

SPOILERS - This chapter, and potentially the following chapters, contains spoilers for the universe that Jackson gets his second tech tree from. What that universe is is revealed first, so you don't worry about surprise spoilers as long as you're reading in order.

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Jackie left about an hour after mentioning a new job, and I immediately returned to bed. I knew from past experiences that surgery, no matter how minor, could really mess with your energy levels. From the same past experiences, I also knew that this was nothing compared to what it should have been. I felt tired, sure, but not utterly drained. Between the drugs that Vik gave me and the nano-surgeon hive already starting to work, healing the damage caused by its own installation, I was in much better condition than I had any right to be.

Still, even with that leg up, I could tell that my body needed sleep, and with nothing else to really do, I decided my best option was to give it what it wanted.

I woke up to Spot pulling on my shirt, trying to wake me up. It was dark, and a quick look at the nearest device told me it was eleven fifty-eight, so Spot had been trying to wake me up gently for a few minutes before finally resorting to shaking me awake.

"Thanks, buddy," I said, slowly shifting to the edge of my bed and rubbing my face. "Waking up like before would have been fucking awful."

I spent a minute or so sitting there, testing my body and seeing how it felt before I stood and slowly made my way to my workshop. I sat down in my chair, turning on my computer as I did, mostly by habit. When I was comfortable, I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, focusing back into my mind. I could still feel the timer, and as I focused on it, I could feel it counting down.

I was relatively sure I would be getting something new when the timer ran out. After all, there was no reason to have a timer if I wasn't going to get something by the end of it. Even so, I still couldn't help but still be nervous, much more so than the last countdown, when I didn't know about the break. Before that, all I was worried about was getting a crappy roll, something that was useless, or at least near useless. That, or something so advanced that there was no way I could use it to the fullest before I lost it again. Now, though, I was worried about whatever other surprises the Entities that did this might have in store. When I first arrived, I was just a ROBed sucker with a simple version of Tinker of Fiction. I was still a ROBed sucker, but now I had a *fully custom version* of ToF.

Who knows what might pop up next?

I still had no idea if the week off was a "consequence" of holding onto XCOM for a second week or if it was going to happen every time. I likely wouldn't know until I rolled

something so crap that I didn't want it for two weeks. Even then, I might keep it just so I get the extra time.

Finally, the last minute rolled around, and I did my best to calm my mind. I wanted to focus on the process as much as possible in hopes I might gleam something I had missed before. It was unlikely, but I still wanted to try.

In the last five seconds, I felt the timer loosen, just like I had felt the XCOM tech tree pull away a week ago. As it pulled free, I felt a rather large something connect back into place.

Without hesitation, I dived in and was stunned when hundreds of images flooded my mind. I could immediately tell this was something more impressive, at least in scale, than XCOM. I could see spaceships, soldier equipment, vast amounts of civilian tech that seemed to be on par or better than Cyberpunk's in many ways, as well as humanoid robots... some of them pretty big... and the AI that inhabited them.

"Titanfall... I just rolled Titanfall."

I sat in my chair for maybe a full thirty seconds before mentally diving back in. Sure enough, now that I knew what I was looking for, there were the Titans. And how to program their AI.

"I'm gonna have my very own BT."

I definitely *didn't* giggle in excitement before continuing to expand on what I had seen. I had played both Titanfall and Titanfall 2, though I only played the campaign of the 2. I never touched Apex Legends myself, but I had seen enough clips and watched enough videos to know it was supposed to be in the same universe. I spent a few minutes looking for any reference to stuff from the battle royale game before eventually concluding that it didn't appear to be part of my package.

I also spent some time looking for the time travel stuff from the second game, eventually concluding I didn't have access to that either. I wasn't surprised I couldn't access the Fold weapon, as that was alien tech and would probably belong to a different tech tree, if it even existed. I was surprised when I couldn't find any hint of the handheld time control device. It was a rather major point in the story, and I knew for a fact that the hand jumper was made by humans.

