

Chapter 43 - Progress

- PoV: Jade -

Jade's exasperation had escalated to the point where she felt like she was on the brink of making a colossal blunder. For over three hours, she had been assisting Mr. Shori in the back of his stall under the guise of "settling her debt" with him—an ideal pretext to closely observe her target, who seemed to do the same as her on a daily basis.

Venturing into this endeavour required a significant amount of bravery from her, especially given the extremely unsettling encounter with Ela just a few days prior.

She had devoted ample time edging closer to the stall, aiming for the perfect position to consistently observe Ela's activities behind the stall, only for Ela to unexpectedly come out of the stall and confront her directly. Jade had nearly bolted, paralyzed only because her legs wouldn't heed her frantic desire to escape.

By this point, however, she had been convinced: Ela was far more formidable than even Vega had anticipated initially.

Jade's irritation wasn't *solely* due to Ela's eerie knack for detecting her, no matter her method of approach, either. What vexed Jade even further was the realisation that Ela seemed to be completely toying with her, like a master might prank their rowdy students.

Initially, Jade had entertained the possibility that Ela was merely extending kindness, maintaining a facade of simplicity in their interactions. However, it soon became evident that the reality was far from this benign.

Ela persistently dropped hints and poked at Jade's true identity right from their very first encounter. Jade remained uncertain whether Ela had completely figured out who she was, but every moment she spent in Ela's vicinity felt akin to dangerously teasing a dormant apex predator in their own lair.

Particularly jarring was their first confrontation behind the stall, where Ela's reaction—or lack thereof—to Jade's stealthy approach was beyond unsettling. Attempting to observe Ela, who seemed to be merely grinding spices, Jade was stopped in her tracks by Ela's palpable warning: A silent but clear message to maintain her distance or face *dire* consequences.

This implicit threat left Jade chilled to the very core.

Ela hadn't made any defensive moves, reached for a weapon, or even uttered a single word.

She had merely stopped grinding the spices for a single moment, as if to say "I can end you, just as easily as I can grind these spices to dust."

Her sheer confidence in handling any threat Jade might pose, despite Jade's proximity and tactical advantage, with nothing but her own two hands, was profoundly disconcerting.

Her mere inaction had spoken volumes, instilling a profound sense of dread in Jade.

To make matters worse, since Jade had joined Ela in the back, their activities had been limited to exclusively cooking!

Although this was exactly what she had said she would do in assisting Mr. Shori, she had harboured hopes for a more secretive exchange with Ela, or at the very least, some direct questioning—*anything* beyond this rotten, culinary monotony.

Yet, their time had been completely consumed with grinding spices, concocting broth, and combining ingredients for Mr. Shori's use at the stall's forefront, stretching on for what seemed like an eternity.

There was nothing she could learn about her target like this!

What truly ended up being the worst for Jade, however, was Ela's apparent contentment with the simplicity of these tasks. The sight of Ela taking pleasure in what Jade considered beyond mundane work only served to truly vex her beyond belief.

'Why is she doing this...? There's got to be some kind of reason for her behaviour. An Operator of her standing wouldn't waste her time like this,' Jade thought, again and again, only to be dumbstruck by the next thing Ela went to do, be it crushing more spices, creating more broth or some other thoroughly mundane cooking-related task.

The first time Jade had seen Ela, she had harboured serious doubts about Vega's assessment, yet as time progressed, it became evident that Vega's warnings may not simply have been accurate, but potentially an understatement—Ela was seriously scary.

Jade found herself unable to decipher Ela's behaviours, subtle hints, and probing questions, despite clearly being able to tell that she *was* aiming towards *something* specific.

This confusion mirrored the challenging early days under Vega's tutelage, leaving her feeling lost and utterly unprepared. Like everything she did, she simply did to teach Jade something that she failed to see, in some twisted, fucked-up way.

