

The following day, I woke up later than ever before, at least while in this reality. It was just past noon when I finally slid out of bed, yawning and stretching carefully, still conscious of my surgery. I was still a bit tired, but a quick cup of coffee fixed that up. I didn't usually drink coffee, but this was exactly the kind of situation I made an exception for. I couldn't exactly spend the entire day moping around, trying to stay awake. I had shit to do, after all. Besides, the coffee was actually real, made from real beans, or at least an instant coffee made from real beans, so it was by and far the most normal thing I had tasted here so far.

Once I had a cup of warm coffee in my hands, I stepped into my workshop, only to find One standing in front of my computer.

"Hey, One. You wanna come out to the couch and talk for a bit?"

I asked my new assistant, leaning around him to see what he was reading. The computer was open to an article about AI, specifically the several that openly worked in and around Night City. A picture of Delamain, the AI taxi service, was tucked up into the corner. I couldn't help but wonder if he had already had his forking meltdown already. From the few seconds I had to read the article, it wasn't mentioned.

One nodded, and together, we headed to the couch. Once we were sitting, I took a sip of my coffee. Before I could finish, One spoke up.

"I have chosen a name," They said immediately, catching me off guard. "I believe I will go by the name Samwise. Sam for short."

"That's... Sure, Samwise. That's a great name," I said with a smile. "How did you settle on that?"

"It is the name of the Hobbit who assists Frodo in destroying the one ring," He responded, tilting his head. "I believe, for my role as your lab assistant, it was a fitting name. The humble MRVN bot, who cannot perform the task for you, will help you along the way as best he can."

"Well... I can't say it doesn't make sense. I just hope that in time, you will develop past just being my assistant. Still a good name, though," I said with a smile. "So, you've had some time to browse the internet, get a feel for the world... Any questions?"

There was a part of me that had been nervous about leaving the newly born AI alone with the internet, especially without me around to answer questions and guide him. However, I had programmed him with some pretty serious intelligence when it came to fact-checking and data analysis. When it came down to it, I trusted his judgment because I made it for him. Over time, his personality would diverge from the core I built, but for now, he wasn't much more than the pre-existing program, one I could predict pretty easily.

"I do have a question. Why do you remain in this city?" Samwise asked, his head tilting to focus on me. "Night City is reportedly the most dangerous city in North America. Are there not safer places to live?"

"There are, but making progress would be a lot slower," I explained with a frown. "You alone contain a dozen parts that I would not be able to buy if we were anywhere but Night City. Here, I bought them online and had them shipped to my door. But I do plan on leaving the city itself as soon as I am more self-sufficient."

"And what criteria must be fulfilled for being self-sufficient?"

"Primarily? I need to be able to produce my own parts. I have a few ideas in my head, and now that I have finished you, I want to try them. If they work, then our next step is moving out of the city."

This was an idea floating in my head since shortly after I woke up in this apartment. Moving out of Night City and going somewhere I could work in peace, without people watching over my shoulder, would make my life a lot easier and safer. Once I could make my own parts, I didn't need to hang around in Night City anymore. Even better, I had the perfect place to go.

Rocky Ridge.

An abandoned town outside of Night City, complete with a garage, bar, a few dozen trailer park homes, and plenty of other stuff. In the game, you're first introduced to the town while working with Panan to get her truck back. There, it was barely a minute past the outskirts of Night City. Here, it was a five-minute drive, far enough away that a lot of the crazy shit from Night City didn't quite make it there.

That wasn't to say it was perfectly safe, either. Wraiths, a nomad family gone bad, were a constant threat in the Badlands. If you survived them, there were plenty of unaffiliated opportunistic assholes who would still see you as easy pickings. Thankfully, I had ways to solve that. I could even make my own power, which was, as far as I could tell, the main reason why the homeless hadn't moved into the abandoned city yet.

Best of all, since the people who had lived there gave up when the town started to fail, I could buy a large chunk of that land for cheap. In fact, it was so cheap that I felt guilty about buying it from them.

But that was all for the future. Whether or not I could move there was dependent on me being able to grab and construct quite a few juicy bits from the Titanfall universe. The IMC, by and far, was an exploratory production company. Their entire schtick was spreading colonies out to the stars, colonies that had to be almost entirely self-sufficient. There were *dozens* of different tech bits that were steered directly to taking materials, refining them, and turning them into useful things. Everything from raw ore and scrap back into useful metal to converting mountains of trash into polymer and normal plastics

Handily enough, there just happened to be literal mountains of trash and scrap all around Night City. Hell, Rocky Ridge had its own fair share of that hanging around.

