

Chapter 84 - Performance

Walking arm in arm with Jade toward the gun store, I couldn't help but mull over her earlier words, looking down at myself.

'What the hell is wrong with my boots?'

While we'd both agreed to play the part, and Jade was nailing it by talking constantly without really saying much of substance, her jab at my combat boots had been unexpected—and, honestly, a little hurtful.

I loved my combat boots.

They were the perfect fit, tough as nails, kept my feet dry, and provided top-notch footing for anything I could possibly need to do.

They were *good* boots. Very good.

But I really never *had* thought about them from a fashion perspective... I wasn't exactly a fashionista in my past life, after all.

Sure, "FashionSouls/Hunter" was the *true* endgame in any RPG, as everybody knew, and these combat boots *definitely* fit that vibe. But when it came to casual fashion—the kind of stuff your average person cared about—maybe they *were* a bit much after all.

Jade had, of course, hit the nail on the head with her assumption as well.

I really hadn't been hit on by anyone since I'd entered this world, despite the fact that Sera was a lot prettier than I had ever been, especially now with a Body stat of 5 giving me some serious heft in all the right places.

Not that I was particularly interested in getting hit on, of course.

But still...

It *was* something to think about. For reasons.

Important reasons that definitely needed no further embellishment or explanation.

Maybe it was because I was only 15—or technically 17½ if you considered Neon Dragons' 14-month years, when translated into my old world's 12 month cycle—but even then, wasn't this the age when people started noticing each other?

You'd think there'd be at least some awkward flirting or something.

Sure, I hadn't spent a lot of time outside my house just socialising, but the walk to Mr. Shori's and my more active role in the stall recently should have gotten some kind of attention from people, right?

But nope, nothing. Not even a hint of it.

I stole a glance at Jade as she kept chatting away, still locked into our cover story.

Maybe there was something to what she said.

Maybe it really was time to think about what I wore, even if just a little.

After all, looking the part was important in every aspect, and if I could blend in better—or stand out when I needed to—it might just be another edge I could use in this crazy world.

Frustrated with myself for being clueless about this stuff, I couldn't help but keep stewing over the issue.

'Damn, I really wish I had some more experience with fashion or whatever. Maybe Jade's onto something... Should I actually get those shoes she pointed out with one of my future paychecks? They look like a complete eyesore to me, but she definitely seems to know what she's talking about...'

I glanced back at the advertisement and internally cringed at the thought of myself wearing those garish shoes—especially those ridiculous, knife-like heels.

I wasn't completely opposed to the occasional high-heel experiment, but these? They were way too sharp and impractically long to be anything close to comfortable or useful.

Shaking my head to clear out those distracting thoughts, I reminded myself that this wasn't the time or place to be thinking about footwear. The mission was what mattered.

We were just a few metres from the gun store, and I could feel Jade's uncertainty as she slowed down, torn between heading inside first or going straight to the deposit box, which sat conveniently in front of a large display screen.

The screen was running an ad for a short-barrelled shotgun, showing a cartoonish character being attacked by what looked like a horde of mutant boar-like animals; they were down on the ground and getting gored fairly brutally.

Then the scene abruptly rewound, and the character was handed the shotgun, suddenly mowing down the charging animals with reckless glee. The ad then took things to a whole new level of absurdity, showcasing various types of ammo—everything from basic buckshot to slugs and even more exotic things like dragon's breath rounds.

And just when I thought it couldn't get more over-the-top, the herd was suddenly joined by a series of robotic boars; because of course there would be?

Naturally, the character calmly loaded some EMP shells and took them down just as easily, however.

The ad wrapped up with the main character standing victoriously atop a mountain of boar corpses—both organic and robotic—raising the shotgun in triumph as triumphant music blared and the sun rose dramatically behind them.

I couldn't help but shake my head at the absurd display, utterly baffled by it.

'What the hell...? Who would ever be convinced to buy something because of an ad like that...?'