Despite navigating this uncertainty, Jade couldn't help but feel an unexpected sense of security amidst her fear of Ela. Her demeanour didn't strike Jade as hostile, despite her evident mastery in stealth and subterfuge—skills that Jade reluctantly acknowledged might surpass even Vega's own.

Ela's prowess and success as an Operator, however, was unmistakable, her competence shining through even in her choice of accessories for her current, more-hidden persona. At this very moment, she sported a combat knife, subtly concealed beneath her attire.

The knife, which was almost guaranteed to be of at least Tier 1 quality, spoke volumes of her wealth, if she considered it to be the lowest of the low.

Though, not as much as her hair did, of course.

Jade found herself both admiring and irked as she observed Ela's recent hairstyle change.

The choice of VoniX-black as the dominant colour was bold to the point of complete and utter recklessness. Jade thought about it, every time she laid eyes on her target's hair, *'Opting for VoniX-black is like covering yourself in, admittedly extremely stylish, liquid gold. Who the fuck does that?'*

Jade, herself, would have never considered VoniX-black as a colour for her *hair*. Maybe some piece of clothing, that she could hide underneath a bunch of layers, but to be wearing it openly like that, on the top of your head? That was downright insane.

VoniX-black was one of the most expensive colours one could buy without dipping into corpo-only mixes, after all. It absorbed the majority of all light, making anything seeped in it appear essentially 2D, as your brain would simply fail to properly analyse the contours of whatever it was that you were looking at.

While Jade couldn't deny the striking effect it had on Ela's hair, she was acutely aware of the audacity behind such a choice. Sporting VoniX-black was akin to announcing one's wealth to the world, almost like flaunting a neon sign declaring some not-insignificant financial resources spent on what others might consider just a hairstyle.

This bold move further solidified Ela's likely pre-existing reputation in Jade's eyes.

It was clear that Ela didn't conform to conventional wisdom or caution, and more importantly, she seemed to be thoroughly confident in possessing the skills necessary to navigate the risks associated with such flamboyant choices.

Despite Jade's personal views and hesitations about Ela, she was there on a mission: To collect as much information as she could about her.

Ignoring Vega's critical advice on staying safe and being an effective spy had put her in a position where she *needed* to deliver valuable intel to justify the risks she had taken.

While they were preparing another set of ingredients, an idea struck Jade, a way to learn more about Ela. With genuine nervousness adding authenticity to her usually more reserved demeanour, she used her Aki voice and ventured, "S...Say, do we not cut any of the ingredients...? Is that all Mr. Shori's job?"

Jade was well aware that Mr. Shori couldn't possibly handle all the chopping himself.

Given the quantity of algae and vegetables needed daily, they would've wilted or altered in texture long before the day had advanced to this hour, if he had cut them before he opened his stall.

It was clear to Jade that Ela must have been responsible for this task before her arrival. Yet, from the moment Jade had stepped in, Ela hadn't gone anywhere *near* the kitchen knives.

To Jade, the avoidance suggested a single plausible explanation: Ela was concealing something about her knife skills. Something that would hopefully be worth risking the direct interaction for.

Ela's reaction to Jade's query was a mix of surprise and calculation, causing Jade's pulse to race. *'Keep your cool, Jade. She's just taken aback by my directness all of a sudden... But I can't just loiter around making broth indefinitely. Vega is going to kill me if I don't make this endeavour worthwhile...!'*

"Oh, no, that's usually my task. I thought we had enough prepared for the day, but it looks like I was wrong, haha," Ela responded, her excuse sounding decidedly forced as she made her way to the cutting area with a determined stride.

Jade trailed behind, maintaining a careful distance as a reminder of the initial caution Ela had impressed upon their temporary "partnership".

"As for me, I usually tackle the algae and veggies in large quantities early on, before moving them to the broth and mixing sections," Ela explained, her expression brightening with a grin that forced Jade to muster all her willpower to stifle a groan.

