

After walking the two Nomads back to the campground, I placed orders for the shades, heavies, and power armor that I had offered to enhance their security. I told them to coordinate with Murtaugh for marching orders regarding shifts or any other details. I also warned Murtaugh that they would be around to talk to him. No sense letting them ambush him.

By the time I had finished the tour with our guests, and their subsequent near breakdown, it was just past two in the afternoon. I had five full days left before my next tech tree arrived, and a lot of what was going on at that moment involved a lot of waiting. I couldn't rush the construction of any of our various buildings or other projects, at least any more than they already were. They would be done when they were done, which was honestly already progressing at a breakneck pace.

Meanwhile, my previous tree hadn't left me with a lot to experiment with. The Jurassic tech would be extremely useful in restocking and repairing the Earth's natural biome, as well as resurrecting many of the now-extinct species that once filled it, both plants and animals. Frank was experimenting, trying to craft resilient and toxin-resistant plants that could aid the healing process, but my hope was that eventually, such custom-designed plants wouldn't be needed.

With any luck, once I had enough advanced technology to heal the planet, Project: Clover would be enough to jump-start the normal ecosystem.

Once Alexander and Panam were gone, I made my way down to my workshop, where I could pass the time and maybe get some work done. Just because there was nothing critical to do at the moment, didn't mean there was nothing at all for me to do, after all. There were dozens of smaller projects that needed attention, not the least of which was refining the equipment and loadouts that my robotic forces and I could utilize.

For example, we still needed vehicles. We might not be running missions or gigs for eddies, but we still needed transportation, even if we had access to the ultimate transportation method, teleportation. Additionally, we required armored vehicles, such as tanks or small, Titanfall-style mechs, probably both. The problem was that I had no experience with either of those concepts.

Sure, I could brute force my way into creating some sort of armored tank, simply by building a vehicle and slapping a turret and some armor on it. However, there was no way I could do the concept justice, even by normal standards. Hell, I didn't even know how to form proper tank treads. I would have to extrapolate them from the designs of a [robobrain](#) from Fallout, since that was the closest I had.

The idea of a mech was in a similar boat. I knew the concept was possible, and I knew humanoid robotics backwards and forwards, thanks to the Titanfall, Become Human, and Fallout tech trees. But that was still a far cry from recreating a [Vanguard](#) or a [Stryder](#).

Thankfully, I did have a solid workaround for a lack of mech expertise. The perfect, instant connection point of the entangled photon could turn any robot frame into a pilotable mech. There was even a variety of different control and interface mechanics we could use,

ranging from simple manual inputs, the basic neural interfaces most people here had, or a full dive cyberware like mine.

Hell, with the proper training, someone could probably control a mech manually, with joysticks, pedals, and a control panel. The only question was if all the trouble was even worth it. Human pilots had advantages, but they also had their downsides.

Eventually, after giving it more thought, I decided to build a robot that contained the best of both worlds. It would be specifically designed to emulate human movement, unlike the heavies, who were only vaguely humanoid in their movements. That way, this new design could be controlled remotely with relative ease. Then, when they aren't being controlled, a standard robot system would take control, allowing them to function outside human interference.

I would probably have the robot system focus on defensive action, so that there was a greater likelihood that it would survive long enough for one of us to take control, should intervention be necessary.

Overall, the design process was relatively straightforward, as I had numerous sources of inspiration. Even just the ALEO robot frame, combined with our current power armor, could be considered an impressive starting point.

Using all of the lessons in robotics that I had learned so far, I worked to design the strongest, toughest robotic form I could, scaling it up considerably. This would allow me to stuff an excessive amount of power into its frame, layering large servos and thick slabs of artificial muscle.

These were going to be our ultimate weapon, something we dropped when we were done messing around, so I wasn't so much concerned about it causing property damage. That said, in order for it to be moved, it would need to be carried by its own Cargo VTOL, most likely modified with a bigger bay.

As I worked and planned the build, I had to repeatedly resist the urge to make it look like a [Gundam](#), instead pushing for a more utilitarian design. This was *not* because I didn't like the Gundam look, but rather because the materials and systems that I had access to really couldn't do a Gundam justice. If I was lucky, I might someday get Gundam tech tree, which, despite not being familiar with the franchise, would likely be pretty advanced. Or, I might someday become so advanced that I could fudge a design that was good enough to bear the name and resemblance. For now, however, I would stick with a more neutral look, function over form.

