

Chapter 94 - First Project

The digital world dissolved around me as I exited the confines of the SPG-01 shard and returned to reality, still lying comfortably on my bed.

I could barely contain the giddy excitement bubbling up inside me—I had *finally* finished the shard!

Though, “finally” didn’t feel quite like the right word here.

Although “finally” was likely the wrong choice of words here—after all, the shard was designed to last the better part of a year, if not a full year, and I had practically speedrun it in a matter of a few short weeks.

That sense of accomplishment hit hard.

Still, before diving into the shard Kill Joy had so “generously” rewarded me with, I had to clear the System Notifications cluttering my vision.

[System]: *800xp gained for [Manifestation] Skill.*

[System]: *[Manifestation] Skill has reached Level 2. Knowledge and Muscle Memory download available.*

[System]: *400xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

[System]: *Intellect Attribute has reached 4. Knowledge and Muscle Memory download available.*

[System]: *400xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Anima Attribute.*

The sheer amount of experience I’d gained for what felt like “not much work” surprised me for a second, but it definitely made some amount of sense, when I thought about it for more than a brief instant.

I had just “cracked the code”, so to speak, on quite a number of fundamental ideas and then also implemented the very basics of those ideas into Cyberspace itself; altering my own Digital Ego to varying degrees of complexity.

That the System was rewarding this level of mental growth with a similar amount of experience shouldn’t come as much of a surprise; but when your first entire weeks had been spent slowly and painfully building experience drops one by one to get your Body to a state where it wasn’t collapsing in on itself anymore, expectations were naturally ingrained in you.

‘*Don’t mind if I do,*’ I thought with a goofy grin, eager to accept the downloads for both [Manifestation] and Intellect.

But I was going to be a bit tactical about this; I decided to start with Intellect *first*.

If my understanding of all things Intellect-related was about to expand anyway, I might as well do before the other one as it could help me make more sense of whatever [Manifestation] Level 2 had in store for me.

Closing my eyes and settling into a more comfortable position, I hit the confirmation for the [Intellect] download.

Instantly, a smooth wave of information washed over me, fitting seamlessly into my existing knowledge. It wasn't chaotic or overwhelming—more like my brain was efficiently slotting in new pieces to complete a puzzle.

Everything logic-related, such as [Programming], [Quick-Hacks], and [Manifestation] became clearer as the pathways inside my brain were rewired, with natural shortcuts and patterns emerging where they hadn't before.

I felt like I wouldn't have to slog through endless lines of code anymore; I could instead see the connections and patterns almost instinctively, undoubtedly leading to faster solutions.

Every thought related to netrunner tasks simply felt... *sharper*.

Intellect as an Attribute wasn't about raw intelligence, of course, but rather about identifying, understanding and applying logical concepts with more and more precision.

By the time the download ended, I instinctively recognized that I had a clearer sense of how to work through logical challenges, layering patterns with solutions without having to analyse every little detail first, as I had before.

My mind wasn't ultimately *faster*, but I *could* tell that the paths from problem to solution had become much more direct as a result.

I shook my head, massaging my temples as the sensation of my brain rewiring itself finally began to subside.

'This can't be healthy, right...?' I thought, wincing at the idea of what this was doing to my body on a physical level. 'What would a doctor say if I told them about the System literally rewiring my brain on the regular? I really hope this isn't setting me up for cancer or something. How tragic would that be—getting a second chance at life—with a bloody System no less!—only to find out that very System is a glorified brain-cancer machine...?'

I gave it a few moments of thought, but as usual, I landed on the same conclusion I'd reached a dozen times before: There wasn't anything I could *actually* do about it.

I wasn't about to stop using the System—the only real advantage I had in this world—just because it *might* be messing with me in ways I couldn't fully control.

Besides, it wasn't like I even knew if I had the *option* to stop.

Sure, the System let me schedule the downloads at my convenience for now, but there was no guarantee it wouldn't force them on me if I waited too long. It had done it before, back when I first woke up in this world, and again with the last Task Reward that timed out.

The System wasn't above forcing itself on me—as horrible as that thought sounded in my head—it had proven so time and again.

