

Chapter 121 - New Quick-Hack

The outside world—and the passage of time itself—blurred into insignificance as I hammered away at the digital keyboard in my dev environment.

At some point, Gabriel came home, shuffling quietly into our room and quickly passing out. His familiar, rhythmic snoring drifted across from the other side of our thin metal divider, but I barely noticed. Later, Oliver got back too, footsteps soft and careful as they always were, trying not to wake anyone as he moved around the living room and kitchen.

Before long, even he had crashed out for the night—but me? Still coding.

I'd stopped exactly once, briefly, to slather myself generously with the ointment from that teal-colored tub Miss K had insisted we all take home. No way was I risking waking up tomorrow as a complete train wreck—though honestly, spending all night hunched over my cyberdeck like some kind of goblin probably wasn't helping much.

'Maybe using an actual keyboard would've been smarter,' I'd thought at one point, rolling my stiff shoulders and groaning quietly. *'At least then some of my muscles would get used instead of locking up completely from this stupid position.'*

At least I'd had the foresight this time to start out laying flat on my back rather than sitting rigidly against the wall. It wasn't like there was any physical effort needed for this coding marathon anyway, so no sense turning myself into a human pretzel if I didn't have to.

Though I had resorted back to sitting later on, as my body had gotten even more rigid from laying down without moving—there was no winning here.

But I was making progress. Steadily, undeniably.

And then, finally—after what simultaneously felt like no time at all and an eternity spent trapped in digital hell—the last lines of code snapped neatly into place.

"Haaaa," I exhaled deeply, utterly exhausted yet feeling the kind of raw, bone-deep relief that only came from finally finishing a project that had been haunting me for days. I stared at the "Successfully Compiled" message floating in my field of vision, feeling a weary grin tugging at the corner of my mouth.

Done.

The digital space around me—my personalized little dev environment—felt like home at this point. I'd put the majority of it together on that first dive into the SPG-01 shard, only tweaking it here and there whenever necessary since then. And honestly, it was probably more comfortable and familiar to me than the actual apartment my physical self was in by now.

But what *really* captured my attention was the shimmering construct hovering in front of me: The visual representation of my completed quick-hack. And man, was it *beautiful*.

Okay, not literally—it was just raw lines of really, really messy code—but seeing it finished felt genuinely incredible.

I'd built this whole thing from scratch—well, *mostly*.

Copy-pasting parts from existing hacks didn't count in my book, okay? Sue me.

Honestly, it wasn't even great code.

If I was being brutally honest, it was actually downright terrible.

But it was *mine*—and, maybe even more importantly, according to the theoretical simulations I'd run within the DDE, it should *work*; Terrible code or not.

Of course, I couldn't take all the credit myself, as much as I'd like to.

[Programming Maestro] and [Spiritus Machina] had absolutely carried me through most of it.

Without [Programming Maestro] guiding me around every roadblock and pointing out solutions whenever things went sideways, I wouldn't have even gotten close to something that compiled, let alone ran smoothly in theory.

That was probably *also* the reason why the code looked like an absolute trainwreck—one beautiful, disastrous, perfectly functional trainwreck—that hopefully marked the first step toward bigger things.

After all, workarounds weren't exactly “the fine art” of coding.

In non-programming terms, the entire code was practically hobbled together with layers upon layers of duct tape, with maybe a chewing gum and some hair ties attached here and there.

That I wasn't getting any [Jury-Rigging] experience for this whole endeavour was honestly the most surprising part, considering the amount of bullshit I had thrown at the metaphorical coding-wall to make this thing compile; but regardless of all of that: It *did* compile.

"Alright, let's give you a spin," I muttered quietly, starting the packaging process to turn the raw source into a neat, deployable quick-hack.

The DDE dimmed around me, temporarily shutting down the visual frills to focus on the heavy-duty task of compiling and compressing everything into a usable format. A few tense seconds later, it flickered back to life, accompanied by a friendly notification:

[Compiling and Packaging of “New Quick-Hack” completed. Would you like to rename it?]

I dismissed the message without much thought—no sense naming it properly when it wasn't even the final version yet—and quickly transferred the finished package into my cyberdeck's storage.

