

Chapter 174 - Mimicry

Starting from the door I knew Higgins and the rest of the crew were waiting just behind—as well as my real body somewhere down the corridor to the left, hopefully not getting stepped on—I pulled up a basic drawing app through my link and started sketching out the apartment's layout.

Simple rectangles for rooms, rough guesses for dimensions, and small red dots scattered around to mark where I could make out each of the Scav's Cyberspace ghosts.

'Not exactly high art or anything, but it'll do,' I thought.

Fortunately, the Scavs themselves were making things easy on that front.

Most of them were still parked exactly where they'd been the second I had entered—glued to what read as a large television in the main living room, barely moving. Whatever was on the screen apparently held their collective attention hostage, which suited me just fine.

The apartment itself was a pretty sharp contrast to what I'd grown used to since landing in this world.

My family's places so far had been laid out in a fairly open way: One large main room that pulled double duty as kitchen and living room, a couple of smaller rooms branching off to the side for the bathroom and individual sleeping spaces.

Cramped by most standards, but at least the layout made sense for movement.

This place, however, had clearly been designed by someone with a deeply personal grudge against the concept of breathing room or manoeuvrability.

I had dropped in right behind the door, perched on the drone delivery tray, which put me smack in the middle of a narrow hallway that stretched the length of the apartment—maybe ten meters in total before it dead-ended at the back wall.

Two doors lined the left side, the closer one feeding into the large living room where most of the Scavs were currently vegetating. Three more on the right, the last of them sitting almost flush with the far end of the corridor.

The walls felt close enough to touch from both sides without fully extending your arms, and the ceiling wasn't doing anyone any favors either.

"This is going to be a *big* fucking problem, if we want to clear this out without getting bogged down, isn't it...?" I muttered to myself, eyes tracing the length of the corridor in my mental sketch.

Even with a full crew, the hallway would reduce everything to a single-file kill zone the moment things turned loud. No flanking, no spread, no room to maneuver around a problem if one came barreling out of a doorway.

"Takeda and Reina might be the only two real options for this—him at the front and her right behind as back-up. The rest of us are just going to get in the way otherwise..."

The only real alternative was splitting up.

Everyone peels off, takes a door, clears their room independently.

Faster and more efficient in theory, but likely far messier in practice—and whoever pulled the living room door would be walking into seven Scavs at once, completely alone or with maybe one other person—Reina, most likely—as support.

Which was, to put it diplomatically, a *tremendously* bad idea.

But the ghost-map wasn't going to cut it from a distance, so I pushed off from the delivery tray and started moving, keeping my steps deliberately slow and measured. Cyberspace or not, old habits had a way of sticking—don't rush in, don't assume the first read is the complete one.

The hallway itself felt even narrower when you were *actually* moving through it rather than just staring at it from one end.

The walls were a flat, textureless grey with rare and thin data-streams racing through them, the kind of low-render background detail that Cyberspace filled in when nobody had bothered to actually program anything interesting there. The floor, meanwhile, had the typical Cyberspace data-grid beneath it, barely visible unless you really focused on it, and the ceiling was just a textureless, gray *thing*—nothing worth noting.

The whole space had the distinct aesthetic of someone who'd set up their digital infrastructure with pure utility in mind and zero interest in curb appeal.

I reached the living room doorway first—the one I had been staring through since I had landed on the tray—and leaned in, just enough to get a proper look rather than relying on the first look from the outside.

Seven Scavs. The read had been accurate.

They were spread across mismatched furniture, or at least that's what Cyberspace interpreted their locations as, as it simulated the rough environment to match their ghost's postures—a couple sunk deep into a sagging couch, one perched on the arm of it like he couldn't quite commit to sitting properly, two more pulled up in chairs that had likely been dragged to face the screen, and the remaining pair lingering near the back wall with the loose, unfocused posture of people who were present but not really paying attention.

I held there for a second longer, cross-referencing what I was seeing against the red dots on my mental sketch, making sure none of them had shifted since I'd first mapped them.

They hadn't.

'All accounted for. Good.'

I pulled back from the doorway and continued down the hallway.

The second door on the left was still ahead of me, and the three on the right were spaced out at rough intervals down the corridor's length.

