

Chapter 159 - First Truths

It took my brain a few slow, grinding seconds before the words actually clicked into place. Not that their meaning was made apparent to me, but at least I had understood the words that were spoken.

“Ela’s blood...?” I echoed, hoping I’d misheard or at least get some extra context from her.

Misha nodded with grave severity, “Ela’s blood, which Misha had collected, has disappeared.”

I blinked once.

Then twice.

“And Misha was collecting my blood *because*...?” I tried again, hoping maybe she’d give a different answer this time—something more complete to make sense of what it is that she was talking about.

My blood disappearing, of course, was not what I was struggling with—that was part of [Lightfoot] and something I had ended up having to deal with quite a few times already.

It was the idea that Misha hadn’t simply asked about why it had disappeared, but rather claimed that she had collected it and then it had disappeared, that was confusing me.

“Because it was there!” Misha flailed both arms, all three elbow-joints bending at equally distressed angles. “Misha could either collect it, filter it, and make emergency blood packs and injectors for Ela’s future injuries, or wash it down the drain! There was *much* of it, so Misha decided it would be a waste to let it simply disappear.”

I stared at her. She stared anxiously back, her tufts twitching.

Then she continued, seemingly desperate to explain her side of the story.

“After the Ripper was done, Misha gathered all the blood and put it through filtration. Misha intended to return it as emergency stock for Ela later. But when Misha checked again, several hours after Ela left... *all of it was gone*.”

Misha sagged like a deflated balloon.

“Misha checked *everything*, Misha swears! Cameras, sensors, motion-detectors—nothing. No entry. No system override. No trace. It is a great mystery... one of dangerous significance.”

She straightened suddenly, eyes sharp and narrow, all traces of playfulness gone.

“So Misha must ask Ela—and Ela must think carefully: Does Ela have a significant enemy? One capable of such a thing? One that would want Ela’s blood for nefarious purposes, that would be aware of Ela’s injuries and subsequent Ripper-visit here at Misha’s Emporium?”

Now everything finally slotted into place.

“Ahh... yes, about that...” I said, rubbing my arm as I tried to line up the words in my head. “It’s actually part of what Ela came to talk to Misha and Jade about, really.”

Misha’s ruby eyes widened. “So there *is* dangers!”

I immediately held up both hands, palms out like I was approaching a skittish animal.

“No, no! Misha, it’s okay! There’s a very good—well, maybe not *good* but reasonable—explanation for all of it, Ela promises. But Ela would like to wait for Jade first, yes? So Ela doesn’t have to explain twice, if that is okay with Misha?”

She rocked her head from side to side, the Gryplik equivalent of deep contemplation, before finally nodding once. “Acceptable. *But* if Misha is unhappy with the explanation, Misha *will* ask Ela for more information afterward! Ela will *not* leave the Emporium without giving Misha satisfactory answers.”

That one I could absolutely agree with.

The whole reason I’d come here today was to keep the few actual relationships I had from spontaneously combusting under the stress of everything else happening in my life.

“Agreed,” I said with a nod. “Ela will stay until Misha is satisfied.”

That earned me a massive, green-toothed smile—warm and utterly unguarded.

Then she started inching closer... and closer... and closer.

I blinked, utterly lost for a moment, until I realized what the darting glances at my arms and chest were about.

She wanted a hug but didn’t want to ask.

A small, instinctive smile pulled at my lips. I opened my arms wide in invitation.

“Misha deserves a hug after satisfying a customer *and* panicking over Ela’s missing blood,” I said. “And for being put through stress because Ela didn’t explain the weirdness around her sooner. A hug is the least Ela can offer.”

Misha didn’t walk into the hug—she *launched*.

Practically cannonballed into me from a meter away, slamming into my torso with enough enthusiasm to make me stumble back half a step. Long limbs wrapped around me like living rope as she nuzzled her cheek against mine, trilling softly.

Her tufts brushed against my skin, smelling faintly of clean fur, machine oil, and that indescribable warmth that was just... *Misha*.

I held her carefully, letting the sheer absurd tenderness of the moment settle over me, a strangely grounding counterpoint to the utter chaos that had consumed my life recently.

I sank into the warmth of the moment, thoughts drifting as Misha kept nuzzling and trilling against me like some oversized cat-owl hybrid that had imprinted on my soul.

