

I was silent for a long moment, staring at Jackie, my brain trying to spin up and figure out what was going on. I was silent long enough for the large, muscular man to notice. He turned to look at me, raising his eyebrow.

“Something wrong?” He asked, looking down at his shirt. “Didn’t make a mess, did I? I got a date later, going back home to change would be a pain.”

“N-No, sorry. You... just remind me of someone,” I finally said, shaking my head. “Sorry.”

“No harm amigo, must have been a handsome friend,” He said with a laugh before slurping up another string of noodles.

I shrugged and continued to eat, doing my best to seem casual, looking over at the rather built man again.

“Names Jackson,” I volunteered, reaching over to shake his hand.

“Huh, how about that, mines Jackie,” He said, reaching over and taking my hand after wiping it off on his pants. “Good to meet you.”

“You live around here?” I asked after a moment, flicking my chopsticks at the Megabuilding. “I’m new to the building so...”

“Not here, but I live around in Valentinos territory. Moved back in with Mama. She likes having me around,” He answered with a shrug. “Saves on rent, and you can’t beat home cooking.”

“Yeah... not much better than that...” I said, a memory of my old life flashing in my mind for a moment. “You a member? Of the Valentinos.”

“Used to be, left to keep Mama happy when I got hurt. Still close with Padre, though,” He responded with a shrug. “What about you? Got any connections?”

“No. I’m new to Night City,” I admitted. “New to a lot of things. The family kept us pretty close...”

“Right, right, crazy ‘ganic family,” He nodded, and for a moment, I felt bad for lying to him. “You looking for work? Lots of people come to Night City looking for a fresh start... Doesn’t always work but...”

“I... I’m a techie,” I explained with a shrug. “Build stuff mostly, inventor, innovator, stuff like that.”

“Really? A techie who isn’t chipped out? Pull the other one. It’s got bells,” He said with a chuckle, looking over to see that I was serious. “For real? Well, maybe you can help me then. Mama Welles has been pushing me to get some subdermal, but my lady doesn’t like the way it feels. Gotta keep the output happy, ya know? You got any recommendations?”

“Body armor,” I respond easily. “Cheaper, no recovery time, replaceable. Just gotta remember to put it on. In fact...”

For a moment, I focused back on the XCOM tech tree, feeling my mind searching for a moment before eventually finding what I was looking for. I focused on the idea, making sure that it was possible with what I had access to.

“I’ve had an idea bouncing around for a new type of protective vest. Something you can wear under your clothes but should still protect you,” I explained. “I can build it just fine... but I don’t have a way to test it.”

“Are you suggesting I wear it while getting shot?” He asked, his expression all but openly questioning my intelligence.

“What? No, I just don’t have any guns, and I don’t really have a place to shoot it,” I explained, not mentioning that I was scared to go somewhere I could shoot it by myself. “All I have is my Unity.”

“Right, okay. What’s in it for me?” He asked, his noodles momentarily forgotten. “I appreciate helping your fellow man as much as the next guy, but bullets ain’t cheap choom.”

“Yeah, sure. If the vest works, I’ll sell you one at a discount,” I said, thinking for a moment before adding. “If it doesn’t, I’ll pay you a couple thousand eddies for your time. Say two?”

I was pretty confident in the armor I had in mind, but everything I knew about it was measured in terms of the XCOM metrics. I would need to test it on the local scale to really be sure. Plus... I wanted to know what was going on with Jackie still being alive, and the best way to do that was to spend some time with him.

“...Alright, I’m starting to see the benefit,” He said, nodding with a smile. “What kind of firepower you lookin to throw at your stuff? I can get my hands on some higher calibers, but I’m only a solo, can’t magic up anything miraculous.”

“Just the kind of things you’re worried about running into,” I explained. “You’re the expert there.”

“I can do that. You need a fireline, too, something out of the way... How do you feel about the badlands? Should be a quiet spot somewhere under the wind farms.”

“Uh... you think it's safe?”

“Should be, but no guarantees around Night City,” He pointed out. “Don't worry, I'll get you back safe and sound. When should we do this?”

“Not tomorrow, but the day after, Sunday afternoon?” I suggested. “I need some time to put everything together.”

“Alright, done deal choom. I gotta say, I got a good feeling about you, did the moment I sat down,” He said with a laugh. “Glad to see my instincts are still top-notch.”

