

Chapter 31 - Gryplik

By the time I finished wrestling with my bedding, making it somewhat presentable again, Gabriel's unmistakable grunts pierced the silence from the other side of our shared room.

"Gabe, you up?" I called out, inching towards the metal sheet that divided our personal spaces. "Can I swing by? How's it going on your end?"

There was a brief pause, filled with a sense of heavy, silent endurance, before his voice, laced with a wry undertone, floated back. "Pretty sure I'm still among the living—hurts too much to be otherwise. So, yeah, that's a plus, I guess. Come over, if you like."

Stepping past the metal sheet, I found Gabriel curled up in a position that screamed 'every inch of me hurts but there's no escape'. A wave of empathy washed over me, and a wry smile tugged at my lips. '*Oh, I know that pose all too well,*' I mused, recalling the agony of my past life's menstrual cramps, which now seemed almost trivial in comparison.

That NeuroCorpse stuff was diabolically efficient.

"Need anything?" I ventured cautiously, feeling somewhat helpless but eager to offer whatever support I could to my brother in his time of need.

After a moment, filled with the sound of strained breathing, Gabriel managed to reply, his voice tinged with a weary humour, "Some painkillers would be great. Feels like a stampede of Borg Psychos ran over me. Didn't expect mom to go all out like this..." His words trailed off as a realisation seemed to strike him, and he propped himself up with a groan and a wince, fixing his gaze on me. "Hold up! Why do you look alright? Did she only spike my dinner?!"

I had anticipated this line of questioning and was ready with my response. I gave a nonchalant shrug and said, "Oh, mine was laced too. I just passed out from the pain at some point. Can't tell you how long I was out, but I woke up still hurting. I guess I'm sort of used to dealing with intense full-body pain... for, you know, other reasons." I let my voice trail off, purposefully looking away to feign embarrassment.

Men, in my experience, tended to steer clear of any discussion about women's periods, especially 16-year old boys. It was the perfect deflection, unless Valeria herself decided to interrogate me—that would be a whole different game.

I saw realisation hit Gabriel like a ton of bricks; his mouth formed an 'O' as understanding dawned on him. He gingerly made his way to the edge of his bed, muttering, "Damn... that's what you go through all the time? I had no idea... That's... rough."

With that, the topic seemed firmly closed, much to my relief.

'*Nailed it,*' I congratulated myself silently, handing over a leftover painkiller from Dr. Maltrick's post-surgery stash to Gabriel. Fortunately, his recent ordeal meant we still had some of these lifesavers left over from his treatment.

He gulped down the pill in a hurry, not even waiting for me to fetch him a glass of water. Recalling the unbearable pain that had wracked my body upon waking, I couldn't find it in me to blame him for his eagerness.

"I'm gonna head out to the living room, kickstart my day. You good here for now?" I asked Gabriel, ensuring he was okay with me leaving. It wasn't just about letting him rest; I had my own packed schedule to tend to. Plus, I didn't want him to miss work because of lingering too long with me, given how Valeria would react to such a slip-up.

Gabriel let out a deep, pain-laden sigh and gave a slow nod. He began to extricate himself from his bed, each movement punctuated with grimaces and soft groans.

'Hang in there, Gabe. This too shall pass... I hope,' I thought, silently offering my gratitude to the cybernetic powers-that-be for blessing me with the Rest Function. Watching Gabriel endure the aftermath of the toxin, I was vividly reminded of how lucky I was.

Trudging through an entire day with that kind of pain was decidedly *not* on my wishlist.

I made my way into the living room and dove into my regular morning workout routine.

After a while, Gabriel managed to emerge from our shared room, each step marked by a wince and a grunt, clear evidence of the lingering pain. He managed a brief, albeit strained, "Catch you later, sis," before exiting the apartment.

Left in solitude, I immersed myself in the rhythm of my workout, the only company being the familiar sound of my own exertion...

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Having completed my exhaustive morning routine, which included a vigorous 45-minute stealth-jog around the floor, I returned to the apartment. I still had not found a good way to incorporate [Acrobatics] into my training, so I had ended up having to jump around like a lunatic once again, towards the end of my jog.