That wasn't to [say it looked bad](#), it just didn't have that iconic look. My determination to keep the control schemes as human and straightforward as possible left it with almost completely human proportions, with anchor points for weapons, extra armor plating, and any other tech we felt like hanging off its large frame.

And it was definitely large, just under two meters taller than the heavies, though it was considerably less stout. Despite the decreased height, my focus on mimicking human movement made it flexible and fast, way faster than something that size should be. I was so

excited to design a jumpkit for it, as well as a fusion sword and basic weapons, that I ended up jumping right into it.

I spent the rest of the day, and into the next, designing weapons, extra armor, and other equipment for the "mech," ensuring that they would have plenty of variety. In all honesty, I was probably going overboard, but I had time and was enjoying the challenge.

I was just finishing up a set of [massive plasma weapons](#), for when we eventually stop holding back, when Sable stepped into my workshop, eyes scanning the room, admiring the space.

"Seems a bit simple for a mad scientist's secret workshop," she said with a smirk, eventually sitting down at one of the computers, swiveling the chair to face me. "Having fun?"

"More or less," I said, mentally pushing the CAD software to the side. "Just building up the next level of our combat tech. What's up?"

"I just finished a meeting with Jackie and Frank," she explained. "Thought I would stop by and say hello."

"Ah, how is that going?" I asked. "I've tried their drinks, they remind me of home."

"Hun, those drinks are just the opening salvo," she said, shaking her head in exasperation. "If I didn't know you better, I would be worried about how you react to being overshadowed. They are going to *dwarf* your tech sales."

"Real, enjoyable food and drinks that aren't radioactive or actively poison you?" I asked hypothetically. "I'm not surprised in the slightest. Should we rename the company?"

"No, they are a subsidiary of TinkerTech, so they will have their own name, as soon as they agree on one," she said, waving away my concern. "Do you have a plan on what Tinker Tech will be releasing once we reconvene, or possibly even before that?"

"I think it's time to release some actual tech," I said, Sable nodding in agreement, standing up from her seat and making her way over to me. "I was thinking of a few things from my medical tech. Handheld scanners and emergency devices, that sort of thing. Nice and safe, but advanced enough to get us a good reputation."

"What about some of your cyberware?" she suggested, carefully watching my reaction as she leaned on the wall beside me.

"What? No, absolutely not," I said with a frown, shaking my head. "There is no way I am contributing towards everyone's tendency to hack off their limbs."

"I understand your reluctance," She said, holding up her hands when I gave her a doubtful look. "I do, really. However, I think I've found the perfect one to avoid that. Your Monocyte Breeder, the one that goes in your chest."

I opened my mouth to complain about her choice, but she put her finger on my lips.

"No, just wait. If you think I'm wrong when I'm done, you can still say so, just let me say my piece," she said, looking at me with a raised eyebrow, but nodded when I said nothing. "Thank you. Now, I know it's something you would consider advanced, but in the grand scheme of things, it is not that big of a deal."

As she talked, she stepped back and sat on the edge of a table, leaving me to sit on a chair, waiting for her to continue so I could say no.

"While the Monocyte Breeder is impressive in that it's entirely new, what it does is not a new concept. Several drug cocktails can help increase your healing rate. Your implant is just cleaner," she explained. "Not only that, but because this is something completely new, we can patent it completely, meaning it's something that the other Corporations would not be able to replicate for some time."

She paused for a moment to let her words land, waiting for me to reluctantly nod in agreement. When I opened my mouth to respond, she started again, cutting me off.

"Even better, while the Breeder does increase your healing rate, it's not fast enough to make that much of a difference in combat. Sure, it will cut down recovery time, but some Tyger Claws punk isn't going to pop up, fully healed after the police take him down, just because of your implant. You said it yourself, it's more of a quality of life implant than anything."

I ran her words through my head, trying to pick apart her argument, but ultimately failed. What's worse, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was a better fit than she thought. The Monocyte Breeder was already at the absolute max level I was able to push it, and since the limitation was set by the cardiovascular system, meaning that, while you might get a boost with an artificial heart, or a second heart, there was no way for Arasaka to take the idea, crank it to eleven at the cost of safety and sell it as a better version.

"Alright, we can release the Monocyte Breeder, as long as it's advertised as a quality of life implant," I said. "Lord knows no one is going to use it for that, but I want to at least have the high ground for making sure people know that's what it was for."

"Fantastic. I'll start the process of teasing the idea to some distributors I know," she responded. "Could you put together a list of the medical equipment you're thinking of offering? Since we would be producing them in-house, we could start selling them before we reconvene, assuming we can set up a delivery service."