Almost simultaneously, I heard Jade mutter under her breath, "Man, I should get myself one of those shotguns... They could come in real handy," which made my head snap toward her, giving her an incredulous look.

Jade immediately noticed my reaction and took a step back, holding up her hands defensively.

"Only for self-defence, of course! Like that character!"

She pointed at the screen, which had already moved on to a different ad, this time for an automatic handgun that seemed just as over-the-top.

I sighed, trying to wrap my head around the idea of Jade, of all people, wielding a shotgun inspired by a ridiculous ad like that.

"Let's just focus on the task at hand," I replied, trying to steer the conversation back to the mission.

With a quick nod from her, we both turned our attention back to the store ahead, the bright neon sign of "Salt 'N' Guns" flickering slightly in the dim light of the street.

The sooner we got this done, the better.

No distractions, no mistakes.

We had a job to do, and I wasn't about to let some ridiculous ad or the idea of Jade with a shotgun throw us off track.

"Let's head inside," I decided, figuring that browsing the wares near the windows would give us a good excuse to scope out the area and keep an eye on anyone who might be tailing us or watching the drop box.

Jade and I slipped into the store, and I immediately steered her toward a rack of pistols near the front, conveniently located right in front of the large-pane windows. The perfect spot to casually look around while pretending to be interested in the merchandise.

"Keep an eye out for anyone who looks like trouble," I whispered, waiting for Jade's subtle nod of acknowledgment before grabbing a random gun from the rack.

I tried to mimic the cool, confident way movie characters inspected firearms, turning it over in my hands as if I knew what I was doing.

It was my first time holding a gun, and I was honestly surprised by the weight of it. It felt a lot heavier than I'd expected, the cold metal grounding me in the moment.

In hindsight, it made sense.

You'd want a gun to have some heft to it, something solid to help manage the recoil and keep it from jumping out of your hands every time you fired it.

As I pretended to scrutinise the gun, I let my eyes wander, scanning the rest of the store through the reflection in the glass in front of me.

The place was surprisingly well-stocked, with a variety of weapons lining the walls and racks.

A few, rare customers milled about, some genuinely interested in the wares, others just as likely killing time or, like us, pretending to be something they weren't.

Jade seemed to be doing the same, her gaze flicking from the weapons to the people around us, to outside the window and across the street. I could see the tension in her shoulders, the slight stiffness in the way she moved—she was on edge, and for good reason.

This whole thing could go south at any moment.

While nobody should be aware of our existence or the drop-off point, I was very much aware that plans didn't always go as one hoped—the last data collection being a prime example.

I took a deep breath, trying to focus on the task at hand.

We were here to pick something up, not get distracted by the fact that we were both way out of our comfort zones. I just had to keep it together long enough to get what we came for and get out.

We spent a few more minutes making idle chatter, pretending to discuss the guns in front of us, all while subtly scoping out the area. I kept an eye on the patrons inside the store, while Jade had her focus on the street outside; surprisingly, we made a pretty solid team for this kind of thing.

"I can't really see much on the left-hand side because of the ad display, but the rest of the street looks clear. We should probably head to the drop box now, yeah?" Jade asked, her eyes flicking to mine for confirmation.

I nodded, my gut telling me that now was as good a time as any. "Yeah, let's move before something changes. Better to be quick about it."

She was right—on a floor like this, the situation could shift in an instant. After placing the gun back on the rack, I hooked my arm through Jade's again, and we strolled out of the store, trying to project the same casual energy we had going in.

The moment we stepped outside, though, both of us tensed up, fully aware that we were now out in the open, exposed, and no longer in what could be considered a semi-safe space.

The urge to sprint to the drop box, grab the data, and get the hell out of there was almost overwhelming, but I forced myself to keep my pace steady, my steps even, and my demeanour relaxed.

The drop box itself was a sizable, secure-looking container around three metres tall and two metres wide on each side, just big enough to accommodate a few weapons for delivery when the store owner wasn't around to receive them personally.

