

It took me about an hour to finally calm down after realizing what was happening.

A solid hour of pacing around my apartment, wondering what I was going to do, chewing my fingernails down, and lamenting and berating the entity that had abandoned me to my new, cruel fate.

Eventually, my own capacity for dramatics outran my mental stamina, and I dropped down onto my couch. I stared up at the ceiling, mind wandering on all the threats that could possibly catch me now. As my panicked spiral slowed to more of a slow, worried rotation, I finally started thinking logically. The threats, the things that I had to worry about, hadn't changed. They didn't suddenly erupt into flurried advancements, and they certainly weren't about to catch up to me, even with my slower speed.

A week between tech branches was, on the whole, not actually that much time. All a week meant was that my meteoric rise to high-tech god was going to be slightly less meteoric.

In fact, after a few minutes of actually thinking it through, while part of me was still annoyed I would have to wait, a break between tech trees was probably a significant benefit. I had been working myself pretty hard for the last two weeks, and while I had really enjoyed the entire process, I knew that kind of pace was not good for me.

With no gap in between and constantly refreshing tech trees, I would have struggled just to keep up with each change. Each new tree would have been a scramble to make the most important and interesting things from each branch before I lost the specialty and had to move on to the next one. It would eventually slow down when my production methods increased, and I could make stuff as fast as I could design it, but until then, it would have been a mad dash.

For each week.

Nonstop.

Even worse, jumping from tech tree to tech tree would have meant I had very little time to work on developing my own creations. Part of what made ToF powerful was the ability to solve limitations in one tech tree by bridging it together with another. With near-constant work, I would have barely had time to do that.

I let out a long breath, letting the last vestiges of worry and panic leave my body. This was not a setback, it was a blessing disguised by a minor annoyance. It made me think that the entities had done it on purpose or at least leaned into something that was already necessary, perhaps some time for the connection to settle or my brain to get used to the next new link.

I stood from the couch and made my way to my apartment window. I opened the shades with the press of a button and looked outside at the city and the river beyond that. I watched as

cars drove past on the overpass, crossing across the river. My panic only lasted about an hour, making it just over one AM.

I let out another sigh, pushing off of the window sill and walking around my apartment, heading for my workshop. There was no way I was getting any sleep now, even if I didn't have to deal with the excitement of a new tech tree. I was way too awake at this point.

I sat down at my computer and flicked it on, spinning once in my chair. I pulled up my plans for the mag rifle and copied them, staring at the blueprints as I leaned back in my chair. The mag rifle was the base form of the heavier magnetic weapons, so it made sense that I should start the design for the mag sniper from it.

By this point, I had a nearly perfect understanding of how every inch of the mag weapons worked, so once I renamed the new copy as Mag Sniper Rifle, I confidently got to work. The first step was changing the chambering system because I wanted this weapon to shoot a considerably larger projectile. I had some ideas about altering the design of the bullet to maintain accuracy for a longer range, some of which came from knowledge gained from working on the bluescreen rounds.

It took me about four hours, the sun just starting to shine on Night City, before the design for [my mag sniper](#) was finished. In the end, I redesigned almost every aspect of the rifle. I switched the old power source, which was a mag weapon-specific Elerium charging system, for two Elerium nodes wired to work in tandem to keep the weapon capacitors charged. I extended the mag coils along a much longer stretch of the weapon, which gave it a slight front-heavy look, but I compensated for it by keeping the coils lighter to even out the weight distribution. Most of the control electronics were now stored in the butt of the rifle to keep it more streamlined as a whole. It would also have actual plating, a mix of aluminum and polymer, to keep the weight down even more.

Unfortunately, as I finished the main design, I realized that I had no idea how to make a scope. Reluctantly, I left an empty space along the top of the gun, where I could attach any sort of hook-up method I could want, depending on what kind of scope I could get my hands on. It irked me that I had no idea how to build a scope, especially knowing that XCOM had a robust weapons upgrade system that I had ignored because none of them represented anything particularly exceptional.