"Pick a warehouse from the land we haven't started tearing down, and we can update its security," I suggested. "I'll have a distribution center we can teleport directly into built here in Rock Ridge. As for the list... how about we discuss the possibilities over lunch?"

"Hmmm, well, can hardly say no to that," she said with a sly smile. "Picnic in the courtyard, perhaps?"

"Sounds perfect. I'll place an order and pick it up. Why don't you head to the courtyard and find a spot?" I suggested with a smile.

With a plan set, Sable disappeared from the workshop, leaving me alone to clean up and head out as well. I sent a message to one of the robots cooking in the test restaurant in the campground, then a few minutes later, I stepped through the teleporter into the garage hub. When I got the food, I headed back down the courtyard, where Sable was waiting.

We spent a few minutes passing food back and forth, before opening everything and settling in. Eventually, after a few minutes of munching and mumbling about the food, Sable stopped and let out a long breath.

"I should probably apologize," she said, giving me a sideways look.

I stopped immediately, looking over at her. Her tone had shifted enough to catch me off guard, and I could see that she was fidgeting slightly, tearing at the bag her food came in with her fingernails.

"For what?" I asked, lowering my food to focus on her.

"Well, for suddenly getting so aggressive, ambushing you before you left to hunt down Maelstrom," she said, now looking down at her food. "I mean, I carved an S into your armor! Like a possessive schoolgirl!"

"I... thought it was sweet...?"

She gave me a look that questioned if I was being serious, and I winced and shrugged. She rolled her eyes, looking down as she put her food down beside her on the bench.

"Look, I... It's very clear we come from very different places," she said, clearly thinking her words through. "But in my world, I was always taught that if you found someone you liked even a little, and he was successful, you had to move quick. Love was just another form of business, and you had to act fast if you wanted to make a profit off your investment."

"That's..."

"It's horrible and stupid, I know," she admitted easily, shaking her head. "But I... kind of panicked and defaulted to what I knew."

"Does that mean you're not-"

"NO! No, I am interested," She assured me, cutting me off and turning towards me, showing that she was blushing, something I found adorable on the usually put-together and serious woman. "But I shouldn't have listened to old habits and lessons."

I was more than a little shocked about what was happening. Sable was not one to open up like this, and I was happy she was willing to do so to me. If I was honest, I hadn't really decided what to do about what had happened. Though, as I looked back on it, leaving it to sit probably wasn't the best solution I could have reached.

"It's okay, I understand," I responded, reaching out and carefully taking her hand, smiling when she accepted. "It was a lot at the moment, but I'm not going to hold it against you. And it wasn't really that bad, I don't mind you being... determined."

"Oh, I suppose I'll keep that in mind," she responded, giving me a wink that is much more her usual style. "We can take things slow, without... my overly aggressive instincts. Just don't ignore me, Jackson. I might find your obliviousness endearing, God knows why, but that only goes so far when directed at me."

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do," I responded, chuckling when she swatted at my shoulder.

We continued to eat, the conversation flowing a bit easier now that we had cleared the air a bit. I hadn't even noticed the tension at first, but with it gone, it was easier to breathe, and our teasing felt a lot... lighter.

When we finished our food, we sat there talking for a while before Sable finally had to excuse herself. With several new products on the horizon, both in food and my tech, she had work to do. I made sure she knew she was always welcome to join the group for dinner, as we often ate together, with even Vik and Rebecca making it most nights. She agreed to make a greater effort to stop by when she could.

Before she left, we shared a hug, and she kissed my cheek. It was significantly less intense than the last time, but also a lot less bewildering and aggressive.

An equal trade in my book.

After walking Sable to the surface, I went looking for Jackie and Frank. While Sable had been happy to talk about their work, I wanted to speak with them directly, to see how they felt and what I could do to help. They were both in a carefully sealed-off section of Frank's lab, where most of their food experimentation took place.

"Jay, how's it going?" Jackie asked, tossing me an unlabeled bottle after I was barely inside the room. "How was your date?"

"It was nice," I said, barely catching the bottle before it smashed into the counter. "What's this?"

"New flavor, cherry," Frank explained. "We are experimenting with the effects of carbonization on flavor."

I looked back down at the bottle, before cracking it open with a turn of my wrist. Sure enough, the bottle hissed as the seal was broken, and when I took a sip, I could feel the bubbles tickling my tongue.