'Please don't give me cancer,' I thought, sending a quick, silent prayer to whatever entity was in charge of this strange System.

With that, I hit the confirm button on the [Manifestation] Level 2 download.

The download kicked in, and instantly, a new wave of knowledge washed over me.

It wasn't as overwhelming as the first level—this time, the concepts settled in a lot more naturally; my gambit with the Intellect download coming first definitely helped process the torrent of information and contextualise them more seamlessly.

Not to mention, the basics were already in place from the Level 1 download earlier, so now it was just about building on that foundation.

Level 2 of [Manifestation] shifted from simply understanding that I could impose my will onto Cyberspace to diving a bit deeper into how it *actually* worked in practice.

It wasn't just about creating objects in a space of my own design anymore; it was about *modifying* and *altering* the existing code in Cyberspace—code that wasn't mine, to begin with. Essentially, [Manifestation] was like breaking into someone else's carefully constructed system, and then rewriting pieces of it in a way that bent to my will.

It further reinforced the idea that I had used earlier at Kill Joy's request, that when I manifest something in a space I *didn't* control, I wasn't truly *adding* any new elements at all.

Instead, I was merely modifying what was already there, bending and reshaping the underlying code that existed within Cyberspace. The more intricate the space I was in, the more delicate this process became, as everything was already woven together into a specific structure by its original creator.

I got the sense that manifesting things in a space I controlled was going to be far, far simpler as a result. But altering things within someone else's system—well, that required some serious finesse; and now I also understood the reasoning for *why* that was the case.

It essentially meant breaching their code first, understanding it intrinsically and then inserting my intent without breaking the rest of the system or tripping any fail-safes while subtly rewriting it to reflect what I wanted.

The muscle memory that accompanied the download further solidified these ideas further.

I didn't receive any real "muscles" in the traditional sense, but there wasn't exactly a more apt description for the idea of gaining specific ingrained sequences to use, that would make the actual manifestation part of [Manifestation] easier; the part that came when the breaches were complete and all the edits had been made—the part where the Anima had to be injected alongside my own Will to enact the change I coded.

It wasn't perfect, but with enough practice, it knew that it would be damn close.

By the time the download finished, I felt like I'd just been thrown through one of those weird LSD-trip sequences you'd see in bad 90s TV shows.

My senses were all out of whack, like I could almost *hear* colours around me, as if my brain was trying to recalibrate after being submerged in this bizarre world of Anima and [Manifestation].

'Damn... even just [Manifestation] at Level 2 is hitting way harder than something like [Meditation] at Level 4,' I groaned internally, rubbing my temples in a vain attempt to ease the pounding headache. *'Why do some Skills suck up so many resources, while others are basically a free ride...?'*

There had to be some kind of balance in the System, something I wasn't seeing yet.

Maybe it was tied to how these Skills were governed.

But aside from the rarity differences that could easily be gauged by the amount of governing Attributes, the original Neon Dragons game had no differentiation between Skills.

There weren't different Tiers of them or anything along those lines, so the vast difference in the amount of exhaustion caused by the downloads sent me for a bit of a loop. While it was possible that I was simply not built for Anima-related stuff, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was *something* more to the fact that those Skills governed by the Anima Attribute were particularly tough on my head.

I thought about it for a bit longer, but with the headache building, I figured it was better to table the whole thing for now. Definitely not the best time to be diving into deep thoughts when my brain felt like it was about to implode.

Instead, I opened my cerebral interface and navigated straight to the SPG-01 shard's menu.

Time to claim my reward: Kill Joy's basic set of Subroutines and Segments.

The past few weeks of constant netrunning had definitely been a mental workout, but this?

This made it all worth it.

Finally getting my hands on a solid set of Quick-Hacks to experiment with was the payoff I'd been waiting for.

I opened up the vault—the golden shard that Kill Joy had tossed me in Cyberspace—and my eyes widened at what lay inside.

