

Chapter 92 - Manifestation

Stepping out of the shower, I felt like a whole new person.

The steam lingering on my skin left a comforting warmth that helped ease some of the tension that had been buzzing around in my mind all day. I still had a lot on my plate, especially with the meeting with Vega's Operator looming closer and closer every day, and I couldn't help but feel wildly unprepared for it; despite my best efforts so far to get prepared.

I sometimes kicked myself for getting swept up in the moment with Jade and her sisters—it had ended up ultimately being what got me out of that situation, sure, but cashing in a favour that big on a whim probably wasn't my smartest move.

But crying over spilled milk wasn't gonna get me anywhere now.

Dressed in my loose "home" outfit that was basically the unofficial uniform of relaxation, I made my way over to the room Gabriel and I shared.

It was time to dive back into the SPG-01 shard and make some real progress.

My goal was to wrap it up completely so I could start tinkering with netrunning on my own terms. If I wanted to prove myself to Vega's Operator, I needed to show I wasn't just another kid trying to claw her way into the scene—I needed something that truly set me apart, at least from the lowest blanks.

My [Martial Arts] skill was shaping up nicely, and my growing arsenal of Skills was nothing to scoff at, but I knew none of them were at a level that would make anyone stick their neck out for me on a professional level.

Just finishing the SPG-01 shard, however, would already push me a few steps ahead of the average upstart, and if I could show off a self-made quick-hack or even just a solid subroutine or segment prototype? Well, then I'd be a name worth remembering.

Like Mr. Stirling had said, good netrunners were rare—and thus, valuable.

If I played my cards right, I could make myself someone Vega's contact wouldn't just consider, but actually *want* to sponsor.

But in order to get there, I needed to do some additional grinding and listening for once; especially for this upcoming part of the lessons Kill Joy had prepared, as it featured [Manifestation] first and foremost—a Skill that hadn't existed in the actual game itself, so something I couldn't actually cheat on by using my pre-existing wiki knowledge.

Determined to get things done, I slotted in the SPG-01 shard and let the program replace reality.

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“The girl has returned,” Kill Joy greeted me with his usual smug grin. “Undoubtedly to glean more insights from the one and only Joy of Kill, isn’t that right?”

I rolled my eyes, not even pretending to resist the urge to dismiss his theatrics. With a small effort, I manifested my chair for the classroom like I always did, sitting down and gesturing for him to get on with it.

No time for games today.

“Someone’s moody,” he said, clearly irked by me blowing past his dramatic entrance. But, true to form, he floated leisurely towards the blackboard. With a simple flick of his wrist, the words “Lesson 3: Manifestation and You” appeared in sharp, digital script.

He turned back towards me with a serious look on his face.

“You’ve been working through this program quite quickly, I must say. I trust that all the lessons, tricks, and tidbits of information have stuck around somewhere in that head of yours, girl... Alas, I am but a humble servant to your whims, so let’s move on to the last lesson of this shard: Manifestation.

“Now, when it comes to manifestation as a *concept*, not many people grasp it fully—not even most netrunners. It’s one of the weird quirks of this world that we inhabit, something that allows those with the right skills to bend it to their will. Take that chair you created, for example: What makes it different from one that’s been hard-coded into the shard from the start?”

He floated over to grab one of the pre-programmed chairs from the corner, placing it next to mine before gesturing for me to stand and take a closer look.

As I stepped up, the difference between the two was glaringly obvious.

Kill Joy’s chair looked simple, made of some non-descript light-brown wood, but it had this undeniable sturdiness to it. Smooth edges, solid design—like it was built to handle anyone who sat in it, no matter the size or shape.

Meanwhile, my chair... Well, it was definitely mine.

It was slimmer, sleeker, clearly designed with just me in mind. The dark-red wood I’d chosen stood out like a sore thumb next to the plain chair, and I’d based it off my favourite one from back home.

But the real kicker? It didn’t feel as *real*, for a lack of better description.

Like, sure, it worked—I could sit on it just fine—but it gave off this weird *vibe*. A sense of being “less” compared to Kill Joy’s. It didn’t have that solid presence the other one did, like it wasn’t fully part of the world that we were standing in.

“My chair is... *less*,” I muttered, trying to put my finger on what exactly felt off. “Aside from the obvious design stuff, it just feels like it doesn’t belong here. It’s not as... *real*.”

Kill Joy nodded, that smug look still plastered on his face. “Exactly. You’re on the right track, girl. Manifestation isn’t just about creating—it’s about making something that *fits*, something that the world itself can’t distinguish from its own. That’s where the real expertise comes in.”

