

## **Chapter 85 - Perfect Opportunity**

*PoV: Jade*

Having been ushered back inside the gun store, Jade kept a close eye on everything around her. The presence of the Golden Phoenix members had thrown a massive wrench into their plans for the item retrieval that Ela was undertaking.

*'At least I managed to make sure this lunatic didn't kill all of them...'* she thought to herself, side-eyeing Ela as the girl moved up towards the counter, waiting for the store owner to finish up with another customer.

Ela had looked just about ready to cause a bloodbath out there, and given the quality of throwing knives she was carrying—coupled with her freakish accuracy and the power of her throws that was undoubtedly enhanced by cybernetics of some sort—Jade knew she was extremely lucky to have avoided a violent confrontation.

Sucking up to a random Golden Phoenix boy for a few minutes was a small price to pay for keeping things from escalating beyond control.

Jade had been in a bit of a panicked, rapid-fire session of 'bullshitting until the situation somehow resolves itself' for the past few minutes, but now, inside the relative safety of the store again, she had a moment to think about her current situation and her next moves.

The first thing she recognized as supremely important was to stick close to Ela.

There were a couple of reasons for that, but the main ones were quite simple: safety and information.

Safety, because Jade had just put herself on the radar of some Golden Phoenix enforcers, young and inexperienced as they might have been. No matter what, she couldn't afford to get captured by them or, worse, land the Clawed Beasts in any kind of trouble as a result of this little excursion.

While it was unlikely that the group of boys outside had any intel on her or connections that could dig that information up, the most important lesson Vega had drilled into her was to *always* have contingencies ready to go.

As much as she didn't want to see any unnecessary deaths, she would very much prefer Ela slaughter every single one of the boys outside in her typical, psychotic calmness than to cause trouble for the Clawed Beasts, or more specifically, Vega and her sisters, by getting herself into a tight spot she couldn't get out of without their help.

And the other reason, information, was the whole purpose of her existence on this floor right now to begin with. She was tasked with gathering as much intel about Ela as possible while acting as the liaison between the girl and Vega.

That liaison business was the entire, and likely only, reason Ela had even called her and invited her to this outing in the first place.

The enigmatic girl undoubtedly *knew* Jade was spying on her and likely reporting everything back to Vega if it seemed important enough, given that most of it had been laid bare during the heated discussion a couple of days ago in Vega's office, but she had still called and invited her along regardless—probably for her own mysterious reasons that Jade couldn't even begin to decipher.

Just because someone knew they were being spied on, however, didn't mean they could keep everything hidden. Even someone as skilled as Ela would slip up eventually, especially on a mission like this, out in the open.

*That's* what Jade was counting on here.

And, already, she had picked up a few interesting tidbits about Ela's behaviour, likely thought processes, and skill sets that neither she nor Vega had known about before.

The most dangerous one, in Jade's opinion, was how much the girl seemingly knew about guns.

The moment they'd entered the store and pretended to browse the goods at the window to keep an eye on the outside, Ela had casually picked up a gun and inspected it with such ease and professionalism that it was clear she knew what she was doing.

There was no hesitation, no fumbling—just smooth, practised movements that could only come from countless hours of experience and familiarity.

The fact that Ela had let that slip past her otherwise nearly flawless facade only emphasised how truly ingrained those skills were in her.

If she'd been trying to hide her expertise, someone less familiar with guns would've likely fumbled or at least hesitated, maybe even tried to act like they were just casually browsing.

But not Ela.

She handled that gun like it was an extension of herself, inspecting it with a casual ease that made it *clear* this was second nature to her.

It was almost as if she didn't even realise what she was revealing.

Or maybe she just didn't care—like it wasn't even worth the effort to hide from Jade.

That thought alone was enough to send a chill down her spine.

It made her wonder just *how much* else Ela was keeping under wraps, or worse, what she *was* showing intentionally to mislead her.

And while the revelation wasn't entirely surprising, given everything else Ela had going on, it was definitely troubling. Guns were everywhere in Neo Avalis; every ganger and most scavs out on the streets were packing heat, quality be damned.

