

Chapter 176 - Wallhack

Higgins took a few moments to come back to me on that, long enough that I'd started running contingency calculations in the back of my head. But when the reply finally hit the group chat, I felt the smile spread across my face before I'd made any conscious decision to let it.

["The walls? Should be standard for this type of low-end apartment. Around ten centimeters for the more structural parts, far less for the ones that aren't. The hallway walls around us will likely be the thickest. Why do you need to know, Ela-san? What are you planning?"]

["While we can't risk trying to fight them through the smoke... we can definitely fight them through the walls."] I typed back immediately. ["Reina, follow me. I'll need your guns—and your aim."]

Then I turned and headed for the closed door directly opposite the living room, the one that had been dark and empty in Cyberspace and had stayed closed and unremarkable in real-space while everything else had been happening.

I opened it carefully, taking an extra second to properly clear the room before stepping inside—no traps, no threats, exactly as advertised, but Cyberspace readings and real-world confirmation were two entirely different things and I'd rather avoid learning the hard way that assuming they were interchangeable was the kind of shortcut that got you hurt.

Thankfully, the room was empty.

I moved through it to the wall that should, if my mental geometry was right, sit directly adjacent to the smoked-off room next door. *Should*.

I pulled up the video function through my cerebral link and recorded a quick clip of myself crossing from the doorway to the wall, keeping the angle wide enough to give Higgins a clear sense of the spatial relationship, then pushed it into the group chat.

["Does this line up with the internals of the other room? Are we directly adjacent here? If we're not, this won't work."]

Because the honest answer was that I didn't actually know.

I'd seen the smoked-off room's door from the hallway and I'd mapped the general layout, but I'd never been inside it—not in the real world, not in Cyberspace—which meant I was working off spatial inference and a rough mental sketch rather than anything concrete.

And in Neo Avalis, especially in the lower-end residential stacks like this one, spatial inference had a way of being abhorrently wrong in ways that would matter quite a lot for what I had planned.

Buildings in areas like this got packed out to their absolute limits, apartments compressed and subdivided and rearranged until the internal logic of the floor plan stopped making obvious sense from the outside.

Any given wall in a place like this could be yours, or it could belong to a completely separate unit that had nothing to do with anything—some neighbor who'd paid their rent and gone to sleep and had no idea there was a running firefight happening five centimeters away from their bedroom.

Telling Reina to open up through a wall into the wrong room was not a version of this plan I was interested in executing.

One of the two rooms—either the one we were standing in or the cramped storage room at the far end with the hidden data shard still buried in its shifting pile of undefined junk—*had* to be directly adjacent to the smoke room.

The overall layout of the apartment basically guaranteed it, the rooms too tightly packed together for there to be anything else slotted in between.

The part I was less enthusiastic about was that alternative.

If it turned out to be the storage room rather than this one, getting there meant passing directly in front of the smoke room's broken-open doorway—and the Scavs inside had *already* demonstrated they had guns, functional trigger fingers, and at least two sets of eyes that worked just fine through a wall of thick black smoke.

'Not exactly my preferred way to spend the next thirty seconds,' I grimly thought.

The reply came after another few moments.

["It should be adjacent, yes. Do you want us to do anything besides hold the door while you and Reina enact your plan?"]

I thought about it for a second, genuinely tried to give it proper consideration—but the heat moving through my blood had its own opinion about how much time we should be spending on logistics versus getting to the part where the “fun things” started happening, and it was lobbying *hard*.

I sent back a simple negative, then reached into my DuraPack and pulled out the small bag of metal beads I'd picked up after my stop at the Emporium.

I opened the bag and scooped out as many as I could fit into one hand—ten, maybe fifteen, the exact count hard to pin down by feel alone—then closed my fingers around them and shifted them around until I had a decent sense of their weight and distribution.

Cold, smooth, satisfying in a way that was mostly about what they were about to be used for.

'This is not going to be precise,' I thought. *'But that's exactly the point, really...'*

"What are you doing?" Reina's voice came in just above a breath, close enough that I could hear it clearly without it carrying anywhere useful. She leaned in slightly, eyes moving between my face and the hand of beads with the focused, slightly impatient energy of someone who'd just agreed to follow a plan without being told what the plan actually was.

"And what do you need me to do? I don't like being in the dark about things that involve me—or my babies."

She lifted her two pistols as if to make a point.

That was, genuinely, a *very* fair point.