'I still need to find somebody who actually knows more about Gryplik—both the people and the language... I don't want to keep too much hidden from Misha for much longer, but I can't risk myself, or her, by making dumb mistakes born from impatience,' I thought, letting my cheek rest lightly against her soft feather-tufts.

'Maybe I can add that to the list of knowledge shards Valeria should look for...? It wouldn't be weird to ask for more info on a species I interact with semi-regularly in some regard. And she almost definitely knows by now that some of my gear is Gryplik-made; she's too detail-obsessed to miss it after hauling my stuff over earlier.'

Then again... she *had* been dead tired.

She'd missed a few things I had *expected* her to catch. Or maybe she hadn't missed a thing and was just saving it for later. Hard to tell with Valeria.

Hard to tell anything with Valeria for anyone, really.

Or at least I couldn't.

Not yet.

The two of us stayed like that for a solid ten minutes, Misha snuggled against me as though the universe had granted her unlimited cuddle permissions.

I didn't mind. Not even a little.

It was one of the very few physical contacts I'd had in... *decades*, honestly, counting my past life—one that wasn't accidental or unwanted or... horrifying.

And it felt fucking amazing.

Her soft trills and those deep, vibrating rumbles settled through my ribs and up my spine, sending pleasant little shivers down my arms. It was like a gentle massage mixed with ASMR, if either of those came wrapped in feathers and pure affection.

By the end of those ten minutes, though, I felt Misha's hands start to wander in a way that was... *different*.

Still gentle, still very Misha, but definitely venturing into territory that was not normal.

"Misha?" I asked carefully. I didn't want to break the hug, not yet, but I also wanted to know why she was suddenly treating me like a very squishy puzzle box.

"Shh... Misha is testing," she whispered, completely unbothered by my confusion.

So I just... let her. Trusted her.

Let the Gryplik do whatever bizarre full-body diagnostic she seemed to be running.

Her many-fingered hands moved with surprising precision—prodding along my spine, skimming over my ribs, squeezing my hips, patting my butt, and even sliding down my thighs. It felt weirdly intimate without being sexual, like being handled by an overenthusiastic doctor who didn't quite grasp personal-space laws.

Uncomfortable, sure, but it was Misha. And Misha wouldn't do anything without a reason.

Then she *froze*.

Completely.

Her hands stilled mid-touch, her body went rigid, and a second later she abruptly pulled back from the hug, eyes wide, unblinking, and shining like polished rubies.

"What happened to Ela...?" she breathed, barely above a whisper—like talking too loudly might make me shatter.

I blinked, thrown for a moment, then sighed because apparently this was becoming the theme of the day.

"Ela will explain—alongside the other things, like the blood," I said tiredly. "Ela would just really prefer to only explain this once."

But Misha wasn't having it, not this time.

She shook her head so hard her tufts fluttered like she was trying to take flight. "No, no! Ela needs to explain to Misha *now*. This is not normal! What has Ela *done* to make this happen to Ela?! Ela is supposed to be Misha's friend for a long time! Ela is not allowed to experiment and ruin Ela's body!"

Her voice cracked at the end—part outrage, part fear, part something painfully protective—and I suddenly felt like the worst friend in the galaxy.

Misha's rising panic hit harder than I'd expected, and for a second I just stood there, arms still half-raised, brain lagging behind the situation.

Her grip on my shoulders was firm—borderline frantic—and those ruby eyes of hers were blown wide, bouncing over every inch of me like she was trying to memorize a before-and-after comparison that only she could see.

Guilt twisted low in my stomach.

I gently eased my hands onto her forearms, not pulling away but grounding her. "Misha... breathe. Please."

She did—not calmly, but she did—her throat rumbling with that anxious trill she only ever made when something truly rattled her.

I swallowed once, realizing that if I dragged this out any longer, she might actually implode from sheer concern alone. Jade wasn't here yet, but... Misha deserved *something*.

Enough to stop her from spiraling. Enough to show I wasn't brushing her fears off.

"Okay," I said softly, letting my voice settle into something calm, steady. "Ela will explain... now. Not everything, but enough for Misha to understand that Ela is not hurting herself. Not experimenting. Not ruining anything."

That earned me a fraction of relief—her shoulders dropped maybe half an inch, but her eyes stayed locked on mine, waiting.

So I pulled in a slow breath and continued.

"Ela's body changed because of something called Anima. Not because Ela forced anything," I said, choosing my words carefully, like navigating a minefield made of Gryplik-level emotional stakes.