Still, even without a scope, the rifle looked impressive. I liked the changes I had made, and with the mix of XCOM and Cyberpunk tech, I was also pretty sure it was more powerful than the base XCOM mag sniper, though I had no idea by how much. It did, however, make me really want to redesign the pistol and rifle. After a bit of thought, I decided that I would spend some time working on them at some point.

Once the fabricator started working on some of the basic repeatable parts for my mag sniper, I stood from my chair and stretched. My first instinct was to go out and get some

breakfast and a coffee, but any excitement I had about the prospect of an early morning treat died when I remembered just how shit the food was here.

As my back cracked back into place, the tension that had accumulated fading quickly, I left my workshop to grab my keyfob, using it to send a message to Jackie. With my week cleared out, I had an opportunity to focus on making some money to replenish what I had spent getting ready. I told my new friend that I wasn't as busy as I had thought I would be and that if he found any business or anyone who wanted some armor, I would be free for the next week.

I returned to my workshop, working for a few hours as I waited. I was about halfway through preparing the internals for the new mag sniper when Jackie called me back.

"Hey choom, glad to hear you aren't gonna keep yourself cooped up," He said before audibly hesitating. "Listen... some of the cleaners we hired, they might have let slip I was working with a borg. I kept up the charade, but... a friend of the family, a fixer by the name of Padre, asked about it. I told him my new friend didn't feel comfortable being out and about quite yet. He connected the dots about my new armor, my new tech friend, and my new borg friend and asked if he could talk to you. I don't think he would assume you're the same person... But he ain't stupid Jay."

And just like that, my one step in an unknown direction led to another. I knew that starting to work with Jackie on actual jobs, even just scav hunting, would mean my time of hanging out in the back, tinkering away, would be over eventually. I had hoped to have a bit more than two weeks, but at least the situation was under some sort of control, not a burning spiral into chaos.

For a long moment, I tried my best to remember everything I could about Padre, the priest fixer. I remember him seeming to be an alright guy, as long as you didn't fuck up royally or do anything he considered to be against god. Kind of sanctimonious, if I remember correctly. His calls to V always made it seem to me like he was hiding behind the bible to avoid feeling guilty, but all things considered, that wasn't that big of a deal.

"It's alright Jackie, I expected people to come looking eventually. At least he is asking," I pointed out. "Do you think he could keep it to himself?"

"Yeah... Honestly, choom, I think talking to him could help. He has a lot of connections and he is a good man, as good as a fixer can be in this paraíso," He explained. "You said you needed equipment, and he expressed interest in the armor you sold me. I could show him some footage..."

He trailed off, letting me finish the sentence in my head as I considered it. Getting access to steady work, plus a place to anonymously sell my goods... or at least get in good with someone with an ear to the ground and a finger on the pulse, could come in handy. Doubly so since I was currently living smack dab in his territory. If I made myself valuable to him...

"Okay, Jackie, we can meet. Would he show up to the Coyote?" I asked.

"Yeah, he stops by occasionally. Like I said, he's a family friend. He helped Mama Welles buy the Coyote after my dad booked it."

"Alright. Well, let him know I'm interested in meeting him at his convenience since I'm guessing he is a busy man," I responded. "Just give me a few days to work on a few things to show off."

"Really, Jay? I was sure you'd be freaking out about this," Jackie admitted, sounding surprised.

"It's fine. In all honesty, there are advantages to having a fixer you're familiar with, especially when you're trying to sell stuff and pick up the occasional job. It's a risk... but what's not in Night City?"

"Aye, I understand. Alright, choom, I'll drop him a line, tell him you're willing to meet and talk, and that you might have a few things he might be interested in," He agreed, sounding happy. "Just... well, don't bring you A game, 'cause those flashy weapons of yours are mierda loca, but he won't be happy if you waste his time."

"I gotcha, Jackie."

"Alright, Choom, I'll let you know when to come by."

Jackie hangs up after that, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I had a few ideas of what I could make to show off, a couple of basic ideas that would make me an asset, but not enough that he wanted to lock me up for my own good. The AA underarmor was obviously on the list, as was...

I stood in the middle of my apartment, trying to come up with things I could sell and, unfortunately, drawing a blank. Like Jackie had said, my A game was off limits, which meant anything with plasma or lasers was really out, as was the hovering tech from Spot. The hover tech would revolutionize small-scale drones and, depending on how my eventual large-scale testing went, much more.

