

Chapter 73 - Cyberspace Foray VI

Taking a few deep breaths to calm my racing thoughts, I swapped out the data-shard for the last remaining blip.

'Gotta get a move on,' I reminded myself. 'Killing that daemon will definitely have caused some more obvious spikes in the server's operations; it's only a matter of time until the netrunner overseeing this thing realises that I'm here. I can worry about the loot and the implications later.'

By now, my avatar had mostly repaired itself, and breathing, as well as moving in general, had become a lot more manageable. Getting up from the bench, I quickly made my way back to the door that had originally led me into the locker room. I peeked through the small window to see if anything had changed in the hallway with the scanner.

Much to my elation, it looked exactly the same as before.

I left the locker room behind and passed the scanner, double-checking with Kill Joy that it would still allow me to pass. According to him, most scanners would continue to recognize me as long as they didn't have a specific cycle built-in or weren't manually reset by the owner.

The specific blip I had used to bypass this scanner had effectively written me into the "allowed users" list, so to speak. It was definitely something to keep in mind for the future, however, as I was unlikely to get my hands on a similarly expansive and powerful quick-hack anytime soon.

If I had used a simple, run-of-the-mill "Open" quick-hack, I probably would have had to use one again to pass the scanner. Just another example of Kill Joy's expertise in netrunning and the sheer difference it made.

I followed down the right path of the t-intersection now, the last area inside the server I hadn't checked yet and the one that seemed like it belonged to the main path designed for it, until I got to the corner at the end of the hallway.

Letting my [Stealth] Skill lead my actions, I pressed myself against the edge and carefully listened for any obvious signs that there might be something waiting for me. After confirming that there were no strange, unexpected noises, I carefully started to look past the corner, not wanting to accidentally get caught by something as simple as a camera or the like.

I was greeted by a short hallway with a security door at the other end. The hallway was seemingly clear—no cameras or scanners in sight—but I knew better than to let my guard down; nothing prevented a server owner from creating hidden traps, after all.

The security door looked quite formidable, however, with reinforced plasteel and a sleek, high-tech design—it even came with the whole neon-lighting accents around the corners!

It also had a keypad on the side, glowing faintly with a soft blue light, clearly meant to serve as the access point. The numbers were backlit, and a small screen above the keypad displayed the words "Access Restricted" in bold, red letters.

Knowing I was on borrowed time, considering the noise I had made fighting the daemon and its destruction afterward, I quickly, yet as stealthily as I could, moved over to inspect the door and keypad.

I wondered if a simple subroutine "Open" quick-hack would be able to bypass the security.

'Kill Joy's blip will almost certainly do the trick, but if I didn't have access to it, would I still be able to get through here...? I won't exactly be able to rely on them pretty much ever, outside of this tutorial session.'

Directing my question at the golden avatar of Kill Joy himself, the world around us abruptly froze; as if time itself had stopped moving.

My eyes widened in a bit of panic, but before I could even consider my next move, Kill Joy held up both of his hands disarmingly and explained, "I've stopped the simulation to explain this part a little bit more in-depth, girl. No need to panic. You're on the clock, and I didn't want to let your time run down like this."

I nodded hesitantly, appreciating the gesture despite my general level of annoyance with him—this was surprisingly fair and reasonable of him to do; not something I had really expected.

"Alright, so what's the deal with this door? If I didn't have one of your blips, how would I possibly know how to bypass it? I can't exactly carry around half a dozen quick-hacks that try to deal with individual keypads, biometric scanners, or whatever else the server owners might have come up with to validate access. And I doubt normal 'Open' quick-hacks could handle the sheer complexity of it all, if they aren't made by you."

Kill Joy floated closer, examining the keypad with a discerning eye, while nodding sagely to himself. "Yes, yes. You are correct, girl. Your run-of-the-mill quick-hacks are *nowhere* near as elaborately designed and carefully programmed as mine are; that's a given. But you are not entirely out of options either, should you run into such a fortified position—mind you, there won't be many of those in any given server, as they are very costly to implement and maintain, but you will almost always run into at least one or two of them."

He paused, letting the information sink in. "Without any of my quick-hacks—or even *inferior* versions that could still do the trick—you'll have to do some on-the-fly adjustments to the ones available to you. This is one of the major skills any new netrunner has to learn and that truly sets apart the blanks from the masters, girl."

