

Chapter 89 - Sale

The adrenaline was wearing off fast, and I was trying to steady my breath, coaxing my body back to a state that didn't feel like I'd just outrun death. The escape from the 38th floor was still fresh, each heartbeat pounding like a drum in my chest.

Jade looked just as winded, slumped against the elevator wall, but at least we'd lucked out with having the ride to ourselves.

Though, calling it luck was a bit of a stretch.

Thinking back on those frantic final moments, it was obvious *why* we were alone in here: The panicked faces of people who had wanted to jump in with us but thought better of it the second they saw me—blood-streaked, eyes wild, and still clutching the gun I'd ripped from that kid's severed arm.

They'd made a collective decision to take the stairs, wait for the next ride, or just get the hell out of Dodge rather than get tangled up with whatever nightmare Jade and I were living through.

So, yeah—luck wasn't quite the right word. More like good old-fashioned human self-preservation working in our favour.

Either way, I wasn't complaining.

The few moments of quiet gave me a chance to gather my thoughts, plan our next steps before the elevator stopped on the 16th floor—the first button my shaky hand had instinctively jabbed when we'd stumbled inside.

It wasn't exactly home turf, but I knew the layout well enough from my visits to Mr. Shori's shop. That familiarity would make it easier to slip away if anyone had somehow managed to follow us this far.

But before we hit the ground running again, there was one glaring issue that needed dealing with: The stolen pistol still clutched in my hand.

This thing was a problem on every conceivable level.

I didn't have a licence to carry it in the megabuilding—not that I had ammo to spare, or any idea where to get more without begging for favours from Mr. Stirling that I had no intention of offering up anytime soon.

Plus, walking around with a gun wasn't exactly the subtle approach I was trying to cultivate. It screamed trouble, and the last thing I needed was more of that.

One day, sure, I'd be the kind of person who could walk around with a whole arsenal strapped to me without batting an eye. I'd get the licences, build up the Skills, make it so no one even thought twice about it.

But today wasn't that day, and right now, the gun was nothing but a massive liability.

And then there was the other problem: It wasn't just *any* gun—it was stolen straight off a Golden Phoenix enforcer. Worse, the kind of cocky kid who'd probably drop his dad's name in every conversation. He had that "my father will hear of this" vibe that reeked of entitlement and the kind of connections I absolutely did *not* want on my tail.

Cutting his arm off had definitely put me on their radar already. I'd been aiming to disarm him, but not like... well *disarm* him. That was just how it played out, and now, holding onto this gun was like carrying around a glowing neon sign that read, "Come find me. It was I who cut off your arm!"

I let out a shaky sigh, eyeing the gun one last time before deciding I needed to ditch it, fast.

No point in hanging onto it when it was basically a flashing sign saying, "Come get me." As much as having a firearm for future tight spots would've been a comfort, the risks *far* outweighed the rewards at the time.

I glanced over at Jade, who was still catching her breath.

She'd been a real asset on this mission, even if just about every plan I'd laid out had either blown up in my face or spiralled completely out of control. But the one decision to bring Jade along as backup had panned out, which was something.

'One out of six plans working? Could be worse,' I mused. But then another idea abruptly snuck into my head alongside it, and a grin started to spread across my face. *'The Clawed Beasts and the Golden Phoenix are sworn enemies, no? I bet they wouldn't mind getting their hands on a weapon lifted straight off one of the Phoenix's enforcers...'*

It was almost too perfect.

I knew *just* the person to offload this problem onto—someone with connections higher up in the Clawed Beasts who might even toss a few creds my way for the trouble. It'd be a massive win-win: I'd get rid of the gun without having to worry about it tracing back to me, and I'd score a bit of extra credits on the side as well.

With a plan rapidly forming in my mind, it seemed like the ideal way to turn this whole mess into something a little more worthwhile.

I quickly pulled up the System Interface, letting the notifications scroll by as I searched for a specific one, eager to put my new plan into motion right away, while we were still stuck in the elevator together.

[System]: 600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for [Deception] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Appraise] Skill.

[System]: 1,200xp gained for [CQC] Skill.

[System]: [CQC] Skill has reached Level 2. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

[System]: [Martial Arts] Skill has reached Level 3. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available. [Martial Arts] Perk Point available.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for [{Anima-Razor}] Skill.

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

[System]: 400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for [Pistols] Skill.

[System]: [Pistols] Skill has reached Level 2. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for [Firearms] Skill.

[System]: Golden Phoenix Ganger (Rookie-Enforcer) defeated. [x6]

[System]: 30xp gained for defeating Golden Phoenix Ganger (Rookie-Enforcer). [x6]

[System]: Golden Phoenix Ganger (Rookie-Enforcer Leader) defeated.

