

I didn't miss my old life.

My old life was crap, honestly. A dead-end job with no respect. Barely making ends meet no matter how much overtime and sind gigs I took. I had no time for friends and no energy to enjoy what little free time I had. I was stuck in a life that was becoming all too common for people my age. My only claim to success was that I had seen college for the scam that it was, and so I didn't have any college debt. I was still working the same jobs as everyone else who had gone to college, getting screwed out of my money just like them. I just didn't have a guillotine hanging over my head.

My old life sucked. Still, as much as I didn't miss it, I would have been tempted to go back to it if it had been an option.

I mean, don't get me wrong, I fantasized about adventure and power as much as the next guy... but actually getting my wish? Getting sent to a world that was a psychopath's wet dream? Not exactly a happy moment.

A streak of movement caught my eye, and I watched as the noon Metrorail streaked past my window, surprisingly quiet despite being so close. I could still hear and feel it, but it wasn't nearly as loud as I would have thought.

When the yellow streak was gone, I turned back to my apartment, focusing on the blue crystal I was fiddling with. It was surprisingly hefty for something the size of my thumb and gave off a faint blue glow. I knew in this state, it was harmless, even if it was warm to the touch. I closed my eyes for a moment, leaning back on the low couch, feeling the small, warm stone in my hand.

I didn't miss my old life, but this one was much more dangerous. It made me wish for something more boring, less lethal. The nine-to-five grind might have been brutal, but at least people pretended to not want me dead.

Two days ago, I woke up in a bed I didn't recognize but was somehow still familiar with. I could feel the knowledge of my new world, just enough information that I wouldn't be bumbling around like an idiot, separate from my own memories. I knew I would have them because I was told I would get them by a bunch of unspeakable eldritch entities. The less said about them, the better.

I had died, and they had offered me a new life, one where I would have access to great power. I, being the idiot I was, agreed without much thought. Who doesn't want great power and a new chance at life, right?

I realized how dumb I had been when they finished upgrading my intelligence, stuffing some basic info about an alternate Earth, and linking my brain to a multi-universal databank. I

wasn't an idiot before, well, not really, but I definitely wasn't this smart either. It made realizing how dangerous this world really was a lot easier.

See, I knew this world. Not too well, but well enough to recognize it. I looked out my window again. I could see buildings, the street below, the Metrorail, and to the right, the corner of an overpass. Further away, I could see two towering buildings that I knew looked very similar to the one I was in. Megabuilding H3 and H4. Which put me at Wellsprings 708, Megabuilding H2.

I was in Cyberpunk 2077.

Well, Cyberpunk 2077 and three quarters. It was June, after all, which was important because the Arasaka heist that V and Jackie orchestrated was in April, and while I didn't know what happened in the DLC, or even the later three-fifths of the game, I did know Vik gave V a month to live, so several months meant they were definitely... well I didn't actually know how it ended, but it was way past the point that I could help.

Now, I played Cyberpunk shortly after it came out. It was buggy, broken, and fell far short of what the company had promised, so I stopped playing it. Then, over time, they fixed the game. When Edgerunners came out, and when Phantom Liberty was released, everyone said it was fixed and that it was great. So, I tried to play it again, only to find out that a significant portion of the game's systems had been radically changed. The leveling, perks, cyberware, and more had been completely redone, leaving me feeling lost. I decided that I would have to restart to get a better feel for the systems and so I could appreciate it properly. But for some reason, I just never got around to it.

Looks like I'm getting around to it now.

I was stuck in a morally broken, murder-happy world where self-mutilation was the cool, hip thing to do. It was only one or two steps away from fucking *Borderlands*, for fucks sake!

I mean, don't get me wrong, as a videogame concept, chopping off your weak bits and replacing them with cool, shiny chrome is kinda cool. In real life, though? Not so much. No fucking way am I letting some random ripperdoc get even remotely close to me. I knew I could trust Vik not to screw me over or anything, but the idea of implanting something inside me that someone else could *hack*? That is so unacceptable it makes my skin crawl just thinking about it.

And let's not forget about the constant worry of Cyberpsychosis floating around. Cutting off perfectly good parts of your body and slamming on robot bits of questionable quality could *not* be good for your mental health. Mix in the very real possibility that the corporations that ran the planet were perfectly willing to do just about anything for profit, including release stuff that fucked with your head, maybe even drove you crazy...?

Safe to say, I was staying organic until I could either make my own cyberware or equivalent. Stuff I know is safe and unhackable. Truth be told, I had always been a bit iffy about limb/flesh replacements, even before they became a very real option in my life. The Adeptus Mechanicus always gave me the heebie-jeebies, too. I think, personally, I was more about *enhancement* than *replacement*. Just my luck that I get shoved into a world with a hard-on for replacement.