I let out a sigh, partly out of frustration and partly to steady myself. "Okay, so let's say I don't have one of your fancy blips. How would I even begin to adjust a basic quick-hack to get through this kind of security?"

“Not quite,” Kill Joy confirmed somewhat. “Let’s have you take a closer look at the door and the keypad; maybe you can figure something out yourself, girl. Try touching them; don’t worry, they won’t bite.”

Hesitating for only a moment, figuring that Kill Joy wouldn’t randomly break his streak of no-lies that he had kept up since the first moment we met, I touched the door, feeling its cold, unyielding structure.

I wasn’t sure what exactly he wanted me to look for, but I tried my best not to miss *anything*, going as far as to even get down on my knees to try and see under it—to no avail.

With a bit of frustration starting to bubble up, as I continued to be unable to see anything that would explain Kill Joy’s recommendation, I went to the keypad and did the same thing.

I touched it, looked at it, and even smelled it—it smelled like absolutely nothing, to nobody’s surprise—but the great epiphany that Kill Joy seemed to want from me was nowhere to be found.

“I... I don’t get what I’m looking for, Mr. Joy. How would this help me figure out how to adjust my quick-hacks?” I hesitantly asked, bracing myself for the inevitable mockery ahead of time.

Kill Joy chuckled, floating closer. “Ah, girl, you’re overthinking it... Or maybe not thinking enough? Regardless. The point isn’t what you’re looking for but *how* you’re looking. It’s about understanding both the physical *and* digital layers of security. Think about it, girl: This keypad isn’t *just* a keypad. It’s a part of the whole security system; the whole code that holds together this entire server you’re in. Your quick-hacks need to be just as holistic in design; they need to deal with more than just this single part. You have to understand how these systems are interconnected.”

I sighed, nodding slowly. “So, I need to think about how the keypad talks to the door, how the door is monitored, and how the system as a whole works together... How do I do that? I can’t exactly rip open the wall and check the wires; that’s bound to trip all kinds of alarms and contingencies, no?”

I swallowed some choice words as Kill Joy’s smug face floated closer to mine.

“That’s where the ‘how’ comes in, girl. You’re not *looking* correctly,” he said, gesturing toward the door and the keypad. “You’ve only looked at the physical representation of it but haven’t bothered with the digital at all. As I told you: You need *both* to figure this out.”

Floating closer to the keypad and positioning himself directly above it, he pointed down towards it. “Touch it again; but this time, look at the digital side of it all; not the physical, girl.”

I stared at Kill Joy for a few seconds, then breathed out a heavy sigh and followed his directions. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, no matter how hard I tried to make sense of his words.

‘This is definitely one of those times, like back in school, where the teacher tries to explain something but only delves deeper into the specific words that you didn’t understand in the

first place. How does this help anyone?! You can't just explain the thing that causes confusion with the exact thing that caused it in the first place!

Touching the keypad again, I tried my best to “look at the digital side.”

Unblinking, I stared at the keypad as hard as I could, as if that would somehow allow me to see the very code that the keypad was made of.

Much to nobody's surprise; it didn't work.

I tried everything I could think of, from gently placing a finger on it to fully grasping it in both hands and everything in between, all the while Kill Joy simply hovered above me with an ever-increasingly smug and annoying look on his face.

I was half-tempted to simply throw the blip quick-hack at it and move on with my life, but if I really wanted to pursue the path of a netrunner in any capacity, I needed to understand and learn how to do what Kill Joy had just explained.

I couldn't afford to just take the easy way out, or I'd be unable to function the moment I met an obstacle I didn't have the perfect quick-hack for.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I took a deep breath and tried to calm my mind.

'Think, Sera, think. Digital side... digital side... How would I want to be looked at, if I was a keypad's digital side...?'

Opening my eyes again, I tried focusing not on the keypad's physical form but on what it represented in Cyberspace: A lock and authentication program that required a specific set of inputs to allow access.

I spent the next few minutes trying to remember everything I had learned from Kill Joy's prior lessons about doors, locks, authentication, and authorization, as well as everything I had learned from my [Programming], [Netrunning], and [Quick-Hacks] skills that could be relevant for this scenario.

Ultimately, however, I came up short.

“I don't fucking get it,” I muttered, leaning against the wall in defeat.