I was very much hoping that there had been no cameras around to record me doing so.

Now however, I was eagerly anticipating the review of my morning progress.

There's a unique thrill in not peeking at the experience gains during a workout, saving them up for a big reveal later. It grants a sort of dopamine surge that's hard to match. Yet, I couldn't help but feel a slight dip in motivation, missing the immediate gratification of watching my experience bar inch up in real-time.

'Perhaps there's a workaround,' I mused, contemplating a potential request to the System.

Could I ask for a periodic summary of my gains, even if I checked the notifications as they came in? The idea of forfeiting those little bursts of excitement, those mini-rewards that kept me going, seemed daunting. With this thought in mind for future workouts, I prompted the System to display the consolidated list of notifications from today's morning's efforts.

[System]: 1200xp (+600xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 500xp.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Edge Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

As I revelled in the satisfying surge of dopamine from witnessing my experience bars dramatically increase, I took a brief pause to strategize for the day ahead. The first item on my agenda was clear: My regular stint at Mr. Shori's.

But after that, a shopping spree seemed in order.

Armed with both Valeria's restricted shard and my personal credits that I had obtained from helping out at Mr. Shori's and from the task I had finished for him, I had a decent budget to work with, and there were essentials I needed to procure in anticipation of Mr. Stirling's likely demands.

'I definitely need some urban gear,' I mused internally, mentally ticking off items. *'A reliable knife, sturdy clothing that can take a beating... and **definitely** a haircut, it's long overdue.'*

Having been in this cyberpunk world for a considerable duration, I still found myself sporting Sera's original, untamed brown hair. It was an oversight that felt almost sacrilegious in a world like Neon Dragons, where vibrant and unconventional hairdos were the norm.

After all, which self-respecting teenager in this universe would be caught wandering about with their natural hair colour and style untouched?

But, beyond aesthetic considerations, a more pressing matter demanded my attention: The strategic allocation of my resources. I had to carefully weigh how to distribute expenses between my own credits and the restricted shard Valeria had given me. The shard was not just a freely given financial resource, after all.

I pondered the delicate balance of spending my personal credits versus using the restricted shard. *'What purchases would Valeria see as justified? It's a test, no doubt about it. But I can't just squander it on trivial things like fancy dinner outfits—even if she would likely agree with me purchasing them, based on how much she seems to love these strange family dinners... I need some **practical** items, yet they also have to meet her corporate standards. If I don't, she'll likely not allow me to use the creds on the shard in the first place, or allow me to use them, but fail me on her test,'* I thought, weighing my options.

The challenge was to make prudent choices that would pass Valeria's scrutiny while *also* serving my immediate needs simultaneously.

Showering off the sweat from my vigorous morning workout, my mind was abuzz with plans and calculations. "Maybe investing in a deck would make sense," I mused aloud, the sound of water echoing my thoughts. "Corpos always need skilled runners, and Valeria might already be aware of the SPG-01 Shard Gabriel bought. It's very likely she's keeping tabs on us... I could even angle it as a move to assist with Oliver's work troubles. That should earn

me some brownie points as well," I reasoned, considering how to best leverage my current situation.

Finishing up, I slipped into my now-standard outfit for Mr. Shori's—a wardrobe choice that had organically become my 'work uniform.' I mentally checked off my shopping list: "Priority one, a reliable knife. Then, at least a couple of new outfits and, crucially, a haircut. This hair situation is downright unacceptable. I'm surprised Valeria hasn't said anything about it yet...."

As I got dressed, I resolved to base my purchasing decisions on my financial reality, balancing between my credits and Valeria's restricted shard.

'Shop for necessities first, then see what's left for anything else,' I concluded, planning my shopping excursion with a mix of practicality and a bit of newfound cunning in mind.

With my shopping plans set roughly in stone for later that day, I made my way to the elevators and down to Mr. Shori's stall for my daily shift...

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Exiting the elevator to make my way to Mr. Shori's stall on the 16th floor presented the usual spectacle. This wasn't unique to the 16th floor; it was more a characteristic of the megabuilding's heavy reliance on elevators.