Luckily, the beings that put me here didn't stuff me with a neural link or cybereyes, which the in-world info that was downloaded into my brain knew damn near everyone had. Hell, I knew that if I left my apartment, I would need to carry a special device as sort of a security pass, or basically nothing would work for me.

I tossed the blue crystal into the air and caught it, my eyes going wide when what I had just done reached the conscious part of my brain. I very carefully leaned forward and placed the crystal on the coffee table, next to the device that made it, which was already busy making a second one.

I listened to the machine hum and vibrate for a moment before leaning back on the couch, sans crystal to fiddle with. I had spent the entire previous day making the device, and the day before dragging in deliveries of parts and materials. So far, the only good part about being in the Cyberpunk world was skipping the first part of being a tinker, making your first tools. I would certainly end up using those tools to make more, better tools, but at least I was able to skip the first part.

Plus, no dumpster diving for parts was nice, too. Not that that might not end up happening anyway.

Of course, I wasn't really a tinker, at least not like a tinker from Worm. I was a Tinker of Fiction, and the vast majority of what I could make was reproducible, solid, not black-boxed tech. The only exception to that was certain exotic materials that cropped up in some realities.

You see, across the multiverse, which I now knew was much more than a fanciful theory, different realities had unique materials. Those materials were often at the core of most, if not all, of that reality's most high-tech toys. Most of the tech from Mass Effect wouldn't work without Element Zero, and plenty of Star Wars tech wouldn't function without several exotic gasses, metals, and fuel sources.

So, according to the entities, I would basically tinker up a way to make those materials. Even materials that were supposedly impossible to synthesize, like the small, thumb-sized chunk of Elerium, Element 115 from XCOM, that was sitting on my table. I couldn't really explain exactly *how* the microwave-sized crystallization device on my coffee table worked, but it did. Even better, if anyone tried to repeat my process, it would fail, potentially catastrophically. But that was only a fraction of what the Tinker of Fiction was.

Basically, my brain was attached to a massive database. Every week, or two weeks if I held onto the specialization hard enough, I would "roll" for a new branch of tech. My current branch, as far as I could tell, was the human side of the XCOM, an amalgamation of the two modern XCOM games. The Elerium generator, which turned about four hundred dolla- *eddies* of chemicals and solvents, as well as a small, pin-head-sized industrial diamond, into Elerium crystals, was black-boxed. That meant that only I would be able to build a function version. Everything else beyond the specific material generators would be perfectly possible to reproduce.

The database itself was hard to describe. The best metaphor I could make was sort of like fog of war for an RTS game like Starcraft but in a slightly different order. At first, the map is completely black. I could push that black fog back by mentally exploring the tech tree, starting from my "base," the lowest levels of the tech tree, and working my way up. All I was doing, however, was revealing what I could build and a vague outline of its construction. Once I actually started to really focus on it by building the item, it was like placing a unit down into the grey fog. The details of that tech started to reveal themselves, and the further I went on the project, the more details I got. The exposed area wasn't just for that specific creation either. I was *learning* how it worked, which meant that once I re-rolled to a new branch, I would remember all of that information.

Technically, I could skip ahead in the tech tree and attempt to start building plasma weapons, but just from what I could see on the surface, through the grey fog, I knew I wouldn't get very far before I stalled out. It was too advanced, to the point that I didn't even understand the basic info I got through the "grey fog." I would need to work my way up to the higher branches of the tech tree.

Later, when I had a few trees under my belt, I would probably be able to skip ahead pretty far and immediately start working on more advanced things. Over time I would probably become the most powerful inventor on the planet, with knowledge from dozens of realities working together to produce advanced technology.

But that was far, far down the line, after I had time to learn and build myself up. Until then, I needed to survive first, and I needed resources. The body I had dropped into, which the entities had insisted wasn't a real person that I was taking over, had a surprisingly good chunk of eddies saved up. They would last for a bit, but not nearly as long as I would like. Which meant I would need to engage in the world at large. Even worse, my purchases would eventually get someone's attention.

This world had the same level of privacy as a public bathroom made of glass, which is to say, absolutely fucking none. I knew for a fact that any one of the several companies that held sway in Night City would have no issues swiping me up and "hiring me" to make tech for them. Sure, some of them would offer cash first, but if I said no...? Well, then, all bets were off. Most of them would kill me outright if it came down to it, just to keep me out of competitors' hands.

God, this world was fucked. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror version of my old world, where everything that was bad, corrupt, and broken became the new norm. Companies ran this city and the world at large, and their greed was consistent enough that you could set your watch to it. If I got on someone's radar before I was ready, my best chance would be to swallow my pride and hope I found an opportunity to escape later.

I couldn't even calm down and veg out by watching TV, because it was all shit! I don't know what the hell happened to this Earth, but their TV was like watching the most erratic and random TikTok video ever made, except it just kept going and going for a full TV episode. I hadn't had a chance to watch any movies yet, but I wasn't exactly confident they would be any better.

