

With the limitations on creating the key components of MJOLNIR armor, making fifty complete Spartan units would take nearly half a day. That was a huge deviation from our normal ability to pump out shades faster than they could be destroyed, but with how impressive each Spartan unit would be, I was more than happy with that speed. Once we ran the initial group through some testing and patched any problems, I would have the factories running at full speed until we had thousands stored away, with at least two dozen Dumb AI teams ready and waiting to deploy.

Until then, however, I had finished the day's tasks and was free until Samwise was ready to launch the first of our surveillance satellites into space. My first instinct was to see what Sable was up to, but while she would be free in time for dinner, she was busy with meetings for now.

That left me with a few hours to complete a task I had been meaning to do for a few days, so rather than dive into another project, I headed to the campground.

I had one hell of an offer to make our Nomad friends.

I made my way to Rocky Ridge, stepping out of the parking structure and out into the renovated town. I could see Sable's Caliburn parked at the meeting hall, along with several other high-end cars I didn't recognize, no doubt the business she had mentioned needing to finish. I continued on, making my way into the campground area.

While Rocky Ridge had gone through an incredible explosion of development, the campground had also undergone some minor adjustments. Almost all of the sand in the campground had been replaced by gravel and concrete, with several sections looking like areas where Noah would implement his rising and falling garden sections. This made the area seem considerably less dirty than normal, and with the vehicles having had plenty of time to be cleaned, not to mention the people, the entire space looked much tidier, with significantly less dust coating everything.

As I walked further into the campground, I spotted Alexander standing near a series of power armor stations. One of the updated, fallout-style power armors was being worked on, with what looked like a new section of armor being lowered into place. It appeared that they had fabricated a new chunk of back armor and were in the process of fitting it on.

"Hey, Alexander. What are you working on?" I asked, stepping onto the concrete slab that their "garage" was built on.

"Oh, Jackson, hey," He said with a nod, though he was clearly distracted. "We designed a new chunk of armor that contains some extra hardware, mainly a more robust, standalone computer system. Our netrunner wants to redesign the HUD and include a few more bells and whistles for sensors, and they need more computing power."

"Sure, understandable," I said with a nod. "It looks good."

The updated power armor, the models I had been willing to give them, had run with very little computing power, as most of the articulation was done by analogue controls. Putting in a

compact computer wasn't a bad idea, and keeping it on the back, away from where you would be looking, and being shot at from, wasn't bad either.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that I could have given them a computer that fit in the palm of their hand and was more powerful than a whole server of hard drives running a single system.

"Listen, I wanted to set up a meeting between you and Dakota Smith," I explained as we both watched the power armor getting worked on. "It's not an emergency, but I would like it to happen as soon as possible, even right now if that's not too much to ask for."

"I'm sure she would make time for you," he said, giving me a curious look. "Why, what's going on?"

"I have an offer. For you and all the other nomads," I explained with a smile. "To live up to your name."

The slightly taller man furrowed his brow, considering my words. After a moment, he visibly gave up trying to puzzle out the extra meaning and merely shrugged.

"Give me a minute to call her, I'm sure she will make time," He responded, turning to head to a tent. "Do you want a ride?"

"No, I think I have that covered," I said with a chuckle. "In fact, you and Panam can ride with us."

"... Do you mean in that beast we saw tearing out of here the other night?" He asked, turning back to me, a hungry look on his face.

"That's the one," I said with a smirk. "I'll even let you drive."

The Nomad leader rubbed his hands in excitement before rushing back to his tent. I couldn't help but chuckle, heading back through the campground and into Rocky Ridge. A quick trade of bodies through the teleporter, as well as a call to Riggs later, and I hopped into the Warthog, driving it out of the garage and over to the campground. Both Panam and Alexander were waiting.

"Fucking hell choom... that thing is a monster," Panam said, walking around the vehicle as it came to a stop. "How the hell do you come up with this?"

"It just comes to me," I said with a shrug as I jumped out of the driver's seat, leaning back against the tire well. "Before you ask, it's not for sale. This is technically military tech."

"Do they come with enclosed paneling?" Alexander asked, trying to pop the hood stealthily, though the way he did it made it obvious he was joking.

"They do in fact," I responded. "For now, hop in, I'll teach you how to drive."

