

I spent about an hour moving around the apartment, getting used to the armor system. By the time I finally took it off, I was pretty well acclimatized to it, having worked my way through a long string of stretches, burpees, jumping jacks, and shadow boxing. I could feel the entire system supporting me, speeding up my movements, and when I started doing one-handed pushups, enhancing my strength and stamina. I was far from some of the insane feats of strength that some of the borgs out there, like Atom Smasher, were capable of. People like him could tear a man limb from limb with little to no struggle or crumple a car with their bare fists. Still, I was definitely at least a hair or two above what a peak human could do.

As long as I was wearing the armor.

When I was done experimenting and testing, I pulled off the armor and set it aside. There was a temptation to just remove the outer AA shell and leave the skeleton and artificial muscle system on, but the knowledge I had gained from building the armor told me that prolonged use could result in serious muscle and bone atrophy. It could be countered by regimented workouts that compensated for the increased strength, but even that only lasted so long. Yes, it would take days, even weeks, for that to set in, but there was no reason to set up bad habits.

When I was finally free of the armor, I spent a few minutes inspecting it for any stress or mistakes. I now knew that the AA skeleton was the only reason that this system worked, as no other material was light and strong enough to withstand the mechanical disadvantage that many of the artificial muscle groups functioned under. It certainly explained why there were no compact power armors like this that existed in Cyberpunk, at least none that I knew about. I'm sure there were plenty of bulkier systems around, though.

I sat down at the computer and spun around in my chair, finally looking back at my computer. It was too late to start another project, for no other reason than I was exhausted from working nearly nonstop. I had five days left with the XCOM human tech tree, plenty of time to work with the plasma weapons, and two or three other smaller projects.

At this point, I had well and truly written off Psionics. I just didn't have the resources to tackle a whole room, not without doing a whole lot of stupid shit. Stupid shit that would probably get me killed. As much as I would have liked to have the ability to create Psionics in my back pocket, letting it go was my only realistic option.

For a moment, I considered pushing through my fatigue and starting on the plasma pistol, or at least the CAD design process for it, only to shake my head. I hadn't seen the outside of my apartment since going out with Jackie, and I was starting to feel the stress and tension coiling around my spine.

Before I could change my mind, I grabbed my keyfob and called Jackie, the only friend I had made here.

“Jackson! Good to hear from you, school, what's up?” The familiar accented voice asked once the call went through

“Not a whole lot. I just got finished with another project and wanted to see what you were up to,” I explained, leaning back in my chair. “I need to get out of the apartment.”

“Aye, sure thing! I was thinking about heading to the Coyote tonight, you want a ride?”

“On your cycle?” I asked skeptically.

“It's fine, it's a short trip,” He assured me. “I'll meet you out front in an hour.”

“Alright, fine. See you then.”

It took me a bit to get cleaned up, dressed, and ready to go, but I still ended up killing time by doing some online shopping. I set up an express delivery for the next morning before heading down to wait for Jackie. I was armed, of course, but rather than bring my rinky dink Unity, I strapped my mag pistol into a slightly modified holster. Its non-skeletonized casing made it seem just like any other pistol, though any aficionado would be able to tell it was custom. It was loaded with AA-tipped steel slugs that *should* be able to punch through any armor or subdermal I could reasonably run into at a dive bar.

I was also wearing my AA under armor, but honestly, I really only took that off when I showered.

I wasn't waiting long before Jackie showed up, his famous red Archer loud enough to hear him coming plenty far enough away. I winced when I saw how little room there would be for me. Not to mention the lack of a helmet.

What kind of idiot rides an organ donor generator without a helmet?

“You know what, I'm just gonna grab a cab,” I said as he motioned for me to hop on.

“Ahh, don't be a gallino, hop on,” He said. “I'll take it slow, promise.”

I let out a sigh, realizing that, apparently, I was that idiot before hopping on. I put my hands behind me, using the back lip of the seat to keep myself on. After a moment, he nodded, the motorcycle rumbling as he gave it gas. Thankfully, he was telling the truth and kept the ride nice and slow, though I assumed that was for his own safety as it was for mine.

When we finally arrived at the bar, we pulled around to a long alleyway. We both got off his bike and walked it much further in, leaving the well-loved and maintained motorcycle at the back of the building. He then led me inside through a back entrance.

The interior of the building looked pretty much like how I remembered it from the game. It wasn't the worst dive bar I'd ever been in, but it was definitely in the running.