'I swear... If she wasn't so fucking scary and Vega didn't give me clear instructions on getting intel on her, I'd have slit her throat right away. I can't believe this bitch. I'm clearly asking for you to show me some of your skills, yet you give me a rundown on mundane cooking tasks just to fuck with me?! How much more do you plan to have me embarrass myself to get you to give me a clear demonstration?!' Jade fumed internally, although maintaining an interested look on the outside.

Their interaction was peculiar, to say the least. Both seemed to be aware of the other's true nature, yet they continued to act as if they were mere acquaintances, casually meeting in the confines of a food stall's kitchen.

Jade was no stranger to this game of feigned ignorance, having played it more times than she could remember. However, familiarity didn't make it any more palatable, especially under these conditions where she felt like a puppet in the hands of somebody her own age.

That, in itself, was likely the most frustrating part of this entire assignment.

Jade had considered herself fairly skilled at all things espionage, but being directly pitted against somebody that was on Vega's level or even beyond, that *a/so* just so happened to be her own age, was truly humbling—and consequently, thoroughly infuriating.

Enduring Ela's detailed exposition on her culinary processes, from the precise dimensions of her chops for Mr. Shori to the minutiae of kitchen banalities, was far from Jade's idea of time well spent. It seemed like an eternity of condescension before Ela finally deemed the charade sufficient, gracefully moving to retrieve a knife from the collection nearby.

As Jade's gaze fixed on Ela, she noticed a shift in her demeanour the moment her hand wrapped around the knife's handle. The transformation was subtle yet undeniable; Ela's movements with the knife were fluid and precise, slicing through the algae with an ease that betrayed a level of skill far beyond the mundane tasks they had been performing up until this point.

It was as if Ela had finally allowed Jade a peek behind the curtain, revealing a hint of her true capabilities, forcing Jade to thoroughly school her face to not betray her excitement at being able to finally get some actual intel on her target.

She observed meticulously, recognizing that the finesse with which Ela handled the knife was not just basic skill but something *more*. This was the moment Jade had been waiting for, a direct insight into Ela's nature, yet the revelation brought with it an unexpected disquiet. Watching Ela manoeuvre the knife should have, at worst, elicited fear, considering the potential danger it represented. However, the unease Jade felt was different, deeper and more profound in nature.

It wasn't the threat of the knife itself that unsettled her but rather the way it interacted with the algae. There was something *off* about the cuts, a discrepancy that Jade couldn't quite articulate.

Not yet.

The algae seemed to yield to the knife too easily, as if reality itself was bending slightly to Ela's will. Jade quickly realised that this subtle anomaly was what truly unnerved her, igniting a suspicion that there was more to Ela's cutting technique than she could initially see.

While a lot more refined than the rest of the skills Ela had pretended to not be adept at until now, the knife handling skills she was portraying now weren't anything to write home about either. But that one particular aspect, Jade could not make heads or tails of, no matter how much she tried.

This wasn't just skill; it was something else, something "wrong" that Jade couldn't yet fully understand.

Without realising it, Jade had edged closer to Ela, now standing only a few centimetres away, her attention riveted on the knife as it effortlessly sliced through the algae. Despite expecting some resistance from the spongy material, under Ela's guidance, the algae seemed to part with ease, as if it were less substantial than air.

She was utterly captivated by the sight of the knife moving through the algae with such ease, a sight that challenged her understanding of basic physics. The algae, wet and typically resistant, seemed to offer no challenge to Ela's knife, parting as if by mere will rather than force. *'This is not possible... What is happening to the algae...? No matter how sharp a knife, wet algae like this should not simply be... cut like this! Especially not with the miniscule amount of force she uses. This makes no fucking sense!'*

Just when Jade thought her perplexity couldn't get any deeper, Ela, almost as if she had tapped into Jade's thoughts, casually remarked, "Cutting the algae is a breeze with Mr. Shori's knives. They're exceptionally sharp, which simplifies the task a lot," offering an explanation that seemed far too simple for what Jade had just witnessed.