I shook my head, focusing myself back on the current topic, smiling at Samwise. It was well and good to have plans for the future, but for now, I needed to focus on the present. I only had eleven days to get as much out of Titanfall as I could, and there was a whole lot that I wanted.

"That is agreeable," Samwise said with a nod. "We are vulnerable here, both from monitoring systems and corporate watchlists."

"I know, and it's getting harder and harder to ignore," I admitted, shaking my head. "Keep your eyes open, even just around the apartment."

"I will, sir," He agreed. "If our future plans are set, what of the short term?"

"I'm going out with Jackie to do a job for Padre, a local Fixer," I explained. "Before that, I want to make a few small blueprints. When I'm done, I want you to build them both up until they are almost complete. Then you're gonna finish one when I get back, and I will finish the other, probably tomorrow morning."

"You are putting our compatibility to the test?" He asked while flashing "ToF" on his chest screen.

My abilities, or at least, everything I knew about them so far, were included in his final build, built into a subsection in an easily deletable data chain. He was also programmed to be extremely circumspect about mentioning it, even when we appeared to be alone.

"That's right. Better to learn now than get surprised later," I pointed it out. "With any luck, even if it turns out like I think it will, I'm hoping that disassembling it and putting it back together will make up for any discrepancies."

We talked a bit longer and answered Sam's questions so I could get a feel for his conversational abilities. I was at least partially still testing him, seeing if any bugs sprung up. His core was, after all, a custom project rather than a line-for-line copy of something from the Titanfall universe. After I finished my coffee, I got some food from the machine in my room, actually paying for it since I had already removed the hack Spot and I installed. I sat down at my computer and got to work, eating my late breakfast and early lunch as I did.

I already had the two projects for Samwise to work on in mind, so I could immediately start putting the plans together for him. The first was a simple double fist-sized drone surveillance drone. As far as I could tell, this world seemed determined to strap thrusters on every little drone, doubling their size, making them big, hot targets, and making them much more expensive to upkeep. The Titanfall universe, on the other hand, developed an entirely new

thrust system for a lot of their drones, one that I was pretty sure was a more refined version of the Gremlin thrust system. They also maintained propeller-based drones, advancing them in small bursts but mostly leaving them as they were. They were cheaper, easier to maintain, easier to keep powered, and frequently easier to use. They could also be relatively quiet, at least when made correctly.

Like the one I was designing.

The second project was an early version of the minion detector, a semi-standard piece of equipment for Titan pilots. In the game, there was an advanced version of this device you could equip on your character that would clearly mark hostile targets on your minimap. Its only real limitation was that it couldn't track pilots because they were frequently moving way too fast for it to follow. This version was very much not portable, significantly less efficient, and its difficulty tracking faster targets was even more pronounced, so much so that the device had to be stationary to work, but it did have one solid advancement.

It was much easier to build.

As I started to mentally dive into the Titanfall tech tree, I quickly realized I would have a serious problem replicating complex, nonstandard parts. XCOM had been easy since the scientists and engineers working for the program were pulling from a relatively low-tech world. Titanfall, on the other hand, had two hundred years of advancement and specialization. I could mix and match some of the general, simple stuff, like hydraulics and servos, but when I started making the crazy, high-end tech with no real equivalency in the Cyberpunk universe, I was going hit a wall very quickly. This only made self-sufficiency even *more* important since that was the key to making those unique parts.

Luckily, the older model of the minion detector required a lot fewer small, finicky parts, so I could settle for an off-the-shelf infrared scanner, a sonar module from an underwater drone, and a seismic gauge used to monitor road traffic. These three devices worked together to create a real-time tracking system for all slow-moving entities in and around a singular building. By excluding people with proper credentials, you had an impressive addition to any security system. I didn't have the sonar module or the seismic gauge on hand, so this device would be the one I finish on my own, probably tomorrow when they were delivered.

At the end of the day, both of these devices would be sold to Padre, this time at a much more reasonable price. I had already cemented myself as someone he should protect, and it was in his best interest to keep my name off the records now that I could prove I wasn't just a one-hit-wonder.

