

By an unspoken agreement, Jackie and I left the Coyote behind when we were done with our business with Padre. He said a quick goodbye to his mother before we headed out, making it all the way back to my truck. We climbed in, him in the passenger seat, before sitting there silently for a long moment.

“So, how badly did I get washed?” I asked, looking at my friend, who was sporting a shell-shocked look similar to mine.

“What? Washed? Well... If your goal is to stay out of the spotlight, choom, you did pretty well,” He assured me. “Plus, Padre was serious about looking after you. You just showed up at his door and offered him three bits of tech that he could make a whole lot of money off of. You're the golden goose, and Padre ain't the type to let that kind of asset get zeroed.”

“Right. Well... Either way, I'm glad I don't have to spend much time working on their stuff,” I said, already mentally planning out when I would make the vests. “The under armor is bad enough. How much did he pay you?”

“Eight thousand eddies,” The larger man said, still sounding shocked. “Thanks for that, choom. I wasn't gonna say anything, not like I did much.”

“You set up the meeting, so you deserve a cut,” I said with a shrug before starting the truck and pulling out of my parking spot. “I need someone helping me with stuff like that, Jackie. I'm a bit of a mess regarding networking or contacts.”

“Padre mentioned that. When he sent me my cut, he added a message,” He admitted, scratching his cheek. “Said I should stick by you, that you had potential. I'm thinking he was right.”

“I hope so,” I said with a chuckle. “Otherwise, I've got some serious delusions of grandeur.”

As we drove, Jackie directed me back to his garage and told me to wait once I pulled up alongside it. A few minutes later, he walked out with a small box of bears, sliding them into the back seat. He climbed back into the passenger seat and slapped the dash. I pulled away, and we headed off to my apartment, pulling into the parking structure and taking the elevator up to my room.

Once we were inside, I spent a few minutes starting up the AA smelter since I knew I would need a bunch more metal. I had enough for two more AA undersuits, but since I still wanted to redesign my mag weapons and work on a few more things, it was better to get everything working now. When I left my workshop Jackie was waiting, handing me an opened beer, holding out his own to clack together in cheers.

“For our first big sale,” He said, taking a long pull from the oversized bottle.

I took a much smaller sip, doing my best not to wince slightly. It wasn't bad tasting, not really. It tasted like someone had set out to take something that wasn't beer and make it taste as much like beer as they possibly could. It was obviously not beer, but the fact that they got it so

close was actually more worrying than anything. Before I could sit down on the couch, Jackie spotted the new sniper rifle, his eyes lighting up.

“Jesus Christ, Jay, another one?” He asked, stopping closer to pick up the rifle. “A sniper rifle?”

“Yeah, designed it the other day,” I answered with a shrug. “I wanted to use what I learned when I made the normal rifle to make something heavier hitting and with longer range.”

“This thing hits harder than your rifle?” He asked, snorting and shaking his head as he examined the weapon. “Damn Jay...”

“I’m probably going to be redesigning my rifle and pistol over the next few days as well,” I explained with a shrug. I’ve learned a bit since I made them, so I want to finish off the design.”

“What about your plasma guns?” He asked, putting down the rifle and looking around the room for them.

“In the workshop. I’m probably gonna take apart the rifle for materials,” I responded, taking another sip of my “beer.” “I want to leave the pistol in case of emergencies.”

“Hell of a backup weapon,” He said, shaking his head as he made his way over to the couch. As he sat down, he looked around, nodding in appreciation. “You know, this isn’t a bad place here. You even got burritos on demand,” he said.

“They are free, too,” I said, getting a wide-eyed look in return.

“No... you didn’t.”

He almost jumped up from the couch, heading over to the food dispenser built into the wall. If ever I needed proof this was a cyberpunk hell world, being able to buy food in my own home from a vending machine, was it.

“Press and hold the XXL for three seconds, then quickly press which one you want,” I explained. “Just get one for each of us. Too many at once, and the system warning will trip.”

He nodded and followed my directions, the three-second press activating a subroutine that Spot and I had inserted while testing out the G-Hackers, making the next burrito free. I would probably take it down in a few days to keep from getting too much attention, but it would be fine for now.

