice of my therapist. '*Enjoy the good moments as they come. Not every positive experience **needs** to be shadowed by fear of something bad happening.*' I was determined to stop these negative thoughts before they took root and overshadowed the day's success.

I summoned up the recent memories of the adorable Misha to drown out these self-destructive thoughts.

However, as I did so, my mind was quickly occupied by another pressing issue that I had completely forgotten about until now—my long-overdue haircut.

"Damnit!" I muttered under my breath, quickly checking my now-dwindling finances, half-hoping for a miracle increase in my credit balance. With only 22 credits remaining, a professional haircut seemed out of reach, especially given the current state of my hair.

But then, an idea struck me.

In the game, there were automated styling stations—auto-dressers—that offered a more affordable alternative to traditional salons. Though they lacked the range of options provided by a professional stylist, they were significantly cheaper.

'*There has to be an auto-dresser nearby,*' I reasoned, hopeful.

With renewed purpose, I began scouring the area for one of these automated styling kiosks, not ready to give up on tidying up my unruly hair just yet.

—

About ten minutes into my quest, I stumbled upon exactly what I was looking for—a small kiosk that bore a nostalgic resemblance to the retro-style photo booths of my past life.

However, this one was infused with distinct cyberpunk elements.

The kiosk was a compact, angular structure, its surface a fusion of sleek metal and neon accents, somewhat dulled by the patina of urban grime that spoke to its frequent use.

Futuristic designs etched onto its panels glowed faintly in the dim light, giving it an almost otherworldly allure, despite its clearly run-down nature.

I stepped inside, the door hissing shut behind me with a soft pneumatic sound. The interior was surprisingly clean and functional, much unlike the exterior, and was dominated by a large touchscreen interface. As soon as I approached, the screen came to life, scanning me with a soft blue light.

It then presented me with an array of hairstyle and colour options. The choices were somewhat limited, lacking the diversity and trendiness of a professional salon, but they were sufficient enough for a basic makeover.

I browsed through the options with a tinge of disappointment.

'It's not ideal, but it's certainly better than what I've got going on now,' I thought pragmatically.

After a few moments of deliberation, I pieced together the best look I could manage from the available selections, settling on a style that was functional yet somewhat stylish.

Before confirming my choice, I glanced at the price: A mere 12 credits.

A wave of relief washed over me. Even with my constrained budget, this was comfortably affordable. *'Well, that's one less thing to worry about,'* I thought, content that this small yet essential personal care task could be checked off without breaking the bank.

As I finalised my selections on the touchscreen, I initiated the transaction via the Restricted Shard, seeking Valeria's approval for the expense. After all, it was her credits that I was about to use for this minor personal indulgence.

However, almost instantly after submitting my request, the interface flashed back to life with an unexpected response.

[Shard-Lender has declined the transaction of 12 Credits to "Auto-Dresser #331" for the "Hair Makeover" service. An attached note is available.]

[Displaying Note: "No daughter of mine shall resort to these dreadful machines for grooming. Seek a professional haircut, child. Do not lower yourself to such standards."]

[Restricted Shard Balance Update: {c} 22 -> {c} 122]

I stood there, momentarily stunned by the message and the sudden boost in my credit balance.

'Valeria's disdain for auto-dressers seems quite intense... More than just a preference, it feels like there's a deeper reason behind her aversion,' I pondered, trying to decipher her strong reaction.

The added 100 credits were a generous, albeit perplexing gesture.

Valeria was typically composed and deliberate in her actions, making this response all the more surprising. To add an extra 100 credits simply because I opted for an automated haircut service seemed a bit extreme.

Her reaction hinted at almost personal principles or perhaps a past experience that made her vehemently oppose such trivial conveniences. Whatever the reason, it was clear that Valeria had strong feelings about maintaining certain standards, even in something as mundane as a haircut.

Accepting Valeria's decision with a mix of surprise and understanding, I quietly remarked, "Well... I'm definitely not going to defy her on this. The options here are truly dreadful. This ain't a hill I'm willing to die on, whatsoever."

With a few taps, I cancelled the auto-dresser transaction and stepped out of the kiosk, feeling a sense of relief mixed with curiosity.

Now that I had the necessary funds for a more upscale haircut—courtesy of Valeria's unexpected generosity/trauma—a new question arose.

"Alright, where can I find a reputable hair salon around here, then...?" I pondered aloud, glancing around.

The quest for a professional hairstylist felt like a small adventure in itself, one that I embarked on with an air of anticipation, curious to see what kind of style a professional might suggest for me in this vibrant, cyberpunk world...