

Chapter 72 - Cyberspace Foray V

Carefully pushing open the door leading into the locker room, I tried my best to remain as quiet as possible.

While I was equipped for a fight, I'd much rather get out of here without risking myself.

Plus, getting stuck between the daemon and the door behind me was a surefire way to limit my options if it came to dodging.

I kept my eyes locked on the daemon the entire time, even as I nearly stumbled when my left foot got caught on a nearby bench, almost causing me to fall and blow my stealth attempt entirely.

The daemon had easily heard and seen the lockers open all the way down the room when I first goaded it into action, so I knew its senses weren't bad.

Yet, it hadn't reacted to my presence whatsoever despite my near-miss.

'I guess it's more of a cone-shaped sensor,' I thought to myself as I carefully continued towards the daemon. *'If it were radial in nature, there's no way it wouldn't have heard or seen me by now... Lucky me.'*

Although the daemon was only about five metres away from the door, it felt like an eternity as I slowly approached, shield and sword in hand. By the time I was next to it, ready to swing, I felt cold beads of digital sweat running down my neck.

Without wasting any more time, not wanting to risk the daemon abruptly turning or anything of the sort, I swung the [Data-Blade] at the daemon's centre of mass.

There was a strange tearing sound when the blade connected with the daemon's back, like someone was ripping apart a whole bunch of cardboard, mixed with a strange digital vibrance added to it.

I watched in a mix of elation and awe as the [Data-Blade]'s golden hue sank into the daemon's unnatural black and red body, slicing through it cleanly and splitting the code in twain.

The strangest part of the whole experience was that the daemon itself was dead fucking silent.

I had braced myself for a scream, a screech, or even just another strange noise like the one from the instant the blade had started cutting, but instead, I was met with an uncanny, eerie silence as the blade continued its path through the daemon's body unhindered; as if it didn't even realise anything was happening at all.

I realised I had definitely over-committed with the strike when the blade finished its cut and started trying to rip apart the solid code structures that made up the floor of the locker room.

This unbalanced me, and I lost my footing, stumbling forward slightly. I regained my balance just in time to see one of the slime's tentacles racing towards my face.

Instinctively, I held both arms in front of my face, not wanting to get hit.

As the tentacle hit the smugly smiling face of Kill Joy on my shield, a small, golden ripple of light sprang into existence, suffusing both the tentacle and my body, along with the code structures around us.

Peering out from behind the shield, only now remembering that I had it and that it was likely the only thing that had actually kept the tentacle at bay, instead of my stupid and meagre attempt at shielding my face with my arms, my eyes went wide.

Where I had cut the slime-type daemon in two, thinking that going for the centre of mass was the most likely way to success—as I was effectively trying to rip the code-base of the daemon apart enough for it to be unable to function—I had inadvertently played right into the daemon's hands.

*'Of course it simply split... It's a **slime**, Sera! What the fuck did you think was going to happen when you cut it in half?! Is this your first time ever seeing a slime or what?'* I couldn't help but internally lament the stupidity of my actions. While, technically, this was in-fact the first time I had ever seen a slime in real life, it wasn't exactly what the furious part inside of me had asked.

There was practically no slime-based enemy in existence that simply died when cut in two, so why should a daemon designed like one?

I needed to think quickly. The daemon's split forms were now writhing and reconfiguring themselves, preparing for another attack. Unfortunately I had clearly been too busy lamenting my own stupidity than to mentally prepare myself for the inevitable attack.

When two tentacles, one from each slime, came at me simultaneously, I realised just how deep in trouble I really was.

Unapologetically panicking, I swung wildly in front of me with the golden short-sword in one hand while covering my face and upper body as best I could with the shield in the other.

I somehow managed to get either my sword or the shield in front of the myriad tentacles swarming in to attack me, but I knew it was more luck than actual intent that saved me from their initial retorts.

The [Data-Blade] cut through tentacles of unnatural red and black, the golden hue of the blade slicing cleanly through their corrupted code. Each severed tentacle writhed and disintegrated into digital fragments as they hit the floor, but my satisfaction at this small victory was decidedly short-lived.

Almost instantly, a new tentacle swung at me from a different angle, and much to my dismay, I saw that the slimes started forming replacements, small nubs on their bodies rapidly starting to grow out into fully fledged appendages, voiding my frantic efforts to not get overwhelmed.

I kept slicing with the sword, each swing connecting, severing tentacles that dissolved into fragments, but the onslaught of the daemons simply did not stop or abate whatsoever.