Jackie threw me my burrito before plopping down onto the couch and digging in. He was clearly enjoying it, and I won’t lie, the fact that it was free did make it almost not horrible.

Everything tasted better when it was free, even if it wasn't enough to save it. When we were done eating, Jackie brought up my guns again.

"So, you're gonna redesign the rifle and pistol... You plan on getting some practice with them?"

"I probably should," I admit with a wince, rubbing it off of my face. "Feel like making a trip to the Badlands?"

"What about Padres order?" Jackie asked, leaning back and relaxing on the large couch.

"I'll get most of the metal cut out tonight," I explained. "Should have time to put two together tomorrow morning. We could go out... the next afternoon? Should have time to work everything out by then."

"So much for taking time off," He responded. "But alright, we can go shooting then."

"Gotta work hard to make it, Jackie," I pointed out. "But honestly, the reason I'm so crammed is that I'm still in my build-up phase. Kind of like... Getting used to new cyberware. Everything is twice as hard and takes twice as long because you're learning every step, working out the kinks, and seeing how your setup works. Once everything settles down a bit, things shouldn't take nearly as long. The fabricator will help with that."

"I'll take your word for it, choomb," Jackie said, standing to grab another beer. "Refill?"
"Nah, not yet," I responded, nursing my beer a bit more.

He sat down on the couch, using the corner of a lighter to pop the top off of his beer. He took a second to line up his throw, only to miss the basket by a few inches. As the cap skipped off the side of the bin and rolled along the floor, it came to rest three or four feet from the trash. Before he could get up to grab it, Spot lifted off from where he was docked by the alcove of my bed, flew across the room, and hovered above the cap.

"What the-!"

Jackie jumped a bit, his hand dropping down to his hip, where he kept his pistol. He stopped just before drawing it as Spot lifted off with the cap in his tiny manipulators. After watching the small drone drop the bottlecap into the trash, Jackie turned to look at me.

"What the hell is that?" He asked, pointing at Spot, who had floated back to its dock area. "I've never seen a drone like that!"

"It's a Gremlin," I explained with a smirk. "I call him Spot. And you've never seen anything like that before because it flies using something I invented."

"You... Dammit, Padre was definitely right," Jackie said, shaking his head, taking a deep drink of his beer. "How the hell does it fly?"

"Ionized air and very powerful electromagnetic fields," I explained. "Totally new idea as far as I know."

"Thats... Holy hell... I really shouldn't be surprised at this point..."

"I don't know, kinda like blowing your mind every time you come into the apartment."

The large man pulled a pillow off of the couch beside him and threw it at me, splashing my beer on me. I cursed him out as he laughed, and after a moment, I joined him.

We drank and talked for another few hours until the big guy fell asleep on my couch, snoring like a freight train. Rather than try and sleep quite yet, I headed to my workshop. The first new batch of AA was done, so I immediately removed the metal plates, which were still hot, and started another batch. When that was done, I got the fabricator going, making sure it had plenty of materials to do its work. It wouldn't get the plates done since that was obviously a different shape, but the scales for the first two pairs of AA underarmors would be done by the time I woke up. When I was done setting that up, I spent a few minutes transferring and labeling my designs for the TEMP and the G-hack, fitting them onto a shard.

I did my nightly routine and started the Elerium generator before climbing into my bed, falling asleep pretty easily despite the sound of a small jet engine coming from my couch.

The next morning, Jackie and I both woke up to the sound of someone pounding on my door. I was up and out of bed before I knew what was happening, and Jackie sleepily drew his pistol, looking around a bit confused.

"You good?" I asked, making my way to the door, Jackie nodding as he lowered his weapon, though he didn't holster it quite yet.

I opened the door to see a man dressed in casual clothes, probably a few years younger than me. Two other people stood a bit further back, and all three of them had several bits of visible cyberware.

"Got something for Jackson?" He said, nodding to a large box sitting on a wheeled trolley. "From Padre."