Since, as far as I could see, it didn't exist, I had to assume it was removed for a reason. It was possible that the hand controller only worked because of the Fold weapon's existence since, if I remember correctly, it was the source of the time fuckery in the first place. It was also very possible that the Entities had specifically cut out the time manipulation tech on purpose. Honest, I was okay with that because while I had no interest in messing with, and most likely

getting into trouble with, time tech, I also knew myself well enough to admit that if something went *really wrong*, I would be tempted by the concept of just going back and trying again.

So, no alien tech, no time stuff, and no Apex Legends tech.

I was honestly okay with that.

Titanfall was one of those settings where, save for a few high points development-wise, most of the other technology was just basic future tech. No crazy near-magic levels of technology, no deceptively advanced shiny stuff, just taking what I was familiar with from my old home and advancing it by two hundred years. This was something I desperately needed to round out my knowledge. Looking through the massive backlog of civilian tech, I could see that while it was more advanced than Cyberpunk's tech, it wasn't bullshit, crazy shiny stuff. The vast majority of what I could make wouldn't stand out too much unless you looked closely.

There was some military tech that would stand out, especially things like particle shields, but most everything else would easily just pass for just one or two steps higher than Cyberpunk's.

Right off the bat, I knew I would not be making a Titan. It broke my heart to admit this to myself, but while the idea of running around Night City in my very own Vanguard sounded incredible, there was no way I would be able to increase my production to the point I could make one. Technically, if I went all out and started doing stupid shit, I could probably manage to make one. I could hire some people to machine parts, maybe get a corp involved with the design, or something equally as drastic. But there was no way I would be able to keep up with the rest of what I wanted from this tech tree, not to mention it would run counter to everything I was trying to do, namely not become some corpo leashed money printer.

Besides, as amazing and cool as the Titans were, they really aren't that crazy tech-wise. I'm sure if I looked closer, I would find some impressive servomotor tech or some advanced power distribution systems or something else. But I knew I would eventually be able to build a mech no matter what. They were pretty prevalent through media, after all, so I had no doubt I would get access to one eventually.

What was much more rare was an incredibly stable AI system that was capable of growth, adaptation, and development. One that stayed loyal, dedicated themselves, and, even better, empathized with their pilots and partners. The bonds the Titan AIs had with their pilots were legendary, and save a few spots across the multiverse, it was completely unique. I would build mechs eventually, I'm sure, but having a few loyal, adaptive, competent companions now would push me forward to an incredible degree.

My mind ran wild for nearly twenty minutes. Ideas, plans, and desires swirling around my head nearly constantly. Eventually, I shook myself back to my senses and took a deep breath.

My first step was producing a force multiplier, an assistant AI, and a body for them to use. A quick search through the tech tree showed several AI programs specifically designed to assist engineers, inventors, and lab techs. They were basic, at least when compared to the more advanced military AIs, which, in turn, were inferior to the AIs attached to the Vanguard Titans, which were some of the most advanced, stable AIs in the Titanfall universe.

I shook my head again, stopping for a moment to take another deep breath. I needed to focus. I hadn't even started building, and I was already getting overwhelmed.

My first step was to make a robotic chassis for my new assistant. I spent a minute searching through the tech tree, finally stopping at what I wanted. The MRVN units, more colloquially known as Marvins, were simple AI, barely counting as that when they were built, that served as simple manual labor.

They were simple enough that I could already cut in pretty high up in their evolution. Not only would creating one serve as the first step in the more advanced humanoid robots in the tech tree, but it was also pretty well suited to help with what I wanted. I would have preferred to start with the more advanced models, but a quick check showed I wasn't "ready" to start working on them. Still, even the basic Mark III MRVN was pretty advanced and more than I would need at first.

Already formulating a plan, one that would stretch at least the next two days, I started working on translating the blueprints from my head into the computer. The designs for the industrial, mass-produced robot were, predictably, mostly simple. They were designed to be robust, functional tools, just at home in a factory as they were in the field. Two of the three most advanced bits, the central processing core and the internal gyroscope responsible for letting the bipedal droid walk, were located in its chest, and *both* of them were relatively simple. The third was the AI core, located in the robot's head. The rest of the parts were simple hydraulics and servomotors. I would likely have to modify any servos I bought stock, but Cyberpunk's robotics were advanced enough that the leap would be small.

