

Chapter 132 - Probatio

Pina glanced over at me and Cryo just as the footsteps came to a stop on the other side of the door. We both gave the nod—quiet, sharp, and synced.

We were ready for whatever came next.

A quick electronic chirp broke the silence, followed by the clunk of an old mechanical lock disengaging. The door creaked open just a crack—then—

“Well—”

That was all the Scav managed to get out before Pina slammed forward like a freight train.

Her heavy revolver jammed straight into his mouth, cutting him off mid-breath.

She grabbed the front of his jacket with one hand and yanked him towards her like he weighed nothing, before stepping through the threshold with him held tight as a meatshield.

The guy's eyes bulged, darting from the muzzle stuffed between his teeth to Pina's expression—which, for the record, was *not* friendly. He was shaking already, hands hovering in mid-air like he couldn't decide whether to surrender or piss himself—or both.

“Alright, listen the fuck up!” Pina's voice cut through the space like a shotgun blast, hard and loud. “This is a clear-out! You've got sixty seconds to get outta this building or you'll be leakin' outta new holes. Don't play fucking hero. You're outgunned and outclassed. We're experts and we *don't* have to worry about clean-up. So move. *Now.*”

For a second or two, nobody reacted. Just wide eyes and slack jaws from a crowd of scrappy, underfed Scavs scattered around the warehouse like rats in a dimly-lit kitchen.

That hesitation was all Cryo and I needed.

We moved in right behind her—me with RaZ in my main hand and two throwing knives drawn and ready in my off as I stepped inside.

My eyes swept the room, taking it in fast.

The place was bigger than I'd expected—very high ceilings, rusty support beams, scattered crates, junk tech, and some janky-ass furniture. A flickering ceiling light cast long, twitchy shadows across the cracked concrete floor. There were a half-dozen people in immediate view, and probably more tucked behind the heaps of trash and makeshift barricades.

I had expected the warehouse to be a bit more sectioned off—maybe a second floor, a few offices, something resembling structure.

But nope.

This place might as well have been a giant garage or an old hangar, just one wide, open sprawl of space with barely anything breaking it up aside from the Scav's “furniture”.

I didn't say anything. Just kept scanning, ready for the first wrong move.

The Scavs, eight of them scattered around the immediate area near the entrance, stared at us with varying mixtures of shock, fury, and fear etched across their dirty faces. For a few tense heartbeats, nobody moved; the only sounds were the muffled choking noises of the guy currently gagging on Pina's revolver.

"What the fuck is this?!" one of them finally shouted, rising from his chair aggressively but freezing when Cryo shifted his stance and aimed his gun right at the Scav's face.

"We ain't fuckin' going nowhere!" another scav spat, clenching his fists and glaring at us defiantly. His bravado, however, faltered the instant he noticed Cryo's cold, unwavering stare hit him.

Behind them, another scav—a smaller, wiry guy with nervous eyes darting frantically between us—quickly snatched up a battered backpack from the floor and bolted, nearly tripping over himself as he sprinted past us out into the street.

We made no move to impede him, as his body language and demeanour were more than enough to guarantee that he wasn't going to try anything on his way out. He didn't even glance back, clearly uninterested in risking his neck for the place—or the rest of the crew.

"Smart man," Cryo muttered, his gun still trained steadily on the group. "Y'all should follow."

Pina ignored all the drama, not even sparing a glance towards the fleeing scav, and instead calmly began counting down, each number punctuated by another forceful shove of her revolver barrel deeper into the captive scav's mouth.

"Fifty-five," she said flatly, prompting another strangled gag as the scav's eyes bulged, tears streaking down his grimy cheeks.

"You fat bitch! Let him fucking go!" the largest scav barked, stepping closer, but still around a dozen meters away, as if he thought his size alone might intimidate Pina.

"Forty-eight," Pina continued calmly, her cybernetic hand effortlessly keeping the scav pinned as he squirmed and choked, desperate for air.

The revolver shifted just enough to keep him terrified.