"Mmm, makes it feel like a soda. Not bad," I said, taking another sip. "Personally, I like the juice better, but I can see people liking this."

Frank nodded, marking something down on a tablet, while Jackie gave me a thumbs up. I made my way to the pair, looking over their shoulders to see what they were working on. In front of both of them was a long list of data, notes, and more, all about the food and drinks they had come up with for selling. It was all things that could be packaged up and would last for at least a few weeks, usually quite a bit more. The people of Night City, and this era in general, expected their food to be near timeless, something that I found moderately revolting.

"We're working it down to a smaller list," Jackie explained. "Sable wants five drinks and five food options to start out with. It's tough, and we are having trouble coming to an agreement."

"We believe we have the drink options settled," Frank added. "We are struggling to pare down our food selection. Jackie insists that three of those slots should be meat jerky."

I looked at Jackie with a raised eyebrow, and he rolled his eyes.

"Hey, it's a good choice! Not only is it easy to make, but it will sell well, and it's semi-real meat!" He pointed out. "It will be the best and healthiest source of protein some people in Night City have ever experienced."

"That's... actually pretty fair," I admitted, nodding in agreement. "But some variety is also good. How about two kinds of jerky? That way, people have an option, and you can still present a wider variety now. What kind of other stuff were you suggesting, Frank?"

"I suggested a partially candied dried fruit, nuts, cookies, a chocolate bar, ice cream..."

Frank listed a dozen more things before looking back up at me, his list complete. I chewed on the inside of my lip, going over his suggestions.

"I think the chocolate bar is obvious, as far as I know, good chocolate is rare and expensive here," I said, getting a nod from Jackie. "Ice cream is a good idea, but selling just one flavor is kind of pointless. Maybe hold off on that and launch that as a whole line of flavors later?"

"That does make sense," Frank said after a moment of consideration. "I must admit, I am concerned about the health of our customers. With our superior quality, and with how low our prices will be, I am certain people will consume inordinate amounts of them. And all our food is junk food."

"What about something basic then?" I suggested. "Instead of a prepackaged snack, sell milk. Or 'artificial' eggs."

"I was under the impression that revealing our near authentic foodstuffs was for later?" Frank asked, his head tilted.

"Maybe, but with the right tweaks, they could present as more artificial, right?" I pointed out. "Not enough to change them majorly, but enough that under a microscope, they are even

further from the original. We can't sell the nearly identical vegetables you've created, but selling a rough approximation is fine."

"Then what about some fruit cubes?" Jackie suggested. "Preserved and frozen, like a cool treat."

"Pickles," Frank suggested next. "They seem divisive, but more than half of the Aldecaldos seem to enjoy them."

"Maybe some sandwich meat?" Jackie suggested. "Or a cheese? They could make a whole sandwich with our stuff."

"Perhaps we angle for that?" Frank suggested. "Sable did explain that a theme would be something to consider. What about sandwich ingredients?"

"Cheese, meat, pickles..." Jackie listed, ticking off on his fingers. "Maybe a second flavor of meat and a side? Like chips? Some sort of flavored crunchy thing to go with the sandwich?"

"I think grouping them all together might be hard since some of those are shelf stable and the others need refrigeration," I pointed out. "But being known as the sandwich people would not be a bad start. Especially if you're concerned with health issues. A sandwich isn't the healthiest option in the world, but it's better than chocolate bars and cookies."

"...Is there a reason we can't sell sandwiches altogether?" Jackie suggested after a moment of silence. "Sure, their shelf life is going to be shorter, but these things are going to sell like Kiroshi's. Not to mention that we make them for free."

"A full, prepackaged meal," Frank continued, sounding excited. "A full sandwich, a side of chips, and perhaps even a dessert. The five options could be five different sandwich types."

"So what sort of sandwiches could we make without tipping our hand at the depth of our food production?" I asked, raising my eyebrow at the other two, who both looked down at their lists, before pushing them aside.

"We need the master list. This only has the stuff we were considering before this idea," Jackie said, shaking his head and putting down the tablet. "I'll text Amelia and tell her to bring down a copy. How far do we push the flavor?"

"I believe we should start less adventurous, let the ingredients speak for themselves," Frank suggested.

"Have you cracked horseradish yet?" Jackie asked, clearly entirely focused on the idea of sandwiches. "I remember reading an old reference to horseradish sauce on beef sandwiches..."