He gestured towards my chair. “Now, sit. I will explain so that you may learn from the greatest mind this world has ever seen.”

I sat down, tuning out the last part of that sentence with the kind of practised ease that comes with having dealt with Kill Joy long enough. His flair for drama was something I’d gotten used to, even if it still made me roll my eyes occasionally.

“Manifestation,” he began, “is essentially a form of quick-hacking, if we’re sticking with analogies we’ve already covered. The netrunner—or really, *anyone* with the right know-how—hijacks the world’s fundamental code and injects their own snippets to bend it to their will. Just like you would with a quick-hack when breaking into a secure vault or slicing through a slime daemon with a data-sword.

“In a way, manifestation is the most fundamental form of running. It’s actually the *first* form of running, if we’re being exact.”

I blinked at that.

The first form? Like some kind of ancient netrunner technique? Or was he being more philosophical? I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, but I didn’t get a chance to ask before he continued, clarifying it in his own roundabout way.

“Before there was netrunning, before the NetBurn, even before the first lines of code were written for Cyberspace itself—manifestation existed. It was the early days of hacking and cracking, where the original runners used crude tools, basic programs, and raw imagination to manipulate systems no one else even saw as manipulable. The earliest form of running.

“Nowadays,” he said, pacing back and forth in front of me, “masters of manifestation no longer require those tools; or any, for that matter. Their understanding of the world’s code and their imagination and will to change said code are enough. They can create where creation should be impossible; change what shouldn’t be changed. Of all the lessons you’ve learned in this shard, this one is by far the most fundamental. If you grasp the true nature of manifestation, everything else—quick-hacks, programs, even combat with other netrunners and daemons—becomes supplementary.”

It was a bit strange seeing Kill Joy wax philosophical like this, given his usual smug and aloof attitude. It felt like, for once, he was letting me peek behind the curtain—showing me something deeper, more meaningful than his usual cryptic, superiority complex-riddled lessons.

But I couldn’t deny it—it was definitely getting to me.

[Manifestation] sounded way more vast and critical than I could’ve ever guessed. Still, one thing kept bugging me in the way Kill Joy kept phrasing it.

“You keep saying ‘the world’ when you talk about manifestation. Why? Don’t you mean Cyberspace? Or at least, the digital world in general?”

I ignored the smug grin that spread across his face as he floated lazily toward me, as if he had been waiting for that exact question. “Do I mean Cyberspace, girl? Do I?”

Sometimes, with Kill Joy, you had to play his games if you wanted a straight answer—this seemed like one of those times.

“If you didn’t mean Cyberspace,” I replied, trying to think it through out loud, “then you’d be implying that manifestation could work *outside* of it. Like, in the *real* world. But if that was possible, wouldn’t people just be walking around like demi-gods? Changing things, creating whatever they wanted in the real world? So why keep saying ‘world’ instead of ‘Cyberspace’ or ‘digital world’?”

Kill Joy’s smug smile widened as if I’d just walked into a trap he’d carefully laid out for me, but instead of springing it, he gave me a slow nod, seemingly satisfied with my reasoning.

“Ah, finally, some signs of sapience,” Kill Joy said, his voice dripping with exaggerated surprise, like I’d just solved the world’s simplest puzzle. “Indeed, you’ve stumbled onto something, girl. And you’re correct—if I phrased it that way, it’d be quite the implication, wouldn’t it?”

He chuckled to himself, clearly getting more entertainment from this than I was.

His cryptic little jokes probably made him feel like some ancient sage, even if no one else thought so or could follow any of the punchlines.

“To answer you directly: Yes, I *am* implying that. Manifestation *isn’t* limited to the digital world or Cyberspace. In fact, the first times runners used it—half-consciously, mind you—it happened outside the digital world entirely. It’s what gave rise to the whole idea of quick-hacks in the first place.”

My eyes widened at that. The implication was massive.

I hadn’t even *considered* that [Manifestation] was something that could potentially be used outside of Cyberspace. The sheer idea of it had seemed far too absurd to even entertain.

But now, Kill Joy of all people, was telling me that this was actually possible? That you could just... what... be a demi-god and create things or change them with a mere thought?

How did that even make sense?

And why hadn’t anything of the sort ever been mentioned in the game?

Before I could lose myself in a rabbit hole of thoughts, Kill Joy raised his hands in a ‘calm down’ gesture. “Before you spiral out of control, girl, let me clarify: Manifestation isn’t nearly as powerful in the real world as it is in the digital. But it *is* there. Almost every netrunner uses it, usually without realising. It’s just that the term they’re familiar with is more basic. Most

corporate class-rooms and guides do not cover manifestation as a whole, but focus only on a small part of. A subsection of manifestation, if you will. They call it *projection*."