[==**Golden** Reward Shard - "Kill Joy's Vault" - SPG-01 Completion ==]

[Subroutine: Shield] (Tier 1)

[Subroutine: Data-Blade] (Tier 1)

[Subroutine: Spike] (Tier 1)

[Segment Subject: Layer] (Pseudo Tier 1)

[Segment Subject: Person] (Pseudo Tier 1)

[Segment Verb: Open] (Pseudo Tier 1)

[Segment Verb: Search] (Pseudo Tier 1)

[Segment Adjective: Careful] (Pseudo Tier 1)

[Segment Adjective: Reckless] (Pseudo Tier 1)

I had expected maybe one measly Subroutine and a few basic Segments. But there were a whopping *three* Subroutines and *two* of each type of Segment: Subject, Verb, and Adjective.

It was a veritable treasure trove!

Way more than I had thought I'd be getting from these past weeks of marathon netrunning.

A giddy giggle slipped out before I could stop it—the sheer excitement of diving into this code and figuring out how to tweak and write my own versions was hitting me hard.

'*Thank you, Kill Joy,*' I thought, sending a little mental gratitude his way—wherever the real guy was out there.

The SPG-01 shard's rewards were ultimately based on how well the instructor thought you performed, if they worked the same way as they had in the game, and it was clear that the digital version of Kill Joy was pretty damn impressed with me.

I couldn't help but let a bit of ego creep in.

I mean, why do well if you're not going to feel a little smug about it, right?

Sure, it was just the absolute basics of netrunning, the starting point, but considering that a month ago, I didn't even know what "netrunning" meant outside of gaming videos and wiki entries?

I'd say I did pretty damn well for myself; thank you very much.

Of course, I was conveniently overlooking the fact that the System had a lot to do with my success. But hey, if it was going to hitch a ride and force its influence on me, I figured I could claim its help as my own victories as well.

Quid pro quo, right?

Buzzing with excitement, I dove headfirst into my new treasure trove, starting with the first Subroutine's code. Ripping open the virtual gift-wrapping on Subroutine: Shield was surreal, to say the least.

The deck that had been running the SPG-01 shard since my little netrunning burnout incident seamlessly connected with my cerebral link, launching a miniature Cyberspace development environment. It was like the one I had set up back in the shard, but this time, it was happening in real-time in my own room.

The weirdest part? It wasn't fully *here*... or maybe *I* wasn't fully there? I couldn't quite tell.

I was perceiving both the real world and the digital Cyberspace environment simultaneously.

It was like having an opaque filter over my eyes, where I could shift my focus and tune in to one or the other as I pleased.

If I concentrated on my actual surroundings, the Cyberspace window faded to almost nothing—just faint outlines and colours bleeding into the edges of my vision.

But the moment I shifted my attention back to the CDE (Cyberspace Development Environment), it took over, and the room around me became a distant backdrop, almost like a shadow of reality.

"Neat," I muttered to myself, playing around with how seamlessly I could switch between the two worlds and quickly found that the deck was doing a tremendous amount of interpretation work as it tried to figure out and provide *exactly* the outcomes I was aiming for.

When I looked at the wheelchair still next to my bed from all those weeks ago and focused intently on it, a replica of it appeared within the CDE mere moments later.

Similarly, when I intently focused on only a small section of the CDE, it automatically "minimised" the rest of it all, providing a small picture-in-picture-esque version of what I was looking at, overlaid over my actual vision of the room I was in.

'*This is going to be very useful for long coding marathons!*' I recognized happily, once again thankful for Misha's impeccable equipment.

This deck was a lot better than I had originally thought; it turned out!

With a flick of my mental focus, I started setting up the CDE to feel more like my own.

A comfy chair manifested for my digital self, cushioned just right for long coding sessions. I sank into it with a satisfied sigh and began to tweak the environment further.

The first order of business was to fix the light-levels in the room. The brightness of it was way, way too much—like someone had set the thing to "nuclear blast mode." Why that would even be an option, I wouldn't dare to speculate, of course, but I'm sure it was set to exactly that option.

With another quick thought, I dimmed it down to something much more bearable, casting a soft, ambient glow around me. No good coder wanted to feel like they were being fucking flashbanged every time they opened their development environment, after all.

Once the setup felt right, I focused on the task at hand: Delving into my very first Quick-Hack Subroutine—*Subroutine: Shield*.

