

Chapter 87 - Simplum Propositum

I scanned the alley carefully as Jade and I started making our way toward the far end, putting as much distance as we could between us and the gun store.

I was hoping—maybe foolishly—that the Golden Phoenix enforcers were still hanging around the front, none the wiser about our little escape.

That hope was short-lived.

“Fancy meeting you two here,” came the all-too-familiar, irritating voice of their leader, his tone dripping with smugness. I glanced back to see him sauntering toward us with his posse in tow—only now there were three extra goons tagging along.

I barely had time to wonder how they’d figured out we were in the back alley so quickly before I noticed a lanky kid, barely out of his teens, jump out from behind a nearby dumpster, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

Great, they had lookouts. Just my luck.

I locked eyes with Jade, and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing: *Not this shit again.*

The main group was still a good twenty metres away, but I could see Jade’s posture tense, her body ready to bolt at the first hint that I was about to do the same. It was tempting, to be honest—just run and hope for the best.

But there was one big problem: The leader was casually swinging a pistol around in his hand—a massive gun safety violation, that—a gun he hadn’t shown before.

If we bolted now, it wouldn’t just give him a reason to think we were up to something—it’d also give him a perfect excuse to take a shot at us.

With the straight, 80-metre stretch of alley ahead of us before we could even think about hitting the next street, we’d be easy targets.

We were caught between a rock and a hard place.

Running was risky, but staying put wasn’t exactly a great option either. I could almost see the wheels turning in Jade’s head, trying to calculate the odds, just like I was.

We needed a plan, and we needed it yesterday.

The leader, clearly undeterred by our silence—maybe even getting a kick out of it—kept up his smug charade.

“I believe we’re scheduled for a date, yeah? I assume you’re done with your ‘shooting lesson,’ which, by the way, seems to have been done without the store owner. But hey, who am I to judge how people teach others these days, eh?”

His crew, right on cue, chuckled and tossed out a few “Yeah, right”s and other idiotic comments, inching closer with every word. They were barely ten metres away now, and it was crystal clear that if we didn’t act fast, we’d be completely surrounded.

"Any smart plays like last time?" I whispered to Jade, barely moving my lips to avoid drawing attention.

She gave a tiny, hesitant shake of her head.

That was all I needed to know.

"Alright, that's far enough," I said, letting my voice cut through the alley with a sharpness that could slice through steel. I channelled every ounce of Edge I could muster into it, hoping to catch them off guard.

It worked.

The Golden Phoenix boys stopped dead in their tracks, clearly not expecting the sudden shift in tone.

"We've tried to be nice about it, but I'm done playing games," I continued, standing as tall as I could—which, okay, wasn’t exactly impressive, but it was the attitude that mattered. "We're *not* interested. Go find someone else to mess with, because whatever you think you've got planned? It's not happening. We're not easy targets, and we're definitely not going to roll over for whatever it is you think you're going to pull if we say no."

Their surprise was obvious, but I wasn’t finished.

I pressed on, keeping my tone icy. "If the very fact that we had access to that gun range unsupervised didn’t clue you in, then let me spell it out: We're out of your league. We're not looking for trouble on this floor, but if you push this, you *will* regret it. I promise."

I watched as the leader's bravado wavered for just a heartbeat, his eyes narrowing as he tried to size us up. We were either bluffing hard, or we really were out of his league—and he had no way of knowing which.

Truth be told, neither did I.

Sure, I had a few [Martial Arts] and [CQC] levels under my belt, and my Body stat was sitting pretty at a solid 5, which wasn’t bad for someone my age. But when it came down to an actual fight? I had no real clue if I’d be as effective as I liked to think I was.

The thought lingered at the back of my mind, but I pushed it aside—now wasn’t the time to start doubting myself.

Jade was fidgeting nervously beside me already, her anxiety clear as day. Not exactly the kind of energy that would help sell the story I was spinning, but I hoped my confident front would carry us through this.

A tense silence filled the alley as the leader kept his eyes on me, weighing his options. His crew was just as unsure, glancing between him and us, clearly waiting for a cue on what to do next.

