

I wake up the next morning with a pounding headache, the world spinning and turning around me. I blinked slowly, sliding to the edge of my bed, wondering how I got there. Someone must have helped me, because halfway through the night, I resigned myself to sleeping under the stars, completely content with the fact that the itching from my Skinweave had faded under the constant buzz of heavy intoxication. I still couldn't feel it even now, which told me it was probably a bit past my normal wake-up time.

The itching had stopped, or was at least dulled, by the time I reached halfway into my bottle. Rather than stop there, however, we kept drinking, and the rest of the night was a wash. I was pretty sure that Jackie, Misty, and Kaytlyn had taken it slower than I had, but they had still been drinking pretty heavily. I would have shaken my head if I wasn't sure it would make me throw up.

After a few minutes spent stabilizing myself, I slowly stood from my bed, only for the spins to force me back down.

"Oh fuck me," I said, taking a minute before trying again.

This time, I managed to stay upright, slowly making my way across the trailer to the door. I pushed open the door, cursing wildly as the sun caught me off guard. When I had mostly recovered from that, I stumbled out into the outdoors, making my way across the town, focused solely on the BD shack.

When I had finished the medical equipment during the Titanfall tech tree, Samwise and the MRVN units moved all of it into the cleared-out and repaired side room of the BD shack. [Originally](#), the space had been a mess, but by then, it had been cleaned and sealed off from the elements and filled with cabinets and stuff salvaged from the rest of the town. With some elbow grease from the MRVN units, it now looked like a semi-respectable space. Certainly better than quite a few Ripperdoc offices around Night City.

They even painted!

I was about halfway to my destination when Riggs showed up, seemingly out of nowhere, and helped me the rest of the way. We entered the cool interior of the BD shack and made a beeline for the soon-to-be-finished AI Doctors space. Once there, I walked over to the Auto-Pharma machine.

The large piece of equipment was really an impressive bit of tech, and creating its code had been a long process. The programming was not just for the machine's controls and interface. It also contained the instructions for thousands of different drugs from the Titanfall universe. When I completed the machine, I couldn't afford to waste any precious time over the burst of completion knowledge. But now, looking back, I had access to a massive list of drugs. Unfortunately, I had no idea how any of them worked, or how their creation process worked outside of the Auto-Pharma. I knew how to program for their creation, not the actual chemical process.

Still, having a pill that treated almost every single symptom of the common cold had to be worth something, right? Not that I should sell it now. I already had enough attention, no reason to prove the true breadth of my expertise.

I pushed off the distracting thought and activated the machine, quickly scrolling through several dozen options before finding what I was looking for. I tapped the option for a singular dose, and the machine immediately started going, the large piece of equipment humming softly as it worked. As it did, I silently thanked god that Chuck had included a bunch of materials for the machine in his first delivery.

By the time Riggs returned with a glass of water, the Auto-Pharma had spit out a tablet the size of a sand dollar. I accepted the cup from the AI and dropped the tablet into it, letting it fizzle and dissolve, encouraging it by mixing it with my finger. When it was finally done, I slammed the whole cup back as quickly as I could.

The tablet had turned the cup of water into a cocktail of several different things, including electrolytes, stomach settlers, and a headache reliever designed to treat hangovers. Consuming it, plus a couple more cups of water, would do well to reduce the symptoms seriously.

"Thank you," I said to Riggs, slowly standing and patting his shoulder. "How's it going?"

"Better than you, it seems," he responded. "Should you make one for Kaytlyn as well?"

"Yeah, good idea," I agreed, turning back to the Auto-Pharma and tapping on the screen a few times. "I'm guessing that means Jackie and Misty went home?"

"Murtaugh drove them home late last night," He explained. "He was the only one who could drive the truck, who also passes for a borg."

"That's good... I wonder if I could make a chauffeur bot..."

I idly pondered the idea, realizing that it would actually be incredibly easy, before the Auto-Pharma finished the second tablet for Kaytlyn. I made my way to her trailer, Riggs staying close by. I wasn't that infirm, and the stumbling from before was mostly from the spins, but Riggs clearly wanted to make sure I would be okay.

