

We quickly found out that, with my armor on, I was just slightly too big for the passenger seat of the large van. Jackie joked about me running alongside him as he drove, but I just climbed into the back. I was worried I would be taking up room for the loot, but he assured me he had it covered. The van was just in case we found something either of us wanted to keep.

I climbed into the back and sat down against the outside wall of the vehicle. Thankfully, it was relatively clean.

“So, where is the den?” I asked as I shut the van's back doors and sat down. “Nowhere near here, I hope?”

“Ah no, never stir up shit where you eat and sleep, genio,” Jacke responded as if he was giving sage advice. “Plus, I don't want to upset the balance between Valentinos and the scavs. Heywoods got enough trouble without mixing in agitated scavs in.”

“Thought you said they won't care if we only hit a few?”

“I mean, they will notice, choom, but they aren't gonna come hunt oy down,” He explained. “Might be agitated for a few days. They may work vaguely together, but trust me, scavs don't care about anything but themselves and their profit. Long as we don't move deep into their org and start cutting into their eddies, they won't really care.”

I nodded in understanding before busying myself, checking over my weapons for the third time, making sure they were fully loaded and charged, ready for combat. After that, I just focused on keeping my breathing steady and calm. Luckily, the helmet of the warden armor was full of fans and cooling systems, keeping me surprisingly comfortable, considering it was a fully military design.

“Ey, choom, we're here. You ready to rock?” Jackie asked, startling me from the slight meditative state I managed to sink myself into.

“Yeah, I'm ready.”

He nodded at my simple response, watching as I climbed out the back of the van, standing tall, feeling the musculature of the suit work around me. I had to admit, it was hard to not feel confident wearing so much armor. I scanned the area, with the armor giving me just enough of a height boost to look over the van.

Jackie climbed out of the driver's seat and started making his way to one of the many buildings along the street. It was heavily graffitied, and its doors were nearly hidden by several large mounds of trash. I took a moment to mentally thank Lily Shen that the original warden armor had built-in air filters before following after my new friend.

“According to T-bug, there shouldn't be more than ten of them here,” Jackie said, leading the way into the first door. “The first floor is all garages, but we should clear it first. Just follow my lead... What should I call you?”

“Uh... what do you mean?”

“I gotta call you something if I can't call you by your name,” He pointed out as he stopped, his hand on a solid inner door just a few feet from the main entrance. “How about Alloy? You said your stuff is made of a special alloy, right?”

“It is... Really, though? Alloy?”

“Trust me, choom, borgs love giving themselves names like that. Just look at Adam Smasher. You think his mama named him that?”

“I... Well, it will do for now, I guess,” I said with a shrug, looking over my shoulder at the door we had just come through. “Should I call you something else?”

“Nah, Just Jackie. I'm not trying to be someone else,” He pointed out with a grin before pulling out a single pistol, checking its magazine, and giving me a nod. “Alright, Alloy, let's do this.”

I nodded and pulled my rifle off of my back, the electromagnets keeping it in place fighting me for a second before releasing the weapon. I flicked the high-tech weapon on, smirking as the whine of the charging capacitors filled the small entry room. I set the weapon to fire with a three-round burst before giving Jackie the thumbs up.

“I'm ready, lead us in,”

Jackie nodded and pushed the door inward with his shoulder, his pistol held out and ready as we walked in. I couldn't help but notice that while the large man clearly had experience, he also just walked into the room, crossing a clear, open space. Once he had crossed a three-meter clearing, he finally took cover behind the side of a large truck. Clearly, while Jackie had more experience than me, both with the people we were fighting and with violence as a whole, he was far from a strategic genius.

Still, I would rather have him here than anyone else I could think of, to be honest.

It just meant that I would need to take over V's job of being the brains when I got more experience under my belt. At least, I would if we continued to work together like this.

As I followed after him, I tried to scan around as much of the first floor as I could. Most of the space was taken up by three large parking spots, with two rows of storage along the wall

behind them and three garage doors in front. Two of the parking spots were taken, with the large truck Jackie was taking cover behind, and a much smaller car on the opposite side of the room. The spot between them was filled with a cargo crate, sealed with a sturdy-looking lock. Across the building, a single set of stairs disappeared upwards, leading to the second floor.

