

Chapter 71 - Cyberspace Foray IV

Carefully walking through the door past the scanner, I found myself inside what looked like a locker room. It was strange, considering the building so far had seemed more like a high-level corporate office or a bank.

But here I was, standing in a gym-style locker room with rows upon rows of lockers and wooden benches between every two rows for people to sit on while they changed.

I gave Kill Joy a confused look, and, luckily, he caught my unspoken question immediately and deemed it worthy of an answer for once.

"The inside of a server is fully malleable, girl. Whatever the creator of the security and data servers wants to create, they can do it with enough time and effort," he explained lazily, sounding almost bored. "It seems the creator of this one had a penchant for working out, perhaps? Or maybe it's just a reminder of their youth; who knows. Regardless, I believe this lesson hasn't concluded yet. You best continue onwards."

Following his pointed look towards the centre of the room, I had no choice but to agree.

Whatever the purpose of this room was or the history of its creation, I'd have to just take it as it was and continue my way through.

Strangely enough, however, as I started walking further into the room and looked around for any obvious signs of potential data vaults or further doors, I felt a strange feeling of unease come over me, step by step. Each step echoed slightly, the sound bouncing off the metal lockers in an eerie rhythm.

It felt like my Intuition Attribute was nudging me, but after several seconds of thorough deliberation and observation, I couldn't put my finger on what it wanted to tell me.

The locker room seemed normal enough at first glance, but something was *definitely* off.

Dropping into a crouched stance, my [Stealth] Skill kicking in with muscle memory, I moved towards the first set of lockers and hid behind them. Something was definitely not right.

I glanced at Kill Joy, floating lazily next to me, only to be met with an impassive smile.

'Looks like he won't help me out unless I ask the right questions, huh? Typical...'

I decided to stay put for a bit, trying to figure out what might be causing this strange feeling of anxiety. I carefully scanned the walls, floor, ceiling, and the lockers nearby, but couldn't spot anything unusual.

Frustration starting to mount at my inability to find anything, I turned to my teacher for some extra info.

"Mr. Joy, is there some kind of trap in the room? The blips you've provided don't seem to come with trap detection. I don't see how I could adequately detect, evade, or disable one if

that were the case,” I asked, trying to keep my tone diplomatic despite the annoyance creeping in.

Kill Joy raised a singular eyebrow, clearly amused by my question. My Ego Attribute kicked in to stop me from rolling my eyes at the sight.

“Well, girl,” he started, his voice dripping with exaggerated boredom. “If you don’t have the necessary blips, do you *really* think I, the magnanimous, kind, erudite and charming Kill Joy, would allow you to walk into a situation like this? When you didn’t even have any chance to deal with the issue?”

“Yes.”

He lifted a hand to his mouth in a mock gasp before breaking into a big smile. “You’re correct, of course. It’s good to see that even a young one like you can be taught properly. There are no traps in this room. Or rather, no traps as you might traditionally think of them. That’s all I’ll say on the matter. Toodles, girl.”

With that, Kill Joy melded seamlessly into a nearby row of lockers, leaving me alone in the room.

‘No traps as I might traditionally think of? What does that even mean...?’ I thought, furrowing my brows as I concentrated on his specific wording. *‘There’s definitely **some** kind of obstacle in the room. Kill Joy is an asshole, but he’s never lied to me. So, no trip wires or falling boulders, but something is here.’*

With nothing else to go on and feeling thoroughly out of my depth, I had no option but to continue onwards. Sticking close to the lockers, I crouch-walked my way through the surprisingly large room, keeping a keen eye out for anything that seemed off.

Luckily, it didn’t take long to find another door located at the exact opposite side of the entrance, diagonally across the entire room.

“Well, at least I know where to go now,” I muttered to myself, half hoping that hearing my own voice would calm my beating heart—but of course, it didn’t.

Continuing to zig-zag my way through the huge locker room, trying not to stay in any given row for too long, I managed to get about three-quarters of the way towards the door.

That’s when I finally found the source of my Intuition’s warnings.

I carefully backed off, step by step, and hid behind a nearby locker, my wide eyes locked onto a strange amalgamation at the end of the row to my left.

It was a digital daemon, a sort of multi-tentacled slime-like being, its colours thoroughly wrong—a strange mix of neon black and red, like the code that made it up was a complete anathema to the way Cyberspace normally functioned.

The creature writhed and pulsed with a disturbing energy, its tentacles moving in an almost hypnotic pattern.

The black and red hues clashed violently with the air surrounding it, creating a nauseating visual effect that seemed to warp the very fabric of Cyberspace around it. Each movement it made left behind a trail of corrupted data, sizzling and crackling like static in a bad signal.