Just a few strides from the elevator, past a buffer zone maintained with a semblance of respect, I would invariably encounter a crowd of beggars, the homeless, and others who seemed unfit for the grind of daily jobs.

The path to Mr. Shori's, located in the bustling trade district of the floor, always had me weaving through these unfortunate souls. The area teemed with activity, thanks to the constant flow of people between the elevators and the shops. The beggars weren't a threat, but their presence was a stark reminder of the harsh realities of life in the megabuilding.

Today, however, as I made my way through the usual throng, something different caught my attention, adding something new to the already disconcerting daily experience.

The desperate pleas of a young girl, struggling against the iron grip of a grown man, shattered the monotony of my walk to Mr. Shori's stall, about ten metres away. My initial instinct was to keep walking, to blend into the background like I had on previous journeys, but the girl's frantic cries yanked me from my thoughts.

"Let! Me! Go! Somebody! Help! *Please!*" she screamed.

Around us, hundreds of people were within earshot, yet not a single head turned towards the unfolding drama.

The girl, dressed in ragged, barely-there clothing that spoke of hardship, seemed to blend into the background of the usual beggars and "homeless" folk that populated the area.

The man was relentlessly dragging her deeper into what was once a hallway but had now, through neglect and disuse, become little more than a dirty, dark alleyway. Despite her valiant efforts to resist and attract help, she was rendered invisible in the busy throng of passersby.

Frozen in place amidst the river of people, the urgent need to intervene crystallised in my thoughts. *'I can't just stand by,'* I resolved, abruptly halting in the middle of the crowded thoroughfare.

This sudden stop, an island in the stream of busy passersby, earned me a chorus of curses and irritated shoves. But their annoyance was background noise, drowned out by the urgency of the girl's plight.

My mind raced as I grappled with the situation unfolding before me.

'How can I even help?' I pondered, feeling the weight of my own limitations.

Martial arts expertise was not in my skill set—not yet, at least—and without any weapon at hand, having given the combat knife back to Gabriel, I was at a severe disadvantage.

Even if I had a weapon, what was I going to do? Stab the guy? The risk of aggravating the man and putting both the girl and myself in greater danger was way too high.

My Body Attribute, though improved to a 3, was hardly a match for an adult male, especially one fueled by desperation or malicious intent.

'Is there another way to handle this? There must be something I can do...!' I thought frantically. Seeking help seemed futile; there was no obvious authority like megabuilding police to turn to, and the area lacked any sort of gang presence that might have offered a different kind of intervention.

The urgency of the girl's cries underscored the need for immediate action, yet I stood there, momentarily paralyzed by indecision and a lack of viable options.

As the girl's cries became fainter and the pair began to vanish behind mounds of refuse, the brutal reality hit me: *I wasn't a hero.*

The girl and her captor disappeared from my view in the next moment, fully swallowed up by the shadows and debris in the alleyway. The broken ceiling lights, long neglected, offered no illumination, no respite, shrouding their retreat in complete and utter darkness.

In that moment, my mind reflexively shifted, compartmentalising the incident immediately.

The pressing urge to intervene, which had so consumed me moments ago, began to ebb, transforming into a lingering 'should have' rather than an immediate 'must do.'

I had neither the prowess nor the resources to play the saviour in every dire situation I encountered. This realisation was sobering, and it brought a sense of helplessness that weighed heavily on me.

I stood there, grappling with my own inability to act, the noise of the thoroughfare returning to the forefront as the echoes of the girl's pleas faded into the background.

A heavy realisation dawned on me.

In this world I was limited by my own capabilities and circumstances even more so than in my old life. Where in my past life, I had the security and knowledge that, if anything were to happen, the police were only one call and a couple of minutes away—notwithstanding their overall effectiveness.

However, in Neo Avalis, the situation was strikingly different.

Yes, there existed a form of police force, but their efficacy and response time were nothing to write home about. More critically, within the confines of the megabuildings, which were corporate territories, they had virtually *no authority*. Unless an external investigation necessitated their presence inside these colossal structures, they remained outsiders.