As I looked around, I could see dozens of clues as to what kind of place this was. Blood spatter on the ground and along the back of the vehicle we were now hiding behind, and random personal belongings were thrown into a corner like trash. There was even more blood leading from the back of the car to the stairs.

“Alright, looks like ther-”

Jackie cut himself off and brought his gun up as someone came out from between two rows of the shelves that ran along the back of the room. The scavenger was rolling his one organic shoulder, a dark blue cyberware arm scratching his side as he yawned, almost as if he had just woken up. I could see glowing implants on either side of his face, and blood splattered along his shirt and pants. His eyes went wide when he spotted me, locking on and hardly even noticing my partner.

It seemed like Jackie was right. Borgs really do freak people out.

Seeing as though neither Jackie nor I had any silent options, something that I was already mentally noting to fix, I raised my rifle and squeezed the trigger. The sound of my weapon charging and launching three rounds of solid metal slugs broke through the relative silence of the garage. Jackie raises his pistol as well, firing twice.

Both of Jackie's much more experienced shots hit the scav, center of mass with a surprisingly tight grouping, especially considering how startled he was. Two of my shots went wide, but the single shot that did connect blew the man's organic arm clean off. Blood splattered against the floor, shelving, and even the low ceiling while the man dropped to the ground, already stone-cold dead.

“Put a madre ay güey! What the hell are you shooting out of that thing?” Jackie yelled before noticing the commotion our gunfire had generated upstairs. “Go around that way, take cover behind the crate so we don't get sidelined!”

Jackie pointed down and around the car he was hiding behind, and since his request made sense, I rushed around and managed to just make it into cover before a burst of bullets sparked off the floor behind me, chipping the concrete.

Shouting in Russian echoed from the stairs, and I peered around the corner, spotting three people of various fits and levels of augmentation making their way down the stairs. I pulled the trigger on my rifle twice, sending two bursts of AA tipped steel their way. Every single shot went wide, slamming into the stairs, wall, and door behind them, throwing up shrapnel but

ultimately not harming anyone. I cursed, pulling back as all three of them focused on me, firing a barrage of automatic weapons fire that peppered the cargo container I was hiding behind. A few even slammed into my armor, denting several plates and rattling my left shoulder. Much of the impact was bled off from the artificial muscle layer, but at least one of them felt like getting slapped with a bat.

I cursed, rolling my shoulder despite the already spreading soreness, before hearing Jackie return fire, using the distraction I had made to take out one of the people firing at me. Cursing myself for not practicing with my mag rifle, I stepped out of cover the second there was a lull in the incoming bullets. I raised my rifle as the two remaining scavengers looked at me in shock, seemingly just realizing what they were shooting at before they opened up.

My first burst slammed into the highest scab, obliterating the woman's gun and removing her left hand before putting her out of her misery by blowing a fist-sized chunk where her heart was supposed to be. I kept pulling the trigger, blowing chunks out of the stairs until I finally managed to control my aim to stitch three shots across a man with two replaced arms and glowing blue eyes. He collapsed into a bloody mess, like a broken puppet with its strings cut.

"You good?" I called out to Jackie as I pressed the mag release on the side of my rifle. The mostly empty mag dropped to the floor before I slid a new one into place.

"Yeah, I'm good," Jackie shouted back, making his way to the stairs between the shelving and the parking bays. "You got a fucking cannon, choom. Now I wanna know what your other toys do."

"Me too. I think I might have been underestimating them," I admitted.

In truth, I was relatively certain the extra power was a combination of me comparing the weapon's effectiveness against more armored targets and that I had made the mag weapons out of parts that were actually better than what XCOM had on hand. The mag coils, capacitors, and several other bits rated far above what XCOM used. I had restricted a lot of those parts and done quite a bit of extra math and programming to make sure it all still worked.

Looking at what the rifle was now doing, I might have miscalculated. Still, I couldn't have been too far off, as it had counted as close enough to the original design to confirm its creation for the tech tree. I was still learning how finicky that process really was, but it still seemed like a decent confirmation that this rifle wasn't that different from the original. I-

"Eh, focus up, Alloy, we got more to deal with," Jackie called out, waving me closer. "There are probably more upstairs, I will-"

"No, you're not wearing any armor, I'm going first," I said easily, surprising myself as much as I surprised Jackie. When he gave me a look, I just shrugged. "Next time, wear armor if you want to be the heavy."