'What the fuck is that thing?' I thought to myself, feeling a mix of curiosity and dread.

While I could instinctively tell that it was a daemon—a sort of bad code, that could alter or delete other types of code like a sentient quick-hack—the exact type of daemon, I had never seen in the game before.

The daemon didn't seem to have noticed me yet, but I knew I had to be careful.

This was undoubtedly the non-traditional "trap" that Kill Joy had hinted at earlier.

I needed a plan.

If this thing was guarding the path to the door, I had to find a way around it or disable it without getting caught—or alternatively, leave behind this side-path and go back through the scanner and follow the main path towards the data-vault.

But what kind of self-respecting gamer would ever shy away from a challenge like this, much less one that clearly pointed towards a reward? A guarded door on a side-path in, what was essentially, a dungeon?

I was bound to get some kind of reward for this, even if it was all a fake Cyberspace; of that, I was certain.

Taking a deep breath, I quickly scanned my surroundings for anything I could use to my advantage.

The lockers, the benches, even the digital environment itself could offer a clue or a tool.

I had no blips capable of combat and no sign of Kill Joy around to ask for more, so I had to make do with what I had.

'Alright, Sera. Time to think,' I mused, trying to recall everything I knew about daemons in Cyberspace. *'They're essentially semi-sentient pieces of code, designed to track down and attack intruders—most of the time, at least. Low-level ones are pretty dumb, so that might help. I have no offensive tools, nor any quick-hacks to protect me or hide me... So I guess a distraction is the best I can hope for?'*

In the game, dealing with daemons was primarily done through quick-hacks.

Quick-hacks didn't just open doors or data vaults; they were essentially the equivalent of "magic" in fantasy RPGs, though only available in Cyberspace.

Quick-hacks usable in the real world were mostly debuffs for enemies with cybernetics or direct attacks on their data-links—less flashy, but still extremely useful, if used right.

Without a “Fireball” quick-hack to deal with the daemon directly, however, I hoped Kill Joy hadn’t screwed me over by placing a super-intelligent daemon in my path.

I quickly checked the remaining uses on my blips and decided to use the last charge on the segment-based blip.

I threw together a quick combination of Door, Unlock, Propagate, and Quiet, aiming it at the lockers further down, away from where the daemon was.

‘Here goes nothing...’

With a quick mental command, the translucent, grey line shot out from my neck towards the locker I had aimed at, turning green almost immediately. With a squeak reminiscent of old, rusty metal, the locker opened.

Immediately, the daemon’s attention was grabbed. Its misshapen, slime-like body started moving towards the sound, away from the door it had been protecting.

“Nice,” I whispered, feeling a surge of relief. The daemon’s unsettling neon black and red form slithered away, its tentacles twitching and leaving behind trails of corrupted data.

Simultaneously, two more lines shot out from somewhere near my neck towards the lockers to the left and right of the one that had just opened, turning green and unlocking them as well.

As the next two lines shot out, I started moving—quietly at first, but as quickly as I could muster—while the daemon was distracted by the propagating quick-hack that continuously opened lockers to keep its attention.

By the time the third propagation happened, I could feel the heat start mounting in my neck.

‘Gotta hurry up before I burn myself out...’

While “Propagate” was an exceedingly powerful Verb, one that I was unlikely to acquire anytime soon outside of Kill Joy’s blips, it had a significant drawback: Heat.

With each propagation, it essentially reused the quick-hack again and again until it stopped or couldn’t find any more things to propagate to.

The lockers were a fairly safe target, propagating two at a time, one in each direction.

But I’d seen videos where players used “Propagate” and nearly killed themselves instantly as it arched out towards dozens of targets at once.

Definitely a double-edged sword, but my initial calculations about its potential dangers to me seemed to hold true for now.

Rounding the last corner around another set of lockers, the door now in sight, I felt the quick-hack activate once again. My neck felt like I’d spent too much time in the sun—sunburn was going to be the least of my worries.

Quickly, I cut the connection to the quick-hack, letting it fizzle out after this final propagation.

The daemon seemed sufficiently distracted for now.

Not wasting any time, I quietly rushed towards the door.

I quickly checked whether or not it was locked—it thankfully wasn't—before double-checking the daemon's position.

The slime-like creature was about thirty metres away, inspecting the last of the lockers that had opened. Each time one of its tentacles touched the locker's data constructs, a hiss could be heard as the impossibly coloured data of the daemon practically melted parts of the construct itself, causing broken and corrupted data to crumple onto the floor of the locker room.

'Better you than me, locker-chan,' I thought with a hint of a smile, before opening the door, stepping through, and carefully closing it behind me. I had no idea whether the daemon could leave the locker room, so I wanted to make sure it was thoroughly unaware of my presence.