As we stepped into the main open area, I could see maybe about twenty or so people, some at the bar, but most scattered around the various sitting and standing areas. Nearby, there were two people playing pool while a third leaned against a game cabinet and watched, a beer in his hand. One of the people playing spotted Jackie and smiled, giving him a small wave before focusing on their game. Jackie waved back but led me to the bar, plopping down on one of the seats.

"Pepe, we'll take a round when you got a sec," Jackie said, nodding to the bartender, who smiled and nodded back but continued talking to a different patron. "So, how's your work going? Anything interesting genio?"

"Just exploring some of the basics for now," I said vaguely. "Still pushing against that single fabricator and 3D printer."

"Well, invest in some more," He said. "I could find more people looking to buy some of this armor."

As he offered, he tapped his chest, the sound of tapping metal audible, though muffled by his shirt.

"That's the thing. The more I focus on making things to sell, the less time I have to develop new stuff," I explained.

Before I could continue, the bartender, who I vaguely remembered had a quest involving debt or something, dropped off two beers.

"Jackie, Mama Welles was looking for you," He said, before giving me a smile as he leaned on his side of the bar.

"She was? Where is she?" He responded, turning around in his stool to look around before stopping after looking up. "Never mind, Pepe, I see her. Put these on my tab and then start one for Jackson. I'm gonna go see what she wants."

Pepe nodded, and Jackie stood, patting my shoulder before walking out of sight. When I spot the bartender staring at me with a frown, I realize he is trying to connect with me. I reach out and pull out my keyfob to swipe.

"Sorry, all 'ganic," I explained with a shrug.

He nodded, looking surprised but generally indifferent, connecting my tab to my account before walking away to another customer. I sipped from my beer for a few minutes, letting the

tension from nonstop pushing myself slowly leave me. After a few minutes, Jackie returned, this time accompanied by his mom.

“So you are the man who got my mijo to wear some protection?” She asked, leaning against the bar on the other side of me. “It’s not as good as getting some subdermal, but it’s better than nothing. Gracias m’hijo.”

“It’s no problem, Ms. Welles. He helped me test it out and sell a few pairs of it,” I explained. “Small price to pay for good help.”

“And polite, too. Just call me Mama Welles. Everyone does. Mijo, don’t drink too much, si? I know you’ve got a job por la mañana” She said, giving me a smile and a nod before walking away.

“I won’t Mama, thank you,” Jackie responded, watching her leave before leaning heavily on the bar top with a long groan. “I need to move out.”

“You know, hearing that would break her heart,” Pepe said, having stopped by when Mama Welles did. “She loves having you around so much.”

“I would still be around,” He insisted. “But she is treating me like niño imaduro. I can’t even bring Misty around ‘cause she doesn’t approve of her. Likes my ex more.”

“She means well, pendejo,” Pepe reminded him, shaking his head. “Just remember what’s important.”

“Aye aye, I know,” He responded, waving his words away. “So, how’s the little one?”
We sat at the bar for a bit, chatting with Pepe, before eventually making our way to the pool table when the previous group of people left. After setting everything up, Jackie hit the break and ended up with solids.

“So, güey, what’s your next move?” He asked, leaning over the table. “We made some money, you know what you’re doing next?”

“I need to up my production abilities,” I explained, watching him smack the cue ball. “My fabricator is impressive, but it’s slow. I need a few more production tools, maybe another 3D printer, another fabricator...”

“Sounds expensive.”

“It is, especially when I’m spending a lot of money on materials too,” I explained.

With XCOM’s extreme reliance on AA and Elerium, I was forced to constantly invest more and more money into material production, making everything I made more and more

expensive. The warden armor cost more than every weapon I had made so far combined. It had nearly three times as much Alien Alloy as my AA under armor. At this point, I was really looking forward to having a tech tree that was built from normal materials.

“Well... there are other ways to get what you need,” He pointed out after missing his second shot. “Plenty of ways we could earn a little money on the side.”

“Like what?”

“We could always roll a few Scav dens,” He explained with a shrug. “Flatlining them is practically a public service, even includes a bounty usually. They won’t even care as long as we don’t hit too many.”

“‘We’?”

“Yeah, choom! I told you I had a good feeling about you, and we made a good bit of eddies already,” He said, slapping my shoulder. “I’m the muscle, you’re the brains, genio.”