“Fine, whatever, you can go first,” He said, gesturing up the stairs. “Make it fast, though!”

I nodded, and after checking my gun one final time, I charged up the stairs. I shift my body as I move and slam my shoulder into the frame, crumpling the door around the lock area as it struggled to hold me back before finally bursting open, all in a split second. Part of me wanted to leap into the room in a combat role, but luckily, I had enough sense not to embarrass myself. I didn't even know how to do a combat roll normally, never mind while actively enhanced.

I was starting to realize I may have really jumped the gun on this.

As I burst into the room, I also realized I wasn't the only one going for the door. My impact had knocked someone back, a leather jacket-clad man with a submachine gun held in one hand, the weapon off target from the impact. Rather than try and shoot him, I just kept running, shoulder lowered, until I slammed into him as well. I crashed into him with enough force to drive him back, partially lift him up, and slam him into a concrete wall. I could feel his chest give in, sounding like bending metal rather than cracking bone, which told me he had some sort of bone replacement.

Despite the impact, he was still moving, raising his weapon just enough to aim it at my legs, pulling the trigger, and dumping his mag into my thigh and waist. None of the bullets made it through, but it still felt like dozens of light punches to my leg.

With a curse, I slammed my fist into his mechanical shoulder, the one holding the gun, feeling the cyberware there buckle under the blow. I hammered it again and again until it was a sparking mangled mess, the limb hung limply. Finally, I stepped back, brought my rifle back up, and wasted a three-round burst to finish him off.

Needed to add a knife to my list of things to make.

By now, Jackie was at the door, taking cover against the frame. I turned around slightly to look for cover as well, only to feel something slam into my side hard enough to spin me around. I could feel a deep dent in my armor on my right side, deep enough that it was already restricting my movement. Jackie popped out of cover and fired his pistol, giving me time to recover and take cover. As I moved, I saw a scav wielding a double-barrel shotgun drop his weapon and slump to the ground. He must have been shooting slugs, judging from how much damage it did.

“You good?” Jackie asked as we stepped further into the first room on the second floor.

“Yeah, armor stopped it...” I said, reaching down to check the large dent before adding. “Barely.”

Jackie didn't have time to comment because a pair of scavengers burst out of a nearby door, screaming in Russian, immediately opening fire. I saw Jackie take a pair of shots to the chest before I raised my rifle and opened fire. The first three rounds ruined a woman with some sort of projection implant on her face, punching through her chest, stomach, and neck. The second burst missed the second person completely, letting him fire his pistol at me over and over. Finally, I managed to pull my shots tight enough to punch two rounds through his shoulder and chest.

Through all of that, I was shot several times, all of them leaving only streaks of lead and copper on my armor. It seemed my armor was more than enough to handle smaller rounds.

With the current threats terminated, I turned to check on Jackie, only to find him already standing, rubbing his chest. I could see holes in his jacket and shirt, as well as the armor underneath.

"Maldita Perra!... Looks like your armor works, amigo," He said with a pained grunt, shaking it off and reloading his pistol. "The plate took it easy, but the scales sting like hell!"

"Would hurt a lot less if you were wearing some armor," I pointed out in a sing-song voice, getting a slightly annoyed look in return. "I can't force you, but I can definitely pester you about it."

He chuckled and shook his head before motioning to go around a set of chests and boxes in the center of the room. Now that we weren't being shot at, I could better appreciate our surroundings. The room was simple enough, with a couch along one wall, a desk and computer nearby, with containers, shelves, and other stuff around the room. So far, save the occasional dry bloodstain, it looked pretty ordinary.

We crossed the room on opposite sides, eventually converging on the last door in the room. I couldn't be sure, but judging from how big the building had looked from the outside and how the garage had looked, there was only really enough space for a medium-sized room on the other side. As we approached it, I caught Jack's eye, who gestured for me to go ahead.

"By all means, compadre, do your thing," He said.

