

Chapter 63 - Important Preparations

Inside the restricted elevator on the way back to my home floor, I was greeted by a few System Notifications.

[System]: *400xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.*

[System]: *[Negotiation] Skill has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Ego Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

'Looks like this is also one of the delayed Skills; although definitely a lot less delayed than [Deception] was...' I thought just as I felt the knowledge download begin.

It laid out foundational negotiation tactics akin to those taught in what I'd imagine to be an advanced business course at college or similar.

The first thing that truly filled my mind was the concept of "anchoring".

This tactic involved setting the initial number or demand in a negotiation to set the stage for the entire discussion. For example, if I wanted to negotiate a higher payment for a task in the future, starting with a high initial offer would make subsequent lower offers seem more reasonable, even if they were still above the usual rate.

Additionally, it was common to round up or down to the nearest even number in a lot of situations. So anchoring with an initial payment request that is extremely uneven and has no clear "next even neighbour", so to speak, would allow me to control the rough level of where my gains would lie even better.

Next, I grasped the idea of "mirroring and matching".

This technique involved subtly copying the body language, speech patterns, or attitudes of the person you're negotiating with to build rapport and make them more receptive to your own proposals. If they leaned back casually, doing the same might make the conversation flow more smoothly and make them feel more at ease.

While this was something I had been doing anyway, just as a general side-effect of my extremely poor social skills relying on other people to really teach me how to be a real person, it was nice to know that this wasn't actually a bad thing; but instead something that was passively helping me in a lot of situations.

Lastly, the skill download included an understanding of what was called "framing".

This strategy was about presenting information in a way that specifically highlighted the benefits to the other party.

For example, if I were trying to get someone to accept a risky job, I would frame it as an opportunity for significant career advancement and exposure, rather than focusing on the potential dangers.

While it was important to not hide or lie about the problems, by downplaying them appropriately but still including them, it was possible to create an image of a well thought out idea with limited risk potential.

A lot of these technique were things that felt somewhat “natural” to a degree, as a lot of it was mostly stuff I had been doing to begin with, just as a consequence of how I interacted with people in general, but the more nuanced and minute details that came with each technique as a result of the knowledge download would undoubtedly come in handy going forward.

The knowledge download was also perfectly timed with the elevator dinging and opening its doors for me on the 44th floor.

Back on my home floor, I hastily made my way to the apartment, craving nothing more than a hot shower to wash away the day’s tensions.

Along the way, I had enough of a mind to quickly shoot a message to Mr. Shori, reassuring him that everything had gone well and that I was safe—I didn’t want him worrying too much, especially after the intense goodbye under such precarious circumstances.

‘I still can’t believe that all actually worked out,’ I mulled over as I unlocked my door, utterly baffled by how my hard-ball play with Vega had somehow fallen perfectly into place.

Not only had I secured a contact with an Operator who might vouch for me with the OPN, opening up avenues for future Fixer-related tasks, but I had also managed to have Jade assigned to me, almost like a subordinate. Although she remained a Clawed Beasts member and warranted cautious interaction, it was clear she was keen on staying in my good graces—a perfect setup for a liaison.

Moreover, by some stroke of cosmic luck, I had also managed to get Vega to consider offering me potential tasks in the future.

‘What exactly does he think I can do for him? I’ve only done like three courier jobs, one of which nearly got me killed... A success rate of one out of three is hardly stellar, but I suppose that’s good enough for him?’ The thought crossed my mind with a mix of amusement and disbelief.

But these were all problems for future-Sera to sort out.

One thing present-Sera *had* to deal with, however, was getting ready for the Operator contact Vega had promised. He’d said it would take a few days to set everything up and choose the Operator, so I had around a week or so to make myself presentable.

Just meeting an Operator wasn’t enough, after all.

I had to somehow convince them that a 15-year-old kid like me was worth vouching for.

And given my current skill set, I had serious doubts about getting anyone to put their name on the line for me.

