

The next morning, there was a report waiting for me from Samwise letting me know that all stealth satellites had been deployed, and the closest of them, the ones directly around Earth, were already in position. It would likely take about three days for the remaining satellites to get into position, which was plenty of time to design and build the probes I planned on sending out.

We would likely need about a hundred, as at the moment, that was how many Earth-like planets that had been discovered within ten light-years, which Samwise and I agreed would only be a short hop for our probes. We knew there were about a hundred Earth-like planets in that range because it was public knowledge, the leftovers from this planet's past efforts in understanding space. Not much was happening these days in space exploration, as there was no profit in learning just for the sake of understanding, but once upon a time, there had been. The scientists here had managed to refine a much more precise list of planets than my world had, unsurprisingly considering how strangely advanced their tech was.

All we had to do to get all the information we needed, at least for our first attempt, was for Mary to whip up a fake ID for a random college, then use those credentials to buy all of the data we needed from their research publication services. It gave us plenty of data to calculate and plot the planets on a galactic map, which we would use to send out our probes. Some of the data was likely not perfect, but we could always adjust the probe or self-destruct it if it was off completely.

After a quick breakfast with Sable, I left for the workshop to work on our probe design, primarily so that Samwise could focus on other things. It didn't have to be anything special, it was just a way to get us to these planets and land us on the surface, not exactly a difficult task for what I knew about starships. This meant it didn't exactly take me long to [plan out the design](#), as it didn't need to be stylish or over the top. Considering the lack of any radio or other communications coming from these planets, which were certainly close enough for us to notice, they didn't have anyone on them that we needed to worry about impressing. So, the probe ended looking like a long, singular rectangular box, with two shorter rectangular boxes on either side for the thrusters.

Despite its visual simplicity, it had everything it needed to do its job. It was technically unmanned, though there was a small cockpit deep in the hold. There were also eight MRVNs on board, folded up and stored away, as well as an active teleport pad, and several others that were packed away. The already attached teleporter was in place in case we needed to pilot it manually, and the packed away ones would be deployed once the probe made landfall.

The slipspace drive wasn't the fastest we had access to, though it was one of the smallest, meaning we could keep the probe small. In fact, the fact that I wanted it to have room for a pilot was the primary limitation on size.

When the probes were completed and ready to send out, they would be able to make a jump from inside the atmosphere, as we had fully integrated the information we learned from the translocator tech.

We did learn in the process of integration that there was a bit of a size limitation for slipspace drives that could jump around a planet. If the slipspace tear was too big, it would likely lead to some rather energetic feedback. Not to mention that I was nervous about opening large slipspace tears planetside, for no other reason than because slipspace was all sorts of weird. It wasn't nearly as fucked as, say, something like the [warp](#), but there were enough strange safety warnings attached to the drives, not to mention stories I remember from the books, that it did make me wary.

The final design of the probe was three and a half meters tall and around ten meters long. It was just about the limit of what I would want to launch from the ground directly into slipspace.

Once I was done with the design, I double-checked my work before running it by Samwise. I felt bad for distracting him, but I would feel better about starting the production process knowing he had reviewed the design as well.

When I was done working on the planetary probes, I made my way to Frank's lab. It was time for me to take the first step of getting my new Spartan cyber and bioware. Unfortunately, rather than getting anything new, the first step was getting my old implants and upgrades removed or disabled. I was about to undergo an extensive, comprehensive, full-body upgrade, so it was essential to start from a mostly clear foundation.

At the moment, I had eight body mods installed. My Monocyte Breeder implant could be turned off with an internal switch, so that would only require a simple incision. My brain computer interface could stay where it was, as it already did everything I would need to interface with our custom MJOLNIR, without the ability for an AI to interact with my brain and nervous system. Any other change that would happen to my brain wouldn't interfere with the enhancements.

Yes, that did mean I would be missing out on the not-insignificant boost that having an AI interfacing between the armor and the wearer gave, but, honestly, I was happy to take the hit. I had been nervous about the idea of my implant, which couldn't directly control or alter my brain chemistry in any way. The UNSC neural implant was *so much more invasive*, there was no way I was getting it.