“You realize I have no combat experience,” I pointed out. “Not even shard simulations.”

“Everyone’s gotta start somewhere,” He answered with a shrug. “I’ll keep you alive until you can keep yourself alive.”

For nearly a minute, I was silent, Jackie leaving me be so I could think. Morally, I had no issues killing Scavs. No level of ‘down on your luck’ or ‘I need to survive somehow’ could excuse openly murdering people and tearing out their cyberware to sell. I had no idea how I would react to actually killing someone, but from a distant perspective, I had no issue dealing out a little justice.

That said, it was definitely a step in a direction. Good, bad, dangerous, safe, I wasn’t entirely sure. But it was definitely a step, one I wouldn’t be able to take back. I let out a long sigh, before finally nodding.

“Okay. You find us a target, we can hit it,” I said. “Keep it small.... And give me a few days. I want to make you some armor and some guns for myself.”

“I don’t need armor,” he said, waving me off before leaning over the pool table and taking a shot. I didn’t comment that he had skipped my turn.

“Really? You want to go into combat wearing just the under armor?”

“That’s what I got it for, güey,” He responded with a smirk. “Can’t cover myself up to much, how will the ladies admire me?”

I shook my head, but ultimately gave up trying to convince him. He was an adult, and I couldn't force him to do anything he didn't want to. When he finally took the shot he had been lining up for a few minutes, I tapped up on his pool cue with mine, causing him to hit the cue ball wrong and completely miss. When he pointed at me, and I laughed.

"I seem to remember you having a girlfriend already," I reminded him, the annoyed expression he had morphing into a chagrined shrug. "And you skipped my turn."

We continued to play pool for another hour or so before I called a cab home, since Jackie had been drinking. I was barely comfortable on the back of his Archer when he was sober, never mind four beers and two shots later.

When I arrived home, I restocked the generators before dropping down into bed. The combination of relieved tension and just enough alcohol to feel a bit of a buzz put me to sleep almost immediately.

The next morning, I finally got to work on my plasma weapons, starting, as I had with every weapon level, with the pistol. Once the design was finished and the fabricator and 3D printer were running, I started working on the internals. First, I prepared the parts, starting with magnetic field generators, which were essentially a series of powerful electromagnets. Each generator would be directed and contained by Alien Alloy.

Essentially, the system used all of the accumulated knowledge from previous weapon systems, working them together in one final design. For starters, like in the laser weapons, an Elerium shard was agitated with high levels of energy. The shard would absorb and magnify this energy before releasing it as a plasma-esque energy pulse. Rather than converting that energy to charge a laser or a battery, it was directed and fired out as a high-energy beam. The beam was directed by a line of magnetic field generators, just like the mag rifle bullets. Technically, plasma was a bit of a misnomer, but it was close enough.

This system was simple in design, but complicated in execution. Everything had to be precise and reinforced to withstand the high stress and heat put out by the energy released by the Elerium shard. The amount of energy in play energy was a higher concentration than was used in any other weapon. Because of this, Alien Alloy made up a much more significant amount of the weapon frame. Essentially, everything but the outer protective covering, the sight, and the trigger system was Alien Alloy. That meant that not only was each of these weapons going to be more expensive, but I would also have to modify quite a few of the parts off the shelf parts, replacing significant portions with AA.

Thankfully, that also meant all the weapons would be very durable, even the sniper, which looked particularly fragile. In fact, the plasma weapons were overall much safer than the

laser and magnetic weapons since they held no charge save a small battery used to generate the agitation energy.

Plasma or Beam weapons, as they were sometimes called, were superior in every way, save cost, to all of the other weapons I had made so far. In fact, the only thing that slowed down the plasma weapons was the charge and energy release time of the Elerium, and a need to cool down after consistent shooting. There was a warning light system that would warn the shooter of overheating before the gun shut down to prevent a critical failure.

It took most of the morning and into the afternoon to finally finish my pistol. When I was done assembling the pieces, I spent a few minutes inspecting it for any issues before turning it on, the subtle whine of charging electronic coming from the grip. Satisfied that my new weapon functioned and armed with a much better understanding of how the pistol worked in much greater detail, I immediately dove into making the rifle.

Unfortunately, I didn't have nearly enough time to finish it that day, so once I was done putting together the CAD files, I set the fabricator up with a specific piece I would need quite a few of, a casing for the magnetic coil. The robotic arm would remove finished ones and insert new stock material as needed. Satisfied that a chunk of it would still get done, I ended up going to bed early.

