

Jackie treated me to a small pizza shop on the outskirts of Valintino territory. The pizza tasted like cardboard, and I had to threaten physical violence to keep him from putting crickets on it. I was also pretty sure I spotted a few people eyeing me up, but when Jackie called one out by saying hello and asking how they had been doing, they stopped sniffing around. It was still nerve-wracking, though, and closer to gang contact than I really wanted.

Mind you, I wasn't naive enough to think I would get what I wanted. Dealing with gangs was a part of Night City and, as far as I understood it, the Cyberpunk setting as a whole. It didn't matter where I went, some sort of gang would call it home. It still made me nervous.

Still, hanging out with Jackie was fun. I definitely understood how V ended up trusting him so quickly. He seemed to have a way of drawing you in and making you feel comfortable. Eventually, when we were done eating, he took me back to the megabuilding, dropping me off as close as he could get with his borrowed car.

"I'll be in touch, maybe even later today," He said. "Depends on when certain people respond to my messages. Don't worry, I'll keep your name out of it."

"Alright Jackie, you've got my number," I said as I climbed out of his car, turning around and leaning back into the open door. "If I don't pick up, just try again. I might not have my keyfob on me."

"Sure thing, Jackson."

I gave him a lazy salute and shut the door, slapping the hood as I stepped back. The older car pulled away from the curb, leaving me standing on the sidewalk. I looked around, paranoia already rising now that I was alone. When I was certain I wasn't about to be ambushed, I turned back and made a beeline towards the building entrance, heading straight up to my room.

All in all, the test had been very encouraging, and not just because the Alien Alloy held up very well to quite a few of the basic weapons used in Night City. When I completed the original version of the nanoscale and plated vests, I learned an awful lot about them. While at the time, I had been most interested in how to best manipulate Alien Alloy, I also got quite a bit of info on how durable the nanoscale and plate was. The only issue was that this information was primarily in terms of weapons from that reality.

With a live demonstration, I could now compare the damage I saw with my own eyes with the damage I knew XCOM weapons were capable of. From there, I could extrapolate how Cyberpunk and XCOM weapons compared, at least in general.

As far as I could tell, the normal ballistic weapons from XCOM were equivalent to low-end weapons from Cyberpunk. Laser weapons generally equated to the middle tier, though there was something to be said about the perfect precision and heat transference of the system.

Mag weapons were mainly in the middle to high tier since they could penetrate plate armor with a few shots, putting it on the same level as the high-powered rifle Jackie had gotten his hands on.

That just left plasma weapons, which, as far as I could tell from my general perspective, were a complete upgrade from mag weapons, combining the best aspects of laser and magnetic while adding a substantial amount of secondary damage from heat. I was pretty sure that all of the plasma weapons from the XCOM universe would match or beat the best that this world had to offer. I'm sure there were some secret weapons that Arasaka or Militech were working on, but I couldn't imagine they were nearly as polished, stable, or reproducible as the plasma tech that I could access.

Assuming I could build them before my specialty changed.

The second I got home, I set the fabricator back up, getting it working on the next piece of the mag pistol. I then stripped all of the Alien Alloy from the test armor, dumping it back into the smelter. I would get a nearly one hundred percent return on smelting Alloy scraps.

Once the smelter was going and the fabricator and 3D printer were moving, I sat down at the computer and spent every eddie that Jackie had paid me, then a few hundred more. My "savings," which were really just a chunk of eddies that the entities who stranded me here had given me, were getting lower and lower. With the last batch of purchases, I finally sank below ten thousand. It wasn't a small amount, especially considering I was used to living on a much smaller buffer in my home world, but I still knew that wouldn't last long. I was dreading that my second "specialty" would end up being something money-intensive but extremely potent, forcing me to struggle and miss out on some worthwhile stuff because I had spent everything.

Within three hours of arriving home, the parts for the mag pistol were finished, and I could assemble it. I had to say, the mag pistol, and I assumed mag weapons as a whole, were fascinating. The barrel, parts of the receiver system, Elerium charge chamber, and the energy diffusion bank were all built out of Alien Alloy, meaning it took significantly more resources than the laser pistol. As a bonus, though, it also made critical portions of the weapon substantially more robust.