The sun was rising steadily above the city when I finished the full design for my bipedal, humanoid robot. Already the fabricators were working away on various platings and parts, fabricating the nonstandard things I wouldn't be able to buy. I also made an order for some other parts, but since I wanted to make as much progress as possible today, I left most of what I needed for a shopping trip.

I slid back from the computer, checking both of my 3D printers and fabricators before stepping out of the workshop. I made it as far as the door before stopping and leaning against it, my body suddenly reminding me that I should be taking it easy. I reached down and touched my stomach, wincing at the soreness. I sighed, turning back into the workshop, using my computer to contact Jackie, leaving a message for him for when he woke up.

Rather than waste time, I set forward on the second half of Project: Assistant. The programming behind an AI, even one as simple as what I wanted for my first step, was hundreds of years beyond what I knew from the XCOM reality. Even the complicated response programs that drove Spot were nothing compared to a learning, growing, evolving AI. So, I needed to start learning myself.

Luckily, learning programming was one of the easier aspects of expanding my knowledge. All I needed to do was copy down the programming I could handle from my new Tech tree until, eventually, my understanding was advanced enough to start with the lower-level learning programs. Then, I would skip around as necessary until I could put it all together in my first full AI.

Okay, so it was only simple on paper. In practice, I would likely be working on my programming for a while, maybe even longer than it took me to make the physical MRVN unit, which wouldn't technically be complete until it had its own AI, as low-level and basic as it was.

So, with a new, reachable but distant target set, I got to work. I was halfway through programming out some random data extrapolation software when Jackie called me back.

"Hey Jay, what are you doing up so early?" He asked after I greeted him. "Doc wanted you to take it easy."

"I know, that's why I messaged you," I assured him. "You free today? I need a bunch of shopping done, quickly, if possible. Got a new project I would like to get done by tomorrow."

"Genio, you need to take a break. Working cyberware before it's done healin' is a good way to ruin it," Jackie said, his frown audible through the connection. "But if it keeps you from going out, I'll do some shopping. What do you need?"

I sent him a list of both parts and locations. The shops were spread out all over the place and, as a whole, were different from what I usually bought since these parts weren't stuff I had used a lot of. Spot had a few small servos he used to adjust his flaps, but beyond that, I hadn't done much with articulating parts.

After wiring Jackie some eddies and reminding him to use the truck, I got back to programming. I had already made some decent strides and advancements, which was encouraging, to say the least. It was easy to foresee programming becoming one of my most advanced subjects, though I assumed eventually it would plateau. Then again, there were some insane-level AIs out there in the multiverse, and while I had no intent on bringing forth something like the monstrous TITANS in Eclipse Phase or AM from I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, knowing they existed was proof that programming was a powerful tool.

Jackie arrived with my parts nearly three hours later, looking a bit sweaty from running around on what was a surprisingly warm day. He carried the boxes and bags to the couch so I

could examine them comfortably, making a couple of trips to haul in everything. When he was done, he laid out under one of the AC vents after cranking it to the max.

When he was done, I ordered lunch, which arrived promptly since the restaurant was inside the building. He eagerly accepted the free pizza and beer, sitting up to enjoy the food.

"So, what are you building next?" He asked once he had finished his first slice. "Not exactly an expert, but I noticed some new stuff..."

"Yeah, I realized I needed some help automating things, so I'm building a bipedal assistant," I explained, looking down at one of the boxes. "Should help me a bunch."

"Really? You know... I could ask around for an actual assistant," He said. "I bet Padre would-"

"Jackie, I know Padre is a friend of your family, but you realize anyone he recommends is gonna report back to him, right?" I asked, looking up from a pair of small, self-contained hydraulics. "Nothing against him, business is business, but I don't trust people not to do something stupid like brag about my work."

"I... can't argue with that," He admitted. "But would it be so bad to work with him more? I mean, Padre does a lot of good for the community, and he's a damn good fixer too."