Alexander nearly flew into the driver's seat, eyeing all the switches and display screens. Thankfully, he wasn't impulsive enough to start pressing random buttons, unsurprising considering how complicated some of their vehicles were.

I spent about twenty minutes explaining the basics and setting the Warthog to a simplified mode, designed for new drivers in emergencies. It disabled a lot of the more finicky or dangerous buttons, setting most of the vehicles to an automatic system. A crowd of nomads formed around us to watch, while Riggs and Panam climbed into the back. When I was sure that Alexander wouldn't accidentally grind out the gearbox or dump the spare hydrogen tank, I gave him the green light, and he shouted for his people to step back.

With a near manic laugh, the man gunned it, swerved, and tapped the brakes, rather expertly managing to spin the wheels and turn the all-terrain vehicle around on a dime, before letting the wheels catch and peeling out of the campground. He thankfully slowed down as we passed through Rocky Ridge, but he leaned heavily on the gas as we left it behind.

If I had actually been in my body, driving with Alexander would have been a terrifying experience. He was clearly a master behind the wheel, seeming to adapt to the 'hog in minutes, but he was happy to push his skills to the max, weaving around cars at full speed.

Of course, Panam was loving it, hollering for him to go faster.

The benefit of pushing the war machine to its max was that it didn't take long to get to [Dakota's garage](#). When we pulled in, we of course got everyone's attention, but thankfully, they seemed to know we were coming. We pulled along one corner of the cleared space in front of the fixer's business, and quickly hopped out.

"I will stay by the vehicle," Riggs said, leaning against the hood and giving me a nod, his power armor making him even bigger than usual.

Man, I couldn't wait to get him into some MJOLNIR.

With Alexander leading us in, nobody even questioned us as we walked through the garage to the back rooms, where Dakota was waiting. The older fixer was sitting at her desk, reading files on a computer, and as we entered, she blanked the screen and turned.

"Jackson, it's good to see you," She said, standing slowly to shake my hand. "Alexander tells me you have an offer, something about turning us into real nomads?"

"That's right," I said simply, taking a seat. When Alexander and Panam remained standing, I gestured for them to sit as well. "Should probably sit, guys."

Alexander raised an eyebrow and sat, but Panam just rolled her eyes and leaned back against the wall. I shrugged before looking back at Dakota.

"Hypothetically, how many nomad groups do you think would be interested in pioneering uncharted land?" I asked, leaning back. "Exploring, settling, marking down resources, the whole lot."

"I..." the fixer trailed off, her words failing her for a moment before she managed to plow through the confusion. "Hypothetically? I think quite a few of them would be. Most of them. But where on Earth is left to explore?"

"Nowhere. There's nothing left to explore on Earth," I responded simply.

My statement was met with confusion for almost half a minute before Dakota and Alexander's eyes both went wide at the same moment. Panam wasn't far behind and reacted much more viscerally.

"Bullshit, I call bullshit," she said, shaking her head. "There is no way you..."

As she refuted my unspoken statement, she slowly realized that I was in no way joking. As she did, her legs went a little weak, and she barely managed to drop roughly into a chair.

"Told you," I said with a smirk.

"Jackson, what exactly are you implying?" Dakota asked. "I'm aware that some of the things you are building are beyond anything we have seen..."

"I have discovered a reliable method of faster-than-light travel," I responded clearly, Dakota's jaw dropping. "Later tonight, I plan on launching several stealth satellites to get a more exact idea of what is going on upstairs. After that, I plan on sending out drones to several dozen promising planets that might be Earth-adjacent in their environment."

The room was dead quiet, all three Nomads stun-locked into complete silence. They stared at me, eyes wide, jaws hanging down. Rather than just sit in silence, I decided to continue, waiting for them to catch up.

"Once I find a world that is livable, I plan on setting up a forward operating base of sorts," I explained. "What I'm suggesting is that the Nomads make up the backbone of the exploration teams that land on the planet, and on any other Earth-like planets we find within the general neighborhood. I'm offering the Nomad families an opportunity to explore the stars and entirely new planets, looking for resources, interesting locations, and just about everything in between."

"...Jackson..." Dakota finally said, after another long moment of silence. "That offer is incredible... impossible, and yet somehow I don't doubt it for a moment."

