

Chapter 173 - Squeeze

We stepped into a grimy corridor that immediately made me regret every life choice that had led me here.

The air was thick and damp, carrying that unmistakable musty scent of definitely-unhealthy-growths thriving somewhere behind the peeling gray-green wallpaper. The walls were stained in uneven patches of dark discoloration, and the flickering overhead lights did absolutely nothing to make the place feel more inviting.

I instinctively pulled Misha's scarf higher over my mouth and nose, suddenly reconsidering whether the whole "experience and loot" thing was really worth inhaling whatever fungal nightmare was currently colonizing this building.

The hallway itself was narrow—tight enough that only two of us could technically walk shoulder-to-shoulder—but none of us were that stupid. We kept space between each other, staggered just enough to avoid turning ourselves into a neat little line of targets. If someone jumped us from a side door or stairwell, we'd need room to dodge, pivot, or fall back.

Huddling up like sardines in a place like this was just asking to get cut down in one burst.

'Really appreciate that Cryo referred me to a group of people that seem to know what they're doing... Gonna have to thank him for that, when I meet him the next time,' I thought to myself, as I followed behind Reina who was the last-in-line of the Higgins crew.

On the drive over, Higgins had given me a quick rundown of the building's general layout and what we were walking into, so I already knew we'd have to head up a few floors.

Still, seeing the elevator in person made me hesitate for half a second.

Takeda led us straight to it—a dingy, rust-streaked relic wedged into a cracked concrete alcove. The metal doors were scratched to hell, paint flaking off in strips, and the call button looked like it had been stabbed more than once.

It was the kind of elevator I would've flat-out refused to step into in my old life for no possible money in the world.

And yet... I didn't actually doubt it would work here.

That was one of the weird things about a world like Neon Dragons.

Even in the lower layers of Neo Avalis—even in places that looked like one decent storm could tip the whole block over—the core infrastructure almost *always* held up.

Elevators. Water. Basic power. Even the plumbing, most of the time.

That was part of the dystopian bargain, in a way.

Corporations didn't give a damn about comfort, obviously. You got the bare minimum required to keep a human body functional and able to show up for work the next day.

No more, but most importantly, *no less*.

Because they *absolutely* cared about productivity.

And productivity had a funny way of tanking when workers ended up pancaked at the bottom of an elevator shaft because the corporation had decided that maintenance was a bit too much on the comfort side of the scale to pay for.

So even decades of neglect rarely translated into full-on catastrophic failures when it came to essential systems like this. They were built with just enough redundancy and long-term durability to avoid liability issues and major productivity hazards for as long as humanly—or corporately—possible.

'Hard to squeeze maximum output out of people if they keep dying to easily preventable accidents,' I thought dryly.

The doors groaned open with a metallic screech that sounded far worse than it probably was, given everything.

"Ela-san, can you disable cameras and any potential alarms in it?" Takeda asked, gesturing toward the elevator with the tip of his katana.

I didn't even have to think about it. I shook my head immediately. "Not without a substantial time investment. I don't have the right quick-hacks loaded for that."

There was a low rumble from him, and then a quiet, "{Too much to ask?}" in Japanese, clearly not meant for me.

Higgins shrugged lightly. "{Cryo-san *did* mention she's still a fresh Operator. Can't expect coverage for everything. Still... basic cameras and alarms being off the table is unfortunate. We'll manage.}"

"We're taking the stairs," Higgins said, nodding toward the nearby stairwell.

Takeda moved instantly, abandoning the elevator without a second glance.

He slipped to the stairwell door and cleared the initial landing with practiced, economical movements—blade low, eyes scanning corners, no wasted steps.

I, meanwhile, felt a faint twist in my gut.

They absolutely weren't wrong.

'Cameras and alarms really aren't too much to ask for,' I thought sourly as I fell in behind Reina. *'I need to upgrade. Badly.'*

It wasn't like I hadn't known that already—but hearing it brought up in real time, in the middle of an op, hit differently.

“Fifth floor,” Higgins said quietly, voice lowered to keep the echo in the stairwell from carrying too far.

We started climbing.

The stairwell was just as grimy as the corridor had been—paint peeling in strips, metal railings cold and slightly sticky to the touch, the air stale and unmoving. The space was tight, forcing us into single file whether we liked it or not, boots thudding softly against worn and cracked concrete as we ascended.

No idle chatter. Just the sound of breathing and fabric shifting as we climbed.

We reached the fifth floor without incident, and Takeda moved first the moment the stairwell door creaked open. He slipped out into the corridor like smoke, blade low, shoulders relaxed but ready, clearing left, then right, checking corners with the kind of efficiency that only came from years of doing this exact thing.