Panic visibly rippled through the remaining scavs as Pina's countdown progressed. Their bravado faded as reality settled in. Slowly, one by one, they started exchanging uncertain, anxious glances.

"Thirty-nine," Pina went on, utterly indifferent to their indecision, her voice clear and menacingly calm.

Finally, another scav broke ranks, shaking his head bitterly, muttering something incomprehensible, and storming past us out the open door with whatever supplies he could grab in immediate reach.

“Thirty,” Pina kept counting, the tension ratcheting up even further as everyone remaining in the room realized we weren’t bluffing.

At “twenty-seven,” the mood in the room turned. Fast.

The biggest of the remaining Scavs—some slab of synth-muscle and bad decisions with a metal jaw and eyes that screamed too many stims and not enough sleep—took a single slow step forward.

“The fuck do you think you are?” he barked, voice thick with gravel and rage. “This’s our turf. You don’t get to just walk in here and *take* it.” He jabbed a thick finger toward Pina, who didn’t so much as blink. “You think just ‘cause you got fancy guns and some asshole blank paying you, you’re better than us?!”

The others, emboldened by his show, began to shift, pick up whatever junk they had nearby.

One grabbed a rusted pipe off a workbench. Another slid a box cutter from his sleeve. A third picked up what looked like the broken end of a shovel, wrapped in electrical tape. None of it was high-grade gear, but desperate people didn’t need good weapons—they just needed enough courage and numbers.

“Twenty-two,” Pina said, voice still calm, almost sing-song. The bastard still gagging on her revolver whimpered wetly.

The big one kept talking, taking another step, slow and deliberate. “You don’t get to walk in here and act like you’re gods. We bled for this place. We *killed* for this place. Ain’t no one takin’ it from us!”

Cryo’s voice came low, barely above a whisper, so that only Pina and I could hear him: “On fifteen. They’re past the point’a talkin’.”

I nodded, not that he could see.

The seconds stretched painfully, as adrenaline and anxiety collided in my veins. I forced my breathing steady, trying to anchor myself against the fear that threatened to break through.

‘They’re not people, just scavs,’ I reminded myself, the mantra louder and louder inside my head.

“Eighteen,” Pina counted, completely ignoring the raging scav leader as he tried to further stir up his group, eyes locked on ours, full of barely-contained violence.

“Seventeen.”

“Sixteen.”

My grip on the RaZ tightened.

The nerves were back, coiled tight and burning in my chest, threatening to choke me. But the adrenaline drowned most of it out, sharpening everything into focus.

Every motion. Every breath. Every shuffle of feet or shift of weight from the Scavs ahead of us etched itself into my awareness like I was watching it all in slow motion.

The big one was still moving forward, real slow, like if he dragged his feet enough we wouldn't notice the gap closing between us. His voice stayed loud, angry, echoing across the hangar, riling the rest of them up until they all looked just mad enough to do something very, very stupid.

"Fifteen," Pina's voice finally rang out and everything exploded into motion.

She didn't even finish the word before slamming her forehead straight into the scav's face she had been holding onto this entire time. The sickening crunch of shattering bone echoed sharply, and the poor bastard crumpled instantly, his jaw now a mangled mess, blood and teeth scattering as he hit the ground.

Without even glancing at the poor bastard she'd just headbutted into unconsciousness, Pina fired her revolver—except it wasn't actually a heavy revolver at all, I now realized as the shot went off.

It was a shotgun revolver.

She'd clearly spent the countdown subtly shifting her "hostage" into position, using his limp weight as a screen until she had a perfect shot lined up center-mass on the big guy, mid-rant and completely unaware.

The payload of shrapnel-like ammunition hit him like a swarm of furious hornets.

Some rounds sparked and pinged off his metal jaw and half-reinforced cheek, but the rest tore straight through flesh and bone, punching bloody holes through his torso and exploding out his back in a spray of gore.

His whole body seized up for a split second—like a puppet with half its strings cut—before crumpling to the ground in a twitching, sloppy heap.

My ears rang with the roar of the shot, but before the rest of the Scavs could even process what had happened, Cryo had already fired twice in quick succession—two precise, controlled pops from his pistol. Two scav heads snapped backward with sharp cracks, red mist splattering across their friends, their bodies slumping without so much as a twitch.