"After what we saw in your bunker... I don't doubt it either," Alexander agreed, Dakota's words seeming to have broken him free from his frozen state. "You would really let us explore a whole new worlds, not just wander around this one?"

The truth was, I didn't really need their help. In fact, letting them do this would likely considerably slow down the exploration of any world I found. But not everything needed to be done at a breakneck speed by advanced AIs, superior scanning equipment, and a broken production system. I was holding the key to a post-production nightmare in my pocket, where everything was done by machines and humans were relegated to boring, meaningless lives.

Or worse.

The key to avoiding that fate was to engage in pursuits that could be automated, but that you chose not to. It's what I planned to do with most of the robotic workers that would be staffing my buildings. Each one would be replaced by real people, providing jobs and letting people earn a proper living. Eventually, when the world was ready, I would slowly push the world into a post-scarcity state. Unfortunately, they were not nearly at that point, which meant doing my best to provide work and goals for people.

Of course, there was another reason as well. I needed people, a significant group, or even better, several significant groups, who had experienced space, seen the planet or planets I had found. When I was finally ready to turn my interstellar assets back to Earth, they would be part of the vanguard of spokespeople for the wonders of what we had achieved.

"I think it's something you would enjoy, it gives you something to strive for, other than just wandering the dusty wastes of North America," I finally responded. "Some of you might even find a space you can finally call home. Somewhere alive, but safe from outside threats, radiation, dust storms, and raffen shiv."

Something in Panam's eyes glowed at the mention of a real, safe home, somewhere new and not barren. A hunger that I didn't realize she had, which neither Dakota nor Alexander shared.

"That... that is an incredible offer," Dakota said, sitting loosely in her chair. "We... If it is seriously something you're going to make happen... I would need to call a gathering of the families. I know some who would love to go... but others who would rankle at being under your thumb, even if it meant missing out on... on this."

"That is understandable. It will likely be a few days before I'm ready to launch our interstellar probes, and I will likely be laid up recovering from cyberware sometime around then," I explained. "That said, I want to be there when you meet, before you reveal anything. I want to properly establish just how far down the rabbit hole we are going, and to do that, I need to be present."

"It will take some time to gather everyone who needs to be here," Dakota responded. "I will call an emergency, face-to-face meeting. They happen very rarely, and the punishment for calling one when unneeded is severe, but I doubt anyone will question my decision after you give your offer."

"How many planets... fucking hell, I can't believe I'm asking this, but how many planets do you plan on exploring?" Alexander asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"I plan on colonizing and building on one, for now," I explained easily, before shrugging casually. "But there's no reason to restrict what you guys are exploring. Just as long as you understand that any garden worlds we find are hopefully going to be settled properly. They aren't your personal playgrounds. Yes, you would have first dibs on any site you find, but they

aren't your worlds. They belong to me, and by extension, the people of whatever system I put in place once I'm done taking control of Earth."

All three of them went silent again, looking at me with a complicated mix of expressions. Apprehensive, unsurprised, curiosity, all mixed in, until finally Dakota spoke.

"I suppose that is inevitable, with how you are growing," She said. "No major company would let you rest with how advanced you've become. They won't go quietly."

"Some will. Some won't. Either way, it's happening, and there's not much they can do about it. At this point, we are taking our time to try and keep casualties to a minimum," I explained with a shrug. "Owning Night City will make protecting it significantly easier, and making it a near utopian city will catch everyone's attention. At the same time, I plan on working on dominating space as well."

"The highriders won't go quietly," Alexander pointed out.

"I think quite a few of them will greet me with cheering and excitement when I reveal I have a way for them to finally travel the stars," I counter, causing him to rock. "They've lived on the edge for so long, whole generations of people looking out into space, the real adventure just beyond their grasp."

There were a lot of ways I could deal with most of the problems in space. Gunboat diplomacy was likely going to be my go-to with any weapon platforms or corpo assets, but I wasn't going to blow up any of the station with innocent people on it. That would require different approaches. Worst case scenario, I could offer to slap a slipspace drive onto their stations, and we can watch them disappear into space.

"This is a lot of information coming at you pretty fast," I admitted. "But it is a serious offer that you need to consider. It also needs to remain a complete secret. I don't think I need to explain the issues that could come up from this getting out. Assuming they believe you at least."