The secrecy hadn't been intentional or strategic at all—it had just felt faster to move than to explain everything to everyone, which was its own kind of problem. But Reina was about to be an active, and frankly, essential component of this, so at minimum she needed the relevant parts.

I kept my voice at the same near-silent level she'd used and said, "I'll use these to get a read on their locations through the wall," I opened my hand briefly to show her the beads, then closed it again, "and then you shoot them through it. Either they panic and return fire blind—as they would've already shot us if they could actually see us through the wall—or they try to push out through the door, and Higgins and Takeda-san handle whatever comes out."

Reina looked at my hand.

Then she looked at me.

One eyebrow climbed slowly toward her hairline. "These are just *metal beads*, no?"

The silence that followed was entirely internal, but it was very loud.

My brain, apparently running several degrees hotter than was ideal for careful tactical reasoning, caught up to the problem approximately two seconds after Reina's six-word question had already solved it for me.

Metal beads. Regular, unmodified, purchased-from-a-general-goods-counter metal beads.

Which had no capacity *whatsoever* to reveal the precise locations of enemies through a solid wall in any format that would then translate into actionable targeting information for a shooter.

That simply was not a feature that metal beads possessed—if they did, they would be a massive staple in anyone's toolkit.

'*Are you an actual idiot, Sera?*'

The question answered itself immediately and—unfortunately—unfavorably.

The plan had made complete, perfect sense inside my own head, which was currently being run at least partly by something that had been locked in chains specifically *because* its judgment couldn't be trusted and which was, if anything, enthusiastic about shortcuts that got to bloodshed faster.

Of course it had seemed like a good idea. *Of course* I hadn't stopped to explain it to anyone before dragging Reina into an empty room and opening a bag of beads at her.

I hadn't been thinking about the repercussions at all.

I'd just wanted to get to the next part.

"...Right," I said, after a beat that lasted far too long. "Good catch."

Reina's eyebrow stayed exactly where it was, the silent prompt clear enough.

[Deception] threw me a lifeline before I'd even consciously reached for one, the Skill's accumulated knowledge giving me a quiet, helpful nudge toward the exact shape of lie that would land cleanly and not require too much scaffolding to hold up.

"They're slightly electro-magnetically charged," I said, with the easy, unhurried delivery of someone explaining something perfectly mundane. "I've got a Quick-Hack that tracks their trajectory in real-time—so when they bounce off something, I get a read on what they hit. Person versus wall versus desk registers differently. When I've got a location, I'll point, and you shoot."

I kept my eyes steady on hers as I said it, leaning fully into the reasonable assumption that Reina had approximately zero working knowledge of what Netrunning actually involved on a technical level.

After all, Higgins had specifically gone to Cryo for a Runner contact, even a green one, which strongly implied that *nobody* on this crew had that gap covered themselves.

It was a pretty safe bet in my mind.

Reina took a moment with it all, eyes doing that quick, analytical thing where she was clearly running the logic of the plan through her own internal filter rather than just taking it at face value.

Then, thankfully, she gave a single, measured nod.

"Decent enough to try," she murmured, keeping her voice at that same careful near-silence. "Still dangerous—they'll almost certainly panic-shoot through the wall the second they realize what's happening. But they're doing it completely blind, so the odds of either of us actually catching a round are..." she tilted her head slightly, "low enough to work with."

She paused briefly, clearly still thinking on the logistics of it all, before adding, "For targeting—send me an image with them marked through the wall. Don't try to point or explain it verbally mid-shoot. That'll just slow everything down. Send me updates if they move."

That was, genuinely, far more practical and smart than anything I'd been about to suggest, so I agreed immediately and was already turning back toward the wall when another thought caught me cleanly before I'd even taken a single full step.

Two shooters was better than one. Significantly better, actually—especially given that I'd have the targeting data running in real time and would be better positioned than Reina to track anyone who started moving the second the shooting started.

I turned back.

"Can I borrow one of your guns?"

The look Reina gave me in response could most accurately be described as visceral *disgust*.

Her eyes dropped to the pistol in her left hand, then came back up to me, and for a few long seconds she just stood there doing what appeared to be a thorough internal negotiation with herself, jaw set, expression cycling through several distinct stages of absolutely *not* wanting to do this.

Then she exhaled—long, thorough, and deeply resigned—and handed it to me.

Before her fingers fully released the grip, however, she fixed me with a look that communicated several things simultaneously and all of them deadly *seriously*.