[System]: 70xp gained for defeating Golden Phoenix Ganger (Rookie-Enforcer Leader).

[System]: 800xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.

[System]: [First-Aid] Skill has reached Level 2. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

[System]: 1,600xp gained for [Intimidation] Skill.

[System]: [Intimidation] Skill has reached Level 1. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: [Intimidation] Skill has reached Level 2. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 600xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 400xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

[System]: 800xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

[System]: 1,900xp (+800xp Bonus) gained for Edge Attribute. Stored Bonus Experience has reached 0.

[System]: 1,100xp gained for Ego Attribute.

[System]: 100xp gained for Anima Attribute.

My eyes nearly popped out of my skull when I saw the sheer amount of experience the System had dumped on me from this wild ride, but before I could let the giddy excitement take over, my Ego swooped in, keeping me grounded.

‘Save the celebrations for later,’ I reminded myself.

There was still a job to finish.

Refocusing, I scrolled through the notifications until I found exactly what I was looking for: the [Intimidation] Skill downloads.

I hadn't expected much, maybe one level if I was lucky, having given it a 50/50 that I actually had something waiting for me here, so seeing that it hadn't just levelled once but twice was more than just a pleasant surprise. I was definitely not going to complain—especially since I was likely going to need every ounce of that Skill right now.

I pressed my back against the elevator wall, trying to minimise any outward reactions that Jade might catch onto. She was sharp, and I didn't need her poking around in my headspace right now.

Taking a steadying breath, I mentally nudged the System to kickstart the Muscle-Memory and Knowledge downloads for Levels 1 and 2 of [Intimidation].

The moment the download began, I felt a surge of heat and tension spread through my body, like someone had turned on the pressure cooker inside my head.

My vision flickered for a split second as the information started to flood in—nuances, postures, subtle shifts in voice, eye contact; everything needed to make myself come off as just that little bit scarier than I had any right to be.

It was truly wild how much there was to absorb and maybe doing two Levels at once wasn't exactly the smartest of choices, but time was of the essence.

The System wasn't just dumping some random know-how into my brain either—it was downright reshaping the very way I carried myself, giving me the instincts to push people's buttons without even trying too hard. My muscles twitched with newfound muscle memory, every little movement slightly more deliberate, slightly more commanding.

I could feel the shift immediately, and it was oddly reassuring—like I'd just unlocked a whole new tool in my kit that I hadn't even known I was missing. But as much as the new knowledge felt empowering, it also came with a gut-punch of embarrassment.

The more the System filled in the gaps, the more I realised just how amateurish my previous attempts at intimidation had been. It was like having a front-row seat to a brutally honest highlight reel of my most cringe-worthy moments, showing exactly why the Golden Phoenix enforcer had no choice but to throw down with me.

Every awkward pause, every misplaced threat, every sloppy movement and every instance where I pushed far too hard for no reason—laid bare in excruciating detail.

It was like watching a "How Not to Intimidate" tutorial, but instead of just an in-depth, 40-minute YouTube video, it was my own screw-ups on repeat, dissected down to the second, and crammed into my head all at once.

I didn't just feel exposed; I felt like I'd been caught out in the middle of a performance with no lines memorised and my pants around my ankles.

The urge to just melt through the elevator floor and vanish was almost overwhelming.

The realisation that Jade, the enforcers, and probably half the damn floor had witnessed my pathetic excuses for intimidation prior to this point made me want to curl up and disappear.

But, as always, the System didn't have a "graceful exit" button, and I was left standing there, stewing in my newfound awareness of just how out of my depth I'd been.

Forcing myself to push past the cringe, I gripped the stolen gun tighter in my hand, grounding myself with the cold, hard reality of what still needed to be done.

There was no going back, no way to rewrite the past few hours of screw-ups, but at least now, with this new edge, I could make damn sure I didn't fumble the ball on this same thing in the future; starting with my attempt at selling this damned gun to the Clawed Beasts.

As my vision returned to normal and the downloads finally ceased, I immediately double-checked to see whether Jade was showing any indication that she had caught on to something being off about me—I couldn't afford her, of all people, to catch even a whiff of the System.

Luckily she was still breathing heavily on my right, leaning heavily against the wall with her back, eyes shut tight and face turned towards the ceiling.

'Alright, showtime, Sera. Don't mess this up now,' I hyped myself up, before tapping into my newly found [Intimidation] knowledge and letting my Edge chill my demeanour down to an icy level.