I nodded, and while Jackie stood idly watching the door, I went into my workshop, grabbed the shard, and slid it into a small container before exiting and handing it to the man. Jackie and I then used the trolley to move the fabricator into my workshop. It fit nicely next to the AA smelter. I could tell that if I kept expanding, I would be running into some space issues

soon if I wanted to keep most of my work stuff in my workshop. It wasn't quite a problem yet, but it was only a matter of time before it was. Once I was done moving everything, I thanked the delivery guy with a tip before he transferred over a large chunk of eddies, the second half of my payment.

Fifty thousand eddies, all for a few day's work. I now had enough money to fund my work for a while or to increase my capabilities significantly. But first, I needed to complete Padre's order.

Jackie ended up leaving not long after the delivery, saying he needed to head back home so he could get ready for a date. I reminded him that we would be meeting up in a few days to head out to the Badlands for some target practice as he left.

Once my friend was gone, I got to work. I now had quite a few things to take care of, and while I wasn't under such a heavy weight since there was no ticking clock until I lost access to something, I still wanted to get everything done. My first task was surprise, surprise, a rather large shopping spree online. I knew by now I must be drawing some attention from my neighbors with how much stuff I was buying, but I was really hoping that Night City's systemic indifference towards anything that didn't benefit someone would keep anyone from doing anything stupid.

I was just ordering a second arm to help automate the second fabricator when I realized something. My network, which was what air-gapped from any other network, was connecting to the internet. At first, I panicked a bit, thinking that I had actually been open to cyber-attacks and netrunners this whole time. But the closer I looked at the system, the more my panic faded into confusion. By every metric that I could see, including several scans with some of my tools, my computer was not connected to the net. Yet I was using it to do research and order materials.

After confirming for the third time that I was still very much air-gapped, with no connection to the net, I finally gave up. The only explanation I could think of was that the entities had been even more helpful than I had originally thought when setting up my new digs. Of course, my first thought after coming to that conclusion was if it would protect me if I used my computer to hack something risky. Thankfully, the entities also improved my intelligence since I was able to immediately realize that risking the perfect internal security because I wanted to take advantage of it was beyond stupid.

With my momentary distraction settled for now, I turned to focus on my tasks. First, I set up Spot to review the new fabricators' programming, cleaning it of any back doors or suspicious junk. I would check his work, but since we had already done this for the circuit board printer, I was confident he could do it on his own.

With shopping and Spot all set, I started the original fabricator up to fashion out the plates of the under armor, letting it work as I focused on getting the scales attached. By the time I finished the first two sets of underarmor, the materials to make the third and final one were

also done. It was mentally grueling, but I managed to finish the order at around dinner time. Jackie had volunteered to transport the finished product, so I called him up. He didn't have much time to chat, but he stuck around long enough for me to treat him to dinner. I ended up getting some pizza delivered from one of the businesses built into the megabuilding.

When we finished, Jackie headed out with a duffel bag, and I returned to my workshop. I wanted to give redesigning my mag weapons a shot before I went to bed. I was pretty sure that the sniper rifle I had designed, between the ammo and the buff of base parts, was at least slightly superior to the XCOM version. I didn't think it was close to the level of the plasma lance, but better was always better, even if it's only slightly.

As I was digitally disassembling the design and reworking it into something less slapdash and more professional, I considered what the original rifle was built for. [My first design](#) attempt looked and would have functioned more like a DMR than an assault rifle. It was too long to be used reliably indoors, especially in high-stress combat. So, I shortened the stock and cut off two of the mag coils from the barrel, reducing the length by a full fifth. It knocked down the power a bit, but the sniper was all I needed for long-range. Besides, despite the reduction, it was still slightly more powerful than the original rifle. The best part of the redesign was the accuracy increase I would get from redesigning the ammo, the increase in magazine size, and the use of two compact Elerium nodes instead of the previous charging system.

Or at least it would be when I finished building it, which I did the following morning, having spent the night waking up periodically to switch out the fabricator jobs. With both of them running, it meant that by the time I woke up and finished modifying the premade pieces, all of the metal, polymer, and AA parts were complete. I also spent some time between installing the feeder arm to the second fabricator as well as setting up a second 3D printer that I had bought. At this point, I had seriously ramped up my production capability.