For someone like me, who lived inside the megabuilding, this technicality offered no real hope of intervention in urgent matters. If I found myself in a situation that demanded immediate action, I could only really rely on myself and the people I knew I could trust.

As I continued my walk to Mr. Shori's stall, I couldn't help but feel a sense of helplessness and guilt. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, my voice barely audible even to my own ears.

The reality that I had stood by during the girl's ordeal, not intervening when she desperately needed help, pressed heavily on my conscience. Despite understanding logically why I had chosen inaction, a persistent guilt gnawed at me, as heavy as an unseen burden.

I've never been one to subscribe to notions of fate or karma, but the idea of debts, both tangible and intangible, resonated with me.

By failing to assist that girl, I had, in a way, accumulated a societal debt. This "society" in Delta, or Neo Avalis as a whole, might have been minuscule, but it existed nonetheless. I had, after all, been on the receiving end of Mr. Shori's generosity and kindness, yet when an opportunity arose to contribute back to the society he was a part of, I had chosen to look away.

Aware that this omission might come back to haunt me, I decided to do the only thing that felt right in that moment: Attempt to balance the scales, even if only slightly.

Approaching a familiar beggar I had noticed over the past few days, I quickly executed a sizable credit transfer to him. His sole functioning eye briefly glowed yellow as the transaction hit, then widened in apparent disbelief as he processed the amount.

[You have transferred {c}111 to (Unknown) account with the note: "Evening the scales."]

I quickened my pace, moving away briskly before the beggar could fully articulate his gratitude. The sum I had transferred, 111 credits, was arbitrary but significant.

It was an amount I felt was substantial enough to weigh against the potential devastation or end of a young life.

In the context of Mr. Shori's stall, where a meal cost around 3 to 6 credits for the highest quality dish, 111 credits represented a small fortune. The decision to part with such an amount was not easy; it felt like a financial wound, but deep down, I knew it was the correct choice.

As I heard the beginnings of the beggar's thanks, I didn't stop or turn back. Instead, I simply called out over my shoulder, "Pay it forward."

I hoped this act, this gesture of goodwill, would ripple outwards, serving as a counterbalance to my earlier inaction. Maybe, in some small way, it could mitigate the debt I felt I owed to the society that had been calling for help.

The idea of this act of kindness multiplying and spreading through society, however unlikely that actually was in reality, offered me a faint sense of solace as I continued toward Mr. Shori's stall.

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The remainder of my morning unfolded without any further hitches.

At Mr. Shori's stall, I immersed myself in the usual tasks, racking up experience in various Skills and Attributes, a routine that had become almost second nature to me.

As I wrapped up my shift, ready to embark on my much-anticipated shopping spree, a sudden realisation hit me like a bolt from the blue: *'I actually have no fucking clue where to find quality stores around here...'*

The megabuilding was a labyrinth of shops and stalls, similar to those I had briefly explored during my less-than-stellar attempt at stealth prior to my assignment on the 27th floor for Mr. Shori, or even the ones located on that very floor.

However, none of these establishments seemed to offer what I was looking for.

Their wares reminded me of the trinkets sold by street vendors at mediaeval festivals of my old world: Charming and intriguing at first glance but disappointingly short-lived in terms of durability.

Armed with a substantial amount of credits—thanks to both Mr. Shori's generous payment and the restricted shard from Valeria—I was in a position to invest in higher quality, more durable items. Moreover, with the knowledge that Valeria would be informed of my purchases, the pressure to make wise choices was immense.

I couldn't afford any further missteps in her eyes, especially in light of the harrowing aftermath of yesterday's family dinner. Just the thought of that night sent an involuntary shudder through me.

The solution to my shopping dilemma dawned on me with refreshing simplicity.

Mr. Shori, a seasoned stall owner who had operated his business for decades, surrounded himself with high-quality equipment. It was unlikely he would continually replenish his supplies with subpar materials. Seeing an opportunity, I approached him during a brief respite from the bustling crowd of customers, just shortly after my shift had concluded.

"Mr. Shori," I began, trying to sound as casual yet earnest as possible, "I'm planning to use some of my earnings to buy a few things, but I'm not quite sure where to find quality items around here. Could you recommend a place? I'm looking for durable clothing, a decent haircut, and maybe a deck. Also a combat knife for personal protection probably wouldn't go amiss. Know any spots that might have what I need?"