I dropped down into my seat, Spot flying around me before settling to float around the room. As I sat there, I reviewed everything I had made over the past two weeks, trying to think of anything interesting I could do that wasn't insane or didn't use Elerium or AA. The list was small, but eventually, I had two solid ideas on top of the AA armor. All that was left was to get to work designing and building them.

It was the next afternoon that Jackie reached out to me again, asking if I could be ready by that night. I agreed, with the caveat that one of the things I wanted to show him wasn't tested yet. He assured me it was fine.

That night, I arrived at the Coyote holding a duffel bag, having driven myself in my new truck. Jackie immediately spotted me and waved me over, slapping my shoulder as I sat down at the bar beside him.

"You're here early, Padre is still talking with Mama Welles," He explained, taking a sip from his beer. "So, what happened? You sounded pretty confident you would be busy over the next few days."

"I realized I was spending just a bit too much time in my workshop," I admitted, not entirely lying. I did know I was spending too much time building, I just didn't think I had a choice. "Can't say I won't disappear now and then, but I also need to get out more."

"Took you long enough, choom! I only told you a hundred times!" He said, thumping me in the side, making me shake my head. "You gotta relax, can't-"

There was a whistle from behind us, and Jackie stopped, looking up and behind us. I turned to see his mother waving us up to the second floor.

"C'mon Jay, time to introduce you to Padre."

I nodded and followed after the larger man, still carrying my duffel bag. Mama Welles met Jackie at the top of the stairs with a hug, surprising me with my own after releasing her son. After a short conversation with the older woman, Jackie led me to the corner booth on the second floor, where a man I recognized from the game was sitting, reading a book. As we started to approach, he closed it, revealing it to be a worn and weathered bible.

"Jackie, it's good to see you again, my child," He said, though he remained seated, reaching out to shake Jackie's hand. "Mama Welles tells me you are finally taking your safety seriously."

"Si Padre, mi amigo here sold me some armor," He explained, though something told me that the fixer already knew. "It's comfortable, and it actually works, unlike that corpo crap."

"Interesting. And this is your friend?" He asked, looking over at me. "Fully organic, a rarity in this world, especially in Night City."

"Jackson, sir," I said, reaching out to shake his hand, the older man's grip surprisingly firm for his age. "It's how I was raised. Left me with questionable feelings about cyberware."

"We are all products of our upbringing, but we must not let it tie us down," He responded before gesturing to the seat opposite of home. "Sit, please."

I slid into the seat first, putting my bag on the red faux leather seat beside me, shifting in enough that Jackie could join me. When we were both settled, Padre leaned back in his spot, studying us for a moment before focusing on me.

"Jackie insisted that you are a man who enjoys his privacy," He started, slowly sitting forward and putting his elbow on the table, bridging his hands in front of his face. "I respect that. A man's actions, done in privacy, are his own. But a new borg, suddenly active in my neighborhood, with someone I consider a friend, I cannot just ignore. This Alloy, what is his game? Where did he come from?"

"Father, as a fixer, you know how dangerous information can be," I responded, doing my best to sound respectful. "Every secret I tell is another tool someone could use against me. The more I reveal, the more dangerous my life becomes. I can say, with one hundred percent confidence, that Alloy is not a threat to you, Jackie. He is interested in making money, as am I."

The older man stared me down, eyes boring into my soul. It was odd, but I could feel his conviction, his experience, like a man who had seen it all and wasn't about to take shit from anyone, even the people he liked.

"Why? Why are you so desperate for money?" He asked, still staring me down. "Everyone chases eddies, but not many choose to go to the lengths that you or your borg friend have. So, what is driving you towards the hunt for money?"

Jackie was right. This man was not to be taken lightly. In all likelihood, he had already decided Alloy and I were the same person, and if he hadn't, it was only the idea that power armor as compact and streamlined as the Warden armor didn't exist.

"I... have a gift, sir. For making things. Jackie can confirm, some of the things I make..." I said, trailing off to speak much more quietly. "They would make a lot of corporations very interested. Enough to do things that I would very much not enjoy to get access to them."

