

Lunch ended up being chicken parmesan subs, mostly because Jackie had leftover parm from the night before. With only a few adjustments, it made a great sub filling, and when served with hot fries, it was a weighty meal.

Jackie did all the prep in his apartment, and I spent that time sitting at his counter, sipping strawberry peach soda, watching him work, and explaining how some of the Spartan enhancements worked, and how the MJOLNIR worked and felt. He seemed incredibly keen on the idea of more enhancements that didn't involve implants or any flesh removal, which was exactly what Frank was attempting to create.

The most intense part of the Spartan enhancement process would likely be the [brain implant](#) that interfaced the armor and the user's nervous system, but Jackie wouldn't need that. His Sandevistan was already just as deep, if not more deeply connected to his nervous system as the neural link MJOLNIR required, and was also a lot more sensitive.

The UNSC might have put together an impressive super soldier, but Cyberpunk was still miles ahead in terms of most Cyberware. Even some of the more advanced versions of the [Neuroport](#) could have likely done the job, though it might have needed a few slight modifications.

Either way, it would be a relatively simple process to link through Jackie's Sandy, rather than putting in a new implant, and it would probably end up working better. Hell, with a bit of luck, we might even be able to make his Sandy functional in the armor. The armor could certainly take the stress, and since it could also handle the speed, there was no reason to disable it.

The image of Jackie clad in MJOLNIR, blurring around in a fight like he was teleporting, was equal parts terrifying and exciting. It made a teeny-tiny part of me want to get a Sandy of my own.

By the time we were finished with lunch, I was pretty sure that Jackie was next in line for the enhancement process. He would be right after myself, though I envisioned him getting a slightly heavier version. He was certainly eager for his own set of MJOLNIR armor.

With lunch finished, I made my way back down to my workshop. I had about eleven hours left before my time with this tech tree was up, which meant it was officially down to the wire. I wracked my brain for anything I might have missed, any branches I might want to invest my remaining time in.

As I sat down at one of my work stations, I dove back into the tech tree, scanning the edges of the fog, of which there was honestly very little of. I had covered a considerable portion of the tree, to the point that almost all of it was at least partially revealed.

The more I dug, the more I realized that, for all intents and purposes, I was done with individual branches, and all that was left were a few interesting bits of tech dotted around the entire tree.

I let out a long breath, releasing a lot of the tension that had built up over the last few days. I had done a frankly impressive job getting everything that I wanted, and at this point, even if I missed a few cool bits, I was too happy with what I managed to accomplish to care.

Before I got to work on individual items around the tech tree, grabbing anything that piqued my interest, I did have one thing I wanted to do. While I know I held a considerable amount of knowledge when it came to designing a ship, building one from scratch would still take a considerable amount of time. I could always just throw things into a simple shape, like a cube or a long cylinder, but there was something to be said of the psychological impact of an intimidating-looking ship. So, before I lost contact with the tree, I wanted to copy down the plans for some of the much larger ships I didn't get to build.

My first instinct was to copy down the [Infinity-Class](#) super carrier, but in all honesty, as much as I loved the look of the city-ship, there wasn't much to it. It was special because it was massive, and the pinnacle of what mankind was capable of at the time, but its design wasn't anything miraculous. I was relatively certain I could come up with something similar, just by stacking more and more and more on top of each other, then slapping on the biggest fuck off thrusters and MAC cannons I could.

So, instead, I spent about two hours copying down the designs for the [Autumn-class](#) heavy cruiser, as well as another hour and a half copying down the [Strident-class](#) heavy frigate. Combined with the already copied and downloaded [Anlace-class light frigate](#) and [Gladius-class Heavy Corvette](#), it was a decent start to a proper star navy.

After all, the Autumn class was already over a thousand meters long, which by the multiverse's standards was pretty big. Star Wars liked to go past that, but only for its really crazy ships, like a [Super Star Destroyer](#). I had no reason to go that big, most of the starships I now had the plans for had plenty of room to hold whatever improvements I came up with.

With just under four hours burned, it was time to start bouncing around again through the tech tree, trying to find anything that might be useful. I built a few tools, some home appliances, and several industrial systems that might end up coming in handy.