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when I put the finishing touches on the plasma rifle. I turned it on to test it, and the weapon powered on with no issues, though it whined quite a bit louder than the pistol.

As I gained even more information about the plasma weapon system, I realized I could probably build the plasma lance without the actual mental blueprint. After a quick check of the tech tree in my mind, it showed that the same was true for the laser sniper and mag sniper. Either completing plasma weapons had somehow filled in a few blanks, or all of the sharpshooter variants fell under the concept of "more power=better." At the end of the day, it didn't matter. I could now focus on other things rather than rushing to cover all weapon types.

I had no interest in figuring out the shotgun variants. The rifles were more than adequate at close range, and having a weapon that stopped being effective past fifteen meters was beyond stupid.

When I was done mentally studying what I had learned and what it meant for my tech tree, I realized I had a new problem. This was all a lot of gear, gear I didn't want people to know I had. Eventually, I wanted a place to live and work that wasn't a heavily populated arcology. Unfortunately, for now, I needed a way to get my armor and weapons out of the building so I could use them without showing all of my neighbors what I had.

It only took me a minute to remember that in the game, Jackie had a garage where he kept his bike. The fact that he didn't live out of it was odd since, by the time he had died in the game, he was.

Rather than call him directly, I sent him a message, using my computer to contact his neural link to ask if he had a place I could store my stuff, someplace easier to use than my apartment. It didn't take long for him to respond back and confirm I could use his garage. He even offered to help me move it, saying he knew a guy he could borrow a van from. After a bit of planning, he agreed to come by in a few hours since it would take him a bit to borrow the vehicle.

I settled down on the couch, my brain more than a little fried from working nonstop for two days... again. Still, even if it was a bit rough on me, I realized I was *enjoying* myself immensely. I could feel my knowledge expanding with everything I made. It was a heady, worryingly enjoyable feeling. I was already looking forward to what kind of secret, other reality knowledge I would get from the next tech tree.

I sat alone for a while, contemplating what I could possibly get, before shaking off the daydream. I was unlikely to get something perfect on my second draw, especially considering that, if my current tech tree was any hint, the trees would be divided up beyond just one entire universe. I was not looking forward to getting something like the Zerg.

Besides, I didn't really want to hit the jackpot so soon. If I unlocked something outstanding, I would end up fighting my limited resources to make anything exceptional. The idea of getting something like Star Trek and not getting to the matter replicator, the holodeck, or the transporter, because I was trying to make a power generator strong enough to support those things, hurt my soul.

Not that I would ever use a transport on humans. Teleportation was fucked, and there was no way I was going to mess around with Prestiging myself in real life.

Eventually, Jackie showed up, knocking on my door. I opened it to reveal him standing there with an old shopping cart filled with broken-down boxes. He pushed it in past me, and I shut the door behind him.

"Really? Do you know a guy who deals in shopping carts, too?" I asked as he stopped at my workshop door.

"No pendejo, just paid a homeless guy out front a few eddies for it," He said with a shrug. "Sounded like you had a lot to move."

I snorted and nodded, tapping the door controls to my workshop and grabbing some of my armor.

“No mames! What the hell is that!” Jackie asked, his accent getting deeper for a moment. He continued in a string of Spanish that was too fast for me to even parse out.

“It’s power armor,” I said with a shrug.

“Are you serious? How did you get this! This is preem, better than preem!” He asked, taking the chest piece and examining it closely.

“I made it,” I explained with a shrug, Jackie’s growing tirade halting immediately, his eyes looking to mine. Whatever he was looking for, he seemed to find it.

“I might have underestimated you, compadre,” He finally said, eyes going back down to the armor. “I can see why you want to get this out of your apartment. Gonna catch a lot of eyes wearing this around.”

“Exactly. Would rather keep what I’m making separate from me for a while,” I explained, and he nodded in understanding. “At least until I can take care of myself,”

We spent a bit packing up the various armor pieces, really just using the boxes to cover up everything rather than actually boxing everything up. When I finally brought out the rifle and pistol, Jackie went wide again, though this time I stopped him from taking them from me.

“These are powered weapons, Jackie. No messing around with them,” I explained, waiting for him to nod in understanding before handing him the pistol.

“Dios Mio, Jackson, is this what I think it is?” He asked, turning the weapon over in his hand.