I couldn't help but smile as I watched both of them work. It was clear that they were having a good time, and were fully invested in their soon-to-be food empire. As they talked, they discussed options for simplifying and downgrading certain ingredients without compromising the

taste or experience. Eventually, I left them to their devices, leaving just as Amelia arrived, carrying a tablet. She nodded, stepping to the side as I walked by her.

"Hey Amelia, how have you been doing?" I asked. "I apologize, we haven't had a chance to catch up. Is everything going well?"

"I have been busy working alongside Jackie, as well as doing my own research," She explained, giving me a small smile. "I have been well, enjoying my work."

"That's good. Have you been finding time for yourself, time to work on your own projects?"

"Yes, I have found myself enjoying reading, and Jackie has made sure I have time to do so," She assured me with a smile. "Thank you for your concern, Jackson."

"Of course," I said with a smile. "I created you. What sort of person would I be if I didn't make sure you were doing well? If you need anything, please come find me, and we can see about sorting it out."

"I will. Thank you."

She gave me a short bow before turning back to Jackie and Frank, handing Jackie the tablet she had been carrying. He smiled, thanked her, and immediately dragged her into the conversation, asking her opinion. He finally spotted me making my way out of the room and raised his hand to wave goodbye.

I spent about an hour exploring the vault, visiting the empty halls and rooms. It was impressive to see what Samwise had created, although the empty state did throw me off a bit. It was hard to believe that another vault, nearly identical to this one, was being made far away from here. Eventually, I stumbled into a large swimming area, a frankly luxurious area with hot tubs, massage chairs, several large pools, and even several lifeguard robots.

I swam for a while, enjoyed the hot tub before eventually climbing out and drying off. I was just coming out of the male locker room when I spotted Kaytlyn of all people, walking between a pair of pools.

I was about to call out to her when Riggs exited one of the side rooms, dressed in swim trunks, though they were dry. Kaytlyn, who was wearing a two-piece bikini, turned slightly, angling herself for the AI. As I watched, just as Kaytlyn reached him, he caught sight of me. Before he could say anything, however, Kayt planted a big kiss on his lips, wrapping her arms around his neck. I froze in surprise, and while Riggs seemed to enjoy the kiss, when they were done, he whispered into her ear. The mostly retired mercenary whirled around, spotting me immediately.

"Son of a bitch!" She cursed, shaking her head, turning around to slap Riggs' chest. "You couldn't have said something?"

"You didn't give me a chance."

"Uh.. it's alright..." I said, raising my hands. "It's fine, if you were trying to keep this to yourself or something... I mean, I'm glad that Riggs is, and you are... I don't know if keeping it a secret is the best idea, but it's your choice and..."

As I was talking, rambling really, Kayt continued to curse, both at me, herself, and at Riggs, before she finally realized I was talking as well and stopped.

"What?" She asked, her voice colored with confusion before her brain worked through what I said, and she shook her head. "No, it's not a secret, just about everyone knows already."

"Oh..." I responded, reeling back a little in surprise, feeling a little hurt.

"Relax, it's not like we were hiding it from you, or didn't tell you on purpose," She explained, rolling her eyes. "It's just that everyone else isn't blind, so they picked it up on their own!"

"Wait...then... why are you so upset?" I asked, starting to get a little confused. "Did you think I was going to have a problem with it?"

"No, of course not," she said, waving me off. "I just lost the betting pool by a few days! You couldn't just keep being distracted for the rest of the week? I was so close!"

"You guys were betting on whether or not I realized you were dating?" I asked, scoffing in denial. "There's no way it's been long enough for that. I would have picked up on it."

"Jay, we started dancing around it when he took a bullet for me during the time when the Wraiths attacked us," She responded, raising an eyebrow at me. "We were pretty much dating a week later."

I frowned, counting the weeks in my head, shaking my head in denial. Then, the more I thought about it, the more certain moments started to make sense.

"... I can't believe I never put it together..." I admitted with a frown. "Sorry, I guess..."

"It's fine, Jay," Kayt assured me, her annoyance sliding away. "In all honesty, we probably should have said something. But, look on the bright side, drinks are on Misty the next time we get together."

I shook my head and chuckled, finally turning to leave the apparent couple to their downtime.

"Sounds like a plan," I said as I made my way out. "Riggs... do me a favor...?"

"... only because I was going to do it anyway," he responded.

"What does he-" Kaytlyn started, only to let out a gasp as Riggs lifted her up.

I was just walking out the door as he jumped into the pool with her, a loud splash following me out the door as I laughed.