Or, really, a three-hit wonder.

I spent the last bits of the afternoon whipping up the minion detector's programming since it was a pretty complicated system. Collating three streams of live data, interpreting it as a

visual representation, and laying it over a 2D representation of a building was relatively complex. The drone's programming was much more simple, so I had that finished in ten minutes.

When I was finished with the design process, I handed the projects over to Samwise. At this point, I had a pretty solid grasp of both builds, with a good understanding of the general design and how some of the bits worked. I was still missing a good chunk of information, as well as that final blast of knowledge that accompanied the finishing of a build.

In all honesty, I had relatively low expectations for this to work. My ability, Tinker of Fiction, while it provided me with real, hard technology that actually functioned on its own, still had a lot of Tinker-like aspects, limitations, and quirks, a lot more than I first realized. Having someone else complete my projects so I could focus on other things, drastically reducing the time it took me to build and advance, seems like a pretty obvious loophole. It's why I chose two bits of tech I wasn't overly interested in having locked into my brain.

Still, even if my fears proved true, having someone like Samwise to help me build stuff I already got the benefits of, construct my own creations while I was focused on a tech tree, or just generally help me work, especially once we moved into better facilities, would be absolutely priceless.

I watched Samwise work for a few minutes before idly checking the time.

"Alright, Sam. I'm gonna have to leave you to work on your own for a while," I said. "I'm already running a bit late to meet with Jackie."

"Very well, sir," He said. "Please endeavor to be as safe as possible."

"Don't worry, buddy. I got a whole suit of armor stashed in Jackie's garage," I assured him. "Plus, Jackie will be with me, we've got it covered."

"Understood. See you soon."

The robot turned back to his work, preparing the off-the-shelf parts for the small drone while I started getting ready to leave. Once I had everything, including a few magazines of bullets for my rifle, I headed out, making my way down to the garage and hopping into my truck.

It was a quick drive to Jackie's garage, my friend waiting outside the large door for me. He waved and opened the garage door for me, and I backed the truck halfway into it.

"You ready?" I asked, stepping into the garage.

"Just about," Jackie said, grabbing his helmet off a counter.

He was already dressed in his armor, wearing his black and red jacket over it. He looked intimidating as fuck, which would only get better with his helmet on. As he watched, I made my way over to a stack of cargo crates, where I knew he kept my armor. While I put it on, Jackie filled me in on the details about our job.

"So 6th Street has been pushing on Valentino turf for a while," Jackie explained, sitting down on his weight bench. "It happens all the time. Usually, they just push them back, take out a little extra, then retreat. Problem is, this time, they pushed too far, and when they got pushed back, they took something with them."

"What did they take?" I asked, pausing as I pulled on the second part of my chest armor, feeling it connect around my back and tighten into place.

"Padre didn't say, I didn't ask," Jackie said with a look, though after a moment, he shrugged. "My guess is a drug shipment or maybe some hardware. Either way, when the Valentinos pushed them out, it went with them."

"So we what, we clear a 6th Street hideout, then get whatever they stole back?"

"No, they've already written off whatever it was, which is why I'm guessing drugs. They would have already split it up to sell and use," Jackie explained. "But a message needs to be sent, something deeper than just a bit of a pushback, so we are going in, clearing out the building that Padre tracked the good too."

"What's the building for?"

"Just a gathering area, nothing major," He responded. "We are looking at twelve, maybe fifteen, no more than twenty members."

"Seriously?" I asked, looking up from finishing the last piece of my armor. "That's a bit more than seven or eight scavs."

"We can handle it," He assured me, "Just gotta hit hard before they can react, cut the group down by a handful. After that, we move slow and steady."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, pulling on my helmet, letting it seal itself in place, feeling the synthetic muscles squeeze and move as they activated. "I'm ready, let's go."

Jacke nodded, and together, we climbed into the truck. Thankfully, unlike the van we took to the scav hit, the truck had more adjustable seating, letting me slide the passenger seat back and down, meaning I *just* fit inside while in my armor.

It was tight, but it was better than laying in the back with the guns.

The drive was blessedly short, crossing across a bridge from the Vista Del Rey subdistrict into Arroyo, otherwise known as 6th Street Gang territory. Thankfully, we didn't move very far into their territory, only passing a few blocks before Jackie pulled up on a driveway, startling a few people walking on the sidewalk.

