

Chapter 99 - Unexpected Encounters

PoV: Jade

Following Ela up to the 31st floor, Jade could barely contain her excitement.

She practically bounced with every step, the kind of giddy energy that only came from knowing you had a pocket full of Credits and permission to blow it all on yourself.

Sure, she was a little on edge around Ela—how could anyone not be when dealing with someone so... just strange!—but the thrill of the shopping spree ahead more than made up for it.

Having Citrina shadowing them definitely helped ease her nerves, too.

After the run-in with the Golden Phoenix enforcers, there was no question the gang had gathered at least some intel on both her and Ela.

Vega wasn't taking any chances.

He'd decreed that for the foreseeable future, Jade couldn't leave the Clawed Beasts' controlled floors without either Ruby or Citrina in tow.

The decision made complete sense to her, so she hadn't complained.

Ruby and Citrina were the only sisters with both licences and whitelisted firearms that could legally be carried inside the Megabuilding, making them the clear picks for protection detail.

While Emira might have been the most skilled in pure combat, her specialisation in close-quarters made her a poor choice for situations that could require a quick, ranged response.

If a fight broke out unexpectedly and suddenly, Emira would likely be too far from the action to intervene in time, considering the distance required to make sure Ela wouldn't be able to pick up on her and Jade being shadowed.

'But retaliation?' Jade smirked to herself. *'Yeah, Emira would definitely shine there.'*

Still, Jade felt more content than she had in years.

It wasn't just the Credits burning a hole in her pocket or Citrina's presence at her back, of course.

No, the main reason she was practically feeling like she was on Shine—or what she imagined Shine to feel like, at least—was because Vega had been genuinely *pleased* with the outcome of her last mission.

Sure, the job hadn't gone off without a hitch, and Vega had been understandably rattled by the possibility of inter-gang complications, but the intel she'd brought back more than made up for it.

Not only had she delivered actionable insights about Ela, but she'd also managed to uncover details about the Golden Phoenix's operations. And let's not forget the pre-war gun she'd secured through the deal with Ela—a weapon that had gotten Vega's attention immediately.

For once, her report had been met with untainted approval rather than a mixture of reluctant acceptance and chiding.

It was her first *true* success, at least when it came to solo missions, and that feeling alone was enough to put her on cloud nine.

If this was what winning felt like, Jade could absolutely get used to it.

'I've totally earned this shopping trip!' she thought with a grin so big it practically lit up her face. But a flicker of doubt crept in as her thoughts shifted. *'I just hope Ela doesn't take me somewhere crazy expensive... I've got **some** Creds, but who knows what her usual budget even looks like?'*

Her eyes darted to Ela's hair again, drawn to the unnerving, VoniX-black void that seemed to consume light rather than reflect it. It was hard to look at without wondering *why* anyone would pick such a strange colour for their hair, unless they *wanted* to stand out.

Yet the more time she spent around Ela, the more it started to click.

The hair, like the girl herself, was unusual—but also fitting in an odd way.

Still, it wasn't the hair or even Ela's general strangeness that had Jade's attention right now.

No, what really lit her up with excitement was the thought of the gear.

Ela's outfit, despite everything they'd gone through on their last outing, hadn't taken so much as a scratch. It had even withstood the bullets of the guards on the 33rd floor, shrugging off damage like it was nothing.

'If I could get my hands on something like that, Vega might finally stop babying me all the time!'

Sure, Jade appreciated how protective Vega was, but it felt overbearing, especially when compared to how her older sisters were treated. They got sent on high-risk missions regularly while she was kept in a proverbial bubble.

She couldn't help but pout a little, the thought nagging at her.

'Sometimes it feels like he sees me as more of a pet than an actual asset...'

Her spiral of frustration was cut short by Ela's voice.

"We're almost there," Ela said, glancing back at her with just a hint of amusement. "Quick heads-up: Misha's a bit... *unique*."

There was something in Ela's tone—an almost playful glee—that made Jade pause. It was rare to hear such unfiltered emotion from her, and it was enough to catch Jade off guard.

The other, and potentially even more disturbing, part of that sentence, however, had her on high-alert.