I chuckled and nodded along, taking another bite of noodles. We talked for a few more minutes, mostly about what was going on in the neighborhood and what sort of places were good to go for, like food and shopping. He had plenty of good things to say about Coyote Cojo, the bar his mom owned. I promised I'd consider going, but personally, I was wary of going anywhere so blatantly owned by one gang. The Valentinos might be a gang that focused on honor, loyalty, and family, but they were still a gang.

Eventually, my keyfob vibrated, an alarm going off that my latest piece on my fabricator was complete. I quickly finished my noodles, which by now had gone cold.

“Sorry, Jackie, but I gotta go. Got a project going that I need to get back to,” I explained, reaching out to shake the larger man's hand again. “I'll see you on Sunday. Just knock on my door.”

“Bout time for me to get going anyway,” He admitted, standing with me. “Need to get going if I'm gonna pick up my girl. Good luck with your work.”

I nodded and headed back to the entrance of the Megabuilding, climbing into the elevator, my mind already spooling up. I had no idea how he was still alive, and seemingly no worse for wear. It was possible that V and Jackie didn't get involved with the Arasaka job, but even that seemed unlikely. At the beginning of the game, the montage of V and Jackie working together made them seem thick as thieves, the kind of partners who did everything together, so I couldn't imagine he wouldn't mention getting some protection for them as well, which made me think that they weren't partners at all. Unfortunately, I didn't have nearly enough information to draw any conclusion beyond now knowing that this reality was not the canon reality.

Like I needed any more excuses to be paranoid.

I shook my head and did my best to put aside the new mystery because, without more info, I wouldn't make any progress cracking it. Besides, I had work to do, especially since I just set a deadline.

I stepped back into my apartment, the door opening for me and shutting behind me. I made a beeline for my workshop, only stopping when I realized that the status light on the Elerium generator was blinking green. I walked around to the coffee table and cracked open the top of the crystalization chamber, using a pair of 3D-printed tongs to reach in, grab the new blue crystal, and gently replace the seed diamond inside. I topped up three of the chemical reservoirs before closing the lid and sealing the chamber, pressing a button to start the machine back up.

I detoured to the bathroom to wash the crystal off before finally heading back into the workshop. The first thing I did was restock the fabricator before sitting down at the work table and spinning around. I let out a long breath, frowning as I watched the fabricator work away in the corner.

The machine was incredible, blowing anything that the humans in XCOM out of the water. It did a hilarious number of different metalworking tasks almost completely by itself. It was a bit on the wasteful side, but the real problem was that it was still only one machine. I was on a time limit with this tree, and if I wanted to get to the few things worth knowing, I needed to escape this bottleneck. The problem was that even with several impressive things dotted around, the human branch of XCOM didn't really offer any solutions.

The XCOM program managed to push human tech, especially military tech, to a whole new level. The problem was that most of that advancement was due to integrating alien tech with human thinking. Even worse, most of the stuff they were making was *handmade*. Engineers would be given alien salvage, and they would strip it down of anything useful, refine anything that needed it, and then use it to make stuff almost completely by hand. Sure, there was some minor automation, but nothing really beyond the standard tech of the time, which would be around 2015 in my old world.

The human XCOM branch had some shiny stuff, sure, but a lot of the other stuff useless, and almost *all* of the background tech was pointless. Hell, I wasn't even sure how the mag weapons would stack up against the tech weapons here.

The more I worked with it and the more I explored the options, the more I realized that there would only be a few things genuinely useful from the human tech tree. Everything else could be beaten by the standard Cyberpunk tech.

"Which means I need more Cyberpunk tech," I muttered to myself, shaking my head. "More fabricators, more printers."

I turned back to the computer and pulled up a calendar app. I marked the day I could switch, which was four days away, then I marked the day I had to switch, which was four days, one week away. I marked the testing meeting with Jackie. Then I leaned back. After a few seconds, I added 'Alloy smelter' on Friday, today, and 'Nanoscale vest', then 'Plated vest' on Saturday.

Alien Alloy, as you might expect, was a strange substance, so learning how to work with it was paramount. I had always planned on working on the two vests, both to familiarise myself with the material and to make some protection for myself, but making a bit of dough off the top wasn't a bad thing either.

My quickly dwindling funds were another problem that I needed to solve.

I shook my head and focused on the calendar before closing my eyes and looking back on what sort of options I had in the tech tree. Psionics was obviously something I wanted to investigate for no other reason than to keep it as an option. I couldn't think of many universes where making psychics was as easy as locking people in a room for a few days. Unfortunately, I barely even had to focus on the tech used to unlock psionics for a second before seeing that it was far beyond me.