Mr. Shori regarded me thoughtfully, as if assessing my intentions or perhaps the seriousness of my request. After a brief pause, he responded, "I think. Maybe. Floor 31, Misha Emporium. Good clothes. Good knives. I buy knife there." He gestured towards a few knives on the counter. Almost simultaneously, his eyes flickered yellow, and my cerebral interface buzzed with the coordinates and details of Misha's Emporium on the 31st floor.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Shori! That's incredibly helpful!" I exclaimed, my gratitude genuine. With renewed purpose and direction, I quickly strode towards the elevator to get to Floor 31, my mind already cataloguing what I hoped to find at Misha's Emporium.

As I passed by the location of this morning's distressing scene, my eyes involuntarily scanned the surroundings, seeking any sign of the girl or her abductor. Despite my earlier hesitation, a part of me still clung to the hope that there might be something I could do for her, even after the fact.

Regrettably, my search yielded no sight of either the girl or the man. The area had returned to its usual state of bustling anonymity. A twinge of disappointment mixed with a reluctant sense of relief washed over me.

'Maybe it's better this way,' I reasoned silently, fighting the internal battle between my conscience and the pragmatic side that was all too aware of the dangers of getting involved.

With a heavy sigh, I stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the 31st floor, while part of my mind still lingered on the earlier incident...

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Stepping out of the elevator onto the 31st floor, I was struck by a sudden shift in atmosphere, almost as if I had entered a different world altogether.

The first thing that caught my eye was the lighting—it was bright, yet it had a classic warmth to it, lacking the harshness I had grown accustomed to on the other floors. The light bathed the entire area in a welcoming, energising hue that immediately lifted my spirits; distracting me from my earlier, dreary thoughts.

As my eyes adjusted, I noticed the security personnel stationed right next to the elevator.

They were observing everyone exiting the elevator with trained, discerning eyes. Each guard was clad in light-type body armour, a design I recognized from the countless Let's Plays of Neon Dragons I had watched in my past life.

Their armour was a blend of sleek, interlocking carbon plates, coupled with a thick layer of a material that was more akin to kevlar than anything else, combining into an armour that was tailor-made for in-door mobility without sacrificing any protective capabilities.

Each guard was equipped with an array of non-lethal weapons, seemingly chosen based on personal preference and the specific demands of their role. I noticed stun batons dangling from the belts of a few, their sleek design and subtle glow indicating a high-tech approach to an age-old design.

Others carried what looked like the Neon Dragons version of handheld tasers, compact yet undoubtedly powerful devices that could incapacitate without causing permanent harm—until they did.

One guard sported a compact launcher that I earnestly hoped was a net launcher, perfectly designed for immobilising targets harmlessly. The alternative, a grenade launcher like those in Neon Dragons, bore an unsettling resemblance, however.

But surely, nobody would be stupid enough to use a grenade launcher indoors though, right...?

My attention was drawn to the symbol emblazoned on their armour—a distinct emblem that immediately resonated with me. It was the logo of Rockefeller Inc., an angular, stylized 'R' interlocked with a myriad of hexagonal plates. The logo was displayed prominently on their shoulder pads, a symbol of authority and corporate power.

I had seen this logo in the game countless times, representing one of the major corporate entities in Neo Avalis, known for their extensive security, surveillance and subjugation operations.

To say it bluntly: They were a mil-corp, focused on all things military.

This clear display of Rockefeller Inc.'s presence was both as impressive and intimidating as I had imagined it would be. While it signalled that this floor operated under their watchful eye, suggesting a level of order and safety not found on the lower levels, it also suggested the fact that they had complete, autonomous control over everything that occurred on this floor.

As I stepped off the elevator, I reminded myself to remain calm and walk as inconspicuously as possible.

The scrutinising presence of the security personnel brought back memories of lining up for airport security checks, where I'd irrationally worry about inadvertently packing something prohibited.

You could never be sure whether you didn't accidentally pack a bomb with your underwear, after all.