With a heavy stomp, I abruptly stepped up into Jade's personal space, startling her horribly as I did.

"Call your boss," I demanded immediately, without giving her even a second to recover.

[Intimidation] told me that I needed to be assertive and not lose momentum if I wanted to be successful on this. It would have been nice to simply use [Negotiation] for this whole thing, as I really didn't want Jade to be scared of me as a whole, but necessity dictated that things needed to be done fast; [Negotiation] was not fast.

"I... What? Why?" Jade replied, stuttering and trying to wrap her head around what was going on.

I simply stared her down, letting my Edge do the talking through my eyes. I practically saw her wilt in front of me over the next few seconds, as the combative side of Jade quickly folded under my silent glare.

"Okay, okay...! One second," she finally conceded, after failing to inch away from me in the narrow space the elevator afforded us. Her eyes turned yellow as she started the call.

"Patch me in," I ordered, not wanting her to have a chance to let anything slip past me; I needed this to go well.

A simple, hesitant nod from her end caused a connection request to pop up on my cerebral interface, which I immediately agreed to.

While Jade was setting up the call, I prepared the last important part of the plan.

Using [Appraisal] on the pistol in my hands, I read through the information quickly; paying particular attention to the specs of the gun and the estimated price the System was recommending for it.

[== Alter Z-04 Custom - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: **Uncommon**]

[Tier: 0]

[Price: 610-670{c}]

[Barrel Length: 127mm]

[Empty Weight: 524g]

[Manufacturer: Alternate Manufacturing]

[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel]

[== Alter Z-04 Custom - Combat Information ==]

[Durability: **472/600**]

[Firing Modes: Semi-Automatic]

[Rate of Fire: **420** Semi]

[Calibre: 9x19mm]

[Magazine Size: **23**]

[Effective Range: 10-200m]

[== Alter Z-04 Custom - Misc Information ==]

[Passive: Custom - This item has been custom designed and created at a manufacturing level. **Fire Rate** and **Magazine Size** are increased by **20%**.]

[Passive: Antiquity - This item is difficult to maintain, having been created in times long past. **Durability** is **90%** harder to restore and replacement parts are unlikely to be readily available.]

'It's a Tier 0...? Maybe because it's an Antiquity...?' I thought as I scanned the details. 'Still, an Uncommon is definitely a nice find, and 600 Credits would do very nicely in my account right about now.'

I could practically feel the weight of those credits in my pocket already, and it was a welcome distraction from the mess we'd just escaped.

A moment later, the call connected, and Vega's slightly concerned voice echoed in our heads. "Jade? What's going on? You okay? Why are you calling me?"

Hearing that genuine worry in his voice, despite his usual sleek and ruthless demeanour, was oddly heart-warming. It was a side of him I hadn't really seen before, even though I knew it had to be there, considering how he looked out for Jade and her sisters.

Jade glanced at me, uncertain, and I gave her a nod to go ahead—though there was an unspoken warning in my gaze.

It was something I probably wouldn't have noticed before, but now, with my newly downloaded Skills, I realised that just by being here, I was exerting a subtle pressure.

My presence alone was enough to keep certain things unsaid, whether I explicitly told her to or not.

"Olivia, Opal," Jade said, her voice carrying a coded message as she looked nervously in my direction. I couldn't be certain what it meant, but based on her behaviour, I was about 90% sure it wouldn't cause any problems for me.

Before Vega could respond, Jade added quickly, "Ela is also on this call; she asked me to call you. I'm not sure what—"

"Hello, Vega," I cut in smoothly, taking control of the conversation.

This setup was exactly why I had asked Jade to make the call, despite having Vega's contact ID myself. I wanted to catch him off-guard and apply a bit of pressure—something my newfound [Intimidation] skills suggested might give me the upper hand.

By speaking through Jade, I was subtly implying a threat: If I wasn't satisfied with how things went, Jade might bear the brunt of my displeasure.

Of course, I had no intention of actually doing that, but *they* didn't know that.

"Ela," Vega's voice returned, the warmth and concern vanishing in an instant, replaced by that smooth, guarded tone I'd come to expect from him. That charisma-laden facade he always wore when dealing with me, the kind that set off alarms from the first moment we'd met. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The subtle shift in his voice made it clear that he wasn't thrilled about being put on the spot like this, but that was just fine by me. [Intimidation] wasn't about keeping things pleasant—it was about tilting the power balance in your favour, and right now, I had no problem making Vega squirm a little.

"Just wrapped up my job on the 38th. Your girl, Jade, was a real asset out there," I started, keeping my tone casual but letting just enough of an edge creep in. "But we did have a little run-in with a 'welcoming committee.' Funny coincidence, don't you think? Any chance you've got some insight on that?"