It was large enough to be practical for its purpose, yet not so massive that it would tempt anyone to try and break into it—especially since Scavs weren't welcome inside the Megabuildings; the only "people" insane enough to consider breaking into a drop box of a gun store a potentially viable endeavour.

As we got closer to the box, the tension in my chest wound tighter with every step. Jade was just as keyed up as I was; I could sense it in the way she moved, her body language practically screaming that she was ready for anything.

When we were just a few metres away from the box, I decided to play my part.

"Ahh...! My foot!" I yelped, letting my [Deception] and [[Perform]] Skills do the heavy lifting as I faked a limp, steering us directly toward the box. "I think I twisted it... Damn, that hurts!"

Jade caught on right away, her reflexes sharp as ever.

She half-carried me the rest of the way, gently leaning me against the large box.

Without missing a beat, she dropped to her knees and carefully lifted my foot onto her knee, removing my boot with careful, yet surprisingly practised movements.

She started to gently prod and examine my foot, pretending to check for any signs of injury.

I had to fight the instinct to accidentally kick her in the face—my Ego Attribute came in clutch here once again, keeping me from reacting to the tickling sensation that threatened to break my focus. I needed to stay in the moment, to make this convincing; not alienate the only ally I had brought to this mission.

While Jade busied herself with her part of the charade, I shifted my attention to the real task at hand, leaving my foot in her capable hands.

Keeping my movements subtle, I reached for the keypad on the side of the box, my fingers moving swiftly and deliberately as I entered the code I had committed to memory.

'0-1-6-3-7-7-4-3,' I repeated silently to myself, each number falling into place as I punched it in, careful not to make a single mistake that could trip an alarm.

After I pressed the confirmation button, there was a brief moment of tense silence, the kind that makes your pulse thrum in your ears.

Then, a soft chime rang out, and the box unlocked with a low mechanical whirr.

I took a quick look around, making sure that no one was paying us any attention. With Jade crouched in front of me, it was easy to keep our movements hidden from prying eyes.

I carefully cracked the box open just enough to slip my hand inside.

The last thing we needed was to draw attention by flinging it wide open.

My fingers fumbled around the interior, brushing against cold metal and the occasional piece of equipment, but nothing that felt like the data-shard we were here for. Jade kept up her act admirably in the meantime, her hands still gently prodding my foot while she rambled about how I'd be fine in a few minutes.

Despite her convincing performance, I caught a flicker of interest in her eyes as she subtly tried to catch a glimpse of what I was doing.

She had to be wondering what we were really here for.

I hadn't exactly told her much, after all, just that we were picking *something* up. Given that we were at a gun store, she probably assumed it was some kind of weapon.

The reality was a lot less exciting, but a hell of a lot more valuable, if I had pegged Mr. Stirling correctly and he was truly working on a major bit of corporate espionage.

Finally, my fingers brushed against something small and rectangular in the far corner of the box. I leaned in more than I had planned, stretching to reach it.

The smooth, cool surface confirmed it was what I was looking for—a data-shard case, just like Mr. Stirling had described.

"Got it," I whispered to Jade, quickly pulling out the case and giving it a once-over to ensure it was sealed and undamaged.

It looked exactly as it should according to Mr. Stirling's information, which was a huge relief.

Jade, ever the pro at improvising, started slipping my boot back onto my foot.

"It's not as bad as it feels; you should be good in just a few minutes, you big baby," she said, her voice a bit louder than necessary, likely to sell our cover story and give us a clear exit strategy.

I gently let the drop box close behind me, pressing the lock button on the keypad and listening for the reassuring chime that confirmed it was secure. I gave Jade a quick nod, signaling that we were good to go.

To keep up the act, I made a show of prodding my foot and wincing, slipping the data-shard case into my pocket before adjusting my boot properly. Jade had done her best, but combat boots weren't exactly easy to put on someone else, especially when they're form-fitting.

"Alright, let's head on—"

Before I could finish, however, a loud voice interrupted me.