"This *never* happened," she said, voice barely above nothing. "If anyone asks—and I mean *anyone*—I was the one doing all the shooting. Both guns. The whole time. Are we clear?"

"Completely," I said, without hesitation, and meant it entirely.

I wasn't remotely interested in being on the wrong side of that particular woman's goodwill.

The image of what she'd done to the two Scavs against the far wall of the living room was still fresh enough to make that an easy commitment to keep.

She let go of the gun.

The weight of it settled into my left hand immediately and substantially—far heavier than the Raz, heavier than I'd instinctively anticipated too, with the dense, serious heft of something built to do *exactly* what it looked like it did.

I took a few quiet seconds to adjust my grip, get a feel for the balance, let my hand find a natural position around it.

[Firearms] and [Pistols] did their quiet work in the background, smoothing out the unfamiliarity, while [Ambidexterity] lent my left hand the strength and steadiness it needed to hold the thing without making me look like someone who'd never held a gun like this before—which, in any meaningful real-world sense, I essentially hadn't.

The guns at the firing range I had tried out together with Jade had been far less hefty than this one, in every sense of the word.

'*I hope I can manage the recoil on this thing,*' I thought, turning it over once more in my grip.

Though, realistically—Body sitting at a solid 6 now, Reflex at 7—the math probably worked out in my favor by now. Reina ran two of these simultaneously with no visible augmentation on her arms or hands to compensate for the kick, and she made it look effortless.

One gun, with my current stats behind it, was unlikely to become a serious problem.

Unlikely. *Probably.*

"Ready?" I murmured, glancing back at Reina.

She gave me a firm nod, confident enough on the surface—though her left hand kept making the smallest, most involuntary awkward motions, the muscle memory of having two guns apparently not interested in accepting the new reality without complaint.

I turned back to the wall and stepped away from it by a few paces, giving myself room to work, then stopped and actually thought about the exact necessities for a second.

'I need these to spread out across as much of the room as possible—but at around chest height. Maximum coverage, right height...'

The problem with throwing fifteen-odd metal beads in a single handful was that they were going to go absolutely *everywhere* the moment they left my hand regardless of what I did—that was unavoidable and also, quite frankly, the point.

But the angle of release would determine where "everywhere" actually was, and chest height on the other side of the wall meant I needed to account for the throw arc carrying them up from somewhere lower, so that the top-end of the beads didn't simply sail over everyone's heads.

I dropped into a slight squat, bringing my shoulder down to roughly Reina's chest height, sighting the wall in front of me.

'Aim high, let the trajectory do the work. That's probably the best I can manage.'

It wasn't an elegant solution.

But *elegant* had left the building sometime around when Kaito had taken a hit and the smoke had started rolling into the hallway, so I was working with what I had.

The anxious heat in my blood had just about exhausted its patience for deliberation anyway, the anticipation of what came next pushing hard against any remaining inclination to keep standing here planning things.

I let it go.

One breath in. One breath out.

I leaned fully into [Throwing]'s muscle memory, letting the Skill take over the mechanical details—the grip, the release point, the angle of the wrist—and in the same motion activated the two things that made any of this actually viable.

[Blademaster's Throw]

[Homing Beacon]

I threw with everything I had.

[Blademaster's Throw] caught the motion and multiplied it, the Ability's enhancement hitting like a gear shift, the beads leaving my hand at a velocity that my Body of 6 couldn't have produced on its own in *any* universe.

They hit the wall in front of me not like thrown objects but more like fired bullets, punching through the thin partition with a sharp, splintering *crack* that was over before the sound had fully registered, carrying straight through and into the smoke-filled room beyond in a spreading cone of fast-moving metal.

The impacts came back through the holes immediately—the muffled thud of beads finding the far wall, the harder crack of them hitting furniture, the clatter of them skipping off something solid near the floor.

The sounds were chaotic, overlapping and *exactly* what a handful of metal shrapnel detonating across an enclosed room was supposed to sound like.

And then, underneath all of it, the sounds that had been the entire point.

Surprised yelps. A pair of sharp, pained shouts. Then another. Three voices registering sudden, unwelcome impact in rapid succession, the specific register of people who'd just been hit by something they hadn't seen coming and hadn't had time to brace for.

[Homing Beacon] activated the instant the beads made contact, three distinct outlines blooming into my awareness with clean, immediate clarity—positions, exact sizes and postures, the slow and panicked movement already beginning as the Scavs inside started reacting to the fact that something had just come through their wall.

I didn't give them time to finish reacting.