Once he gave the all-clear, we filed out behind him.

The corridor looked like a copy-paste of the one downstairs—peeling walls, flickering lights, the whole deal. The air was just as stale and moist too.

Reina peeled off toward the intersection near the elevator and took point there, positioning herself to maintain the longest possible lines of sight down both directions. From where she stood, she could see anyone coming from either end long before they got close.

Takeda, Higgins, and Kaito motioned for me to follow as they moved down the hall toward our target—the third apartment on the right.

They flowed into position around the door. Takeda to one side of the frame. Kaito opposite him. Higgins just off-center, angled slightly to avoid stacking.

Another biometric lock blinked beside the door.

Higgins nudged his head toward it in my direction.

Clear enough.

I stepped closer—but then hesitated.

‘Something about this feels way to clean, doesn’t it...?’

Yes, Higgins and his crew were clearly professionals. Yes, the front door hack had gone off without a hitch because I had Kill Joy’s quick-hacks to fall back on.

But we’d *just walked* in here. No patrols. No lookouts. No warning systems triggered. A simple door crack and now we were at the supposed nest of at least a dozen Scavs?

Like, yeah, they were Scavs—so “competence” definitely wasn’t their middle name—but if there really were at least a dozen of them holed up in here, there had to be *some* structure.

Even the messiest groups usually had a pecking order. A boss of some sort. Someone paranoid enough to insist on lookouts, fallback plans, maybe a couple of early-warning measures that weren't just "hope for the best."

And they'd managed to secure the biometric locks.

Not every Scav crew had someone capable of setting up something like that. Which meant there was at least one person in there with a bit more technical sense than would be expected of your typical Scav-crew.

Higgins had mentioned on the way here, that this one likely had some spice.

But so far? I wasn't tasting a damn thing.

My gut twisted, just a little, that quiet inner alarm bell ringing without a clear reason.

Trusting that little prickle of Intuition, I leaned closer to Higgins and whispered, "Do we know the exact layout inside? Or how many we're actually dealing with beyond 'at least a dozen'?"

He shook his head once. "Just the location and minimum headcount. The details were vague. As usual."

I hummed quietly, eyes drifting along the corridor, scanning for anything that felt out of place or could help me settle my nerves.

Takeda and Kaito shot Higgins a questioning look, probably wondering why I was stalling.

They hadn't heard the exchange.

Higgins raised a hand slightly, a subtle sign to give me a moment.

"Something wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Something feels *off*," I admitted. "Could just be nerves. But if you give me a few minutes, I can try to pull more intel—layout of the room, maybe even positions. We don't *have* to charge in blind. I'd much prefer that, personally."

One of his brows lifted at that.

For a heartbeat, I thought he might brush it off for one reason or another.

Instead, he nodded lightly. "Proceed."

Relief loosened the tightness in my chest.

I nodded once, then turned and retraced my steps down the corridor toward Reina, already reaching for my Deck.

'Alright, Ela. Time to actually prove you're worth the slot on this team,' I told myself. 'And let's see if this even fucking works.'

I crouched down near the corner of the corridor, back to the wall, trying to make myself as small and unobtrusive as possible. Reina raised an eyebrow at me but didn't comment, just shifted her stance slightly to give me better cover from the long sightlines down the hall.

During my earlier scans of the building, I'd noticed something interesting.

Drone-delivery shafts.

They ran along the upper section of the corridor walls and ceilings—a narrow metal vent system, barely wider than a shoebox in height, clearly meant for automated deliveries.

The idea was simple: Delivery drones slipped in through the shaft, navigated to the right apartment node, dropped off packages internally, and left again without anyone needing to physically open a door.

It was too small for a human. Probably too small even for a moderately sized kid.

I had briefly considered sending my own drone through there to scout the inside of the apartment, but that thought had died almost as quickly as it had formed.

I already knew that Scavs were inside. The odds of my expensive drone getting spotted and blasted out of the air were... uncomfortably high.

I wasn't about to lose that kind of expensive hardware over something like this.

So I went with the arguably safer option instead—one that could also answer a question I've had about the way my Perks worked as well.

I pulled out my Deck's cable and, after one last steadying breath, jacked it straight into the port at the base of my neck.

The connection snapped into place with a familiar, almost comforting click.

"Make sure nobody kills me, okay?" I murmured quietly to Reina.

She gave me an amused little nod, clearly entertained but also very aware of what that meant.

Then, with nothing more than a mental command, I slid into the local Cyberspace.

The world peeled away in layers.