'She's fucking with me again...! These are clearly ordinary knives, the kind you'd find in any reputable knife shop. There's no way they could perform like this, not unless they're some kind of hidden vibro-knives!' Jade mentally scoffed at Ela's oversimplified justification.

"Would you like to give it a try, Aki?" Ela suddenly inquired, extending the knife towards Jade with an encouraging smile. A wave of apprehension washed over Jade as her gaze shifted from the knife's handle, up to Ela's strangely gentle-looking smile, and then to the meticulously, perfectly-straight cut algae beside them.

'This must be some kind of test,' she surmised, her mind racing to deduce Ela's expectations. 'She's offering me a weapon, while comfortably within my striking distance. If I accept the knife incorrectly, she might just kill me immediately... Alternatively, could this be her way of maybe sharing some of her techniques with me...?'

Jade deliberated briefly about whether it was worth the risk, yet the course of action seemed evident almost immediately. The risk far outweighed the potential benefits. "Uh... No, thank you, Ela. I think I'll just watch. Handling knives isn't really my strong suite..."

In the fleeting moment before Ela resumed her task, Jade detected a subtle trace of... compassion in her smile, a nuance that left her momentarily puzzled. *'What...?'*

As Ela returned to her slicing, she reassured, "That's alright. You can just watch until you feel more comfortable. I think it's very worthwhile to learn some cooking skills like this, however. Cutting things with confidence is very much a skill worth having."

This comment set Jade adrift in thought once again, perplexed by Ela's implication. It didn't sound like a threat; rather, it came across as sage advice. Almost like a warning of something yet to come. Did Ela possess some intel that she lacked?

'The way she said that almost sounds like she's suggesting I should learn how to defend myself,' Jade concluded, frissons of doom running down her neck. The implications of such a direct warning by the enigmatic girl were beyond concerning to consider...

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The remainder of their shift unfolded without further incident, lasting another two hours before Mr. Shori signalled it was time to finish up.

As they were preparing to leave, Ela turned to Jade with surprising enthusiasm and asked, "Will you be coming back tomorrow? I think we made a great team today!"

Jade, momentarily taken aback by the nature of the inquiry, pondered the invitation.

'If she's asking me back, she must not see me as a threat to her territory. And considering the numerous opportunities she's had to disappear me completely unnoticed, it's unlikely she poses any immediate threat to me—as long as I stay in her good graces, of course,' she reasoned internally.

The need for further intelligence on Ela was undeniable; Jade had spent hours observing her cutting technique without deciphering any of its secrets. Ela's skills were evidently far out of Jade's league. Yet, as Vega had mentioned initially, Ela might be somewhat more open around someone of her own age.

The thought of what might happen if her sister Ruby had instead been sent to spy on Ela halted her train of thought—imagining such a scenario did not bode well for Ruby, as far as Jade could tell.

Deciding it best to continue her surveillance for Vega's sake, aware that he wouldn't easily dismiss Ela, especially considering her prior report, Jade couldn't justify putting Ruby or anyone else in potential jeopardy.

"Yeah... I... I think I will..." she murmured in her 'Aki' voice, a softer, more hesitant version of her actual tone.

"Great! See you tomorrow, then. Take care and stay safe out there, Aki," the girl cheerfully said before she briskly made her way past the broth station and exited the back of the stall.

Jade stood there for a moment, taken aback by the sudden departure.

She half-expected some veiled threats, further probing into her true identity, or at least something more than a casual "take care and stay safe," given all the indirect warnings that had hinted at potential dangers Jade might soon face.

But this simple farewell left her puzzled and slightly unnerved.

'What was that all about...? Was she trying to tell me something or was she just fucking with me again? I can't read—' As Jade pondered the possible implications, her extensive training under Vega instinctively drew her gaze to the ground Ela had just traversed, especially near the broth station.