I nodded and lined up with the door, spartan kicking it just next to the lock. The door, which wasn't the most impressive-looking fixture, caved in immediately, slamming open with a surprising amount of force. The sound of some random song, with way too much base and set way too loud, filled the room, getting even louder as I moved forward. I stepped into the new room to find a scav cowering in the corner, trembling with a Unity in his hand. His apron was covered in blood, and only a few feet away was a DIY operating table, complete with a "patient." Between the amount of blood collecting on the table and the pale blue tinge to a lot of "patients" skin, it was obvious that they were dead.

As I stepped into the room, the last scan fired at me, their Unity going off as quickly as they could pull the trigger. More than half the shots didn't even get close to me, hitting the concrete walls, cabinets, and crates stacked around me. The few bullets that did impact my armor barely did anything but cosmetically mark it.

When the scavs gun clicked empty, I took aim with my rifle, flipped it to semi-auto, and damn near blew their head off.

After a moment, I looked around and used another shot to scatter chunks of the radio all over the right side of the room.

"You good?" Jackie asked, coming in from behind, noticing that I had obliterated the radio. "Not a fan of music, Alloy?"

"Just couldn't hear if we were alone," I responded, stepping further into the room, checking around the corners and behind a few crates. "I think we are clear."

"Yeah, I think so too...." Jackie said, watching me closely. "You feel okay? You said this was your first gunfight..."

I took a moment to collect myself, taking a deep breath and letting it out. My adrenaline, which had been pounding in my ears, was slowly fading into the background, leaving me feeling drained and uncomfortable. I looked over at the corner of the room, where the scat lay dead, blood and brains splattered against the wall. I felt... fine. And even more, the fact that I felt nothing didn't phase me either. These lunatic's murdered and killed people, and I wasn't going to waste perfectly good guilt and emotional trauma on them.

Especially considering it was likely that I would have better reasons to feel guilt or be traumatized eventually.

"Yeah, I'm good," I responded. "Like you said, these guys are scum. Killing them is practically a public service."

"Aye, it is. Good to see you can hack it."

"So, what happens next? We fill up the van or..."

"No, I got some cleaners coming, just gotta give them a call," He explained, his eyes already glowing. "They come in, strip a place of anything useful, and give you a cut of the profits. Even help you take out any chrome you might want from people you kill."

"I... I really shouldn't be surprised something like that exists in Night City," I said, shaking my head. "What's the cost?"

“Five thousand eddies or twenty percent, whichever is higher,” He explained.

“... I don't know enough to know if that's fair or not,” I said after a pause, Jackie snorting at my admission.

“It's steep, but it's to keep punk gonks from calling them in for dumb shit,” He explained, waving away my concern. “But for things like this... it's worth it. As long as you're not working for a fixer, they tend to dislike people messing with their work.”

I nodded, and after another run-through of the second floor, we made our way back down to the first, then outside. Jackie stayed out front, just inside the first door, to wait for the cleanup crew while I did a quick sweep around the building. I saw some signs of a homeless camp and a dumpster that smelled a bit too much like rotting meat for it to be anything other than where the scavs threw their “waste.” Other than that, there wasn't anything worth noting. When I was done, I quickly joined Jackie back at the front.

“We should claim one of the vehicles,” I said once we settled in to wait. “Whichever is in better condition.”

“Would be useful,” The usually bigger man agreed with a nod. “But I don't have anywhere to store it without coughing up a chunk of eddies.”

“I can keep it at the H2 parking garage,” I explained. “Only five hundred eddies a month.”

“Good deal, I'm running out of favors for cars and rides.”

I chuckled, though I kept my eye on the road that marked the front entrance. The likelihood that the scavs had anyone coming to avenge them was small, but it could still happen. Much more likely was someone coming to claim their loot, but even that was unlikely, according to Jackie.

After about twenty minutes of waiting, the cleanup crew arrived. It was a team of five people, all hopping out of two vans and a truck. They seemed calm and collected, armed and relatively professional, until they spotted me. Immediately, three of them reached for their weapons, only for Jackie to step into view and hold his hands out. He spoke in rapid-fire Spanish, and after a minute of back and forth, they slowly pulled their hands away from their weapons.

As they moved into the building, they still looked at me warily until they were inside.

“What did you say?” I asked once they were all inside, and we were out front, still keeping watch.

“What? Oh, right, no translator. I said you were a friend of mine, and we were working together,” He explained. “I told you borgs make people nervous.”

