

Rather than heading off directly to bed, I ended up going out and looking for Jackie and the others. My foray into the UNSC super soldier program was actually completed relatively early, early enough that once we settled and stored everything away, it was only around ten PM. Jackie was the definition of a night owl, so I knew he was around somewhere. Eventually, Murtaugh directed me to him, sending me back up to the courtyard of all places. There, I found a surprising number of people, with only Sable missing from the usual group.

"Jay! You done for the day?" Jackie asked as I stepped out of the teleport hall. "Come sit down, you missed dinner, but there are plenty of leftovers choom!"

The remnants of a picnic was spread around one of the gravel areas, which itself was surrounded by the growing greenery. The artificial sky was dark, but the moon was big and bright enough that I could still easily see as I set down at one of the picnic tables. I had barely sat down when Misty placed a plate of food in front of me and Gloria poured me a drink.

"Thanks, guys," I said with a smile. "And I am done for the day. What are you guys up to?"

"With all the talk of space floating around, Samwise admitted we could adjust the sky here so we could see a meteor shower, without the light pollution and space debris getting in the way," Vik explained, an undercurrent of excitement running through his voice. "It's been a long time since I've seen anything like that."

"Jackie is the one who suggested we make a night of it," Misty explained. "Sorry that we didn't message you..."

"It's fine, I told you all I would be too busy," I assured her. "I was shocked that I finished what I wanted to get done this early, too."

We chatted as I enjoyed some of the cold picnic food, listening to my friends as they sat around, waiting for the show to begin. They were all aware that Smawise could easily speed up time or put on a fake display, rather than create a simulation of one that actually happened. I wasn't about to argue with them, especially when there was something special about staying up and watching something as innocent as a meteor shower.

"Yeah, yeah, sparkly trash falling out of space," Rebecca said, trying her best to seem casual and uninterested, before focusing on me with a grin. "So... what kind of weapons will your spaceships have? Gonna start flying around, traveling the galaxy, blasting aliens?"

"A mix of kinetic and energy," I commented without thinking, before shaking my head. "How does everyone know about the FTL?"

"FTL?" Vik asked, his eyes wide. "That's faster than light, right? We didn't know about that, we just knew Samwise was working on making you a place to work on big stuff. We asked what kind of big stuff, and he explained your current inspirations are all about space ships."

"Starships," I corrected, scratching my neck a bit. "Space ships travel around planets. Starships can travel between stars. Though it's a lot more than just that..."

The two tables went silent, watching me for a moment as I ate. It took me a minute to realize everyone was staring at me.

"So, does that mean you're just gonna skip over all the Highriders and just go straight to the aliens?" Rebecca eventually asked. "Can't say that doesn't sound like something you would do."

"I don't know about aliens, but Highriders... they are the ones who live in space, right?" I asked with a frown. "I have to admit, I'm a bit behind on what's going on upstairs."

"Highriders make up the majority of people living permanently in space," Vik confirmed with a nod. "The Highride confederation runs two O'Neill Cylinders, the first and second, as well as the two moon settlements, Tycho and Copernicus."

"That's... more than I thought," I admitted, digesting the information. "What exactly is a cylinder?"

"It's a huge space habitat," Vik explained. "Almost completely self-sufficient, some say, with conditions better than most people have on Earth. Each one is like sixteen kilometers long, maybe a third of that wide."

"There's a [third cylinder](#) too, still under [ESA's](#) thumb," Jackie added. "Plus the Crystal Palace and a bunch of smaller stations. It's been like this for a long time, since I was a chamaco."

"And... people just let that happen?" I asked with a frown, looking towards Vik. "No corps or governments trying to grab a piece of the pie that's not theirs?"

"Oh no, they tried. NUSA tried a few times, and I'm sure others have too. But no one wants to mess with the people who control the mass drivers. At least not after [Colorado City](#) and [Delaware](#)."

"... what happened to them?"

"Delaware was flooded by tidal waves, and Colorado City was wiped off the map," Kaytlyn responded, Vik nodding in agreement. "Both by rocks launched by ESA's Mass Drivers. Which are now controlled by the Highriders."