I knocked on Kaytlyn's door, waiting for a few minutes for her to open it. She looked disheveled and certainly not happy, but not quite as bad as I'm sure I looked. Somehow, her hair remained nearly perfect, which all but confirmed that it wasn't real her hair. Before she could say anything, I reached out and handed her the tablet.

"Dissolve it in a cup of water, drink it all in one go, and then slowly drink a couple more glasses," I explained, already walking away. "You're welcome!"

With my hangover slowly fading, I made my way to the garage, before stepping into the workshop and looking around. Both of the molly-makers were active, and when I stepped into the side room, I could see why. The much larger version of the molly-maker I had requested was almost eighty-five percent complete, unsurprising considering Samwise had been working on it

for the entire night and a good portion of the previous day. With any luck, it would be done in four or five hours.

"Nice work, Samwise," I said, looking over his shoulder as he worked with an MRVN unit. "When this is done, we can get it working on the addition."

"Sir, I am concerned we will run out of trash and scrap to recycle soon," Samwise admitted. "We have several car wrecks and a few more pallets of random junk, but if we continue to push at our current rate of progress, we will run through those resources in approximately one week."

"What about the rest of the town?" I asked, looking confused. "There is a ton of scrap all over the place.

"Yes, but we do not own that," He pointed out. "Could someone not hold that over our heads?"

I scratched my head before shaking it.

"Maybe for like a fine, but the scrap should be good to use. Maybe leave the cars alone and only take the trash and the junk near it," I explained. "I'm probably going to buy all the land anyway. Actually... I should probably do that soon."

"Why?" Samwise asked, not turning as he finished attaching one of the export control motors inside the maker.

"Because, as much as I want the previous owners to get something for it, I can't afford to pay full price," I explained. "If I start improving the area, prices are going to skyrocket. I wish I could afford to give the current owners more, though. They really got screwed over with this whole thing."

"Well, perhaps an invitation to live here once the conditions improve? Sam suggested. "They would be rent-free, which would save them a considerable amount of money, and their dream of being a part of a new town would also be fulfilled.

"That... isn't a bad idea, though it would have to wait until I was comfortable with protecting and defending ourselves..." I pointed out, nodding as I thought about it. "Maybe if we ever reach some sort of peace agreement with everyone? I don't know, but it's a good idea either way."

He nods in acknowledgment of my compilement before returning to his task, slowly making progress on the large molly-maker. I watched for a few more minutes before wishing him good luck and heading back to the garage proper.

Despite my slow start, I did have a goal for the day. Misty had warned us that Jackie was really working hard to find us more work. That meant that I was now on a schedule, and if I wanted to join them, I would need to finish some sort of armor redesign.

I pulled up my files on the different armor types I had so far. I had the AA under armor, the original XCOM variants, the underlayer, and the warden armor. The obvious conclusion was to work them all together, using the underlayer as the anchor point for the exterior shell of the warden armor. The only problem was that any combination of the warden armor would most likely share the original's issue, namely that it was big and unwieldy. Riggs was now wearing the original set, and his added strength could handle it, more or less brute-forcing the problem away. I didn't have that option. I wanted a system that was much more flexible, which meant designing something from scratch.

I started the design process by working to combine the underlayer with my underarmor. Immediately, I ran into a problem. The whole design breakthrough of the Titanfall underlayer was that it could move and shift on its own, removing the need for a rigid skeleton. Slapping on some armor plating would break the system entirely since there were no anchor points. Still, I wanted one comprehensive underlayer system that I could wear almost all the time.

After struggling through for about an hour, I finally figured it out. Rather than anchoring the plates of Alien Alloy at hard points, I would anchor it to woven strands of the artificial muscle that the underlayer was built out of. This idea would mean, with some fancy programming, that I could control its positioning and in what state it was to compensate for the underlayer moving and shifting under it.

I got to work with renewed excitement, eager to prove that my concept worked. I started with the base underlayer design, cutting off the arm in my CAD program before dissecting that and getting to work. It was a bit of a challenge to interweave the new strands of artificial muscles, especially as each plate needed at least three, but eventually, I completed the arm. In the end, the "plates" ended up being more like scales, as that would allow for flexibility and control. My last addition was a simple strap so I could wear it without the rest of the armor, just as a test.

