

Chapter 203 - Appraisals

The trip back down to the 31st floor went considerably faster the second time around—partly because I had already walked that entire route once already just an hour ago, and partly because Ela simply *moved* differently than Seraphine did.

Where Seraphine walked with measured, unhurried *purpose*—the gait of someone who expected the world to arrange itself around her schedule—Ela cut through foot traffic with a more practical economy of action.

Shoulders angled through gaps, pace adjusted around slower walkers, eyes doing constant, low-grade threat assessment—hopefully—without ever looking like they were doing anything at all.

The persona had fully settled over me in the elevator down, the way it always did once the outfit was on, and by the time I stepped out onto the 31st floor, Seraphine and her kitsune mask purchase were a different person's business entirely.

'It really is kind of remarkable how much of it is just the clothes,' I mused, weaving past a one-person cargo hauler that was blocking half the thoroughfare. 'Put on the gear, and the posture follows. The posture follows, and the mindset follows. Wonder how much of that is the Perk actively working versus just... good old-fashioned method acting.'

Probably some of both, if I had to really guess.

The System did have a way of amplifying things you were already doing, after all.

The Emporium's entrance came into view quickly, and I felt the small, familiar warmth that always accompanied a visit here as Ela.

This place had definitely, somewhere along the way, become one of the very few locations in Neo Avalis where I felt genuinely *comfortable*.

Mr. Shori's kitchen.

Miss K's dojo, on the good days.

And, of course, Misha's beautiful disaster of a store.

I pushed through the entrance and headed for the bell—but before I even reached it, the heavy backroom doors swung open and Misha emerged, mid-stride, carrying a crate of what looked at first glance like disassembled drone components to my [Jury-Rigging] and Tech knowledge.

Two of her four eyes landed on me.

And she stopped *dead*.

"Ah—the customer has returned," she started, her professional retail voice snapping into place. "Has the customer reconsidered the purchase alrea—"

She actually *looked* at me properly then.

All four eyes were now doing their rapid, darting sweep—the hair, the face, the clothing, the DuraPack slung over my shoulder, the posture, the way my weight sat on my feet.

The crate of drone components hit the floor with a crash.

"*Friend Ela!*"

She crossed the intervening distance at a speed that, frankly, should not have been possible for someone navigating that much floor clutter—and a fairly sizable counter—and hit me with the full-body enthusiasm of a small gray missile.

Her overly long arms wrapped around my middle, her head tucked itself under my chin, while I had to take a half-step back to absorb the momentum as she squeezed with the surprising strength her lithe frame always managed to hide.

"Ela, Ela, *Ela!*" she chirped against my collarbone, each repetition punctuated by a small, happy bounce. "Misha was wondering when friend Ela would visit again just earlier today! Misha has heard *nothing* for days! Days and days! Misha was beginning to think *friend* Ela had forgotten about Misha entirely!"

"Ela would never," I said, and truly meant it, wrapping my arms around her and returning the squeeze. "Ela has just been... very busy. *Too* busy, honestly. Ela apologizes."

"*Hmmph.*" Misha leaned back just far enough to fix me with all four eyes at once, which was her version of a stern, searching look, I figured. Her hands stayed gripped on my arms.

"Busy makes Credits... Which means busy has to be acceptable at times... *Barely.* Misha will allow it this once."

Then the sternness collapsed entirely and she beamed, sharp green teeth on full display.

"Misha is very happy to see *friend* Ela! Come, come—Ela must tell Misha everything that's happened! Misha even has snacks! *Friend* Ela will try them and Ela will be honest about them, because Misha has been hard at work trying to improve."

"Snacks? That sounds great," I agreed happily—I had never even had snacks in Neo Avalis yet, I only then realized—letting myself be pulled deeper into the store by the wrist.

"They are *experimental*, but Misha is *certain* they will be popular amongst the customers once they're fully figured out!" She said brightly, as if this explained everything, and towed me toward the backroom with the unstoppable determination of a tugboat.

I let her, grinning the whole way.

'*God, I missed this.*'

The thought surfaced with more weight than I expected.

After the last few days—the gig, the injuries, the Anima Network, the endless careful management of every conversation with every person, including trying to stay under the radar of a sudden, potential Anima-expert's gaze—there was something almost *medicinal* about being around someone whose entire emotional state lived on the outside of her body.

