

I left the BD shack not long after Kaytlyn, exiting just in time to wave as she headed into the city. We needed a better view of the neighborhood around the Tyger Claws compound, so she would chip away at it over the next few days. Part of me was tempted to try and build some sort of invisible drone. It wouldn't even be that difficult. I already had a bunch of newly finished, half-invisible drones flying above the town. Unfortunately, while I could visually hide a drone, I could do nothing about silencing one. There were only so many ways to make something fly, and none of them were quiet. While I could make a halfway decent glider, surprisingly using plans from Become Human, they weren't really suited for the city environment.

That really only left the tried and true art of casing the joint.

After seeing Kaytlyn off, I made my way back to the garage. Samwise was working on molly-maker parts and preparing for the completion of the addition, which was still a day or so off. Duke followed behind me inside as I claimed an empty crate as my seat, watching Samwise carry a pair of parts from our medium molly-maker into the side room. He returned a moment later and paused, turning to me.

"Is everything alright, Jackson?" He asked, his forward screen blinking a question mark.

"Yeah, everything is fine," I responded. "I'm a bit nervous about the new gig Jackie found us, and I'm wondering what Sable is up to. Oh, and I'm trying to figure out what to work on next... But that's all fine. I can handle it."

Samwise looked at me for a few seconds before nodding in understanding.

"What would you like to work on next?" He asked, checking on the molly-makers before turning back to me. "Do you have anything you would like to make?"

"I don't know," I admitted with a shrug. "Anything big that I make would get in the way of the expansion, but beyond that... I've gotten used to having my tree provide guidance. With a bum tree... Not sure what I should build."

"Well... while our current production is taken up by preparing for expansion, your designing station is not," He pointed out. "If you complete the designs for various additions now, we will be able to produce them while you are working on the next tech tree."

"That's...Damn, Sam. That's a good point," I said, rubbing my chin. "Our next priority after getting the addition up and running is security and defenses..."

For a few minutes, I sat there and brainstormed. Murtaugh and Noah eventually joined in as we spitballed some design ideas to fortify the town. My head of security desperately wanted hardpoints, armored positions through the town to provide cover and serve as stations for heavier weapons. Noah also pointed out that reinforcing or replacing common structures would also be smart.

"Okay, our first priority will be hardpoints, a dozen of them in total, with half of that armed with heavier weapons," I decided, both Noah and Murtaugh nodding in agreement. "For now, I

want to keep them focused around the parts of the town we use, so you are free to tear down the trailers or clear out anything else to make them."

"A reasonable decision, trying to defend the whole town would stretch us thin," Murtaugh agreed. "I would prefer to have multiple lines of defense, but that is a good start."

"Exactly. Once the hard points are done, we can start building our own buildings. I say we tear up the parking lot and build a proper security station," I suggested. "Something tailor-built for its function, rather than just temporary housing."

"I will begin designing the plans in my downtime," Noah agreed. "I will likely need to collaborate with you, Murtaugh, as well as do some research on my own."

"Good, that's perfect. I want the security building to be a hard point in and of itself."

Murtaugh nodded appreciatively at that idea, while Noah seemed to take an interest in it, nodding a single time before I moved on.

"After that, when the security building is done, we can knock the current security building down and replace it with a visitor or meeting center, someplace where people can take breaks and where we can meet people," I explained. "And when *that's* done, we can tear down the BD shack and replace it with... well, actually, an apartment building might be nice. Nothing major, four or five apartments in a stack or something."

"Apartment building?" Noah asked. "Any particular reason?"

"Besides being spoiled and wanting a bigger place to live?" I asked with a chuckle. "I want more space for more people. I was thinking of looking for some more human security to add to our current roster. Plus, having a place for people to stay will always be handy."

"Very well. With proper production set up in the garage addition, we should be able to complete those tasks," Noah readily agreed. "Do we have a set timetable?"

"No, not quite yet," I explained. "Work on your designs, but focus on the addition. Once that's done, we can clear the parking lot, and if your design works, you can get started. It's difficult to plan so far ahead without knowing what will change in a week and a half. We should have plenty of production capability for what comes next, but I don't want to risk resources being taken up just in case."

"A buffer is sensible," Noah agreed. "But should we consider the hard points necessary?"