"Rocks from Mass drivers?" I asked, my eyes wide. "Wow... I definitely underestimate what was going on..."

I had to stomp on more than a bit of panic as my friends continued to talk about what was going on above our heads, revealing things that were common knowledge to them but were certainly new to me. I, of course, knew bits and pieces. I knew that there were moon habitats, and I knew that there were some space stations, specifically Crystal Palace. But as they talked,

I used my brain implant to connect to my protected systems and run some internet searches to gather information. And what I found was rather concerning.

If I thought Earth politics was complicated, then adding a thick layer of space on top made it downright unknowable. Even worse, they were sitting on high with a gun to the planet's head. No matter how much progress I made down here, all they had to do was threaten to blow it all away.

"Of course," I muttered to myself, now completely distracted from hanging with my friends. "I get the ability to fly into space, only to find it gets even more complicated up there."

I needed more information, more information than the internet or data packets had available. I sent a message to Samwise, the AI looking over at me from across the table, though he remained silent.

"I need you to design a stealth satellite. Something that these people have no chance of finding," I messaged, staying silent. "Use everything we have to make them as hard to find as possible, no punches pulled. Then put them out all around the planet. If a corpo farts in the Crystal Palace, I want to know what he had for lunch."

"That is a lot of data, Jay," he pointed out.

"We will make a Dumb AI to analyze it, and another to control and direct the individual satellites," I sent after thinking for a moment. "That should make the system a lot easier to use."

The ability to create Dumb AI systems, despite the poor naming, was already paying dividends in terms of their usefulness. Any place I needed an advanced, learning, interactive, or otherwise powerful control system for a complicated process, I could just create and insert an AI. They were relatively simple to make and run, stable, and better yet, completely and utterly not alive, and incapable of changing that without outside help. With them, there were no more ethical quandaries of creating a real AI to fit a spot I needed. Granted, the Dumb AI did have its limitations, but most of them could be solved simply by slapping a second one right beside it.

It made me wonder why they weren't more common in Halo. If I were in their shoes, each soldier would have a minor Dumb AI in their helmets to help with any number of things.

"I believe that will work," Samwise agreed through the connection. "I will work on a design tonight."

"Thank you, buddy," I said, sending him a thumbs-up.

Our silent conversation went mostly unnoticed, and I drifted back into the conversation, even if I never quite got over the news that I had learned. I had been almost entirely oblivious to the troubles that waited for us in space and how dangerous the weapons they had lined up on Earth were. Gone were the visions of launching a massive ship and just letting it fly up and out of the atmosphere. I needed a much subtler play if I wanted to explore.

Pushing the newfound dangers of space out of my mind for the evening, eventually it was time to watch the meteor shower. Samwise hooked up to the systems and turned off the city's and the moon's light pollution, and for about an hour and a half, we watched a quasi-simulation of a real meteor shower. This wasn't the first time I had seen one, but it was for the rest of the group, minus Vik, especially with the night sky so dark and filled with stars.

I made a note to do something like this with Sable, as I could see both Kayt and Riggs, as well as Jackie and Misty, snuggling pretty close as they watched.

When the night was finally over, I headed back to my room, messaging Samwise to follow me so we could continue talking. As I settled in at my desk, spinning around in my chair, I couldn't help but shake my head.

"I can't believe I didn't know about this space crap," I said, immediately standing up and starting to pace. "This is a major oversight on my part."

"You admitted yourself, Jay, you never finished the game," he pointed out. "There's also a possibility that there was nothing in the game about them, which is why you missed it. There was more story beyond the game, correct?"

"Yeah, it was a tabletop RPG first," I responded, frowning as I stopped to look out one of my fake windows. "Which I know *nothing* about."

"I admit, missing the situation in orbit around Earth is an issue," Samwise admitted with a nod. "But it's not the end of the world. As long as we don't make any threatening moves toward them, they have no reason to engage us."