Concrete, mold, peeling paint, the faint hum of bad wiring—all of it fractured like brittle glass and collapsed inward, dissolving into geometric shards that folded into nothing.

The damp, suffocating air vanished with it.

Sound followed a split second later, stretching thin before snapping into silence.

Then Cyberspace flooded in.

The corridor reassembled itself around me, but cleaner. The same dimensions, the same structural layout—but stripped of the decay and neglect. The walls were smooth planes of muted half-translucent grayness and faint gridlines, their surfaces pulsing softly with low-level data traffic.

The flickering overhead lights were replaced by steady, even bands of pale illumination that traced the ceiling like embedded circuitry.

There was no mold, no stains. Nothing to even have rust.

It made sense, in a way. Data didn't *rot* just because no one looked after it. Neglect didn't create grime here—it created gaps, blind spots, vulnerabilities. But visually? The building's digital twin looked almost respectable.

There were, of course, things that could cause some very real rot and decay inside a digital environment, but that required some level of consistent shaving away of the structure—just like it did in real life.

Without that, however? Things just stayed the way they were designed to be.

Where the biometric locks were mounted in meatspace, there were now structured nodes—compact, layered constructs of glowing code. Thin data-streams flowed through the walls reflecting the low-tier infrastructure of the digital layer underneath.

And then, lastly, there were the *ghosts*.

I could see my team.

Not directly—not as flesh and bone—but as distortions in Cyberspace around me.

Their cybernetic components left impressions in the local net like half-formed silhouettes phasing in and out of view. Only the cybernetic parts themselves fully rendered here, stripped of much of the surrounding flesh and context.

Reina's augmented eyes hung in the corridor's periphery like two floating shards of glass, phasing in and out, only the faintest of outlines of the rest of her skull and Cybernetic Link giving a hint of context to the person that should be there.

Takeda's smaller implants appeared as intermittent sparks of structured code near the door further into the corridor—brief, hovering fragments with no body attached.

Kaito's fully cybernetic forearms manifested the clearest, of course: A disembodied construct of hardened data geometry suspended in mid-air, fingers flexing in slow, ghostlike intervals without the rest of him ever fully rendering in.

Even Higgins left only a single distinct presence—his optic implant, his amber eye drifting a few feet above the floor, blinking at measured intervals before dissolving back into the data-stream.

They weren't fully present here, of course—just echoes.

Digital bleed-through from the hardware threaded into their bodies.

Every few seconds, their outlines shimmered into partial visibility before dissolving back into nothingness only to repeat the cycle a few moments later.

I forced myself to wrestle my focus back to the matter at hand.

I turned toward the wall where the drone-delivery vent intersected the corridor.

In Cyberspace, it wasn't a solid, metal vent but a narrow, vertical conduit of structured data—a thin shaft of dimly flowing packets running downward through the building's lower layers.

It was *exactly* what I'd been hoping for.

The delivery drones needed a guidance structure, some kind of internal routing logic to follow through the building, after all. That meant the vent itself had to somehow double as a data pathway in the network.

Now, if the shaft had been rendered as a sealed construct with additional sub-layers or segmented internal barriers, this idea would've died on the spot, of course. But instead, the vent was the pathway: A streamlined digital corridor threaded straight through the building's internal structure.

Which meant, if I could fit, I could travel through it as well.

'Please don't let there be a Runner babysitting this thing,' I thought quietly.

If someone was actively monitoring local traffic, this next step was where they'd notice something odd.

I called up my [Data-Blade] Subroutine.

It wasn't pre-loaded into memory, so there was a brief delay—a faint hitch as my Deck loaded the Subroutine and assembled the executable structure. Then the familiar construct manifested in my hand: A sleek, angular blade of compressed data, its edge flickering with tightly bound data strands.

'No point wasting more of the crew's time...'

I stepped forward and drove the blade into the thin construct guarding the vent's access layer. The resistance, if it could even be called that, was laughable. The shallow, sparsely layered code disintegrated under contact immediately, unraveling into harmless fragments that scattered like dust motes in low gravity.

I carved out a rectangular opening, letting segments of the vent's digital skin peel away before dissolving entirely. When the hole was large enough, I dismissed the [Data-Blade] with a thought, watching it collapse back into nothing.

For a moment, I just stared at my handiwork, surprised it had actually worked the exact way I had imagined.

Now came the real test, however.

Did Perks apply here the same way they did in real space?

In reality, I could *never* fit into that drone vent. Even with [Narrow Twist], there were limits—bones, joints, actual anatomy.

My skull alone would've made the attempt an impossibility.

But here?