I also had my medical nanohive, a skinweave, a bone weave, and a muscle lace, all of which would need to be removed. Now the good news was that, in his incredible wisdom and intelligence, Frank had foreseen the need to strip someone down of their weaves and lace, and had developed a much faster system to do so than what was commercially available. I would be able to take it today and be weave and lace-free by tomorrow morning.

Unfortunately, the increased speed would make an already miserable experience even worse. I would absolutely need to be put under, as I would be in near constant, bone-deep pain otherwise. Though, that said, already being under did give Frank the opportunity to remove my nanohive.

Unfortunately, the process of removal would almost certainly ruin the relatively delicate bioware to a point that was beyond saving. It was unfortunate, since finding that piece of bioware had been one in a million, and it had cost me a pretty ennie. But it would interfere with the implanting process, so it needed to go.

Frank promised he would analyze it as best he could, in an attempt to learn more about it, but he wasn't exactly hopeful he would be able to replicate it. Thankfully, my enhanced lungs and secondary heart would not need to be removed, as they would both react normally to their specific upgrades.

Jackie, who had decided he also wanted to participate in Project Tulip, was looking at a much more significant removal process. Not only did he have skinweave, boneweave, and muscle lace to get removed, but he also had a bunch of subdermal armor plates that needed to be taken out. His heart, lungs, and nerves would be fine, just like mine, thankfully. Unfortunately, removing Sandy would be way too complicated and dangerous, so that would need to be worked around.

When I arrived at Frank's lab, he was already getting ready for me, with a surgery suite partially set up. As he gathered tools and got ready, I sat back on a bench, reading through the final specs for each level of Project Tulip. Originally, I had assumed that I would settle for the first stage, getting turned into a Spartan, just so I could wear the basic version of MJOLNIR. The first level consisted of mostly injections, with only three minor implants.

However, as I had read through the actual process, not just the specs Frank gave me to calibrate our armor designs, I was beginning to consider the second level. I already had two parts, the secondary heart and the enhanced lungs, which meant there would only be four more organ transplants, a more intense muscle and bone treatment, as well as a handful of minor bits of chrome. It was then finished with a custom skin weave as an added level of durability.

The third level was where things started to get *really* invasive, with muscle replacement therapies, nearly a dozen implants, secondary nerve replacements, and so much more, all before the person finally went through a barrage of injections to complete the enhancements. Then, once that was all in place, the user would receive several subdermal and bone-anchored reinforcements before finally capping it all off with the same custom skin weave.

"Frank... what is the recovery time for the second level of enhancements?" I asked, putting down the tablet and leaning back on my seat.

"Around the same time," he responded, not looking up as he organized his tools, an assistant robot ready and waiting nearby.

"Seriously?" I asked. "How is that- oh right, stimpaks."

"Exactly," he confirmed. "Most of the implants and replacements can be performed on the same day, meaning there is very little extra recovery time."

I nodded and leaned back slightly, considering my options. A level one upgrade would essentially make it so that with MJOLNIR, I could likely take on a full, gang-funded Borg one-on-one. Level two was approaching the point at which I would stand a fair chance outside of my armor. With it, I would steamroll them.

A level three upgrade would likely be able to fist fight a corpo-funded borg without their armor, and with it... Well, I would put good money on them beating Adam Smasher.

The less said about level four, the better.

"I think I am going to go with the second level," I said after a few more minutes of thinking. "Other than the one-to-one organ replacements, it's all additive, and I would feel safer knowing I could handle myself if need be."

"Really?" Frank asked, turning around, his head tilted slightly. "Well, that's fine, I already have a stock of necessary mechanical parts, as well as the injections. I will get started on growing enough organ replacements for you and your biological doppelgangers as soon as your procedure is finished."

"Has Jackie scheduled his removal surgery?"

"Yes, he will be here later today," Frank responded with a nod. "He also opted for the second level, so you will be undergoing the same program."