I frown, putting down the part I was examining. I was definitely not considering what Jackie had suggested, but rather considering how best to explain to him why I wasn't interested in that. Yes, it would make some things much easier, but it also came with a lot of risks. To someone like Jackie, who grew up in Night City, gang and faction connections were as natural as breathing and would feel like just another part of life. That went double for someone in his line of work. And while selling some relatively minor tech was fine, releasing my bigger creations into the hands of people who are dedicated to an already existing cycle... felt wrong. I may not have much of an idea when it came to my final goals, but participating in the cycle of Night City like that was not one of them.

"Jackie... I think it's pretty clear by now that I'm not exactly a normal techie," I said, looking over at my only real friend in this world.

"Yeah, when you started popping out laser rifles and plasma swords, it was pretty clear, pendejo," Jackie answered with a curious look. "What of it?"

"Honestly, Jackie... this is only the beginning. I've got a lot of ideas in my head, and I know that what I've done so far... it's only a drop in the bucket," I explained, letting out a deep breath. "What I'm building, or what I can build, is enough to change the fucking world. And I don't just mean bigger and badder guns or high-tech cyberware. I mean fixing the planet, saving lives, traveling to other *stars*, and more. I'm talking about tech that could make this world better

for everyone... or finally burn it down to nothing. I *can't* fall into the wrong hands, Jackie. I can't just saddle up to someone for safety because I can't just take a passive role, building away and selling my stuff. I want... maybe even need to build, but what I build can't fall into the hands of people who will use it to sate their greed or rise in power."

"I... You're serious, aren't you?" Jackie asked, now sitting up on the edge of the chair. "That's... that's a lot to take in, Genio."

"I know. I gotta warn you, Jackie. This is gonna be a wild ride. Right now, we are shopping, building, and having fun, going out to bust some small-time stuff and making small-time money," I said, looking right back into his eyes. "But eventually, this is going to escalate. It might be when I'm ready, or it might be when someone else decides to poke their heads into my business and spots something they want. Either way, it's going to happen. I can only hope I have enough time to expand my operations and capabilities so that I stand a chance of surviving."

"We," Jackie said, without even batting an eye, not even a sliver of hesitation. "So that we stand a chance. You're loco if you I'm jumping ship now Jay. It's just starting to get good."

"That's good to hear because I'm gonna need your help," I said, finally looking back down at the servo I was taking apart, definitely not getting watery-eyed from Jackie's loyalty. "Is there anything else you wanted, tech-wise? Your armor and helmet should keep you alive, but do you want any weapons? Equipment?"

"Something to hit things with might be good," He said with a shrug. "Nothing like your plasma sword, though."

"... How about an axe?" I asked, looking up from the servo again.

"An axe?" He asked, sounding confused.

"Yeah, like a battle axe. You're too big to be swinging around a dainty little katana, and I already have the longsword, so why not a battle axe?"

"I... sure, alright. You haven't steered me wrong yet, choom," He admitted. "Just, not anything fancy. I don't want to worry about plasma or even a thermal edge."

"Sure, I can do that. A simple battle axe, something you can really slam into people," I agreed with a nod. "Should have something ready for you by the time we head to that 6th Street job."

We chatted for a bit longer before Jackie left to do some of his own stuff. I tried to pay him for his time, but he insisted that the axe would more than cover it. When he left, I started working on assembling and modifying the pieces that he had delivered. I ended up having to modify the servomotors, adjusting and exchange several of the internal gears, but the work was



relatively simple. I also had to modify some of the hydraulics, as well as reseal some of the computer parts. Still, I managed to finish a lot of the primary assembly, holding off on the upper torso and several joints since I lacked a few parts, primarily the central gyroscope.

Gyroscopes were extremely finicky devices, and not something I could reproduce in my workshop. I ended up ordering one designed for small, expensive drones, the kind that weren't necessarily military but ended up getting converted to combat drones anyway. I considered trying to get away with the gyroscope that Araska used in their bipedal drone, but it wasn't quite what I was looking for, and I would probably have to steal it off an already active drone to get one, since they were restrictive on who they sold them to. Besides, I wanted my assistant to be as steady as possible, which was only possible with a powerful gyroscope at its core, as well as several other powerful sensors working together.

