

We stayed at Viks for another hour or so, discussing the bioware implantation process, what I needed to do, and the schedule. On my side, all I really needed to do was not eat anything the day before the surgery. It wasn't technically required, but it would reduce some risks and made Vik's job easier.

Vik also went out of his way to make sure I understood exactly what having the bio-nanosurgeon hive implant meant. He didn't want me getting any delusions of grandeur. The implant could certainly save my life, but it did not make me Wolverine, not that Jackie or Vik got my reference. I could heal a bit if I got injured, but I wasn't going to heal gaping wounds or missing limbs.

With my expectations fully tempered, he did admit that the nano hive would drastically lower recovery time for any more invasive implants. It wouldn't do anything for things like muscle or bone lace or skinweave bioware I had been looking at, but it would help if I got something that required cutting me up. I wasn't planning on getting many more implants like that, but it was nice to have the option.

Once we were done discussing the options and the order was made, I left Vik's shop, cutting through Misty's shop to do so. She happily handed me some information about meditation, including some calming ambient noises and some incense. I was genuinely interested in learning meditation, so I was eager to accept and pay for her help. The process of scanning and looking through my tech trees was cerebral and strange, and I was hoping that learning some mental discipline and calming techniques would help me handle that better.

Jackie stayed behind as he wanted to talk to Vik about boxing and, after that, spend some time with Misty.

I arrived home not long after I left Vik's shop, stopping at a drive-thru to grab a burger and some fries. Honestly, out of all the food I had eaten so far in this reality, the greasy, fast-food burger and its accompanying fries were the closest to the food I was familiar with, tasting like vaguely bad McDonald's. It was definitely the kind of food that becomes more and more inedible the longer you look at it and the cooler it gets.

As I was cleaning up from my meal, I headed into my workshop. I needed to make Jackie some armor, especially now that I had told Misty about it. As I worked through the beginnings of a design, puzzling out how to make sure it was functional and looked good enough that Jackie would actually wear it, I heard the call button for my door. The bell came through clearly in the workshop through a secondary speaker in case someone was sealed inside and couldn't hear the normal one.

I frowned, tapping my computer to turn off my screen before making my way out of the workshop and to the door. I looked through the mini camera, checking to see who was on the other side. To my surprise, it was a [woman](#), maybe a year or two younger than me, with shocking blue hair. It flowed down one side of her face, the rest of it braided into a long, thick

ponytail, which ran down her back and out of sight. Her eyes were a pale blue, with irises that were too big and perfect to be anything but cyberware. She appeared to be holding a box, and after a moment of waiting, she frowned, reaching out to press the call button again.

With a sigh, I slid my pistol back into my holster before tapping the control to open the security controls, the thick, dense door sliding to the side.

"Oh! Hey, hi, how are you?" She asked with a smile, her eyes shifting to a pale purple as she did. "I'm your neighbor!"

I raised my eyebrow and followed her finger, which was pointing down the hall to the next door from mine. I looked back to the still-smiling woman, who then energetically thrust the box out to me.

"This is yours, I think. It was delivered to me by accident a few days ago..." She said, trailing off with a wince.

Her admittance actually caught me off guard. It wasn't the fact that something had been misdelivered. That was honestly inevitable, especially with how much I had been ordering. No, it was the fact that she actually made an effort to return it to me rather than just throwing it out or, even more likely, selling it for a few eddies. Honestly, if it wasn't such a blatant, strange, and suspicious thing to do in this city, I would have assumed this was some sort of spying attempt. Even so, I could already feel my anxiety spike.

"Ah, I see. Thank you," I responded, finally accepting the box and looking down to examine it, noticing that the seal had been broken. "And you looked inside?"

I asked, lifting up one of the plastic flaps to look inside. As far as I could tell, the internal packaging wasn't breached, but to a determined person, that didn't really mean anything. I looked up at the woman, who now looked slightly annoyed.

"Yeah, my brother opened it up when he brought it inside," She explained. "Gonk was watching my apartment and thought he could pawn it if it was anything good."

"Yeah... that's about what I would expect," I admitted. "Well... thanks for returning it."

"No problem!" She said with a smile. "Take care!"