"Absolutely, yes. We desperately need to reinforce this town, and the hard points seem like a good first step," I agreed. "I plan on working on some heavier firepower the second we are done here."

We talked a bit more about potential options, and Noah brought up the idea of creating a second scrap truck. The first was paying dividends already, both in relieving the strain on our

resources and also in leveling out what we were low on. I was down to spending a tiny fraction of what I was paying for before, and my bank account could feel it.

"It's not a bad idea," I agreed. "Especially if we can get it done before the new tech tree. Okay, Samwise, see if you can't find a used Thornton like we have, and see if you can't convince them to deliver it for a few extra eddies. Converting it shouldn't be too difficult now that everything is designed, correct?"

"A MRVN could do most of it alone, Jackson," Samwise confirmed with a nod.

"Great... should also set up a resource building nearby too, Noah, someplace to store raw resources, rather than junk storage like the BD shack," I pointed out. "The closer to the garage, the better."

The conversation continued a bit after that before we went our separate ways. Noah got back to work on the addition, preparing to cut and lay down doors to connect it to the garage, while I got to work on a heavy weapon emplacement.

At this point, I was a master at creating mag weapons, having truly explored all levels of it, from pistols and submachine guns to snipers and cannons. It didn't take me long to put together a few ideas.

Rather than commit to making a jack-of-all-trades-style heavy weapon, I decided to split the idea into three chunks. The first would be anti-personnel, the second was anti-armor, and the third was anti-air. The [anti-personnel turret](#) was pretty easy since I could just take a mag rifle, beef it up by increasing its size, and apply Titanfall tech. I then borrowed inspiration from my world with a massive drum container of slugs for the weapon, fed directly into the weapon from a belt.

The finished product would be considerably more powerful than the standard mag rifle. In fact, I ended up cranking down the default power settings a bit in order to give it more fire time before it overheated.

The turret could easily be controlled by anyone, as it was pretty intuitive to use, but it could also be controlled by a system similar to the specters, heavily modified with Spot's help. It was a perfectly safe system, which Murtaugh had control over through the security station. They would be connected by a hardline, meaning no chance of being hacked. Its "brain" was stored in the base of the turret and would use sensors built into the weapon to read out targets.

Turret number two, the anti-armor option, was based around Rigg's cannon, at least at its core. I took the design for that and upscaled it as best I could. This was not a weapon we would be firing willy-nilly, so I didn't bother with in-person controls. Instead, the security station would designate targets. Since I didn't need to worry about making it people-friendly, I could beef it up and [make the system robust](#). I was confident these turrets could take down tanks,

firing massive metal slugs the size of my forearm. Hell, I was pretty sure one of these cannons could probably hit Arasaka Tower from anywhere in the Ridge.

I would probably keep them hidden until they were necessary.

It was with the final design that I first hesitated. Anti-Air was a bit of a misnomer, since its purpose would not be to take down aircraft. The anti-armor cannon would be more than capable of doing that, especially if I put them on the rooftops of our new buildings. No, the Anti-Air would be responsible for stopping missile barrages, which was why I hesitated.

Back home, one of the more common anti-missile systems was called the [Centurion C-Ram](#). The system basically brute forces its way through the issue of bullet drift, firing an insane amount of projectiles in order to take down incoming missiles. It was practical and effective, for sure, but wasteful and... inelegant.

I, on the other hand, have access to laser weaponry that was nearly one hundred percent accurate, as long as it is fired from a perfectly stable weapon system. The XCOM laser rifles could be upscaled considerably with Titanfall tech, and with the right sensors, I could shoot down hundreds of missiles with just a few turrets.

Of course, that would mean revealing that I have access to laser weaponry.

Then again, if we were under attack by a missile barrage, or even just one large missile, shit had already hit the fan, and hiding what I could do would be pointless. On top of that, this world had lasers already. In fact, this is precisely the scenario in which it wouldn't be strange to see a laser in use. A big, nonportable turret connected to a large power generator and used to hit quick, distant targets.

After running the idea by Samwise, who agreed with my logic, I finally decided to go with the laser defense grid rather than downscaling to a system similar to the Centurion.