Jade's eyes went wide, the insinuation hitting her hard.

She knew exactly what I was implying, and while I didn't truly believe Vega or Jade had set me up, I wasn't above using the all-too-inconvenient timing of those Golden Phoenix enforcers to nudge things in my favour. It was too perfect of an opportunity to pass up—using the appearance of betrayal to keep Vega on the back foot.

I kept my expression neutral, but inside, I was gauging every little reaction.

While I was almost certain it truly was all just bad luck on our part—rookie enforcers showing up at the worst possible time—it was all about what I could make *them* believe.

Jade had been blindsided, and from what I could tell, hadn't exactly had a backup plan either, which only reinforced the idea that this wasn't an orchestrated ambush.

Still, pushing this angle gave me leverage. Whether they'd actually betrayed me or not, I was positioning myself as the wronged party—the one who needed compensation, or at the very least, a show of good faith.

"I do not, as a matter of fact," Vega shot back, his tone laced with irritation. He clearly wasn't a fan of being put on the defensive. "Got any more intel you can share? I could dig around, see if anything shakes loose."

"Leader's name was Damien Valir. He had a group of rookie enforcers tagging along when we crossed paths. Tried to de-escalate, but things got... messy," I said, keeping my voice as flat as possible, even though the memories of the fight were still fresh, the adrenaline still buzzing in my veins. "They've got a few casualties on their side now. All Golden Phoenix."

Vega was about to jump in again, but [Intimidation] nudged me to keep control of the narrative.

"Jade held her own during the scuffle," I added, glancing at her. "She could use a little more group fight training, but she didn't fold when it counted. There's potential there."

To my surprise, Jade looked almost pleased, like I'd handed her the biggest compliment ever, despite my lukewarm assessment. Not exactly the reaction I'd expected, but I'd take it.

Vega, on the other hand, stayed quiet, probably running scenarios in his head, figuring out how to spin this mess. Finally, he spoke up, voice measured. "Damien Valir... that name's going to be a headache, mostly because of his mother."

'Damnit! It's a mommy's boy, not a daddy's!' I lamented internally at my earlier misread.

"Carinola Valir, Senior Enforcer in the Golden Phoenix," Vega continued, sounding like he was trying to piece together a puzzle. "She's not going to be happy about her son getting shown up. It's manageable, but it could cause ripples. She'll probably kick up a fuss..."

"Yeah, she's going to need to get him a new arm too," I said, trying to keep the smugness out of my voice. "Things had to be... *disarmed*. But he's alive, if that's any consolation."

Jade's eyes flicked to me, her expression a mix of disbelief and something I couldn't quite place. Vega, though, was dead silent—probably not a fan of my wordplay.

Not that I blamed him; I was enjoying the gallows humour more than anyone else.

"You... *cut off* Damien Valir's arm?" Vega finally asked, his voice tinged with something between disbelief and exasperation.

"Yep," I confirmed, keeping it casual. "He pulled a gun, so I took it—and the rest of his forearm."

Vega let out a long, audible sigh.

A brief moment of silence stretched out afterwards as the elevator continued its slow descent, bringing us closer to the 16th floor, which would naturally signal the end of this conversation. For once, I was glad these non-restricted elevators were so sluggish.

"I kept the gun; tossed the arm, though," I finally said, steering the conversation toward the real reason I'd started this whole exchange in the first place. "Figured the Clawed Beasts might be interested? Junior Enforcer Squad leader's gun—son of Carinola Valir, no less. Sounds like y'all have some history there, if you already knew about her."

"You want to sell us the gun?" Vega responded, his tone sharp with a brief hint of disbelief.

Jade looked just as taken aback, her confusion morphing into a flicker of fear even that I really couldn't place or make sense of.

"Yeah. Makes the most sense, right? Rival gangs, a firearm that's likely already registered in the megabuilding... Plus, it's not a bad piece of hardware on its own," I pressed on, launching into my sales pitch.

"It's an Alter Z-04 Custom. Modified magazine, tweaked firing mechanism for an increased rate of fire. Bit of an antiquity, but that just makes it easier to re-register on a new licence—like any other pre-war gun. Condition's pretty good too."

Jade's eyes widened at my detailed breakdown, making me feel more than a little smug—[Appraisal] was an absolute cheat, and I loved it.

Vega's voice came back, slower and more measured this time, "You're offering to sell us a pre-war era gun that's already registered in the Megabuilding...?"

I could understand his scepticism.

