

By the time Chuck finally showed up the next afternoon, Samwise and I had five different boxes filled with Become Human android parts. It was more than I originally intended, but since I was already pumping them out like crazy, I figured I should really saturate the branch. That way, there was really no way I wouldn't get everything about them downloaded, which meant I could be done with the entire tech tree.

In two days.

Again, I would probably build a few things here or there just to get access to some stuff, but in all likelihood, these androids were all the "major" projects I would touch from this universe. With them done, I could focus on other things. In fact, Samwise and I had been brainstorming, and while some of the bigger projects, like fortifying the town, would have to wait for more money to come in, there were plenty of things I could build on the small scale to keep busy. This was no longer a break week after all, even if the tech tree was kinda useless.

My mercury came in at around a few hours before noon, along with a delivery of basic foodstuff and toiletries. It was actually Robin, the other "scrounger" that Dakota Smith introduced us to, who ended up making the delivery. We didn't do much business with her as she mainly dealt with "specialty items," but apparently, several containers of mercury counted as special.

The thirium took a half hour to make, and after that, the thirium 310 took another twenty minutes. The process was actually relatively simple and cheap, all things considered. I got the feeling that the Become Human reality would have *killed* for a way to just make the material, even if mercury was a particularly unpleasant element to work with.

Luckily, the transition to thirium and thirium 310 actually made the metal safer, which meant I wouldn't feel bad about storing it away when I was done with it. Samwise started testing the empty container the dense metal arrived in as soon as I emptied it, to make sure it was safe for long-term storage.

Once the blue android blood was done, I got Riggs and Murtaugh to seal off the garage. Riggs took up position by the front while various specters waited around the other entrances, including the roof. It looked suspicious as hell, but it was better than people learning that I could make these sorts of androids.

When we were ready, Samwise and I quickly put together the first android, connecting its bright white limbs together, installing its several biocomponents, and finally inserting its "brain." Finally, I poured in the appropriate amount of Thirium 310 for this model. Only then was I finally rewarded with a decent download of information.

The liquid skin system they used to camouflage the androids was indeed interesting, and if I ever decided to create androids who could hide among humans, I would likely end up using it, or at least a derivative. There were also several micromotor systems that were interesting, as well as a few bits and bobs that might come in handy later.

I also received a bit of a surprise. While I knew that building certain things came with information on the creation process, even tangentially, I didn't expect a large amount of information on how to make robotics *seem* biological. It made sense, as the creators of the androids were clearly trying to make them as human as possible. On the other hand, experiencing an entire library of sculpting, sizing, and even artistic concepts downloaded to my brain was pretty unique.

I now knew more about freckle placement than I ever really needed.

With the download complete, we began disassembling the android. First, we drained the thirium 310, before disassembling the rest of the components and finally tossing the entire box into the mass recycler. It was a bit gruesome to watch it shred human-looking limbs, even ones that were pure white, but it was better than being caught with them.

We continued that process for three or four hours, assembling the androids, reviewing the information download, and then destroying the android.

While I was really not impressed by quite a few of the design choices that Cyberlife, the in-universe company that produced Become Human androids, I did have to admit that, for the time period they came from, they really weren't *bad* engineering. If you ignored the ridiculousness of so stringently sticking to the idea of false biological design, the science and technology behind them was cutting edge, at least when compared to the rest of that world's tree.

I just wish the rest of the tree could be more interesting.

When Sam and I were finally done, and the last androids, a pair of animal analogs, were disassembled and dropped into the mass recycler, I sat down back at my workstation. One of the androids had been a nearly perfect recreation of a wolf, meant for display and educational purposes. The programming for it had actually been pretty amazing, and now that I had it downloaded to my brain permanently, it left me wanting to take a crack at my own companion.

I had no intention of making something that looked like a natural dog, since I would have people kicking down my door by the end of the day. Instead, I would be building an obvious robotic canine companion, something that looked cool and could serve as a bodyguard unit.

I had barely started the initial design process when my radio clicked on.

"Jackson, this is Murtaugh," the AI's familiar voice called out. "We have a visitor at the front end of town."

I frowned, picking up the radio and tapping the on button.