I didn't have a physical body. No bones, no cartilage, no brain to worry about.

I was exclusively a digital avatar—still shaped like me, still constrained by some echo of my real-world proportions, but not governed by the same *hard* laws of physics and biology.

So the question that I had come up with in the corridor earlier, upon seeing the vent was simple: Could [Narrow Twist] let me compress far beyond what was physically possible in the real world?

In theory... It *should* work. I saw no reason it shouldn't.

I took a slow breath—pointless here, but habitual anyway—and stepped toward the opening. Then I forced my digital self forward into the vent, tilting my head slightly as if that would somehow help the oversized melon get inside the way-too-small-opening.

I felt [Narrow Twist] engage.

My avatar's geometry began to warp and compress, edges bending inward, dimensions narrowing in ways that made no anatomical sense. The construct resisted at first, as if confused by what it was being asked to accommodate, but I pushed harder.

My digital form thinned, elongated, folded in on itself in strange distortions, sliding into a space it *absolutely* had not been designed to accept.

And yet—I found myself inside the vent.

Or at least, some warped, compressed version of me was.

I could tell I had crossed the threshold because the surrounding data-flow shifted, tightening around me like a narrow current—but I couldn't properly *feel* anything anymore.

No sense of up or down. No clear edges. No sound. No visual reference beyond faint, distant pulses of routing data traffic further along the shaft.

The sudden loss of my Avatar's natural proportions sent a spike of cold, unadulterated panic through me.

My usual sense of self—arms, legs, center of mass, vision, smell, *anything* really—was completely gone. Replaced by stretched vectors and flattened geometry that barely resembled anything human.

The disassociation crawled up my throat threatening immediately to spiral into a full-blown panic attack.

I let my entire Edge clamp down on the rising chaos, cooling my thoughts by force.

'I don't need sensation. I just need a direction...'

I focused on the vent's internal routing lines, faint threads of structured data guiding delivery drones along predictable paths.

The shaft angled upward along the wall, then leveled out across the ceiling.

I followed it as quickly as I could, afraid that lingering too long in this distorted state would make my brain start asking questions it *really* didn't need answers to at this very moment.

Having a panic attack while existing as a contorted digital construct—folded and stretched in ways no sane system had intended—did not sound like a healthy way to stress-test the psyche.

The routing lines thickened ahead, the data-stream subtly branching in ways that what I was hoping hinted at delivery nodes. I followed the flow, counting intersections in my head, mapping them against the building layout I had walked with Higgins and the crew just moments earlier.

'Third door on the right. Third door on the right...'

Then the conduit finally curved inward.

I felt the pathway widen just slightly, the pressure around my warped geometry easing as the shaft terminated in a distribution node. I forced myself upward and forward at the same time—and then my digital form spilled out of the vent's endpoint.

It wasn't graceful.

One moment I was compressed into a vent-thin distortion, the next I unfolded like a snapped rubber band, geometry expanding outward in rapid succession.

Limbs redefined themselves. Angles corrected themselves. Depth perception returned.

My avatar reconstituted mid-air and practically *plopped* onto the glowing delivery tray construct embedded in the apartment's internal network.

I staggered back a step, knees buckling slightly.

Breath hit me like a freight train.

Which made absolutely no sense—I didn't need oxygen here—but my mind didn't care one lick. I found myself breathing heavily anyway, dry-heaving as sensation flooded back in.

Up and down reasserted themselves. My own edges and physical limits became solid again. My proportions snapped back into something recognizably *human*.

The contrast was what really got me.

Going from being a stretched thread of thought inside a conduit to suddenly existing in full dimensional space again felt *violently* wrong in ways that I couldn't even properly describe.

'*Never again,*' I promised myself silently, swallowing down the lingering wave of nausea. '*Unless it's absolutely necessary. Never. The. Fuck. Again.*'

Once I trusted my perception not to tilt sideways on me, I lifted my gaze.

I was inside the apartment, behind the locked door.

And I was definitely not alone.

My eyes widened.

Half a dozen figures phased in and out of visibility directly in front of me—ghostly digital bleed-through just like my crew's, only rougher and messier in nature.

Scav-grade cybernetics left distinctly jagged impressions in the local net: Flickering optics, mismatched, cheap limb replacements, glitching neural implants that pulsed unevenly and sent errant data into Cyberspace like low-speed shrapnel.

They were clustered in a loose semicircle around a massive, glowing construct mounted along the far wall—a broad slab of shifting light and layered data patterns—A TV, if I had to guess.

I swallowed, then started slowly moving around the place and looking around, '*Alright... Time to get a proper layout charted and note down where everyone is...*'