Before I could say anything else, she walked away, heading right to her room. Her ponytail bounced and swung as she walked, a particularly energetic bounce in her step. As I watched her leave, she sent me a look over her shoulder, her grin growing to a smirk as she disappeared inside her own apartment.

With a snort, I shook my head, stepping back into my own apartment, my door sealing behind me. As I walked back to my workshop I pulled the parts out of the box, inspecting said box closely before tossing it to the side. I then spent a good five minutes inspecting the contents of the box, checking for any unwelcome guests or tampering. I even had Spot look them over, looking for any tool marks my standard eyes wouldn't be able to pick up. When even he came up negative, I reluctantly concluded that the woman was just actually being a good neighbor. I spent a minute putting the parts away before throwing away the packaging, Spot catching it before it even hit the ground. As he zipped away, I frowned with a sudden realization.

"Huh... didn't even get her name."

I debated going over and thanking her, but between her seemingly innocent and kind personality and my own crazy, potentially violent life, I figured it would only complicate things. If I was going to make friends, my best bet was people like Jackie, people who could take care of themselves and were used to fighting. In fact, networking with some reliable solos was probably a good idea, regardless of any need for friends. I'm sure there were plenty of people out there willing to work I exchange for some interesting gadgets and solid armor.

Shaking my head free of the idea after a few moments of consideration, I instead focused back on my computer. I had three days of free time left, not including the rest of today. Between my surgery and the switch to my next tech tree, my time was limited, and I needed to get this done before we got our next job, which Jackie was hoping to find soon.

Part of me wanted to tell Jackie I wasn't interested in taking any more jobs, or clearing out scav dens, not after making so much money from selling my stuff to Padre. However, I knew that Jackie was never going to willingly give up Solo work, not until he felt he had made his mark on Night City. Despite how little time I had actually known him, I wasn't about to leave him facing that alone. Maybe, over time, I would be able to temper his burning desire to cash in his life for a bit of fame, but until then, I would do my best to keep him alive.

What else were chooms for, after all?

As I worked, I considered what my real goal was for Jackie's armor. While his death in the game would absolutely go down as a genuinely heartbreaking moment, my primary concern was not him getting shot in the stomach, not with the underarmor I made him. Don't get me wrong, whatever I settled on would absolutely add protection to his torso, but the final design was mostly about protecting his head.

I knew he had cyberware protection there, but as any armorer knew, real damage resistance was about layers. Layers were the key to stopping incoming damage, so my armor would be all about layers.

My design for the helmet was pretty simple; well, actually, all of it was pretty simple. Jackie had made his position on full heavy armor clear, so there was no way for me to work in

strength enhancement or anything. Instead, I used a miniaturized Elerium node to power a simple cooling and heating system, as well as an air filtration system. Eventually, after a few more tech trees, I was sure I would be able to work in a whole host of things, but for now, simple, comfortable, and effective was all I needed.

When I was finished with my design, both the helmet and the torso, I sat back on my chair, blinking my eyes. A quick check of the time, and I cursed under my breath. It was late, much later than I had intended to work. I quickly set up the fabricators to print a few pieces and got the 3D printer up and working before getting ready for bed. By the time I lay down, my fatigue caught up to me, and I was out like a light.

When I woke up the next morning, rather than immediately starting to work, I got through my morning routine as usual, then switched what the fabricators and 3D printers were working on before heading out of the apartment. After yesterday's barely passable experience with a burger shop, I wanted to look a little harder for semi-decent food. I knew it was likely to be overly expensive, but I also knew I needed some source of edible food, or I would lose my mind.

I made it all the way down to my truck, climbing into the driver's seat and tapping the ignition before finally remembering that Vik asked me not to eat anything in preparation for the next day's surgery. I let out a long groan, slapping my forehead off the steering wheel, sitting there like that for quite a few minutes.

When I eventually made my way back up to my room, I dove into putting Jackie's armor together to distract myself from my growing hunger. The design and assembly process was pretty simple. The armor was a combination of AA, Kevlar material, and polymer plates, all of which were layered and overlapped to shore up any weak points. The eyes of the helmet were anti-fog-treated sapphire glass, reinforced and treated to be bullet extra resistant, which was what I used in my Alloy armor. When I was finally done putting it all together, it was just about noon. I called up Jackie as I tightened the last screws.

