

I was not surprised when I woke up the next morning, and it was already nearly two PM. Nor was I surprised to still feel tired as I rolled to the edge of my bed, eyes closed as I mentally reviewed the last few days. It was clear that I had pushed myself way too hard, way beyond what was healthy. Unfortunately, I couldn't even say that I wouldn't do it again, that I had learned from my mistake, because in all honesty, I knew I would do it again.

Titanfall had been a major boon, basically exactly what I needed to take my production capabilities and general knowledge to the next level. I was in a much better position to handle whatever came next at a much more reasonable pace, but the next time something big came along, I knew I would do whatever was necessary to make the most out of that tech tree.

The worst thing was, even with all the struggling and all the hard work, it hadn't been enough.

When I was putting together the list of things that I wanted to build before my time with Titanfall was up, I had forced myself to be as pragmatic as possible. The FTL systems had been one such point, as had several other bits of tech.

Like the advanced AI core that the Frontier Militia designed, along with the AIs that utilized it. The core that BT was built on.

I had put them both far down the list because, realistically, I didn't need them. The AI and the cores I had access to were plenty advanced to fit almost all of my needs, and with some added storage and software, there weren't many situations or needs that I couldn't adapt them to. So I put the upgrades further down the list, knowing very well I wouldn't be able to reach it. But I tried anyway because I wanted the future AI that I created to be the best I could make.

And it wasn't like the AI designs I had now were insufficient. They would grow and develop, eventually gaining much more independent thought. They would develop emotions, likes and dislikes, goals, desires, and more. But they would always be robotic. Their emotions would be muted, their desires reasonable, and their goals based on logic. They would never be dreamers, reaching out past what was reasonable to achieve greatness. They would be smart, efficient, and even the best in their field. But they would never really be able to push past being an AI.

It wasn't like I would be able to upgrade the ones I had already created, but I had sacrificed that idea for future AI because it wasn't necessary, and I needed to be utilitarian.

I let out a long breath, shaking my head. Intellectually, I knew eventually, I would get access to more advanced AI. There were just too many that existed in media for me to not eventually roll one.

But I still wanted a BT goddammit!

After a few minutes of sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to desperately put together my considerable knowledge of AI development and creation to use by cracking the Frontier

Militia advancement with the smallest of scraps I knew about it, I gave up. I stood and stretched, about to reach for my keyfob, when someone knocked heavily on my door.

"Jay, you up?" Jackie called. "Got some lunch."

"Yeah, Jackie, doors open."

A second later, the door opened up, and Jackie climbed in, his large size making the trailer look especially small. He was carrying a trio of beers and a bag that looked greasy.

"Well, at least you're out of bed. C'mon and eat something," He said, sitting down at the small table in the "kitchen" area of the trailer. "It's from that burger place you mentioned to me."

I made my way to the table and dropped down heavily into the seat opposite Jackie, accepting a beer from him after he popped the top. I took a long swig of the beer, ignoring the chemical aftertaste. Jackie tore open the takeout bag and began dividing up the food, handing me a big burger and a large fries. He had two burgers and an even larger fries for himself.

"Does your muscle weave let you eat like that?" I asked, watching him scarf down some fries.

"No, but general bioware always burns calories," He explained. "Until you start making your way to be a borg, then it's less calories. Something to do with your body trying to figure out what's going on or something. Vik explains it better."

"Speaking of Vik, any news about what I was looking for?"

"He managed to find you a pretty decent Skinweave kit, but he is still looking for bone and muscle lace," He answered with a frown. "He said he would call you."

I looked at him blankly for a moment before looking for my keyfob, scrolling through the screen to see that I had, in fact, missed a call from Vik, yesterday around noon. I let out a sigh and nodded.

"Yeah... I missed it," I explained. "I'll call him in a bit to set up an appointment."

For a minute, we ate in silence, Jackie making much quicker headway than I did. I finished my beer, but rather than accept another from Jackie, I poured a glass of water, freshly pulled from the air, for myself.

"You set up one of those water things?" Jackie asked, looking at the tank that I had set up to hold drinking water.