"Sprites—Anima spirits, as they're called—did work on Ela's body. Ela will try to explain what they are, but Ela isn't too sure of that either... But, thing is, Ela didn't exactly ask for it. Didn't even know it was happening to this degree. But it's done now, and... Ela is okay. Better than okay."

Misha's frills twitched, her brows knitting in that painfully earnest way of hers. "Sprites worked on Ela without permission...?"

"Yeah," I admitted, wincing. "Kinda like that."

A low, resonant growl rumbled through her chest—not anger at me, but something protectively indignant on my behalf.

Very Gryplik. Very Misha.

"But," I added quickly before she declared war on incorporeal forces, "Ela is safe. *Truly*. Ela checked with an expert on the matter and they said the Sprites were all done with their work and there were no real downsides. So... Ela is not in danger from what was done. It just made Ela's body... stronger and faster. More efficient, in a way. Nothing broken. Nothing hurting. Just an upgrade."

Misha stared at me for a long, tense stretch.

Then she reached down with both hands and squished my cheeks together, pulling my face up to her height.

"Ela must *never* scare Misha like this again," she declared, voice trembling. "Misha's heart cannot take it."

Despite everything, a tiny laugh slipped out of me—muffled through my squished cheeks, but real.

"Ela will try," I said once she finally let go. "Ela *really* will try."

That seemed to soothe something deep inside her.

Her tufts settled, her face smoothed down, and she let out a slow, relieved trill as she pulled me back into a gentler, more normal Misha-hug this time.

We stayed like that for another quiet minute, until the sound of a familiar voice wafted into the backroom from the reception area, “Misha? It’s Jade! Is Ela here already? Jade was waiting for her in front of the store, but it’s already past the time...”

I was surprised at myself for how excited I felt in hearing the other girl’s voice again, after what felt like a damn eternity.

Before Misha could answer, I figured that simply replying myself would get the point across faster, “Ela is here, yes! In the backroom, come on in.”

Misha seemed fine with me taking the lead on this as it allowed her to nuzzle for a few more seconds, before she broke away from me—clearly not wanting to showcase her weakness in front of Jade.

Jade stepped through the doorway a moment later, her eyes landing on me first—and softening in that very Jade way where she pretended they hadn’t.

Her posture eased, shoulders dropping just a hair, like she’d been holding tension she didn’t want to admit to. I felt a spark of warmth flare in my chest at the sight.

“Hey,” she said, voice casual but not actually casual.

“Hey,” I replied, a small grin tugging at my mouth.

She reached out and squeezed my shoulder—light, careful, like she wasn’t sure how fragile I still was—which was probably fair, since the last time she saw me I had been half a second from death.

I leaned into it just enough to tell her I wasn’t made of glass anymore.

She caught that and nodded, a ghost of something glad flickering across her face.

Behind us, Misha perked up with a trill of greetings, her ruby eyes brightening as she said, “It is good to see Jade again under better circumstances than last time’s.”

“Good to see Misha too,” Jade replied in that slightly awkward way where she was fighting her own brain to not include things such as “you”, “I” and the like, that would hurt the poor Gryplik’s brain. “And same. Definitely prefer it this way, that’s for sure.”

After their brief introductions, the two of them turned toward me in unison.

It was clear, from the expectation in their expressions, that the baton was in my hands now.

This was my meeting, my explanation, my mess to unravel.

I cleared my throat. “Before Ela starts—Can Misha close up the shop for a bit? Just to make sure no one wanders in. What Ela needs to talk about shouldn’t be overheard.”

Misha straightened immediately, all business. “Acceptable. Misha will secure the Emporium.”

She vanished through the front doors with surprising speed for a creature her size.

Jade watched her go, then turned back to me with that same unreadable-but-soft look she always got when she was worried but doing her best not to show it.

“You look better,” she said quietly. “Like nothing ever happened, really. It’s impressive...”

“I’ll explain. Long story,” I muttered. “We’ll get there.”

Misha returned less than a minute later, dusting her hands dramatically. “Emporium secure. No customers will interrupt *Friend* Ela’s important revelations.”

She waited expectantly—so I gestured around at the piles of reinforced cases, stacked crates, and random fabric bundles scattered everywhere.

“Alright. Let’s all sit down. Doesn’t have to be fancy—just comfortable.”

Misha immediately began rearranging her surroundings with the natural grace of someone who had spent years navigating their own chaos.