The ball was in his court, and he knew it.

But I wasn't about to let him play his game.

I took a small step forward, just enough to keep the pressure on, locking eyes with him and silently cursing for not having invested in [Intimidation] earlier on to know whether what I was doing was correct.

"So what's it gonna be?" I asked, my voice steady. "You can either walk away and nobody needs to know about this whole deal here, or find out just *how far* out of your depth you truly are."

The leader hesitated for just a moment longer, his eyes dropping to the gun in his hand.

The instant they locked onto it, I realised I'd pushed a bit too far.

Internally cursing my lack of finesse with [Intimidation], I felt every muscle in my body tighten as his gaze returned to me, a devious grin spreading across his face.

"Weapons," he barked, and the guys around him broke into nasty chuckles, pulling out knives and slipping on knuckle rings. He turned back to me, voice dripping with arrogance, "Go on then, *girl*. Show me just how far out of my depth I am. Think you can outrun a bullet, you blank-ass bitch?"

He strode confidently toward me, gun raised, stopping just a metre away.

My body locked up, every instinct screaming at me to move, to run, but I couldn't hear anything over the pounding in my ears.

Adrenaline surged through me, my heart racing, but I was frozen in place.

'I'm going to fucking die,' the thought echoed in my mind as I stared down the barrel pointed at my head. Despair clawed at me, urging me to give in, to beg for forgiveness and to submit to whatever horror they had in store if it simply meant survival.

But even as panic threatened to consume me, my Ego clung to the single goal I had given it earlier: Escape.

Forcing my emotions into submission, I could feel my Ego working overtime, straining to keep me standing tall and outwardly composed. The pressure was immense, like a crushing weight bearing down on me, ready to snap me in half with the slightest push.

It was clear that this was the absolute limit of what my Ego could handle at this Level. But just as I felt myself teetering on the edge, a cold, sharp clarity began to spread through me—my Edge stepping in to support my Ego.

Suddenly, I could feel my body and mind syncing up, primed to react in an instant.

Every nerve was on a hair-trigger, a single thought away from action.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, the words barely escaping my lips. I wasn’t sure if I was apologising to Jade, to myself, or to the universe at large for the mess we were about to plunge into.

This situation never should have happened; *wouldn’t* have happened if I had prepared better.

If I’d spent less time messing around and more time honing the *right* Skills.

Social Skills, Combat Skills, Stealth Skills—those were the three pillars of any Operator build worth its salt.

Yet I had *thoroughly* neglected the first one.

Now, I was paying for it, and worse still, I’d dragged Jade into this mess with me.

The leader’s grin widened as he heard my whispered apology, clearly thinking I’d folded, that I was begging for mercy.

In a way, maybe I was.

But the second he glanced back toward his approaching crew, ready to let loose another nugget of golden wisdom and wit, undoubtedly, I let go—let my body and mind move on autopilot, following the emergency plan I’d cooked up for moments just like this.

It wasn’t anything fancy.

Fancy plans always failed, just like this last one had.

No, this one was *simple*, and in its simplicity, there was beauty.

‘Blademaster’s Strike.’

In a flash, far faster than humanly possible, I yanked the RaZ from its sheath on my back while simultaneously lunging forward and turning my head towards the right, out of the firing line, while reaching for the hand holding the gun.

The leader wasn’t slow nor stupid—he’d half-expected a move like this and tried to step away, but by the time he did, it was already far, far too late.

There was a disconnect, though.

Whether I’d underestimated the RaZ’s sharpness, my own strength at a Body of 5, or the sheer speed granted by [Blademaster’s Strike], I wasn’t sure—maybe it was all three.

Whatever the cause, the outcome was clear.

As the leader turned back to me, ready to pull the trigger, *nothing* happened.

In my left hand, I held his entire forearm, hand, and gun still attached, poised to shoot.

The RaZ in my right hand gleamed with a perfect edge, not a drop of blood marring its surface. The cut was so clean, it looked like he'd been sliced by a laser.

For a moment, time seemed to freeze.