No matter what I tried, I couldn't “see” the digital side, as Kill Joy had put it. I had no idea what he wanted from me, and his explanations so far had only served to confuse me more and more.

I hadn't exactly been a programmer in my last life, so how was I supposed to just understand how it was designed in code, simply by looking at it? It made no sense, no matter how you tried to cut it.

“It seems that you have run into a bit of an issue,” Kill Joy's voice wafted over from above my head, and I tried my best to ignore it.

I had just about had it with the smug fucker and his useless explanations.

Floating down from the wall and landing in front of me, his eyes met mine, and surprisingly, he didn't carry his usual smugness in either smirk nor hidden behind his eyes.

"It can be frustrating to not understand something, girl. I know all too well how that feels, you know? I wasn't always the most erudite, magnanimous person in this world. I, too, had to learn a lot of things in my life," he ventured, his voice surprisingly gentle.

"Don't let that frustration hinder your progress. It would be a shame to see someone as talented as you stumble and break at this hurdle. If you have questions, ask them. This whole simulation is meant to teach you, after all. But I cannot answer questions that are left unspoken."

I sighed deeply, looking at the keypad again.

He was right, of course, but I didn't exactly fancy more of his cryptic and useless advice.

But at the same time, what other option did I really have?

"Alright, fine... How do I 'see' the digital side of this thing, Mr. Joy? I get that there's more to it than just the physical keypad, but I don't know how to tap into that. In as simple terms as possible, please?"

Kill Joy nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. "That's a great question. Think of Cyberspace as a layered reality. By default, you're currently only seeing the top layer; the physical manifestation. To see the digital layer, you need to interface directly with the things you are trying to detect."

I raised an eyebrow. "Interface directly? Like... plug into it somehow?"

"Precisely," he said, his smile widening. "You need to establish a direct link with the keypad. Think of it like using a data-link implant in real life to connect to a server directly. Once you're connected, you'll be able to see and manipulate the digital constructs that make up the keypad. It's essential for figuring out how to adjust your quick-hacks."

He gestured towards the keypad once again. "Touch it with any part of your avatar that is uncovered, and try delving into your cerebral interface. It should allow you to see the digital side of whatever you're touching; the keypad in this case."

Feeling a mix of annoyance and relief that he finally decided to give me some usable advice, I followed his directions once more.

This time around, it didn't take long to figure out how to access the digital layer.

With my fingers on the keypad's outer edge, I popped open my cerebral interface and was immediately greeted with a wholly different view than before.

Even without opening any apps or looking at any of the myriad notifications that had stacked up over the course of the session today, the keypad my finger was touching had changed

completely: It no longer looked like it was made out of a combination of plastic, metal, and rubber.

Instead, it was completely made up of cascading, yellow-green lines of code.

Focusing on it a little bit more, a window popped up inside my cerebral interface. It didn't take a genius to figure out what it was about.

"Alright, I think I got it. I can see the code, what now?" I asked Kill Joy for further instructions, feeling like a massive weight had just disappeared from my shoulders.

My netrunning dreams were no longer in dire jeopardy.

"This is where your programming experience comes in," the golden avatar explained uncharacteristically patiently, seemingly recognizing that I was in no mood to humour his usual smugness or cryptic answers. "You need to figure out which aspects govern the actual mechanics of the keypad and ignore the parts that handle the physical looks or usage. Once you've done that, find the corresponding entries related to how it authenticates and locks the door so you can bypass it. But don't bother looking for a password or anything; you won't find those. Nobody would be stupid enough to put those in plain text within the construct of the lock itself. You're trying to bypass the authentication or brute-force an entry, instead."

He paused, letting that sink in. "Arguably, this is still way above what you should be able to do based on our time spent together so far, so don't feel too overwhelmed. Just spend a couple of minutes looking through the code; try to learn and understand as much as you can from it. You won't be able to whip up a full-on quick-hack out of nowhere like this anytime soon."

Hearing him say that made me feel a lot calmer.

The admission that this was far above my pay grade lifted a lot of self-set expectations.

Having the opportunity to simply peruse some of the code without having to focus too hard on getting everything perfectly right was going to be a lot less stressful than the last few minutes had been.