At around noon, I took a break, heading out of the megabuilding to do some shopping on my own. My primary destination was the nearest gunshop. I needed to buy a scope for the sniper rifle and sights for my rifle and pistol. After looking around a bit, I eventually settled for a simple hologram sight for the pistol and a red dot for the rifle. I was tempted to splurge a bit and get something really high quality, but by cyberpunk standards, my guns were pretty dumb, meaning they had no sensors or data to connect to or send to the telemetry of the more high-end scopes and sights.

Once I had my intended purchases, I headed to a few different shops, purchasing a few bags of materials, mostly stuff to refill the AA smelter and Elerium generator since I knew I would be needing more of that. Once it was all loaded up the back seat of my truck I headed home, lugging it up to my apartment after I parked.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent attaching the scopes to my rifle and sniper rifle before starting on the pistol. By comparison to the other redesigns, the [pistol's](#) was relatively easy, as I wasn't really trying to do anything special. Like the other redesigns,

using Elerium nodes, only one this time, saved a significant amount of room, which I put to use by increasing the number of mag coils. Beyond that, I really just streamlined everything, focusing on magazine size and power since even if I focused everything on accuracy, there was only so much you could do for a pistol. Better to keep it as a backup that I *know* will put down any motherfucker who tried to get close.

Between my improved production and my advanced knowledge of the systems, I managed to make the pistol in record time. I was stocking up on ammo and mags when Jackie let me know he was on his way. I told him to park in the garage and that I would meet him down there so we could take the truck.

As we drove out of the city and into the Badlands, me in the driver's seat and Jackie sitting shotgun, he reached out and turned off the radio, which was already on low.

"So, Jay, I know most of that scratch is for supplies and stuff... But maybe you should consider getting chipped," He suggested, leaning back into his seat.

I clicked my teeth, already shaking my head and preparing to shut him down when he held up his hands.

"Relax, pendejo, I know the idea doesn't exactly appeal to you, but there is plenty of meatware and simple stuff that doesn't have much of an impact on you," He explained. "I got a friend, my ripperdoc. He's a great guy, and I can introduce you. He says that there is a whole list of bioware and cyberware you can get that won't interfere with your day-to-day."

"Then what's the point?" I asked, internally wincing at my petulant response.

"They'll keep you from getting zeroed, gonk!" Jackie said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "He said that there is a whole list of cyberware that doesn't have any shit that can be hacked. You're not the first person to be paranoid about netrunners and quickhackers, Jay."

I glanced over at my choom, who was looking at me with a "don't be stupid" look. I could tell he was just repeating some of the stuff he was saying, but I could also tell he was genuinely worried. I focused back on the road, pulling off the asphalt onto a dirty path, the same one we had pulled down before when we were testing the AA armor.

"You understand how it weirds me out, right?" I asked, stopping the truck under the same wind turbine shadow.

"I know choom, I get it. But I asked about it, and Vik assured me there would be something for you, though Bioware is on the rare, more expensive side," He explained as we both exited the truck.

We walked around to the back of the large vehicle, meeting behind the truck bed. As I unlatched and pulled down the tailgate, Jackie continued.

“Look, all I’m saying is you should go in and talk to the Doc. He knows his stuff, and he won’t try and push you any chrome you don’t need,” He explained. When he caught the side-eyed look I was sending him, he shook his head. “I’m not pushing chrome on you, Jay. I’m trying to keep you from being flatlined by a stray. I got bone and muscle lacing done two years ago, and I haven’t regretted it for a second. I got some plates and subdermals on my head, too, to keep from being popped by some punk with a spitball. None of that can get hacked, and it could save your life, certainly saved mine a few times.”

I stopped, leaning on the tailgate, letting out a long breath as I looked into the truck bed. I could see my guns, plus three boxes of ammo stuffed into a couple of plastic boxes, but that wasn’t what I was focused on. I couldn’t argue that Jackie wasn’t right. I had done my own research since I first landed here, and I knew the kind of mods he was talking about. In all honesty, the only thing stopping me from getting some of the less noticeable but still useful mods was my own hang-ups and the fact that I might be able to make something better eventually.