"Right, well... let's get this over with," I said with a frown, standing up from my seat. "Do me a favor, let Samwise know he can go ahead and run the tests on the Spartans when they are done. Just record it for me so I can watch it later."

"You don't want to participate?"

"I do, but I want to start getting the shades replaced ASAP," I said, before gesturing to the surgery suite set up. "This needs to happen now, so I can start the upgrades. I have a meeting with the Nomads after my recovery. The factories will be opening any day now, though Mary and Sable are taking care of that. Watching recordings later will have to do."

"I understand," he said with a nod, though he paused for a moment before continuing. "Though I should point out that, during your 'recovery', you will be on bed rest as the injections settle, you can still use your machine interface."

"...Right... Well, this still needs to happen now," I said, shaking my head. "And I still want the Spartans ready ASAP, so the point still stands."

I lay down on the bed, letting Frank hook me up to various monitoring devices. He quickly hit me with a series of injections starting at my legs and going all the way up to my head. By the time he was done, I was already beginning to feel some aching in my legs. Thankfully, after a few quick scans to confirm everything was working, he put me under before it got too bad.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up very early the following morning. Sable was back in Night City, so I didn't feel bad for turning the lights on and sitting up at the end of my bed. My body felt tight and heavy, my enchantment gone, leaving me feeling weak, but there was no pain or even any soreness. I was just starting to do a few stretches to confirm everything was still where it should be when Samwise teleported in through my personal teleporter.

"Good morning, Jackson," he said as he approached, carrying a paper bag. "You need to eat something dense, and drink plenty of water."

He handed me the bag, and I opened it to find a smoked salmon bagel with cream cheese and a cheese danish. Both smelled incredible, my mouth immediately watering.

"Thanks, bud," I said as I made my way to my desk, placing the bag on the table and pulling out my food. "Did I miss anything while I was out?"

"Nothing that you didn't already know about," he responded. "The Spartan test went well. I made several small adjustments to the armor, but your five-node structure worked well."

He handed me a tablet, which he had been carrying in his smaller secondary arms. I set it up on the table, before pressing play, watching as the video began, showing the Spartans, clad in their armor, running through an obstacle course set up along the ground of the large-scale assembly room. As I watched, I couldn't help but lean forward, my eyes going wide as I reached out and grabbed the tablet again, picking it up as if I didn't trust what I was seeing was real.

"As noted in the bottom corner of the screen, this is their first run through of the course," Samwise pointed out. "I believe your project was a success, Jackson."

I nodded dumbly, watching twenty-five robots, clad in armor, each one just under seven feet tall, running through the course with the grace of Olympic athletes. *Better* than Olympic athletes. Their movements were fluid and smooth, yet they still looked human. The uncanny valley that sometimes occurred with robotic movements or movements that were too smooth was completely absent.

"Sam... put this on the big screen."

He nodded, taking the tablet and quickly hooking up to the large TV along the far wall of my apartment. Within a minute, I was watching the feed again, my eyes wide.

It was astounding how human they looked, though, with all the programming I'd dumped into them, I supposed I shouldn't be surprised. A combination of data from Detroit: Become Human, Titanfall, and Fallout worked together to help show the Dumb AI in charge of human interaction now exactly how to make every step.

I watched as one Spartan helped another across a large pit by throwing him as the other one jumped. The thrown Spartan just cleared the drop, skidding to a stop on the other side. He then helped catch three more before they formed a sort of bridge and counterweight system, allowing one of the other Spartans to reach and lean quite far over the pit. The last of the five

jumped across, catching the outstretched hand, while all of the other absorbed the impact of its weight.

It all took about thirty seconds and was repeated over and over, with all fifty Spartans performing the move or a similar one.

"This is incredible, far above what we predicted," I said, watching the Spartans tear through the remainder of the course, stopping and standing in formation at the end. "How did the Dumb AIs perform. And issues?"

"No, they were working at optimal levels, no spike in processing requirements," he responded. "Both of the human interaction nodes from each cluster were actively learning from the movements of people watching. Observe."