There were several things I needed to build before I could tackle that, not to mention the resources and time.

I started filling out the calendar, trying to find a way to make as many of the interesting parts of the tree as possible. It wasn't just about solidifying the tech for future work, but also about the knowledge I gained for each finished project. I learned quite a bit about energy transference from constructing the pistol, enough that building the laser rifle seemed well worth it. I also wanted to tap into the mag rifle tech, if nothing more than to understand it for future improvement. Then, between what I would learn from the mag rifles and the laser weapons, I was hoping I would be able to tackle plasma weapons.

I was also interested in the higher-level armors, like the Warden and E.X.O Suit. I'm not sure how difficult getting to them might be, but using them as a platform to understand and build the W.A.R. suit would be a decent end-of-rotation project if psionics continued to be an unreachable goal.

I would have to explore the options more later. It had been a while since I had played any of the XCOM games, so I'm sure there were more than a few hidden gems tucked away in the corners of the tree. For now, I needed to focus on getting my Alien Alloy production up and running. Which, unfortunately, for now, relied on me waiting for parts to finish.

About an hour and a half later, mainly spent working on blueprinting on the CAD program and feeding metal and ceramic stock to the fabricator, I could start putting everything together, starting from the ground up. The smelter was a lot more robust than the Elerium generator, with layers of heatproof insulation, ceramic tiling, and several cooling and heating elements, as well as agitators and several ingredient distributors that would mix in chemicals and several other ingredients at specific times. If I had been dropped in a less advanced time, I would have likely been doing this over a large furnace, timing and weighing ingredients by hand. Luckily, I could skip that step with a few dozen purchases online.

Essentially, I was burning money to advance myself further and in less time. I wouldn't be able to do that for long, but I was desperate to get my hands on better ways to protect myself.

Putting the smelter together took four hours in total, during which I pulled out another small crystal of Elerium from the generator, which was good because the previous one went into the building of the smelter. When the smelter itself was complete, I filled up the compartments with several different materials and filled the primary crucible with several bars of titanium. The last thing I did was very carefully crush up the latest Elerium crystal, as well as the waste from the last few projects, into as fine a powder as I could, before adding it to the final distributor.

Now I knew that, in reality, there was no way that the aliens in the XCOM universe were using Elerium to make Alien Alloy. But then again, they weren't using titanium as a base, either. This was all black-boxed, and tinker-magicked to the max, which was frustrating but understandable, considering I had no way of getting my hands on the real materials.

I spent a minute or so double-checking everything, making sure the smelter was all set. The materials going into this batch cost about four hundred eddies in total, including the small portion of Elerium it would use, so fucking up wasn't an option. After making sure everything was set, I finally activated the smelter. I could hear the heater kicking on, and after listening to it for a moment, I left the room. According to the plans I had in my head, the system should put off some heat, but not so much that the room's climate control wouldn't be able to keep up. Part of me doubted that was possible, but I decided to trust it for now.

I made my way to my bed, sitting down at the edge. I set my alarm for three hours, which was when the next Elerium crystal would be done, and laid down to catch some sleep. I was out pretty quickly, though it hardly felt like any time had passed when my alarm woke me back up.

For the rest of the night, into the next day, and all the way to Sunday morning, I slept and worked to the beat of my machines. I would wake up to change out the Elerium crystal, add more metal to the smelter, and give the 3D printer and foundry a new project. When I was done trying to sleep, I started feeding the fabricator Alien Alloy, which the smelter could produce in thick ingots or in thinner sheets. The lack of variety meant a lot more waste, but luckily, I could feed almost all of it right back into the smelter to recycle.

I also spent a lot of time programming, repeating programs verbatim from the XCOM world, each one increasing my knowledge just a bit more. While I wasn't ready to start dabbling in AI, the VI that the XCOM program had access to, like the Gremlins and Spark units, could really come in handy. It would take a few days of programming random stuff till I got to that point, but it was easy progress since I was essentially just rewriting the code on my computer.

By the first hour of Sunday, about two pm, I had converted all of my ingredients into Alien Alloy and Elerium, though not much of it was left at that point. My first project was a nanoscale vest that followed the plans I had in my head exactly. Upon completion, I could feel a surprising

amount of information about how the XCOM program worked with Alien Alloy put into my head, as well as how a lot of their protective vests worked. I could confirm that even without changing the overall design, my vest was better than the original simply because the bullet-resistant fabrics available blew past anything XCOM could get their hands on.