"You ready for this?" He asked as he shut the truck down.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" I asked, a bit confused.

"Well... 6th Street are assholes, but they aren't quite scav assholes," He explained with a shrug. "I was worried you wouldn't be up for it."

"Oh... well, I mean... I'm not going full murder hobo, but... Live by the sword, die by the sword, right?" I said, quoting the paraphrased gospel line. "If you're gonna be a violent ganger, you don't get to complain when that violence gets turned back around on you."

"Damn, fitting in pretty quick, Genio," Jackie said with a laugh, stepping out of the truck just as I did as well.

The sudden appearance of a rather large, fully armored man, looking everything like combat borg, got even more attention than Jackie riding up on the curb did. Suddenly people knew shit was about to go down and decided that this street was a very bad place to be.

Both of us walked around to the back of the truck, grabbing our weapons from the truck bed. I racked a round into my rifle, before reaching in and letting my sword latch onto the magnetic holster on my back. I then reached inside and pulled out Jackie's axe, handing it to him.

"Damn... I like it."

He took a moment to study the axe before clipping its holster to his belt, practicing pulling it before nodding and sliding it back on the opposite hip as his pistol. He then reached forward and grabbed his helmet, slowly pulling it over his head. He looked at me, the menacing, almost ogre-like face looking back at me, giving me a simple nod.

Together, we walked down the street, weapons ready, before finally, Jackie turned onto a pavilion, one lined with a few dozen vending machines, all lined up along the walls. There was one of those mini shops in the center, though it was empty of anything to buy. Instead, two gang members, covered in metal, both chains and cyberware, were sitting inside. Rather than say anything, Jackie simply reached into his jacket, pulled out a frag grenade, and underhanded it into the mini shop as we walked by. Both of the gangers were shocked by our appearance, and when the grenade thunked off the wall behind them and landed at their feet, it was way too late for them to do anything about it.



The grenade went off when we were a dozen feet away, blowing smoke and hundreds of fragments up and out of the structure, annihilating both of the "guards." We kept walking, both of us protected by the building, though I did feel a few small, residual fragments ping off my back. As we approached the front entrance to what was once a store, three gangers came pouring out of the front entrance, shouting and yelling. They ran face-first into us, having no idea what was going on, completely unprepared to meet us. Jackie snapped his axe out of his holster and slammed it into one of their skulls as the ganger tried to skid to a stop while I raised my rifle and pulled the trigger twice, spraying down the remaining two.

My time in the Badlands had given me a much better understanding of how my rifle worked, and it showed. The first bursts I fired went a bit wide, only the last two bullets hitting my target. Even so, each impact was devastating, with the heavy steel rounds blowing chunks out of the first man's shoulder and chest. My second burst was much more on target, with a quartet of rounds annihilating the third man, both of them dropping to the ground and sliding to a stop.

"I'll lead," I said, my voice filtered through my mask.

"Si, right behind you."

I stepped closer, kicking the door in. The flimsy, cheap frame crumpled and slammed open hard enough to knock the door off its hinges, clearing the door permanently. However, rather than stepping through, I stepped to the side, just as whoever was on the other side mag dumped through the open door. Eventually, after a moment, I heard a click, and Jackie immediately stepped into the doorframe. He fired a pretty tight grouping of bullets into the frantically reloading ganger. When Jackie stepped back, I stepped through, my rifle up and ready as I cleared the front entrance.

I confirm in the back of my head that shortening my redesign of the mag rifle had been the right choice as I turned and scanned the entrance, the rifle up on my shoulder, ready to fire. Two steps into the room, a ganger with a significant portion of his left side replaced with cyberware burst from behind cover. He was armed with a telescopic club, sparks of EMP static crackling around the end. The second he laid eyes on us, he jerked back in surprise, clearly not anticipating either of us. He dropped a second later, his baton going silent as it rolled away from his corpse.

Two more gangers came charging out of a back room, a door marked with a fading sign that read "Employees Only." We were facing the other direction, and both of them got several shots off. Bullets pinged off my armor and flattened against Jackie's, but neither of them had anything capable of penetrating our armor.