The daemons were relentless, and for every tentacle I cut down, another one took its place.

I had barely any time to think, more working on instinct, following my Intuition to try and adjust the unwieldy shield to incoming attacks, while more-or-less blindly swinging the sword as best I could.

The only thing I was consciously thankful for, was that the slimes seemed to be unable to use more than one appendage at a time; a blessing that was likely the only reason I hadn't gotten immediately ripped to shreds.

My arms were starting to ache rapidly from the constant defence and attack, and my breath was coming heavy and quick. While I was far from unathletic, considering my Body of 5, I had absolutely no idea how to wield a shield or a sword—something that was rapidly proving to be a massive issue in this particular encounter.

Intellectually, I of course knew that I wasn't exactly exerting physical effort, as I was simply lying on my bed in the real world, but that didn't matter all too much, as the mental exhaustion from trying to have my avatar survive this ordeal took just as much of a toll.

When I started to feel the back of my neck also get to an almost uncomfortable level of heat, I knew that I had to hunker down and actually come up with a plan. In a battle of attrition like this, I had no chance of winning against the daemons.

The [Personal Shield] held strong, absorbing the brunt of their strikes, but the sheer force of the attacks was also pushing me back towards the door, inch by inch, in addition to spiking the heat at the back of my neck momentarily.

Another tentacle swung at my legs, and I barely managed to block it with my shield, the impact sending a jolt up my arm while my neck briefly screamed of a light burn.

Two more came at my sides, and I twisted, the [Data-Blade] cutting through one while the shield deflected the other, once again sending a jolt of pain into my neck.

But they kept coming regardless, a relentless wave of unnatural red and black corruption.

I gritted my teeth, trying to focus on the rhythm of their attacks, hoping to find an opening; anything to get me out of this situation without burning my neural link.

*'I **have** to reach their cores; that's how you kill slimes. Everyone knows that... But how?!'* I thought, desperately side-stepping another swing and slicing through an incoming appendage at the same time. *'Think, Sera! You've killed tens of thousands of slimes before!'*

My back abruptly hit the door behind me as I stepped back from another tentacle that I couldn't dodge.

I knew it was do-or-die.

I had never been a fighter, always more of a bystander in these sorts of things. Bullies in locker rooms, pushing the nerdy kid into one and locking them in.

I was the kind of girl to just stand at the opposite end of the hallway, ruefully look in their direction, then head off to the next class.

Now I was the nerdy kid, with no idea how to fight back, being bullied in the locker room with nobody to help. One could call it irony, karma, or whatever else you might believe in, but the whole poetry of it all definitely wasn't lost on me.

Sure, they were daemons instead of bullies, but at the end of the day, what was really the difference? They were both destructive and wouldn't take no for an answer or react favourably to diplomatic attempts.

There was only one thing that I knew would stop a bully: Punching them in the mouth, as hard as you could.

Taking as deep a breath as I could manage, my digital avatar thoroughly exhausted and my mental energy reaching its limits, I focused on the slime to my right.

Waiting for the right moment, just after deflecting another attack from the left slime, I abruptly stepped towards the one on the right. I angled my shield to the left to keep the other slime busy punching it, while I swung at the right's bundle of appendages.

Once, twice, thrice—I swung again and again, hoping to clear them faster than they could regrow, with no real technique behind it. By the time the fourth tentacle evaporated into digital ash, I saw with a hint of elation that the nubs were unable to keep up with the speed at which I was taking out the newly grown tentacles.

That elation was *thoroughly* short-lived.

An indescribable pain wrecked through my body as a tentacle from the left slime managed to slip past my shield and slapped right into the left side of my stomach.

I screamed a hoarse cry of pain as I felt the corruption forcibly inject itself into my code and latch onto it, overwhelming the ICE inside my neural-link in an instant thanks to the physical connection between us in Cyberspace. My vision went white for an instant as the daemon's maliciously corrupting code ripped out chunks of my avatar—the digital representation of my very mind—replacing it with parts of itself

The pain was unlike anything I'd ever felt.

It was as if a hot poker had been thrust into my gut, only for it to expand and tear apart everything in its way, searing and tearing at my very essence.

My nerves felt like they were on fire, each synapse overloaded with the invasive, corrupting data. The corruption burrowed deeper, rapidly clawing through my code and spreading more of itself with a relentless, agonising efficiency.