*'What do you mean, they're a bit **unique**...? Coming from **you**? Just what the fuck kind of place are you taking me here...?'*

"Follow my lead, and you'll be fine," Ela continued, her voice confident but tinged with that same mysterious excitement. "I'll introduce you two; I'm sure you'll hit it off. Oh, and whatever you do, do *not* insult her wares. Should go without saying, but better safe than sorry, right?"

Ela finished her little speech with a self-satisfied nod, the kind she always seemed to give after saying something she clearly thought was profound.

It was an odd quirk, but Jade found it surprisingly endearing.

For all the mystery surrounding Ela, moments like these gave her a rare, almost human charm—something that was easy to forget in the shadow of the unreadable vibes she gave out.

Naturally, Jade had no intention of behaving like a complete fucking blank and doing something as stupid as insulting a vendor's wares. That was one of the fastest ways to either get yourself banned or, depending on where you shopped, end up dead.

'Not to mention Vega's counting on me to build a solid contact here,' she thought, her mind drifting back to his orders. *'Or at least for him and the crew—the gang's more of a bonus, I guess.'*

The Clawed Beasts already had a decent network of vendors with deeper ties, but Vega was always looking to expand outside of the gang's own network. The guy's ambitions were practically sky-high, and new contacts were crucial to those plans.

Jade followed Ela through the 31st floor for another minute before they stopped in front of an odd-looking storefront. The only thing marking it as a shop was the neon sign above the entrance that read "*Misha's Emporium.*"

'Emporium?' Jade thought, furrowing her brow. *'Who even uses that word?'*

The sign felt decidedly out of place, like it belonged to a dusty antiques shop rather than a spot that supposedly sold high-tech gear.

But she shook off the thought, snapping herself back into focus.

'Stay focused. Open mind, Jade. Open mind.'

She took a steadying breath, glancing at Ela, who seemed completely at ease. *'Ela wouldn't drag me here just for fun... At least, I don't think so...?'*

"Alright, this is the place," Ela said, her voice casual as she gestured vaguely toward the glowing *Misha's Emporium* sign. "Owner's name is Misha, as you probably guessed."

She hesitated, like she was considering saying more, but then just shook her head and added, "Just follow my lead," before stepping through the door.

Jade trailed behind, keeping her senses sharp. Technically, this was just a shopping trip, but being around Ela's strange, unpredictable energy always had a way of putting her on edge.

Inside, they stepped into a reception-like area with a counter set against the far wall and a thick, reinforced door blocking off the actual store. The setup struck Jade as odd, though not *particularly* surprising given the range of bizarre places she'd seen.

"Misha? Ela is here, and brought a friend!" Ela suddenly yelled, her voice echoing off the walls and snapping Jade out of her thoughts.

Jade shot Ela a look, half-annoyed and half-confused.

What kind of place needed customers to *shout* for service? To her surprise, however, Ela responded with an actually genuine, apologetic expression. They both turned their attention to the security door, waiting for whoever—or whatever—was on the other side to show up.

'Seriously? What kind of store operates like this?' Jade thought, crossing her arms as they stood in silence. *'Ela wasn't kidding when she said the owner was a bit... unique, huh?'*

After about thirty seconds of awkward waiting, Ela gave Jade a sheepish grin, signaling that she was going to try again. Jade gave a small nod, letting her annoyance go for now.

"Misha! Ela is here! Ela brought a fri—"

Before Ela could finish, something shot out from the side, tackling her like a bullet and slamming her to the ground with a resounding thud.

"Ah!" Ela yelped as she hit the floor with a loud crash.

Jade moved on instinct, knives flashing into her hands as she stepped toward the blur of movement. But then, just as quickly, she froze mid-step, her mind trying to process what she was looking at.

*'What in the actual fuck is **that**?!'*

Jade's eyes widened in horror as she took in the nightmare perched on top of Ela. It was unrecognisable, wrong in every conceivable way, like something plucked straight from the depths of a fever dream.

Ela, meanwhile, didn't seem nearly as alarmed as Jade thought she should be.

Instead, she groaned in frustration, pinned beneath the creature like this was just another mildly annoying inconvenience.

The thing had a vaguely humanoid shape, though it was stretched and distorted to absurdity. If it stood upright, it would've easily hit two meters tall, its elongated arms and legs bending at an unnatural third joint where no joint had any right to exist.