Vouching wasn't just simply saying, "Hey, this person's not a cop" or something like that; it was a serious process. If the Operator you vouched for messed up big-time, your reputation took a massive hit too.

It could straight up ruin a career if it got bad enough.

That's why I needed to come up with a compelling sales pitch.

Something that would convince this Operator Vega found that I wasn't going to get them into trouble. Ideally, I could make myself seem like an asset, but the bare minimum was to avoid looking like a walking PR disaster.

It was the same game I'd been playing with Valeria for the past weeks—trying to prove I was more than just a clueless teen—but this time with a focus on the Operator mindset.

I had to figure out what made me valuable to them and why taking a risk on me might just pay off. It wasn't going to be easy, but I'd figure something out.

I always did—or so I hoped.

Jumping under the shower, I let the hot water cascade over me, trying to wash away the stress as I mulled over how best to use the upcoming week, considering my current commitments.

'I've got two more sessions with Miss K before next week; the next one's in about three days...' I thought, hoping these sessions could shore up my rather basic combat skills. 'But what about close to medium range? I can't just charge at people with my knife if things go sideways. A shooting range would be ideal, but getting a gun isn't exactly kid-friendly either—too risky to carry it around.'

As the steam filled the bathroom, I felt the last of the day's tension ebb away, and the remnants of my nauseous episode wash down the drain—a definite bonus that I wasn't going to complain about!

'Maybe throwing knives would be a better option?' I considered, rolling the idea around in my mind. 'I've already levelled up that Skill quite a bit, and with my [Sharpen] Perk, they'd probably be quite deadly. Plus, if things really go south, [Blademaster's Throw] could even the odds. It's a one-shot deal, and if I miss I'm in deep shit, but it's better than nothing. I don't plan on diving into any Bounty Hunter-type missions anytime soon anyway. Probably going to stick to Data-Collection tasks for starters...'

As I continued pondering my potential offerings, it was clear that netrunning could be a major part of my skill set as well.

I hadn't actually hacked anything outside of simulations yet, but I'd done a ton of groundwork on the necessary Skills and even unlocked a few Perks that could help with it.

The real issue was my stark lack of real-world experience.

I hadn't even finished the SPG-01 shard's Quick-Hacks tutorial, so I hadn't gotten my hands on my first library of code snippets yet.

I could try cobbling together my own subroutines or code segments, but realistically, without access to professionally written examples and not being able to dissect them for tips and tricks, it was probably going to be a waste of time.

If there was one thing I remembered about programming from my past life, it was that your first attempt at writing code was *always* a disaster. So, diving into netrunning without a solid foundation could be more of a liability than an asset at this point.

I'd need to make sure I had a firm grasp on the basics and perhaps some professional insights before I could really include it in my pitch as a dependable skill.

As I considered the feasibility of significantly advancing my netrunning skills within a week, I reflected on my journey with the SPG-01 shard so far.

Though I had been in this world for several weeks, my actual time spent with the shard was sporadic and far less compared to some of my other skills.

However, the progress I had made was surprisingly solid.

Much of this rapid progression could likely be accredited to the [Mentor Bonus] provided by Kill Joy's digital alter ego and the structured learning path laid out for me, which spared me from having to stumble through the learning process on my own.

If I spent some more serious working-hours on completing the shard and then went out to get some real-life experience playing around with my deck and whatever Quick-Hacks Kill Joy was willing to hand over, I might *just* be able to pass as a beginner netrunner by the time the Operator meeting rolls around.

'Could this actually work?' I pondered with a flicker of optimism. 'But it would mean sacrificing my usual grinding for experience points. If I skip the Rest Function every night, that's eight uninterrupted hours I could devote to honing my netrunning skills. That's a significant time investment, and right now, actual hands-on experience and knowledge are far more valuable than levelling up my other Skills...' This shift in focus felt right, considering the upcoming challenges.

Putting a pin into that plan and considering trying it out for this very night, at the least, I finished up the shower for now and got myself dressed in my Operator outfit. If I wanted to be taken seriously, I'd need some extra gear.