I moved past the first right-side doorway without stopping for long, merely peeking in briefly to make sure there wasn't anything of note inside—the room beyond dim and *very* empty—and kept going until I reached the next one down.

Closed.

I slowed, then stopped, staring at it for a moment.

Something about it tugged at the back of my brain in a way that I couldn't immediately place, an itch that sat just below conscious thought. I stood there for a second, head slightly tilted, until the itch *finally* sharpened into an actual observation.

*'...Why is there a door here? And why is it **closed**?'*

Cyberspace didn't *have* doors.

Not like real space did. Not unless someone had deliberately coded them into the architecture—and even then, they *always* served a purpose.

Data vaults, partitioned spaces, access-locked nodes—*anything* that required a new handshake and the correct, elevated authorization to access. Doors in Cyberspace meant *something* was behind them that whoever built this place had specifically wanted separated from everything else.

But this obviously *wasn't* a vault.

There was no reason for a vault to exist here and the makeup of it all just didn't fit what I knew vaults to look like. This was just a bog-standard corridor inside someone's squatter-space.

There was no reason for this door to exist at all, logically speaking.

I took a slow step back from it, the itch curdling into something colder as unease spread across my back in a shudder.

My eyes traced the door's edges—the frame, the handle, the seam where it met the floor—looking for anything that visually flagged as wrong or off.

I found nothing immediately obvious that would flag it as something other than what it appeared to be. But it just looked like a simple door that would perfectly fit into the apartment's whole aesthetic without fail.

Which was, in and of itself, the whole damn problem.

'Guess it's as good a time as any to try this one out...'

I mentally pulled up one of my unused Perks, which had been sitting mostly idle since I'd acquired it—one of those things I'd mentally filed under "useful eventually" without ever landing on the right moment. Apparently the right moment was standing alone in a sketchy Cyberspace corridor staring at a door that had no business existing.

So I activated it with a simple mental flick.

[Spectral Scanner]

The ping left my chest in a clean, even wave—visible, almost physical in the way it expanded outward, radiating across the floor and up the walls like a sonar pulse rippling through water.

It spread the full width of the hallway in under a second until it reached the door.

Then it hit *red*.

The kind of red that the System clearly reserved for things it wanted you to notice immediately, a sharp bloom of color that filtered directly into my mind alongside a compact burst of information: Hidden Daemon, built into the door's code.

If I'd reached out and touched the handle—initiating the data handshake to authenticate me—it would've activated instantly.

'Like a fucking door-shaped mimic...!'

The mental image was uncomfortably apt. Just sitting there in the hallway, looking completely mundane, waiting for someone to make the reasonable and obvious mistake of trying to open it.

I let out a slow breath and took another deliberate step back, updating my mental map with a very clear marker over that door.

The [Spectral Scanner] pulse hadn't died out at the door, though—it had been stopped there physically, the Daemon-door blocking it from pushing through to whatever lay beyond.

But down the rest of the hallway it had kept traveling, unimpeded, rolling forward and fanning out into the rooms at the far end.

The one remaining on the left, and the last one on the right.

Another knowledge transfer hit me a second later, as something was apparently hidden back there, in the far-end room on the right. Not hostile like the door, nor flagged as a threat in any way, but an object, as far as the Perk could determine.

Concealed deliberately, or at least not passively visible without something actively looking for it. I stood in the corridor for a moment, running through the options, then made a quick decision—I still had to hurry up or Higgins and the crew would get understandably uneasy.

I updated the mimic-door's position on my mental map with a fat, obvious marker and enough cautionary notation to make sure nobody on the crew would miss it when I relayed the layout, then gave it a wide berth as I slipped past and continued down the hallway toward the far end.

Keeping my steps quiet was pure reflex at this point—unhelpful in Cyberspace, where sound didn't work by the same rules as meat-space, but apparently a hard enough habit that my brain wasn't willing to drop it just because the physics were different.

The left-side door at the far end turned out to be a bathroom.

I stood in the doorway for a second, taking in the flat, low-detail render of a toilet and a sink that Cyberspace had bothered to approximate, and felt a quiet frown settle across my face.

'...Where the hell are the rest of them?'

Higgins had said there were at least a dozen.