As we passed the desk where—less than two hours ago—four KDM crates had been arrayed for a certain corporate scion, Misha's ears did a small, irritated flick.

"Ela just missed a somewhat interesting customer, actually," she said, in the tone of someone deciding mid-sentence to file a complaint. "Big purchase! Good Credits for Misha."

She paused briefly, her eyes meeting mine, before she added, "But *rude*."

I raised an eyebrow, keeping my face in the neutral zone with a small assist from [Deception].

"Rude?"

"Mm." Misha hopped up onto her usual stool and began clearing space on the workbench with brisk, downright automatic motions. "Corporate girl. Young. She spoke *properly* from the get-go, which—Misha will be fair here—is rare *and* appreciated. Very correct speech. Someone taught her well."

Her ear tufts flicked once.

"But then! *Then* she demands an *inspection period*. Three days! A third party to review Misha's work! As if Misha's work has *ever* needed reviewing! As if anything leaves this store at less than perfect!"

Both of her arms had shot all the way up by the end of it, the long limbs stretched out toward the Emporium's ceiling in full, theatrical outrage—claws splayed, as if calling upon the store itself to witness the brutal injustice done to her.

'*Yeah. That's probably a fair reaction... Completely fair,*' I thought, keeping my expression sympathetic while, internally, wincing on Seraphine's behalf. '*Sorry, Misha. Valeria's terms, not mine.*'

"That does sound annoying," I offered empathically.

"It is *deeply* annoying," Misha confirmed, nodding profusely. Then, suddenly, in the span of about half a second, the irritation evaporated entirely and she shrugged. "But! Credits are Credits, and corpo customers are all like this. Suspicious of everything except the things they *should* be suspicious of. Misha has seen it a hundred times."

She waved one clawed hand dismissively, closing the topic. "Enough about rude customers. *Friend* Ela is here! What does Ela need? Or—" her eyes narrowed with sudden suspicion, "—is this a *social* visit? Has *friend* Ela come just to see Misha, with no business at all?"

"...It's mostly business," I admitted, a bit awkwardly.

I was halfway to feeling genuinely bad about it—when I caught Misha's expression turning *more* satisfied rather than less. Business meant potential Credits, after all, and Credits sat very near the top of Misha's personal hierarchy of good things.

'Of course. *Misha is still Misha*,' I thought, suppressing a smile.

"Hmmpf," she said anyway, purely for form's sake.

"But Ela is happy to stay after business as well," I added, "for snacks. And talking. Ela has at least *some* time today."

"Acceptable! Very acceptable!" Misha declared, and patted the cleared workbench.

"Business first. Show Misha."

I swung the DuraPack off my shoulder and dug into the side compartment, coming out with the small bundle of cloth I'd been carrying around since the gig.

I set it on the workbench and resting on the folded cloth, were a pair of cybernetic eyeballs.

Misha leaned in closer. All four of her eyes blinked, in perfect sequence.

"...Ela brings Misha *eyeballs*...?"

"Ela liberated them," I said diplomatically. "From someone who was no longer using them."

"Mm-hm." Misha shot me a look that communicated, quite clearly, that she had translated my use of *liberated* with *perfect* accuracy. "Well. Misha must be honest with Ela up front—cybernetics are not really Misha's field. Not implant-grade ones, anyway. Weapons, armor, drones, gear—yes, yes, all yes. But wet-interface cybernetics?"

She wagged one hand in a so-so gesture. "Misha knows *enough*. Misha does not know *properly*. Ela should know the difference before Misha says anything."

"Understood. Ela just wants a pointer, mostly. What they might be worth. Who might buy them. Whether they're even worth carrying around at all."

"*That* Misha can do." She nodded briskly and reached up to pull her work goggles down off her forehead and over her eyes—the battered, multi-lensed set I'd seen her wear a hundred times before. She tapped the side of the left lens twice, and it whirred softly, telescoping outward into what was very clearly a magnification array. "Let Misha look."

She picked up the first eyeball with a delicacy that contrasted almost comically against her usual crate-slamming energy—two claws, featherlight grip, rotating it slowly under the workbench light. Her magnified, ruby-like eye, grotesquely *huge* behind the lens, tracked across its surface in small, methodical passes.