The new room was a stark contrast to the locker room in more ways than one.

Firstly, it was much smaller, more akin to a janitor's closet than an actual room.

Secondly, it was exceedingly well-lit. Where the locker room had been tinged in ominous darkness, this room was almost unrealistically bright, bathed in a strange golden hue.

What took the cake for absolute strangeness, however, was the singular other thing inside the room—besides myself and the obnoxious face of Kill Joy peering out from the wall next to me. It was a chest.

I did a double and triple take to make sure I wasn't hallucinating, but it truly appeared to be a bona fide treasure chest, like something straight out of a traditional JRPG. It sat there in the middle of the small room, atop a burgundy carpet, as if mocking gaming conventions itself.

My eyes met Kill Joy's, and I gestured towards the chest, asking, "What... What is that?"

A raised eyebrow told me I definitely hadn't asked the right question, so I quickly rephrased. "Why is something like this here? There's no way this was designed by an actual server owner. This is your doing, isn't it?"

A faux hurt look crossed Kill Joy's face before he floated out of the wall, coming to a halt right above the treasure chest. "You would once again be correct, girl," he said with an amused smile. "As for your question... Consider it a reward for veering off the beaten path. Go ahead, open it."

I would be remiss to say I fully trusted Kill Joy, but I had to remind myself that he was not someone to lie. He truly meant it as a reward, even if his words could be misconstrued into all manner of horrible outcomes for me.

That said, this was all still within the SPG-01 shard, so it was unlikely that any real harm could come to me as a result of whatever occurred in this faux Cyberspace.

Cautiously, I stepped up to the chest and took a closer look.

It was ornately decorated, with intricate carvings and golden accents, almost too cliché to be real. The lock was a simple mechanism, not requiring any quick-hacks or special tools to open.

“Alright, here goes nothing, I guess,” I muttered, reaching for the lock.

With a soft click, it opened, and I lifted the lid.

Inside the chest, nestled in a bed of velvet, was a shimmering data shard.

It pulsed with a soft, blue light, casting ethereal patterns on the walls of the small room. It was beautiful, almost mesmerising in its glow.

Picking it up, I took a closer look to figure out what it might entail.

As if prompted, my cerebral link read out the digital signature of the shard and provided the list of contents to me with its usual interface.

[==Rare Data-Shard Contents==]

[Subroutine: Personal Shield]

[Subroutine: Data-Blade]

[Subroutine: Spark]

My eyes widened at that, but I managed to school my excitement rather quickly.

“Are those... full Subroutines? Like, I can take them with me outside the confines of this tutorial?” I asked hesitantly, somewhat afraid Kill Joy would say no.

Having access to these Subroutines would be a tremendous advantage when starting in the world of netrunning. Not only could I use them at my leisure, but since they were full-on Subroutines and not simply blips, I would be able to break them apart and study their composite code to figure out how to write my own Subroutine-based Quick-Hacks.

These three were essentially the bread and butter for low-level netrunners.

[Data-Blade] provided a solid option for fighting daemons or other netrunners in close range, while [Spark] did the same at longer ranges. [Personal Shield] wasn't something I was familiar with, but if it functioned like [Shield] with a more short-range or single-target focus, it would be equally, if not more, valuable for pretty much all of my future netrunning endeavours as well.

“Naturally,” Kill Joy declared with a simple wave of his hand, and for once, he truly felt as magnanimous as he always claimed to be.

My excitement and smile froze immediately, however, as he continued. “*Although...* I cannot simply offer this to you just for veering off the beaten path. Consider it a lease for now. But I am not known as a liar, so you shall get to keep them as a reward if you manage to clear the rest of the session without my intervention. If you can get your hands on the data-vault and extract the data inside from this server, then you can keep the Subroutines you have just found. Otherwise... We’ll just pretend they were blips after all. I’m sure a clever girl like you will understand that I can’t simply give these out for nothing, yes?”

A spark of annoyance and anger flared inside me at the thought that such a tremendously expensive tutorial might withhold rewards, but my Ego Attribute quickly helped to douse those embers.

At the end of the day, I hadn’t even been *aware* that the SPG-01 shard could give permanent benefits beyond Skill levels and Perks. So this was more of a welcome surprise than a problematic occurrence, all things considered.

No matter what, having the possibility to get such a massive boon for the start of my netrunning career was completely unexpected yet very welcome.

I just had to make sure I didn’t screw it all up now.

“That sounds fair,” I replied, actually feeling like it was, strangely enough.