"Hey, your armors ready," I said after my call connected. "Just need you to come by so I can fit it to you, make any adjustments."

"Alright, fine," He said, obviously still not happy about the idea of wearing armor. "I'll be by in an hour. Just gotta finish helping Mama Welles move some stock around."

"Sure, I'll be free," I responded before saying goodbye and hanging up.

It took him a full two hours to show up, stepping into my apartment reluctantly.

"Choom, come on, I really don't-

Rather than listen to him try and worm his way out of the extra protection, I handed him his [new helmet](#). He looked down at it, his jaw hanging a bit as he took it from me. The helmet,

which looked like a cross between an oni mask and some high-tech armor, was blood red with gold fixtures and long black straps and bands. The straps and bands were what kept the helmet in place, but at least two-thirds of them were just for show. I reached out and tapped a button on the side of the chin, and the mask lit up, red light swelling up from behind the various seams and plate separations.

It had a vague, loose Asian feel to it, but I was hoping that with the overwhelming Japanese and Asian cultural infusion that Night City enjoyed, people wouldn't immediately connect that with the Tyger Claws.

"Jackson... this is fucking nova," He said, looking back up at me. "It... looks like something from a corpo's nightmare! No mames! I'm going to scare the shit out of people!"

He immediately tried to start putting it on, but before he could, I handed him the rest of his [armor](#). It was just chest, stomach, neck and back armor, made to be flexible but strong, with AA plating and reinforced by Kelvar. I specifically mimicked the metal ab armor type you sometimes see on superheroes, since I figured Jackie would like his armor to be as muscular as him. Most of the armor was red, with gold highlights and black kevlar behind that.

"It's nothing compared to what I wear around," I admitted. "But with this, you're not gonna get popped by some lucky asshole who manages to get their hands on some higher caliber stuff."

"Damn, Jay, this is great! The armor is cool, but fucking hell choom, that helmet is *scary*," He said with a big grin. "I like it!"

"Well, put it on." I said, pushing the armor to him. "Let me know if it fits right."

We spent about fifteen minutes getting both the helmet and armor to fit him perfectly. When we were done, we put both of the pieces into a box so he could carry them out of the building easily. When we were done, Jackie left to go get some lunch, and since I didn't trust myself not to eat something, I stayed back at the apartment. We did agree that he would come by the next day to drive me to Vik's, since I would likely not be up for driving when I was done getting sliced up.

The rest of the day I spent idly working on my computer. Over the last couple of weeks, I had a few ideas for improving the CAD program I used for most of my design process. The biggest one was integrating a response program similar to a Gremlins. This one focused on smoothing out designs, anticipating errors, and looking out for mistakes that I could miss. It could even foresee potential issues with a design needing stronger materials or heavier reinforcement, though that was hit or miss.

The goal was to speed up my CAD work by preventing me from making simple mistakes without noticing them. Sometimes, stuff like that was nothing, but occasionally, those types of

errors cause a whole cavalcade of similar issues, all of which added up to a whole lot of extra work. With any luck, this would decrease the amount of time I spent working on the design process, especially when I was directly transferring the designs from my head to digital blueprints. Spot was a big help during the process, showing me how best to integrate new programming into an existing bit of software.

When I was done messing around with that, I got to sleep early, actually using one of Misty's calming ambient tracks to help. I had decided that for the next two nights of my seven-day break, I wouldn't interrupt the night for anything and do my best to get a full night's rest.

Up to that point, I had been waking up every five hours or so to switch over and restock my AA smelter and Elerium generator, building up a decent-sized stockpile of both materials. Now, though, I wanted to get as much rest as possible, both because I was getting some not-insignificant surgery done early the next morning, and because it was the second-to-last day of my break. I wanted to be able to push myself pretty hard when my new tech tree locked in.

The following morning, after spending some time idly adding some of the upgrades to the CAD system attached to the circuit board printer and desperately trying to ignore the free burritos just waiting for me in my home delivery system, Jackie came to pick me up. He joked about stopping by a pizza place to grab himself some lunch, but by this point, I was a bit grumpy when it came to food.