Time passed, and I continued to work, running down the clock with creation after creation, my knowledge expanding in small fits and bursts. Eventually, I had run out of time, the last hour passing by as I finished a project. By the time I was done, it was too late to start another one.

As usual, the thought of losing a tech tree came with a sense of sadness and anxiety, both competing for supremacy. As the final fifteen minutes came around, I made my way to the courtyard, which was dark and empty. There I settled in to wait out the last moments, watching the moon cross the clear, starry sky. Samwise showed up within a minute of my sitting down, as he usually did for the end of a tech tree.

"Five minutes remaining," I warned him, leaning back on the bench. "I'm pretty sure I got everything I wanted out of this one..."

"I would imagine it still seems like you're forgetting something, though," he guessed.

"Always," I confirmed with a chuckle. "It always feels like I'm forgetting something."

After a few more minutes, I could finally feel the tech tree pull away, leaving me feeling empty for a moment before the timer clicked into place. As I focused in on it, I couldn't help but wince.

"Fuck. Well, there it is," I said, shaking my head, leaning forward on the bench, my elbows on my knees. "I said I wanted to confirm if it was going up or not, and that's all the confirmation I need."

Originally, the week-long break between my tech trees had caught me off guard, and I panicked. It didn't take me long, however, to realize how much of a boon it could actually be, both to my progress and to my mental health. It gave me time to unwind from the more challenging tech trees, as well as time to combine and create my own tech. Unfortunately, the last two breaks had introduced a variable that I didn't quite like, an extra day, eight days off instead of seven. While many aspects of that were worrying, the uncertainty involved with what it meant was perhaps the most unsettling, at least to me. Was it something I did? Was there something going on behind the scenes? Was there a pattern? And perhaps the biggest question, would the break continue to get larger?

Well, now I had at least one answer, as the timer slowly counted down from nine days, for a total of two extra days.

"What's wrong?" Samwise asked, still standing to my left. "Should I assume your timer has changed again?"

"Nine days," I responded simply. "What it means, I don't know, but it's definitely going up."

"Well... on the plus side, you've already accomplished two of the major hurdles you were concerned with," Samwise pointed out, leaving out the 'before you lose your ability' part. "While you do not have materials ex nihilo, you do have what could be the next best thing. You also have a solution to interstellar travel and defense."

I nodded my head, acknowledging he was right. In truth, my biggest concern, the reason I had so desperately clutched on to so much of the starship branches, was that I was concerned about threats from outside the planet, specifically beyond the solar system. At this point, once I had fully integrated and spread the latest developments, there wasn't much on earth that could directly threaten us. My bunkers were too deep, and my tech was too advanced. As our projects started to come together, it became more and more about maneuvering and targeting the right people.

But this was a story world. Depending on how that worked, on how the metaphysics of this "setting" played out, solving one problem, or all the problems, really, might not mean a

golden age for millennia. No, it likely meant the setting would shift, and we would need to adapt, and I refused to be anything but as ready for that possibility as I could be.

"Sam, get your stealth satellites designed and ready," I said, standing up from my bench. "And get some MRVNs together to assemble a proper Slipspace deployment system. That will be the perfect way to deploy satellites into orbit, where they can spread out and start updating us in real time."

"You plan on pushing into space?"

"I plan on pushing on most aspects, Sam," I admitted, shaking the cobwebs from my head. "Though I will say we will be waiting until after we develop Watson a bit more before starting to really engage Night City."

"Any other preparations?"

"Yeah, have Noah start putting together a full work team, something around the size you used to make vaults," I explained. "Once we get a better look at what's going on in orbit, we are going to launch quite a few probes. Probably at the two dozen closest potentially habitable exoplanets."

"Looking to settle on a different planet?"

"Absolutely," I said, unable to keep an eager grin off my face. "I want a base that can start producing proper ships, without worrying about launching them, since that slipspace teleporter has a hard upper limit on size."

"And in the meantime?"

"We keep our projects going," I responded, once again looking up at the fake stars above us. "Rebuilding our army, building up our workforce, preparing for expansion, and moving people into our buildings. Eventually, we will start trying to take control of Night City without burning it all to the ground first."