Taking a closer look, I tried dissecting the code as best I could as Kill Joy had instructed: Dividing up the parts that made up the physical construct, the visuals, and the functionality, as well as the actual parts that seemed to govern the underlying systems and connections.

It was a bit like peeling an onion, layer by layer, each piece revealing more of the keypad's true nature and how it existed in Cyberspace.

I managed to identify the lines of code that dictated the colour of the buttons, the sound they made when pressed, and the slight vibration feedback given to the user. I found the aspects that governed how it looked in Cyberspace, the metal, the rubber and the plastic parts each carefully designed to fit together.

Ignoring all the superficial stuff, I honed in on the deeper, more complex lines of code linked to security protocols and access controls.

A smile crept onto my face as I slowly started to piece together how the keypad communicated with the door. Each segment of code was like a puzzle piece fitting perfectly into place, revealing a clearer picture of the security measures in place.

Even though I couldn't *fully* understand how and why everything worked the way it did—my meagre three Levels in [Programming] weren't enough to decipher the full-on Cyberspace integration just yet—I recognized similarities to what I had already learned thanks to the System.

The underlying code wasn't too different from how I would design such a lock and key system; it was just vastly more complicated because of the Cyberspace layer, which required additional hooks, callbacks, and integrations.

I had easily spent 15-20 minutes dissecting the code, but it was time to get back to work and finish this session.

I still had a long way to go, but at least now I felt like I was on the right path.

Closing out of the window, I exited my cerebral interface before turning to Kill Joy. "I'm good to continue now, Mr. Joy."

"Very well, girl. I will resume the simulation and let you go on. Do try not to make me regret spending this extra time here with you, would you?"

And just like that, the seemingly frozen air around us resumed its subtle movements; the lights around the door and keypad oscillated slightly, and Cyberspace felt "right" again.

Without wasting any time, I threw one of the last remaining "Open" quick-hacks from the subroutine blip at the door. During my brief dive into the code of the keypad earlier, I realised the door was only locked from this side, making it unnecessary to "open" the keypad.

Instead, by using the quick-hack on the door, I could skip accessing the keypad altogether.

By the time I needed to leave, I could just walk through from the other side, as it wasn't locked to begin with.

The door opened with a quiet swoosh, revealing an expansive server room.

The air wafting out was cool and sterile, and a low humming noise permeated through the doorway as I carefully stepped up to take a look.

The room was massive, easily twice as large as the locker room where I had fought the daemon, and clearly too large to fit into the office building's footprint I had observed from the outside.

But such was Cyberspace.

Restrictions like "laws of physics" or other such minor trifles didn't really exist as long as you knew how to code the workarounds. Making something bigger on the inside than the outside was one of the easiest tricks in the book, coding-wise.

I quietly moved into the room after checking for any cameras, traps, or daemons, once again relying on my [Stealth] Skill to keep my digital footprint as small as possible.

Passing by row after row of massive server racks, I had to seriously focus on my objective of finding the data-vault. The sheer amount of high-tech hardware around me was incredibly distracting.

'Focus, Sera. This is all just data, made to look like high-tech servers; not actual hardware you can take with you. It doesn't matter what they actually do, just focus on finding the vault.'

Passing row after row of imposing server racks, I had to force myself to stay focused on my objective: Finding the data-vault.

The servers were mesmerising, glowing with vibrant, neon lights and humming with the quiet power of stored information. But I had no time to admire the digital craftsmanship. Every second wasted could mean the Netrunner who owned this place could be realising that their daemon had been taken care of.

I kept my movements swift but cautious, sticking close to the shadows where the rows of server racks cast faint silhouettes. My [Stealth] Skill guided my steps, helping me navigate the maze of data without leaving much of a trace.

After a few tense minutes, I finally spotted a large terminal against the eastern wall of the room. It looked like an old-school ATM machine, but with a Cyberpunk twist: Sleek black metal with pulsating neon blue accents, a large touchscreen interface, and various ports and slots for data access.

It was the only thing that had stood out amidst the uniform server racks so far; so I figured it was my best bet.

Approaching it, I noticed too late that the server racks flanking the terminal didn't match the others I had passed. They were lacking the rhythmic lights and the quiet hum that the rest of the servers had and they were slightly too perfect in their arrangement.

The moment I stepped between them, a strange sensation washed over me as a hidden scanner activated, probing my avatar for authorization—and failing to receive it.

