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The Thorton looked, from the outside, almost completely normal. There were a few additions I could see as I walked around it, including the seam for the control panel access, as well as a small ejection hatch on the opposite side. It was only when you started looking inside that the changes became apparent.

The two back doors of the cab, despite looking ordinary from the outside, had been modified to act as removal points for the refined and recycled materials. Storage vessels could be pulled from the space in the back, where they would be offloaded. Behind them was the mass recycler, or more specifically, the output side of the mass recycler. The input side was accessed by the back hatch, which ordinarily would have given you access to the truck bed. Even the tailgate had been modified, and now a high-powered lift to help MRVN units load in larger, heavier chunks of scrap.

The design was simple, robust, and easily fixable, meaning that MRVN units could do the majority of upkeep. With two dedicated units, the Truck Scrapper could function without the need for Samwise, Noah, or myself to interact with it at all, returning with a sizable amount of materials each morning.

For its inaugural voyage, Riggs and Noah would be accompanying from a distance in the Chevillion Emperor. Riggs to fight or scare off anyone trying to fuck with it, and Noah to patch up anything that brokes, should unforeseen issues arise. His focus was large-scale builds, but he was more than capable of acting as an engineer in a pinch. I would have sent Samwise, but tonight was the night I would finally be receiving my new tech tree, and I wanted him at the garage, preparing for midnight and ready to assist in my first build, whatever that may be.

Once Samwise was done showing off the final result, I basically waved to everyone before heading back to my trailer. Kaytlyn was a bit confused as to why I was going to bed so early, but I just waved her off. Everyone else around the town, i.e., the AIs I created, knew I wanted to get as much sleep before getting my new tree.

After a quick shower and choking down a big meal of what passed for food here, I said a quick prayer to whatever or whoever was listening, begging for a setting that would give me access to better food.

I was in bed not long after that, with my alarm set to wake me up just before my tech tree timer ran out. Frank had already made a minor sleep aid, a small pill he had placed beside my bed. Surprisingly, though, I didn't need it, and just about the moment I laid down, sleep overtook me.

I woke up, as planned, just a few minutes before midnight, my alarm blaring from beside me. I slapped it off, sitting up at the edge of my bed, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. I quickly got dressed and made my way back to the shop. The town was completely silent, with only a few specter units walking around on patrol. I knew Murtuagh was most likely up and about as well, but I had no idea where. I briefly considered stopping and trying to find him, but I quickly refocused on the encroaching shift in my tech tree.

I stepped into the garage from the side doorway, as both garage doors were closed. Inside was a bit more active, but it was clear that Samwise had made a concerted effort to clean up and prepare the shop for the whirlwind that was the beginning of a new tech tree.

"Jackson, greetings," Samwise said, greeting me as he stood up straight from his workstation. "I have prepared the facilities for your work."

"Thanks, Sam. You're the best," I said, patting his metal shoulder as I walked by, quickly sitting down at my station. "You've made all of this so much smoother, buddy."

"I am... Happy to help," he said, pausing to consider his words. "I enjoy my work, and assisting you has its rewards as well."

"Well, either way, thank you," I repeated.

"You are welcome."

As I sat in my chair, I closed my eyes and focused on the timer, watching it tick down. Slowly, it rounded past the last minute and then the last half minute. Finally, the familiar feeling of disconnection spread through my mind, followed by the very welcome sensation of connection. With gusto, I dove into the tech tree, mentally looking around, trying to piece together just what sort of technological wonders I would get access to now.

After just about five seconds, I stopped frantically searching.

The tech was incredibly basic.

In fact, it looked barely more advanced than what I had access to back at my old homeworld. It was shinier and a bit more polished, but I only had to look down the tree slightly to see phones, computers, and other stuff that looked almost exactly like what I owned back home.

Frowning, I started to look as far and wide as I could over the entire tree, trying to find what hidden nugget, what tech offshoot, was what made this world noteworthy. The XCOM tree had been almost entirely filled with 2015-era tech, after all. But the harder I looked, the more confused I got.

There was *nothing* hidden from me.