“Testing time,” I breathed, excitement bubbling up inside me as I disconnected from the DDE and shifted my attention to the place I knew I'd get the clearest feedback: The SPG-01 shard's main program.

It was high time to pay digital Kill Joy another visit—and this time, I had a special little surprise ready just for him...

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A few moments later, I found myself back in the overly familiar classroom, the digital space I'd already spent far too many hours getting lectured by Kill Joy over the past weeks.

He sat casually reclined behind his desk, boots propped comfortably atop it, looking like he owned the damn place—which, technically, I guess he kind of literally *did*.

As expected, Kill Joy didn't bother acknowledging my entrance—not even a nod or a glance—but I wasn't really expecting anything different.

It would've been a lot weirder if he suddenly decided to greet me politely.

"Hello, Mr. Joy," I began, giving a small, courteous bow while doing my best impression of respectful politeness—something I knew he secretly loved. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to give me a consultation on a quick-hack I've just put together? You're literally the most experienced, knowledgeable, and talented person in this entire field, so honestly, there's no one better qualified to give me feedback than you."

Slowly, almost theatrically, his head swiveled around to face me, one eyebrow lazily raised, skepticism clear in his eyes.

"Oh really?" he drawled, voice positively dripping with sarcasm and amusement. "Pray tell, girl, if I truly am as knowledgeable, experienced, absurdly handsome, and mind-blowingly humble as you claim, what exactly would I gain from spending my precious time reviewing some blanks sloppy first project?"

A small smile tugged at my lips despite myself.

After all the wild twists, turns, and frankly insane revelations of the past few days, there was something undeniably comforting about the fact that Kill Joy was still very much the same self-obsessed, outrageously arrogant persona he'd always been.

It was reassuring in a way, almost grounding—proof that not everything in this world was changing and going haywire at mach-5.

For better or worse, Kill Joy remained as reliably, spectacularly full of himself as ever.

"Well," I started carefully, deciding to lay the flattery on extra-thick, "as your student, having completed the SPG-01 shard program, any shoddy, amateurish work on my part would inevitably reflect badly on your unmatched reputation; if only a miniscule amount. However, a teacher of your extraordinary caliber wouldn't want to have their name associated with half-baked garbage regardless, right?"

Kill Joy's eyes narrowed slightly, his expression still skeptical, but I caught a flicker of curiosity there. Sensing the opportunity, I quickly pushed on, leaning into his obvious weakness for self-aggrandizing praise.

“Besides, Mr. Joy,” I continued, my tone respectful but subtly teasing, “I might’ve added some stealth-related routines in this quick-hack—stuff I doubt anyone would expect from a rookie coder like me. Nothing groundbreaking for someone of your skill, of course,” I added hastily, noticing his skeptical eyebrow twitch upward, “but still pretty damn good considering how fresh I am.”

He tilted his head slightly, interest clearly piqued now.

“Stealth routines, huh?” he muttered thoughtfully, the dismissive tone replaced with cautious curiosity. “You’re not just bluffing here to get me interested, are you?”

I shook my head quickly, maintaining eye contact. “Would I dare, Mr. Joy? Honestly, I’m pretty confident you’ll find something intriguing enough to be worth your time. But if there’s nothing interesting in there, feel free to kick me right out and bar me from the shard for a month—make me figure things out the hard way.”

Kill Joy smirked at that, clearly liking the sound of punishing me if I wasted his precious time. “Deal, girl. But remember your words—if there’s nothing good, it’ll be a full month before you’re allowed to crawl back here again. No circumventing the restriction; I’ll toss you out myself. You’ll have to rely on your own pitiful skills until you learn to create something halfway decent.”

I nodded vigorously, throwing in an extra dash of groveling for good measure. “Absolutely, Mr. Joy. Thank you, Mr. Joy. That’s completely fair!”

My confidence wasn’t *entirely* bravado, though.

Thanks to [Spiritus Machina], I’d managed to integrate some genuinely nasty stealth layers into the quick-hack—layers I never could’ve developed at my current skill level otherwise.

Sure, Kill Joy probably wouldn’t find the routines themselves surprising; he’d almost certainly seen or created something many times better a long, long time ago.

But the fact that a beginner like me had actually implemented them successfully at all?

That *had* to grab his attention—or at least I seriously hoped it would.

