Chapter 32 - Misha's Emporium

My gaze lingered on the creature before me, a mix of shock and fascination washing over me as I beheld the Gryplik, hunched over the ground and its unnaturally red eyes staring at me.

Luckily, one of the playthroughs I had watched about Neon Dragons had encountered a member of their species, which gave me a blank-cheque to check out their wiki-page.

I had delved deep into the wiki entries, absorbing everything about their history, biology, and cultural norms, along with the particular nuances of their major character appearances in the game.

Sure, some might argue that a single encounter in a playthrough hardly justified such an extensive dive into the lore, but have they ever considered that, "Fuck you, I made the rules"?

The Gryplik, as I recalled, belonged to a group of sentient races in the game generally referred to as demi-humans. This term was used because, despite their distinct physical differences, they shared several notable characteristics with humans, blurring the lines between fantasy and familiar.

They weren't just background characters in the game's world either; they had their own intricate histories, societies, and roles to play in the sprawling narrative of Neon Dragons.

At first glance, they were all unmistakably humanoid, striding about on two legs and typically equipped with two arms. Of course, this wasn't a hard and fast rule. A few outliers defied this standard, but, to my definite disappointment, you wouldn't stumble upon any sentient feline-like beings among these demi-humans.

No talking cats for Sera. At least for now.

Now, the Gryplik stood apart from humans with their rather unique bodily proportions.

Their limbs were notably elongated, giving them a surreal, almost Slenderman-esque appearance. But that's not all—their arms and legs boasted an unusual triple-jointed structure, adding a whole new dimension to their physical capabilities.

Each of their hands and feet was further adorned with seven digits, enhancing their precision and dexterity to remarkable, beyond-human, levels. This anatomical advantage lent them extraordinary fine-motor skills, though at the cost of sheer muscular strength and brute force.

In game terms, the Gryplik would be your quintessential crafters, experts in tasks requiring meticulous attention and a delicate touch.

Before the Demi-Human Accords were established around twenty years prior, promising equal rights for humans and demi-humans alike in the bustling urban sprawl of Neon Dragons, the Gryplik were often subjected to brutal enslavement by humans and other species alike.

Their exceptional craftsmanship skills, coupled with a lack of physical prowess to resist overpowering forces, sadly made them an ideal target for enslavement by the previous humans.

Curiously, the Gryplik were once the dominant species on the planet, reigning in untold numbers until the tumultuous events of the Twilight War and the devastating aftermath of the Scorching Rapture.

The origins of the Twilight War, a fierce battle for planetary dominance among various species, were enigmatic and very much obscured by the sands of time. Yet, it was strongly suspected by the community that the prolonged oppression of the Gryplik played a pivotal role in igniting the initial flames of the conflict.

Fueled by years of subjugation, a coalition of both liberated and enslaved Gryplik united in fury, demolishing entire cities in a dramatic display of righteous vengeance.

The debate over whether this uprising was the true catalyst for the war or simply a symptom of an already raging storm had been a hot topic among the lore nerds in the Neon Dragons community for months. Without concrete evidence to support either theory, however, the true cause remained an intriguing enigma until my last day, shrouded in wild speculation and mountains of mystery.

The conclusion of the war, however, was not shrouded in mystery, yet it was every bit as heartbreaking and abrupt.

The event that brought it to a halt was known as the Scorching Rapture, a disaster that seemed less like a twist of fate and more like the planet's own furious outcry.

This devastating phenomenon swept across the globe with fire and brimstone, a relentless tide of destruction that gave no quarter to human and demi-human alike. Nearly 97% of all life was extinguished in its wake, a merciless purge that wiped out countless species and civilizations, abruptly silencing the chaos of war with a forced, sombre truce.

What was left of the planet lay in tatters, a shadow of its former vibrancy—or so goes the stories.

The rich history and potential futures of many, including the Gryplik, were irreversibly reshaped by this catastrophic series of events.

Amidst this desolation, the Wall stood as the sole chance for survival.

This mysterious barrier, the secrets of which I still deeply regretted not uncovering from those spoiler boxes, somehow managed to repel the Scorching Rapture, paving the way for the reality that now unfolded before me and ultimately leading to the beginning of the story of Neon Dragons.

For me, standing here face-to-face with a member of the Gryplik race, and the likely proprietor of this store, this history translated into one exciting prospect: This Gryplik was bound to have some top-notch gear for sale!

It dawned on me then that I'd been doing nothing but gawking at the Gryplik in front of me, wordlessly, for a good minute or two.