"Yeah, we can even take showers, completely free," I said, getting an impressed look. "I'm worried someone might try and flush us out by cutting the lines. I can make power, even if we didn't have enough solar panels around here to run the whole town. Now we are good for water, too."

"Still need food, though," He pointed out.

"Yeah, fingers crossed that changes soon," I said, Jackie groaning at my tone.

"Jay, listen, you gotta slow the fuck down," He said, shaking his head. "You look rough, and Kaytlyn said you worked through the night a day ago."

I let out a sigh and nodded, unable to deny that I had pushed myself too far. I was still exhausted, and not the good "I just completed something impressive" kind. It was a deep tiredness that practically screamed to slow down. Thankfully, I had a week to do just that.

"I know, I know... It's just..." I trailed off for a moment before shaking my head. "We've gone over the fact that I'm... unique, right?"

"Yeah, you talked circles around it," Jackie said. "Plus, not exactly hard to see, Genio."

"Yeah, I know, that's a problem in and of itself," I said, shaking my head. "Do you wanna know how it works?"

"Works? You say that like... you know what, unless you feel like you need to share, it's okay, Choom," He said, shaking his head. "I got your back no matter what's going on, and it would probably just go over my head anyway."

I stared at him for a handful of seconds before snorting and shaking my head. I had been worried about how he would react, but I clearly shouldn't have been.

"Fair enough, Jackie," I responded, still chuckling. "Well, either way, I got another week of downtime, so we can go on some missions, and I can take it slow. I just need to remake some armor and redesign my underlayer. Need to make you one too."

"I already got my under armor, choom," He pointed out. "And the armor you made me, I don't need anymore."

"This isn't armor, it's an underlayer. You wear it under your armor, and it enhances your movements and makes you stronger," I explained. "I have to work out how to wear the under armor under that... or maybe over it? I'll figure something out."

"How much stronger? Jackie asked with wide eyes. "Like how your old armor worked?"

"Better, especially for people who are more durable than normal, say someone with Skinweave and bone lace?" I responded, chuckling at Jackie's excitement. "I'm looking forward to being able to use it fully, too. Just give me some time to improve the first design and figure out a way to keep your old armor."

We chatted about some of the other stuff I made while I was working myself to the bone, before someone eventually knocked on my trailer door again. I opened it to find Riggs standing outside.

"Dakota Smith is here," He said simply, as he usually does. "She wants to talk to you, Sir."

"Really?" I asked, surprised that she would come out this far without prompting. "Alright, give me a minute to clean up a bit, then I'll be out there. Jackie...?"

"Yeah, I'll go out and chat, work the charm," He said with a smirk. "You need five minutes?"

"Should do fine."

He nodded and left the trailer, leaving me alone to quickly rinse the last two days of work off and change into something clean. When I was done, I pulled a T-shirt over my AA under armor, stepped out of my trailer, and made my way to the center of town.

As I approached, I could see three cars parked along the road, with Dakota Smith sitting on the hood of one of them. A woman was standing by one with her arms crossed, and a man slightly older than me by the other. Dakota was talking to Jackie and Kaytlyn, while Riggs and Murtaugh stood back. I could see that Samwise had been busy while I was sleeping because two new specters were standing at ease by Murtaugh, bringing our total to three. They were holding normal weapons, [copperheads](#), I think, ready to engage but still holding back.

I could also see Dakota eyeing them warily as I approached, even as she talked to my friends.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting," I said as I finally arrived, combing back my still-damp hair. "I wasn't really presentable."

"I think I can forgive you," She responded, pushing off the hood of [her car](#).

As I got closer, thinking I was going to shake her hand, she gestured to one of her people. He reached into [his truck](#) and pulled out a container of some kind, as well as a pair of cups. He walked around and wordlessly handed Dakota and I one cup each before opening the container's cap. Slowly, carefully, he poured us each a glass of crystal clear, ice-cold water.

Starting to understand what was going on, I held out my full cup, and she tapped hers against it. She gave me a nod, and together, we drank the perfectly pure, crisp, cool water. After we each finished the glass, she fixed me with a serious look.

"A day ago, that glass of water would have been worth a not inconsiderable amount," She explained. "Perfectly clean, low rad, pure water is a premium, and you handed us the key to making as much as we could ever need."