Seven spindly digits on each hand clawed at Ela, while its head swivelled back and forth, rotating unnaturally fast as if searching for something.

'I... I have to help her!' Jade thought, willing her frozen body to move.

But the sheer size of the thing—combined with the fact that it had taken Ela, the seemingly indestructible enigma, to the ground in a single leap—had her locked in place.

Her knives were raised, ready to strike, but her feet wouldn't budge.

"Ouch, Misha! That fucking hurt!" Ela's voice cut through the tension, her tone more exasperated than anything else. "For fuck's sake, Ela brought a potential *customer*, not an intruder! Stop making a bad first impression here!"

'Wait... Misha?!' Jade's mind reeled. Her eyes darted around the room, expecting to find someone—*anyone*—else who might step in and help.

But the only movement was the creature itself, still latched onto Ela.

Ela sighed dramatically, already pushing herself up from the floor despite the creature clinging to her like some kind of grotesque parasite. "Alright, let's get Misha off of Ela, shall we?"

"Misha doesn't want to! Misha's been *lonely!*" the creature suddenly whined in near-perfect human speech. Its voice was high-pitched, almost childish, with a faint hiccup of swallowed syllables that gave away its inhuman nature.

Jade could only gape, her knives still poised, her brain scrambling to process what she was witnessing. *'What the actual fuck is even happening?'*

Ela stood fully upright now, the creature still clinging to her upper body with its freakishly long limbs wrapped around her like a grotesque hug. She showed no sign of strain, as if the creature's weight—easily 80 kilograms, by Jade's estimation—was *nothing* to her.

'Just how fucking strong is she?!' Jade thought, her mind finally latching onto a coherent question. Spindly or not, that thing had a ridiculous size, and thus, mass, and Ela had just casually stood up with it on top of herself, like it was simply a blanket she'd thrown on.

Shaking her head, Jade forced herself to focus on the more pressing realisation. *'Wait... hold up. That's Misha? The store clerk is a fucking monster?'*

She lowered her knives slightly, still staring slack-jawed as Ela patted the creature—*Misha*, apparently—on the back like it was just an overly affectionate friend, while giving her an apologetic smile once again, as if to say, *"Don't worry, it's not dangerous."*

Whatever Jade had expected from this trip, *this* was definitely not it.

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Getting cannon-balled by Misha wasn't exactly on my to-do list for this trip, but seeing as Misha was still clinging to me like a barnacle after I'd asked to be let go, I couldn't really stay mad.

'Lonely, huh?' I thought, my irritation softening. *'Guess that makes two of us. Even with all the people I've been around lately, it's not really company when you're constantly having to pretend...'*

I glanced at Jade, who still looked like she was debating whether to bolt or fight.

Her wide eyes darted between me and Misha, clearly struggling to process the entire situation. I gave her an apologetic grin, hoping to calm her down. With Misha's sudden appearance—or, honestly, just Misha's *appearance* in general—she looked just about ready to unravel.

"Misha, Ela isn't going anywhere for a while, okay? But can we at least acknowledge Ela's friend? Say hi?" I tried to pull Jade into the interaction, feeling like a terrible host even though this wasn't even my store.

Honestly, Misha was being a particularly uncooperative shopkeeper today.

With a dramatic huff, Misha swivelled their head a full 180 degrees, locking eyes with Jade in a way that made the poor girl yelp and leap back a step.

To her credit, though, she didn't raise her knives this time—small victories.

"Misha welcomes Ela's friend to Misha's Emporium," Misha said in a robotic tone, the words as formal as they were clearly scripted. Then, just as abruptly, their head spun back around, and they buried their face in my chest again.

"Misha has been *very* lonely," they muttered, voice muffled but pitiful. "Lots of annoying people recently; none that understand how to speak. They hurt Misha's head with their language! "He" this, "She" that, "You" this! They make no sense! Misha is *very* upset and requires *Ela-time* before any business can be conducted."

It was delivered with the same energy as a child demanding dessert before dinner, and I couldn't help but let out a resigned sigh. We were not going to get anywhere before Misha had gotten her Ela-time, it seemed.