"Right. Just make sure your stealth satellites are well hidden. Maybe have them painted with an old logo of a defunct company as an added layer of protection," I suggested, rubbing my brow. "Once we have the data we need, we can start working on a plan. I will not rebuild this world only for Arasaka or some assholes in space to blast it back to the stone age because I refused to play ball, or because [Sarubo](#) decided if he can't have it, no one can."

Samwise nodded, and for a few minutes, we discussed some of what we wanted on the satellite and potential methods for launching them. Between the recent sensors we picked up from building starships, as well as the stealth tech from some early [Prowlers](#), the satellites were likely to be undetectable from anything anyone had working for them. Mix in the various methods of stealth I've picked up from other places, and that was almost guaranteed.

I was confident that Samwise would make something that worked perfectly.

That said, I still wanted to work on making the later levels of Prowlers, as I was pretty sure that they started doing some crazy things around the end of their branch. I would likely need to build at least two full ships to get to that level, which would likely take an entire day, so I would need to have a lot of extra time to make sure it was worth it.

Maybe I could make just one, to push my understanding just a bit further.

I shook my head and said goodnight to Sam before tucking myself into bed. Unsurprisingly, considering the depth of the thoughts running through my head, I struggled for some time before finally breaking down and taking a sleep aid, brought to me by a MRVN, all the way from Frank.

I was out pretty fast after that.

When the next morning came around, I made some time to have breakfast with everyone before heading down to the lab. There, I discovered we had a major issue when it came to cracking the MJOLNIR armor system.

"Well, it seems like space is the subject of the week," I said, sitting heavily into one of my chairs, shaking my head. "Guess what is required to create one of the primary parts of the MJOLNIR suit?"

"I do not know," Sam responded, tilting his head to the side. "Zero Gravity?"

"Zero Gravity," I repeated, shaking my head. "It's a [piezoelectric](#) liquid crystal, which isn't exactly an unknown concept, but this one has an easily replicable and predictable shift when electric fields are applied. The force the suit can generate is nearly double what my undersuit can, and combined with the human upgrades, a soldier wearing it is considerably stronger than someone in my power armor."

"But you can only recreate it in zero gravity," Samwise responded. "That isn't an impossible request. You do have access to ship designs."

"I have no way to deploy such an asset, though," I explained, cursing under my breath. "We just learned how many things are flying around space above Earth. We can't exactly launch a factory up there without anyone noticing and wanting to see what we are up to."

"What was your plan for launching ships in the future?" Sam asked, looking for an angle.

"I was going to find a planet, anything with a solid surface, or a large asteroid," I explained. "Then I was going to land a small stealth ship on one, carrying nothing but a teleporter. From there, we would build up a ship berth like you made in the baseball field, but this one would be open to space, so we could build something and then just fly it away."

"...I do not believe we could do that in time."

"Yeah, neither do I."

"... How long does the creation process take?" Sam asked me, causing me to frown and dive deeper into my mind.

I followed along the armor tech tree until I arrived at the clunky predecessors to MJOLNIR. As I climbed up the branch to focus on the first actually produced model, the first step into the crazy features that defined MJOLNIR, I focused on the liquid crystal. The process wasn't overly complicated, once you got over the need for Zero-G and the fact that the base

ingredient was insanely dangerous to be around. After examining the process they expected me to use to build the material, I nodded.

"To create the [polymerized lithium niobocene](#), the liquid crystal I mentioned... it takes around ten seconds," I answered, opening my eyes to focus on. After that, the material is safe for normal earth gravity."

"In that case... why not create a freefall chamber?" Samwise suggested. "A properly controlled and adjusted freefall system should be completely indistinguishable from zero gravity, at least in a local setting. A tube, going straight down, with a magline control track could complete that process perfectly."

I went over the idea in my head, quickly realizing that he was correct. Einstein's Equivalence Principle said that free fall should mimic zero gravity completely, since, technically, they were the same thing.

"How long would that take you to make?" I asked, doing some of the math in my head. "Assuming you could use the magline to accelerate the freefall vessel, so it would only need to be under at least partially vacuum, to reduce drag to a minimal level."