The older man looked at Jackie wordlessly, who nodded to confirm my statement. He looked back to me, finally leaning back as if to pull back the pressure.

"God's gifts often come with a burden, a way to prove your mettle," He responded, his face tied in a frown. "And I do not blame you for wanting to stay the tender mercies of the corpora scum that claim this city. I will take your word that your friend will not cause any trouble. But it is your word on the line. Remember that."

I nodded, and for a moment, we sat at the table silently. The older fixer seemed content to collect his thoughts, shifting in his seat before looking out the nearby window. Eventually he focused back on me.

"Jackie mentioned you have things to show me."

"I do. As I said before, I need eddies for my work, and I'm happy to share some of the things I've created," I explained, reaching for my bag.

I could feel rather than see the bodyguard tense as I moved, but Padre waved them off. I unzipped the duffel and pulled out the two parts of my AA under armor. As I slid it to the fixer, Jackie pulled out a small shard, extending his hand to show Padre before passing it to his guard, who inserted it smoothly into his neck once his boss nodded.

"This armor is designed to be worn under your clothes and protect your vitals. It's as comfortable as I can make it and will stop anything short of a high-powered precision rifle," I explained. "The metal I used to make them is my own special alloy, which takes a while to make and then attach to the kevlar material."

"How much would this set sell for?" He asked, his eyes glowing as he reviewed the footage his guard was watching. "It seems to be impressive."

"At the moment, I am making each of them by hand, cutting into my time by a lot. I need four thousand for each of them to make them worth my time."

"Jackie was right. You do not know your own worth," Padre responded, putting down the armor and sliding it away. "I would not have batted an eye at double that price."

"I'm relatively unknown at this point," I pointed out, internally reeling at the idea of selling the armor for eight thousand. "I thought it best to keep my prices low to attract new customers."

"Not unwise," The fixer responded with a single nod. "What else do you have?"

I reached for my bag again, this time pulling two devices and laying them on the table. One was essentially an oversized, slightly restructured bluescreen round, while the other was a completely original design. It was a seven-inch long rod the width of a soda can, fused to the tip of a four-sided pyramid that added four more inches of length.

"This is the prototype for an EMP device, and before you ask, it's not currently armed," I said reassuringly. "Now, there are already several other options for EMP devices available, but, realistically, save the grenade, it's hard to get a hold of anything reliably. And while the grenades sort of work, they are certainly not precision devices."

I held up the device's payload, the upscaled bluescreen round, passing it to Padre when he held out his hand.

"This device, which I've been TEMP for tactical EMP, delivers that payload through low-level armor with precision rather than a random throw," I explained. "Because the EMP blast happens *inside* your target, the damage is much more severe and can even work on partially shielded tech. It can be activated by hand, but it can also be linked to a detonation device and set off remotely."

"How close to being complete is this prototype?" Padre asked, handing me the payload.

"Very close. I just need to test them a few times to make sure there aren't any hidden surprises that I missed."

I was thankful that the TEMP was cheap, Elerium free, and could be made without AA. It fired using good old-fashioned explosives, and the only Alien Alloy it used was the tip of the EMP penetrator, which could be replaced by something like tungsten. It was designed to be disposable, which meant I wasn't going to be forking over thousands of eddies just to test them.

"And how much will the finished device cost?"

"I'm hoping to keep these under two thousand," I responded, getting a rather stoic nod in return. "They are one-use devices, so charging too much for them is counterintuitive."

He nodded again, and I took the technically unfinished device back, storing it inside my bag and pulling out my last creation. It was a simple, custom-built tablet with a small screen, the device no bigger than a smartphone from back home. Along the side were the same sort of interface plugs that many people had in their palms. I demonstrated the plug by pulling it out and uncoiling it to show it had nearly three feet of range before letting it slowly pull back inside the device.

"This is a G-Hacker," I said, handing Padre the small tablet. "It is capable of hacking low-level security and ICE. Anyone with enough tech nohow to read the screen and press the buttons along the side can use it to bypass doors, shut down cameras, unlock and start cars, anything a low-level hacker could do. Just keep in mind that this is not a skeleton key. It won't punch through corpo ICE or get you through 'Saka security. Low-level stuff only. I recommend testing it yourself to get a better feel for its capabilities."