A muffled ping echoed through the apartment, startling me from my downward spiral. I took a deep breath and stood slowly, leaving the Elerium generator going but grabbing the already completed shard. I walked out of the sitting area, over to the door that led to the small side room, tapping the controls to open it, stepping into the only enclosed room in the small apartment.

In the game, V had turned this smaller room into an armory, but mine was a small workshop. There was a 3D printer tucked into the corner, a fabricator along the back wall, two tool chests, and a host of other tools, as well as a computer that was networked with the fabricator and 3D printer. There were even some basic supplies in various containers and drawers. All of it had been in the apartment when I first woke up here, and the fabricator and 3D printer had been essentially working nonstop since then.

Or at least they had been after I confirmed that they were not connected to any extra networks or the internet. Apparently, the entities responsible for my new life shared my paranoia because none of the equipment or tools had any logos, markings, or internet access. All of it was at the normal Cyberpunk level, but none of it seemed to be made here. As far as I could tell, they were snapped into existence the same way I was.

A quick inspection showed that both the fabricator and the 3D printer had completed their last jobs for my next project. I carefully extracted the chunks of metal from the fabricator and heavy-duty polymer pieces from the printer, carrying them to the workstation. There, separated and organized, were several dozen other parts, ready to be assembled. I grabbed a bag of screws, connectors, a soldering iron, and a pile of other parts before getting to work, sitting on the low stool and hunching over the table.

At this point, after spending so much time building the pieces and prepping the other parts, I knew this project pretty well, and I had learned quite a bit about how the laser weapons from XCOM worked. At least the human-made versions. The primary outstanding component was the power generation, which used Elerium. Essentially, the mysterious blue crystal released more energy than it took in, so charging it with a slight burst of radiation resulted in a substantial

energy release. That's why it glowed. The radiation from the visible spectrum caused it to release more energy than it was absorbing. The XCOM specialists had a few theories on how the crystal managed to do that, but it seemed far beyond what I had learned so far.

Thankfully, I didn't need to understand it to use it.

I grabbed the Elerium crystal and a small cutting tool, using it to slowly flatten the edges of the crystal, making sure to capture as much of the dust as possible since I knew it would be useful soon. When I had cut the crystal to the perfect size, I set it aside and started to assemble the rest of the parts. It took about an hour and a half to finally put it together, including sliding the small, shaved-down piece of Elerium into the energy pack. It slid in against a small X-ray emitter, which I was very glad existed in this world because building my own would have been an incredible pain in the ass.

Even better, it was smaller than the one the XCOM plans fed my brain.

I finally screwed in the last part before turning over the new laser pistol in my hand. It looked extremely similar to the laser pistol from the first modern XCOM, but a bit slimmer since I was using a variety of parts that were technically *more* advanced than the XCOM reality. After a final test to make sure everything worked and I hadn't just made a fancy, shiny bomb, I flicked on the activator switch. The pistol hummed, and the transparent aluminum glass tube that functioned as the barrel gave off a deep red glow, lighting up the room like a glowstick. I knew I would cover those up with east sinks, both to increase the fire rate and block the light from giving away my position, but I couldn't deny it looked cool.

Even better, I could feel my understanding of its construction, the ins and outs of how everything about it worked, solidifying in my brain. It wasn't anything too advanced, mostly just a bit of material science, a chunk of knowledge about radiation, and some details about energy direction. The extent of XCOM know-how was the process of using X-Rays to stimulate the Elerium into releasing enough energy to fire a laser blast, but it was still something. It was an anchor to further knowledge, and with any luck, I would be able to push that even further over the next week and four days.

For now, it was time to work on the next step.

With my pistol completed and, more importantly, with the Elerium generator now working, it was time to get to work on the next big project, the second stage of material generation for the XCOM human tech tree.

Alien Alloy.

An alloy of several elements, three of which didn't exist on Earth, anything more advanced than the general level of my new sidearm would require the durable, multipurpose alloy. Even just the next step up from the pistol, the laser rifle, would require the alloy in order to

redirect the considerable increase in energy output. I would need to set up another black-boxed generator, this time an alloy smelter, to produce what I needed.

Putting my pistol down on my workstation, I turned on my stool to face my computer. My Cyberpunk CAD program was already open when I activated the desktop, and the final designs for my pistol were on display. I quickly saved the blueprint to a palm-sized external hard drive, so I could grab it and run if necessary, before clearing it out completely from my computer. I then started a new file, quickly labeling it as the "Alien Alloy Smelter" before going to town.

The plans for the device, a tower about a foot wide, a foot deep, and four feet tall, was already clear in my head. I had spent the last hour contemplating it, resizing it a few times to better fit my workshop. It wouldn't be able to produce a ton of alloy, but since I was only producing stuff for myself, I really didn't need that much. Plus, the Elerium generation would be a solid bottleneck anyway. If there was anything I needed to scale up, it was that.