She began muttering to herself in Gryplik as she worked with her usual clipped cadence.

{*"Optical housing intact... iris assembly standard, boring, mass-produced... connector port is third-generation, old but serviceable... firmware seal unbroken, good, good..."*}

I stayed quiet and let her work, following along with the Gryplik easily.

I made sure to keep my face arranged in a polite, uncomprehending patience that I hoped read like I was listening to pleasant background noise.

That part, at least, took *genuine* effort—there was a constant, low-grade temptation to react to what she was actually saying, yet I had to keep my responses anchored to her *tone* rather than her *words*.

{“*Second one... same model, matched pair, that is better for resale... housing also intact... hm. Hmmmm?*”}

Her muttering slowed.

She rotated the second eyeball under the lens, tilted it, brought it closer.

{“*...What is this. Scratching? No—abrasions. Deep ones... Here, around the anchor points, and here...*”} She clicked her tongue—a sharp, disapproving sound. {“*Sloppy knife-work. Someone **pried** these out with a blade. Like digging a screw out with a chisel... Barbaric. Absolutely barbaric. Who does this to perfectly serviceable hardware...*”}

I winced and immediately smoothed it over—but the wince happened, because *that was me*.

That was absolutely, one hundred percent me, crouched over a dead Scav in a safehouse corridor with shaking hands and a combat knife, working on a timer, with exactly zero prior experience in the delicate art of cybernetic extraction.

In my defense though, the previous owner had been *thoroughly* past caring.

But the hardware, clearly, had not been.

'Note to self,' I thought, keeping my face carefully neutral as Misha continued her disapproving Gryplik muttering. *'Loot extraction is a skill I gotta pay more attention to... Maybe [Slicer], [Jury-Rigging] or a future [Medicine] level covers more of it. [Ripper], at the very least, should for sure. But I don't exactly have access to that one... Either way. Gotta improve. 'Cause apparently I went at those sockets like a raccoon opening a trash can, and the merchandise clearly seems to remember its treatment.'*

Misha set the second eyeball down on the cloth with exaggerated gentleness, as if apologizing to it on *someone's* behalf. She pushed the goggles up onto her forehead, fixed me with all four eyes, and switched back to common.

"So. Misha has news for Ela. Some good, some less good." She held up one claw. "Ela wants which one first?"

"Ela will take the bad news first," I said. "Always better to end on a high note."

"Wise! Misha very much agrees with this philosophy." She nodded, then tapped the cloth beside the eyeballs with one claw. "The bad news: Ela's *liberation* technique needs work. *Serious* work. Whoever removed these—and Misha suspects Misha is looking at the person

in question right now—used a blade, and used it *badly*. There are abrasions all around the anchor points. Deep ones. The optical housings survived, yes, but the mounting hardware is scored, one of the connector collars is damaged, and any buyer with functioning eyes of their own will see this damage in the first five seconds of inspection."

I kept my face neutral. It took quite a bit of effort.

"Ela was... working under time pressure," I offered meekly.

"Mm-hm..." She fixed me with a flat, four-eyed stare.

Then she picked the eyeball back up and held it aloft between two claws.

"Watch. Next time, Ela goes in *behind* the anchor points—" she tilted the eyeball and traced a slow line along its rear circumference with the tip of one claw, "—here, and here. Then Ela cuts the connector cable *first*."

Her free claw mimed a single, clean snip at the trailing stub of cable at the back of the housing. "*First!* Always first. Cable still attached means tension, and tension means Ela is fighting the socket instead of working with it."

She rotated the eyeball slowly in her grip, demonstrating a smooth, corkscrew-like twisting motion. "*Then* the housing rotates out along its own seating channel. It *wants* to come out this way. It is *designed* to come out this way. See? Smooth. Like unscrewing a bulb."

She set it back down on the cloth and leveled all four eyes at me again. "No prying. *Never* prying. Prying is how *good* merchandise becomes *bad* merchandise. Yes?"

"Got it," I said, nodding enthusiastically, while filing the technique away carefully. That was *exactly* the kind of practical knowledge I'd been hoping to walk out with, even if it arrived wrapped in a scolding—well-deserved scolding, at the very least.