"I read you, Murtaugh, what's going on?"

"A woman just pulled up just on the outskirts of the town. She stepped out of her car and is sitting on the hood, just waiting," He responded. "She looks like a corpo, Sir."

A shiver of panic raced up my spine. Was this it? Had they finally caught on? We weren't nearly ready enough to fight off even a small corporation at the moment. I cursed and racked my brain, trying to think what could be going on. When I couldn't come up with anything, I shook my head.

"Why didn't the sensor grid pick her up?"

"It did, Sir," He responded. "She was driving too to react before she was already too close. Plus, we have standing orders not to fire unless fired upon."

"...We need to extend the scanning area, and go over SOP..." I mumbled to myself before speaking up into the radio. "Lock the town down, turn on all the specters, and get them all armed and ready to go, but keep the hidden ones indoors. Get Kaytlyn up high and armed if she isn't already. Call Jackie and ask him if he invited someone out here and forgot. I'll be out in a minute."

Samwise was already preparing my armored underlayer, allowing me to slip inside easily. I quickly threw my clothes back on over that, resisting the urge to armor up completely, my clothes obscuring a good amount of the armor under it. The last thing I did before stepping outside and starting to make my way down the road was wrap my holster around my hip, my mag pistol charged and ready.

As I walked down the asphalt and got closer, I could see that Murtaugh's description was unsurprisingly accurate. A woman, just around my height, maybe a bit taller, was leaning back and sitting on the hood of her car, a [Rayfield Caliburn](#). I as I walked, I passed Riggs, who was leaning against the corner of the BD shack, and Murtaugh, who was standing beside the security building, a pair of armed specters on either side of him. When I got within a few feet of the woman, she pushed up from the hood of her car.

She was certainly striking, with long white hair and blood-red fingernails. Her hands showed the telltale sign of being cyberware, the kind that was meant to be seen rather than the hidden variations that most corpo's seemed to prefer. Her chest, a good bit of which was shown off by a deeply unbuttoned dress shirt and suit combo, was covered in a black phoenix tattoo.

Her eyes, though, were what really caught me. They were like pure liquid gold poured around her pupil. Despite their impossible color, they lacked the dullness that most ocular cyberware had.

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say you are Jackson," She stated, dropping a cigarette to the ground and putting it out with the tip of her red high heels. "My name is Sable Arcturus. I've come to talk."

"Is that it?" I asked, eyes trailing over the dry landscape around us.

"You don't have to worry about anyone else," She assured me, shaking her head with an understanding smile on her lips. "I'm all alone, you have my word."

"I don't know you, so your word isn't worth much," I explained, considering what she did for a moment before shrugging. "Alright, I'll hear you out."

I turned back to the town, gesturing for her to follow. I desperately wanted to tell her to fuck off, but I couldn't afford to piss her off until I knew what she wanted.

I could hear the clacking of her heels as she did, following behind me without another word. I brought her into the BD shack, which, at this point, was mostly empty. The door to Frank's office was closed, and most of the stuff we kept in the building was in the back rooms. Other than a few crates, the interior was clean, save a table and a few chairs, where Kaytlyn, Murtaugh, and Riggs would take breaks. I silently sat down on one side of the table, facing the door, while Sable sat on the other. Just as we were sitting down, Murtaugh and Riggs stepped inside.

"Something to drink?" I asked simply, the woman raising an eyebrow at my question.

"No, unless you have some actual clean water."

I looked up at Murtaugh, who nodded and pulled up his radio, whispering into it as I focused back on the woman. She looked calm as a cucumber, completely at ease with her situation. She was either a lot tougher than she seemed, or she was a good actor.

"Well, Ms Arcturus. You said you wanted to talk."

"I did," She confirmed, leaning back in her seat.

From somewhere on her person, she pulled out another cigarette and slid it into the corner of her mouth. She snapped her fingers, her nails sparking like a ferrous rod as she did, lighting the cigarette in a flash. She pulled from it softly, all the while not breaking eye contact with me for a second.

"I originally sought you and your friends out to pay my debts," She explained. "You see, not too long ago, I had an unfortunate run-in with a pair of scavs. Imagine my surprise when I wake up to a Valentino hitting me with a Max Doc."