“And you said I was a borg?”

“Yeah. It's a good cover, right?”

“It's good for now. Thanks.”

We stood guard for two hours, occasionally walking around to check the perimeter before the cleaners were finally done. They ended up moving their vehicles around to the back and using the garage doors to load up everything worthwhile. There were a few crates of cyberwar, some tools, a few containers of equipment, weapons, and even some of the clothes the scans were wearing. I felt like that was a bit much, but again, I wasn't going to waste time feeling bad for a bunch of psycho-murdering bastards.

At some point, Jackie took a quick look at the two vehicles and ended up telling the cleaners that we would be keeping the truck, which apparently was a Thorton Mackinaw Larimore. They seemed disappointed because, apparently, it was by and far in better condition than the car. Thankfully, they had no choice but to agree since the agreement they gave said we get first dibs on anything we find.

When the cleaners were finally done, our cut was just over sixteen thousand eddies, which Jackie and I immediately split evenly. Watching my account roll up by over eight thousand eddies was the perfect way to end a night of getting shot at.

“Well... I won't say that was fun, but it could have been worse,” I said once the cleaners had left. “Well worth the time spent as well.”

“Not a bad bit of work, aye? You want to head the Coyote to celebrate?” Jackie asked.

“Nah, I need to get home. I have a lot to do over the next few days. That said... if you come up with anything new for us to do anytime soon... let me know.”

“Sure thing, compadre,” Jack said, seemingly genuine. “You did well for your first time. I'm looking forward to working with you more.”

The truck, which was now linked to my keyfob, followed behind Jackie's borrowed van perfectly as we made our way back to Jackie's garage. The cleaners had done a decent job of wiping away any evidence of the vehicle's previous owners, both digitally and physically, so as far as anyone would be able to tell, the vehicle was mine. I would have preferred to drive it back myself, but I didn't want to take off my armor quite yet.

When we finally stopped back at Jackie's garage, I quickly took off my armor, layer by layer. Once it was off, I surveyed the damage. The worst, by far, was where I had tanked a slug from a shotgun. The divot in my plating was as wide as my thumb and was deep enough that it damaged the artificial muscles underneath. There were a dozen other dents from various other bullets, but only three of them that really needed immediate repair. The others were barely past cosmetic damage.

I quickly removed the panels that needed repair, as well as the entire side chest piece, since the damage was much deeper there. Thankfully, everything was designed to come apart for relatively simplified repairs. Once I was done, I stuffed everything into a duffel bag happily donated by Jackie.

"Alright, I'm heading out," I said, sticking my head into the side room of the garage where Jackie was sitting. "I'm probably gonna be dark for the next few days, probably longer. I have a few ideas bouncing around in my head, and I want to get them out before I start to lose them."

"Sure, no problem," He said, looking up from his phone to stand and walking me out.

I put my stuff down in the passenger seat leg space before climbing into the large truck and closing the door. Jackie leaned on the side of the truck, talking through the open window.

"Listen, Jackson. Your shits impressive, let me know if you need a runner or loan," He said seriously. "Your armor and tech weapon is Nova, and those energy weapons sound crazy as hell. I'm all for helping you make stuff like that, just be careful who you show it off to. You'll get snapped up quicker than you can say corpo slave."

"Yeah, I know. Why do you think I've been so anxious about showing my face and sharing my stuff," I pointed out, the solo mercenary nodding.

"Fair enough. See you later, school; keep me in the loop if you're looking for anything."

I nodded before starting the truck and pulling away, immediately activating the truck's self-driving, leaning back in my seat with a smile. It was strange to me that most cars were capable of entirely self-driving, and yet people never really sat back in the driver's seat and napped or skipped the driver's seat at all. According to Jackie, it was because they were locked to the speed limit and usually drove far below it, but that just sounded stupid to me. Why would I care if my ride was going ten miles under the limit if I could sit in the back seat and read or watch a movie?

As my new vehicle took a leisurely pace back to the megabuilding complex, I couldn't help but yawn. It was late, and I was tired. The night's action left me worryingly tired. Luckily, I didn't foresee any issues falling asleep with how tired I was, which was great. I only had four full days left with the XCOM tech tree, which meant I had a lot of work to get done and not a lot of time to do it.