"Shit! Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I muttered, realising too late that I had walked into a hidden trap.

With no time to waste, I quickly threw my last "Open" quick-hack at the terminal. The digital line shot out from my neck, connecting with the machine in a flash of grey, before turning green almost immediately; Kill Joy's coding work once again proving exceedingly proficient.

I hammered away at the touchscreen, desperate to find out if this was the data-vault I had been searching for. The screen flickered to life, displaying a series of options and prompts.

My fingers flew across the interface, navigating through the different layers and trying to prompt it to release whatever it might hold.

With the alarm tripped, it was only a matter of minutes or seconds until the netrunner tasked with keeping everything in order with the server would be showing up.

Just when I thought my luck had run out, the terminal finally emitted a soft chime.

A perfect cube, roughly 6x6 cm, ejected from a slot at the bottom of the terminal into my hand. I didn't even need to ask Kill Joy for confirmation; I knew this was it immediately.

The sheer density of code crammed into the cube lent it a strange, physical weight in my hands.

"Got it," I whispered, clutching the precious data tightly with a triumphant smile.

In the next moment, the world spun, and pain exploded from my right side.

I was thrown across the room, tumbling a good dozen metres before hitting the ground hard.

Parts of my data construct were ground into smudges on the solid server room floor. A groan of pain escaped me, but I knew I had no time to dawdle; even though parts of my body were leaking code at a worrying rate as a result of the missing pieces—digital skin that had been removed by the painful sliding across the floor.

Orienting myself to look back at the terminal I had just been launched away from, I saw the culprit.

A humanoid figure emerged from the shadows near the terminal, wearing a featureless mask that gleamed under the dim lights of the server room. The netrunner's sleek, dark outfit clung to their form, decorated with lines of glowing code that pulsed rhythmically, as if mirroring the beat of a heart—given a different situation, I would have definitely loved their style.

Panic surged through me, but I couldn't afford to freeze.

Clutching the data cube tightly, I sprang to my feet and darted towards the exit as best I could, limping slightly as each step sent a jolt of pain through my body; the tumble having definitely dislocated or sprained something.

The netrunner immediately gave chase, while launching a barrage of quick-hacks in my direction. Sparks of golden light shot past me, manifesting as bursts of electricity that exploded upon impact.

I zigzagged through the rows of server racks, narrowly avoiding each attack just barely, by blindly trusting my intuition to guide my steps.

"Move, move, move!" I muttered to myself, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Every muscle in my body screamed as I pushed myself to the limit, ducking and weaving to dodge the incoming fire.

The netrunner's quick-hacks continued to tear through the environment around me, ripping up entire sections of the floor and sending debris flying in all directions, some of which hitting

me and leaving painful cuts and bruises as they did. The cacophony of explosions and the hiss of disrupted data filled the air, making it feel like I was running through a literal war zone.

My mind raced as I tried to stay ahead of the onslaught.

I needed more protection.

Slotting the rare data-shard mid-run, I called upon my [Personal Shield] quick-hack. Instantly, the shimmering, golden kite shield, featuring Kill Joy's smug face, formed on my left arm.

A moment later, I barely managed to turn in time to angle the shield to absorb the brunt of the damage from another lightning-fast quick-hack, but the impact sent jolts of pain through my avatar regardless.

The netrunner was relentless, their masked visage devoid of any emotion as they closed in on me. I could feel their presence like a cold shadow at my back, their quick-hacks growing even more intense and frequent the closer I got to the hallway I had taken to get inside.

A [Spark] exploded to my left, sending a burst of flame up and forcing me to veer right, while another quick-hack, sent out almost at the same time, ripped up the floor just inches from my feet, sending me tumbling to the ground.

Instinctively, I managed to roll and keep my momentum, thanks to the muscle memory inherited by my [Acrobatics] Skill. Gritting my teeth despite the mounting pain, I forced myself to keep moving. The security door leading back to the main path and out of the server was just ahead, a beacon of hope in this digital nightmare.

With one final burst of speed, I reached the door, slamming into it with the shield, nearly toppling over in my haste. To my immense relief, the door hadn't been completely closed down by the netrunner yet, and it gave way.

I scrambled through the opening, glancing back just long enough to see the masked figure pause, their eyes—if they had any—burning into mine with cold fury.