When the first vest was done, I immediately converted it into a plated vest, which wasn't quite as easy as just welding on some Alloy plates, but it also wasn't far off that. As I finished it, I could feel the knowledge of more advanced armor techniques flowing into my brain as I finished, as well as more general knowledge of metalworking.

With the designs solidified in my head, I completely disassembled the vest, rebuilding it from the ground up to cover more of my body. I have no idea why XCOM reserved the nanoscale part of the vest to just the chest area, but my version would cover my arms just above my elbow as well. I also made a pair of nanoscale undershorts, which covered down to my knees. I then added plating to the chest and crotch area.

My final version was a mix of the scale and plate vests, designed to give maximum protection to vitals while still being as material-effective as possible. I used almost all of my Alloy to make three of these. One for me, one for Jackie should he want it, and one for testing. The test one would be melted down when we were done so that I could re-use the Alloy.

While I spent a lot of my time putting together the vest, I was also using the 3D printer to work on a laser rifle. The original plans used a surprising amount of plastic in the design, and other than the Elerium charging chamber, the containment unit, the central barrel, and a few other small parts, the advanced polymers that the Cyberpunk era 3D printer was capable of using were more than sufficient. The end result felt more like a well-made nerf cannon than a powerful weapon, but what mattered was that it counted as completing the tech, and I got a whole dump of information about exotic energies, Elerium charging systems, and high-temperature materials.

Once again, it was all derivative of alien tech, especially the Elerium and Alien Alloy, but it was still important information.

When I finally called it a night, I set up the fabricator and 3D printer to run while I slept, giving them two of the larger, more complicated parts of the mag pistol. I crawled into bed, sleeping uninterrupted until the following morning. I was halfway through making the rest of the mag pistol parts when there was a knock on my door.

"Jackie, hey. Good to see you," I said, greeting the mercenary with a handshake. "Let me just set up a few things, then we can go."

I walked back into the apartment, and Jackie followed behind me. I stepped into my workshop and sat down at my computer.

“Nice little setup you got,” He commented, leaning against the doorframe as I tapped away on my computer.

“Small is the problem,” I said, shaking my head as I fed the fabricator a new plan, before feeding it a bar of Alien Alloy. “Bottlenecks suck.”

“Eh, don’t be too hard on yourself,” Jackie said with a shrug. “Gotta walk before you run.”

“Don’t have the time to learn, unfortunately,” I mumbled, mostly to myself.

It took me a minute to strap on my gun and finish getting dressed. Thankfully, I was already wearing my copy of the armor. When we finally left, I was carrying the test copy, as well as the one for Jackie.

As we left the apartment complex, Jackie led me to an older-looking car. My in-world knowledge told me it was a cheap model almost as old as I was, the kind that people kept updating to keep it usable. I put my bag in the back seat before climbing into the passenger seat.

“So who did you borrow this from?” I asked as Jackie sat in the driver's seat, starting the car started with a press of a button.

“That obvious, huh?” He asked with a chuckle.

“You strike me as a motorcycle kind of guy,” I responded with a smirk.

“Damn, good guess,” He responded as we pulled away from the sidewalk. “A choom of mine owed me a couple favors, lent me the car and some iron. Should have plenty to test your vest.”

I nodded and looked out the window, watching as a few buildings. As we drove, I found myself switching between recognizing some patches and not having a clue where we were going. I was pretty sure the city itself was mostly like it was in the games, but I had a feeling that some areas, like the slums or certain apartment blocks, were significantly larger than they had been. It made sense, all things considered, but it also was just another thing on the growing list of differences between the game and my new life. I looked over at Jackie, another thing on that list, shaking my head.

“So, how did your date go?” I asked, the muscular solo smiling at the question.

“It was preem. Misty always knows how to make me slow down and relax,” He responded. “She is one of those mystic types, all about the soul or chakras. I try to understand, but it honestly just all goes over my head.”



"I know the type," I admit. "I don't like the idea of living my life on the terms of spiritualism or what my sign is, but there is something to some of those beliefs. The hard part is seeing what's for gonks and what's real."

"For real?" he asked, looking over at me surprised. "Didn't think techies believed that kinda stuff."