"Well, hello there, ladies," came the voice of a young man who had just emerged from an alley on the far side of the store, right behind Jade.

His tone was dripping with fake concern.

“You okay there? You seem to be in quite a lot of pain. If you need some strong arms to help you get to where you’re going, we wouldn’t mind lending a hand—or *several*.”

He sauntered toward us, three of his buddies following close behind, all of them snickering at their leader’s words. I couldn’t help but curse internally at the terrible timing.

We were so close—just one more minute; even *half* of one, and we’d have been out of here, clean.

I kept my face neutral, hiding the irritation bubbling beneath the surface at potentially another plan having gone tits up, and gave Jade a sideways glance.

We needed to handle this without causing a scene, but the tension was already ramping up, and I could feel the adrenaline kicking in.

I quickly weighed our options.

We could try to talk our way out, or we could make a break for it.

Either way, we had to be smart about this; the last thing we needed was to draw even *more* attention.

With a deep breath, I turned toward the guy, keeping my expression calm and collected.

“Thanks for the offer,” I said with a slight smile that didn’t reach my eyes.

“But we’ve got it covered. Just a little twist, nothing we can’t handle.” I kept my tone light, trying to defuse the situation before it escalated.

Jade shifted slightly beside me, subtly positioning herself to keep an eye on the other guys while still playing along with the act. We were on the same page—get out of this without a fight if we could, but be ready if things went sideways.

The leader of the group, oblivious to my attempts at keeping things civil, took another step closer, his grin spreading wider across his face.

His voice oozed fake concern as he continued, “Come on now, no need to be shy. We’re just trying to be friendly. Surely two pretty ladies like yourselves know how dangerous it can be to be out and about all by yourselves? Especially when hurt.”

I felt a flare of irritation rise within me, my patience wearing thinner by the second.

I could see where this was heading, and it wasn’t somewhere I wanted to go.

I kept my expression neutral, though, unwilling to show just how close I was to snapping and beside me, Jade shifted slightly, her body language mirroring my own growing tension.

“Thanks again, but we really *are* fine,” I said, my tone more clipped now. I didn’t bother with a smile this time. “We were just on our way out, so if you’d excuse us...”

The guy’s grin didn’t falter. If anything, it grew even more smug.

“Nah, my dear. No need to rush off,” he said, his voice taking on a more insistent edge.

“We’ve got a place nearby where you can rest that foot of yours. You wouldn’t want to hurt it worse by trying to walk on it, would you? We got quite a few hands between us that can help *massage* out any errant cramps too...”

His friends snickered behind him, two of them even fist-bumping like third-class fodder, clearly enjoying the show.

I could feel the situation spiralling and the options narrowing.

We couldn’t afford to let this escalate into something worse, but it was getting harder to keep my temper in check with this obvious, disgusting ploy being thrown in our faces.

Before I could respond with something unwise, however, Jade leaned in close, her lips brushing my ear as she whispered, her voice low and tense, “He’s Golden Phoenix. That pin on the right side of his shirt...”

Her words hit me like a bucket of ice water, the realisation making my heart skip a beat as my eyes darted towards the indicated pin.

Of course, it couldn’t just be a group of sleazy guys; it just *had* to be gang members from the very group that controlled this floor. The stakes had just skyrocketed, and the situation was now a lot more complicated than I’d initially thought or hoped for.

I forced myself to stay calm, but I could feel the pressure building, despite my Ego’s best attempts at keeping me focused on my task.

The last thing we needed was to provoke a gang confrontation in the middle of a floor we didn’t control, especially with the data-shard now secured in my pocket—I couldn’t afford to get into a physical altercation and risk it getting damaged or worse, lost.

I glanced briefly at Jade, her expression a mix of wariness and urgency, clearly on edge from the new development. There was something else in her eyes, too—something almost pleading, like she was trying to communicate a plan or a warning without saying a word.

But unfortunately for both of us, I couldn’t read minds, so I was left guessing at whatever she was trying to tell me.