It took me about thirty minutes to fully plan out the metal skeleton of the device, then another twenty to work up plans for the ceramic plates that would line the inside of the smelter, as well as the receptacle for the finished molten alloy. When I was done, I selected the first part, stood up from the chair, and fed the fabricator a plate of metal. I quickly sealed the metal inside before activating the fabricator, watching through the see-through barrier as it got to work, cutting and trimming the plate.

When the fabricator was all set, I got to work on the forge internals, preparing the heating element, testing the thermometers for the smelter internals, as well as several other bits and pieces. If this were a general-purpose smelter, I would include nobs to adjust things, like the heat and maybe a timer, but as it was only going to be an Alien Alloy generator, there was no real reason to. A small programmable chip would control everything, and there would only need to be one setting.

The next few hours were spent browsing the internet for more materials, mostly parts and metal stock, ordering a batch for future projects since I already had everything I would need for the smelter. Occasionally, once every ten to fifteen minutes, I would need to pull out something from the fabricator or 3D printer, but that was it. After I had spent another three thousand eddies, my shrinking "savings" taking another hard hit, the fabricator finally got to one of the more intricate pieces, which would take a lot more time. Plenty of time to go and get something to eat.

With a groan, I stood up from my stool and stretched, my back cracking as I did. While I had plenty of what qualified as food for this world in the fridge, I knew that sitting inside for such a long time was going to start affecting my sanity eventually.

I grabbed the laser pistol I had just finished making, looking at it for a moment before shaking my head and deciding that, as much as I would like the extra firepower, I couldn't just show off my tech randomly. Instead, I walked out of my workshop and headed to the door,

grabbing my belt holster off of the hanger. I pulled it around my hips before grabbing my Unity pistol, which came with my new apartment and life, and slid it to the hoster.

Suitably armed, I grabbed the little keyfob that acted as my stand-in for the basic neural link and stuffed it into my pocket. Then I stood in front of my door, just staring at it. After a few seconds, I let out a long sigh. Honestly, the fact that I was hesitating so much was concerning but expected. This world was so incredibly different from the one that I knew, and my only exposure to it was a hyper-violent video game.

"It's just down and out the front of the building, Jackson," I mumbled to myself. "There is always a police team down there. No one is going to try anything."

I let out another long breath before finally tapping the controls for the door, which slid open. I could feel my keyfob vibrate as it recognized I had left my apartment, the door sliding behind me as I stepped out, finally leaving my apartment for the first time in a few days.

I let out the breath I was holding, looking around the familiar space around me. As far as I could tell, every megabuilding's general shape was the same, which meant that between the extra memories I got from the eldritch horrors that sent me here and the hundreds of times I ran from V's apartment down to the first floor, I knew my way around alright.

I walked forward, ignoring my neighbors as I leaned on the concrete railing that ran along the inside of the megabuilding. I looked up and down, taking in the sights of my new home. Surprisingly, it wasn't as terrible as I had expected. Still not good, but I suppose the fact that this massive arcology was built in a significantly better area than the one V lived in counted for something.

I pushed off the railing and made my way down to the floor below, weaving in between people as I cut a path to the nearest elevator. I could already smell several vendors around as I worked my way through, but I ignored them. As bleak and broken as the environment was on this planet, I wanted to see the sky. It hardly counted as getting out of the house if I don't really leave the building anyway, right?

Besides, I knew there was a noodle vendor out by the front entrance who seemed to put actual value in keeping his small shop clean. It was far from perfect, but I knew these days that beggars can't be choosers.

When I finally stepped out of the massive building, I had to shield my eyes for a moment as they adjusted to the bright, shining day. It was hot, but not horrifically, so I made my way down the steps of the entrance. The plaza was populated but had far fewer people than I had expected. I noted a cop standing by a large mechanical monstrosity, which I was pretty sure was called a Minitaur, off to the side. Focusing on my goal, I kept walking, going down two sets of stairs, until I reached a well-kept, mostly clean noodle shop. I sat down on one of the chairs and ordered a simple bowl of noodles with synth-beef, swiping my keyfob to pay for the food.

"Aye, I recognize that. That's one of those 'ganic chips. Never actually seen one before," Someone said from behind me, causing me to tense up.

"Uh... yeah... My parents were one of those religious nuts you hear about," I explained, something poking at the back of my mind. That voice sounded so *familiar*.

"For real? That's loco, man," The nosy man said. "Never thought I'd meet someone with so little chrome."

"Yeah, well, congrats, I-" I finally looked over at the man who had sat down at the vendor just as I did, and my brain locked up.

There, sitting two seats away, was Jackie Welles in all his glory, months after he should have been dead.