"We could make it a complete vacuum with sufficient overengineering, but considering the limitation of time, a partial vacuum would suffice," Sam agreed, tilting his head as he considered my question. "As for how long... Two and a half days, assuming I can allocate resources from the second vault."

"Still cutting it close... but it's a lot less close than if I had to build a ship, find and then build a berth, then another ship..." I accepted. "Plus, a lot less risky now that we know that space is not nearly as simple as I thought."

We discussed it a bit more before Samwise left to begin work on the freefall tube, which we would have to build somewhere already far above sea level to avoid temperature issues at the deepest parts of the tunnel.

After he left, I sat down and contemplated just what I would do now that I would be waiting for Samwise to finish his newest project. None of the other parts of MJOLNIR would require such a unique creation method, meaning it would be pretty simple to complete once I had the polymerized lithium niobocene. In fact, I wasn't a hundred percent sure that I would have to use the tunnel past the first set. The liquid crystal was something that the base molly maker would struggle with, but I was pretty sure that was only because I didn't fully understand the material. Once I completed the creation process and used it inside a suit of power armor, I was pretty sure that would change.

It was just about the strangest materials I had gotten access to from my tech trees, excluding the blacked boxed materials like Alien Alloy and Elerium.

With any luck, I would have plenty of time to crack the code once the first armor was completed, letting them climb up the tech tree until the most advanced versions, those designed

for Spartan IVs. By Samwise's estimate, the tunnel would be done around the midpoint of the twelfth day of the cycle, leaving me two and a half days.

After a few minutes, I purposely pulled my mind off the issue, since there was very little I could do about it. We had chosen a solution, the best solution given our circumstances, and the rest was on Samwise. In the meantime, I would do what I could to maximize what I got from the tech tree, starting with getting a better feel for MAC weaponry.

Starting small, I quickly pumped out the designs for two [Onagers](#), putting them together in the large assembly room, one after the other. When that was complete, I gained access to several much larger designs, including a sort of mini-orbital MAC. I basically spent the rest of the day designing and building increasingly large and advanced MACs until I reached the limits of what I could realistically make in the time I had.

Thankfully, by that point, I had a pretty solid understanding of how the weapon worked. Between what I had just learned and what I had learned building the previous starships, I was confident I could create a custom MAC system of any size I wanted, as well as integrate a variety of tech developments to improve the weapon's power and speed.

When I was done for the day, I gave Sable a call to see what she was up to. It had been a few days since I had last seen her, and not only did I want to check in to see how all the businesses were going, but I also just wanted to see her. Thankfully, she was just finishing up some business when I called, and she was happy to make her way to the Ridge.

After our call was over, I made my way to the surface, specifically to Rocky Ridge. As I did, I realized it would be the first time in at least a few days, potentially longer, since I had seen the town. As I walked out of the teleport hub and parking garage and looked around, I couldn't help but shake my head with a grin. The Ridge was starting to look insanely different, and with the Garage now gone, replaced by the first steps of a small park-like area, it truly looked considerably different. All of the primary buildings were gone, replaced by gleaming white structures that stood at odds with the desert around them. Even the walls, which still surrounded the entire town and the campground, were being replaced. The once purely military-looking barrier was now much more refined, built in the same gleaming style as the buildings.

Still, even though the rapid change was mildly unsettling, I couldn't help but smile at the progress. We were perched at the precipice of real change, hiring hundreds of people to work in our factories, which I could also see starting to rise over the new walls. A whole new section of the Ridge was being built from the ground up as an opportunity for good people to work. Soon, those opportunities would expand, both at the two towers we were building and in new factories as we began to increase what we were producing.

I found a bench to sit on and wait, watching as MRVNs worked together to carve and create what I was pretty sure was going to be one of Noah's raising-and-lowering gardens, which I was extremely eager to see finished. About ten minutes after I called, Sable pulled into town in her supercar, pulling into the parking garage. A few minutes later, she walked out, her heels clicking on the sidewalk.