She shoved aside a stack of armored cases, flipped two others on their sides to create makeshift stools, and tossed a thick cloth over a pile of sealed bags to make something resembling a cushioned seat.

It wasn’t glamorous, but it was surprisingly comfortable—and very on-brand for Misha’s Emporium.

I took the cloth-covered seat.

Jade settled next to me on a case that still had hazard stickers on it.

Misha perched on her own improvised throne, towering over us both but radiating a focused seriousness I didn’t see often in her—if ever.

Taking a few deep breaths to settle myself, I felt nowhere near as confident as I had on the elevator ride up.

Whatever script I’d tried to draft in my head had already dissolved into static.

Hard to prep for a talk when I still didn’t know what the average person in this world *knew*, what counted as normal, what was taboo, or how Jade’s loyalties actually tilted when the pressure was on.

But this wasn’t something I could keep dodging. And I didn’t want to anymore either, not really.

“Alright, so... Ela will start off by saying that this strangeness regarding Ela’s body has been going on for a while now,” I began, easing myself into the words as if testing the water.

“There was an accident, around a month, maybe two, ago, that nearly killed Ela. Even more than the recent one where both of you got Ela out safely.”

Misha gasped.

Jade just stared at me with this look that said “*Yeah, that sounds like your life,*” and honestly? Rude.

Completely uncalled for.

It wasn’t like I went out of my way to get almost-murdered on a weekly basis.

It just... kind of had a habit of happening around me recently.

I powered through the sheer and utter disrespect. “Since then, things have been... different for Ela. Things have progressed slowly. Some changes have been noticeable to others, like Jade. Other things were more subtle but became obvious when observed up close, such as Misha’s realization about Ela’s blood.”

Jade flicked a confused look between the two of us—clearly she’d missed the whole blood-disappearing subplot.

That would be fun to explain later.

“So,” I continued, letting myself drop into serious-mode and tapping just enough of my Edge to steady my voice into something cold and controlled, “Ela wants to be perfectly clear that this is *not* something that can, or should, be shared with anyone else.”

Both of them stilled as they heard the level of seriousness in my voice.

“Ela has been made aware—by people far, *far* more informed on this entire mess—that even possessing knowledge about the topic can be grounds for... *severe* repercussions.” I held their gazes, making sure they understood this wasn’t melodrama. “Ela means kidnapping, torture, and even *death*. This is not hyperbole. It is an active, very real threat, and Ela does not want either Jade nor Misha walking into this blind.”

Jade swallowed hard. Misha’s tufts puffed in alarm, like she’d just been hit with a static charge.

“Ela will answer questions as best as Ela can,” I finished quietly, holding their eyes one at a time, “but *understand* the level of danger you’re accepting by even listening. Ela will grant a few minutes of thinking time; use it. Ela will not accept immediate answers.”

They both drew breath to protest—Jade with that stubborn tilt of her chin, Misha with a quiet, rising-pitched trill that usually meant she was about to fling herself into something headfirst, usually straight at me—but the moment they caught the expression on my face, everything died on impact.

Silence settled over the backroom like a heavy blanket.

I wasn't joking. I wasn't exaggerating. And I was making damn sure they both saw that.

I did not want either of them stumbling into this because they felt they had to prove something to me, or to themselves, or to whatever idea of friendship they thought we had.

This wasn't a cute little shared secret. This wasn't low-stakes gossip.

This was the kind of knowledge that, according to every single person in my life who actually knew what they were talking about—Mr. Shori to some degree, Miss K, Valeria—could get people *erased*.

Anima wasn't some half-forgotten rumor or hobbyist niche.

It was a landmine with a handwritten sign taped over it that said "DON'T DEAD OPEN INSIDE" in increasingly frantic handwriting.

If they listened to my explanation now—if they crossed this line—there was no going back.

They'd be carrying that danger for the rest of their lives, no matter how careful they thought they were.

No matter how careful I tried to be.

So I watched them think.

Jade stared down at the floor, jaw tight.

Misha sat perfectly still, hands folded in her lap—far too still for the energetic Gryplik—her tufts flicking every few seconds as if adjusting for invisible crosswinds.

I didn't think either of them would choose to walk away; that wasn't who they were.

But I still needed them to *choose* it—not get dragged along by momentum.

Not jump just because they cared about me.

This had to be intentional and carefully considered.

Chosen with both eyes open.

So I waited, breathing slow and controlled, letting them have the silence and the space to actually think, even though my own nerves were scraping against my ribs like broken glass the entire time...