Samwise focused on the tablet for a moment, bringing up another video. After a minute-long clip of the Spartans remaining in almost perfect, complete formation after being given a ten-minute break, the feed switched to another scene.

"The first video was taken immediately after the obstacle course," my AI assistant explained. "The second is just before their final dismissal."

The new scene showed the Spartans being told they have ten minutes. Immediately, formation fell apart, the robots splitting off into smaller groups, gathering in vague circles, sitting along rocks, portable cover emplacements, or crates. Some of them stretched, while others sat and began "talking," sharing a silent conversation, with gestures included, as if they were talking over a radio. None of it was disruptive, and all of them remained on alert, but they looked like a bunch of soldiers, waiting for whatever challenge came next.

"Holy crap... That's a lot more life-like than I expected, than we need, really, especially this fast," I said, shaking my head a bit. "Hell, I think the actual Spartans would have been more robotic than that. And there aren't any signs of sentience?"

"Both clusters are clean," Sam assured me. "No signs of anything beyond expected growth. The speed is due to just how much processing power each node has."

I chewed the inside of my lip, reviewing the design in my head. I had worked hard to keep the growth of sentience impossible for the cluster, but watching the human interaction node learn so quickly was intense. Dumb AI did not just suddenly develop sentience, but I had five of them, with massive amounts of computing power, tied together as they piloted twenty-five Spartans together...

"Samwise, put checking up on their development on Mary's checklist, it shouldn't take her more than a moment to glance at each cluster and determine if anything is changing."

"And if she notices anything?" He asked.

"We quarantine it and any other cluster that is growing abnormally," I explained. "We take off their armor, but let them keep control of the inner robots. If they develop further, we do our best to communicate peacefully."

"And the rest of the clusters?"

"If they aren't showing signs of growing sentience, we give them an update that further divides their systems, keeping them from working as closely," I responded with a frown. "It will likely reduce effectiveness quite a bit, but it's better than spawning a legion of AI."

In all honesty, this was unlikely to spawn anything. It was not a recipe of any sort of AI I knew about, not even from the various science fiction stories I had read over the years. I was mostly just being paranoid because of this new Dumb AI configuration, not to mention the amount of computing power being thrown around. I was pretty confident that nothing was going to happen.

Still, in the immortal words of Ian Malcom. "Life uh... finds a way."

I watched several more clips of the testing, including the Spartans rerunning the obstacle course, this time with jumpkits. I also watched a series of mock melee battles and mock battles with firearms, though they were using tagging lasers, not actual weapons. Each one was incredibly impressive, and I was ecstatic to finally have a ground force capable of effective hand-to-hand combat. The shades failed miserably at CQC, and it was constantly worrying me, as quite a few gangs liked to fight up close and personal.

"Well, I am more than satisfied with what we created here, Samwise," I finally said. "And looking forward to getting suited with my own suit. Did you get production up and running?"

"I did. The first two clusters have already been moved to their server room, and more are already being assembled," He answered with a nod, working to unplug the tablet from the TV. "The fifty Spartans already completed have replaced the shades protecting Rocky Ridge. We are currently working on producing appropriate combat gear to support them."

"Does that include the walls around the new warehouse?"

"Yes, it does."

"Then do me a favor and put the next two clusters on that as well," I said as I mentally reviewed the newly created space. "That would make me a bit more confident. A hundred Spartans guarding the town... yeah, that works for me."

"Very well."

Samwise was silent for a long moment, standing off to the side as I finished my previously forgotten breakfast. When he spoke again, I turned my chair around to focus on him.

"Jackson... could I ask why you are so excited to be augmented, and to put on your new armor?" Samwise asked, clearly confused, with a hint of concern coming through his voice. "You



seemed happy to do away with going on missions when you had your computer interface installed."

"Well... some of it is my inner child nerd," I said honestly with a wince. "I mean, we built our own Spartan program! How could I not get at least some of the enhancements done? And my own MJOLNIR? I mean, I kinda almost have to. Plus, it's insurance. I'm putting a massive target on our backs. I'm honestly shocked we haven't had any issues yet beyond a few break-in attempts at our towers. Not only will these enhancements mean I'm more likely to survive if something goes wrong, but I'll also be better equipped to handle the day-to-day. I'll need to sleep and eat less, my reaction times and thinking speed will increase, and I'll be able to work longer and harder."