'I'm sorry Gabe...! Repayment for the shard is gonna have to wait just a tiny bit longer. I swear I'm working as hard as I can on getting the Credits together, but I just keep getting into situations where I need to spend the little I earn!' I lamented internally, as I checked my current balance.

[=== Account: Seraphine Vildea ===]
[Credits: 130 {c}]

'That's... really not a lot. But if I can't get a gun, I need to at least secure some throwing knives. It's better to commit early and master them than to delay and scramble to find a solution when it's too late. Procrastination may be my middle name, but this time around, I can't afford that luxury...' I reasoned, feeling the weight of necessity pushing me towards a decision.

There was only really one place I could go to that would likely have what I needed and that was willing to be generous with the prices.

It was time to pay Misha's Emporium another visit—I swear I didn't plan to simply go there because I missed the oddly cute Gryplik. I seriously needed gear as well...!

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It felt kinda weird being back on the 31st floor, but not in a bad way—just one of those "huh, been a minute" kind of vibes. I'd been way too busy lately, so taking a leisurely stroll, just window shopping and checking out the scene, was actually kinda fun.

Not that I could afford to buy anything, of course.

My credit count was pretty abysmal, so my current shopping strategy was "look but don't touch." Still, it was good to take a breather and just wander.

But yeah, I made sure not to dawdle *too* much. With that OPN licence on my mind, I didn't have a lot of time to waste and way too much to prep for still.

After about half an hour—thanks to a few shops catching my eye—I found myself outside Misha's Emporium.

The place hadn't changed a bit, which was comforting.

With all the chaos that'd been my life lately, it was nice to see something familiar. Consistency was always wildly underrated when you were juggling a bunch of mafia-like gang issues back-to-back, I always said.

My life's motto, really.

As I stood outside, I couldn't help but think about Misha.

I hoped she was doing alright since the last time I'd seen her, especially after that whole incident that had preceded my first time in her store.

'I really don't get why those people had beef with Grypliks,' I thought, shaking my head in disbelief. *'They're literally the best possible shop owners to have around, no question. You want quality, you go Gryplik. Simple as that.'*

Stepping into Misha's Emporium, I was greeted by the same small reception area as last time, but thankfully, minus the chaos of Misha scrambling to pick up items hurled around by less-than-friendly visitors.

It was a definite upgrade from my last visit.

Scanning the room, I didn't see a service bell or any sign of Misha herself.

'Maybe she's in the back? But, uh, I can't just waltz in there, right? How do people even do shopping in stores like this...?' I puzzled over it for a moment before deciding not to just stand around like a lost puppy.

After a minute of no signs of life, I raised my voice, calling towards the backroom I remembered from my previous visit.

"Misha?" The name echoed a bit more than I expected.

Almost immediately, there was a thump from behind the counter, startling me.

I watched as Misha popped up like a jack-in-the-box, her eyes squinting as if she'd been caught mid-nap.

'Was she seriously snoozing behind there?' I wondered, trying not to openly chuckle.

Her expression morphed from sleepy confusion to recognition in a heartbeat. "Ah! Customer! Welcome to Misha's Emporium! How can Misha be of service?" she chirped, shaking off her drowsiness as she slipped into her shopkeeper persona.

I couldn't help but flash a wide grin, amused by the whole bizarre yet endearing situation.

"Ela needs throwing knives, so Ela figured it was time to pay Misha another visit, as promised!" I announced, a bit overenthusiastically.

Something about the Gryplik's goofy yet completely serious vibe was infectious, making it hard not to match her energy.

A moment of awkward silence passed between us, and I started to wonder if she'd completely forgotten who I was.

Her ruby-crystal eyes darted over my whole body, taking me in, then settled on my hair. Suddenly, her eyes widened unnaturally, and she squeaked, "Friend Ela! Ela has returned!"

Misha bolted around the counter, stopping just a few centimetres in front of me. The concept of personal space clearly wasn't a thing for her as her massive grin showcased her bright green teeth.