Carefully moving toward the counter, I couldn't help but feel relieved that Misha was a Gryplik rather than human. If Misha had a more human bone and muscle structure, they'd have weighed at least twice as much, if not more, and there was no way I'd have been able to haul them around so easily.

I gently set Misha down on the counter, trying to pry myself free from their clingy grip without upsetting her further.

"How's business been lately, Misha? Outside of the annoying people, of course," I asked casually, partly to make conversation but also because I was genuinely curious.

Every time I came by, Misha seemed to be lounging behind the counter like she didn't have a care in the world. I'd always wondered if that meant the shop was thriving or just coasting by.

"Business has been acceptable. Misha is the greatest Gryplik merchant, after all!" she declared with a defiant tone, puffing up proudly, although still thoroughly refusing to let go. "Misha's Emporium is doing very well, but it can always do better!"

I saw my opening and gestured for Jade to come closer.

She was still hovering a good distance away, clearly trying to maintain some sort of safety zone between herself and Misha.

"Funny Misha mentions that!" I said, leaning into the opportunity. "Ela brought a friend, Jade, who might help bring in more business. Jade has lots of contacts that might need Misha's wares in the future."

I turned to Jade, giving her a nod to take over and steer the conversation.

She blinked at me, looking confused—borderline panicky—before hesitantly stepping closer.

Her eyes flicked between me and Misha, and I could tell she was still half ready to bolt if things got too weird again.

"Ahhh, yes. Hello, Misha," Jade began, her voice wavering. "I'm... eh... Jade. Jade is Jade...?"

She glanced at me for approval, and despite how awkward it sounded, I nodded encouragingly. For someone who'd seemingly never heard of, seen, let alone spoken to, a Gryplik before, she was picking up on their language quirks surprisingly fast.

'I probably should've briefed her on this,' I thought, wincing internally. 'But how was I supposed to know Misha would already be in a mood about it before we even got here...?'

What had been an attempt to avoid overloading Jade with too much info beforehand was now backfiring spectacularly, making it look like I'd withheld something on purpose just to mess with her.

"Jade has some friends who are always on the lookout for new business contacts," Jade continued, her voice growing steadier with each word. "Jade would like to take a look at Misha's wares to see what kind of equipment might interest Jade's friends—whenever it's convenient for Misha, of course."

'Not bad...' I thought, giving her a subtle nod of approval as I continued trying to peel Misha off my chest. It was like trying to remove a particularly clingy octopus.

"Mmm... yes," Misha said after a thoughtful pause, her crystal-like eyes narrowing slightly.

“Misha thinks it’s a good idea. Business is always a good idea.” She finally started loosening her grip, letting me pry her hands from my back, but then her tone shifted as she added, “But Ela has to stay for at least an hour!”

Her gem-like ruby eyes glinted with a look I could only describe as defiant.

I wasn’t entirely sure *how* I could read defiance in something that looked like a multi-faceted gemstone, but there it was, clear as day.

Meanwhile, [Cultural Savant] was pinging like crazy, feeding me a flood of details about Gryplik customs and norms. I tried to push it to the back of my mind for now—I didn’t need a cultural masterclass in the middle of handling this situation.

That could wait until I had downtime, maybe when Misha was busy showing Jade some gear.

“That’s fine with Ela, Misha,” I said gently, finally managing to set the Gryplik down on the counter, now completely free of her octopus-like grip. “Ela doesn’t have any real plans today beyond shopping for gear with Jade, so the two of us can stay here for a while.”

Misha gave a satisfied hum, resting comfortably on the counter as though the entire tackle-hug situation had been completely normal.

Jade, still standing a little stiffly nearby, cast me a sideways glance that screamed “*What the hell did I just get into?*” I shot her another small, reassuring smile.

It was going to be a long hour...

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“So what can Misha help Ela and Jade with...?” the Gryplik asked as she led us into the main store a few minutes later. The interior was just as chaotic and uncoordinated as ever, a mess of shelves, crates, and items scattered seemingly at random.

Thanks to [Cultural Savant], I now understood this wasn’t just Misha being disorganised—this was a Gryplik cultural thing.

Apparently, the lack of organization was a flex, of sorts.