His crew kept moving toward us, Jade behind me, readying her knives for the inevitable fight, and the leader still wore that victorious grin, completely unaware of what had just happened.

Time only resumed when the first torrent of blood spurted from the stump of his arm, the rhythm matching his rapidly accelerating heartbeat. His grin twisted into horror as his brain caught up with the sight before him: Me, holding his severed forearm.

The world snapped back into motion with the scream that tore from his throat, his crew halting in their tracks, their expressions flipping from cocky confidence to shock and terror.

Jade, who'd been gearing up for a fight, froze mid-motion, her eyes wide with a mix of disbelief and unadulterated horror.

My Edge kept me from violently throwing up at the sight of the blood and the feel of the severed, still-warm forearm in my hand. But it was clear that both my Edge and Ego were struggling to keep up, teetering on the edge of collapse under the weight of what I was putting them through..

'*Push now,*' I urged myself, trying to will my body and mind to obey, to keep moving, to stick to the new plan that I had just concocted.

I took a step towards the leader, who was stumbling backward in pure panic, and tried to steady my voice. "I told you, you were out of your—"

"Kill that fucking whore! Kill them both! *Fucking kill them!*" The leader screamed, cutting me off, his voice a mix of pain and rage that pierced through the alley like a siren.

Any hope of intimidating them into backing down shattered in that very moment.

His frantic orders broke the spell of terror that had held his crew frozen in place. The posse of five lunged toward me and Jade, murder flashing in their eyes, their previous fear overridden by a bloodlust fueled by their leader's screams.

Instinctively, I dropped the severed forearm, my body moving on autopilot as I reached for one of my RI-05s hidden inside my jacket, while tightening my grip on the hilt of the RaZ.

'*No time for hesitation now,*' I told myself, feeling that strange, eerie calm wash over me—the same one that always seemed to settle in when things got too intense, like back at Miss K's dojo with Kenzie.

Jade, still wide-eyed with shock, snapped out of it just in time, her hands moving with practised speed as she drew her own knives.

We were in this now, and there was no backing down.

Without hesitation, I threw the first knife, aiming for the knee of a lanky guy from the posse charging at me with a mean-looking hunting knife. I didn't even bother checking if it hit, already stepping forward to close the distance between me and the nearest thug.

I launched a hard, running-kick straight into his midsection, feeling the satisfying thud as it connected, sending him stumbling back.

But there was no time to relish the moment.

I sensed movement behind me and instinctively ducked, turning to the side just as another attacker swung his knife at me. The blade skidded harmlessly off the tough composite fibres of my jacket, missing its mark as I completed my turn, ending up in a crouch facing my opponent.

He was off-balance from his missed swing, leaving him wide open.

I didn't hesitate.

With a swift, brutal motion, I drove the RaZ straight into his kneecap and yanked it downward with all the strength I could muster. The blade sliced through flesh and bone, nearly severing his lower leg entirely as he crumpled to the ground with a scream.

Blood sprayed across the alley as the guy crumpled to the ground, clutching at the shredded remains of his knee.

My heart was pounding in my chest, but the strange, detached calm kept me moving.

There was no time to process what I'd just done; I simply had to keep going.

Another thug was already closing in on me, his knuckles gleaming with metal rings that promised a world of pain if they connected.

I spun around, whipping out another throwing knife from my jacket and hurling it with all the precision I could muster. The blade sailed through the air, embedding itself in his forearm just as he reared back to strike. His hand jerked back involuntarily, the knife sending a shock of pain through his arm, but he wasn't down yet.

Before he could recover, I lunged at him, slamming the hilt of the RaZ into his stomach with a force that knocked the wind out of him, trying my best to use my limited [Slicer] knowledge to not aim for anything particularly lethal.

He doubled over, gasping for breath, and I brought my knee up hard into his face, sending him sprawling back onto the dirty alley floor. The move wasn't perfect—more of a desperate swing than anything else—but it worked.

For now.

The very next moment the guy I had kicked away to buy me a few seconds of time initially came in swinging his knife at me.