Desperation fueled my next move. I swung the [Data-Blade] wildly at the appendage, severing it and stopping the daemon from injecting more destructive code into me.

The tentacle dissolved into corrupted fragments, but the damage had been done.

Panting heavily, I staggered back, once again with my back to the door, trying to regain my composure. My avatar's form flickered, the corrupted areas struggling to stabilise, as black and red, molten code kept pouring out of my body.

The pain was still there, a dull, throbbing ache that refused to fade, but I had to push through it. The combination of my unpleasant experiences with Valeria's "teaching methods" and my Ego Attribute working overtime was the only thing keeping me sane at this stage.

For all the pain and strangeness I was feeling as a result of my mind being attacked by a daemon, it was nowhere near as bad as being exposed to the NeuroCorpse for an entire night.

Figuring there was no point in holding anything back anymore, especially since I was probably close to tripping Kill Joy's failsafe if the pain was any indication, I stepped back up towards the right slime.

Pointing my open palm at the slime on the left, I mentally commanded the shard inside my neck-slot to activate, calling upon the [Spark] quick-hack. Immediately, I felt a searing pain in the back of my neck as the quick-hack activated, but I ignored it for now.

A golden flame shot out of my hand, punching into the slime's body and burning away parts of it. The creature writhed and slithered like a blinded animal trying to retreat from a predator.

With the other slime momentarily incapacitated, I put my full attention on the one in front of me, hacking away at it one appendage at a time. Quickly, I carved my way through the forest of tentacles and finally found the opening I had so desperately struggled to achieve.

With a quick stab and a pleading prayer to the Cyberspace gods, I lunged at the slime's core, aiming for the small, exclusively red orb near the top.

When the [Data-Blade] connected, there was a moment of resistance as the daemon's ICE attempted to fight against the malicious code being injected. It was only an instant, but to me, it felt like an eternity. I feared the sword wouldn't be able to do the trick.

But then, finally, the core split and dissolved into millions of code strips that were carried away by an ethereal, non-existent wind. With the core gone, the rest of the slime slumped over immediately and started turning to digital ash on the locker-room floor.

Without wasting any time, I turned towards the second slime and started working towards the same goal. The small flame of [Spark] had already been dealt with by the daemon at this stage and it was slowly recovering as I looked at it.

It didn't take long—now that I only had to face a single slime—before my sword managed to pierce right through its core, resulting in a second pile of ash mere moments after the first.

Thoroughly exhausted, I slumped against a group of lockers behind me, breathing heavily and quickly. I dismissed both [Data-Blade] and [Personal Shield] for now, as the heat at the back of my neck had become thoroughly painful.

I silently hoped that I hadn't overdone it, but I secretly already *knew* there would be some consequences to my poor Heat management—pain like this could not possibly be intended.

"You know," Kill Joy's sudden appearance and voice startled me, almost making me jump to my feet, but I ended up clutching the left side of my stomach in agony at the sudden movement instead. "I was *this* close to pulling you out, girl. But I figured you had it under control. And lo and behold, you did! Wouldn't be the first time I was right about something now, would it? Hehehe."

The golden avatar's annoying laugh echoed through the empty locker room as I tried my best to stay lucid despite my exhaustion and pain—I still had a data-vault to breach, after all.

"How do... fix this?" I struggled to ask, each word coming out in pained bursts, as I looked up at Kill Joy and vaguely gestured towards my side.

"There's a few different types of daemons, you see. Some cut, some destroy, some corrupt. These slime ones," he nodded towards the piles of ash on the floor, "they corrupt. So parts of your avatar's code have been thoroughly perverted and changed into irreparable code snippets. They're not part of your mental construct anymore, so they can't be regenerated."

Just before I could succumb to exasperation at my own terrible plays, I saw his pointed look—the one that screamed, "I have just given you a hint, girl." It was the same look he always liked to give me as a subtle nod that there was a test presented to me.

Not a mandatory one, but an optional bid to gain *more* information, should I manage to extrapolate from his words.

It was Kill Joy's way of separating the wheat from the chaff, as far as I could tell. After all, anyone with the requisite Credits could get the SPG-01 shard and learn something about Netrunning.

But only those who truly *engaged* with it and understood it to a degree that allowed them to extrapolate from Kill Joy's hidden tests would actually gain the full breadth of knowledge from the shard.

I wasn't quite sure whether it was my lucidity slipping, my recent experiences in this new world, or maybe just plain madness, but the first thing that came to my mind as I thought about a solution was to cut out the infected area.