My own target, the guy who'd been idly eating synth-beans moments before when we had entered, now surged forward, pipe raised and eyes wild with panic and rage.

Heart pounding so hard I thought it might punch its way out of my chest, I let everything else fall away—thoughts, nerves, anxiety—just muscle memory and adrenaline taking the wheel.

The first Scav came at me fast, pipe raised like he actually thought that was gonna be enough. I sidestepped the telegraphed swing easily, pivoted off my back foot, and brought the RaZ low, then up in a sharp arc.

The blade bit deep into the meat of his right arm, just above the elbow.

His scream was immediate and raw, the pipe clattering to the floor as he dropped to one knee, clutching the wound with a frantic desperation as torrents of blood started pouring out in a rhythmic cadence.

A gunshot cracked somewhere to my left—Cryo's, probably—and another Scav dropped mid-charge. I didn't look.

The guy in front of me was still screaming, still alive.

I stepped up towards him, aiming to finish the job.

He looked up at me, eyes wide and bloodshot. "Wait! Please, fuck, I give up! I give up, alright?! I was stupid, I was—shit, I'm sorry, I'll leave! I'll leave right now, just—just let me go! I swear!"

Another blast echoed—Pina this time, close and loud enough to rattle in my bones.

"I... I got a fucking sister!" The Scav wheezed, his breath hitching as he clutched his mangled arm. "She's your age! I'm all she's got! Please... Please don't kill me—she'll be all alone out there!"

The blade in my hand was still dripping, the edge ready for the next strike.

But my body stopped.

Not frozen—just caught between the instinct to finish it and the words he'd thrown out like a lifeline.

'They are not people.' The mantra kept repeating itself in my head, but it felt distant now, dulled by the raw humanity of his panic.

The scav couldn't have been much older than Gabriel, and his terrified pleas had managed to claw at something buried deep inside me. I'd promised myself I wouldn't hesitate—that mercy wasn't for scum like this—but his words felt so painfully *real*.

Too human. Too close to home.

And worst of all: People-shaped.

"Fuck," I muttered bitterly, feeling my grip on the RaZ slacken slightly. "Get the fuck out then—*hurry!*"

I stepped past him, eyes already scanning for my next target that wasn't already in a brawl.

'Three more. I'll take the—'

Movement.

Just a flicker in the corner of my eye, but enough. The bastard had picked up the pipe again, this time in his off-hand, coming at me from behind with all the cowardice in the world.

Fast, but predictable—especially when half of me had already expected this very thing.

Compared to Jin's punches or Kenzie's terrifying dashes, this wasn't *fast*.

I smoothly shifted my weight and leaned back, feeling the displaced air whisper past my face as the pipe missed by centimeters. I spun back around, eyes locking onto his.

The scav's twisted grin of triumph froze instantly, eyes going wide with sudden, cold realization. It shattered completely as my RaZ plunged through his temple, splitting bone with a sharp crack, driving deep enough that the guard itself smashed into the side of his skull.

"*Thank you,*" I whispered quietly as his body slid lifelessly off my blade, collapsing onto the floor in a tangled heap.

'Not people, indeed. None of them are.'

I was already pivoting towards my next target, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cryo's gun—aimed right at *me*.

My heart lurched in shock.

'This motherf—!'

I didn't even get a second to process what the hell was going on—why Cryo would suddenly be aiming at me, what could've made him do this, or how the fuck I was going to get out of this situation.

My body just *moved*.

I was already mid-dive, hand snapping back, ready to whip a knife his way, and the half-formed thought of burning my emergency-Trait-use pulsed at the edge of my mind.

[Blademaster's Th—]

But no muzzle flash came.

No gunshot followed.

Instead, Cryo gave me the smallest, sharpest nod I'd ever seen—just enough to catch, just enough to say '*good*'—before whipping back around and putting a round straight into the nearest Scav's skull. The guy hadn't even seen it coming.