Still winded from the exertion and in the process of getting my footing again after laying out the last guy, I had no time to dodge.

Raising my arm to protect my throat that he was very clearly going for, I felt the heavy impact as the knife tried to bore its way into my jacket—but failed.

His body crashed into me as he transformed the running slice into a tackle, moving the both of us to the ground.

The impact was like getting hit by a truck.

We tumbled to the ground in a mess of limbs, my back slamming hard against the rough pavement. The guy's weight bore down on me, and his knife scraped uselessly against the composite fibres of my jacket.

But that didn't stop him from trying to force the blade through, grunting with effort as he pressed it harder against me, forcing my arm and his knife closer and closer towards my face.

My mind raced, and my instincts kicked in—I had tussled quite a lot on the ground with Kenzie; I knew this battleground.

With one arm pinned beneath me, I used the other to drive the hilt of the RaZ into his side, trying to hit anything that would make him flinch.

He grunted in pain but didn't let up, the blade inching closer to my exposed cheek. I could feel the cold metal almost graze my skin, and panic threatened to overwhelm me.

But I couldn't afford to panic.

Not now.

With a desperate surge of strength, leveraging all the power my Body of 5 could generate, I twisted my body to the side, managing to free my pinned arm.

I brought it up in a brutal arc, slamming my fist into the side of his head.

His grip faltered for a split second, and I took the opportunity to shove him off balance.

But as I did, another guy loomed over us, his eyes wild as he moved to help his friend—this wasn't like the fights in Miss K's dojo at all!

The second guy's foot came down towards my head, and I barely managed to roll to the side, feeling the rush of air as his boot missed me by inches.

I twisted back onto my feet, but the first guy grabbed my ankle, yanking me back down.

I hit the ground again, hard, the wind knocked out of me for a second time.

He was on me in an instant, his knife slashing wildly at my torso.

My jacket absorbed most of the slices and stabs, but I could feel the force behind them, each one threatening to slip past the protective material and find flesh; heavily bruising my ribs and stomach underneath.

My mind was a whirl of fear and adrenaline, but my Edge and Ego kept me from relenting.

One thing was clear, however: I needed to end this, and fast.

There was no chance I could win a two versus one in a situation like this.

I brought my knee up sharply, catching the guy in the ribs, causing him to gasp and loosen his grip on my ankle. I wrenched it free and kicked out at his stomach with as much force as I could muster, sending him sprawling back on the ground.

But before I could get to my feet, the second guy was already on me again.

He came at me with a wild overhead slash, his blade aimed straight for my face.

I managed to raise my arm just in time, the knife skidding off the sleeve of my jacket. The force of the blow jarred my arm, bruising it painfully, but I didn't let it stop me.

I swung the RaZ in a wide arc, catching him across the shin.

The blade bit deep, and he howled in pain, staggering back with blood streaming down his leg.

The first guy was back on me at that very moment, though, his hands grappling with mine as he tried to wrestle the RaZ out of my grip.

We rolled across the pavement, trading blows as we fought for control of the blade.

He managed to pin down my RaZ between his right arm and his body for a moment as a result of a failed stab on my part, his hands suddenly around my throat as he tried to choke the life out of me.

My vision was fading fast, and black spots danced at the edges.

Desperation fueled my next move.

I released the RaZ that had gotten stuck in the guy's clothes and grabbed the guy's head with both hands, forcing my thumbs into his eyes with every ounce of strength I had left.

He screamed, thrashing wildly as he tried to pry my hands away, but I didn't let up.

A surge of air rushed back into my lungs, and I didn't hesitate.

I slammed my forehead into the bridge of his nose with a sickening crunch, feeling bone and cartilage shatter beneath the impact. Blood sprayed from his face, and his grip on me finally broke as he fell backward, clutching his ruined face.

Releasing him, I reached for the RaZ, pulled it out and, in a brutal, desperate motion, drove it into his knee with all my remaining strength.

This time, I didn't miss.