But I needed to get there first, so I was only hurting myself.

“Alright, I will go talk to your ripper,” I said, reaching forward and dragging the boxes to the tailgate. “But! You have to let me build you some armor. Something that you have to actually wear when you go out on gigs.”

Now it was Jackie’s turn to click his teeth, letting out an aggrieved wounded sound, shaking his head.

“The same argument goes right back at you, choom,” I pointed out. “I can make you something basic, something that looks good and will keep your vitals safe.”

“Fine, fine. I’m not wearing a full like your Alloy suit, but if you make it look good...”

“Yeah, yeah, I can make it look good.”

“Gracias chico, looking good has its own uses,” Jackie pointed out. You saw how the clean-up crew reacted to you looking like a borg. You’d be surprised just what you can get by looking lethal or by being a harmless guy from Heywood with soulful eyes.”

He gave me a wide-eyed, innocent look like he was confident in himself but still naive about the ways of the world. I’m pretty sure half of it was his optics, but I also had to admit that if I didn’t know him already, it would have been at least partially effective. I scoffed and tossed him a magazine for the new mag rifle before reaching into one of the boxes and lifting out the actual rifle. Jackie let out a long whistle, accepting the weapon from me.

“Choom... I gotta admit, that first rifle was a bit... well it looked like it was made custom,” He said politely. “This... It looks like it should still be hot from the assembly line. This is preem shit.”

I chuckled and nodded in agreement. Even after replacing the skeletonized shell with something more substantial, the base mag weapons looked like someone had made them in a garage, a symptom of the pressure they were under when they designed them. With as many threats as they were facing, who cared what it looked like, as long as they worked.

“I know. That's why I wanted to redesign them so badly,” I said, pulling out the pistol, which really got Jackie's attention. “I think they came out pretty good.”

We spent a few minutes setting up a few handmade targets, just a few broken down corrugated plastic boxes with circles drawn on them, set up along and hung in some of the many cactuses growing in the Badlands. When our impromptu range was set up, I hopped up on the truck tailgate and gestured to Jackie, who was now holding the pistol.

“Go ahead, Jackie, give it a whirl.”

He nodded, turning to the targets and raising the weapon, firing it off with no hesitation, first in a single shot, then in a three-round burst that was so fast the sonic booms coming off the bullets blended together. Jackie was suitably impressed, firing a few more times before turning back to me, holding out the pistol so I could try.

“Not bad, Jay. The three-round burst is hard to control, but damn, I could feel it packs a punch,” He said, making me smirk as I slid off the truck bed and took the pistol back from him.

I aimed down the holo reticule, taking a moment to adjust my stance. In all honesty, I didn't know that much about shooting, save for some range time when I was a bit younger and still in my old world.

I fired the pistol, liking the feel of the single shot but ultimately agreeing that the triple shot for a pistol was a lot to control. What I liked even more, though, was the complete lack of firing sound. Previously, the original mag guns made a very distinct sound as the Elirium charging system cycled and fired, sounding more like an energy weapon than the whip cracking of an actual mag weapon. Now, however, since I ditched the old charge system for Elerium nodes, that sound is gone, leaving only the loud woosh and crack that accompanied a projectile breaking the sound barrier.

With a smirk, I adjusted my grip on the pistol, holding it in my left hand and using my right to adjust a small lever along one side. With a simple shift, I cut the power significantly, slowing down the projectile. After a few practice shots, I scaled the power level perfectly so the projectile didn't break the sound barrier. It was far from silent. The projectile still made a

whipping noise that echoed a bit across the empty desert, but it was remarkably quieter than a normal gun with a silencer.

I smirked at Jackie's dazed look before dropping the pistol's mag, checking to see how many more rounds I had in it before sliding it back into place and mag dumping the rest. At the lower power settings, the triple tap was much more manageable, to the point that I could keep all three shots on the nearest target, nearly fifteen meters away. When I was done, I smirked and passed the pistol back to Jackie.

"That worked pretty well," I said, taking the rifle off the tailgate and giving it a quick look over. "C'mon, grab the sniper, I really want to put these things through their paces."