That area was notoriously slippery and messy, often splattered with broth from when Jade carelessly added algae to the pots, not particularly concerned about neatness. The surrounding floor had been damp all day, some spots even sticky and slightly muddied from the spills.

However, what truly shocked Jade, causing her eyes to widen in a mix of terror and awe, was the complete absence of any trace of Ela's passage.

Despite having just watched Ela step through that very area while bidding her goodbye, there wasn't a single footprint or even the slightest imprint left behind. It was as though she had either never been there or had somehow glided over the surface without touching it, yet Jade had clearly seen Ela's boots make contact with the ground, which now bore no evidence of her presence whatsoever.

'It looks like I chose the right answer, for her to show me this small part of her true skills,' Jade mused in complete awe, before the more frightening sides of this revelation came crashing down on her. *'Holy shit... Vega, what the fuck have you gotten me into...?'*

If this was just some of the capabilities that the girl *truly* possessed, just what kind of a monster would she be, if somebody ticked her off...?

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Leaving Mr. Shori's stall, I was in high spirits, pleased with how the day had unfolded.

'I actually got Aki to open up a bit. And she's planning to return tomorrow!' I couldn't help but let a broad smile cross my face as I made my way to the restricted elevators, heading back to my apartment.

'As I had expected, it seems like she has her reservations about knives, but she didn't seem to mind me handling one. She was quite captivated by it, actually. That's a detail worth remembering. It might just be the key to helping her come out of her shell more in the future...'

With those thoughts on Aki momentarily shelved, I turned my attention to reviewing the day's experience notifications, reflecting on the extended time I had spent at the stall.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Knives] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Cooking] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for Tech Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

Reflecting on the day's experiences, I couldn't help but note a significant increase in the experience gains.

'Did the System grant me a bonus for attempting to teach Aki?' I pondered, noticing that the gains were almost double what I usually received, even though I hadn't spent twice the time at the stall.

'Tomorrow, I'll run a normal shift and continue explaining things to Aki, see if the experience gain is altered,' I planned, curious about the potential correlation for my future grinding sessions. After all, if there was a way to increase my efficiency, I would have to make sure I understood its inner workings precisely!

Moreover, I was looking forward to tomorrow's shift for another reason as well: My Intuition was on the cusp of reaching level 4, which would be my fourth Attribute to reach this milestone in total.

While a 4 in an Attribute didn't particularly mean anything, aside from Body, which indicated that you had reached "above average" physical fitness, it was still a bit of a milestone in my mind, as it often marked the beginning of the true grind.

The first three levels were fairly easy to get, going from Level 1 to 4.

But once you reached that 4,000xp requirement to go from 4 to 5, things tended to slow down rather dramatically in Neon Dragons, which seemed to be the case here as well. Despite using all my available bonus experience on the Body Attribute, for example, I was still many days, potentially even weeks, away from the 5th rank for it.

The challenge wasn't just the steep climb in experience points required for each level, but also the escalating difficulty of tasks needed to earn those points in the first place.

Pre-level 4, I could rack up experience through everyday activities or some regular, very basic exercise regimens. However, beyond level 4, it demanded much more deliberate and intense training efforts for consistent gains, a hurdle that intensified with each subsequent level.

Yet, achieving another level 4 in an Attribute, particularly Intuition, was a victory I eagerly anticipated. It promised to sharpen my understanding of Aki, who, despite my progress, remained somewhat enigmatic. Today marked a significant breakthrough with her, but deciphering her fully was definitely still a puzzle that required some serious thought.

Arriving home, I promptly dealt with the aftermath of a long shift at Mr. Shori's—my work attire reeked of the stall's ambiance, thanks in part to Aki's frequent broth overflow mishaps. Considering a shower but mindful of the ticking clock, I decided against indulging in what I termed "idle vanity."

Time was of the essence, and I had plans to keep.