The blade sliced clean through the kneecap, severing muscle and bone in one horrifyingly smooth motion. His scream of agony pierced the air as he crumpled to the ground, the lower part of his leg separated from the rest of his body.

Blood was everywhere—his, mine, I couldn't even tell anymore—but I didn't care.

I was still alive, and that was all that mattered.

But it wasn't over yet.

The second guy was already limping toward me, his knife raised high, determination and rage etched into his face. My breath came in ragged gasps, my energy heavily drained from the high-intensity fight.

I scrambled backward, desperately trying to put some distance between us, but there was no way I could outrun him in my state.

Then, my hand landed on something slick and fleshy.

Realisation struck like a lightning bolt.

Without wasting a moment, I dropped the RaZ, turned around and ripped the gun from the severed arm's hand.

I spun around, barely aiming, and fired blindly at the advancing enemy. The gun roared in my hand, a deafening crack as I squeezed the trigger, praying for a hit.

With the short distance between us, however, praying was not necessary.

The first bullet found its mark with brutal efficiency, hitting the approaching enemy right in the groin. His eyes widened in shock before he crumpled to the ground, letting out a scream of pure agony that echoed through the narrow alley.

Spinning around, I quickly assessed the rest of the combat situation.

Jade was locked in a one-on-one fight with the last remaining guy, her movements cautious and measured. She was clearly playing it safe, not wanting to get hurt after already taking out one of the attackers. Her opponent was relentless, but Jade's defensive stance was holding him at bay, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Without hesitation, I adjusted my aim, focusing on the back of the guy's leg.

Squeezing the trigger once more, I fired.

The bullet tore through the air and connected with his calf, dropping him to the ground with a strangled cry of pain.

Jade didn't waste the opportunity, immediately closing in to disarm him, her knives flashing as she sliced the muscles on both of his arms, before kicking him in the face hard enough to knock him out.

With all the immediate threats neutralised, the alley fell into a tense, heavy silence, broken only by the ragged breathing of the two of us and the cries and whimpers of the enemies around us.

The fight was over, but the adrenaline still pumped through my veins, clouding my thoughts and making it hard to focus. There was one thing, however, that I knew I needed to do.

Using what little energy I had left, I forced myself up from the ground, my legs shaky and my vision still a bit blurred. I stumbled towards the enemy leader, who was desperately trying to stop the bleeding from his freshly severed arm.

His panic was palpable, his frantic muttering filling the air.

"I... told... you," I panted, each word a struggle. "We... were... out... of... your... league."

His response was a jumbled mess of fear and disbelief, "That bitch took off my arm...! Fuck...! MY arm! Fuck!"

Without a second thought, I stepped closer and swung the butt of the pistol against his temple, silencing his ramblings as he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Kneeling down beside him, I pulled out the Coagulator and jammed it into the stump of his arm. The auto-injector hissed as it delivered its dose, and I watched as the bleeding slowed to a stop, the rhythmic pulsing of blood ebbing away.

The wound sealed up quickly, the medicine doing its job.

I didn't stop there, however.

Moving from one fallen enemy to the next, I checked their injuries and used whatever scraps of clothing I could find to bandage their wounds, especially the ones where I had nearly—or entirely—severed their legs at the knee.

Jade, still in complete shock but surprisingly focused and quick-minded, quietly helped with those I couldn't reach, her usual chatter gone as she worked in silence.

The guys were surprisingly subdued now, reduced to grunts, cries of pain, and occasional whimpers. None of their earlier bravado or sleazy comments remained—a small mercy in the midst of the chaos.

Once the last of them was rudimentarily bandaged and I had gathered up all my gear—the throwing knives and the RaZ I had dropped—I signalled to Jade that it was time to go.

We needed to get out of here, *fast*.

I led the way out of the alley and onto the open street, not caring about the blood that soaked through my clothes. Some of it was mine, but most of it was theirs.

Hiding in the crowd with this much blood on us wasn't really an option.

But at this point, blending in wasn't our main concern.

The Golden Phoenix enforcers had undoubtedly already called for backup. Our only hope was to move quickly and put as much distance between us and them as possible.

So, we ran...