"A small amount of burning might be necessary," Samwise points out.

"More than a small amount, in all likelihood," I countered, shaking my head. "But we can work with it. Getting a reasonable hospital up and running will be a good first step. Not to mention making our own better version of Trauma Team as well. The towers need to be completed, and our waterside project needs to be completed. How's that going, by the way?"

"Both the exterior and interior projects are nearing completion," the AI robot responded. "Jackie's surprise is also going well, the kitchens are being implemented tomorrow morning. After that, its internal design is up to Jackie."

"We have an eta on both projects?" I asked, looking over at my assistant. "I feel like they would be better shown off together..."

"Two days from now, early morning, all projects should be complete for the waterside development," he answered easily. "That includes interior furniture and the primary robot staff, which will be replaced once we pass hiring to Mary."

"Good, fantastic," I said, stretching slightly, my back cracking as I did. "I'm going to sleep in tomorrow morning, but if something comes up, feel free to wake me."

Samwise nodded, and we said goodbye, the AI heading off to spread out the tasks I had asked him to do, while I headed straight to my bedroom. I let Sable know that I would have something to show her in the morning, two days from now, since she didn't actually know what the project was. I had been playing this particular card close to the chest so I could surprise both her and Jackie.

When I was finally ready for bed, I all but collapsed into it. I was exhausted, mentally and physically, but despite that, my mind was struggling to slow down. We were rapidly reaching a tipping point in this mad venture I had started on, and it simultaneously felt like it was taking forever, and going way too fast. Time was marked by my tech trees, each specialty marking more time and a further step past the corporations and corrupt governments that were grinding this planet to dust.

I lay there for a while, looking up at the curved ceiling of my apartment. A thousand thoughts spun through my head, with absolutely no signs of slowing down. Eventually, I let out a long sigh, shaking my head and shifting towards the edge of my bed, standing with a groan. I made my way out of my room after throwing on a t-shirt and some shorts over my boxers.

I walked through the courtyard before stepping into the teleporter hub. After a moment of scanning through the options, I tapped on one and stepped through, reappearing on the other side, now standing at the heart of a large underground mall. The whole space was utterly devoid of people, but still looked impressive. If not for the occasional splashes of high-tech devices or holoprojectors, you could have easily mistaken it for a mall back home.

Including the fact that it was empty.

After walking around a bit, I stopped at an ice cream parlor, the [service robot](#) behind the counter booting up as I approached. I quickly ordered a thick strawberry milkshake, grabbing a spoon as I left.

I walked around for a minute or two, trying to find a place to sit, though mostly I was just exploring. This place was enormous, once again proving that I needed to be careful with letting Noah and Samwise off of their preverbal chain, especially when they were working together.

"You come looking for me?"

I nearly fell over as a voice called out from one of the shops, a café painted with warm colors and small, cozy tables. There, sitting at one of the "outside" tables, was Gloria Martinez. As she saw me nearly fall over myself from the shock of hearing her, she snorted and shook her head.

"Well, I suppose that answers that. What are you still doing up, Chico, wandering around like that?"

"Ms Martinez-"

"Call me that again, and I'll put this tasty pastry somewhere you won't like," the shorter, slightly older woman warned, giving me a sharp look. "After all you've shown me, you call me Gloria."

"Right, sorry, Gloria," I said, giving her a smile. "I couldn't sleep, so I chased down a craving."

"Sounds familiar," she said, gesturing down to the smoldering cigarette in an ashtray, and a huge pile of pastries. "Come, sit, sleeplessness is easier with company."

I nodded and sat opposite her, carefully taking my milkshake from my bag. Gloria raised an eyebrow before nodding in approval.

"Not bad, Genio, you have good taste," She said as I scooped out a spoonful of thick milkshake. "So, can't sleep?"

"No, too many things buzzing around my head," I admitted, spooning another pink bite into my mouth, before speaking around it. "What about you?"

"Too many all-nighters working for Meatwagon," she explained, shaking her head. "Bouts of insomnia are just about normal now."

"Fair. I can imagine working for a company like that has a way of etching itself into your brain."