But inside the megabuildings, carrying a gun was a whole different game.

Jade and most of her sisters had only really handled guns during the rare shooting drills Vega set up for them.

Only Ruby and Citrina carried guns regularly, and that was because they were the only ones with the licences required to carry them on floors not fully controlled by the Clawed Beasts.

Any floor partially or fully owned by a corporation required those licences, and without one, you were just begging for trouble with the corpos—the last thing anyone in their right mind would want; or given a bad day, ever do.

But Ela? She didn't just know how to hold a gun; she knew how to *inspect* one, like she'd been doing it her whole life.

That level of familiarity was way beyond what any average megabuilding ganger would have.

Jade knew plenty of gangers, and most of them were absolute blanks when it came to firearms. Sure, they could shoot, but actually knowing their way around a gun like Ela did?

That was rare, even outside the megabuilding.

It was something you usually only saw in higher ranked members, who actually had to do a lot of the procurement for the rest of their squads.

This little detail was definitely going straight to Vega once they made it out of this mess.

Jade wasn't sure how he'd react, but it would definitely change the way he saw Ela. It wouldn't spur him into immediate action, not that Jade was hoping for anything to happen of course, but it *would* shift the picture he had of the girl nevertheless.

Another thing that had become increasingly clear during this mission was that Ela wasn't used to working with others.

Sure, her acting skills were top-notch when it came to staying off the radar of corpos, gangers, and just about anyone who wasn't Vega.

But when it came to their little pickup charade? She was stiff, downright amateurish.

Jade had wondered if it was an act to throw her off, but that didn't really add up. The foot injury bit had cost them precious time, enough for the Golden Phoenix crew to notice them and make their move.

That slip didn't seem like something Ela would have done on purpose, especially if her goal was just to get in, grab the goods, and get out.

The most logical explanation was that Ela's performance had been hampered by having to include someone else in her plan.

She wasn't exactly the social type, either—something Jade had already picked up on during their walk to the gun store.

Jade had tried to pull Ela into some playful banter, teasing her about those hideous shoes in the ad, hoping to get a bit of back-and-forth going to sell their cover.

But instead of playing along, Ela had just sulked, stiff as a board.

If anyone had been watching them closely, that awkwardness alone could've easily blown their cover.

The only explanation that made sense to Jade was that Ela was a lone wolf by nature—someone who was used to working solo and had a hard time adjusting when she had to coordinate with someone else.

It explained the stark difference between her usually flawless facade and the clunky, almost amateurish acting that came out whenever she had to rope Jade into one of her schemes.

It was for those reasons, that she now found herself standing right next to the girl as they both approached the store owner that had finally finished up their business with the previous customer.

Jade had no idea what Ela's endgame was with this whole charade—something about a shooting lesson, according to the story she spun for the Golden Phoenix guys outside—but the way Ela confidently strode up to the man made it clear that she did in fact have some sort of a plan.

Walking up to the owner, a middle-aged guy with a bit of a belly but a friendly, if slightly worn-out, smile on his stubbled face, Ela flashed him a disarming grin. "Hi there... I was wondering if you could help me and my friend out a bit?"

Jade blinked, caught off guard by the vague and almost casual way Ela phrased the request.

She had expected something more direct, more in line with the careful planning and sharp execution she'd come to associate with the girl. But here was Ela, playing it cool and leaving the store owner just as perplexed as Jade felt.

The man hesitated, clearly puzzled by the unusual request, but his customer service instincts kicked in.

"Uh, yeah, sure. That's what I'm here for," he replied, though there was a hint of confusion in his tone. After all, helping customers was quite literally his job—why the roundabout way of asking?

Just as Jade was wondering where Ela was going with this, the girl leaned in to whisper something to the store owner. A wave of panic shot through Jade as she realised she'd let her guard down, lulled by the strange approach Ela had taken. She strained to catch the hushed words, but Ela had shifted away from her just enough to make it difficult for her to hear.

*'Damn this scheming fucking eel...!'* Jade thought, her frustration mounting as she tried to pick up any snippets of the conversation.