The G-Hacker was a joint effort between Spot and myself. We had worked together to program the interface before copying and pasting his hacking programs and slapping them into the tablet, with just enough of its extra programming to control and direct it. We had also purposely held back some of the inherent flexibility of the original program, restricting it down a few notches of effectiveness.

"And it does so without the user's input?" Padre asked, looking down at the device with something akin to shock. "How powerful is it?"



"It opened my front door and got me a free burrito for lunch," I said. "But it's going to take some time to really understand its limits. It's designed to give gonks and solos an option when they don't know anything about hacking. Like I said, it's not gonna get you into Arasaka Tower, but it will keep your guys from being thwarted by a random door."

Padre fiddled with the tablet for a few minutes, exploring some of the menus. Technically, there wasn't much need for the menu, as the system should be able to recognize what the primary security issue was before asking for confirmation. However, people liked being able to tell things what to do, and I wasn't going to deny that to anyone.

"I want them," The older fixer finally said, putting the tablet down. "All three of them."

"Okay, great. How many of them?" I asked, though something about how he had phrased his words tugged at my brain. "I'm not really set up for mass-"

"No, you misunderstand me. You must have plans for these devices. I want them," He corrected, cutting me off. "I will give you seventy thousand credits right now. I have a few shops that will take up building them for me. Your name won't ever even be attached."

I stared at him for a long moment, wondering whether this was an offer that I couldn't refuse. None of these devices were truly groundbreaking, and save for the AA under armor, they could easily be attributed to new applications of old ideas. The G-Hacker might make some waves, but since it really was a low-level device. That said, I knew they would eventually bring in more than that seventy thousand credits.

But what a hassle getting to that point would be. I would have to dedicate a massive amount of time to just these three things to even approach that number. Plus, the likelihood of my name getting out rose with every deal I made. The ability to make my sale and just walk away... that was worth a lot.

"I came here looking to get on your good side, Father," I admitted. "Someone who could warn me if my name started getting whispered around."

"Continue selling your ideas to me, and I will be very interested in your safety," He responded, picking up what I was saying immediately. "You and your borg friend."

"Even so... I cannot sell you the protective vest. The designs aren't anything special, it's the Alloy that really sets it apart. I came up with myself. It has so many uses, I can't just sell it to you," I said, lying through my teeth since the creation of AA was still heavily blackboxed. "I don't mind washing my hands of these two devices. But that metal, it's not something I can give up."

He considered my words for a while before eventually nodding in agreement.

"Very well. Fifty thousand credits for the other two designs," Adjusting his price downwards. "Plus sixteen thousand more for four pairs of armor."

"The plans I can hand over before the day it is over, but the armor will take a few days," I admitted. "Making them is a long process."

"Jackie did mention you were looking for equipment. I know of the fabricator device he described to me, I could have one at your apartment by tomorrow morning for the cost of three of your suits."

Now, that was a tempting offer. I knew from my own research that new fabricators were worth just over twenty thousand eddies, which was why I hadn't bought another one on my own yet. I considered the offer for a few minutes before finally nodding. I was underselling what my creations were worth, but having them out of my hands, my name removed from their production, and the responsibility removed from me as well... just about made up the difference in my mind. I stood and held out my hand.

"If you cover Jackie's cut for introducing us and making this happen, then the deal works for me."

For a moment, Padre looked up at me before finally nodding and standing up as well, reaching out and sealing the deal with a single shake.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Jackson," He said, his eyes glowing as my keyfob vibrated in my pocket. "I have given you half of your payment. The second half will be delivered tomorrow morning by whoever drops off your new portable fabricator. They will also be picking the plans."

"Thank you, sir," I responded before gesturing to the prototypes that sat on the table. "You can keep the prototypes and the armor as the first of the four."

I stepped away and let Jackie shake his hand next, the older man's eyes glowing again as he paid my partner. Whatever Jackie received, he seemed surprised by the amount, both of us remaining silent as we left the second floor, only stopping to pay our tab as we left the bar.