When I was done building for the day, I hopped back on the computer and got back to programming. I was hoping to be ready to tackle the first AI by tomorrow afternoon, which was a challenge considering that I had quite a few more parts to print, more assembly to do, and an upgraded AI core to construct. I also needed to visit Doc Vik, since he wanted to do a check-up to make sure everything was working well. I was tempted to cancel or at least postpone the check-up a few times, but then I would remind myself that I was now carrying actual bioware, which was putting actual nanites into my bloodstream.

The urge to skip didn't last long after that.

By the time I finally crawled into bed, I was very happy with my progress. I had thousands of ideas flooding my mind, things I desperately wanted to build, things I knew I needed to make before my two weeks was up. While Titanfall wasn't at insane levels of technology, it would serve as both a fantastic foundation and an incredible way to increase my basic understanding of tech. With any luck, by the time my two weeks were up, I would be in a much better position.

I managed to fall asleep after an hour or so, waking up early the next morning. I started off the day with some very light, slow stretches to test my stomach. I felt good, energized even, eager to get to work. Almost too eager, so I tempered myself by going down to the street and grabbing a breakfast burrito. Fake cheese, fake eggs, fake sausage, and fake vegetables. The only real thing was the tortilla, but it was clearly store-bought garbage. Still, it was spicy and actually didn't taste half bad. It had nothing on anything I could get at home, but I only cringed every other bite, and for here, that was a win.

I returned to my room at a quick walk, making a beeline for my workshop. While I had forced myself to go get some breakfast, I wasn't going to waste time, so the fabricators and 3D printers had been working on [Jackie's axe](#). It was a brutal but simple design, with a good bit of funk and strange angles added in to make it sufficiently interesting enough. It had a just over two-foot collapsable handle, so he could use it with one hand or two, and was almost completely made from Alien Alloy, with a sturdy polymer grip.



Simple, brutal, and effective, but with just a dash of flair. Perfect for Jackie.

When I finished throwing his new weapon together, I immediately started assembling my MRVN unit. Between the work I had done yesterday and the delivery waiting for me when I was done with Jackie's axe, I made solid progress.

Rather than assemble the robot in the workshop, which was already getting cramped, I put them together against the wall where, in the game, V had her computer set up. I very quickly put together a drone work station, which was a quick welded metal frame with large hooks set into it, which I then bolted directly into the concrete wall. I definitely wasn't getting my deposit back when I left, but I hardly cared about that.

I wasn't even sure if management knew I was living in the building. The entities never told me anything about the process, after all. I had just woken up in bed with a note that said the apartment was mine. I didn't even know if I was going to have to pay rent.

With a sturdy work station set up, I got to work on the final assembly, starting with the torso and working out. My circuit printer was getting a workout, making sure that everything was custom built, fusing Cyberpunk tech with Titanfall design methodology. It was actually a halfway decent mash-up.

Once I had attached the limbs to the torso, the last step was the head, which would get fastened on after connecting it directly to the central processing core. For whatever reason, IMC, otherwise known as Interstellar Manufacturing Corporation, the guys who made the MRVNs and the main big bad of the two games, decided that the AI core would be located in the head, but the extra processing power that the AI used tackle complicated tasks was located in the torso. I had plans to massively increase that processing power once I got rid of the relatively large battery pack and replaced it with a few Elerium nodes.

When I finally finished connecting the head, I stepped back to admire my work. It was missing its iconic orange paint job, but other than that, it looked like it stepped straight out of the video game. I couldn't help but rub my hands together in excitement. All that was left was to keep working on my programming. I was so close to being able to take that last step, if I-

I was mid-step into my workshop, already planning out what I would work on first, when Spot zipped over to me, holding my keyfob. It was vibrating, and the reminder for my appointment with Vik was going off. I groaned but nodded.

"Thanks, bud, I would have definitely missed that," I said, patting the small robot chassis. "I can finish working on your big brother when I'm back."

I quickly got undressed and started my morning routine, starting with a shower and ending by strapping on my belt, my custom mag pistol safely tucked into my holster. I gave the

unpowered, empty shell of my new assistant one last look before stepping out of my apartment and heading toward the elevator.