"Good." The sternness dropped away, and she brightened immediately. "*Now* the good news! Because there is good news. These are *not* junk. Simply not as good as they could have been."

She picked the first eyeball back up, holding it toward me like a jeweler presenting a stone.

"These are Optica-Verve 'ClearSight' Mk. IIs. Manufactured by Hesperion Biotechnics—mid-tier outfit, respectable, makes solid workhorse implants. Not fancy, not anywhere near chrome-status, but *reliable and cheap*. The ClearSight line is popular with people buying their *first* implant—better than baseline human eyes across the board. Sharper acuity, better low-light pickup, minor zoom function. Almost Pseudo-Tier 1 in quality, if Misha is being generous with the category. Which... Misha is, today, because Misha is in a good mood."

"And what would a pair like that be worth?"

"Pristine? A matched pair like this—150, maybe 200 Credits, depending on the buyer and the day."

She set the eyeball back down and gestured at the abrasions with visible, lingering grief.

"*These*, however, are *not* pristine. And Ela must also understand—the seller *always* takes a beating on price for salvaged implants. Always. Buyers assume the worst about where they came from—" she gave me a pointed look, "*—usually correctly*. So. With the damage, with the salvage discount? Ela should expect maybe a hundred Credits. Tops. Likely less from a first-time buyer."

'A hundred Credits...!'

For something I'd pulled out of a corpse's head in ninety seconds of panicked knife-work, that was not bad at all. Especially given that my entire liquid worth had been sixteen Credits right after finishing the gig, I was not about to complain whatsoever.

"That's still very good news," I said honestly. "Where would Ela even sell something like this? Misha would not want it, right? Misha said cybernetics aren't her field...?"

"They are not! Misha does gear, not *wet* things." She wrinkled her face at the eyeballs briefly, then held up two claws. "Unless they're more chrome-spec, at least. But Misha *does* know of two places. Knows *of*, Ela understands—not knows *well*. No partnerships, no guarantees. Just names Misha has heard good things about, and traded a few messages with. Sometimes merchandise."

She folded down the first claw.

"Option one: Inside Delta. The 35th floor—that whole floor is Kessler-Danforth territory, the medical logistics corporation, so Ela should mind her manners and her bag straps up there, everything is watched. There is a shop called *Second Glance*. Small place, tucked behind the licensed Ripper clinics. The owner deals in refurbished implants—buys salvage, restores it, resells it with proper certification. Misha's customers say the owner pays fair and asks few questions, which is a rare combination. Misha has traded messages with *Second Glance* twice before. Polite both times. That is everything Misha knows."

She folded down the second claw.

"Option two: Outside, in Neo Avalis proper. Fourth layer, District 12—a place called *Chrome Orchard*, on Vessel Street 88, wedged between a noodle bar and a scrap processor. The owner is a woman named Odaya. Ex-Ripper, people say. Misha does not know. Retired from the cutting, now Odaya only buys and sells. Misha has moved merchandise through *Chrome Orchard* once, maybe twice—small things, mostly drone optics—and it went smoothly. Customers speak well of Odaya. But it *is* on the fourth layer, Ela. The shop is fine. The *layer*... is the layer."

She spread her hands.

"Misha's honest opinion? For one damaged pair of low-tier eyes like this, the 35th floor is closer, far, far, *far* safer, and the price difference will be small at best. Odaya might pay ten, twenty Credits more—*Chrome Orchard* has less overhead and fewer corporate eyes than *Second Glance*. Downside of trading in Delta, really—high costs. The connection *itself* might

be worth making... But whether that is worth a trip down to the fourth layer for Ela... Ela can do that math."

I gave Misha a genuine, appreciative nod as she wrapped up her rundown.

"That was... a lot more thorough than Ela was expecting, honestly. Thank Misha. Seriously."

"Misha is a *professional*," she said, with the simple, matter-of-fact pride of someone stating that water was wet. "Even about the things that are not Misha's field, Misha knows *enough* to point a friend in the right direction. This is the *minimum*."

I turned the options over in my head for a few moments.

The 35th floor was closer and *considerably* safer.

Corporate-monitored, sure, but corporate-monitored cut both ways—it meant cameras and scrutiny, but also meant nobody was going to try anything stupid on a shop floor owned by a medical logistics corp.