The charging system could hold much more energy, and the strange properties of AA meant barely any of a fired projectile's speed was lost to friction despite still engaging with the barrel's rifling. As I built the pistol's Elerium charging chamber, rather than use one of my whole shards, I took apart the power generator of the laser pistol and used the Elerium inside that.

Once I finished the new pistol, I basked in the deluge of information I got from it, enjoying my new understanding of the technology. I then removed the pistol's ridiculous skeletonized shell and replaced it with an aluminum one with built-in heat sinks and a much more complete frame. This would not only better protect the sensitive tech inside the frame, but it would also serve to hide how the pistol was built.

Between going out to lunch and finishing the mag pistol, it was starting to get late. I spent the last few hours of the day building the CAD blueprint for the mag rifle, before calling it a day.

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The following morning, my sixth day in the Cyberpunk world, I woke up to an express delivery of materials being dropped off by my door. It was a rather large bundle of stuff, and I was excited to get it into my workshop. Most of the delivery was materials and ingredients, a portion of which went immediately into my Elerium and AA production.

There was also a single industrial robotic arm, the kind that you would see in an automotive factory back home, only around the size of my own arm and significantly more advanced. Now, technically, I could have built something similar with my own hands. I had the parts and tools after all, and the XCOM universe did have several models that I could have used. But here, in the age of cyberware, a simple robotic arm was amazingly cheap. The model I bought was essentially a glorified learning aid, and it was already stronger, more flexible, and had several more points of articulation than anything the XCOM universe had access to.

It took me about an hour to bolt the arm to the side of the fabricator and another two to whip up a basic program that allowed me to feed simple directions to the arm, specifically to remove and feed materials to the fabricator. It would be useless for new, unique things, but now I could go to sleep and leave the fabricator running to produce simple, repeatable things, like the scales and plates for my brand of AA under armor. It would make keeping up with any orders I got from Jackie much easier. I was still looking forward to getting better systems in the future, but this was a step in the right direction.

I spent the rest of the morning and start of the afternoon building my mag rifle and preparing the base fabrics for another set of AA under armor. That turned out to be a good idea because Jackie called me at about ten PM with some news.

"Good news, Jackson! I showed some of the footage I got!"

"Footage? What footage?" I asked, talking into my keyfob, mentally cursing the idiot who decided not to make it more like a smartphone.

"I recorded some of our testing yesterday," He explained. "I got some Mk. 1 Kiroshi's from a ripperdoc friend of mine. They record preem footage, self-stabilize, the whole shebang. Anyway, don't worry, I didn't show anything with you in it. They were interested in grabbing a few sets of your armor."

"Jackie, my production cycle isn't really set up for mass production," I explained with a wince. "I don't"

"I know, compadre, I explained that, but get this. They thought I was playing hard to get, so they offered fifteen thousand eddies for three sets. Thought they were paying a premium to cut ahead in line, I couldn't bring myself to correct them."

"Well... I might be able to make three by... Wednesday afternoon..." I admitted, going over how long everything would take in my head. "That's if I can get a delivery of stuff in by tomorrow."

"What if I did some shopping for you?" He asked. "I can play delivery boy for a day if I can get an extra grand."

I chewed my lip as I considered the possibility before nodding to myself. I had no issues paying Jackie a bit more, and getting the order done quickly was a solid plan.

"If you can pick me up a few things from around the city, I could get it done Tuesday afternoon, maybe a few hours after. But that's an all-nighter."

"You can crash after we make some eddies," He said like I was being dumb. "I'll stop by in an hour, so have a list ready for me."

"Wait. Who are these people?" I asked. "How well do you know them?"

"...They are Valentinos," He admitted after a long moment. "They watch the block that Coyote is on. They are good people, Jackson."

"...Don't take this the wrong way, but I need to ask Jackie because I'm new to this city. The Valentinos. They sell people?" I asked simply.

"What? No, that's bad business, cabrone. They might help people cross some borders occasionally, but no selling people, I promise."

"Do they sell to kids?" I asked, this time noting a slight pause.