I had seven accounted for in the living room and a mimic-door that was almost certainly hiding someone behind it. That still left a good chunk of headcount unaccounted for, and an empty bathroom wasn't exactly reassuring on that front.

I filed the question away and turned back toward the last door on the right, the one [Spectral Scanner] had flagged.

I approached it and carefully peaked inside and found... Nothing of note.

No ghosts, no Daemon, not even a Runner signature lurking in a corner waiting for me.

Just a whole host of... *stuff*.

I blinked.

The room was roughly a third the size of the living room, and every inch of floor space that wasn't the floor itself was occupied. In real space, this was clearly some kind of storage—piled high with whatever the Scavs had accumulated or stripped or just never bothered to sort through.

And Cyberspace had absolutely *no idea* what to do with any of it.

Physical objects only rendered properly in the digital layer when they were either programmed to be part of the space or had some kind of datasource nearby to anchor off of—something to give the system a reference point, a definition to work from: Furniture that people actually used, equipment that was connected to something, objects that interacted with the digital infrastructure in any meaningful way.

Those things Cyberspace could render with reasonable accuracy.

A pile of random Scav junk in a back room had none of that.

What I was looking at was the result—and it was deeply, profoundly *wrong* in a way that made the back of my brain itch.

The objects weren't stable. They didn't hold their shapes at all.

A suitcase bubbled outward at one corner and became something vaguely pillow-shaped before collapsing into what might have been a blanket, which then sprouted the suggestion of forks along one edge before those dissolved back into the general mass.

Everything was in constant, lazy flux, melting into and out of each other without any apparent logic or direction. Sizes shifted, proportions stretched and compressed, then the whole pile suddenly breathed, *almost*, in a way that had nothing to do with anything living.

It wasn't threatening or anything—wasn't reaching for me or doing anything with purpose.

It was just Cyberspace struggling to render undefined physical mass, filling in the gaps with static-shaped noise.

I stared at it for probably longer than I should have, until I finally managed to gather myself.

*'...Okay. So **that's** a thing that exists. Cool. Wonderful... Moving on.'*

I dragged my focus back to the actual reason I was standing in this doorway and carefully pushed my hand into the shifting mass, of course not moving anything in real space—my physical body wasn't here, and even if it was, rummaging through a pile of junk in Cyberspace didn't translate to rummaging through the actual pile—but diving into the data structure beneath it instead. Feeling around in the architecture of the space for the thing [Spectral Scanner] had already told me was there.

The formless objects churned and shifted around my hand, suitcase-pillow-blanket-fork cycling through their pointless transformations, and I pushed past all of it, looking for the one thing in this room that *actually* had a real digital presence.

I found it almost immediately once I broke past the surface layer of morphing strangeness.

After all, everything else in the pile had literally *no* definition.

But *this* thing had actual weight to it in the digital sense, a solidity that the rest of the shifting slop completely lacked. Something that existed in the digital layer not just as a rough approximation of a physical object, but as a thing with actual data in it.

It turned out to be a data-shard, buried under everything else like it had been deliberately tucked away down there.

A grin broke across my face before I'd even fully processed it.

"Looks like the Perk's already paying for itself...!" I said, to absolutely nobody, because I was alone in a Scav's storage room in Cyberspace talking to myself. "Not like detecting the Mimic-Door wasn't equally important, but data-shards are... Well, they're basically loot boxes. They could be anything—even a boat!"

I tagged it clearly on my own, personal mental map for later retrieval and carefully withdrew, leaving the shifting pile to its endless, meaningless transformations.

The room got a quick notation—empty, no threats, storage—on the map that I'd share with the rest of the crew and then I was moving back down the hallway the way I'd come, retracing my steps toward the delivery tray end. On the way, I slowed just enough to lean into the living room doorway one more time, doing a final headcount out of habit.

Seven. Still seven.

Continuing to be glued to the screen, still not paying attention to anything around them.

'Alright,' I thought, pulling back and letting out a quiet breath. 'Seven in the living room, a mimic-door that's almost certainly sitting on top of wherever the Runner and the rest of the crew are holed up, and a data-shard in the back room that nobody seems to know about. That's... actually not bad. That's more than workable... If we can figure out how not to get killed trying to storm this cramped place.'