I took one last look around the room, checking for any potential exits or hidden treasures I might have missed. Satisfied there was nothing else of interest, I turned and headed back towards the door to the locker room.

Just as I reached it, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Peering through the tiny window in the door, I saw the slime-type daemon standing about five metres in front of it, back at its original position from before my distractions had pulled it away.

“Fuck.”

“It seems that somebody didn’t pay any heed to the potential dangers of their reckless actions, huh?” Kill Joy’s smug voice wafted over from the other side of the room.

“Oh my, whatever will you do now, girl...?”

Deciding to entirely ignore the annoying golden man, I checked my options.

I could try to rush out and run away from the daemon, hoping it was slower than me in this part of Cyberspace—an unlikely scenario, considering this was its home turf.

Alternatively, I could try sneaking by, but with it being literally just a few metres away, and the fact that I’d have to open the door first, which it would almost definitely catch, there was practically no chance I’d be able to sneak past it.

Then there was the ever-present option of emergency exiting from the server itself, which would put me right in front of the main entrance to the server. It was essentially like closing a browser window but would invalidate all the progress I had made so far.

Considering I was down to the last three uses of the subroutine blip that Kill Joy had offered for this part of the tutorial, there was a very low chance I could finish it if I went back to square one.

“I guess I have no other choice then,” I sighed heavily, before slotting in the rare data-shard and loading the subroutines into memory, after making sure it hadn’t come with any of Kill Joy’s typical surprises.

Since I wasn’t actually using my deck—the one I had recently acquired from Misha, as I hadn’t planned to go on such an exhaustive Cyberspace deep-dive—I couldn’t simply load them into the deck and call it a day.

I’d have to keep the data-shard inserted for the entire duration I planned to use the quick-hacks from it. That also meant I couldn’t use Kill Joy’s blip either, as long as I wanted to use them.

My basic cerebral link didn’t come with a massive amount of storage space, after all.

I also ran the risk of potentially damaging the data-shard if the daemon managed to corrupt the data near my avatar’s neck-slot.

It was a risk I really didn’t want to take but was seemingly forced into by Kill Joy’s machinations.

There was no doubt in my mind that he had orchestrated this whole section, purposefully granting me a very limited amount of uses on the blips and very specific use-cases to put me in this spot.

As if to confirm my suspicions, Kill Joy’s voice appeared right next to me as his face manifested out of the nearby wall.

“I see you are preparing to face the daemon, girl,” he said, a smug smile plastered on his golden face. With a mocking tone, he bellowed, “Sally forth now, valiant knight! May thee vanquish the horrible beast standing in thine way!”

Internally, I was *screaming*.

Kill Joy had rapidly gone from being one of my favourite characters to one of my most hated ones over the past few days, especially the past few hours. In the game, you never really had to interact with him for long periods, which I now realised was a godsend, as his personality and demeanour were downright abrasive.

Trying my best to ignore the golden avatar of Kill Joy, I focused on the mission at hand: Facing a daemon in direct combat.

Combat in Cyberspace was a strange beast.

It was a blend of real life and unique Cyberspace rules.

A sword in Cyberspace could be used to cut through data and corrupt it, just like it could be used in real life to cut through a person. A gun wielded in Cyberspace could similarly shoot data-shredding bullets or corrupt bits of code that held the integrity of another person or daemon together.

Then there were quick-hack “Fireballs,” which were more like straight-up magic in fantasy RPGs than anything one might have expected from this world.

At the moment, however, I only had access to two forms of attack: [Data-Blade] and [Spark].

Realising there was no point stalling, I called upon the [Data-Blade] Subroutine Quick-Hack.

Immediately, a golden shortsword appeared in my right hand.

Absently nodding to myself, confirming that [Data-Blade] worked exactly as I had expected, I pulled up [Personal Shield] next. [Spark] wouldn’t be something I could pre-cast, as it was more like a traditional quick-hack that fired off immediately at the target I aimed it towards.

Calling up [Personal Shield], I wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but when a kite shield formed on my left arm, I couldn’t help but groan.

‘So that’s what he meant by “valiant knight” just now...’

My equipment really *did* make me look like some strange golden knight, at least when it came to my weapon and shield.

The [Shield] quick-hack was quite different, so I hadn’t exactly expected this; it generally conjured a movable plane in front of your target, allowing you to cover not only yourself but others as well, if required.

But Kill Joy’s rewards seemed more focused on personal, one-on-one options—plus his strange obsession with knights.

Just as I was about to leave and face the slime-type daemon, I couldn’t help but roll my eyes when I caught the reflection of the shield in the door’s glass window.

In the centre of the shield, where the crest had usually been placed in mediaeval times, was the face of a smugly smiling Kill Joy...