"In all honesty, I was happy to," I said, meaning every word. "Water is something that should be a right, not a luxury. The idea of companies withholding it... Doesn't sit with me right."

"It's one thing to believe that, but to hand someone the keys to their chains..." She paused, her eyes glowing. A moment later, my keyfob vibrated, and a quick check showed she had paid in full. "You've done an incredible service to all nomads everywhere. I've already dispersed the plans for this over the Net, and personally sent it to dozens of friendly nomad groups. No mention of your name, of course."

I looked back at the older woman in surprise. I had expected her to share it with friendly nomad groups, but over the Net? that was big and pretty altruistic.

"I'm hoping the fact that it was released anonymously over the net covers nomads from any backlash," She explained as if sensing my surprise.

"I see, that's a smart play. And I'm glad you decided to share it with everyone," I said with a smile.

"Yes, well... On top of the agreed upon payment, I'm also offering you the services of these two," She said, gesturing to the man who had poured our water, who waved, as well as the woman still standing by her car, who nodded, her arms still crossed. "At family rates. They are two of my best scroungers. You need something, especially if you need something quietly, these two can get it for you."

"Are we talking deliveries or specialty items?" I asked.

"Both, though Robin does better work with specialty items," the fixer explained, gesturing to the woman. "They've both been working with me for years, and they know that turning on you would be like turning on the family."

"Well... that's good. I'm starting to run low on specific resources," I admitted, thinking about just how much stuff I had burned through the last few days. "What is the family rate?"

"Depends on what we are finding," Robin, said, speaking up to explain. "But it will be reasonable. We also trade favors and equipment."

"Oh, that's good news. I think we will get along just fine," I said with a smile. "I could put together a list right now, if that's alright."

The man, Chuck, gave Dakota a look, the older woman nodding. She reached out and shook my hand before making her way to her driver's side door.

"I'll be in touch, Jackson," She assured me as she opened her door. "Keep your eyes open for Wraiths. I'll keep an ear out for them, but best keep watch yourself as well."

"We will," I said simply, adding a nod as she slid into her vehicle.

Her car rumbled as we stepped away, the fixer swinging her car around and leaving the town behind, Robin hopping in her car and following after her. I gestured to Chuck to follow me,

making my way to the garage. I spent ten minutes coming up with a list of stuff, including as many medical study materials as he could get his hands on. That got an eyebrow raise from the man, but he didn't ask any questions. When I was finished with the list, I asked about payment.

"Dakota mentioned you make some decent armor," He said, his eyes glowing as he looked over the list I had given him. "Is that something I could get?"

"It would earn you a pretty good discount," I responded. "Let's say... five thousand eddies off?"

"What would it cost then?"

"For a friend? I'd say two thousand," I answered. "I could charge more, have charged more, really, but you guys will be running around for me, so I want you protected."

"Yeah, alright, that works for me," He said, reaching out to shake my hand. "I can have most of this stuff to you by tomorrow morning, but the medical shards might be a while. Gonna have to source them first, scope out a few shops."

"That's fine. I would prefer the supplies be here first and the info here later," I explained.

He agreed, and after transferring a chunk of eddies for him to work with, he left, hopping into his truck, and drove off. I sagged back into my workshop chair, idly spinning it around before leaning on the counter.

"Sir, are you well?" Samwise asked, no longer pretending to be a mindless robot.

"Yeah, Sam, just feeling tired," I responded. "Nice work on the specters, by the way. How many do you plan on building?"

I turned to look at my AI assistant, who was standing by our drone workstation. There were a variety of specter parts laid out on two separate wheeled tables, ready to install on the half-finished drone hanging on the station.

"This is the final one for today. I did not wish to interrupt any plans you had," He explained, turning to focus on his task.

"Alright, keep working on them when you have downtime," I responded. "Ideally, I would like five of them up and running with two in parts waiting in case they need repairs."

"Very well, I will complete the task as time permits," He responded. "Do you have a project in mind for today?"

"I was going to create a design for a mag submachine gun for Kaytlyn in a bit," I explained. "After that, I wanted to take a crack at working up some perimeter sensors... Then I think I'll take it easy for the rest of the day. I can work on some larger projects tomorrow."