Not a full picture—the missing headcount still nagged at me—but it was more than we had just minutes ago. Hopefully enough to hand Higgins something that justified the detour and the extra minutes spent skulking around in someone else's digital backyard.

'And perhaps even good enough intel for him to consider me being here a worthwhile thing as a whole...'

With a simple thought, I exited Cyberspace, happy to find that there was nothing inside this server that kept me from simply logging out.

The world around me collapsed instantly—walls, floors and all—dissolving into loose streams of data that meant nothing and went nowhere as my consciousness was yanked back through the connection and slammed unceremoniously into meat-space.

I came back to, leaning against the corridor wall, Reina crouched right beside me with that particular tight-shouldered stillness that meant she'd been watching the hallway, watching me, and probably running contingency plans in her head the entire time.

I pulled in a slow breath—musty, stale, with that faint underlying bite of something that *definitely* wasn't passing any air quality standards—and felt it ground me back into my body properly.

"Got intel," I quietly said, and pushed the map across to her through the link.

Reina accepted it without hesitation, eyes flickering yellow for the second or two the transfer took—and then her brows climbed just a fraction, the controlled expression cracking slightly at the edges.

"Oh shit..." she muttered, rapidly scanning the map. "This is some good stuff."

Coming from someone who'd given the impression she didn't hand out compliments carelessly, that landed well.

I filed it away with quiet satisfaction, got my feet under me, and pushed up from the wall.

Reina caught the motion and gave me a short nod as I gestured that I was heading back—already shifting her attention back to the hallway before I'd even fully turned around, which somehow made the acknowledgment feel even more genuine if anything.

I made my way back down the corridor toward Higgins and caught his eye as I got close.

He read the gesture for a data-transfer immediately and dipped his chin once, so I sent the map across without breaking stride, closing the last few steps and leaning in to keep the conversation at a level that wouldn't carry through any doors.

"Layout of the apartment and positions on seven of the Scavs," I said, voice low. "Couldn't find any others in the remaining rooms—bathroom and storage on the far end, both clear. But there's a door, second on the right, that's been deliberately closed off. Coded into the Cyberspace fabric, not just a standard render."

I paused just a beat to let that land, but he just raised an eyebrow at me as if to say "I have no idea what that means"—which was probably fair. So I added, "I'd put money on the rest of them being in there—including *their* Runner. I'm fairly certain now that they have one. Because there's a Daemon woven into the door itself. Touch it wrong and it bites back—Cyberspace only, so you guys should be good."

Higgins' expression didn't shift much, but his eyes carefully moved across the air—scanning the map, no doubt—with the focused attention of someone who'd actually done this enough times to know exactly what they were looking for.

"Biggest problem's the hallway, I think," I continued. "There's no room to work in there—anyone past the first two people is basically dead weight until something opens up. And I wouldn't want to send *anyone* up against seven Scavs in that living room alone, no matter *how* capable." I shook my head slightly. "Scavs are unpredictable specifically *because* they've got nothing to lose and no real playbook. They'll pull some completely blank-ass move out of nowhere and suddenly your best guy's dealing with a problem nobody planned for."

Higgins went quiet for a moment, eyes moving across the map with the measured patience of someone who didn't make decisions until they'd actually finished thinking them through.

Then he gestured for a transfer request to both Takeda and Kaito and pushed the map across to them without a word, the two men's eyes flickering with the brief yellow flash of incoming data simultaneously.

A communication request hit my link a second later.

I accepted it and found myself dropped into a group chat with the full crew.

["Good work on the intel. This is some seriously useful stuff, Ela-san,"] he wrote. ["I figured that Cryo-san would not let me down on the recommendation, but this is honestly quite a bit more than I had expected. He had said you were a *beginner* Runner—not many beginners

out there, jumping headfirst into Cyberspace and getting this level of intel out of an enemy location though, so not sure where he went wrong on the assessment...”]

I felt a satisfied blush rise internally and did my absolute best to keep it off my face, which probably worked about as well as it usually did.

But god, it felt *good*.