Getting your hands on a firearm inside a megabuilding was anything but easy. Licences were ridiculously expensive, and even once you had one, getting a gun approved for use inside the building was a whole other ordeal.

The building owners couldn't just let someone stroll around with a T6 Particle Cannon, risking the entire structure coming down. Approval wasn't just about the gun's capabilities—it was also about politics, connections, and a whole lot of credits to grease the right palms.

Pre-war guns, however, were a bit of a loophole.

They almost never packed enough punch to be considered "high-risk."

Most were designed for single-target engagements, making them easier to get whitelisted.

So this weapon, being a pre-war piece already registered and whitelisted for use, was a rare and valuable find for any gang operating inside the building—one of the main reasons I had no choice but to offload it.

It would probably be just as popular with Operators, but I didn't have the right contacts for that yet. The Clawed Beasts were my best bet.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I said. So, do you want it or not, Vega? We’re almost at our destination here,” I replied, letting a bit of Edge-induced irritation seep into my voice.

“Ahh, yes. Definitely interested,” Vega shot back almost instantly, and I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head as he likely sifted through his options, trying to figure out what kind of offer he could make. “You got a price in mind already?”

[Negotiation] lit up in my mind like a neon sign, signalling that this was its moment to shine.

“1,000 creds,” I said, not missing a beat. “Half up front, half when Jade delivers the weapon.”

I let the combined weight of [Negotiation] and [Intimidation] carry the demand, my voice cool and unwavering. I barely had to think about it—just let the System do its thing, trusting its knowledge to handle the heavy lifting.

“That’s a steep ask, and you know it, Ela,” Vega replied, his tone tinged with a mix of admonishment and something like enthusiasm. The guy liked to haggle—there was a certain spark there that told me he was enjoying this back-and-forth.

That was going to be real useful intel later on.

“Maybe,” I shrugged, knowing full well he couldn’t see it but adding the casual flair anyway. “But it’s not just a gun, which in itself is pretty valuable but also leverage. And leverage against the Golden Phoenix is worth a whole lot more than creds, if you ask me. I’m doing you a favour here, Vega. A rare opportunity to hit them where it hurts without even lifting a finger.”

I could sense Jade watching me from the corner of her eye, caught somewhere between impressed and worried, but she kept her poker face on, not daring to interrupt.

Vega hummed thoughtfully on the other end, the silence dragging just long enough to hint at some deep calculations running through his mind. “800. I’ll send 400 now, and you’ll get the rest on delivery. We both know the gun’s valuable, but it’s not priceless; even considering who it belongs to.”

A smirk crept onto my face. I had been hoping for somewhere around 600; but Vega was being surprisingly more forthcoming than I had even dared dream of.

“950, same terms. You get a clean hit on the Phoenix and an easy whitelist gun. I’m basically giving you a discount out of goodwill—don’t make me regret it. Consider the eight enforcers down as complimentary, on the house.”

There was a beat of silence, the only sound the faint hum of the elevator as it descended, the tension hanging thick between us.

Finally, Vega’s voice crackled through again, grudging but still holding that shrewd undertone.

“Fine. 950. 500 now, 450 on delivery. And I want Jade back intact, weapon included.”

I caught the unspoken threat there, clear as day—he was rattled, worried enough about Jade that he was willing to play ball. My earlier [Intimidation] had clearly done its job, putting him in a spot where he couldn't afford to cut corners on this deal.

"Deal. Gun's going to her now. Pleasure doing business, Vega," I said, feeling a sense of relief as the tension began to ease off my shoulders. The 16th floor was fast approaching, and it looked like this whole mess was finally wrapping up.

Keeping my cool, I used the new [Pistols] knowledge and muscle memory download to strip the gun down in record time—magazine out, safety engaged, chamber cleared. The whole thing was smooth and quick, and it felt damn good knowing I'd pulled it off without fumbling.

Jade's eyes widened as I handed the gun, the mag and the loose bullet over almost haphazardly, her expression caught between awe and disbelief, like I'd just performed some kind of black magic ritual right in front of her.

It was a simple manoeuvre, honestly—basic [Pistols] fundamentals that had been drilled into me with the Skill's download.

But I wasn't going to lie, it felt pretty badass, and judging by Jade's reaction, it looked it too.

"Likewise," Vega replied, his voice sounding strained, but still managing to maintain that professional edge. Then, his tone dropped, turning icy enough to send a shiver down my spine. "And Ela... Don't ever drag Jade into actually dangerous shit or we're going to have a *serious* problem."

The line went dead before I could respond, leaving me and Jade standing in a tense silence as the elevator finally dinged, signalling our arrival on the 16th floor...