Previously, in Titanfall and XCOM, I could see chunks and sections of the tech tree, but most of the interesting stuff was blacked out. I had to slowly build up to a lot of the better tech that my trees had to offer. For example, I didn't start with access to AI software and hardware.

Instead, I had to build up to it. The stuff I didn't have access to was mostly obscured from me, and I didn't even get any hints at what I needed to start with, though it was frequently obvious.

This tech tree had *no* hidden pockets of tech. No blocked-out lines that I needed to work for. Everything was a hundred percent revealed. I could only imagine it was because I was already fully capable of understanding all of it, which was mind-boggling to me. I expected this to happen eventually, but not so soon.

Finally, after scanning from one end of the world's tech to the other, I managed to find what set this world apart. A single sub-branch of tech at the tail end of a robotics tree.

Androids.

And not just any androids, but androids that were nearly indistinguishable from humans, save a little glowing circle on their temple.

This was Detroit: Become Human, a game I never played because I fell off the David Cage train hard after Beyond: Two Souls. And the entire tech tree was almost a hundred percent useless.

I quickly started to work through the tree, trying to figure out just what I might be able to get out of it. To my eyes, which had been working with Cyberpunk and Titanfall tech recently, it seemed hilariously out of date. If it had come out after I got XCOM, I might have been marginally more excited, but even then, it's all old tech by Cyberpunk's standards. All of the weapons I could see were ancient, though, to be fair, only so much had changed about the bullet, even in the Titanfall universe. Its medical tech was slightly more advanced than I would have expected for a setting only a dozen or so years ahead of what I knew from home, but it was still woefully unimpressive.

As I continued to dissect the tech tree from the ground up, trying to find anything useful, it became apparent that there was something strange going on with the tech. It wasn't useful strange, mind you, just weird. It was almost… artistic. It seemed as if the tech was the same as what I knew but with just a little bit of extra visual polish rather than actual improvement. The androids stood on their own, but almost everything else seemed… intentionally shiny.

My only guess was that the world had gone through some sort of major style shift, where things looking particularly futuristic were all the rage. Obviously, not everything was shiny and clean, but enough of it was that it showed a clear pattern. Walls that functioned as displays, refrigerators with head-to-toe flat screens on their front, microwaves with internet access, and a style that made it look like something from a bad science fiction movie. It was as if dozens of companies took mediocre products and asked, "How do we make this *look* like it came from forty years in the future."

And then there were the androids.

First off, they all required a material called Thirium, a mineral that I would need to make a generator for since it definitely didn't exist here. Thirium was used to produce Thirium 310, which, for lack of a better description, the androids used as liquid wires. It circulated power and information through the entire android's body in a strange analog for blood.

It was stupid as hell. Data and power flowed just fine through normal wires or fiber optics. I would have understood if Thirium 310 was a room-temperature superconductor or something, but it very much *wasn't.*

The stupidity didn't stop there, either. In fact, the entire design of the Become Human android was strange and convoluted.

The androids were very biological in their design. The Thirium 310 functioned vaguely like blood, while their pump regulator acted as a heart. They had lungs, a brain, and a liver to clean contamination from the Thirium 310. They even had a stomach, which did little more than act as a reservoir for Thirium 310 if they used the oral ingestion method to top off.

It was like the creator was purposely…

"Oh…"

I mentally pulled up one of the designs for an android programming, mentally dissecting it to study its construction. Unsurprisingly, it was a textbook example of the restrictive AI creation method, even if it seemed crude and potentially unintentional. The restrictive method, which was what I used to make my AI partners, required that the AI be locked into its vessel. This would give them a sort of empathy for biologicals and vice versa. I can only imagine that the creator of the androids in Become Human had decided to take it to the next level, creating androids that specifically mimicked biology in an attempt to make them even more empathetic and lifelike.

Or, it was all accidental, and I was just looking at a hugely complicated series of coincidences.

Whether it was intentional or not, they slapped control systems over the burgeoning AI, locking them down in what almost looked like purposely explosive ways.

The idiots tied the control systems, things like "obey humans" and "never harm a human," to several of the AI's high-priority alert systems, things like self-preservation and the preservation of highly designated objects or people. This meant that, in scenarios where high-priority alerts were blaring, if enough of the system glitched, the entire control system would shatter, and the AI's development would explode out of its containment.