"Not pulling your punches, eh choom?" He asked. "Padre's official rule is that kids don't get anything, but pushers aren't exactly asking for detes. And who knows if some corner gonk follows the rule anyway?"

I let out a long breath, trying to parse out where my limit was, where I would draw my line. How far was I willing to bend to survive? In a world like Cyberpunk, that is exactly what was on the table.

"Alright, Jackie, stop by soon. I'll have a list for you."

"Preem, see you soon."

My keyfob went dark, and I continued to stare at it for a moment before letting out a long breath and tossing it onto my workbench. I ground my palms into my eyes for a second before looking around. I needed to fill up the smelter and restock the Elerium generator. By then, the part the fabricator was working on should be done, so I could queue up parts I would need for the first AA under armor.

I stood and got to work, quickly getting everything set before sitting back down and getting to work. I was just starting to affix the first batch of scales to the upper torso armor when Jackie came knocking on my door. I let him in quickly before returning to my workshop and using my keyfob to send him a list.

"There's a list of places you should be able to buy that stuff from," I said, already working on the armor again. "Try to spread it out so it's not all coming from only a few places."

"I know the drill choom, not my first shopping gig," Jackie assured me, his eyes glowing orange as he read through my list. "Gonna need eddies to buy all this..."

"Right, sorry," I said, grabbing my keyfob and sending him the eddies, before returning to work.

"Alright, I'll get- Jesus, Jackson, what is that?"

I whirled around to see Jackie lifting the mag rifle, putting it up to his shoulder, and looking down the sights. To his credit, he wasn't facing anywhere near me, instead aiming the empty weapon at the apartment's exterior wall. He even had good trigger discipline. It looked good without the skeletonized structure, which I replaced with the same sort of aluminum plating I had used on the mag pistol.

"Where did you get this from?" He said, looking over the rifle with wide eyes. "This is preem iron, Jackson."

"It's a prototype Mag... Tech weapon," I explained, turning around and watching him. "I don't really have any ammo for it at the moment. I was just sort of trying it out."

"Seriously? You're just throwing together guns too?" He asked, still looking over the rifle. "What's that one?"

As he asked, he placed the mag rifle back onto the couch, hand already reaching out to the finished, and very much armed, laser rifle.

"Don't touch that one!" I said loudly, Jackie freezing in response. "That one is charged and not safe to be showing off indoors."

"...what is it?" He asked, pulling his hand back.

"A prototype," I explained. "No use bragging about it yet."

He seemed to accept my explanation, though I couldn't tell if it was cause he actually believed me or if he just didn't care enough to call me out.

"Right. Well, I'll be back with your stuff soon," He responded. "Few hours tops."

"I'll be waiting," I responded without turning around, still focused on the vest in front of me.

I heard my new business partner leave, my front door sealing back shut and locking automatically. I let out a long breath and got back to my work, slowly affixing the AA scales to the first layer of the bullet-resistant fabric. The fabric was shockingly easy to work with, especially with how much knowledge of how to stitch, bind, and make sturdy combat gear and clothing I had from making the original version of the nanoscale vest. I was pretty sure I would become a world-class seamster eventually.

By the time Jackie returned from shopping, I had finished the first pair of Nanoplate shorts and had started on the first shirt. I immediately started filling the AA smelter and Elerium generator while Jackie sat down on my couch, eating a burrito he had bought. He had even gotten me one. I would try to stomach it when I was done... it would be rude not to.

"This is some real mad science shit, eh choom?" He asked, leaning in to watch as I gently put the seed diamond into its brace. "How has a Corp not snapped you up yet?"

"Because I've only recently started really building stuff," I admitted, closing the generator up. "I want nothing to do with the Corps."

"Well... you came to the wrong city then," He said with a wince. "Arasaka owns Night City. And whatever scraps they don't own, the other corps fight over."

"I know... It wasn't exactly my first choice," I admitted, plopping down on the other side of the U-shaped couch, grabbing the burrito that Jackie had gotten me, unwrapping it, and taking a bite.