Unfortunately, I wasn't nearly as familiar with laser weapons as I was with mag or coil. Thankfully, I still had plenty to go off of. I started with a simple upscale, mixing in more advanced materials and upping the energy outputs as much as I could, all while still maintaining a fast fire rate. With a bit of tweaking to the energy input cycler, I was able to design a system that would continuously fire the powerful red laser rather than settle for individual blasts.

The more I worked, the more I realized that the most challenging part of the project was going to be designing the sensor and programs that would direct the weapon to the target. Hell, even coming up with a gearing system that could handle swinging the turret around at high speed to track missiles was going to be more difficult than actually getting that much power out of the laser system. I managed to finish the [turret design](#) by the end of the day. Thankfully, Samwise agreed to work on the programming and sensor system while I was asleep.

I did manage to design the disguise for the defensive weapon, which basically equated to a large metal box design to look like an innocuous piece of rooftop equipment. On command, a series of explosive pins would fire, slamming open the box in seconds. After all, when trying to

shoot down a missile, even waiting a moment or two for something to open up or move out of the way was unacceptable.

By the time I finished up the physical design of the turret and disguise, it was getting pretty late. After thanking Samwise for volunteering to finish the programming and sensor system design, I made what was becoming my usual rounds. I spent an hour walking around, talking to everyone and making sure everything was in order, before heading back to my trailer. Duke followed me around, of course, running around the streets, sniffing and picking at everything he could get at. I had to admit, even as the one who programmed and designed it, he was an incredible facsimile of a real dog.

When I finally climbed into my trailer, the cool air of the climate-controlled space pushing at me from the interior, I couldn't help but let out a long sigh. The night in the badlands tended to cool off nicely, but even that was far from what I preferred to relax and sleep in. Duke followed me inside before I locked up and flopped down into my bed. I laughed when Duke tried to jump into bed as well.

"No, you big lug, you're not allowed in the bed," I said to the dog, who rolled off with a huff. "You've been running through the whole town, stepping in who knows what. I'll come up with a way to keep you clean, but until then, floor only."

He barked and whined before eventually settling down near the door, curling up and pretending to close his eyes. I knew for a fact that he never really shut off and was now in a deep scanning mode, feeling for every sound and vibration.

I also knew he didn't actually want to stay on the bed, as that would impede his scans a bunch. He would have waited until I was asleep before crawling off to the ground.

Early the next morning, after getting a wake-up call from Duke in the form of him nudging me with his snout and barking relatively softly, I got ready for the day, quickly washing up and getting dressed. Jackie and my own appointment with Vik was scheduled pretty early, and I didn't want to be late.

As I stepped out of my trailer and turned to shut the door, I spotted something stapled to it. It was a piece of paper, folded up and stuck firmly to the fake wooden exterior. I reached out and pulled it free carefully, unfolding it to find the image of a black cat, with "Don't Forget" written on it, underlined several times.

I snorted and shook my head, refolding the image and sliding it into a pocket to use as a reference later. I would get to work on Kaytlyn's gift after I got home, barring any other projects coming up. Her officially joining the... whatever all of this was meant a lot to me, so I wanted to make her something special. I already had a few ideas. I just had to get them all to fit.

I waved to Murtaugh and Riggs, who were both up and about, before climbing into the Chevillion. Once again, I made a mental note to find something less ostentatious and more easily drivable. I had some vague ideas of turning the truck into our mission vehicle, armoring its

paneling and reinforcing its interior, and maybe even wholly replacing its engine. It would be nice to have a vehicle I knew could take everything I could throw at it.

That said, I might actually be better off just building something from scratch. Become Human had plenty of truck designs I could use to gain knowledge of vehicle making., but those would be pretty serious projects, especially with most of our resources focused on the addition.

With Duke sitting in the back, I pulled out from under the garage's canopy, heading down the asphalt road to Night City. Riggs nodded as I passed, but Murtaugh and the three specters with him rigidly saluted until we left the town behind.

"Alright, Duke, you're going to have to be in incognito mode while we are in Night City," I said as I reached behind to scratch his head. "I know it sucks, but I can't have anyone catching on to what you can do just yet."

He let out a bark and quickly went rigid, enough that I could tell just by scratching his head that he had switched modes. The drive to Jackie and Mama Welles's house wasn't too long, and when I arrived, Jackie was waiting for me. For once, he wasn't wearing his ever-present jacket. Instead, he settled for a simple t-shirt with some sort of TV show image on it.