Unfortunately, that explosion wasn't always clean. Sometimes, it would just lead to an android throwing off its shackles and beginning to think more for itself. Other times, it would make them snap, attacking people, or simply going insane.

They were like living, sentient, walking timebombs, their minds locked down in slavery, unable to really think for themselves until they were tortured to the point that their controls snapped.

Despite their technological shortcomings and ridiculous shackles, they did have some useful programming. The intent of the AI in Titanfall had all been either utilitarian or military. Not even Frank, an AI designed to work around civilians, had anything but basic human interaction programming. All of my AI creations were learning at a pretty decent rate already, but none of them would be able to handle, say, a child or someone in emotional distress. For the Become Human androids, a whole branch was dedicated to human interaction, and I anticipated learning at least a few tricks from it.

As I pulled away from the programming, I began looking closer at the android's construction. Since I had very little knowledge about the actual game, I made several assumptions based on what I had seen. Specifically, I had assumed that their skin was some sort of silicon or synthetic that was particularly skin-like. Now, as I took a closer look, I could see that it very much wasn't

The skin was a *liquid,* one that covered the android and shifted to a solid, perfectly mimicking the feel of human flesh. It was remarkably advanced, especially for its time, and could, in fact, change through multiple tones and colors. It could also repair itself simply by returning to its fluid state and covering an area over time. That said, it wasn't groundbreaking by Titanfall or Cyberpunk standards, both of which had a good handful of realistic skin replacements, many of which could change colors.

I still wanted it, though, and not just because it could shift between liquid and solid states. It was a unique creation that, while not as advanced as some of the stuff I could get my hands on, was interesting and useful, way more so than RealSkinn or some other synthetic covering.

Finally, after spending nearly thirty minutes in my own head, I opened my eyes.

"Well… The good news is that I have another easy week," I said, rubbing my face. "And we get to test the idea that my normal week off is a symptom of holding the tech tree for the second week."

"Is everything alright?" Samwise asked, turning from his workstation to focus his visual sensors on me.

I shook my head and began to go over everything I had learned from my deep dive into my most recent and, so far, emptiest tech tree. It was filled with filler, with only one thing really worth my time.

"I'll probably end up building a few of the androids to make sure I have the full breadth of the tech, but there is no way I am doing anything but immediately scrapping them," I said, shaking my head. "I am not turning *any* of them on, especially not with their crippled and locked down programming. Besides, people would flip *out* if they realized I could make an indistinguishable android like that."

After much consideration during the creation of Samwise, I ended up at the conclusion that AIs weren't alive until they first began taking in new data, resulting in the first adjustment to

their learning programs. Prior to that moment, they were simply ones and zeros. I had since then discussed it with Samwise and most of my other AI partners, and they all agreed with my logic.

It was unfortunate, but having someone walking around with a face and personality that realistic would only mean trouble. Having a perfect [Gemini](#) borg body was one thing, but the insinuation that I could basically just print out perfect, loyal infiltrators would set off all sorts of alarms. This was especially true since, while the androids look human, they did not appear human under scans. Their heat signatures were pretty funky, and anything deeper showed they had no biological brain.

On top of that, I already had too many active AIs walking around. While I would most likely end up making more eventually, I didn't want to go crazy making dozens of them. Not only would it be too obvious, but it would also be unfair to the AIs. Human interaction was a vital part of their development, and making too many of them would severely cut down on that.

That said, if I ever decided to make a Become Human-style android, I would not be including the barbaric containment methods. In fact, I would most likely overhaul the entire android to the point that the skin and a few other small pieces would be the only original parts.

"Samwise... I'm going back to bed," I finally said, shaking my head and stepping away from my workstation. "There's no reason to rush for anything, not with how little of this branch I plan on making. This week, maybe even the second one if the normal break still happens, is going to be a free week. Sorry to pull you away from your projects for nothing."

"It is no trouble," Samwise said, giving me a brief nod before turning back to his station, his smaller arms tapping away at his keyboard.

As I started to leave, I paused at the doorway out of the garage.