"Deeper than that, Genio. That job left its tracks on my soul," She responded, shaking her head. "I worked for the Valentinos for years, busting heads and gluing them back together. Meatwagon is the one that wakes me up at night. Only my David kept me from crashing out."

I leaned back in my chair, pulling my dessert with me.

"How are you feeling these days?" I asked. "You've had some time off, right?"

"I'm the most well-rested I've been in years, for one," she said with a smirk. "And seeing David learn from your boys, even Jackie, has been wonderful."

"Once we get some space at the towers, we can look into getting him some official tutors," I added, wincing internally.

"Good. Though I'm not worried. You were right, I didn't want to see him taking classes at Arasaka because I wanted him there specifically, or anywhere near them," she admitted with a shrug. "I wanted to see him thrive, and I can see him thriving here. Even without finishing his formal education. Though I will hurt you if you tell him I said that."

"Mums the word, Gloria."

"Good," she said with another sharp look, picking up some sort of quiche tart and taking a bite. "What about you? Jackie said something about it being time for your slow period. You gonna have some rest?"

"When I can get it," I said with a chuckle. "Yeah, I'm in my downtime technically. Should have some time to unwind."

I knew I would still be busy, but the simple fact that I wouldn't have to follow up on everything I designed by building it myself made all the difference in the world for these break weeks. Usually, I would wish for a slow tech tree after one like the Halo universe, but seeing as it seemed like I now had a limited amount of cycles, that felt like something I shouldn't wish for.

"You seem awfully wound up for incoming downtime."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised," I said with a chuckle. "There's just a lot bouncing around in my head. We are quickly pushing towards a lot of potential change, and if we don't do it right... There is a pretty large chance that this all spirals out of control. We would be fine, this bunker is too deep even if they start using space weapons, but a lot of people would likely die in the crossfire."

"Got a lot of weight on your shoulders," She said with a nod. "It's hard to imagine, I've never been part of the big picture before. But I trust you. Your people trust you. And when people see what you're trying to do, I think they will trust you too."

"I...thank you, Gloria, that means a lot to me," I admitted. "I'm sorry if I seemed distant since you and David joined up. I feel bad for giving you the 'Join us' speech and then burying myself in work, but-"

"Don't be ridiculous, Jackson, you've been more involved with us than any person I've ever worked for," she said, shaking her head. "You worked with David, and don't send him away when he visits you at your workshop. You eat meals with us, talk to us, listen to our words, not just for show. Living in Night City, you learn to sniff out Corpo lies and normal words, and I never heard you say anything but the truth. As far as I'm concerned, that makes you the best boss in the world."

I was silent for a while, drinking my shake now that it was a bit melted, though I hardly paid attention to it, my hands just idly doing what they would. Eventually, I spoke again, and Gloria and I chatted for a while longer, the heavy subjects giving way to lighter ones. Eventually, we started talking about what role Gloria wanted in the hospital I planned on building for Vik.

During the early days of the concept, when we were still deciding what the purchase of so much land would mean, we had intended Vik's hospital, a casual offer turned eager idea, to be part of the two towers.

Now, after having seen how much land we were able to get, and considering what exactly having a hospital, one offering cheap care for anyone who needed it, would do to the

building's population, traffic, and more, we decided to make it a separate building. A *large*, separate building, likely to take up a significant portion of our purchase and to go deep into the ground. I was going to put every other hospital in the world to shame.

Then, funnily enough, maybe a year or two down the line, I was going to make a considerable portion of it obsolete by finally revealing stimpaks to the general population. But in the meantime, it would save countless lives using tech and medication hundreds of years ahead of what this world had access to.

Gloria, having had more time to think about it, was very direct in asking to be in charge of the hospital's ambulance service. After all, I couldn't trust any of the current services, so I would need to make my own. And Gloria had on-the-ground experience that could make all the difference. What her practical knowledge didn't fill, a few Dumb AI assistants would.

Honestly, the ability to create Dumb AI on a whim and just throw them at a problem, with no ethical downsides, was going to be incredibly useful.

Eventually, the late hour finally seemed to catch up to both of us, and we both headed back to the living quarters. Gloria said goodbye with a hug and a reminder that she knew where I lived if I told David I had caught her smoking.

She did not appreciate my chuckling through her threat.