"I suppose... in that context it is a bit more understandable," He admitted. "It is just strange to hear you so eager when not a few months ago you found just the idea of cyberware was disquieting."

"That had a lot to do with the style of cyberware that this world has to offer. Seeing the different methodologies between all of the settings has helped," I explained, with a shrug. "So did the fact that I can actually trust the source. I can reliably say that they aren't ticking time bombs waiting to be set off by some punk netrunner, or make me crazy."

Samwise seemed at least partially satisfied with my response, so I turned back to my breakfast. Once I was done, Samwise and I headed down to the Spartan server room, as I wanted to check it out. It wasn't overly complicated, just a large, chilled room, with two completed clusters and nearly a dozen more under construction. The clusters were built with five large computer systems, stationed in a five-pointed star around a central computing system. Each of the five nodes was where one of the Dumb AIs lived, and the central node was where they "met" and communicated. I could see twenty-five slots for entangled photons, each for one of the Spartans under the cluster's control. The slots were dotted around the central cylindrical communication hub, built for easy exchange.

In total, the setup only took about the same amount of space as a large, jumbo-sized kiddie pool, and with how they were being lined up, this room alone would have enough space for at least fifty of them. Considering all we needed to do when that room ran out was dig another layer down and build a new floor, I was pretty sure we were covered.

After getting a good look at the setup, which really only took a few minutes, I made my way up to Rocky Ridge. I had planned to go straight to the security building, but on a hunch, I made my way to the meeting hall, Samwise following behind me.

"Is something wrong?" He asked as we stepped inside, the building slowly lighting up as we did.

"No, I just want to get a good view."

We rode the elevator to the top of the building and stepped out onto the rooftop lounge. I made a beeline to the edge, looking out over the town.



It hadn't been that long since I had seen this view, and it was already drastically different. Another apartment building had popped up, bringing the grand total up to four, though the last one didn't look entirely finished. The warehouses were completely finished, as were the protective walls and gun emplacements that surrounded them. The small restaurants were popping up quickly, and several more spaces had been cleared for places of entertainment and other services, including a bowling alley and a shopping center. Rocky Ridge was very rapidly becoming a full-fledged town, with finished roads and just about everything a person could need.

With our workers starting to move in later today, we were getting really close to starting our production.

Of course, the whole real town concept was a bit thrown off by the thick, solid wall built around the entire place, manned by Spartans. The robotic soldiers walked around in groups, seeming like regular human guards. Some patrolled the streets while others walked along the wall ramparts, looking out into the desert around us.

I could already see that another space, next to the large warehouses, was being cleared for more walls. Inside them would be new warehouses, which would likely be needed almost instantly once our products started to sell.

"It's crazy to see what we have accomplished," I said, shaking my head as I turned away from the view, already making my way back to the elevator. "Hard to believe I made you in a Megabuilding apartment."

"Certainly progress was inevitable," he pointed out. "With the knowledge you gain, surely it was only a matter of time?"

"Maybe... but I could have used a very different mentality," I pointed out. "I could have been looking for ways to make me and my friends stronger, rather than expanding exponentially. I would have likely had the same potential, just grown in a different way."

Samwise nodded in understanding as we both stepped into the elevator. Once we hit the ground floor, we crossed the street, heading to the security building. As we did, a trio of Spartans crossed ahead of us, giving me a close-up look at them. They were just under seven feet tall, exactly what I had been aiming for, each one looking like an invincible soldier, moving with confidence. As they spotted me, despite most likely knowing exactly where I was at all times, they snapped into a salute.

"Uh... at ease," I said with a nod, the robots settling, continuing on their patrol.

I couldn't help but shake my head and chuckle, watching them walk away before finally making my way into the security building, its heavy doors sealing behind the both of us.