Jackie dropped me off in front of Misty's shop before leaving to park the truck somewhere. Rather than wait out front and risk getting mugged for my shoes, I stepped into Misty's shop.

"Jackson! Welcome back," Misty said, peeking around a customer to greet me. "Vik should be setting up for you now. It should only be a few minutes. Did you get a chance to look at some of the meditation stuff I gave you?"

"I did, already listened to some of the ambient noise. It was nice, drowned out the sound of the building completely without being overwhelming," I answered with a smile. "I haven't had a chance to look into everything else, I was working on Jackie's armor."

"Oh! How is it looking?" She asked, multitasking as she walked back to a cabinet to grab a few things before handing everything to the customer with a smile. I waited while their eyes glowed, and Misty waved the customer out before focusing back on me.

"It came out looking good, pretty intimidating," I responded. "Jackie seemed to like it. Even better, he seemed eager to wear it next time we go out."

"You really plan on going out again, doing more solo work?" She asked, leaning forward on the counter. "Jackie mentioned you made heaps of money with Padre. Why go out and put yourself at risk?"

"Cause I need a lot more money than what Padre gave me, and working with Jackie will hopefully provide some of that," I explained, before looking over my shoulder, checking to make sure Jackie hadn't arrived. "Plus, he really needs someone watching his back. It's easy to get swallowed up in that line of work, even with someone you can trust. I know Jackie wouldn't even think about giving up his dream of making a name for himself so... I'll back him up."

Misty listened to my words, and for a moment, I thought she was going to tear up. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes, reaching over and giving my hand a squeeze.

"You're right. He won't give that dream up, not anytime soon. But knowing he's got someone backing him up, making sure he's got the tools and equipment he needs... It's a huge weight off my shoulders," She said with a slightly watery smile. "Thank you, Jay."

"Happy to do it," I said, returning her smile.

She pulled back and sniffed again before nodding to the door out the back of her shop.

"Go on, Vik is waiting for you, and I need a minute to collect myself before Jackie comes in. And thanks again."

I nodded and smiled, heading out the back entrance and down into the ripperdoc clinic. As I stepped through into the basement area, I could see Vik had moved a few things around. The cyberware installation chair that normally sat in the middle of the room had been replaced with an operation table. A bunch of equipment sat on either side of it, most of it already on. As I pushed the dividing gate open, Vik turned to look at me, smiling as he saw who it was.

"Jackson, welcome back. Just getting a few more things set before we can start," He said, turning back to what looked like some sort of monitoring equipment. "Delivery came in two hours ago, and everything looks good."

"No problem, Doc. Take your time," I said, sitting down on the spare chair in the corner and watching him work. "Did the delivery go smoothly?"

"Perfectly, much better than usual," He said, tapping a sealed cylindrical container with several blinking lights and a small temperature read-out along the side. "My buddy has access to corpo services, so the guy delivering it was a real professional courier, not some rando nomad looking for a quick buck."

I chuckled and nodded, about to ask how close we were cutting it to the bioware's best-by date when Jackie came down the stairs. He waved to Vik, who nodded before focusing back on his work, before leaning on the wall next to me.

"So, you ready, choom?" He asked, looking down at me. "Not getting cold feet?"

"It's not like I'm scared of it, man," I said, shaking my head. "It's just a new thing for me. I mean, it just took some convincing to get me to take the plunge. Besides, it's a lot less weird to get something extra than it is to get something removed. Not sure I'll ever be okay with hacking off an arm or getting something replaced."

"Just to be clear," Vik said, cutting off Jackie's response. "I will technically be removing and replacing about an inch of your small intestine."

"Yeah, I'm alright with that. You already mentioned it," I said with a shrug. "That's not really what I mean."

"I didn't think so; I just wanted to make sure you understood completely," Vik explained. Well, I think it's time for you to hop up on the table, Jackson. I think everything is all set."