'*That... can't be it, right?*' I wondered as I looked over at Kill Joy's leisurely floating form. '*Can I cut out parts of my own mental construct? Is that even a thing?*'

Somehow, this plan made the most sense to me at the time. It was like having a thoroughly infected part of your body, threatening to kill you. Amputation was the most likely path to success in those instances, so why shouldn't it work for daemoniac corruption?

Mentally pulling at the data-shard inside my neck, I conjured another [Data-Blade], which caught Kill Joy's attention. A subtle smile was the only indication I received from him that I might be on the right track—or maybe he just enjoyed watching me suffer.

Carefully, I turned the golden short-sword on myself and only now realised that the “blade” itself had a cascading flow of golden code rippling through it. It was thoroughly mesmerising, but a renewed pang of searing pain from my abdomen rapidly got me back on track.

Taking a deep breath and clenching my teeth, I sliced into my own avatar.

I had expected pain, but the result of my action was something *beyond* that.

When the tentacles had hit me and started corrupting my mental construct, it had felt like a burning poker had been inserted into my stomach, before it rapidly expanded. The golden sword of the [Data-Blade], however, was not corruption.

It was *destruction*.

The parts where the sword touched my mental construct simply ceased to exist, evaporating with a forceful, spiteful pain that almost made me pass out and drop the quick-hack altogether. Only my Ego Attribute supporting my endeavours towards my goal—removing the corruption—managed to keep me together and on track.

I blindly cut, ripped, and tore at my own digital body, tears of unadulterated agony streaming down my face as I removed the red and black corruption wherever I found it.

Guided mostly by the strange burning sensation of pain that managed to pierce through the [Data-Blade]'s destruction, I hacked away at my mental construct.

I had probably screamed myself hoarse, or maybe I didn't scream at all—I had no idea. Each cut brought a mix of relief and agony. The corruption was being removed, but at the cost of large chunks of my own code. It felt like tearing off pieces of my own soul, leaving raw, gaping holes in my avatar.

But the alternative was far worse.

Leaving corrupted code inside my avatar would make it impossible to finish this tutorial, no matter how much I wanted to believe I could do it—and I was certain there were no retries for special rewards like the shard inside my neck.

I had barely been able to stand with the gaping hole of corruption in my side, much less move around. There was still at least one more hallway to clear and a potential run-in with the netrunner who owned this place.

Going into that without being as close to 100% as possible was not an option.

I had no concept of time or how far I was into the operation.

All I could think of was the pain and wanting it to end.

The intensity had now surpassed the level of the NeuroCorpse treatment, but I held onto the vague promise that once the corruption was removed, the pain would stop.

The hope that my suffering was not for nothing kept me going.

Finally, as the last dregs of corruption were excised and the burning sensations within my body ceased entirely, I let go of the shortsword and slumped to the ground, panting heavily.

The quick-hack disintegrated immediately, losing cohesion from lack of intent.

To my immense relief, the pain subsided moderately quickly as the digital construct that was my avatar started regenerating the parts that the [Data-Blade] had destroyed.

It felt like a gentle, cold compress being applied to my beaten and battered body, the coolness spreading from the surrounding tissue into the open nothing that was the hole I had carved inside my avatar. I simply breathed and let the rules of Cyberspace work their magic, repairing my mental construct with no conscious effort on my part.

“You know,” Kill Joy’s voice droned through the locker room with a hint of sadistic joy in it, “you didn’t *have* to be so reckless. The [Data-Blade] is destruction, while the daemon’s damage is corruption. You could have simply applied the blade to the corrupted code from the outside, like cauterization, in a way. You really didn’t *have* to go at it like a mad butcher, girl. Have some more decorum, tut tut.”

I remained silent at that, simply filing it away as a better option for the future.

There was nothing I could do to the digital version of Kill Joy, even though I seriously wanted to strangle him right now, and I was fresh out of energy and grit to yell at him.

Instead, I spent the next few minutes, as I waited for my avatar to fully repair itself, reflecting on the fight. I had made some serious mistakes, and I desperately needed to learn from them for the future.

This was all a tutorial, after all. And those were meant to teach.

First and foremost: Heat management.

The [Data-Blade] had proven to be vastly less heat-intensive than the [Personal Shield], which made a lot of sense in hindsight.

Each time I cut something, I was just injecting a destructive piece of code into the specific data structure connected to the sword.