When both of them had been dispatched, we both made our way to the door they had come from. We both had time to reload before I put on a repeat performance, kicking the door off of its frame and stepping into the small storage room beyond. It was empty, but not for long, as a man dressed in modified military fatigues and chrome built into his head stepped around a



door further in, holding something in each of his hands. Even as he tossed both of his grenades, I turned, my body running on instincts I didn't even know it had. I slammed into Jackie, the enhanced strength of my armor just enough to drive us both through the door frame. I was in the process of shoving him away from the opening when the grenade went off.

The explosion was deceptively small, but with nothing between me and it, I was battered by a barrage of shrapnel. Still, the explosive had gone off inside the room, so instead of being battered and broken, I was merely tossed a bit, falling down on my ass, my ears ringing.

Thankfully, I had succeeded in pushing Jackie out of the danger zone, so when three gangers came sprinting around the corner, coming to confirm or finish us off, he finished off all three of them, dumping most of his pistol mag into them.

Slowly, I stood up, quickly helped by Jackie after he confirmed the storage room was empty.

"Ey, you good choom?" He asked, his voice barely detectable under a constant whine.

"Yeah, I'm good. None of the shrapnel made it through," I confirmed. "Probably just some bruising. Ears are ringing."

"That's good, the ringing will pass," He assured me as he slapped my shoulder.

With a nod, Jackie grabbed my rifle and handed it to me, covering me while I stretched, shook off the explosion, and checked my weapon. I gave him a nod when I was ready.

We pushed back through into the storage room, which was now a heavily perforated mess. After quickly clearing the mess, we cleared the next room as well, which was set up as a break room of sorts, with a staircase going down in the far corner.

I took the lead, slowly descending down the stairs and entering a run-down, patched-up basement. As I stepped out of the stairwell, I got my a clear view of the surprisingly open room. There was a lot of stuff stored there, crates and boxes all stacked up along the walls, with a table in the center of the decently sized room, with what looked like the remnants of a poker game going on. There were also three gangers waiting for us, in cover behind some of the crates. I stepped forward, looking to take cover as well before they could open fire, only for one big mother fucker to come out from behind a stack of boxes and slam into me. Just from a glance, I could see he was seriously chromed out, with all four limbs replaced by exposed cyberware. The impact drove me back and knocked my rifle from my hand, the shock of his charge and yell stunning me just long enough for him to disarm me.

Jackie, who was just behind me, stepped out of the stairwell, trying to line up a shot on the chromed-up ganger, only for a barrage of bullets to force him back into the stairs.

The brute continued to try and grapple me, his robotic limbs, and whatever other enhancements he had, actually giving him a significant edge. My warden armor only improved my strength and speed to around, maybe even slightly past peak human. It did not contend very well with someone kitted out to the nines in steal and servos, especially someone with actual experience fighting hand-to-hand.

Knowing this, I didn't fight him for dominance, only to stay standing, focusing instead on reaching down to holster, grabbing my knife and pulling it from its sheath. I slammed it down into his back, just below his neck, punching through what I was pretty sure was some sort of subdermal armor. I stabbed him several more times before finally hitting his spine, or the cyberware equivalent, the man going limp instantly, falling to the ground. I left my knife in him, focusing on the other three gangers still standing, their attention now split between Jackie and myself.

Rather than scramble on the ground for my rifle, I grabbed my pistol, pulling it out and holding it one-handed, firing as I moved, trying to flank around the three remaining goons. One of the three noticed what I was doing and tried to pull his shots to follow me, but his [Copperhead](#) clicked, his magazine empty. As he screamed out a curse, desperately fumbling with a new mag, I put him down before focusing on the next ganger.

Together, Jackie and I made quick work of the remaining two 6th Street gangers. When the gunfire finally stopped, we both took a moment to breathe. I retrieved my fusion knife, wiping the synthetic blood off of it and sliding it back into my holster before reloading my pistol and sliding it away as well.

"Let's clear the upstairs again," Jackie said. "Then you stand guard while I fill some duffel bags up."

"Sounds like a plan," I said with a nod. "So... how did you like your ax?"

"Worked well, thought for sure it would get stuck in that guy's skull," Jackie answered. "Not bad."

"What can I say? I do good work," I responded, following after Jackie while he shook his head.

"Don't get cocky Genio," He said, though I could hear his smile. "Just keep watch, I'll fill a few bags, and we'll get out of here quick."