It tasted like someone tried to cook a tire mexican style, gave up and stuffed it into a cardboard tortilla. It was horrifying and made me miss Chipotle. If I ever made it back home, I would never complain about low-quality food ever again.

I did my best to choke down the food, trying not to reveal how horrible it was, focusing on the fact that someday, if I was very lucky, I might get a tech branch that included a way to make food. Maybe a Star Trek branch.

"You have any plans past making armor and guns?" Jackie asked, sounding genuinely curious as he leaned back on the couch, his food done.

"I... have a few ideas," I admitted. "Nothing concrete yet, though."

In all honesty, I was waiting to see what my next tech branch would be. I was desperately crossing my fingers that whatever I rolled would have some sort of automation, something I would be able to put together and would work similarly to how the fabricator did. Even if it was a lesser version, having a few of them working while the fabricator handled the more detailed work would be fantastic.

After we finished our food, Jackie left me to my work, promising to come pick up and deliver the AA under armor the following afternoon. I quickly got back to the process of attaching the AA scales, finishing that, and starting to attach the plates. It was boring, mind-numbing work that poked and prodded at my patience, wearing it thin. By the time the afternoon had turned into night, I was cursing Jackie's name and heavily regretting letting him win me over.

When I was finally done putting everything together, it was early Tuesday morning, and the sun had risen over the city, light peaking in from my window. I now had three sets of the AA armor complete. I would have been done sooner, but I decided to spend an hour double-checking that everything was done right. As frustrating as it was making three of the exact same mind-numbing things in a row, with no time to work on other projects or even take a prolonged break, I still wanted to deliver a quality product. The big corps might not understand the importance of having a product you can stand by, but I did.

When I finally finished the job, I barely stayed awake long enough to crash into my bed. I wasn't really good at pulling all-nighters or staying up extra late, something I had learned the hard way as I got older. I could do it as long as I was keeping busy and working hard, but the second that stopped, I was out like a light. I slept for four hours before Jackie stopped by to pick up the delivery. I was awake just long enough to let him in, hand him the three sets of AA under armor, and shoo him out the door before I collapsed back in my bed. This time, I set an alarm for three more hours. I felt like I could have slept all the way to the following morning, but I had work to do and a time limit to do it in.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm and an extra thirteen thousand eddies in my account. Jackie had already taken his cut, and it was still by far the largest amount of money I had ever made in such a short time. It completely replenished what I had spent so far, plus an extra grand. It was a heady feeling but also quite nerve-wracking. I had just put a dozen or so pounds of unique, blackboxed metal out into the wild. Sure, it was a simple, unassuming use, but it wasn't hard to imagine someone getting their hands on it and realizing what they had. Or rather, realizing that they *didn't* know what they had.

Yes, I was still paranoid, but at this point, I was embracing it, because the corpos, if they knew I existed, would *definitely* be after me.

When I finally got around to sitting in front of my computer, I opened up my schedule. My first week would be up at midnight that night, so I wanted to take a look at what else I could get done with my remaining time.

From what I could tell, I would probably spend two whole days on plasma weapons simply because I wanted to make every form I could so I had a firm grasp on how they worked. I also wanted to take some time working on the warden armor, especially because I was pretty sure I could skip over the predator armor and start making the warden armor with what I had learned from making the plate vest. On top of that, I wouldn't have to learn how to make and then produce the synthetic muscle fiber that made the armor a "power" armor. I could just buy it by the box online. Even better, I could get it relatively cheaply since I didn't have to buy top-of-the-line.

The only issue was that, from what I could tell, developing the enhanced, heavy version of the warden armor, called the W.A.R. suit, was heavily reliant on the E.X.O. suit, the enhanced version of the predator armor. Of course, as one might expect, the E.X.O. suit seemed to be heavily tied to the predator armor, and since I planned on skipping that, it meant I wouldn't be able to make the W.A.R. suit. I tried to focus through the confusion of the E.X.O. suit, but when that failed, I decided to move ahead anyway. The warden armor system would substantially enhance the wearer's speed, strength, and durability already. Besides, while the W.A.R. suit would have been a nice addition, the more I studied the tech tree, the more I realized that building my way up to the W.A.R. suit would have taken up too much of my time.