"Your crappy, barely standing town is looking pretty good these days," she said, looking around with me. "Did you have any idea you would end up building like this when you bought it?"

"Hun, I knew very little about the future when we moved out here," I responded, shaking my head. "And this was not on the radar. We had plans to build some permanent apartments for us, to replace the mobile home trailers, but beyond that..."

We made our way to the campground, and after grabbing some dinner, we headed to the meeting hall. Rather than stopping on one of the floors, we took the elevator to the roof, which was set up like an outdoor patio, with umbrellas, tables, and a view of the town that was getting increasingly interesting as we continued to expand. From there, we could easily see the factories as they were quickly assembled, as well as the second apartment complex going up.

"It looks even more impressive from up here," I pointed out, leaning on the railing, looking out at what was being built.

"Maybe, but I see something more impressive," Sabel said, pointing out across the desert. "Look at what's poking up over the hill."

I followed her fingers, squinting past the fading light. Sure enough, just cresting the hill between us and Night City was the lower portion of our two towers. There was still a lot to go, but judging from what I could see, just over two-fifths of the towers were completed.

"Whoa... I can't believe they've gotten that far already," I said with wide eyes. "That's incredible. I really need to revisit the site."

"*You* can't believe they got this far?" Sable asked, looking at me like I was crazy. "I saw you build two starships in around four days. My question isn't how they are going fast, it's why haven't they been finished yet?"

"For one thing, they may be using a superior version of concrete, but they still need to let each pour harden," I pointed out. "Plus, the ships were being built in a supported, perfect environment. I had precise access to every inch of every starship, and was orchestrating the whole thing as fast as I could think. Not to mention I had every part on demand, ready to combine with other parts and add to the ship."

"That really counts for that much?" She asked, doubt clear in her voice.

"It really does. Given how much control I had over the ship's parts, it was basically like building a scale model. I had complete control over every piece, and every piece was at my fingertips, on demand," I explained. "For the towers, well, it's all at a much bigger scale for the MRVNs and the cranes. It all needs to be lugged around, held in place. That plus the concrete and the slight delay in materials..."

"Hell... is that how fast things were made in... you know..."

"The tech tree that I'm getting the starship tech from?" I asked, Sable nodding in confirmation. "No, actually. This speed is a combination of several tech trees working together. The molly makers from one, the protomatter generators from another. That combined with sophisticated assembly tech and complex connection between my brain and the control systems, and you get... well, a massive starship in just under two days."

"Well, either way, you are stirring up some waves. People expected you to collapse as costs ate away at your money, draining you until you were forced to fold," Sable explained. "Meanwhile, you're skipping every method they have at price gouging you, and you're still building faster than anything they've even dreamed of."

"Should I be worried?"

"With how many robot soldiers you have patrolling the construction site? Plus, with Mary dancing around their slicing attempts?" She asked with a smirk. "No, not particularly."

I chuckled and slowly turned the conversation away from work. We still discussed what she was working on and what sort of progress we were making, but it had a more casual tint to it. Eventually, the sun finally set, leaving us with the town below and Night City in the distance. Despite my own thoughts on it, I couldn't deny it did look amazing all lit up.

"Crazy to think that you're aiming to take control of it," Sable said, both of us looking at the shining city. "I mean, you're not the first person I've met who wanted to, but you're the first person who I believed might actually do it."

"Yeah. It's a few steps away, but it's gonna happen sooner or later," I commented. "Crush the gangs, start buying more land, build better infrastructure, start creating more jobs... Boot out the Corps who refuse to play ball, which is going to be all of them, most likely. And that's all just the first step. Not to mention, now I know that space is a whole other can of worms I need to deal with. Haven't even taken the first steps there."

"Got a bit of a journey ahead of you," Sable pointed out, before looking over with a smirk. "Should be a hell of a ride, though."

I chuckled and nodded, reaching out to take her hand. She leaned against me, and after a while longer, I invited her to spend the night. We made our way down to my apartment, this time fully aware of the trip.