Finally breaking the silence, I blurted out, “Ehh… Yes. Hello. I’m in need of a few things—some quality clothes, a decent knife, maybe even some netrunning gear. Got anything like that?” My words tumbled out in a rush, as I tried to keep my gaze steady, not darting between the four intense red orbs that were fixed on me.

I couldn’t shake off the thought about the unique functionality of their eyes, each one designed for different levels of magnification. This ability allowed Gryplik to effortlessly switch between macro and micro perspectives. Feeling the weight of all four eyes on me was unnerving, like being scrutinised at a level most beings couldn't even begin to fathom.

The Gryplik responded with a hint of pride in its voice, “Naturally, Misha’s Emporium has all manner of things. What is your name?” They continued to drop the 'ium' from 'emporium', a small quirk in their speech.

I couldn't determine whether the Gryplik was male or female, but there was a distinct tone of reverence when they asked for my name. Surprisingly, I instantly grasped the significance of this—the moment they uttered the word with such respect, a piece of trivia clicked into place, enlightening me to the reason behind this oddity.

The [Polyglot] Trait kicked into overdrive and began to unravel the intricate cultural tapestry of the Gryplik’s relationship with names. Intriguingly, they lacked the conventional understanding of personal pronouns like “you” and “I.” Instead, their communication pivoted entirely around the use of names, both in reference to others and themselves.

This newfound knowledge struck me as peculiar.

The [Polyglot] Trait was designed to assist with language acquisition—speaking, writing, reading, and grasping basic cultural nuances, not for gleaming deeply-rooted cultural insights into why languages were the way they were. But here I was, delving into a deep dive, almost encyclopaedic, into the unique linguistic idiosyncrasies of an entire species.

This insight also shed light on the Gryplik's seemingly scripted manner of speaking.

The roots of this practice traced back to the era preceding the Twilight War when Grypliks formed about half of the planet's sentient population. Their staggering numbers birthed a cultural emphasis on names and their significance. In their society, the gravest insult was to be stripped of one’s name, reduced to being just “one of many,” or worse, a mere number.

Over generations, Gryplik gradually lost the linguistic capacity to comprehend the very concept of an individual that is disconnected from a specific name. Consequently, when they pick up languages like English, the notions of "you" and "I" remain alien to them.

They had likely memorised standard phrases for interacting with other sentients, enabling them to greet customers and navigate them through their store, even without knowing the relevance of their names. Their speech pattern, a mosaic of learned expressions, was their bridge to engaging in what they perceived as normal human interaction.

The Gryplik's remarkable adaptability left me thoroughly impressed, but equally astonishing was the depth and versatility of the [Polyglot] Trait.

When I initially chose it, my sole intention was to use it for eavesdropping and communication. The prospect of gaining any deeper understanding hadn't crossed my mind. Yet, faced with the Gryplik's unique communication quirks, I found myself grateful for these unexpected nuggets of insight the trait provided.

As I was about to share my name with the Gryplik, a curious thought popped into my head.

'*What if I tried speaking in Gryplik? Would that offend them, or would it be a pleasant surprise?*'

Thanks to [Polyglot], not only was I privy to the peculiarities of Gryplik speech, but I also had the ability to speak, write, and understand it. Merely considering it triggered the correct phrases to form in my mind, validating my capabilities.

However, after a moment's reflection, I decided against it.

'*No, better not,*' I concluded. Speaking Japanese was one thing, but Gryplik?

The thought of trying to justify that skill was daunting.

How could I possibly explain acquiring such fluency if someone got curious? Claiming to have stumbled upon a data-shard that taught Gryplik at a beginner-to-native level would be unbelievable—such a resource would easily be worth more than our entire apartment, considering the dearth of educational materials in this world.

Better to play it safe.

“My name is Ela,” I answered, sticking to the same alias I had used with Mr. Shori and Vega. Consistency was key, especially if inquisitive minds started prying.

The moment my name left my lips, I witnessed a remarkable transformation in the Gryplik's behaviour. Its reaction was akin to a child receiving their favourite ice cream—eyes wide with glee, a broad smile spreading across its face, radiating pure joy.

“My name is Misha, welcome to Misha’s Emporium!” the Gryplik responded with a burst of enthusiasm. And in that instance, a curious realisation dawned on me: Misha was female.

Her name, which would seem utterly gender-neutral by human standards, clearly denoted femininity in Gryplik culture.

Thank you for that revelation, [Polyglot]!

“Let’s head inside. Misha will show Ela the perfect items. Misha knows exactly what Ela is looking for!” she declared, her enthusiasm palpable. With a casual nonchalance, she began to drop the assorted pieces of clothing and miscellaneous merchandise she had gathered from the floor during our conversation.

Each item landed haphazardly back on the floor, returning to its original disarray.