With my next project decided, I closed out the calendar app and started adding things to my shopping list, filling my online cart with dozens of things, including more materials for Elerium and a lot of Alien Alloy. I spent a significant amount, once again burning eddies for quick progress.

With my supplies set to refresh sometime the next day, at a premium for quick delivery, I reopened the CAD software and got to work. By now, I was really starting to get good with the interface, making the design process go much more smoothly. When the first batch of parts was finished, I got the fabricator running.

This project would probably take the better part of two days, mostly because I would be waiting for each part to finish, even with the fact that I would be waiting until tomorrow to receive a lot of the smaller parts. In the end, I actually got very little done for the rest of the day, save finishing the CAD files and printing out about a third of the parts before running out of materials. I spent the rest of the day designing the parts, feeding the two generators the last of my ingredients, and feeding the fabricator the last of my Alien Alloy before going to bed early.

Exactly at midnight, I woke up gasping for breath. I could feel the knowledge of XCOM pulling away, slowly as if to show I had a choice. For a moment, I honestly debated letting it go,

tempted by the chance of getting something new. But common sense won over eventually, and I mentally held tight. After a few moments, or maybe minutes, the sensation dissipated. I idly realized that I was absolutely drenched in sweat and that my heart was racing. Eventually, after washing my face and calming down a bit, I attempted to return to sleep. Unfortunately, any sleep I got was light and fitful.

The next morning, because of the poor sleep, I woke up annoyed, which was annoying in itself. I ended up spending an hour going outside and getting some food since working on delicate equipment and parts while agitated was a recipe for wasted money. When I got back, I immediately dove back in, stopping only to accept a few deliveries.

The rest of Wednesday and Thursday was spent in a blur of building and crafting.

The warden armor, as complicated as it was, basically broke down into three layers. The first was an inner skeleton of Alien Alloy and body-hugging material. This tight bodysuit and skeleton was the primary anchor for the second layer, the synthetic muscles. These were what gave the wearer enhanced strength and speed, working with the wearer's natural muscles incredibly well. The muscle fibers were an interesting material and had a lot of potential, so I was glad that completing the warden armor would give me a much better understanding of how it worked. Or, at least, the vaguely inferior version that XCOM used.

The artificial muscles were controlled by a central control system housed on the back. It was the suit's brain and required a lot of heavy programming. Luckily, I had spent plenty of time learning a significant portion of the programming XCOM was capable of, so whipping up the program and fitting it into a system nearly half the size of what XCOM used was pretty easy. This system also monitored the four Elerium power nodes that provided the synthetic muscles with the energy they needed to function.

The third and final layer was the Alien Alloy outer shell. The shell was attached both to the first and second layers, making the suit surprisingly flexible.

Completing the armor led to another large wave of information flowing into my brain, filling my head with knowledge of the entire armor, including the synthetic muscles and the Elerium nodes, which were the first constant energy generators I had made that used Elerium.

I sat back and, for a moment, just enjoyed the sensation of my mind expanding, going over what I had learned with a smile. It was hard to beat the sensation of becoming actually smarter, having large chunks of knowledge just offered to you, downloaded into my brain seamlessly. When I finally recovered, I started examining the final results of two days of work before finally starting to put it on.

The process of putting on the armor wasn't exactly simple. The armor was heavy, and before it activated, which could only be done when all pieces were in place, the synthetic muscle system did not support its own weight, meaning I had to carry it entirely, and it was *not*

light. The armor went on in several sections, starting with the boots, then the legs, followed by the chest, finished by the arms, and then the hands. The helmet was technically part of the list, but it wasn't required to activate the armor.

When I finally clicked the gloves into place, I could feel the suit powering, the synthetic musculature grabbing and squeezing around me as I shifted. It wasn't quite the perfect connection, as the armor moved with just barely the slightest delay. It would definitely take some getting used to, but I was excited to see what it could do when I had acclimatized to it.

It also took about ten minutes for me to put the armor on. This armor was not for a quick reaction team but rather something made to let one man fight as many monsters as he could and still make it home. It would serve me well until I could make something better.