"Very well. I will continue working on the specter drone."

I nodded and climbed off of my chair, before making my way out of the garage, I spotted Jackie, Kaytlyn, Murtaugh, and Riggs. They were all standing around and talking in front of the BD shack. Behind them, most of the MRVN units were working on fixing up and clearing out the run-down building. I had plans to turn most of it into a warehouse of sorts to store some of my equipment. I would turn the side room into a temporary doctor's office for the medical AI I made.

"Hey guys," I greeted, almost taking a step back as Kaytlyn whipped around and focused on me

"Jay, why didn't you tell me?" Kaytlyn asked as she spotted me, her attitude shifting from calm to annoyed in a split second. "I mean, didn't your parents ever teach you how to share?"

"Tell you what?" I asked with a frown, looking between Jackie and my AI friends. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I watched Murtaugh jump up the side of the watchtower with them... What are they called, jump jets?" She said, fading a bit as she tried to remember the name, before starting right back up again. "Then, when I asked him what they were, he ran all around town, jumping up and over buildings and along walls like it was as easy as walking! How could you keep that from me?"

I rolled my eyes at her antics, shaking my head and sitting down against the side of a concrete divider.

"They are called jump kits, and they are extremely difficult to master," I explained, snorting at Kaytlyn's pout. "Riggs and Murtaugh both have them, but they have the hardware to back them up. It would take years for someone to master them, and you'd most likely break your neck in the process."

"Don't care, still want one," She fired back immediately. "I promise not to haunt you from the grave if it kills me, but I *need* to have one of those."

"Let me do some work on them first, I think I can make them easier to use, but I'm not sure," I explained, holding my hand up to stop her response. "Give me a few days, at least. I have your sub machine gun to make, some armor for myself, I need to update the underlayer, make some for Jackie..."

"Okay, okay, I get it. You're very busy, fine," She responded, holding up her hands in surrender. "I won't bug you for one. At least for a day or so."

"Oh joy, what mercy," I replied with a blank tone.

What I didn't say was that I also desperately wanted to wear one. However, I wasn't stupid enough to think that I would somehow, miraculously, be capable of using a set since they took a ridiculous amount of training to pull off.

Instead, I planned on adding a few more gyroscopes, some advanced scanning sensors, and an angular processor to add a level of autopilot to the system. This would drastically reduce the flexibility of the system, removing a lot of the advanced maneuvers that Pilots used. You didn't see much of them in the game, but let's just say there was a reason the program was so difficult to get into and survive. My version of the jump kit would make a lot of those maneuvers impossible, but in turn, the system would be much more intuitive to use.

I'm sure that eventually, I would find a way to make the system easier while remaining flexible. Either that or I would enhance myself enough that I would be able to master the whole system easily. Until then, I would have to settle for my own basic version.

As soon as I got around to building it.

The five of us chatted a bit more, but eventually, Jackie needed to head back to help around his mom's bar. It was honestly good timing since I needed to at least have a submachine gun design finished before the day was over.

I headed back to the workshop, walking past Samwise as he put the finishing touches on the same specter he had been working on, including adding a number to it for easy identification. I sat down and got to work on designs, starting with the submachine gun. Once I actually got started, it thankfully didn't actually take that long. I had so much experience with mag weapons at this point I could design them in my sleep, and I already had two functioning models to work off of.

After two hours, I had a pretty complete design, including the ammo and magazines. The system was designed for sustained, relatively lower-damage fire, meaning I wanted a smaller round and a nice long magazine. I ended up using a bullpup design in order to pack as much as I could in a smaller frame, and the [result](#) was a tight submachine gun with a large magazine and a surprising amount of punch per round. It was also nice and light since it was mostly made of an advanced polymer, one I got from the Titanfall universe that I could make from the leftover plastic bricks from the mass recycler.

I took a break once I was finished with the design, helping Samwise and an MRVN unit switch over the molly-makers to gun production. The fact that our specters were stuck using copperheads, for which we had limited ammo, was unacceptable. In order to fix that, Samwise was going to spend the rest of the day and the night printing weapons. They required almost zero materials besides what we were gathering on our own, the exception being the Alien Alloy, which required a handful of chemicals we weren't gathering.