"You were in that last truck we stopped?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Unfortunately."

"And out of the goodness of your heart, you came to find us, to... Pay your debt?"

"You saved my life, isn't that a debt?"

I stared back at the woman, raising an eyebrow at her. For a moment, she just looked back at me before a small smile broke out on her lips, and she chuckled, flicking off a spot of ash from her cigarette.

"Well, at least you're not stupid," She praised lightly. "I had planned on paying you for saving me, more as an investment than anything. Assets good enough to take on a scav den with ten-to-one odds are worth knowing."

Before I could respond, Murtaugh's radio beeped. Riggs and he stepped aside, letting Jackie step in, pushing through the double door. He looked a little wind-swept, but his face was all business. He was even wearing his armored undersuit. He stepped closer and put a pitcher of water on the table, as well as three glasses filled with ice, before sitting next to me.

"This is Jackie," I explained, gesturing to him. "He is the driving force behind most of our gigs."

She said nothing, eyeing up the larger-than-life man before pouring herself a glass of water. Somehow, she managed to look dangerous, even when doing that. She took a sip from her glass, the ice cubes clinking in her glass. When she tasted it, she shook her head and put the glass down.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You use Nomad for materials gathering. It makes sense you got some of their new electrocondensers," She said, shaking her head. "They give you the design, or did you find it online and make it yourself?"

"I made it myself," I responded. "I believe you were explaining why you are here?"

She looked ready to move on from the subject, but at the double entendre that I had made the electrocondensers myself, Jackie looked over at me just long enough for Sable to notice. I could see the moment she connected the dots, her eyes widening before she let out a laugh, while I couldn't help but wince.

"You designed them, didn't you?" She asked, laughing again when I shrugged, a chuckle that sounded smooth as syrup. "You know that device has already bankrupted four companies, right? With half a dozen more slowly dying as they try to make up the deficit? Several billion eddies swirling down the drain because suddenly the entire world has access to crystal clear, perfectly pure water."

"What can I say? I like sticking it to the man," I said, keeping my eyes on her despite Murtaugh shifting behind her. "I'm surprised it's not more, to be honest."

The strategy-focused AI immediately identified the same problem I had. If she knew I designed the electrocondenser, and it had caused that much damage, then letting her spread that knowledge around was as good as spraying my brains all over the table. The AI had his hand on his pistol, waiting for the order to solve the problem.

"Not a lot of money in water," She shrugged. "The profit margins are too tight, you see, since it costs too much to clean it. Well, it did, at any rate. Still, congratulations, not many people can claim to have a hit list that deep, especially someone who isn't a corpo. You beat me out with one invention."

She mimed cheering me with her glass, before finishing it in one gulp. She leaned back in her chair and returned her cigarette to her mouth, the tip glowing again as she pulled in the smoke.

"I suppose I should get to the point, though, before your man behind me finishes drawing that pistol," She said, her gaze not moving from me. "I originally sought you out to form a connection with an up-and-coming team of wet work specialists. Then, I got my first glimpse of you guys actually doing your jobs."

She seemed to take pleasure in her pauses, pulling from her cigarette and shifting in her chair. She was obviously playing some sort of game, but I focused on her words and tried my best not to play.

"All your gear, even all your weapons, are custom," She explained. "That doesn't stand out too much on its own, since plenty of edgerunners and solos make their own gear and armor. Though, the fact that it works does stand out. But something about you guys piqued my interest. So rather than just dropping some eddies and filing your number away for a rainy day, I decided to do my due diligence."

She leaned forward, her face pushing through the cloud of smoke she had created around herself.

"Imagine my surprise when I found records of you buying a whole bunch of land out here," She continued, gesturing around us with her free hand. "Didn't take too much after that to satisfy my curiosity, just a chair and a pair of binoculars on one of the windmills up on the ridge. I saw all sorts of interesting things."

The implication of what she had seen hung heavily over my head. I was pretty sure she hadn't seen the androids, but depending on how long she had been watching, she could have seen plenty of impressive stuff. Stuff that a lot of corporations would kill to get their hands on.