Internally, I mused, '*Feels like I've somehow been unofficially adopted,*' as I prepared myself to be whisked away by this peculiar, overly eager demi-human. Her reaction to my name was intriguingly intense. '*And "Ela" doesn't hold any special meaning in Gryplik, right? I made sure to double-check. Didn't want to accidentally call myself something offensive or bizarre in her language.*'

Watching Misha rise to her full height, I was struck once again by a sense of surreal familiarity—it was like witnessing a character from the Slenderman tales that captivated the internet of my old life for a few months.

Her towering presence was both awe-inspiring and more than just a bit unnerving. If not for her cheerful demeanour and my wiki-sourced knowledge that Grypliks were not known for their physical strength, I might have been genuinely frightened of her very presence.

Misha stood impressively tall, easily surpassing two metres. She could have been closer to two and a half metres, for all I could discern the difference.

Her elongated, triple-jointed arm reached out towards me, an invitation to follow her inside.

Hesitating just a moment to collect myself, I accepted her gesture gracefully.

'*This is beyond insane,*' I thought, somewhat bemused. '*My first encounter with a demi-human and it's all so... oddly casual.*'

Misha's lengthy, seven-fingered hand gently encircled mine and she lightly tugged me forward, guiding me towards a second set of doors. This boundary, I assumed, separated the initial reception and payment area from the main part of the Emporium.

As Misha led me through the second set of doors, the interior of the Emporium unfurled before me like a scene from a cyberpunk daydream.

Neon lights in jagged, electric hues cast sharp shadows across the chaotic assemblage of goods. Clothes of all kinds dangled from metallic hooks, draped over crates, or lay in vibrant piles on the floor. The arrangement was haphazard, a visual cacophony of colours and styles, yet it held a certain enigmatic charm.

The clothing ranged from sleek, form-fitting bodysuits with glowing circuit patterns to rugged, patchwork jackets adorned with an array of undefined gadgets. There were also shelves lined with boots, each pair seemingly designed for a different, outlandish purpose. The variety was dizzying, a mishmash of the practical and the purely ornamental, all bearing the unmistakable flair of a world where technology and fashion had collided with wild abandon for far too long.

Off to one side, a rack of knives caught my eye.

Each blade glinted menacingly under the neon glow, ranging from simple, utilitarian designs to elaborate, almost sculptural pieces that seemed more art than weapon.

Nearby, barrels brimming with various long-blades stood guard like silent sentinels, their contents promising protection or peril with equal indifference.

As my eyes fell upon them, I couldn't stop an errand thought from intruding, '*I can't just go for a Katana or something right off the bat… right?*'

Scattered throughout the space were also a variety of stations outfitted with netrunning equipment. These setups were an eclectic mix of old-school laptops, bona-fide looking decks, a rare crown or two, and tangled webs of cables connecting who-knows-what to who-knows-where.

It was a netrunner's paradise, offering tools for every conceivable digital heist or security breach, as far as I could surmise.

Amidst the chaos, strangely unobtrusive armoured cases were placed at seemingly random intervals.

They were sleek yet robust, their exact contents a mystery, but their presence hinted at valuable or dangerous items within. Each case seemed to hum with potential, an unspoken promise of power for those daring enough to inquire—and liquid enough to afford their contents.

There I stood, right in the heart of this eclectic emporium, when Misha finally released my hand. Her four, piercing eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that was both curious and disconcerting.

"So, what can Misha find for Ela? What does Ela need, exactly?" she asked, her voice tinged with an infectious excitement, clearly eager to dive into the task at hand.

I was prepared for this question, having spent considerable time mulling over my requirements for these initial purchases, which I hoped would serve me well for the foreseeable future.

To further ingratiate myself with the Gryplik—and possibly secure a friendly discount—I decided to mimic her unique manner of Gryplik-like speech. "Ela is in need of specific attire with built-in protection. Mainly against blades, but if Misha has gear that could also fend off some low-calibre bullets, that would be perfect. Ela is looking for something fitting for an Operator on a low-tier mission. It must be subtle enough for Ela to blend into everyday life as well. Accessories like belts and bandoliers would be ideal, especially if they are modular, allowing Ela to attach or detach them as needed."

As soon as I finished speaking, Misha burst into a flurry of activity, muttering under her breath as she darted around the store. Her triple-jointed arms contorted in ways that defied my understanding, reaching into hidden nooks and crannies of the store that I couldn't even see, let alone comprehend existed.

I stood rooted to the spot, a spectator to this whirlwind of activity.

Misha zipped back and forth, each time bringing an array of accessories and clothing items.