When the machines were running, I called in Murtaugh. I had planned on working on the perimeter sensors, but I realized that I still had a pile of upgrade parts for all three of my currently active AIs, ready and waiting to be installed. I could have just let Samwise take care of



it whenever he got around to it, but it sounded like a nice, easy task for me to work on while recovering.

The first upgrade required that the advanced strategy and combat AI be turned off, even its emergency power so that I could replace his current power systems with three Elerium nodes. Not only would this remove their need to recharge, but it would give them plenty of extra energy, should it be needed. It also cleared up a not insignificant amount of space where his batteries had been. I was tempted to fill them with extra processing power immediately, but I decided to leave it free for now.

Once I was finished installing his power upgrades, I turned Murtaugh back on. The rest of the work could be done with most of his system active, especially since he could selectively depower portions of his body to make it safe to work on.

"Thank you, sir, I can feel the extra power available to me," He said. "I can also feel the reduction of weight. Do you have plans for the space you created?"

"At the moment, no," I admitted. "But feel free to speak up if you figure something out that you want."

"I will consider my options, Sir."

I nodded and prompted the AI robot to sit on a crate so that I could start applying more upgrades. The first was a series of Alien Alloy plating, replacing or layering several bits of armor. His entire face was replaced to better protect his AI core, as well as several plates protecting his power system and his extra processors. The final upgrade for Murtaugh was an integrated holster on his hip, which would keep one of my [pistols](#) charged and ready.

I'm sure over time, I would come up with a more interesting addition and upgrades, but for now, I was happy with those.

I spent an hour installing the same modifications to Riggs, first removing the modified warden armor. Now Riggs had another layer of defense, making his role as the front-line tank even safer. The plating we installed was even thicker than Murtaugh's since the warden armor could easily compensate for the extra weight.

By the time I finished with Rigg's, I was starting to feel tired again. Despite the fact that I had slept past noon and it was relatively early, my body was clearly still not fully recovered from my insane workload at the end of the Titanfall tech tree. I ended up apologizing to Samwise, promising to apply his upgrades in the morning. I then called it an early night, heading off to my trailer and crawling into my bed before the sun even fully set over the horizon. The last thing I did before falling asleep was call Vik to set up an appointment for the following day.

I woke up the next morning feeling significantly better, my strength and stamina having fully returned. I also woke up on the earlier side, having finally caught up on my sleep debt. After showering and eating a quick bowl of nondescript, barely qualifying food, I headed out of my

trailer. I waved to Murtaugh, who was walking around the town, two specters following behind him. I was happy to see that all three of them were fully armed with my weapons. The specters each had a mag pistol and a mag rifle, while Murtaugh himself had a pistol on his hip, a sniper rifle anchored to his back with magnets, and a submachine gun in his hand. He stopped when he spotted me, letting me catch up.

"Hey, how's it going?" I asked. "Looks like everyone is finally armed with proper weapons."

"It is a vast improvement, sir," Murtaugh said, sounding genuinely happy. "I hope you do not mind, but we tested out the new weapon a few hours ago. It performs more than adequately, even without a proper modern sight."

For a moment, I stared back at the AI, my brain stuck for a full pause before I finally broke down into a string of curses.

"I fucking forgot to work on weapon attachments!" I said, shaking my fist to the sky. "Goddammit! That's two tech trees in a row!"

"Apologies, Sir," Murtaugh said, sounding repentant. "I will endeavor to remind you for your next tech tree."

"It's not your fault. You weren't even around when it happened the first time," I assured him, shaking my head. "Not even Samwise was. I'll tell him to remind me since he will have a better idea when I hit a tree that would have them. Until then, I'll have Chuck bring a few basic ones around for me to copy."

"Very well, Sir," He responded.

"Thanks, Murtaugh," I said, giving him a haphazard salute. "I'll probably be working on a sensor net for around the town later today, so expect a call for your input later."

"Will do, sir."

And with that, the AI robot returned my sarcastic salute with a ridged, perfectly executed one, which the two specters behind him replicated seamlessly. I watched as they walked away before turning around and heading to the workshop, cursing my poor memory under my breath the whole way.