"Worlds filled with crazy shit, Jackie," I said, thinking about my own experience. "Hard to dismiss it all as chance and science."

"I won't argue with that," He said with a shrug. "Anyway, I took her out to dinner. I know this great place, not far from her shop."

We continued to drive, eventually pulling out of the city to the badlands. Part of me realized that I was taking a rather big risk, letting someone I just met bring me out this far into the desert, but I found myself trusting Jackie. Plus, I didn't think he had it in him to lie or act that convincingly if he did plan on taking me out here to shoot me.

Eventually, we pulled off the main road and onto a back road, eventually pulling under a large windmill. Jackie parked directly under the shadow of one, before we both climbed out.

"Alright, I got a mannequin in the back, snagged it from a dumpster behind an old shop. We can set the vest up on that," Jackie said as we walked around to the back of the car, popping the trunk.

It took a minute and a few strips of duct tape, but eventually, we stepped back to the car to admire our work. The mannequin was about thirty feet away, supported by a cactus, wearing the shorts and the vest. Both were taped in place, making the whole thing look like the kind of hack job you see from one of those gun channels on Youtube.

"You want the first shot?" Jackie asked, crossing his arms and sitting on the lip of the trunk. "You do know how to use that Unity, don't you?"

"I know well enough," I assured him, turning toward the target and drawing my pistol.

I took a second to line up my shot before pulling the trigger, the .45 caliber bullet splitting the air until it slapped into the plated part of the vest. Not satisfied with just testing the strongest part, I fired three more times, hitting the arm, the chest again, and then the thigh. None of the bullets went through.

"Well... it beats a .45. That's a good start," I said, pulling out the magazine from my Unity and trading it for a full one, before sliding the pistol back into its holster.

“Don’t get to cock, amigo, I’ve seen .45s get stopped by sturdy leather jackets,” He said, turning around and reaching into the trunk. “Let’s try something with a bit more power.”

He reached into the and pulled out a Liberty, a slightly heftier pistol firing a slightly bigger round. He stepped forward as I stepped back, firing off several rounds. When he was done, we both walked to the armor to examine the damage.

“Well I’ll be, not even a dent,” He said, running a finger over the mark left by the bullets. “And scale is intact too, not bad.”

We walked back to the car, testing out several more weapons. The vest held up incredibly well, only starting to struggle when we started pulling out rifles and a shotgun. Even so, it held up pretty well, with scales only failing after a few hits and the plated sections taking repeat and accurate fire. It only lost outright to a chunky-looking precision rifle I didn’t recognize from the game, one that fired a big old round.

When we were done testing, we pulled down the vest and shorts to take a closer look. Jackie ran his hand over the last hole, the one from the high-powered precision rifle.

“I gotta say, Jackson. I came out here 'cause I figured two grand for a drive and some range time was a sweet deal,” He admitted. “But this is impressive stuff. No offense, but... you sure you made this?”

“I did, it’s made of a new alloy I came up with,” I explained.

“Well... Mama Welles would smack me blue for passing up a deal that could keep me safe. How much do you want for it?”

For a moment, I frowned, wondering exactly what something like this was worth. It was about six hundred eddies of material, most if it from the Alien Alloy. I was tempted to just say a grand because I wanted Jackie to have a little extra protection if he didn’t have V watching his back... But I honestly couldn’t afford to give up the money.

I made a lot of progress over the last few days, but I burned a lot of eddies to do so. It was going to get a lot harder to keep up that momentum if I didn’t make some cash back.

“Let’s say... two thousand five hundred,” I said, about to open my mouth and add that we could take some off for his discount, but he beat me out.

“Seriously? That’s it?” He asked, looking surprised. “Damn, I expected a lot more. I appreciate you cutting me a deal, Choom.”

Before I could say anything, his eyes glowed orange, and my keyfob vibrated. I pulled it out to see two and a half thousand Eurodollars had been added to my account.

“Well... listen, you want me to spread the word a bit?” He asked, before spotting my wince and continuing. “I could keep it down to a few people I trust not to talk, could even run the deliveries for you if you're not keen on showing your face.”

“I... yeah. Keep it slow at first. I have a lot of projects of my own to keep up with, but a set of vests and pants every few days would be fine.”

“Perfecto! We could charge at least three and a half gees for this armor, choom, and I'll take a small cut, from their side, of course,” He assured me, despite me about to offer him a cut anyway. “C'mon, let's get something to eat to celebrate a new opportunity!”