“That depends. Do you think it is a high-energy rifle?” I asked. “Cause that’s what it is.”

“You made a laser gun?”

“Yeah, it’s over there,” I answered, gesturing back into my workshop to the laser rifle I made a couple of days ago. “These aren’t laser weapons. It’s closer to plasma, but that’s not really right either.”

For a long moment, he looked down at the pistol in his hands, then at the rifle I was holding. After a full thirty seconds, he finally spoke again.

“... Jackson, you can’t use these,” He said, sounding very serious. “I’m no expert, but I know this kind of shit is a big deal. If you start shooting these off, you’re going to have a corpo strike team on you before you can blink.”

I cursed and chewed my lip, looking down at my rifle in a new light. I had considered the fact that these weapons would get some attention, but I had assumed there would be some leeway, that as long as I didn't use them completely in the open, any rumors would get dismissed. But Jackie was by and far the expert here, for obvious reasons. If he thought using them would be stupid, then using them would be stupid.

And after I spent so long getting them ready.

"Fuck... well, there goes my trump card," I said, shaking my head. "Alright, fine, I can deal. What do you think about my mag guns. Are they fine?"

"I... think they would be," Jackie said with a nod. "They are definitely unique, but they don't come off as being crazy high-tech corpo shit. How powerful is the rifle?"

"Mid to high range," I explained. "At least as good as that high-powered rifle you got for the armor testing."

"Really? That's pretty powerful... Still should be fine, though," He assured me.

We spent about ten minutes securing everything before I walked him out of the building and helped him load it into the back of a different vehicle, this one a van. When everything was all set, he slapped me on the shoulder and said he would be in touch before jumping into the van and driving away. I shook my head and made my way back up to my room, where I got the fabricator working on the more steel and AA rounds for the mag rifle and pistol, before getting the 3D printer going on the mags that would hold them. The only other thing I would need was a spring, which I had plenty of.

Barely a few hours passed when I got another call from Jackie.

"Hey Jackson, I just got word from a netrunner friend about a scav den. She found it scoping out another gig, so she only charged me a small favor," He explained. "Its a bit sooner than we planned, but you up for a scav hunt?"

I let out a long breath before nodding. Then I spoke up because I realized he couldn't actually see me.

"Yes, let's do it,"

"Great! I'll drop by and pick you up in an hour. We can go back to the garage and get you into that a more."

"Sounds good, Jackie. See you then."

I spent the free hour preparing my ammo, stuffing three rifle mags and two pistol mags into a large utility belt. The warden armor had magnetic latch points on the back for my rifle, but I needed a holster for my pistol. Luckily enough, I could remove the holster I was using on my empty belt and affix it to the utility belt. When I was done getting everything set, I threw it all into a bag and made my way down to the first floor.

I only spent a few minutes waiting before I spotted Jackie's borrowed van. By this time, the sun has set, and the city is going dark. There are still plenty of people walking around, but the normal bustle had faded. I made my way to the van and climbed into the passenger seat.

"What's in the bag?" Jackie asked as I shut the door and put the bag down at my feet.

"Ammo for my guns," I explained. "I only had ammo for the pistol, not the rifle, so I printed out some more."

"You can just print out more?" He asked, looking over at me with a surprised look. "Damn, now I'm really jealous. I don't usually fuck around with tech weapons, but they sound pretty good."

"Just wait till you see them in action."

We arrived at Jackie's garage, the larger man lifting up the door into the smaller space. His motorcycle was already there, and in the corner was my rifle, my pistol, and my armor. I double-checked that everything was in order before putting on my armor. When I finally felt the last piece connect into place, the artificial muscles flexing and shifting around my body, I shook myself a bit to settle the suit in place.

"Fucking hell, you look like a borg, school," He said, watching as I picked up my utility belt and fastened it around my waist, then slid my rifle over my back, letting the magnets grab it firmly. "You look like a fucking borg!"

"Well, I don't think I would be able to go toe to toe with one, but the armor does give me a bit of a boost," I responded. "Stronger, faster, tougher, the whole nine yards."

For a moment, Jackie stared at me before he started to laugh, full belly laughter that had him wiping an eye after he was done.

"And you were worried about getting into a fight? 'Borgs scare people, compadre! They might off themselves when you walk in!" He said, shaking his head with a smile. "C'mon pendejo, get in the van. We got scavs to kill."