After all, considering I’d only finished the shard training a couple days ago, the sheer fact that I’d built a full quick-hack from scratch this quickly was probably half the reason he even bothered humoring my request in the first place.

Kill Joy rose lazily from his chair, stretching theatrically before sauntering over to stand smack-dab in the center of the blackboard—the same spot where he always lectured me from during his endless lessons.

With a cocky grin, he spread his arms wide and gave a challenging nod.

“Alright, hit me with it,” he said casually. “Throw your little quick-hack my way, and let’s see what you’ve managed to cook up, girl. Then I’ll give you my expert opinion.”

Now it was my turn to look confused.

“You... You want me to quick-hack you directly, Mr. Joy?” I asked slowly, as I tried to process his words.

He rolled his eyes dramatically, sighing like I'd just asked the dumbest question he'd heard all week. “That’s exactly what I said, isn’t it? Don’t flatter yourself so much, girl. You really think you could cook up something actually dangerous enough to inconvenience someone as incredibly talented, indescribably brilliant, and unflinchingly humble as myself? *Please*.”

His arrogant smirk widened as he saw me hesitate.

“No matter how clever you think you’ve been with your first little hack here, it won’t even scratch me. Now hurry it up and do your worst—unless you want to back out and forfeit our deal entirely?”

I shook my head immediately.

It wasn't like I had anyone else to turn to about this—correction: Nobody else I was comfortable enough asking. So there was no way in hell I'd waste an opportunity like this, especially when he was literally begging me to quick-hack him.

My initial hesitation mainly came from my knowledge about the game’s mechanics; quick-hacking someone had *always* been a straight-up hostile move in-game. You try that stuff on the wrong person, and their ICE would light you up and trace you before you could even blink—usually followed by a very nasty firefight you were rarely prepared for.

But with Kill Joy’s impatient stare practically drilling into me—not to mention his annoyingly solid logic that there was basically no way I could harm his digital construct with my current skill... Which, *fair*—I quickly popped open the cyberdeck’s interface and scrolled to the newly compiled quick-hack.

‘*Alright, let’s see...*’ I thought, mentally fumbling for a second as I tried to recall how quick-hacks worked in-game. Actually doing it myself felt weirdly foreign, considering I’d only ever watched others pull it off before. Luckily, after a bit of mental trial-and-error, I managed to find the right toggles and switches to access the right parts in the deck’s menu.

[Use “New Quick-Hack” on target?]

The confirmation prompt flashed in my vision.

It was the kind of thing that would disappear once I loaded the hack into active memory permanently, but keeping it passive for now made more sense—it was clunkier, sure, but at least it saved deck storage. Probably smart, given the absolute state of this code.

I quickly confirmed, only to be greeted by yet another window.

[How much RAM and HEAT do you want to allocate to this instance of “New Quick-Hack”?]

With my MOD-IK's limited specs—8 RAM and 4 HEAT—and absolutely no other quick-hacks cluttering up the deck right now, I decided to just go all-in. Might as well push the limits and see how far my deck could stretch while I was already testing the hack itself.

Maxing the RAM would guarantee that every bit of the quick-hack's complexity came online, especially the stealth and propagation routines I'd carefully baked into this particular version of "Spike." Dumping all available HEAT capacity into it would ensure it operated as fast and as aggressively as my deck and the terrible code allowed.

After confirming once more, one final prompt flashed in my vision:

[Use "New Quick-Hack" with the following parameters on Target: 8 RAM, 4 HEAT?]

I mentally gave the green light one last time, and instantly the interface disappeared, replaced by a thin, shimmering line that darted directly towards and through Kill Joy, connecting neatly to the back of his spine, where his cerebral link would normally be.

Holding my breath, I waited, expecting—hoping—for something spectacular, or at least interesting.

But... nothing happened.

Kill Joy stood perfectly still, completely unfazed, looking about as bored and unimpressed as physically possible.

Just as I started to wonder if the quick-hack had flopped—definitely a possibility given how freshly cobbled together the thing was—Kill Joy's eyes suddenly flicked toward me, one eyebrow arching sharply upward.

"Huh... Well, that's interesting indeed..." he murmured, head tilting slightly, a curious expression replacing the bored look he'd worn just moments before.