Thus, I opted to dive directly back into my digital learning environment, swapping my work-worn clothes for comfortable bedding. Inserting the SPG-01 shard, I re-entered cyberspace, where Kill Joy's digital guidance awaited, ready to continue my journey into the depths of programming and netrunning expertise.

My goal for today had been simple, but had ultimately been derailed by my long shift: Reach level 3 [Programming] and start thinking about the Perk for it, as well as starting the 2nd guided lesson and hopefully unlocking [Quick-Hacks].

I eagerly advanced to the starting line of the second guided lesson, finding myself instantly transported to a classroom setup that resembled the first but was decked out with an array of more sophisticated, tech-focused equipment. It was clear that Kill Joy had gone the extra mile to theme each session uniquely, adding an extra layer of immersion and excitement to the lessons.

"Ah, welcome back, eager student!" Kill Joy announced, making a grand entrance not by passing through the walls, but rather as if commanding them to open before him and seamlessly close after his passage—a theatrical touch that brought a grin to my face.

His penchant for the dramatic, a hallmark of his character in the game, was fully intact in this digital incarnation, a detail that I found both amusing and endearingly familiar every time it cropped up.

Focused intently on the task at hand, I dredged through my cluttered memories for the specifics of manifesting an object in the digital realm. The concept of [Manifestation], so alien and unused since my initial encounter with Kill Joy, seemed buried under layers of newly acquired knowledge and experiences.

Despite the overwhelming influx of information since then, a glimmer of recollection sparked within me after a while, a thread of memory I eagerly grasped.

With a deep breath, I concentrated on the mental image of a chair, recalling the texture, shape, and even the weight as best as I could from memory. The digital space around me began to pulse slightly, responding to my focused intent and the barely remembered procedure of how I last used the [Manifestation] Skill.

It felt akin to pulling on a thread in the dark, not fully sure of what would follow.

Then, with a mental tug and a visual flourish that surprised even me, a chair began to materialise. It was a simple creation, far from the elaborate designs one might conjure with more practice or finesse. The structure was basic, utilitarian, yet it held a certain charm—a direct product of my concentration and will.

Its form solidified in front of me, tangible proof of my efforts, though its stability was somewhat questionable. I eyed it sceptically, hoping it would support me as intended.

This act of creation, pulling an object from the ether of digital space and manifesting to become a usable entity within the 3D environment, was a stark reminder of the unique laws that governed cyberspace, and the untapped potential that lay within my grasp.

As the chair finally took its full shape, standing ready for use, I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at this small, yet significant, success at this part of the netrunning skillset.

Settling into the chair I had just manifested, my gaze lifted to meet Mr. Joy's, who was peering at me through those oversized code-snippet sunglasses he sometimes fancied.

Despite their undeniably goofy appearance, they somehow suited him perfectly.

It struck me that when you're the genius behind a revolutionary programming language that has made all previous IT conventions practically obsolete, fashion norms ceased to matter entirely. In my eyes, his eccentric choice of eyewear was a badge of honour, a reminder of his unparalleled contributions to the digital world.

His look, blending whimsy with brilliance, served as a constant reminder of how far-reaching his impact was, allowing him to defy conventions with the same ease he navigated complex code.

"That was definitely a lot faster than last time, girl," Mr. Joy remarked. He leaned slightly forward, his hands clasped behind his back, and began to pace slowly in front of me, tracing invisible figures of eight on the ground. "Now, listen up: This is the second of three guided lessons within this shard. It will primarily focus on the programming aspects of Cyber, which you have just learned during the first guided lesson, as well as the real-world applications thereof in writing proper code, programs and, last but definitely not least, quick-hacks."

He paused for a moment, as if to gauge my reaction, before continuing. "Now, mind you, quick-hacks sound like something only the criminals of the world would resort to. The old-world did not look kindly on anything titled 'hacks', after all."