Once I was done, I had to wait for the small maker to finish its latest copy of the perimeter sensor net before getting it going on the parts for my latest design. While waiting for that to finish, I made my way outside and sat down on the couch. It was bright, hot, and dry, but it was still nice to sit outside for a bit while I waited. I had only been sitting for a few minutes when Kaytlyn joined me.

"What exactly was that?" She asked as she sat down on one of the chairs around the burnt-out campfire circle. "Cleared up my hangover pretty quick."

"Just something I whipped up," I said with a shrug. "Just a combination of a few things in water-soluble form for quick absorption."

"Well, it worked," She said, smirking a bit. "Too bad Misty and Jackie left, I can't imagine they are enjoying their morning."

"I don't know. Jackie strikes me as the kinda guy who bounces back from a hangover," I suggested, shaking my head. "Claims that an energy drink and a shot of whiskey fixes him right up or something."

Kaytlyn laughed and nodded in agreement, leaning back in her chair. After a moment of enjoying the sun, she stood to head over to the security hub. A few minutes after that, I headed back into the shaded garage and started to assemble the test sleeve as the parts were printed. It took a few minutes to get it all working, with most of that time spent getting the small control chip I was using in place of the main control hub.

I quickly pulled on the sleeve, wiggling my fingers into the gloves. When everything was strapped in, I activated it, the sleeve hardening for a moment as the muscle tense and released. Then I began testing the flexibility, wiggling and maneuvering my arm, trying to force the hundreds of scales to bunch up. I thanked whatever god or entity that might have been listening that the scales could be printed on the strips of artificial muscle so I didn't need to affix every single scale.

When I was satisfied that I was losing almost no flexibility with the new suit, I sat back down at my computer and got to work, finishing the design for the rest of the underlayer, which ended up taking the rest of the day. I started the printing process before leaving it in the capable hands of Samwise and his MRVN cohorts. As much as I could have pushed myself to get more done, there was no need to rush and overwork myself during my downtime. I had worked myself to the bone for the last three days of the Titanfall tech tree, and while I was perfectly aware I would probably end up doing it again, I could at least take it easy in between.

The next morning, I woke up around my usual time. It was early enough to be useful but late enough that people still rolled their eyes when you called it "early." I eventually made my way to the garage, where Samwise was waiting, laying out the pieces for two full sets of armored underlayers. There was also some normal armor, similar to [Jackies](#), but where his was cut down to only protect the chest since he was a stubborn idiot, mine covered my whole body. It really did look like some sort of tactical superhero armor that was popular in movies back home.

"Samwise, did you design this?" I asked, picking up the armor, turning it over some in my hands.

It was the same sort of Kevlar, polymer, and Alien Armor combination that Jackies was made of, though I could identify a few new ideas woven into the full form. Most of the armor was a dark blue, almost navy, with black bits behind the plating and similar gold highlights to what Jackie's armor and helmet had, probably to tie us together.

"Yes, based on the design you made for Jackie Welles, with the added knowledge of material sciences we gained from the Titanfall tree," He responded, turning to watch me. "Do you... like the color?"

"I do. It looks good," I nodded in appreciation. "Well done, Samewise, as usual. You've really been knocking it out of the park lately. If there is anything you want or need, just let me know. You've more than earned it at this point."

"I will, Sir," He assured me before gesturing to the armored underlayer. "Should we confirm that it fits?"

I nodded, and after a few minutes of going over how it went on, I quickly stripped down to my briefs and slipped inside. It was surprisingly easy to do, since when you were trying to put it on, you could activate a mode specifically programmed for that, in which the artificial muscles would activate and assist you by putting it on. Once I was completely inside the full suit, I could feel it sealing up behind me, locking in place before going through a start-up sequence, rhythmically squeezing and tensing around my whole body. It actually felt kind of good, so I made a mental note to try to program a massage mode.

I looked down at myself, flexing and stretching, watching the AA scales shift and move with my own movements. They honestly looked a lot like fish scales, though wound to the top of my underlayer, moving perfectly in sync with each other as I tested them. As far as I could tell, even in the full suite, I had a nearly perfect range of motion due to the modified scale shape around my joints.