Hearing that word made everything click.

Suddenly, it all started to make some sort of sense. "Projection" was something I *had* heard of, something I was definitely familiar with from *Neon Dragons*.

It had been one of those stats I'd seen listed with specific netrunner NPCs and also tied to certain cybernetic implants and netrunner-related gear like crowns.

"Projection" was basically the range and "power" of a netrunner's quick-hacks, for lack of a better term. It decided how far away you could be from your target and how fast your code would get there.

In hindsight, it actually made a lot of sense that projection was linked to manifestation, especially after Kill Joy's little lecture.

I'd always wondered just how quick-hacks or cyberdecks always seemed to know *exactly* who you were targeting and why. I'd chalked it up to a "handwave it away" situation—maybe explained by the semi-AI governing things like your cerebral interface since it could "read" your thoughts to some extent.

But if netrunners weren't just relying on the tech but instead were the ones *actively* shaping and directing the code themselves, then it wasn't about the deck doing the work for them; it was about their own intent, their own willpower, guiding that code exactly where it needed to go in the first place; with the hardware simply being in a supportive role.

That also cleared up how netrunners could link up to anything they wanted just by thinking about it—no need to scroll through a list of networks or spend time meticulously selecting a target. They projected their will, and the code just followed along for the ride.

I'd always wondered what that "projection" stat really stood for, fundamentally speaking.

There'd been nothing like it in my old world, being about as mundane and basic as it could get for a world, so I figured it was just some gamified term for "power."

But now I could see it was more akin to "intent and will."

And [Manifestation] itself? It clearly wasn't just some cool little netrunning trick.

It all boiled down to intent and will.

A lot of questions were still buzzing around my head, but at least things were starting to make a bit more sense. It wasn't the complete mess of abstract concepts that it had been before.

But there was one glaring question I couldn't ignore, so I just blurted it out. "How does it *actually* work, though? How do you manifest things in the real world? And Projection—how

can that even be a thing? Doesn't it, like, *completely* break a dozen laws of physics or something?"

Kill Joy, ever the smug teacher, chuckled as he lazily floated around me in slow circles. "Maybe it breaks the laws of physics you *think* you know, girl. For me, it all makes perfect sense. There's more to this world than what meets the eye. Things most people don't even want to imagine could exist. Manifestation, Projection—those are just a couple examples of what's possible. And trust me, they're *far* from the only ones."

He let that sink in for a moment, leaving me to chew on the cryptic message, before he dramatically waved his arms like he was shooing away imaginary flies.

"But enough philosophy. Let's focus on practical examples—that's what you're here for, isn't it? Manifestation is best done in the digital world, because the 'laws of physics,' as you so keenly pointed out, are a lot more flexible here. We can bend them, twist them, and make them fit our will already, through just a few lines of code. So, there's a lot less resistance when it comes to forcing your intent on the rest of it."

With a snap of his fingers, a shimmering golden door appeared beside him.

He gestured toward it with a flourish. "Let's head back into Cyberspace, girl. Time to give that avatar of yours a bit of a facelift, don't you think...?"

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My head was still buzzing with a million-and-one questions when I found myself back in the familiar reception room of Cyberspace. It was the same nondescript, grey, square room I had first landed in before Kill Joy had loaded up the Neo Avalis recreation last time.

Honestly, not the most exciting of virtual spaces, but it did the job.

I took a quick glance at my digital self and was relieved to see that my arm had fully regenerated, and my avatar seemed completely unharmed—a drastic upgrade from the last time, where I'd left it in a pretty sorry state.

'Good, the avatar regenerates. Very good,' I thought to myself, nodding in satisfaction.

Sure, that had been the case in the game too, but I was quickly learning not to take anything for granted here. It was nice to know that some things did, in fact, work 1:1.

Kill Joy floated beside me in all his golden, smug glory, his expression a mix of smugness, patience, and a dash of exasperation. Honestly, trying to decode Kill Joy's moods was like trying to read a rapidly scrolling wall of code—impossible to get a clear read on, but the smugness? Always a constant.

"So, what now?" I asked, deciding to cut to the chase.

As tempting as it was to sit here and unpack all the weirdness he'd just dropped on me about [Manifestation], I didn't want to drag this out longer than necessary. There'd be plenty of time to revisit all that existential stuff later if I really needed to.