"What do you want?" I asked, already wondering just how far I would have to run before her and whoever she represented would stop chasing me.

"I want in." She said cleanly and without hesitation, her admission catching me off guard.

"W-what?"

"I. Want. In." She repeated, jabbing the table, her perfectly manicured fingernail carving into the metal. "I may not have the specialties required to know exactly how all the things you are building here are impressive, but I have more than enough experience to know a gold mine when I see one. And you, Jackson? Are a gold mine."

I was perfectly aware of how insanely valuable my ability was, and even if she had been observing me, I doubted her estimations. That said, her admission of wanting "in" was surprising.

"Do you have a resume?" I asked, raising my eyebrow as I met her stare. She scoffed, but made a quick gesture with her hand.

I was wondering what she was doing when I looked over at Jackie, whose eyes glowed as he received a file. For a moment, he was silent.

"... I have no idea what half of this means, Jackson," He admitted after a long pause.

I raised my hand and rubbed my eyes, eventually focusing back on the woman, Sable, as she sat there innocently, with an expression that said butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"Why exactly should we let you in on anything?" I asked, moving past Jackie's admission. "You found us, congrats. Did you think we would just invite you in with open arms?"

"Of course not," she responded, sounding offended by my assumption. "Listen, despite what the rumors about corpos might say, I'm not an idiot. I know you have no reason to trust my integrity. But I do have something of a plan that I think you might want to hear."

"I'm more interested in knowing why you want to hitch yourself to our wagon," I asked. "You're clearly not some new blood trying to make a name for yourself. So... why?"

"Well... in some ways, I am," She responded. "You see, I belong to a... well-known family. Nothing close to some of the big families, but enough that I am recognized in corpo circles. I worked for the last fifteen years in various executive jobs, both leading companies and working behind the scenes. But the truth is, it was never mine. The wealth, the clout, the power. It was all attached to the family name. I fucking hated it."

For the first time since arriving, the corpo woman lost just a sliver of her self-control. Her smooth, cold visage cracked, revealing a passion underneath that would have burned me if it could.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not some controlling executive looking to push her pawns into place on the threat of harm," She assured us. "But the world of business is a cut-throat place, and being able to threaten someone properly without making a call back home first..."

She shook her head, once again drawing from her cigarette. She scowled when she realized it was dead, before flicking it into the cigarette receptacle by the door... nearly ten feet away. She casually turned back to us and continued without missing a beat.

"The truth is, I want my own power, my own wealth. No more driving my father's cars or working a job his name got for me," She explained. "As for why I'm coming directly for you... I might have quit my last job rather suddenly. I'm burning time before I need to start finding work."

"Explains the lack of Trauma Team saving you from the scav," I said. "Let me guess, you defaulted to the package offered through your job instead of the one your family would have paid for?"

For a moment, a flash of embarrassment and something deeper flashed across her face. Despite not exactly being friendly with her, I regretted my words. I can't imagine many things more terrifying than falling prey to scavengers like that, and slapping her in the face with it like that was a bit cruel.

"You said you had a plan?" I asked, crossing my arms and leaning back on the surprisingly comfortable chair.

"Of course," She said with a smirk, leaning forward. "Now, I only watched you for a handful of days, so I don't know everything you've been making. But I did get a good look at you assembling those combat robots. Think you could bring one of them in here?"

I raised an eyebrow but shrugged, nodding to Murtaugh behind her. He nodded back and spoke into his radio, a single specter walking in after a few seconds.

"Specter, come stand here at attention," I ordered, the robot nodding and moving, standing beside the table.

"Not bad," She commented, looking over the beefy combat drone. "Now, I've seen a few of Arasaka robots. They are clumsy and top-heavy and require constant attention to keep from going on a rampage once you tell them to open fire. These things, though. They are different, I can tell just by looking at them. They seem more refined, more stable, and more resilient. Your construction drones are the same way. I watched them put together whatever it was you built into that old truck. They might as well have been people."

"I'm aware of how advanced what I make is," I agreed with a frown.

"Good. I hope you're also aware that selling one of those on the market would be disastrous. Arasaka would be on your ass in hours."

"I assume someone spying on me and letting slip what they saw would have the same effect."