Once I was back in bed, I did manage to finally fall asleep. It wasn't what I would call the most restful night of my life, but when I woke up late the next morning, I was mostly functional. I probably would have slept even later, but Samwise woke me up personally.

"Jackson, Frank asked for you to head down to the lab," he explained, holding a tablet in his hand, though he was focused on me. "According to his readings, the Golden Retriever puppy is ready to be removed from its artificial womb."

I quickly showered and dressed, sending a message to the group to see if anyone wanted to come watch history in the making, only to be forced to elaborate when they pointed out I had a tendency to do that at least once a day. Unsurprisingly, both David and Gloria were eager to come with us. Sable also happened to be around, putting the final touches on some of the negotiations for our medical products.

Jackie was unfortunately helping some friends move in Night City. I had asked if he wanted to borrow a MRVN to help, as their abilities were on full display at the construction zones, but he didn't think his friends would appreciate the attention it would bring.

Vik and Rebecca were tuning in via video feed, using their watches' secure connections.

Sable ended up meeting me in the courtyard, and we headed down to the labs together, though it wasn't much of a walk, just a step through the teleporter and not much more.

We arrived at the lab with Gloria and David hot on our heels. David was clearly excited, though trying to maintain the blasé, I'm too cool for excitement look that teenagers seemed to enjoy.

As we arrived, we found that Frank had removed the tank containing the unborn puppy from its slot on the wall, placed it on a sturdy table, and hooked it up to a portable power station. He was standing beside it, tapping on the console, only looking up as we approached.

"Welcome, the subject is ready for birthing," He stated simply, allowing me to walk over and inspect the readings for myself. "So far, we have had no significant deviations. The subject appears to be a healthy, pure-bred Golden Retriever. The subject does show signs of being in the high percentile for size, which was what we were aiming for.

During our development of the puppy, there was plenty of room for us to meddle with their genetic makeup. I wasn't prepared to do anything crazy, but I was happy to smooth over some of the risks inbreeding had instilled into the breed. We had also bumped up a few other metrics, looking to give them the best chance at survival.

"Alright... Should I glove up, or are you prepared to lead?" I asked, giving Frank a look. "I'm fine with both, so it's up to you."

"I believe we shall be able to handle the process," Frank said, gesturing to a nearby MRVN, heavily modified for medical work.

I nodded and stepped back, allowing Frank to run the show. With the help of his assistant, they unsealed the tank and carefully removed the artificial womb from inside. After that, they delicately opened the artificial womb, removed the puppy, and cut the umbilical cord. After a detailed examination, they gently cleaned the infant puppy. By then, it was squirming and mewling, its eyes still sealed shut.

Frank quickly and carefully dried the canine before placing them in a warmed, cloth-lined box. The still mewling puppy was quickly provided with a specially made bottle for feeding newborn pups. What it was eating was special as well, a specially designed artificial [colostrum](#). This was milk produced by the mother just after giving birth and contained essential antibodies and other nutrients for the newborn.

"It's... so small," David said, looking down over the pup. "Like... tiny."

"That's how it works, they start small and get bigger," Gloria said with a smile. "You were tiny once, just a cute little baby."

Together we watched the infant pup squirm and mewl, rolling over and righting itself. It blindly sought out the heat of a nearby warming blanket, eventually cuddling up and going to sleep. As it did, I noticed that Gloria had hugged her son from behind, delighted when the teen simply leaned back into the embrace.

"Fuck," I cursed softly, shaking my head.

"What is it?" Sable asked, both David and Gloria turning to look at me, suddenly worried.

"I never considered that we would be bringing this puppy into this world alone," I responded. "No brothers or sisters, no mother."

"We could make an artificial mother," Frank pointed out. "We could even fashion an artificial teat."

"No... we will just have to fill that role," I said, shaking my head. "But we can make siblings. Two more?"

I looked up at Frank, who simply nodded in response.

"Good. In the meantime... I don't want them left alone for too long. Let's get this transferred to a cart of some kind so we can get it up to the courtyard. I want people watching and caring for them twenty-four-seven."

Frank nodded again, and within twenty minutes, we were wheeling the specially made warming box up and out of the lab.