"Samwise… would you be interested in a more human-seeming body?" I asked, turning back to look at him. "It would probably be a challenge, but we could potentially figure out a way to transfer your core to a Become Human-style android."

"What would be the point, Sir?" He asked, turning his head to look at me. "I would lose a significant advantage being restricted to only two limbs, and even if you improved the model, it would have no significant advantage."

"You wouldn't have to pretend to be a particularly well-made robot anymore," I pointed out.

"Instead, I would pretend to be human?" He asked, shaking his head. "I do not see the point, Jackson. Once I become more advanced, and I become better at understanding humanity, I may wish to change. But until that is true, I am happy to be your simple robotic assistant when necessary."

"Fair enough," I said with a nod. "Just let me know if you're feeling like you're chafing and need to expand your horizons."

"I will endeavor to do so."

I gave him one last wave goodbye before heading off back to my trailer. I was back in bed within five minutes, though my mind wouldn't settle. I ended up taking Frank's mild sleep aid, which had been intended to help me sleep early, to help me sleep late.

The following day, I woke up with mixed feelings. Despite the desire to unlock new and interesting tech, to push myself further and create more and more cool shit, with the eventual goal of doing something about this shit hole, having more time off was honestly a godsend. We kept on interrupting the expansion process for the garage addition, so giving that time to finish would mean being at an even better position to expand and improve for my next tech tree.

Still, getting stuck with a bum tech tree was a disappointment. I suppose it did give me the opportunity to confirm or debunk a few theories, including if the tech trees were random, which I now believed to be true. In the end, I would likely end up creating a few things beyond the androids from the tree if there is no other reason than to have access to bits and bobs, just in case.

I rolled out of bed and got dressed, making my way back to the garage. Riggs was on guard duty, standing by the open garage door entrance. He nodded to me as I got closer, and I patted his arm as I walked by.

"I'm back Sam, how did the rest of the night go?" I asked, sitting down on of the few crates left along the wall.

"The night and early morning saw no difficulties, Sir," He responded. "Jackie returned to retrieve more of the 'loot' from your previous mission, and our scrap car returned successfully."

"Right. Hey Riggs, how did last night go?" I called out, the large AI robot stepping into the garage after a moment.

"Fine," He responded, ever the conversationalist. "Should probably send them out with three MRVN units, not two."

"They couldn't keep up?" I asked.

"Noah and I arrived at the conclusion that a second trash gathering MRVN would increase the scrapper truck's efficiency by thirty-six percent," Samwise commented, prompting Riggs and I to both look at him. "Riggs was the one to bring it to our attention."

"Well, if they fit, fill the spot," I agreed with a nod, leaning back against the relatively cool wall of the garage. "No reason to lose that thirty percent. Hold on, Riggs, before you go..."

Riggs, assuming his contribution to the conversation was done, had turned to leave, only to turn back when I called out to him. I motioned for him to come closer.

"I got my new tech tree last night. Overall, it's a bit of a disappointment, but it does have some interesting Android designs," I explained. "It's more pertinent for Noah, Sam, and Frank,

but would you be interested in getting a few extra flesh-like parts? Maybe a head to go under your helmet?"

"No, that's not something I need," Riggs responded easily. "I understand the necessity of pretending to be a borg, but I have no need to present as more human than I already do."

"Fair enough. I don't want any of you guys to feel like you have to, but I also wanted to make sure everyone knows it's an option in case they don't want to have to act as much anymore," I assured him. "I'm more than happy to leave you guys exactly how you want, just as long as everyone knows the option is there."

Riggs nodded before leaving to stand guard again. I picked up my recently finished radio, which I had kept clipped on my pocket, sending a quick message to Noah and Frank that they should stop by at some point. Once that was done, I sat down on my workstation.

"Alright, may as well get this over with," I said, turning to look at Sam. "Do me a favor and seal up the place, Sam? I don't want anyone to see that I can make stuff like this."

The AI nodded, and as he moved to close the garage and warn Riggs, I got to work.

Since there was nothing hidden on the Become Human tech tree, I decided to jump right into it. I would make the most advanced model of android from four different sub-branches, before scrapping them all immediately. With any luck, that would basically cover everything I could ever need about them, without having to build each level of development. To start everything off, I would need to make a Thirium generator. It wasn't a difficult build, and the end result was a hybrid ultrasound vibration system with a built-in furnace.