“...help...outside...shooting lesson...”

The man’s face showed his confusion as Ela spoke, his brows knitting together until she dropped the last few words.

“...pickup...the watcher...”

In an instant, the store owner’s expression shifted from confusion to something much more serious—borderline terrified, even—as he began nodding rapidly, his demeanour doing a complete 180.

“Ah...! Of course, of course!” he responded loudly, a nervous chuckle escaping him as he forced a smile in Jade’s direction, clearly avoiding Ela’s gaze like it might burn him. “Please, follow me, young ladies, I insist. I, Percival, am always happy to teach the art of firearms to newly interested patrons. Let us head towards the back immediately and get your lesson started, shall we?”

His speech had become stilted, overly formal in a way that felt almost robotic, and before Jade could fully process the abrupt change, Ela’s arm looped around hers, guiding her toward the back of the store. The owner, Percival apparently, led the way with a slightly stiff gait, his forced cheerfulness doing little to hide the tension in the air.

Jade couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever Ela had whispered to him had flipped some kind of switch—and not in a good way.

*‘What just happened here...?’* she thought, her mind racing as she tried to piece it all together. The man had been normal—happy, even, if a bit puzzled—right up until Ela dropped those last few words. *‘What could she have possibly said to him? And what in the fuck is “the watcher” supposed to mean? A codeword...? Or a name, maybe?’*

Whatever it was that Ela had whispered, it had worked like a charm. Percival had gone from slightly confused to fully cooperative in a heartbeat and was now fumbling with a set of old, mechanical keys to unlock a grated door in the back of the store.

“In here, if you please,” he said, his voice still carrying that forced cheerfulness as he gestured toward the room beyond the grate. Ela didn’t hesitate, walking straight in with Jade right behind her, still trying to wrap her head around the rapid shift in the situation.

As Percival followed them in, he flicked a practically invisible switch near the door, and lights flickered to life, revealing a surprisingly well-kept in-house shooting range.

Jade blinked, momentarily stunned by the sight.

She had assumed the whole “shooting lesson” story was just a cover, a bit of flimsy deception to get them out of a tight spot. But here she was, standing in an *actual*, fully functional in-house shooting range.

The place was unexpectedly well stocked too, with clean lanes, fresh targets, and a range of firearms neatly arranged on the side walls. The air was filled with the faint smell of gunpowder, mixed with a sterile, metallic scent that made Jade’s nose tingle.

‘Just what kind of place is this...?’ Jade wondered, still trying to wrap her head around the pristine surroundings.

It didn’t seem like the kind of setup you’d stumble upon in the back of an average gun shop.

Most shooting ranges were prominently featured, used as a selling point to draw in customers. They were usually buzzing with activity, with people testing out firearms and showing off their skills.

But this range was different—tucked away behind a locked grate, only accessible by the owner himself. It was high-end, way too high-end for a low-tier floor like this one.

Not a single soul had wandered into this part of the shop the entire time they’d been here.

It didn’t add up.

From a business perspective, it made no sense for this place to exist as it did, almost like it was designed for a purpose beyond the usual customer foot traffic. But whatever that purpose was, Jade couldn’t figure it out.

Not yet, anyway.

Ela, however, moved with an air of familiarity, completely unfazed by the oddity of the situation. She walked over to one of the shooting lanes like she owned the place, her earlier bubbly facade melting away into a composed, confident demeanour.

Jade had seen that look before—it was the look of someone who knew *exactly* what they were doing, someone in complete control, even when everything around them seemed out of sync.

Percival, on the other hand, was a bundle of nerves. He hovered near the entrance, all traces of his earlier enthusiasm gone.

“You... You ladies just let me know if you need anything else. I’ll be... I’ll be in the front! Yes! Customers are calling,” he stammered, his voice lacking any of the certainty he’d shown before.

It was clear that he was eager to get out of the room, to distance himself from whatever was about to happen. Jade could practically feel the tension rolling off him in waves.