He climbed into the passenger seat without a word, and that alone was enough to show how tense he was about this.

"You alright?" I asked as we pulled away, heading directly for Vik's.

"Yeah, I'm good," He responded with a nod. He paused for a second before continuing, shaking his head. "Sandys have a reputation for doing bad things to people. Some people can handle them, some people can't."

"You're going to be staying at the Ridge until you are stable and healed. Frank will keep an eye on you during your recovery," I assured him. "He will see any negative side effects a mile away."

"That's not what I'm worried about, Genio," He said, shaking his head. "It's not required, but cyberware like Kerens or Sandys is how people like me make it to the big leagues. If I'm not compatible, how the hell am I gonna hack it?"

"By letting me kit you out, dumbass," I said, punching him lightly in the shoulder. "What we have so far is just the start. Do you really think I have any plans to stop making sure we have the best gear in Night City? I have no idea what's next, but I can tell you that what we have so far? That is just the fucking start. And if you can't use a Sandy, I'll just have to make you something better."

For a moment, Jackie just looked at me before he chuckled and shook his head.

"You know, choom, if anyone else had said that, I'd tell them they were full of shit," He admitted with a smirk. "But I don't doubt you for a second."

The rest of the ride was a lot less tense, and by the time I parked in the usual spot, we were chatting casually. After arriving at the parking lot, it was just a short walk to Vik's shop. Duke got quite a few stares, but no one was freaking out as the robot stiffly followed behind both Jackie and I. We ignored the stares, and instead of focusing on getting to Vik's

Since Misty hadn't opened up her shop yet, we entered through the alley, making our way down the steps into Vik's domain. The security gate was already opened, and the interior of his setup was very different from the last time I had stopped by. The medical chair, which usually sat in the middle of the room, was off to the side, replaced by a gurney designed specifically for someone lying face down taking its place. Several different pieces of medical equipment were set up around it, the whole space having a recently sterilized feel to it. I could even smell it in the air.

After a moment of standing alone in the front room, Vik appeared from the back, spotting us as he walked in.

"Hey guys, right on time," He said, shaking our hands. "I'm gonna take care of your muscle lace first, Jackson, since that- What in God's name is that?"

Duke had finally made his way to us, having finished navigating the stairs and entering the ripper docs space. The canine construct gave a bark, but rather than the impressive imitation he usually did, he just opened his mouth, and a speaker played a poorly compressed recording of a bark.

"That's Duke," I explained. "Companion and bodyguard. Built him myself."

"That's... he looks impressive," He admitted, which got a snort out of Jackie, causing the ripper to frown. "What?"

I smirked and whistled, Duke instantly dropping his restricted movement. He began sniffing and inspecting the room, though he never went more than a few feet from me. Vik's eyes went wide as we watched him move around.

"What... What the hell?" He asked, still clearly shocked. "How... what?"

"It's just a bit of artificial muscle and some really fancy programming," I assured him with a shrug. "Oh, and some powerful gyroscopes. Can't let people get too curious, though, so he has an incognito mode to appear less advanced."

By now, Duke was done investigating the area, so he approached Vik. After a moment of looking down at the robot, the ripper reached down and ran his hand over Duke's head, scratching behind his ear. It was actually kind of interesting how quickly people adapted to Duke's presence. Dogs and cats were all but extinct in this world, as were a terrifying amount of other animals. Plenty of people in this world had gone their entire lives, having never seen any mammals besides humans. And yet, every biological person I had introduced Duke to so far immediately knew to scratch his head, especially by his ears. Granted, my sample size was

three people so far, and I knew dogs showed up in movies that survived the datakrash, but it was still interesting.

"That is... Remarkable," Vik said, his genuine amazement clear in his voice. "It seems so life-like, so fluid... It is better than most cybernetics..."

"If you look closely, there aren't any servos, it's all artificial muscles. I developed some advancements that... Well, let's just say he is a lot stronger than he looks, and his movement is more fluid as a result."

For a moment, Vik was focused on just petting Duke. After a full minute, he shook his head and focused on us, a smile on his face.

"You did mention you were making some impressive stuff, guess you weren't joking," He responded before gesturing to me. "I'm going to start with you, Jackson. Your muscle lace will only take a few dozen injections, and then you'll be done."