'Just walk normally, Sera. You've got nothing to hide,' I told myself, yet still quickened my pace as I walked away from the elevator. To my relief, the guards only gave me a cursory glance before dismissing me as just another shopper.

The hallways were immaculate, not a speck of trash in sight, and security patrolled regularly, their presence unobtrusive yet unmistakable. The absence of any sort of beggar, homeless or otherwise unwanted population was likely thanks to them as well.

The overall atmosphere on the floor was charged with an air of high-end consumerism, a world away and entirely separate from the grim reality of the lower floors. Around me, shoppers moved with purpose, their expressions a mix of excitement and contentment, each lost in their world of potential purchases.

The stores lining the hallways were a visual spectacle, their gleaming displays showcasing the latest trends in fashion, technology, and other luxury goods available on the floor and in the nearby stores. Holographic billboards hovered above, showering passersby with vibrant, blaring advertisements, each one vying for attention with its enticement of the newest and greatest products.

The entire scene was a kaleidoscope of commerce and innovation, a far cry from the gritty realities of the lower floors of the megabuilding and it was every bit as beautiful as I had imagined it to be.

But my purpose here wasn't to become immersed in the dazzling atmosphere of Neon Dragons' commerce. I had a clear mission: To shop for necessities.

Consequently, I unerringly made my way toward my destination, determined not to be sidetracked by the surrounding allure. It certainly did not take me an excessive amount of time, over two hours, to reach the Emporium, due to frequent stops, captivated by my surroundings.

That would naturally never happen to me.

Not this Sera.

Nope.

In the end, I did reach the Emporium, in a timeframe that, let's just say, won't be detailed further. The exterior of it was a stark contrast to the rest of the floor's flashy displays.

It was surprisingly understated, with no extravagant display windows or ambitious signage.

The only hint of its presence was a simple neon-lit text sign that read "Misha's Emporium" in a tasteful, minimalist font. Gathering myself, I stepped towards the door, which obligingly opened with a smooth swish, welcoming me inside.

I found myself in a modest reception area, acting as a gateway to the main store hidden behind another set of doors. The room was small and efficiently organised, with a register and a few elegantly placed items that hinted at the quality of goods beyond.

But what immediately caught my attention was the presence of another person in the room.

As I entered the Emporium, I noticed someone with their back turned to me, hunched over the floor. They seemed absorbed in picking up some loosely scattered items.

The sound of the door opening made them pause, and they quickly perked up, startled by my sudden appearance.

But what truly captured my attention wasn't their reaction to my entrance.

It was their unusual appearance.

The proportions of this person were entirely off. Their limbs were elongated, about fifty percent longer than the average person's, giving them an unnaturally stretched look. Most strikingly, their arms had three joints, bending in ways that defied normal human anatomy.

They moved with an eerie fluidity, their extra joints allowing them to reach and grasp objects on the floor in a manner that was both fascinating and deeply unsettling.

As I stood there, slightly taken aback, the person's head abruptly rotated, a full 180 degrees, while their back remained turned towards me. It was a sight straight out of a horror movie, yet there was nothing menacing about it.

Their face, now directly facing me, bore a wide, toothy grin, revealing several rows of perfectly aligned, green teeth, and their four ruby-crystal-like eyes sparkled with what seemed like a mixture of elation and surprise.

The creature...or person's voice was surprisingly friendly and warm, contrasting sharply with its bizarre appearance. "Welcome to Misha's Emporium, how may I help you today?" it asked, its tone infused with genuine hospitality.

The person's speech, though mostly fluent, had a notable hiccup when it came to certain English pronunciations.

Particularly, it stumbled over the "ium" in "Emporium," cutting off the syllable entirely. This minor quirk, however, didn't detract from its overall ability to communicate effectively. The rest of its speech flowed smoothly, suggesting a strong grasp of the language.

For a moment, I was speechless, caught off guard by the surrealism of the encounter. The person's form was unlike anything I had ever encountered, yet there was an unmistakable air of cordiality about it.

Furthermore, I also knew exactly what I was looking at, which sent a shiver of excitement and apprehension through me: This person was a Gryplik...