"Whoa, Ela has changed a lot!" she commented, scrutinising my hair and clothes. "And filled out the clothes a lot, too! Misha is very happy to see this!"

I just stood there, letting her do her thing. A happy Misha was a happy Sera, and her compliment was kind of nice.

No harm in letting her gush a bit.

Then, out of nowhere, she stopped, locked eyes with me, and asked, "Can Misha touch?"

Her eyes kept darting up to my hair, fascinated by its near-2D appearance, courtesy of the VoniX-Black colour that had been applied to it.

I really couldn't blame her; it was pretty mesmerising, even to me. And I saw it every day; multiple times!

"Go ahead," I replied with a smile.

"It's VoniX-Black; quite expensive—!" I was cut off by my own surprised squeal as Misha's hands suddenly roamed my body, feeling my shoulders, sides, and even my hips with a thoroughness I didn't expect; prodding, squeezing and pinching me from every possible—and humanly impossible—angle, thanks to her triple-jointed arms giving her more flexibility than I would've ever imagined possible.

It seemed like my hair wasn't what she had been interested in touching after all.

I was so taken aback by Misha's hands-on approach that I didn't even think to protest; not that I minded too much, as she had asked for permission first. I might have misunderstood her intentions, but I had agreed, and it was clear Misha's actions weren't malicious.

I just stood there, letting the Gryplik assess my body—which sounded way more lewd than it really was—until she finally stepped back, looking quite thoughtful.

"If Ela continues to fill out at this rate, Misha will have to remake Ela's outfit from scratch..." she murmured, more to herself than to me.

"Ahh, no worries, Misha! Ela is unlikely to continue growing like this... More of a growth spurt than anything, Ela thinks," I chimed in quickly, not wanting to be seen as some freak of nature who could morph from small and scrawny to muscular in a week and keep up that pace.

While the System did allow for rapid gains in muscle and skills, it wasn't *that* dramatic.

Misha eyed me sceptically, giving me another once-over before gesturing toward the back-room door.

As I walked past her, I felt a sudden squeeze on my back-end. "Quite firm... Misha will be the judge of future developments. Misha will make sure that Ela is properly clothed, regardless of growth spurts," she declared confidently.

It was odd, being examined like that by what was essentially an alien, but with Misha, it didn't feel too uncomfortable—as long as it remained brief and full of professional interest, which it mostly seemed to be. It was probably all part of her quirky, thorough approach to tailoring and equipment creation, after all.

Once inside the backroom of Misha's Emporium, I noticed several changes since my last visit. Certain items had been rearranged, and some of the large metal crates that had stored some of the more advanced tech were now missing.

'Good to see Misha's making some real sales... especially since I can't exactly contribute much financially myself,' I mused internally, a rueful smile crossing my face. My limited income hardly made a dent in supporting a large-scale local business like hers on a scale I wished I could.

Just as I was taking in the alterations to the shop's layout, Misha's voice pulled my attention.

"Misha heard that Ela needs throwing knives, yes? What, specifically, is Ela looking for?" she asked, her voice mingling with the sound of clattering metal from behind a nearby cabinet that she had disappeared behind.

Navigating the nuances of equipment shopping could be a bit like decoding a cryptic puzzle, especially when you get into the specifics like I was now with "Throwing Knives."

At a glance, throwing knives might seem like a straightforward category to the uninitiated, but there was a surprising depth to it that comes with a bit of training. Through levelling up my [Throwing] Skill to a respectable degree, I'd come to learn that not all throwing knives are created equal.

Most people pictured the Hollywood-style spinning throw when they think of throwing knives—the kind with a lot of flair but not necessarily designed for practicality. It's flashy, sure, and looks incredible in movies and circus acts, but when it comes to actual utility, it's not exactly top-notch.

Then there was the lesser-known, but similarly intriguing, "no-spin" throwing technique, which I had only discovered after getting my [Throwing] Skill past Level 3. True to its name, the no-spin throw sends the knife flying straight without rotation, making it far more suitable for combat situations where precision is key.