My hand inched closer towards two of the throwing knives hidden underneath my top, not seeing another way out of this situation than to bloody their noses and make a break for it.

But before I could make a move, Jade suddenly stepped forward, placing herself between me and the group of men.

Her whole demeanour shifted in an instant, from wary and tense to bright-eyed and enthusiastic, as if she had just stumbled upon the most fascinating thing in the world.

“Oh shit...!” Jade exclaimed, her voice bubbling with excitement as she pointed at the leader’s chest. “Is that... is that the Golden Phoenix emblem?! No way! Are you seriously part of the Golden Phoenix gang?”

The leader blinked, clearly taken aback by the sudden change in tone. He had been expecting resistance, maybe even fear, but certainly not admiration.

“Uh... yeah, that’s right,” he said, puffing out his chest a little which pushed the pin further into the light, the emblem gleaming in it. “We run things around here, y’know.”

Jade’s eyes widened as if she was seeing a celebrity in the flesh. “That’s so cool! I’ve heard so much about you guys! What’s it like being part of the Golden Phoenix?! Do you get to do all the important stuff? Who are you in the gang? What do you do?”

The questions tumbled out of her in a rush, and the leader, clearly flattered, couldn’t help but grin. “Yeah, we’re pretty important,” he boasted, glancing back at his buddies, who were nodding along, clearly pleased with how this was turning out. “I’m one of the enforcers around here. Promoted recently. Keep the peace, make sure nobody steps out of line, that sort of thing, y’know? Keep the blanks to a minimum.”

Jade leaned in closer, her eyes sparkling with interest. “Wow, that sounds like such a big responsibility! And you’re so young, too! You must be really good at what you do. How did you even get into the gang? Do they, like, accept women too? Maybe someone like me, or my friend Mabel here?” She gestured toward me, still maintaining her cover.

The leader’s grin widened, clearly enjoying the attention. “Well, we don’t just let anyone in, y’know? You gotta prove yourself, show that you can handle the life. But, uh, we’ve got some women in the gang too. They’re tough as nails, though. Not sure if you ladies are cut out for it,” he said, his tone almost teasing.

Jade giggled, her laugh light and disarming.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Mabel and I can handle ourselves pretty well. Maybe we could even impress someone like you?” She gave him a playful look, her tone flirtatious.

The leader seemed to puff up even more at that, his ego clearly swelling—and maybe something else too, judging by the way he was openly leering at Jade’s body.

“*Maybe*,” he said, clearly enjoying the idea of being the one to introduce some fresh blood into the gang. “If you’re serious about it, I could talk to some people. See if we could arrange something. But like I said, it ain’t easy.”

“Really? That would be amazing!” Jade gushed, her excitement sounding almost too genuine. “We’re just trying to get by, you know? Parent’s are always busy; so nothing for us to do but try and find our own path. Maybe this could be the chance we’ve been looking for!”

I watched the interaction closely, my hand still hovering near my knives but my mind now focused on how Jade was managing to deftly defuse the situation.

It was clear to me now that she had likely sensed I was about to do something risky and had jumped in to buy us some time.

Jade's bubbly enthusiasm was working like a charm, keeping the leader's attention squarely on her while I kept a close eye on the rest of his crew.

The other three guys were typical hanger-ons, nodding and laughing at all the right moments, but keeping a bit of distance—content to let their leader soak up all the attention.

I couldn't help but be impressed by Jade's quick thinking and her ability to switch gears so effortlessly. She was handling this situation way better than I could've imagined, and it made me realise I needed to be more adaptable in the future if I wanted to avoid these kinds of situations spiralling out of control.

'Emulating Jade is definitely going to push me in the right direction for Operator work...'

But right now, my priority was figuring out how to get us out of this mess.

Jade wouldn't be able to keep them distracted forever, and we needed to make our exit before things got any more complicated.

As Jade launched into another enthusiastic rant about how much she admired the Golden Phoenix gang and their leadership, I quickly scanned our surroundings, trying to stay inconspicuous behind her.