In truth, while it was a significant concern, I wasn't overly worried. Keeping this a secret would be Mary's first real assignment. Well, after the security checks she was running on our potential new hires, but that was such a minor task compared to her actual capabilities that it hardly even counted.

This, on the other hand, would be a real test, with constant observation and infiltration, complete data watch for multiple people. She would likely have to do a whole lot of system cracking to get the job done, all the while being subtle enough not set off any alarms or trigger any of the AI's haunting this world's infrastructure. Not to mention Netwatch.

We discussed the details for a while longer, eventually concluding that once I recovered from my new upgrades, which I would hopefully be getting within the next two days, we could hold the meeting. That would give the various nomad leaders and representatives enough time to make their way here. Some would be driving, but others would be forced to fly, and with air

travel an unstructured mess, that would take some time. If everything went as planned, that would put the meeting a day or two before I got my new tech tree.

We agreed that I would host the actual meeting and that Alex would be hosting the nomad leaders until it happened. That would give them a chance to get comfortable with some of what we were doing and with being around Rocky Ridge. It would also give me a place and plenty of time to set up my pitch.

Once we had made our plans, Dakota politely kicked us out, as she had quite a few phone calls to make, which she didn't expect to be done with for several hours. We said our goodbyes and headed out of the garage, where Riggs was waiting for us.

The drive home was startlingly different from our drive there, as both Panam and Alexander were understandably distracted by their thoughts. Panam didn't even ask to drive, as I had been rather certain she would.

After a comparatively sedate drive back, we pulled into the garage and the two nomads left, heading back to their people while I moved the Warthog back up to the third floor. Once I was done with that, I headed to the meeting hall to wait for Sable to be done with her work. For now, I was basically done until Samwise was ready to start launching our sensor network.

It didn't take long for Sable to finish her business, the striking woman escorting the people she was meeting with, before greeting me with a kiss on my cheek.

"Hey, you done talking to Dakota?" She asked, continuing when I nodded. "How did she take it?"

"They were pretty shocked, which is fair," I responded, both of us making our way out of the meeting hall, just in time to watch our guests pull out of the town. "But they were also clearly interested. I think it will be an easy sell for most of them, though I assume some of them will be assholes."

"And you're sure it's necessary?" She asked, her tone lacking any conviction. We had had this conversation a few times over the last few days, and I had convinced her it was the best option.

"Yes," I said confidently. "I know it would be easier and faster to do it with robots and AI, but we are trying to restore humanity. We can't do that by replacing them. Not to mention that having a group of people so closely aligned with me, working with my technology, stress-testing it, and getting used to it in the field is also worth the effort. It's honestly an all-around win for everyone, save the concept of saving time."

She nodded begrudgingly, and the conversation shifted to her meeting. At this point, we were just a day or so away from opening our first above-ground manufacturing facilities, where we would finally start to make products for the general public. Not only had all of the wheels been greased and hands shaken, but we already had the supplies ready and waiting to be

"delivered" to the warehouse, and almost all of our positions were filled with thoroughly background-checked people.

All that was left was to start moving people into the several apartment complexes that were now dotting the town, as well as putting the final finishing touches on the warehouses. That would happen over the next several days. Rocky Ridge was about to be reborn as a full-fledged town. We had even opened up a few more places to get food, these ones run entirely by robots. These would focus on healthy, everyday cuisine, giving our residents a place to get real, nutritious food at a low cost.

As we arrived at Jackie's apartment, I was happy to see a full house. Rebecca, Vik, Mama Welles, and Misty were all there, as well as everyone who lived at the vault. Jackie served an incredibly well-cooked salmon with a delicious ginger, brown sugar, and soy sauce glaze.

When dinner was over, Sable, David, Misty, Jackie, and I all made our way to the large-scale production cavern, which we hadn't been to since we started clearing Maelstrom. The [massive carved-out cavern](#), which had only grown since then, now had six enormous stone pillars, with the two new ones supporting a newly completed section. The volume of available production was truly insane, and I could already see that my request for a construction team to be ready and waiting, prepared to step through a teleporter and start building on a planet had been filled.