The [Personal Shield], on the other hand, was a generalised defensive structure. It had to deflect all different types of daemon attacks and quick-hacks, creating a massive amount of Heat with each impact.

The quick-hack that governed the shield was vastly more complex than the one governing the sword.

'In the future, I definitely need to rely more on movement. Dodging attacks instead of letting them hit the shield would cost me practically nothing,' I mused, noting it down as an avenue to explore more. 'Maybe I can ask Kenzie to spar with me and primarily focus on dodging... Her attacks are way faster than the slime's were, so it should be a decent start.'

The second mistake I needed to address was my decision-making, especially regarding how I had approached the initial daemon. I had the drop on it, with a free attack to boot, yet all I managed to do was create more trouble for myself because I didn't think about the enemy I was facing.

If I had thought about the type of daemon in more detail ahead of time and aimed for the core, there was a decent chance I could have killed it before it even knew I was there with my alpha strike.

Most daemons were based on creatures of fantasy, myth, and legend, as creating thoroughly unique ones was exceedingly difficult and time-intensive. Reading up on those that had lore in this world, would be something to seriously consider going forward.

Even without reading up on any, however, my decades of gaming experience should come in handy with the most relevant tropes for the lower-level ones, at the very least.

Slimes, imps, and similar creatures were, after all, a staple of all kinds of RPGs.

Finding their weak spots and understanding how they were likely to function by comparing them to the knowledge I already had would likely save me from similar situations in the future.

The last thing I had on my agenda before scraping myself off the floor was quite different in nature. When the daemon had died—both parts of it—I had received a series of chimes from the System, but one in particular stood out. It was a sound I had never heard before.

Pulling up the System Notifications, I scrolled through the list until I found something new.

[System]: *Daemon (Slime) drops 1x (Uncommon) Data-Shard [First-Kill Drop Chance Bonus]*

I stared at the notification for around a minute, trying to parse what it was trying to tell me, until my brain finally started to work.

'Wait... "drop"? Like loot?' I thought, confusion spreading through my mind like wildfire.

How could there be loot drops? This was the real world; things didn't just randomly drop loot when you killed them.

I slowly made my way over towards the piles of ash and started digging, trusting the System's Notifications despite my doubts. The right pile was empty, but when I approached the left pile, I didn't even have to dig.

Above the mound of ash, only now visible when I was right in front of it, hovered a small, green data-shard.

“What the fuck...” I quietly voiced as I simply stared at the shard.

Neon Dragons was an RPG, so it only made sense for there to be loot in the game.

But, as mentioned before, this wasn't a game any longer.

My mind was struggling to make sense of what I was seeing, as I failed to understand how loot could possibly work in this world. It wasn't like the slime had simply eaten the data-shard and it just happened to be inside it when I killed it.

This was clearly some sort of outside power putting a straight-up loot drop on top of the enemy's corpse—it was even hovering in mid-air!

Reaching out to it, I stopped just short of the shard; a sudden thought hitting me.

“Mr. Joy, can you tell me what this is?” I directed my question at the golden teacher, who lazily floated closer to take a look.

He momentarily looked interested, then confused, and finally irritated, before answering,

“What are you referring to? The slime's code pile? Or the empty shard in your hand?”

I quickly looked back at my hand, but there was no shard. It was still hovering just slightly before it.

*‘He said “empty”... Is he not able to perceive the drop, or is there really nothing in it? It says (uncommon) at the very least, so there should be **something** in it, right?’* I mused as I grabbed the shard.

Swapping it for the **Rare** Subroutine shard and loading it into the safety compartment to check the contents, I got the answer to my question quickly: He really *couldn't* properly perceive it.

[System]: *Decrypting (**Uncommon**) Data-Shard... Success! Loot gained from Data-Shard needs to be claimed to be transferred.*

[==**Uncommon** Data-Shard #024 Contents==]

[1x Hypercoagulin Injector]

[{c}33 Credits]

[System]: *Loot from [Data-Shard #024] cannot be claimed while inside Cyberspace.*

I had to sit down on the nearest bench.

The implications of the three System screens in front of me were far too significant for me to keep standing upright.

Not only was loot somehow a thing, but it was clearly somewhat randomised.

After all, the shard I had received didn't end up actually being useful for Cyberspace or Netrunning at all, even though I had gained it from exactly that source.

Furthermore, and likely *even more* important, the last screen implied that I would somehow be able to keep the loot shard I had just gained and claim everything inside it once I left the faux-Cyberspace I was currently in...