With a quick, scrutinising glance, she would hold up various pieces against me, assessing them for fit and style. Then, as quickly as she had appeared, she'd rush off again, her murmurs filling the air.

"More of this," she'd say, or "No, no, not this. Ela does not want this," discarding items with decisive flicks of her elongated limbs, flinging them off to god-knows-where, never to be seen again.

The whole process was bewildering, a chaotic blend of precision and haste. Yet, amidst this frenzy, I felt an odd sense of being cared for. Misha's dedication to finding the perfect gear for me was evident in her every move.

It was a strange, almost surreal experience, watching this Gryplik proprietor whirl around her emporium with such purpose, zeal and undeniably enthusiasm.

I wasn't sure whether this enthusiasm was just her natural state or if my attempts at ingratiating myself to her through me giving my name willingly and mimicking her manner of speech had anything to do with it.

Regardless, her energy was infectious, and despite my initial uncertainty, I found myself growing more excited with each item she selected. The care she took in considering each piece, judging its suitability for my needs, was both impressive and heartening.

I couldn't help but feel that I was in good hands, even as I struggled to keep up with her rapid pace and the surprising variety of items she presented.

In mere minutes, the store transformed into a landscape littered with an assortment of discarded clothes, accessories, and equipment. Amidst this chaos, Misha towered above me, a grin of achievement on her face, proudly presenting a curated collection she had aptly labelled as "Ela wants this," throughout her frenzy.

"Misha has returned!" she declared with a flourish, handing over the carefully chosen ensemble. At first glance, I could definitely not complain about her decisions so far. Each piece was a study in muted sophistication, predominantly in shades of sleek black and grey.

Their substantial heft hinted at some kind of reinforced fabric, likely integrated into most of the clothes for added protection, just like I had asked for.

"Ela should try! There are changing rooms! Misha will show Ela!" she urged enthusiastically, her excitement palpable as she began to guide me towards a secluded corner of the store.

The effort it took her to pull me along was unexpectedly significant, and I couldn't help but note her physical limitations.

'*They really aren't strong at all, are they?*' I mused, observing her struggle despite her eagerness and considering my own relatively petite stature. '*Just a small girl, and she's finding it hard to pull me along.*'

I pondered how Misha managed her daily tasks with such a level of physical frailty.

It struck me that she seemed to be constantly operating at a physical capability akin to a Body value of around 1.5, similar to what I had experienced just days ago. Yet, unlike me, she appeared to navigate her world without any apparent struggle, adapting to her limitations with a resilience that was both admirable and intriguing.

Inside the cramped confines of the changing room, I began to don the clothes that Misha had selected for me.

First, I started off with a dark, soft undershirt that felt like nothing I had ever worn before. There was a certain density to it, that made me think it could provide at least a modicum of protection, despite being a seemingly simple shirt.

Next was an olive-green bomber jacket that came with an array of pouches and pockets—a definite step up from the almost pocket-less wardrobe I had found in Sera's home! Its sturdy mag-zipper slid up with a satisfying heft, and I felt the durable and heavy fabric settle on my shoulders with a comfortable weight.

'*This one definitely has some sort of inlays in the fabric. There's no way simple fabric could be this heavy, unless it's completely drenched,*' I thought to myself with a smile beginning to form on my face.

The tactical, tight-fitting, yet comfortable pants were next, the material flexing easily and without any noise or stretching as I moved. They had the same colour as my undershirt, creating a slight contrast with the bomber-jacket's olive-green.

The pockets and straps it came with were positioned in just the right places to be easily accessible yet not cumbersome. Whoever originally designed these pants definitely knew what they were doing.

Finally, I got to the assortment of accessories that Misha had laid out for me.

Slipping my hands into the black, reinforced gloves, I made a fist, appreciating the way they protected my hands without sacrificing any dexterity. I could even properly *feel* through them with my fingertips, hinting at some sort of tech-wizardry going on with them.

Next was a similarly dark-coloured scarf that I quickly wrapped around my neck, its fabric soft yet thick, a comforting barrier against the ever-present smog of the city proper. This would definitely come in handy whenever I started leaving Delta.

Next, I secured the numerous belts and bandoliers around my chest and waist, each pouch and holster both fashion statement and utilitarian alike. The buckles clicked into place easily, a sound that echoed the readiness I felt building within me.

Finally, I laced up the sturdy combat boots Misha had sought out for me, their solid, reinforced soles reassuring me that I could run, fight, or stand my ground as needed—not that I planned to do any of that quite yet, however.

Before I stepped out, I caught a glimpse of myself in the changing room mirror, the same type of black-assembly as I had seen in Mr. Shori's stall.