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Looked like my quick-hack had finally started doing its thing.

Of course, I knew it would take a second to activate, but this had felt like a painfully long wait, especially with Kill Joy's impatient stare drilling into me.

I'd deliberately coded the hack to infiltrate stealthily first, taking its sweet time—within a carefully defined upper limit, which had clearly either not worked properly or Kill Joy's ICE had interfered with—to quietly worm its way into every corner of his digital construct, before finally engaging the aggressive "Spike" routines I'd repurposed directly from Kill Joy's own shard.

It was almost like a biological virus, slowly and silently spreading through its target's digital veins, hijacking processes without raising alarms—right up until the kill-switch flipped and the chaos kicked in.

This combo had been my best bet at punching way above my current weight class—not pure stealth, not brute force, but a careful balance between the two.

I watched Kill Joy intently, hardly daring to breathe, as I waited for his verdict.

For a few tense moments, nothing happened. Then, almost imperceptibly, his head twitched. Soon after, his arm jolted slightly, followed by a sudden involuntary flexing of his fingers.

Finally, a broad, genuinely impressed grin spread across his face.

“Ohohoh, now that’s nasty, girl,” he chuckled, nodding slowly in approval. “Really, *really* nasty.”

After another brief moment, the twitching and flickering subsided, and Kill Joy regained his composure, looking me straight in the eyes.

“I have to admit, I might’ve underestimated you, girl,” he began, catching me completely off guard.

Praise from Kill Joy was so rare it practically qualified as a unicorn sighting.

“Not only is this the ugliest, most atrocious spaghetti-code abomination I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he continued, completely deflating my brief moment of pride, “but you even blatantly copy-pasted significant chunks of my own code—code that I personally handed you mere days ago!”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he quickly raised a finger, cutting me off instantly.

“Not done yet, girl,” he warned, his tone brooking zero argument.

I snapped my jaw shut, humbled and feeling more than just a tiny bit attacked on a personal level, but I knew better than to interrupt.

Kill Joy, clearly satisfied with my obedience, nodded approvingly and continued.

“*However*,” he said, voice growing serious, “the true hallmark of a proper programmer boils down to one crucial factor: Does it actually do its damn job? And on that front, as much as it pains my unparalleled genius to admit it, you’ve passed with flying colors. Somehow, despite your clear amateurishness and blatant disrespect of proper coding etiquette, you’ve created something genuinely, potentially dangerous—especially considering you’re just some blank fresh out of my basic lessons.”

I stood there, stunned into silence, reeling from the emotional whiplash of receiving genuine praise—praise!—from Kill Joy himself.

“Somehow—and trust me, I won’t ask which unholy pacts you’ve entered and what cursed offerings you sacrificed to the coding daemons—you managed to dodge a ton of issues that usually crop up when writing something like this,” Kill Joy said, shaking his head with grudging respect.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s ugly as sin itself, probably five or six times chunkier than it needs to be, and completely atrocious when it comes to RAM and HEAT efficiency—but those stealth layers you bragged about? They’re genuinely interesting. Not because *they* are actually

good—believe me, they're sloppier than a first-year's homework—but the way you've *used* and implemented them? That's the kicker. Clever, crafty, and, as much as I can't believe I'm saying this, shockingly effective."

He shook his head, giving me a look I couldn't quite place—half annoyance, half approval.

"But what *truly* gives me hope that I didn't utterly waste my valuable time on you these past weeks, girl, is this: Your mindset. The approach you took, how you envisioned the hack working, how you combined everything you had at your disposal—regardless of where you shamelessly stole some of it from—*that* right there is what separates a decent programmer from an exceptional one. And this quick-hack of yours, as ugly, inefficient, bloated, and borderline offensive to the senses as it may be... It's actually acceptable."

My jaw dropped wide open.

This...this wasn't even remotely the kind of feedback I'd expected. I'd only come here hoping to scrape together some quick pointers to polish up the hack for the Operator meeting, and instead Kill Joy was practically showering me in genuine *praise*?!

Sure, it came loaded with brutal honesty about my shoddy coding habits, but the message underneath was crystal clear: My mindset for programming was actually solid—solid enough for Kill Joy, of all people, to admit I wasn't a lost cause.