Besides, as long as I didn't sell the shard, I could always come back to this digital classroom and pick his brain whenever I wanted.

It wasn't like this digital version of Kill Joy was going anywhere.

Kill Joy floated lazily, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth as he gestured toward my avatar. "Alright, girl, it's time to put everything you've learned so far to use. Today's task: Changing your avatar's visual appearance. Just something very simple; maybe a different coloured hair; maybe turn your skin bright-pink or something? Now, before you get too excited, however, let me be clear: Yes, it is entirely possible to alter the way your avatar functions in digital space—change its abilities, speed, reflexes, you name it—but that's far beyond the scope of this little tutorial shard. Baby steps, alright?"

I raised an eyebrow, unsurprised, considering that different avatars had existed within the game as well, but still slightly disappointed that I didn't get to actually try creating one quite yet. "So, just aesthetics for now?"

"Exactly," he confirmed with a nod. "But don't underestimate the importance of that, either, girl. The way you present yourself in Cyberspace can influence how others perceive you, and thus, how hard it is for them to track you. Think of it as a mask to hide your identity from unwelcome admirers. Now, mind you, it's not actually necessary to change your actual appearance; simply layering code on top of yourself is already enough to obfuscate the real you, regardless of what you make the avatar look like in the end."

He floated closer, his tone shifting to that of a professor about to launch into a lecture. "The process of altering your avatar isn't as simple as picking some random sliders in a character creation menu, however. You'll be using a combined effort of manifestation, programming, and quick-hack knowledge. And *that*," he said, with a finger raised, "is exactly why this module comes last. Without the programming and quick-hack understanding you've gained in the previous lessons, trying to change your avatar would be like trying to code a new program by banging your head against the keyboard. Exceedingly funny looking, but ultimately, fruitless."

"So, what should I focus on?" I asked, ready for the inevitable onslaught of smug-infused instructions.

Kill Joy grinned, clearly pleased that I was paying eager attention. "The first step is manifestation—this is where you focus your intent. You've already learned the basics of manifestation with the way I've made you create your own chair every time, so use that knowledge to similarly visualise what you want your avatar to look like. You need to have a strong idea of what you want to achieve, to be able to project your will onto the code that governs your appearance."

He flicked his wrist, and lines of code began to scroll through the air in front of me—lines that I could somehow instinctively tell belonged to *me*; my digital self.

"Next, you'll want to tap into the programming skills you've learned over the last few sessions. The visual appearance of your avatar is controlled by specific segments of code, and you need to tweak those. Nobody can really tell you where and how exactly, as

everyone's avatar differs slightly based on who you are. So this is where your knowledge of programming structure comes into play and your understanding of Cyber, the language, as a whole—you're essentially tasked with finding the avatar's visual parameters. Pay attention to what each line affects and make sure your changes don't create conflicts."

He paused, letting that sink in for a moment before moving on. "Finally, you'll want to use your quick-hack skills to actually pull off the change itself. Think of the quick-hack lessons we've had and how you learned to inject code and modify pre-existing systems—that's exactly what you need to do here. You're essentially hacking your own avatar's visual parameters, girl."

He brought his hands together, fingers interlocking as if he were physically combining pieces. "Then you merge all these skills: Your knowledge, intent, and will, to manifest the change. That's how manifestation works—both here in the digital world and out there in the real one. So, the steps again: Visualise the change, locate the code that governs it, inject your modifications, and will the change into existence. Simple, right?"

Kill Joy's voice had that familiar edge of a challenge, almost daring me to mess up.

It was clear he wasn't thrilled about how quickly I'd blown through his previous lessons, and I could hardly blame him.

To him, I probably seemed like someone mashing the skip button to rush through dialogue just to get to the boss fights.

These shards were designed to be completed over months—maybe even a year—not in the week or two I'd been blazing through them.

Each session was supposed to be spaced out, with time in between to practice, research, and experiment. But I'd crammed three or four sessions into every visit, barely giving myself a break.

Even with Kill Joy's intermittent tests and pop quizzes, which I'd aced thanks to the System's knowledge downloads, I hadn't slowed down.

I could tell it frustrated him, but what could he do? He was bound by the shard's programming. If I passed the tests, the lessons continued—it was that simple.

But this final manifestation lesson now? This was different.

It was like a final exam.

If I hadn't truly grasped the core concepts he'd been trying to drill into me this entire time, this challenge would be impossible to pass.

So the first thing I did, which seemed like the most obvious thing for me to do, was to manifest a new chair and take a seat to take a closer look at the code that Kill Joy had pulled up for me—this was going to take a while...