And the price difference, per Misha's own assessment, would be marginal at best.

Ten or twenty Credits was not worth a trip down to the fourth layer—a trip that came with transit time, transit costs, and the ambient risk profile of Layer 4's streets.

Not for a single damaged pair of low-tier eyes.

'Yeah. No contest. The 35th floor it is.'

But the *Chrome Orchard* itself...

That name, I was definitely going to remember.

An ex-Ripper was *exactly* the kind of connection I'd been wishing I had access to earlier.

Someone who knew cybernetics from the inside out, hopefully. Who could answer the questions I couldn't ask a licensed clinic inside Delta without generating more than a few questions I didn't want directed my way. Who might—if I played my cards right and built the relationship properly—even be a source of actual [Ripper]-adjacent experience gain.

Watching her work, asking the right questions, maybe assisting with small things over time...

'But that's a project for another time. A time when I have actual Credits to my name and a reason to be making fourth-layer trips...'

"Ela will go with the 35th floor," I said. "But Ela is keeping the Chrome Orchard in mind for the future. An ex-Ripper sounds like a very useful person to know."

"Mm! Smart. Connections are worth more than a few Credits, long-term. This is known." Misha nodded approvingly, then began carefully re-wrapping the eyeballs in their cloth. "So! Is that Ela's business concluded? Because Misha was *very* serious about the snacks, and Misha's newest experiment requires a test subject with functioning taste—"

"There's... actually one more thing," I said, turning more focused.

My tone made her pause. Her hands stopped mid-wrap, and her ear tufts rotated toward me slightly before her eyes followed.

"Ela found a datashard. On the same outing where Ela liberated the eyes." I kept my voice level, but didn't try to hide that this was the *actual* reason I'd come. Misha would smell that eventually anyway. "A personal log. Most of it is nothing—some corpo drone's diary. But there *are* technical documents attached. Material specification sheets. And Ela doesn't have the knowledge to read them properly."

Misha's eyes narrowed slightly, clearly *calculating*. "Material specifications for *what*?"

"That's the question, really. Ela has... a suspicion. But Ela is a bit of a blank when it comes to materials, and a suspicion from a blank is worth nothing." I paused, then laid the rest out plainly, because Misha deserved it plainly. "Here's the thing, though: If Ela's suspicion is *right*, then this is the kind of information that comes with *weight* attached. Like, the kind that some people would prefer stayed buried *at all costs*. So Ela wants to be clear, up front—if Misha doesn't want that knowledge in the Emporium, or the problems that might come with it, Misha says no, and Ela gets rid of the shard another way. No harm. No offense taken. Ela means that *completely*."

The room went quiet for a moment.

Misha looked at me—all four eyes steady on my face, the usual kinetic energy of her briefly stilled into something considerably more careful.

Her claws drummed once, slowly, against the workbench.

I could practically see the calculation running behind her eyes: Curiosity on one side, and a long, professionally-honed instinct for staying out of other people's dangerous business on the other.

"...Misha does *not* love the sound of this," she said finally. "Misha has a good store. A quiet life. Well... Quiet-*ish*."

Her eyes dropped to the DuraPack where the shard presumably lived, then came back up to me.

"But... Looking is not keeping. Reading a specification sheet is not stealing one. And if friend Ela is carrying something dangerous around without knowing *how* dangerous..." She exhaled through her teeth, a short, sharp sound, and waved one hand in a *give it here* motion. "Then Misha would rather Ela find out here, from Misha, than somewhere worse, from someone worse. Show Misha the sheets... *Just* the sheets. Misha does not want to read anyone's diary."

Gratitude hit me faster than the decision to act on it did—before I'd fully registered what I was doing, I'd already crossed the short space between us and pulled Misha into a hug.

"Thank Misha," I said quietly, and meant every syllable of it. "Really."

She made a small, surprised chirp, then melted into it the way she always did, patting my back with one clawed hand. "Yes, yes. Friend Ela is very lucky Misha is so very generous *and* so very brave. Misha accepts hugs as payment. *This time.*"

I let out a short laugh, gave her one final squeeze, then stepped back and retrieved the shard from the DuraPack, before handing it over...