That was absolutely massive.

"I... Thank you, Mr. Joy," I finally stammered, struggling to process my shock into something coherent.

He waved off my thanks immediately, looking mildly annoyed—but then paused, reconsidering. "Actually, no. You absolutely *should* thank me. In fact, thank me more! Without my incomparable brilliance, the flawless teachings I've generously shared through the SPG-01 shard, and the quick-hack shard I magnanimously gifted you for merely attending my presence—you would be nothing."

He nodded vigorously, fully back in character. "Yes, girl, you should *absolutely* thank me—just wait until I finish jotting down some notes for your sorry attempt at code. Then we can get back to the whole thanking thing."

He fell quiet as a medieval-looking quill and ink, coupled with parchment appeared in his hands and he started jotting down things—likely just meant as a representation of him working on a file... Or so I hoped. I really didn't want to try and decipher Kill Joy's handwriting, especially if he included any code snippets on parchment, of all things.

While I waited for Kill Joy to finish scribbling down his notes, my thoughts inevitably drifted back to the core concept behind my quick-hack.

The original idea was pretty straightforward: "Take Spike, but apply it everywhere."

Of course, actually pulling that off had ended up being way more complicated than the simple premise suggested.

To start off, I'd grabbed a handful of stealth-layer routines from [Spiritus Machina]—just enough to slip past most basic ICE protections without tripping alarms.

Anything that couldn't fit through the hole that the stealth layers created got ruthlessly discarded, allowing the hack to worm its way inside without immediately triggering a cybernetic immune response.

But once safely past the initial barriers, the quick-hack wouldn't just sit idle; it would rewrite itself, patching those discarded gaps with self-propagation code I'd thrown in—kind of like a lizard regrowing its tail, but sneakier.

That propagation feature would come in handy later, too.

Next up, the hack latched onto whatever cybernetic signal it bumped into first—didn't matter if it was a hand movement, leg twitch, arm flex, or just some casual data flowing along the cerebral interface practically everyone in this world had implanted.

Using more stealth components to remain undetected, it would ride along quietly until it reached a fresh target spot, then immediately fire off its secondary function: Propagation.

Once it settled into a new location, the quick-hack cloned itself like a biological virus, siphoning off tiny amounts of energy from whatever cybernetic system it infected. Nothing too drastic, of course; the infected target would probably just feel their reflexes slightly dulled, their hands a bit clumsier, or their cerebral interface marginally laggy than usual.

Not enough to cause immediate alarm, but still quietly spreading deeper through their systems.

The hack would repeat this process again and again until one of three conditions triggered: It ran out of targets to spread to, the target's ICE finally caught on and launched countermeasures, or a built-in time limit was reached.

At that point, it went nuclear.

Each active instance received a repeating, propagating and simultaneous kill command, kicking Kill Joy's "Spike" routines into gear.

Capacitors discharged violently, IO sockets got slammed with contradictory commands, and all manner of other nasty surprises that Kill Joy had hidden inside the original "Spike" routine suddenly sprang to life, overwhelming the victim's cybernetics.

The result? Immediate chaos.

Victims temporarily lost control of their implants, sometimes even suffering real damage if they'd equipped especially powerful capacitors or sensitive implants.

I'd dedicated a bare minimum of three RAM and two HEAT to the whole routine: One RAM each for stealth, propagation, and kill commands, with the kill routines gobbling up every last bit of available RAM the moment it triggered.

It wasn't some groundbreaking, never-before-seen quick-hack that would revolutionize cyber-combat, sure—but it was definitely more ambitious and creative than just a slightly modified "Spike" variant or something equally mundane.

Now the real question was whether it'd impress the Operator at the upcoming meeting.

If they were a netrunner themselves, my odds seemed pretty good, considering even Kill Joy had admitted grudging respect.

But if they weren't familiar with this kind of stuff?

I'd better hope my quick-hack was flashy enough to outright incapacitate or terrify whoever I demoed it on, otherwise I might as well kiss my chances of impressing them with this goodbye.

Ultimately, however, my job right now was just to fine-tune this monster as best as possible with what little time I had left—and pray hard that the Operator assigned to me wasn't a complete blank who couldn't appreciate the kind of beautifully destructive chaos I'd cooked up...