The more chaotic a space appeared and the faster a Gryplik could locate something within it, the smarter they were considered to be. It was a test of intellect, and negatively commenting on it would be a major faux pas.

‘*Good to know,*’ I thought, keeping my mouth shut as Misha proudly gestured around at the glorious chaos of her shop.

I glanced at Jade and gestured for her to take the lead.

I figured it made more sense to let her pick out what she needed before I started shopping for myself. Technically, I already had everything I needed for the Operator Meeting, so anything I picked up today would just be extras or accessories.

But Jade? She still had some serious gaps in her gear, and if she ended up unable to afford something crucial because I'd already blown all my creds, I'd feel like an ass.

She needed to be ready for the possibility of excursions outside the Megabuilding, and I wanted to make sure she had what she needed for that.

Jade hesitated for a moment, glancing at me as if silently asking for permission before stepping forward. Misha's attention immediately snapped to her, those unsettling ruby-crystal eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"Jade would like a high-quality outfit, like Ela's," Jade said, her voice steady but with a hint of hesitation. "Something to keep knives and bullets away, but not too bulky or heavy. The actual design doesn't matter too much—Jade needs it to be functional first and foremost."

Mid-sentence, she stole a glance at me, as if checking whether I'd be upset about her request. The concern caught me off guard, but I kept my expression neutral, not sure if reassuring her again would make her feel better or just make things worse.

'Why would I be mad?' I thought, genuinely perplexed. 'It's the most logical thing to ask for—my gear literally saved her life back on the 33rd.'

Despite everything, it seemed Jade still saw me as some kind of ticking time bomb rather than a potential ally or, hell, even a friend. Clearly, I still had work to do if I wanted to break through that wall of caution she kept around me.

"Mmm, yes, yes! Misha can definitely help with that. Leave it to Misha!" the Gryplik announced.

Without warning, Misha stepped up to Jade and began running her seven-digit hands over Jade's body, sizing her up in the most literal sense. Jade froze, her posture stiffening like she was about to bolt, before visibly forcing herself to relax.

Still, I couldn't blame her—the sensation of those alien hands wandering over you wasn't something even I had fully gotten used to yet.

Moments later, Misha darted off into a mountain of what could only loosely be called "inventory," rummaging through piles of clothes, armor, and gear with the manic energy of a scavenger on Glitter.

Jade shuffled closer to me, her gaze flicking toward the whirlwind that was Misha.

"Your... friend... is indeed *unique*, Ela. Didn't lie about that, for sure," she said cautiously, clearly not wanting to be caught in the crossfire of whatever chaos Misha was creating.

"That she is," I replied with a chuckle. "Sorry for not giving you more details ahead of time. I wasn't sure if overloading you with a full dossier would help or just stress you out more. But

hey, you picked up the language thing really quickly, so I'm impressed. As you've probably noticed, Gryplik don't use singular pronouns for people—only group ones. Oh, and a heads-up: don't mention the chaos here negatively. It's a cultural thing."

Jade raised an eyebrow at me, her disbelief evident as she leaned in and whispered, "She's a fucking Gryplik?! *That's* what they look like?!"

I shrugged, keeping my response simple. "Yep."

Her gaze shifted back to Misha, who was darting between piles of equipment, tossing items left and right while muttering in that characteristic Gryplik way.

"I've only heard about Gryplik from history shards—you know, the Demi-Human Accords, general pre-Wall stuff," Jade murmured, her tone quieter now, as though not wanting Misha to overhear.

That bit of knowledge surprised me, and it must've shown on my face because Jade quickly added, "Yeah, Vega made sure we all got some kind of education after he took us in. He found shards about all sorts of stuff. It's probably nothing compared to yours, but it does the trick."

The mention of "nothing compared to yours" piqued my curiosity, and I was half-inclined to ask what exactly she meant with that—to get a clearer grasp on what exactly she thought I actually was—but before I could, Misha swooped back in, her impossibly long arms piled high with clothes.

"Misha has returned with the best selection of clothes available in all of Neo Avalis!" she declared triumphantly, dumping the heap in front of Jade with a grin full of sharp, green-coloured teeth.

"Let Misha show Jade the features...!" Misha added, already beginning to sort through the pile with an enthusiasm that was as endearing as it was overwhelming...