Ela didn’t even glance his way, simply waving him off with a mere flick of her wrist, her focus entirely on the firearm she had picked up. A moment later, she gave Jade a small nod, a silent command to stay cool and follow her lead.

The message was clear: Don’t ask questions, just go with the flow.

Taking a steadying breath, Jade did her best to match Ela’s pace.

She moved closer, watching as Ela inspected the gun with the same easy expertise she'd shown earlier. It was almost unsettling how natural she was at it, how she seemed completely in her element in this strange, hidden shooting range.

The situation was spiralling into the unknown, veering off in directions Jade hadn't seen coming at all. But one thing was certain—Ela was steering the ship, and if Jade wanted to get out of this unscathed, she'd have to trust that Ela knew what she was doing.

Falling behind wasn't an option.

Not now.

So, she did the only thing that came to mind: She grabbed a gun of her own and did her best to mimic Ela's movements, all the while trying to piece together the real reason they were even here, in this strange back-room shooting gallery...

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As I examined the random pistol I had grabbed from the rack in the back-room shooting range with my terrible movie and youtube-impressions, I couldn't help but feel a surge of unease creeping up on me.

Sure, Mr. Stirling's info had gotten us out of sight from those Golden Phoenix thugs, but now that we were back here, I was at a complete loss as to what we were supposed to do next.

Percival, the store owner, had led us into this hidden shooting range and then just left us here, which only made me more nervous. Being surrounded by racks of guns, crates of ammunition, and absolutely no supervision felt like a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

It didn't help that the place was eerily quiet, the only sound being the faint hum of the fluorescent lights above.

I glanced around the shooting range, trying to keep my cool and maintain the appearance of casually inspecting the guns, just like Jade was doing.

The room itself was surprisingly well-equipped for a place tucked away in the back of a small gun store. The walls were lined with soundproofing material, and the lanes were pristine, with each one equipped with a surprisingly high-tech target system—with automatic target placement, movement and even different modes from what the tiny plaque next to the screen I was standing in front of was telling me—that seemed entirely out of place for a floor like this.

But what really caught my attention—and not in a good way—was the so-called "emergency exit" at the far end of the range.

It was nothing more than a flimsy-looking door with a faded "EXIT" sign barely hanging on above it. The door seemed to open directly onto one of the shooting lanes, which struck me as an incredibly poor design choice.

Whoever planned this layout clearly wasn't too concerned with safety regulations, because if that wasn't an OSHA violation waiting to happen, I didn't know what was.

Then again, OSHA had probably been one of the first things to get the boot once the corporations sank their claws into every politician in sight—assuming OSHA even existed in this world to begin with.

So, it wasn't like there was anyone left to complain to.

All I could do was shake my head at the sheer level of negligence on display.

Part of me was tempted to suggest to Jade that we should just take our chances and slip out through that rickety door, but when I glanced over at her, I saw she was meticulously inspecting the gun in her hands, mimicking the way I had done it earlier.

That small detail reassured me—like I was actually on the right track. After all, she was tied up in some high-level gang stuff with Vega, so it was likely she had some real firearm experience. If she was mirroring my moves, then they probably had some merit beyond just looking cool in movies or YouTube videos.

Who would've thought you could pick up something useful from being a shut-in NEET?

But, more importantly, it got me thinking.

I had never been the biggest fan of guns in my past life, but I had to come to terms with the fact that this truly wasn't my past life anymore.

This was the world of Neon Dragons, and the rules were quite a lot different here.

Sure, I might be able to get by without a gun here inside Delta for now, but if I really wanted to pursue the path of an Operator, it was only a matter of time before I'd have to step outside into Neo Avalis itself.

Out there, I wouldn't have the safety net of a controlled corporate environment.

Out there, I'd be up against all kinds of lunatics, armed to the teeth with everything from high-end, stolen hardware to ancient, half-broken relics that could just as easily backfire on them as take me out.

Bottom line: At some point, I was going to need a gun.

I definitely couldn't afford one right now, not to mention the licence to carry it inside the megabuilding. But what I *could* do was start unlocking the related Skills and maybe even level them up a bit—depending on how long Jade was willing to keep up this charade.