My Intuition screamed of imminent danger, and I immediately threw myself to the ground, narrowly avoiding the massive burst of flame gushing out of the netrunner's open palm.

Hastily stumbling back to my feet, I continued to sprint towards the main path, following the hallways in reverse to get back to the main entrance of the server.

Every step was a battle against the pain and exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm me.

Quick-hacks and [Sparks] flew past me, some grazing my avatar and sending jolts of agony through my body.

I kept my shield pointed backwards, trying my best to dodge as many quick-hacks as I could, but the shield was taking an absolute beating.

The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, the exit feeling like it was always just out of reach. By the time I reached the door to the initial reception room, my neck felt like it was actually on fire. Tears streamed down my face, and my vision had long passed the point of being considered “blurry.” Losing strength quickly, I stumbled into the reception room just as another explosion hit my [Personal Shield] hard enough to wink it out of existence.

The world flipped and turned as I was thrown across the reception room, hitting one of the pillars and crumpling to the floor next to it. If not for the absolute torrent of adrenaline coursing through my veins, I would have long passed out from the sheer amounts of pain I was in.

It wasn't quite on the level of the NeuroCorpse, but it was far, *far* beyond anything I had ever experienced aside from that.

Trying to push myself up from the floor, recognizing that I couldn't afford even a second of respite if I wanted to get out of this server alive, my eyes widened in abject horror.

I was missing an arm.

“Oh no,” I muttered, the beginnings of a serious panic attack setting in. “Oh shit. Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

My left arm, the one that had held and directed the [Personal Shield], was completely gone, torn to shreds by the explosion that had ended my quick-hack.

With the cube in my right hand, I pushed myself off the ground and stumbled through the broken glass doors of the entrance, another explosion missing me by mere inches and sending me tumbling down the stairs into the garden.

‘Just keep moving!’ I told myself, desperation the only source of energy left in my body. *‘Fucking move, Sera! MOVE!’*

Once again, I pushed myself up from the ground and kept moving toward the giant gates at the end of the pebblestone walkway.

Each step was a battle against the searing pain and the throbbing emptiness where my arm had been. The world around me was a blur of light and noise, and I could feel the netrunner's presence like a cold shadow closing in.

I didn't dare look back, focusing solely on the gates ahead, my only hope for escape.

As long as I could get out of the server, the netrunner wouldn't be able to follow me easily.

I just had to reach the gates, and I'd be safe.

The crackling of lightning behind me made my breath catch—I knew there was no way I could dodge yet another quick-hack.

I was long out of fumes to run on.

I simply kept stumbling and limping my way toward the gates, the last remnants of my mental energy accepting that I had been beaten and waiting for Kill Joy to shut down the simulation and declare it a failure, mere moments away from success.

'I really tried,' I thought ruefully. *'If I had just been a tiny bit faster... Just hadn't missed that stupid hidden scanner...'*

As the lightning shot out, my whole body tensed in expectation, but instead of the jolt of pain or the world around me disappearing or freezing entirely, I saw the bolt of lightning impact to my left and right—it had split.

Thoroughly confused by what just happened, I wanted to look back, but I knew that if I even attempted to change my heading by the tiniest of fractions, I would simply keel over.

“Oh whoopsie. I *really* shouldn't be between the simulation and the student. You really should know better than that, considering how much of a genius you are. That is really unprofessional, Kill Joy,” I heard the muttered words of the golden avatar from directly behind me.

A thoroughly pained, disbelieving smile bloomed on my face at his muttered words.

Moments later, I reached the gates and slammed my right shoulder into them.

Immediately, the world around me parted; the garden and office building disappeared, replaced by the same street I had originally entered the server from.

Pulling up my cerebral interface, I disconnected from Cyberspace with a mere thought.

The world collapsed around me, sending me careening through myriads of coloured spaces and lights before I forcefully slammed into a chair inside Kill Joy's lecturing room.

“Well done, girl. You've succeeded at extracting the data!” Kill Joy's elated voice inundated my mind, the haziness and pain making it hard to even focus on the words he spoke. “Better get out of here and get that cerebral link cooled down, girl. You're suffering from some seriously bad burnout. We will talk about all this in your next session!”

With those words, the SPG-01 shard's environment collapsed, sending me careening one more time through a series of rooms, lights and impressions until I found myself lying back on the bed inside my room...