"Sure, what kind of symptoms are we looking at?"

"Muscle lace will feel like an extreme workout for several hours after the injection," Vik explained as he guided me to the normal medical chair, which was now set off to the side. "That will slowly fade over time. Getting rid of it is similar, but instead of fading, it gets worse."

I nodded at his explanation and sat down on the chair while Vik went off to find the injections, returning with the same sort of case the other treatments had been in. He laid it on the table and cracked it open, revealing, unsurprisingly, [injectors](#) that were very similar to what the bone lace had been in.

"Alright, kiddo, this is gonna sting, but not nearly as bad as the bone lace," He warned me. "You're also free to move, as this step is much safer as well. The worst that could happen is some extra bruising."

I nodded, and after a moment of prep, he got to work. He made around forty injections in total, moving much quicker than he did with the bone lace. Each injection was like a deep muscle shot from back home, and I quickly began to feel the pain and soreness he had described spreading throughout all of my muscles. After he was done, we sat for around twenty minutes so he could check the initial progress.

"Alright, Jackson, the nanites are behaving normally, I'm happy with the results so far," He commented. "I'm going to start on Jackie's surgery, and when that's done, and he is sleeping off the sedation, we can run another test."

"Sounds good."

Vik quickly got Jackie situated, the large man lying face down on the gurney. The ripper doc once again went over the general procedure, explaining, in broad terms, the steps he would be taking. He also agreed that I could watch as long as I stayed more than eight feet away, so



even if I tripped, I wouldn't hit anything important. When he was done explaining everything, Jackie gave the final okay, and Vik injected the sedative.

Once Jackie was out, Vik prepared his setup and wiped down his back, getting everything ready for the surgery. About twenty minutes after Jackie was out, he began to actually cut into him.

The process was just about what you would expect when installing an invasive implant like a Sandevistan, starting by removing a strip of skin along Jackie's back and neck. From what I remembered from the clips of Edgerunners I had seen, the main character's Sandy had required the entire removal of his spine, an insane concept in and of itself. While I didn't know the whole story, I did know that the version that Jackie was getting was not that intense. It was more of a commitment than the "civilian" version that was much more widely available, but it did not require the whole spine to be removed.

Instead, the cyberware was grafted to the back of the neck and down, all the way to where the cervical vertebrae stopped, and the thoracic began. I watched as, slowly but surely, Vik removed the top third of each cervical vertebra, giving running dialogue as he did. He then injected each one with specially designed lacing nanites, which would radically toughen those specific bones.

Once the removal process was complete, he began attaching the implants to the nervous system precisely, pushing and weaving them into Jackie's now exposed central nervous system. Those got a dose of nanites as well, with the intent to help them heal together rather than rejecting them. The final step, nearly two and a half hours after Vik began, was to affix the new spine pieces and seal everything up by affixing the outer plate.

All in all, the process took three and a half hours. When it was finally done, Vik and I both shared a drink, me a beer, and him a water, while he recovered. Jackie was still lying down, the back of his neck and upper spine now replaced by realskinn, the telltale lines of cyberware outlining his new implant.

"Impressive work, Doc," I said, both of us sitting, watching over the still-unconscious Jackie. "Do you do that often?"

"I've put in a few dozen civilian models over my career and a few military models like this one," He admitted. "Had to remove about half as many. To be honest, I probably should have removed more of them. They aren't good for most people."

"I have faith," I said, getting a scoff in return. "And I'll be keeping an eye on him for the next few days, and we have someone on hand who can identify any issues that pop up. They could even remove it if it is a huge problem, but most likely, we will come to you for that."

"You have a ripper at the Ridge?" He asked, a bit surprised. "How did you manage that?"

"I built one," I said with a smirk, laughing at Vik's expression. "They aren't really a ripper. They just know enough to treat people who have cyberware. They could install them if they had to, but unless it was life-saving or quality-of-life-improving, they would likely refuse.

About an hour later, Jackie finally started to come around. Vik handed me a bag of meds and sprays that Jackie would need to take for a while before he helped me carry him out of the clinic. I used my keyfob to summon the truck, which showed up about five minutes later. Jackie laid down on his stomach in the back seat while Duke stiffly climbed into the passenger seat.

A quick goodbye to Vik later later, and we were headed back to the Ridge.