One thought—mental screenshot, outlines traced over the top of it with a quick, focused effort, image pushed to Reina in the same breath—and then I was bringing the pistol up with both hands wrapped around the grip, the beads gone and my right hand free to actually stabilize the thing properly.

I put my sights on the furthest outline, the one deepest into the room and hardest to triangulate from Reina's position a half-step to my left. Three seconds between the beads going through the wall and the moment we opened fire.

Maybe less.

The gun bucked hard on the first shot—harder than I'd fully prepared for even with the warning I'd given myself, the recoil jumping through my wrists and up into my shoulders with real, unambiguous authority.

I brought it back down, adjusted, fired again—and then... *kept firing*, the rhythm of it catching something inside me that had absolutely no interest in stopping, the heat in my blood surging up hard against [Edge]'s grip the moment the gun started going off in my hands.

The outline I'd been aiming at had already gone still and grey at the edges, the System's quiet way of confirming what the lack of movement was already telling me, but my finger kept pulling anyway, punching rounds through the wall into a space that had stopped needing them, chasing a feeling that had nothing to do with tactical necessity and everything to do with the part of me thoroughly enjoying the experience.

*'Stop. Stop! He's already down, Sera—fucking **stop!**'*

I finally stopped shooting.

Dragged myself back from the edge of it by main force, shoving the heat down hard and locking [Edge] around it like a vice, my breathing coming out slightly faster than it should've been for someone who'd just been standing still and shooting through a wall.

The whole lapse had lasted maybe a second. From the inside, however, it had felt *considerably* longer, and considerably more like a near thing.

Reina, to my immediate left, was not experiencing any of these problems—neither the recoil related issues, nor anything leading her to waste ammunition unnecessarily.

She had found her rhythm inside the first shot and simply stayed there, working through her ammunition with the calm, methodical efficiency of someone for whom this was as natural as breathing, her rounds punching through the wall in a tight, purposeful pattern that made my own shooting look exactly like what it was—someone who had good stats and a borrowed gun and was doing their genuine best with both of those things.

The two remaining outlines disappeared rapidly as her shots tore through the wall, through the smoke, through whatever they found on the other side.

One collapsed quickly and I signalled Reina to switch targets. The third dropped mid-movement as we both fired at them, the outline flickering and going still.

Then, finally, the expected return fire came.

It came without coordination or aim—pure panic, the surviving Scavs unloading blind through the wall at the general area where the shooting had been coming from.

Rounds punched through the partition above us in a ragged, irregular pattern, dust and fragments showering down as Reina and I hit the floor on pure instinct, neither of us having said a word about it, both of us apparently arriving at the same conclusion at exactly the same moment: The floor was a *much* better place to be right now.

Reina and I apparently landed on the same thought at roughly the same moment, our messages hitting the group chat practically on top of each other.

Reina: ["Go in now!"]

Me: ["Kill them all!"]

I clocked my own message about a half-second after it had already been sent, that particular window where you could see *exactly* what you'd written and couldn't do anything about it anymore.

The wording was—not great.

I held very still internally for a moment, waiting to see if anyone was going to respond to it as the unhinged thing it probably looked like in writing.

Reina, at least, didn't visibly react.

Whether she hadn't noticed or simply didn't find it worth commenting on was unclear, and I decided not to examine either possibility too closely.

The return fire cut off raggedly, mid-burst, the way gunfire did when the people doing it had suddenly acquired more immediate, Operator-shaped problems than shooting through walls at unseen enemies.

What replaced it came through the holes in front of us and the open hallway to our left in fragments—the sharp, close-quarters percussion of bodies hitting furniture, something heavy going over, the particular acoustic quality of a confined space with too many people in it and not enough room for anyone to do anything cleanly.

A short, cut-off shout.

Something that might've been Takeda's voice, low and clipped, giving an instruction to nobody in particular or everybody at once.

Then a whole lot of nothing.

Reina was already moving and I was right behind her, both of us up off the floor and out through the door in the same motion.

I caught her left hand just before we hit the hallway and pressed her pistol back into it without breaking stride, the handoff clean, and her fingers closed around the grip with the immediate relief of someone being reunited with something that had no business being anywhere else.

We hit the hallway and turned hard toward the smoke room—The group chat lit up.

["Mission complete."]

Two words. Higgins.

A big smile broke out on my face and I let out the anxious breath I had been holding since the moment I had let go of the beads without noticing.

'That... Went better than expected...'