The more I mulled it over, the more it started to seem like a golden opportunity.

When else was I going to have a chance like this? A fully equipped shooting range, all to myself—well, except for Jade—with access to a whole array of firearms, practically unlimited ammo, and no one around to get suspicious of how quickly I was picking things up?



It was the perfect setup to give my Operator build a serious boost.

So why not start now?

The first thing I needed to handle, however, aside from somehow convincing Jade to stick around and spend some time just shooting at targets, was freeing up some Skill slots.

As always, I was maxed out, which was getting really old, really fast.

Opening up my Skill List, I took a good look at what I had available. I was down to just a few Level 0 Skills that I could consider giving up at the moment, so the choices were pretty slim.

Out of those, the only ones I was *truly* willing to potentially drop—because they either weren't useful right now or would be a pain to train up—were [Poison] and [Lip-Reading].

[Poison] had potential, sure, but it was pretty useless to me in the here and now.

I didn't have anything to use poison on, and I wasn't exactly in a position where slipping someone a toxic cocktail would be more effective than just stabbing them.

The only reason I even had the Skill was because of Valeria's psychotic "teaching" methods that she had somehow thought were adequate for her own children; something that I was still trying to figure out how to really categorise in this world—Kenzie being my closest avenue for that, if I could get some more info on her familial situation out of her at some stage.

[Lip-Reading], on the other hand, had been on the chopping block more times than I could count, but it had always managed to just squeak by.

But when it came down to [Lip-Reading] versus something like [Pistols] or the more general **[Firearms]**? Yeah, I knew which one I'd rather have in my back pocket, at least for now.

Two Skill Slots should be enough for the time we could realistically spend here today, so I quickly discarded both of them.

I didn't want to start second-guessing myself, especially with Jade giving me those repeated side-eyes, probably wondering why I was taking so long to actually start doing something.

[System]: *[Poison] and [Lip-Reading] Skills have been removed from User.*

[System]: *[Poison] and [Lip-Reading] Skills have been added to list of **Locked** Skills and will be unable to be obtained again until **Unlocked**.*

"Ever used one of these before?" I asked casually, raising the pistol in my hand and making sure to keep the barrel pointed safely at the ground.

If there was one thing those YouTube videos had drilled into me, it was that you never aimed a gun at anything you didn't want dead, even if you were absolutely certain it was empty.

Jade nodded, though she looked a bit hesitant. "Yeah, a couple of times... Are we planning to shoot someone?"

I blinked, caught off guard. “What? No! We’re just putting some lead downrange. We told those guys we’d be here for a while, so I’d rather not risk them getting suspicious and circling around to the back door. Better to let them think we’re actually taking a class and doing some shooting before we try to sneak out.”

I flashed a cheeky smile. “Besides, how often do we get an entire range to ourselves? Might as well make the most of it.”

I was banking on that bit of confidence to smooth things over and keep Jade from asking too many questions or thinking too hard about my reasoning—because, honestly, it didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

Thankfully, confidence seemed to do the trick.

Jade gave me a terse nod and started loading the first few magazines for her chosen gun—some kind of SMG, if my basic weapon-shape knowledge was anything to go by.

*‘Alright, that hurdle’s cleared,’* I thought, turning my attention to the more pressing matter at hand: Which gun to start with. A pistol was probably my best bet, considering it was the most realistic option for me to afford anytime soon.

But the real question was, what kind?

There were so many choices—automatic, semi-automatic, revolvers, hand cannons that barely even counted as pistols, and everything in between.

I scanned the options, letting my instincts guide me and picking out the ones that looked the coolest. FashionSouls/Hunter had never let me down before, so why not trust it now?

Eager to get started, I picked out three pistols that looked cool and placed them on the table in my lane. As I did, I heard the mechanical whirring sound of the target system activating at Jade’s lane, placing targets downrange and starting to move them.

It was time to dig into some serious Skill grinding, this time in a strange, definitely-not-illegal-I’m-pretty-sure shooting range that I had no business being in...