"This... came out pretty good," I said, looking over at Samwise. "Well done again, buddy."

"I was simply following the design," He assured me. "Shall we try the body armor next?"

"Yeah, let's test the whole shebang."

Putting on the combat armor took quite a bit longer since it was broken up into normal clothing pieces, meaning pants, boots, and shirts. Several of the plates were detachable to help the armor on easier, but the required extra hands to clip on. With Samwise's help, it took five or six minutes to get everything on

"Okay, I can definitely feel this," I said, moving and walking around the garage, once again testing my range of motion. "It's not difficult to move, especially not with my strength being enhanced by the armored underlayer, but there is definitely some added bulk."

"Perhaps you should try it outside?" Samwise suggested. "Just be sure to tell the others before you do, however."

"I'll do it," Riggs said, pushing off the garage door. I had honestly forgotten he was there, the large bot standing silently in the shadow as we worked. "Should you wear the cloak?"

I looked over to where the cloak pack was hanging up on the wall, alongside the Holo Pilot pack. For a moment, I contemplated it before shaking my head.

"No, it's fine. I won't be doing anything anyone with cyberware wouldn't be able to do, plus there's no reason to hide it since I will be wearing this on any jobs Jackie finds us," I pointed out. "Doesn't really matter if they see it here or there."

"You won't be using the cloak on jobs?" Riggs asked, sounding surprised. "It's a massive advantage."

"For missions that require stealth, sure," I said with a nod. "But if a fixer wanted stealth, they wouldn't be hiring us. We are bruisers. We get sent in when the fixer wants us to make a mess."

Riggs considered the explanation before nodding cleanly. He then left without another word, most likely to find Murtaugh and Kaytlyn. After Samwise finished one last check, I stepped out into the sun, only to immediately spot Kaytlyn, Riggs, and Murtaugh waiting for me.

"Really?" I asked, rolling my eyes. "Don't you have more important things to do than watch me test this?"

"Considering there is a high likelihood you end up wiping out and looking stupid while you do it... Nope!" Kaytlyn said, smirking as she gave me a thumbs up. "Good luck, choom!"

"I am curious to see your new capabilities," Murtaugh said. "Knowing what your team is capable of is a crucial part of strategy."

"What he said," Riggs added simply, nodding to his sibling.

"Fine. But it's not going to be much different from my first time testing it out," I pointed out. "The armored underlayer should be functionally the same as the original underlayer, and the armor was designed to be as flexible as possible. Once I get the bone and muscle lace, I can jack up the enhancement levels, but until then..."

"We didn't see your first test," Kaytlyn pointed out, rolling her eyes and leaning against Murtaugh. "You were wearing your optical camo."

"..."

I chose to not respond to her statement, instead heading to the street. By instinct, I looked both ways, despite there being a snowball's chance in hell of a car going by. I stepped into the road and jogged along it, making several passes of the garage, just getting a feel for the movement and shifting of the armor and armored underlayer. Just as the previous iteration felt, I could feel the systems of artificial muscles working in tandem to reduce the wear on my muscles, supporting me as I jogged. When I started to speed up, the muscles gradually shifted from supporting me to enhancing me, letting me push my speed considerably past what I would normally be capable of. The downside, of course, was that with my body and the suit working together, I was actually working hard, meaning this enhanced speed had a time limit. It wasn't a small limit, maybe a couple minutes, but it was still something to keep an eye on.

Finally, once I finished with the running tests, I started testing my mobility. I turned off the main road and started running through the side streets, jumping over fences and scaling the trailer homes. I ran all over town, even doing a few risky jumps and flips, nearly eating shit in the process. It was a stupid thing to do since I had no training in acrobatics and I hadn't designed a helmet yet, but it had been too tempting not to try.

When I was finally done, I found myself sitting on the roof of the garage, my legs dangling off the side. I was recovering from the light workout, slowly sipping from a bottle of

water. Before I could finish it, the familiar sound of a motorcycle reached my ears, prompting me to look down the road, spotting Jackie immediately. He stopped in front of the garage and looked up at me, climbing off his ride. Before he could say anything, I slipped down from my spot and landed on the ground beside him, the suit easily handling the drop.