The girl looking back was a far cry from who I had been just days ago, when I had checked myself for the first time in the stall's mirror.

She instead looked capable, formidable even, someone who not only started to truly understand the dangers of her world but was also equipped to face them—maybe not head-on, but looking at them through the rear-view mirror while she runs away as fast as she can.

There was just one thing that was completely off with the picture in the mirror: My goddamn hair.

'*Gods, I really need a fucking haircut. What kind of cyberpunk girl runs around with unkempt brown hair? Where's the colour? Where's the neon?! What on earth was the original Sera thinking with this look...?*' I thought as I stepped out of the changing room, to an overly excited and energetic Misha.

"Ela looks outstanding! This is the look! Misha is very pleased with Ela's appearance!" She announced with a boisterous cheer, then paused, casting a glance around the room as if seeking affirmation from an invisible audience.

I couldn't suppress a broad smile, charmed by the Gryplik's endearing behaviour and her candid enthusiasm. And truth be told, she had hit the nail on the head—this was more than just a good look.

Misha had nailed it, selecting the perfect gear with remarkable speed and precision, even though my own specifications had been somewhat vague.

Yet, before I could fully commit to the transaction, two crucial queries hovered in my mind, demanding clarity: the specifics of my outfit and, inevitably, the cost.

"Ela is curious, why did Misha pick out these particular items?" I motioned towards the bomber jacket and the scarf, the two elements that intrigued me the most. "And Ela would appreciate understanding what materials all these are crafted from, if Misha would be willing and able to explain."

Misha's eyes brightened, clearly delighted to share her expertise.

"The bomber jacket," she began with a hint of pride, "is crafted from a high-tech Synth-Weave interlaced with reinforced aramid fibres. It's quite resilient, especially against stabs and sharp objects."

She ran her fingers along the jacket's surface, demonstrating its toughness. "But," she added with a more serious tone, "it is less effective against bullets. So, Ela should avoid getting shot. It's very unhealthy."

Then she picked up the scarf, her hands gently cradling the fabric. "This scarf is woven from a special nano-fibre. It's designed to filter out toxins, even up to Tier 1 gases—what you might encounter from law enforcement or gang weaponry."

She chuckled softly, a playful twinkle in her eye. “And, it frames Ela's face beautifully, which is very cute, by the way.” The unexpected compliment caught me off guard, warming my cheeks to a bright red. It had been an age and a half since anyone had sincerely called me cute. But I was just a teenage girl now, so it kind of made sense.

Misha continued enthusiastically, detailing the rest of the ensemble. "The undershirt and the pants are also made from a blend of Aramid and Synth-Weave fibres, though with less aramid compared to the jacket. This makes them lighter, easier to move in, and more breathable—a necessary trade-off for agility, I’m sure Ela understands."

She gestured toward the belts, noting, "These are designed for utility and rapid access to tools and gadgets. They are very versatile, so Ela can combine them as Ela sees fit. They're very sturdy yet equally flexible, ensuring that Ela can carry what is needed without being weighed down at any time!”

Lastly, she straightened up to her full height before confidently stating, “Misha has personally maintained these items to their highest possible standards. Misha has even improved upon them in some aspects over the years. Misha promises they are a perfect fit for Ela and Ela’s needs.”

She concluded with a nod, confident in the functionality and thought behind each piece, providing me not just with clothing, but with a second skin tailored for the exact things I intended to face soon.

Scanning over the exquisite gear Misha had assembled, I couldn't pinpoint a flaw or fathom any reason to decline. Her breakdown of each item's capabilities was spot on, aligning perfectly with my needs. There remained just one final detail to iron out: The price.

"How much will this set Ela back? Ela is ready to take it all; Misha has outdone herself," I inquired, mentally steeling myself for the financial blow.

My credit stash was modest at best, and I was keen on avoiding tapping into the restricted shard reserved for my Operator plans. Keeping my future endeavours concealed from Valeria was paramount, should it be at all possible.

A pang of regret for my earlier generosity towards the beggar nipped at me, though I quickly scolded myself, '*It was the right thing to do, Sera. No second-guessing.*'

Nonetheless, a shadow of remorse lingered, my thoughts drifting back to the morning's events—the abduction of the girl, the haunting feeling of helplessness. Could I have intervened, altered the outcome with a simple act of defiance from within the crowd? I had trained up my [Throwing] quite a lot, after all. Had there been a way to balance my karma more judiciously?

Donating the credits had been an impulsive attempt to ease my conscience, yet now, juxtaposed with the potential expense laid out before me, it seemed less like benevolence and more like folly.

Moving forward, I vowed to weigh such decisions with greater care, even when under duress or in the grip of panic…