My mind raced as I weighed our options, quickly coming up with two separate plans.

One involved going back to my earlier idea of throwing punches, while the other relied on the backup plan Mr. Stirling had mentioned in his intel.

I wasn't typically one for unnecessary violence, but these guys were *really* pushing for it.

They were exactly the type who would hassle anyone who crossed their path, and part of me wanted to teach them a lesson. Who knew what they'd do to other girls they came across on this floor if we didn't put them in their place?

But as much as I wanted to crack a few heads, the logical part of my brain reminded me that caution was the smarter play.

For one, I wasn't entirely sure if I could even take them all down.

Sure, I had a Body of 5 and some basic [Martial Arts] training from Miss K's dojo, but my actual combat experience was practically nonexistent, having only really fought Kenzie inside the dojo itself—and let's be real, Kenzie wasn't exactly your typical mook.

I had no real idea where I stood when it came to a real-world fight.

It was entirely possible that I could handle them, but just as likely that they'd overpower me and Jade, and who knew what they'd do after realising we weren't just some random girls but had infiltrated their territory for a reason.

The other, more pressing concern was the data shard.

If things got physical and I failed to take out enough of them quickly, I risked the shard getting damaged or stolen. That was an absolute no-go for the Task, no matter how I tried to spin it.

Ultimately choosing to go with Mr. Stirling's backup plan, I quickly faked a call, entering a random ID into my cerebral interface's call option. My eyes flickered yellow as it tried to connect, just enough to make it look legit.

"Ah, great! Thank you so much! We'll be right there!" I exclaimed, faking enthusiasm just like Jade had earlier. The sudden outburst made everyone turn their attention to me.

Ignoring their stares, I turned to Jade with a bright smile. "Felice, great news! The owner's ready for us now; we can have our lesson!"

I'd thrown out a random name, but I knew Jade would catch on immediately, just like she'd done when she'd called me Mabel.

I quickly turned to the leader of the group and gave him a small, apologetic bow.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we've got a class booked with the owner of the store here. Felice and I are going to learn how to shoot some guns!"

I added a pair of cheesy finger-guns for effect, even though I was cringing internally at how over-the-top it felt.

The leader looked like he was about to interject, his face betraying his intent to keep us from leaving just yet, so I hurriedly continued, "How about you give us your IDs? We'll let you know when we're done inside, and we can chat more about the gang business then. Having a couple of capable gun-girls on your side has got to be better than just some random chicks off the street, right? We're not blanks; we know how important merit is!"

I stood up straighter, lifting my chin in what I hoped was a convincing display of naive confidence. My limited [[Perform]] Skill was working overtime, and I was really regretting that most of the Skill's levels had come from [Juggling] right about now.

The leader hesitated, clearly taken aback by the sudden shift in tone. Jade, not missing a beat, hit him with another flirtatious smile. "Yeah, you're right. Plus, it'll be fun to show off our new skills later, don't you think? Maybe you could even guide my hands a bit; if I mess up? Really get my fingers in the right places..."

She winked, and I could see the guy's resolve *shattering*, as I tried my best to keep the bile down.

Finally, he shrugged and pulled up his own interface, exchanging IDs with Jade and me.

"Alright, fine. But don't keep us waiting too long, yeah? We'll be around."

“Of course,” I replied, returning his grin with one of my own, before quickly ushering Jade back inside the gun store.

Once inside, we headed straight for the counter, both of us still riding the tension from the encounter outside. I could feel my pulse racing as we approached the store owner, who was busy with another customer.

I leaned in close to Jade, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Nice save back there. Fucking disgusting people, those guys... Let’s get this over with and get the fuck out of here before they change their minds.”

She nodded, her eyes still scanning the store, clearly on high alert. We both knew we weren’t out of the woods yet, but at least we would be safe for the next little while.

Now it was all about whether or not Mr. Stirling’s connections would come through in a pinch...