"Of course, once they verified the claim, at least," She admitted easily. "But I have no reason to do that. I don't work for them, and I want to work *with you*."

She stood and walked around the robot, the combat drone staying perfectly still as she did.

"So selling it as a package is out of the question, at least for now. But that doesn't mean you don't have options," She explained before pointing down at the specter's elbow. "I assume this servo is better than normal? Improved somehow?"

"Of course, I had to design them all from scratch," I explained.

"By how much?" she asked, still looking at the robot, eventually turning back when I didn't answer her. "How much more effective is it than a standard?"



I frowned and mentally compared what I would have access to here and what I designed from the Titanfall branch. Titanfall servos were actually one of the more impressive bits of their tech. Cyberpunk had the leg up in terms of miniaturization, but Titanfall servomotors were significantly more precise and robust.

"Significantly," I responded. "It is significantly better than anything on the market."

"Hmm... That won't work... How about whatever is letting them walk around so smoothly?" She asked.

"That's at least partially due to the servomotors, but... the gyroscope is what lets them keep their balance," I admitted. "It is not too different from what's in Arasaka bots."

"But better?"

"By ten, maybe fifteen percent. They also have multiple of them," I responded. "Why? What's the point?"

"The point is that selling a full-sized product that is filled with advancements and new tech is a bad idea. It would draw a lot of attention, and too much of that before you're ready is going to get you eaten by a shark," She explained. "That's bad for you because, well, your freedom is gone. Bad for your friends too, because they will be broke or dead, probably both. And it's bad for me, because my ticket to being more than my name is now under Arasaka or Militechs thumb."

She made her way back to her seat, sitting down in it with a cool smile on her lips.

"However, selling a part? Like a gyroscope that's only fifteen percent better? Or a sensor that's ten percent? That slips under the radar."

"How? Even ten percent is a huge margin for improvement, especially for something like a gyroscope or a sensor," I explained, shaking my head. "Engineers would kill for that kind of improvement."

"*Exactly*. You make a flashy car, a scary robot, or a weapon that blows people away, and you're going to have all sorts of trouble on your doorstep, desperate to get you to make things for them," She explained. "If you make a part that works a bit better, or is cheaper, or is smaller, *engineers* will be desperately buying your stuff, and they won't say a word."

"Because anything they create, they get credit for," I continued, the woman nodding as I guessed correctly. "If my part makes their creations better, it's in their best interest to suppress that for as long as possible."

"Well done," She said with a wink. "Always nice to work with someone who can keep up. Of course, that won't work forever. Eventually, someone upstairs will ask why they are spending money on a license or an expensive part, when they could make it in-house or something like that. But it will buy you time and earn you a lot of money in the meantime."

"Money is not my main concern."

"It's not mine either," She agreed. "We may be chasing it for different reasons, Jackson, but what we both want is power. And that's where I will earn my keep. By selling our products to as many companies as possible, we build a base of people who need us to be independent. Suppose you're making a servo that Militech, Arasaka, and seven other companies use in a variety of lucrative products. If all of them need your parts, any one of them moving in to secure you for themselves is going to piss off the rest. We can wear our success like a shield as long as we are careful."

"Go too far, and they won't care about the fallout," Jackie guessed, nodding his head. "They'll just grab you anyway."

"There's nothing certain in the corporate world," Sable admitted, tapping her nails on the table. "But having a plan is the first step to keeping yourself out of trouble."

"...So, let me get this straight," I said after a long pause. "You want to work with us because you believe we are going places, and you want in on the ride. Your plan to help is to take some of the parts from my inventions, and sell them around in order to make money and defend from corporate takeover, hostile or not. And you expect us to just trust your word?"

"No, of course not," She said with no hesitation. "Listen, I get it. Cold corpo knocks on your door, and you have no reason to trust her. That's fine. I don't need you to trust my integrity or my word. For now, just trust my greed. I want a part of this because I have seen what you are capable of making, Jackson, and my instincts tell me this is just the tip of the iceberg. I know the truth about the golden goose, and I want to be around to make money off those eggs for as long as possible, and that can't happen if I flip you guys over for a quick buck."