I nodded and made my way to the clean, wiped-down table. I stopped to pull off my shirt, handing it to Vik before climbing on and laying back. It was a sign of the prevalence, even addiction this world had to Cyberware, that he didn't ask me to take off my pants, as if such a surgery was so common and normal you didn't even need to strip fully for it. I tilted my head down to watch as Vik strapped my legs with some sort of sticky, tape-like medical covering, sealing it to my stomach. He then put more of it around my body, covering everything but the area he would be operating on. As he was finishing up, he pulled back and looked over at me.

"Alright, so, from what Jackie says, there's a big chance you've never used a MaxDoc or anything like that. That right?"

"Yeah, never had to use one," I admitted, looking over at Jackie, who smirked. "but we should probably buy some for when we work."

"You think I leave my house without some MaxDocs?" He joked, opening his jacket to reveal a trio of small inhalers.

"Don't rely on them too much, those things don't work so well when you use them too quickly," Vik warned, continuing after a pause to tap a piece of his equipment, pulling down something to attach to my arm. "It's mostly just antifibrinolytics, stimulants, antibiotics, beta-blockers, and an anesthetic. Might keep you from keeling over, but you'll still bleed out if you do something stupid. There is a reason I bring this up now, though..."

Vik stepped away for a moment, out of my vision, before returning, now holding an inhaler, though this one did look less flashy than a MaxDoc.

"I'm going to hold this for you and depress the activation tab. An aerosol of anesthesia is going to be sprayed out. I want you to take a deep breath and hold it," He explained. "It's going to feel a bit strange, but just focus on doing it anyway. You're probably going to feel the need to cough since you're not used to inhaling medicine, but I need you to fight that. It will pass as your lungs and throat go numb, but chances are you'll be out by then. You ready?"

I took a long, deep breath before looking up at him and nodding.

"Yeah, Doc, I'm ready."

He nodded back and held the inhaler for me, depression the button. As the spray started, I breathed in deeply again, this time drawing in the anesthesia. I held my breath, feeling my lungs tickle and prickle as the medicine took effect.

"And.... now, let your breath out slowly and start counting down from one hundred," Vik instructed.

I nodded and released the pressure in my lungs before slowly counting down. To be honest, I'm not sure what number I got to. All I know is that I was counting, and then I was groggily waking up, still lying on the same operation table, my brain feeling foggy and sluggish.

"Hey, hey, take it easy," A voice says, my brain taking a second or three to focus my eyes enough to see Vik. He gently pushed me back down onto the table. "The surgery went well, no complications, not that we were anticipating any."

The next few hours passed by in a bit of a blur, the tail end of the anesthesia working through my body. Vik did some scans, asked some questions, and gave me a few pills to take, as well as another inhaler. Jackie returned not long after I woke up, and when Vik was satisfied that I would be fine, he drove me back to my apartment. I ate a burrito, popped one of the supplement pills, and crawled into bed, sleep taking me almost instantly. I was dead to the world until the next afternoon when Jackie came by to check up on me. I had missed a few messages since my keyfob was vibrating on the counter, which was too far away for me to hear.

He brought food, which I voraciously tore into while he laughed, before I collapsed back onto the couch, letting out a satisfied groan.

"How do you feel?"

"Hungry, a bit sore, a bit tender," I said, lifting up my shirt to poke at the incision sight along my midriff, wincing at the increasing pain. "Nothing I can't handle, nothing he didn't warn me about."

"Good. So, I got a new job for us," He said.

"What?" I asked, turning to look at him. "I'm not- Jackie, I'm not doing anything active for at least a couple of days."

"Vik said you'd be good in two," He pointed out, waving me off when I opened my mouth to complain. "But I figured you'd prefer to stretch that out, so this job has a bit of freedom. Padre wants a 6th street hideout leveled."

"That sounds like something that would bring a lot of heat..."

"Padre will take care of it," He assured me confidently. "He wants the hideout cleared out. We can't bring in any cleaners, but we can definitely fill a few duffel bags full of gear on our way out. Pay is six grand for each, add in what we bring back, which should be... well, eight or nine thousand, depending on what we find."

"What's the time limit on this?"

"A week before he starts looking for someone else to do it."

"Well... alright. I'm gonna need tomorrow, and the day after that off, probably. So maybe the night after that?"

"Works for me, choom."