The knives needed for each style differed significantly; a knife designed for spinning will have different balance and weight characteristics than one intended for a no-spin throw.

Given that my throwing would mostly be in combat scenarios, possibly as a last-ditch effort, I was in the market for the no-spin variety. These knives were less about show and more about practical, efficient impact—exactly what I needed.

Spinning a knife when throwing could extend both the range and stability of its flight, which were significant advantages in some scenarios. The rotation helped maintain momentum, overcoming environmental factors like wind or gravity, ensuring the knife reached a farther target with considerable accuracy.

However, these benefits came with some notable drawbacks, particularly in combat situations.

The primary issue with the spinning technique was that much of the knife's flight time was spent with the blade improperly aligned for striking—an issue not unlike throwing a bottle of water straight up in the air and trying to catch it at the same spot you threw it with.

Only a small portion of each rotation actually positioned the knife's tip to impact effectively, making the timing of the throw critical. The knife had to connect at *just* the right moment

during its spin to cause damage, requiring precise distance estimation and leaving little room for adjustment once the knife was in the air.

Conversely, the no-spin technique offered a more straightforward approach, akin to hurling a sharply pointed stone. Although its range might be shorter, the knife itself travels faster initially since it's not encumbered by the need to spin and build momentum off of that.

This direct flight path also kept the tip aimed at the target at all times, increasing the likelihood of striking effectively upon impact. Moreover, the no-spin throw allowed for rapid, consecutive throws with both hands, thanks to its simpler mechanics.

This capability was downright crucial in combat, where quick follow-ups could compensate for initial misses or an opponent's evasive movements. My [Ambidexterity] Perk would further ensure that I could throw effectively with either hand, maintaining both accuracy and power, turning this style into a hopefully formidable technique in my arsenal.

As I mulled over my initial loadout, I realised I needed to make some strategic decisions regarding the types of knives and their intended uses to ensure I equipped myself properly from the start.

'I'll probably need at least four no-spin knives, maybe six if the price is right. And a couple of spinning knives wouldn't hurt for specific situations,' I contemplated, piecing together what to ask Misha for.

The no-spin knives, heavier towards the handle for better grip, control and punch-through power, would be my go-to for any combat at a distance. They were perfect for quick, accurate throws without the complication of rotation, ideal for the kind of unpredictable situations I seemed to find myself in.

On the other hand, the spinning knives, with their balanced weight for a steady circular flight, would be useful for more calculated, stationary targets from afar; think guards or sentries.

Given my recent scrape during that last Data-Collection task, I had come to realise that there was no such thing as over-prepared when it came to being an Operator. I definitely couldn't count on future Fixers to shield me from danger every time, just like I couldn't rely on Mr. Stirling to make sure all of my Data-Collection tasks from him were safe either.

It was essential to be self-sufficient, to have the capability to defend myself effectively if, or more likely *when*, things went south again.

As I began to detail my request to Misha, her wide, ruby-red eyes lit up with eagerness. "Ela is in need of throwing knives, specifically designed for no-spin throws. Ela is looking for something around 25cm long, weighing about 300 grams, with the bulk of the weight oriented towards the handle rather than the tip. Durasteel would be ideal, for durability over sharpness—Ela needs them to *last*," I explained clearly, watching Misha nod vigorously—potentially even a bit too vigorously—as she absorbed the specifications. "And a couple of knives suitable for spin throws, too, please. Same length and weight, but balanced for spinning."

I had barely finished, when I swear I could hear a delighted "squee" from Misha's direction.

With a bounce, she abruptly vanished behind a row of shelves and cabinets, disappearing into the depths of her shop to fetch the knives I had requested.

The sight of her enthusiasm was comforting in a way; it reminded me that not all interactions in this world were high-stakes or dangerous—some were just about equipping oneself for whatever lay ahead with a slightly oddball demi-human...