The code popped up in front of me, lines and lines of text scrolling down like an ancient manuscript, written in the complex language of the digital world by Kill Joy's design: Cyber.

I leaned in, cracking my fingers out of sheer habit—even though my digital self didn't really need to at all—and started reading through it line by line.

"Okay... layers... targets... objects..." I started muttering to myself, letting the terms roll off my tongue as I familiarised myself with the structure of the code.

The SPG-01 shard's lessons came flooding back to me one by one as I started picking out familiar functions and protocols from the last few weeks of my net running training marathon.

There were sections of code that matched up almost 1:1 with what Kill Joy had gone over in specific sections of the shard, which gave me a massive boost of confidence in trying to understand this Subroutine's code. There was a certain satisfaction in recognizing these patterns, like cracking open an old textbook and finding out that, *surprise*, you'd remembered more than you thought.

I even went on to start marking areas down in my CDE with mental notes, drawing invisible circles around segments of the code I wanted to revisit or tweak later; just to see what they were about or how tweaks would interact with the Subroutine's function as a whole.

The subroutine was complex, to say the least, but not impossibly so—not yet, at least.

It was essentially a defensive Quick-Hack that, once activated, created a temporary digital shield around a target, preventing certain attacks or breaches from getting through. It was similar to the Persona-Shield Kill Joy had provided me with during the foray, but different in that it covered the whole target, like a coating of sorts.

It, I instinctively knew, was a lot weaker in terms of overall protection. A smaller area like the Personal-Shield could prevent a lot more data from penetrating through it than an all-encompassing bodysuit.

But that wasn't all. At first glance, it seemed very straightforward, but the more I dug into the code, the more I realised how intricate it actually was.

[Programming] wasn't just about writing a line that summoned the shield and calling it a day, after all. It had layers upon layers of contingencies, specific clauses on how it should react to different attacks, breach attempts or other Quick-Hacks and so, so much more.

Time practically melted away as I delved deeper and deeper into the layers.

I barely even noticed the hours slipping by, despite the fact that my room was always there, in the extremely dim opacity background; but everything else had faded into nothingness as my mind honed in on the logic threads that held this thing together.

Before I knew it, the CDE had become my entire world.

My brain was firing on all cylinders, piecing together how the subroutine was structured, where it could be optimised, and what potential I could unlock with a few tweaks here and there. It was an exhilarating feeling—like standing at the edge of a new discovery, just waiting to be cracked wide open; similar to how I had felt moments after my [Manifestation] breakthrough.

Speaking of which, that new understanding of [Manifestation]—especially the download from hitting Level 2—turned out to be a massive help in tackling some of the more intricate sections of the Subroutine.

Particularly, the parts dealing with the Cyberspace-Layer made a *lot* more sense now.

After about half an hour of pouring over the code, it had finally clicked: A lot of the programming in that section was about forcing a manifestation to happen.

It made sense in hindsight, too.

Quick-Hacks, after all, weren't just bits of code you threw at a target—they had to interact with Cyberspace in real time, meaning they needed a certain level of manifestation to even come into effect.

I realised that Cyber, as a coding language, had been built with the fundamental truth that Anima wasn't just a side note or an afterthought—it was baked into the very fabric of *everything*, even the digital realm.

Without Anima, these hacks would be impossible inside Cyberspace.

They'd have to break down every layer of security, like the more traditional methods of hacking, where you brute force your way past firewalls and encryption before you can enact any changes. But with Anima, and the manifestation it allowed, the Quick-Hacks could simply bypass those barriers, reshaping the digital world *directly* without tearing the whole thing apart.

It felt like slipping a trojan horse past the guards, only without the actual effort of bypassing any security—you just willed it to work.

The more I delved into the code, the more I realised a truth that hit a little too close to home: Writing my own Subroutine was going to take *a while*.

Even with [Programming Maestro] keeping me from getting stuck and [Spiritus Machina] providing those handy blueprints for stealth layers, I was still staring down a pretty big time sink.

And with only three days until the meeting with Vega's Operator? Yeah, not great.

Even if I skipped out on the Rest Function and buried myself in work outside my job at Mr. Shori's and the Dojo session I had coming up in two days, I'd still only have enough time to write one Subroutine.