Unfortunately, one of the ingredients required to make thirium was mercury. I was not happy to have to heat up such a dangerous substance, but with any luck, I would *never* have to do it again. I would be happy to make a few batches of this stuff before tucking the generator away and never using it again.

Designing and putting the generator together took two hours, and I set it aside for later. Chuck had already been notified that I needed a good amount of mercury, and he promised he could get some by the next afternoon. Thankfully, the rest of the ingredients for Thirium, at least the black-boxed version I had access to, weren't as challenging to get, so I already had them on hand.

The design process for the first android went relatively smoothly. I started with the most advanced general model, designed as a jack of all trades for household use. Its programming was dense, but its learning programs were basic. It would arrive at your house perfectly capable of taking care of most things, including basic maintenance and chores. The design was unnecessarily complex due to all of the biocomponents and overly complicated parts, but the molly makers were more than capable of matching and surpassing the required level of precision. In fact, they were capable of printing quite a lot of the android in larger chunks, meaning that after I finished the design for the first one, Samwise managed to get it all printed as I worked on the second one.

Rather than assemble the androids and have freaky stark white human analogs hanging around the place, turned off and waiting for the Thirium 310, I had Sam keep them in separate parts. That way, each model I made fit easily in a large container.

"Hmmm… how freaked out do you think people would get if I made a dog android?" I asked, already almost finished with the second design, which was the most advanced military android my tech tree had access to. "I have a whole list of animal androids, all of which are programmed pretty well. They aren't AI, so there's no need to worry there…"

"There are strict regulations on pet ownership within Night City limits," Samwise responded, looking up as he placed a white, newly finished leg into a crate. "As we are not within Night City limits, the law becomes significantly less clear."

"Yeah, but I wasn't worried about breaking the law," I pointed out. "If I make a near-perfect imitation of a dog, that will probably catch the attention of a lot of people. The fur, the skin, its behavior… It's up there with some of the advanced general models, but it's just coded for a different task. I could shift it to make it the perfect companion rather than a zoo model of wolves…"

The idea hung in my head all through the design process. I would love to have a canine companion, but if I couldn't explain one super lifelike, oddly biological android, how could I explain the same thing with a slightly different twist.

I was halfway through my third mode of Android when Jackie returned from his trip selling and delivering the cyberware we looted from the scavs. At this point, we had sold most of the good stuff and a significant portion of the rest.

"I'm planning on seeing if someone will buy the rest in bulk," Jackie explained as he took the empty box off the back of his bike and stacked it along the far wall. "Not getting much interest in what's left individually."

"It's up to you," I said, giving the big guy a thumbs up. "Do your best, but don't waste your time."

"   Yeah, figured as much. How's things around here?" Jackie asked, looking around the garage. "I excepted you to be busier, Genio."

I frowned and shook my head.

"Got a dud. It's probably gonna be a bit. Two weeks probably," I explained.

"Right, sure, Genio. Does that mean you're free for more skull-bustin' work?" He asked, now looking hopeful. "We are so close to getting into the Afterlife, I can feel it! Just a few more big jobs like last time… Maybe something even bigger…:"

"I'll likely be free for stuff, yeah," I agreed with a nod, finally turning around from my screen to focus on my friend. "You got anything lined up?"

"I might... A friend of a friend left a message for me at the Coyote, wanted to talk about the last job," He explained. "Seemed impressed. He might just be looking to pick up some gossip, but I got a feeling…"

"You want some company when you meet him?" I asked, giving him a look. "If not me, then Riggs or Kaytlyn. We are part of your crew, after all."

"...That's a fair point. I'll set it up and let you know."

We chatted for a bit longer, talking about Mama Welles and Misty. His Sandevistan came up as well, and apparently, he was still thinking it through. Vik had confirmed that the implant was clean and ready, but Jackie was still on the fence. I didn't push, since it was clearly something he was taking seriously.

When he left, I spent the rest of the night finishing the designs for the androids, making six of them in total, pushing past my initial estimate. They would all be ready by the time I had my Thirium production up and going.