A brief chuckle escaped him, a soft glow from the digital classroom illuminating his sunglasses. "But you could not be further from the truth. Quick-hacks are nothing but highly specialised programs that can be used for a variety of purposes—some illegal, others

life-saving. It all comes down to *how* you use the knowledge I'm imparting upon you, and, just between us two," he leaned in closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret, "I *really* don't care what you do with it, either way."

He straightened up and resumed his pacing, his hands now animatedly moving as if sculpting the air with his words. "In their most fundamental form, quick-hacks exist as two separate entities: Finished quick-hack subroutines and quick-hack segments. The first is the easiest one to understand, for they do exactly what they are designed to do and nothing else.

"This could be a break-lock hack, that opens digital locks of a certain type. It could be a simple quick-hack, that opens vending machines for you to acquire some free beverages—which, by the way, you are legally obligated to share with me—or it could simply be something that allows your cerebral interface to download data from a server."

He stopped his pacing and looked directly at me, his tone growing more serious. "The important part here is that each quick-hack subroutine only does *one thing* and one thing only—the stuff it's written for. There is *no* flexibility in them, whatsoever, only providing *exactly* what is written." His gaze lingered for a moment, ensuring the gravity of his words had fully sunk in before he nodded slightly, indicating he was ready to proceed to the next part of the lesson.

Mr. Joy illustrated his point with a practical demonstration, conjuring a row of doors in front of us, each equipped with a different locking mechanism. With a flick of his wrist, a simple break-lock quick-hack's code visibly sprung to life in front of us and easily unlocked the first door.

However, its success was short-lived; it faltered against all others.

"As you can see," he noted, gesturing towards the now static doors, "this quick-hack subroutine fails to be useful in most scenarios, as it only does what it's explicitly told to do: Break this *one* particular type of lock."

He reset the scenario with a snap of his fingers, but this time, his actions yielded a different result. Each door, regardless of its lock, swung open, albeit with a noticeable delay.

"This," he said, turning to face me with a spark of excitement in his eyes, "is where quick-hack *segments* come in. They are a special sort of code, that, much like the subroutines, perform a particular function. However, these can be combined and generalised to a much greater extent."

Mr. Joy illustrated the use of quick-hack segments (Door), (Open), and (Force) from his quick-hack Base, opening the doors. "It's what defines how good of a netrunner you will be in the future. Every quick-hack segment consists of at least one (Verb) and one (Subject), with the option to add as many (Adjectives) and (Verbs) as you want after that." As he spoke, his hands moved in the air as if weaving the code together, demonstrating the flexibility and potential complexity of building these segments.

Pausing his demonstration, he looked directly at me. "Each additional part from your base will increase the RAM requirements, the heat created, and the time the quick-hack takes to do its thing. But, as you've seen, it's *vastly* more flexible than the old way of quick-hacking with pre-written subroutines. They each have their uses, and learning which one to focus on and use in each situation is what will set a good netrunner apart from a bad one, and a great one from a legendary one."

He stopped pacing and faced me squarely, a serious expression replacing his previously animated demeanour. "Before we dive into building your very first quick-hack segment to start working on your own Base, we need to delve deep into quick-hack subroutines. The understanding you'll gain there is crucial for creating effective quick-hack segments going forward, and you will need to use a vast number of subroutines in your life as well, so it's a good start anyway."

With that, Kill Joy waved his hand, and the classroom, along with its doors and quick-hack demonstrations, abruptly vanished. In its place, the familiar IDE setup appeared, where I had spent most of my time during our last guided lesson.

This was, without a doubt, going to be some of the most interesting, but similarly complex sessions I was likely going to experience for quite some time.

But at the same time, I had just heard the all-too-familiar chime of a Skill levelling up and another one unlocking, which gave me a massive dose of dopamine to work with for the next little while.

[Programming] had just reached level 3 and I had almost assuredly just gotten access to the [Quick-Hacks] Skill at the same time...