"Damn Choom, that your new armor?" He asked, peering around to see different angles. "It looks good. Like the colors, too."

"Thanks, Samwise picked them out," I responded before nodding inside. "Got something for you, too."

"Choom, come on, I'm already wearing the chest armor, and your helmet is nova," He responded, rolling his eyes. "I don't need a full suit like you. I like my look."

"Yeah, yeah, I know you do. And don't think I didn't catch that bullshit about not being scary, then immediately turn around and use the Ogre helmet I made you," I said, snorting when the larger man looked sheepish. "And I didn't make you any more armor, gonk. I made you one of the improved underlayers. It will increase your strength by a pretty solid percentage, especially since you have the weave lace combo already."

"So, this is going to make me stronger, and I just wear it under everything else?" He asked after accepting the larger set of armored underlayers."

"Yup. The only change in look will be your fists, but you can cover that with gloves," I assured him. "It's designed to be compatible with a lot of different clothes and armor."

"... How much stronger?" he asked, looking over the suit and at me.

"Well, it pushes me past peak human into a heavily chromed range," I explained. "With your weave and lace... You're going to be noticeably stronger than me. You can use my trailer to change if you're shy."

He rolled his eyes and quickly started to strip, taking care to hand Samwise his jacket so it wouldn't get dirty. Once he was in his briefs, I helped him into the suit, which fit him perfectly, thanks to Samwise being able to analyze stored footage of my friend to get his exact measurements. Once the suit was sealed around his body, he put the rest of his clothes back on.

"I don't feel very different, Genio," He said, looking down at his covered hands. "I can feel the suit working, which is... different, but I don't feel stronger."

"The system is smarter than that, Jackie. No need to relearn your own strength or anything like that," I explained. "C'mon, let's have some fun."

Both of us stepped out into the town, and I ran him through a bunch of running, jumping, and other exercises. Having dealt with strength increases before, he caught on pretty quickly, and even taught me a thing or two.



"If you're heavy, no amount of strength is gonna get your legs moving faster than a certain speed," He explained. "Never had to worry about it before, but guys like me and... borgs like Riggs, we gotta lope."

"... Lope?" I asked, looking at him with confusion. "What?"

"Look, it's what it's called," He said, shaking his head. "Instead of trying to move your legs faster and faster, you push off with more force. Oh, just watch you fucking gonk!"

I was still chuckling when he shook himself loose, leaning forward and pushing himself along the road with one leg. Rather than a normal run, he pushed each foot against the ground, one after the other. He was clearly leveraging his superior strength, with each "step" driving him further than a whole normal stride, rocketing him down the street. He only got faster as he leaned more and more into the suit's enhancements. Soon, he turned, actually rotating around mid "lope" to slide along the road, spraying sand as he came to a stop. Then he started moving towards me, picking up speed, each bound carrying him half a dozen or more feet forward.

"TAG!" He shouted when he was about fifteen feet away, giving me a split second to react, which was absolutely not enough time.

He slapped my shoulder, impacting an armor plate and spinning me around, barely slowing as he blew past me. I cursed and shouted at him before immediately giving chase, moving my legs as fast as they could. It was clear that while I was smaller and was probably technically faster, he had me beat on experience. Plus, he was probably working with at least double his already impressive strength, meaning he was reaching some incredible speeds. Of course, where he was a freight train, literally smashing through rather than going around, I was a zippy sports car, leaping and diving over obstacles. I was also picking it all up as I went.

Thankfully, I was a recently minted quick learner.

It took me seven minutes for me to get the first tag, then one minute to lose it again. The next time was five and two. By the time we were both exhausted, sweating heavily and breathing harder, it was much closer to even, with a slight lead time to Jackie.

Eventually, we made it back to the garage, both of us sitting heavily on the outdoor couch. Riggs was waiting for us, throwing us each a cold bottle of water.

Silently, we drank the cool liquid, both of us still a bit winded from our impromptu game of tag. Eventually, when we had recovered, Jackie gave me a look.

"Not bad, Genio," He said, thumping me on the back. "Not bad."