And that's *if* everything went smoothly.

I briefly thought about working on Segments instead.

They were simpler individually, sure, but also way more abstract and mysterious compared to a full Subroutine. Even if I churned out a few of them, there was no guarantee they'd come together into something impressive enough to catch an Operator's eye.

Nah, my only real shot was to build a solid Subroutine from scratch; at least for this particular time frame until my first meeting.

The question now was: What kind of Subroutine should I go for?

Most of the ones I'd seen in Neon Dragons were offensive—stuff to mess with cybernetics, scramble cameras, break into networks, or steal data.

Classic Quick-Hack material.

There were defensive ones too, though they were harder to come by. I had one in front of me now, but the idea of impressing an Operator with a shield? Kinda underwhelming.

Utility Subroutines, on the other hand, were more my speed.

Things like Ping, where you could locate every device, including cybernetics currently being worn by those pesky gangers, connected to a network—great for stealth, and even better for staying alive when walking into enemy territory.

Sadly, Kill Joy hadn't left me with any utility-based Quick-Hacks to reverse-engineer.

I'd have to get one of those on my own later down the line.

That left me with two real choices: Defensive or offensive.

Writing a whole Subroutine from scratch? Yeah, not happening anytime soon.

I needed something solid to build off of until I got some serious coding experience under my belt.

'Not much of a choice, really...' I sighed internally, my eyes drifting to the Spike Subroutine.

Data-Blade was out of the question—it was Cyberspace-only, and you couldn't exactly go around swinging data like a sword in the real world. As cool as that sounded, it wasn't an option for what I needed.

Shield was useful, sure, but not the kind of thing that would wow an Operator.

Defensive stuff rarely got the oohs and ahhs on first impression.

Spike, though? Spike had potential.

It wasn't exactly a masterpiece of coding, but it could definitely pack a punch.

It was one of the most basic offensive Quick-Hacks—a brute-force attack that threw a mountain of data at a target to overwhelm it. Think of it like the digital equivalent of a fireball.

Pretty similar to that "Spark" move I had seen during the Cyberspace foray, but without the flashy, real-world flames.

Most ICE had some kind of basic defence against a Spike Subroutine, but the beauty of it was that, with enough power behind your deck, you could just overwhelm the system anyway.

It was simple, direct, and surprisingly effective.

Nothing fancy, but it had the kind of raw impact that could make an Operator sit up and take notice; if you managed to make an efficient variant of it.

'Guess I'll just have to make a statement with this one,' I decided, closing out of the Shield Subroutine and switching over to Spike.

If I was going to impress anyone, I had to work fast and efficiently—no room to get bogged down in all the details of the other Segments and Subroutines right now.

Those would have to wait until later when I had the time to really pick them apart.

I might be skipping some valuable insights that could help with my work on “Spike: Sera Edition,” but I couldn't spare the extra four or five hours that a deep dive into each one would take.

With the Spike Subroutine open, I quickly created a second, blank Subroutine next to it—my canvas for creating a more refined version.

I checked the time: 15:47.

Still a few hours before Oliver or Gabriel would be back, which gave me a solid window to get knuckle-deep into this code.

First step? Understanding how Spike worked on a fundamental level.

I needed to know what made it tick, and where I could tweak or improve it.

One area jumped out at me immediately: Stealth.

Thanks to my [Spiritus Machina] Perk, which had been pretty dormant up until now, I could already think of at least *two* ways to make it harder for ICE to detect the Spike Quick-Hack.

'This is promising,' I thought, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. If I could transplant a good chunk of the code as-is and just fill in the gaps with [Programming Maestro] guiding me, this might actually work out.

The System—and especially its Perks—were going to be my ace in the hole for this whole project.

'I'm counting on you, [Programming Maestro] and [Spiritus Machina]. Don't let me down now...!'

With that, I started the tedious but necessary process of copy-pasting sections of Kill Joy's Spike Subroutine into my own version, focusing on the areas that were too complex for me to mess with just yet.

The clock was ticking, but I knew this would take a while. Still, I had a plan, and with the System's help, I just might be able to pull it off...