Before the body even hit the ground, another Scav came charging out of the chaos, slamming into Cryo with a half-mad scream and forcing him into a full-on brawl.

My heart was still thundering in my throat, adrenaline roaring through every nerve, but I didn't have the luxury of figuring out what the hell had just happened.

Cryo aiming at me—yeah, that was gonna need a *serious* conversation later.

But right now? I had two more Scavs left breathing, and they were already moving—coming right at me.

I didn't hesitate.

One step back, one breath, and two throwing knives were already flying from my fingers.

The first thunked into the guy's eye with a wet crunch, the second buried itself in his throat just as he opened his mouth to yell. Whatever sound he'd planned on making turned into a gurgling gasp as his knees gave out and he crumpled to the floor.

The second one didn't even flinch.

He was bigger, faster than I expected—and *pissed*.

He came in with a giant board full of rusted nails, swinging wide. I ducked the first strike and slashed low at his exposed side, aiming to drop him in one clean motion.

Clang.

The blade bounced off like I'd hit a damn car door.

"Fucking Scavs just chipping whatever they can get their hands on!" I cursed under my breath, pivoting away from the follow-up swing as it whooshed past my head and splintered a piece of old furniture behind me.

He pressed forward hard, forcing me deeper into what had once been the warehouse's kitchen area—if you could still call it that.

The floor I stepped on was a fucking nightmare to navigate: Dented cans, broken tiles, rust flakes, some mystery liquids that had been spilled.

But [Elemental Balance] kept my footing perfect, like I was moving across an acrobatic gym flooring. I felt the weight of every shift, every muscle coiled just right, waiting.

He came at me again, this time with the janky-ass board in both hands.

His swing was wild and horizontal, trying to take my head clean off.

I didn't back up.

I lunged sideways into the narrow space between the swing and his chest, my knife flashing up as I twisted past him.

It slid in smooth—too smooth.

I barely felt the resistance as it cut through his throat and into the meat of his neck.

He was still mid-step, still thinking he might land the swing, when his head half-detached from his body. Bone, muscle, artery—all gone in one fluid movement as the force of his own momentum carried him straight into my blade.

He twitched once, gurgled in disbelief. Then dropped like a sack of meat.

I immediately snapped my attention back towards the rest of the room, catching sight of Pina just as she smoothly side-stepped a desperate slash aimed at her throat.

Without skipping a beat, she palmed the scav's face with her cybernetic arm and slammed him straight down into the concrete, turning his skull into a shattered mess of brain and blood as new paint for the floor.

Cryo, meanwhile, had already dispatched the scav who'd barrelled into him earlier.

He was carefully scanning the warehouse, gun still raised, mirroring my own wary inspection of the room as we searched for any remaining threats.

The warehouse had gone dead quiet—well, almost.

Not even a minute had passed since Pina had called out "fifteen," and eight scavs lay dead, sprawled in various grotesque poses across the blood-slick floor. The scav who'd answered the door was still alive, just barely, making pitiful wet noises as he choked on his own blood through what was left of his shattered face.

"Check for stragglers," Cryo ordered. His voice sounded calm, almost casual, but I noticed the slight breathlessness hidden beneath it.

'Did he get hurt?'

I fell into step behind Cryo and Pina, carefully sweeping the warehouse's shadowy corners, crates, piles of trash, overturned furniture—anywhere someone desperate enough might still be hiding.

I kept myself at a calculated distance from Cryo, wary and hyper-aware of his movements.

My nerves were still tight from when he'd aimed his gun at me in the heat of combat, and I wasn't about to ignore that.

'Stay close enough to react if he makes a move, but far enough that he can't catch me off guard,' I reminded myself as I continued my search, half my attention locked onto Cryo while the rest of me stayed focused on the job at hand.

After a few tense minutes of careful searching, Cryo finally gave the all-clear.

The place was officially empty, and it was time to call in the client's crew.

But before he even finished turning around, I was already moving, pressing the bloodied blade of my RaZ firmly to his throat, my voice low and deadly serious. "What the fuck was that shit all about, Cryo, *huh*...?!"