Every ounce of anxiety that had gone into the decision to actually crawl a drone through a ventilation shaft barely wider than half my head, contort my way through it with [Narrow Twist] doing the heavy lifting, and then dive headfirst into an unknown server with zero guarantee of a clean exit—all of it paid its dividends in that one message.

‘Completely fucking worth it...!’

Higgins shifted his attention to the rest of the group before I’d had time to compose myself fully.

[“Takeda-san, you and Reina take the living room on the left. Move in fast and push hard—we cannot afford to stall inside that hallway or let them spill out into it. Kaito and I will take the second room on the right. Based on the layout, that’s most likely where whoever’s running this crew is holed up, so once the living room’s clear, get to us quickly in case we need the extra hands.”]

Then his eyes landed back on me, and the chat filled again.

[“Ela-san—you are technically well past what we brought you on for, and I want to be clear that anything beyond this point is entirely your call. But if you’re willing to continue, I’d like you moving in behind Takeda-san and Reina. Seven Scavs in one room with that kind of spread makes me uneasy, and having an extra pair of hands as backup if something goes sideways would put my mind at ease. Kaito and I should be able to manage whatever’s waiting behind that secured door—the room’s considerably smaller based on your map, so even with five Scavs packed in there, it’ll be tight enough that things are less likely to spiral in ways we can’t predict. Firearms become a lot less dangerous when there’s no room to use them properly—and Kaito becomes a lot more dangerous for the same reason.”]

Kaito grinned a toothy smile, before pumping both of his cybernetic fists into the air, clearly excited to finally get started.

I thought it over for maybe half a second—but the decision had already been made way back when I’d walked into the apartment complex downstairs: I was sticking this out until the end.

‘Not to mention, I’ll have to be inside the damn apartment to pick up that data-shard in the storage room anyway,’ I reminded myself. *‘Would be kind of weird to stroll in afterwards, not having helped at all, only to suddenly try and claim loot that isn’t really mine to claim, huh?’*

That would *definitely* go over great with the rest of the crew.

So I pulled the Raz back out of its holster, letting the familiar weight settle into my hand again before giving Higgins a nod.

I hoped it read as very determined and ready to kick some ass—rather than slightly anxious and deeply worried that things were about to go horribly fucking wrong.

["Reina, get over here. We're about to go in,"] Higgins sent through the Link, before tilting his head toward the biometric lock.

The message was clear enough.

I crouched down in front of it, steadying myself as I connected my Deck to the dataport with my free hand. The cable clicked into place and the interface lit up softly as I queued up [Open - Quiet], letting the quick-hack spin up while I held my breath for the result.

Half a heartbeat passed.

Then my Deck flashed an error and my eyes widened in panic—before I let out a slow sigh of relief and relaxed as I actually read the message.

[Error: [Open - Quiet] has run into an unexpected runtime issue. Most likely cause: Local ICE. [Adjective: Careful] Segment engaged successfully and terminated [Open - Quiet] before intrusion could be detected.]

Or, translated into the gaming logic my brain still insisted on using from Neon Dragons: I hadn't "rolled" enough successes to crack the lock open. But I *had* rolled enough for the [Adjective: Careful] Segment to trigger its failsafe and shut the attempt down before the system noticed anything suspicious.

Which was pretty much the entire point of the Segment.

If I'd been running [Adjective: Reckless]—like the version I'd loaded for [Open - Loud]—the Deck would've just brute-forced the lock instead with however many successes I had rolled at the time. It might have ultimately succeeded in opening the door... but it *definitely* would've set off every alarm tied to the system in the process.

'Alright... here we go again,' I told myself, steadying my breathing.

I fired the quick-hack a second time.

My Deck didn't have any issues repeating the attempt, so the only real failure condition now was if I botched the roll badly enough that [Adjective: Careful] couldn't mask the intrusion.

All I needed was a bit of luck...

Half a heartbeat later, the message I'd been waiting for finally popped up.

[Notice: [Open - Quiet] has successfully unlocked Biometric Lock. No intrusion detected.]

A quiet beep sounded from the panel as the indicator flicked from red to green.

The door in front of Higgins unlocked with a soft click.

Takeda-san moved instantly, slipping through the opening with his katana already drawn, Reina right behind him with her two pistols ready to go as the rest of us followed...