I was pretty sure that Samwise was showing off again, since I didn't doubt that he would have installed a teleporter at our destination, but I had no desire to rain on his parade. Both he and Noah had worked hard on this monument to [Von Neumann-style](#) production.

They deserved to show off a little.

Eventually, we made our way to a smaller cavern carved into the wall of the main area. There, the standard utility plating of the vault returned, eventually leading to a sealed-off observation area overlooking a large room. Along the back wall of the observation room was an extensive control system, with a few separate screens.

Inside the large room that the observation area overlooked, I immediately recognized a version of the Slipspace generator required for the translocation process. It was clearly modified and streamlined, with most of it covered in protective plating, but I knew just about everything about those slipspace drives, I would recognize them anywhere.

Samwise, who was waiting for us in the observation room, turned from the control systems and nodded as we entered.

"Welcome. The final checklist is just being completed now. We should be able to launch our first satellite shortly."

"That's good to hear," I said with a nod, stepping closer to read over the information displayed on the screens. "And combining the tech solved our issue?"

The slipspace translocator method of teleportation was interesting and unique when compared to what was our standard teleportation method. Unfortunately, it wasn't without its faults, primarily that it still needed a beacon to target in order to work. Thankfully, we were able to solve that by combining it with the more advanced Quantum Translocator designs, which allowed one slipspace generator to punch two holes, making both an entrance and an exit.

It was impressive and would let us deploy our satellites across a *large* area around Earth, giving them a significant head start in forming our space sensor grid. Unfortunately, it did require some hardware on the satellites themselves. It was no big deal for larger items, as it was relatively small compared to what was essentially a sensor buoy. Unfortunately, it did make the system inferior to our existing one for frequently used travel points.

Once the final checklist was completed, the [first satellite](#) was brought into the translocator room and deposited on a raised platform.

The satellite's design was streamlined and straightforward. It was about six meters tall with the antenna retracted, and one and a half meters wide. It was basically cylindrical with a band of plating around the middle, and a power core and thruster system in the back, though there were thrusters at the front as well. There were three sensor modules at the "front" as well as more systems under the plating.

Despite its simple look, it was incredibly advanced, utilizing every stealth trick we knew, including an exterior layer of signal-muffling paneling, radar-muffling paint, insulating material to hide the heat of its power generator, two different types of cloaking, and everything else Samwise could throw at it. Its sensors were also incredibly advanced and compact, the best we had to offer.

It was also rigged to blow rather spectacularly, just in case.

Once the satellite was in place and one final systems check was confirmed, Sawise began a countdown. At around thirty seconds, you could feel the hum of the slipspace drive powering up. At twenty, the hum gave way to a beating thrum that pulsed through the entire room. At ten, the thrum stabilized into a whine that wasn't quite sound, that you could feel rather than hear.

When the countdown finally hit one, there was a flash of light that filled the transport room, and suddenly a large blue swirling flare opened alongside the satellite. At the center was the tear, the opening to the slipspace dimension, where the satellite would travel through to emerge in space. The platform the device was on tilted toward the tear, and with the help of its thrusters, the satellite pushed through the opening in dimensions, disappearing in another flash of light.

The tear remained open, the slipspace drive using it to reach through and tear open another hole for the satellite to leave through, just a few seconds after it entered. Then, with a third and final flash, the tear and swirling pale blue was gone, and the slipspace whine coming from the drive slowly faded, the room going quiet. A moment later, Samwise spoke up from behind us.

"Receiving data from Sensor Net Point One.... It made it through, no anomalous readings," he announced easily. "First feed coming through... feeding it through to Security monitoring..."

The large screen in front of the AI lit up, showing a large image of Earth. Sadly, it was far from the green and blue marble I was familiar with. Vast swaths of land were brown, dead, and ruined. Once green forests had burned under the bombs of the corporate wars and beyond, leaving nothing behind. There were a few patches of visible life, mostly in Africa, but by and large, the planet was dead. Worse still, the oceans were a sickly mix of greens and grey.

Not even the space around the planet was safe, as it was choked with space debris, a massive orbiting junkyard that spun around the planet.

"Well... I knew we had our work cut out for us," I said, still staring at the feed. "I guess this just confirms what I already knew."

We watched the live video for several minutes before Samwise eventually began prep to launch the second satellite, and we retreated back to the living quarters.