

I stepped out into the parking garage, pausing for a moment to let Riggs catch up. Mary had contacted him at the same time she had contacted me, so that he could follow me around and act as my bodyguard. They were taking my security seriously, doubly so as I wasn't controlling a doppelganger at the moment.

As we left the garage, a pair of Spartans fell in line with us as well, following me as we made our way to the campground, where the Nomads were waiting. So far, none of them had tried to betray or reveal our secrets. It was actually a bit surprising. I had expected a few of them to at least try and give some hints to people they trusted, if not attempt to reveal it wholesale.

A few had intimated to their subordinates that they were in the process of deliberating something big, something that could change things forever, but none of them had gone so far as to reveal details. That was good, but given that I had Mary specifically watching over them, I wasn't overly worried.

When I arrived, Alexander was at the gate waiting for me. He greeted me with a handshake before turning to lead me deeper into the large, mostly open space. As we walked, I noticed that the campground was unusually quiet, prompting me to ask Alexander where everyone had gone. He chuckled and turned to look at me, gesturing out into the surrounding area.

"With the local Raffens gone, the wastes are a bit safer," He explained. "We have some people working salvage, and some people out training the kids how to drive and to do other things. With how important our talks have been, we thought it was best to have the place on the quiet side."

"Do you want some extra security?" I asked, nodding to one of the Spartans following me.

"I appreciate the offer, but we already do," He responded with a chuckle. "I asked if we could hire a few Spartans for the day, and Murtaugh has been sending them out with a few of your Warthogs. The kids love them, and they are surprisingly good with them."

"Oh... well, I'm glad my team is taking care of you guys while I've busy," I said with a nod. "So...shall we?"

Alexander nodded as we reached a large tent, holding the front flap open for me, letting Riggs, the Spartans, and myself inside. The interior was cooled, with the light hum of air conditioning coming from the corner. I couldn't help but chuckle when I saw they had a pile of trash in the corner made up of wrappers, baskets, and bags from Jackie's test kitchen.

"It's good to see you all again," I said with a nod, taking one of the empty seats and sitting down. "So, tell me what you think."

"As you can imagine, this was a difficult decision to make," Dakota pointed out. "It would change everything. That said... the opportunity is immeasurable. There is... Well, it is

something that transcends words. We are interested, most of us even eager to agree, but we have concerns that must be addressed before we are ready to accept."

"Of course, I would have been worried if there wasn't," I accepted with a nod. "What can I do to make this something you accept eagerly?"

"Our biggest concern is becoming dependent on you," one of the older leaders pointed out. "We are Nomads, and we refuse to become a tool, locked into service."

"I don't blame you," I acknowledged. "We have plans for basic travel gear and equipment. Vehicles and generators that run on water, tools, things like that, all for planet levels of exploration. Everything we give you will include plans and an explanation on how to fix them, and we will include fabrication equipment that will allow you to repair them on your own. All of that basic equipment is yours to do with as you wish."

While the equipment we were designing was advanced, it was not anything that would make them a threat. Their vehicles and power would run on hydrogen engines from Halo, meaning I wouldn't be handing out fusion tech. It would make the large aerial transport slower, but being able to run off the water they pull from the sky with their electrocondensers was worth it. Their fabrication tech started with a mass recycler from Titanfall, which enabled them to recycle materials at an incredible level of efficiency. It could also serve as a less efficient ore refiner, allowing them to generate their own materials.

Having me produce what they need would be easier and cheaper, but if they so chose, they could leave and do what they wanted without having to worry about everything collapsing around them.

"While you work with me, we will fund expansions, repairs, whatever you need to do your work," I explained, looking around the tent at the older nomad leaders. "If you decide you're done, you're welcome to continue living on whatever planet you are on or wish to be delivered to. You would also be citizens of whatever we manage to build, which would afford you the same rights everyone gets. And yes, they would be more than you have here."

"What about food?"

"Well, the whole point of your exploration is to look for new food sources, animals we could hunt and domesticate, things like that," I pointed out. "I would, of course, help in emergencies, but that would tie back to you being citizens. You would also be welcome to trade with whatever companies arise to sell food, should you want something from Earth."

"How would we afford that?" The same person asked, raising an eyebrow.

"... I suppose I might have forgotten to mention I would be paying you for this," I admitted after a long moment. "Your pay will be enough to buy food and plenty more, especially since I would be handling work costs like repairs and upgrades."

My words seemed to mollify them, at least slightly. It would have been easier to give them the food printers we started our own food production with, but since they started with

modified molly makers, those were too advanced to just hand out. They definitely liked to hear that I would be paying them in Eddies as well.

"What about beyond basic equipment?" An older woman from the back asked with a frown.

"Eventually, when you're done exploring Avalon, I plan on sending you to other planets I find," I explained. "You could refuse, of course, ending our partnership, but you would not retain control of the starships or teleporters used to move you around. FTL and teleportation are protected technologies that I plan to keep for government deployment only. No civilian models."

The list of "government-only" tech would likely grow as we considered which bits of tech we would be releasing. The protomatter generators were already on that list, and I was considering adding plasma weapons, as well as the third and fourth levels of Project Tulip. I was still on the fence about the second level, but the first was minor enough that it was definitely acceptable. Eventually, some of the things on the list might be taken off, but that was quite far in the future.

My statement got a few frowns, but most seemed to understand the need to control such potent technology. Or they at least didn't care.

"Are weapons part of basic equipment?"

"Mag weapons would definitely be included in basic equipment."

That response caught their attention, the implication being that I had access to better weapons, but none of them would be part of the deal.

"What about those of us who don't wish to go?" Someone else asked. "We already agreed to keep this secret, even if we declined the offer, since you have been nothing but an ally to the Nomads. But some of us will undoubtedly refuse the offer, and we cannot force people to leave. I have hopes that the number will be low, but to pretend it isn't likely is foolish."

"If you're afraid that I might forcibly silence them, I will not," I responded. "We may be forced to keep tabs on them to make sure they aren't actually doing damage to us by spreading the word. If they decided to spill in a casual manner, we may have to discredit them. If they attempt to sell their information, then silencing them might be an option. But I have no intention to harm anyone just because they don't wish to leave."

The group was silent for a while, as if trying to decide whether I was being honest. I got the feeling most of them didn't mind at all that I had said I would kill any of them that tried to outright betray me. By that point, they would be betraying the family as well, so people wouldn't exactly be leaping to defend them. Finally, one of the older members nodded in acceptance.

"You will not have to worry about that. We were merely curious as to how far you would go to ensure our silence," he assured me. "Despite wanting certain assurances, we do see this as a massive opportunity, something we are excited about. We discussed the issue and came up with a solution."

"Rather than sending every member of every family, we advise keeping a few groups from each family here. Those who don't wish to participate will be moved to those groups," Dakota explained. "The members who wish to explore but are staying behind will keep an eye on them. Every few months, those who wish to will trade off with people who have been exploring. This will also allow people with family or friends here a chance to visit them, and help keep up appearances."

"That is a great idea," I admitted, smiling as I nodded. "We can absolutely do something like that. We can set up a teleport system to bring you back to the main base on Avalon, where you can jump through another teleporter to head back. A good solution."

I, of course, didn't mention that we would absolutely still be keeping tabs on the groups. Mary would have a list of people to track and listen in on, and we would likely set up some sort of insurance. Not lethal, but something to keep them from releasing sensitive information.

The conversation continued, and I made a few more minor concessions, mostly about ensuring that they wouldn't be completely screwed if I suddenly decided to leave them high and dry. It took a bit of convincing, but eventually we stood and shook hands, the group finally accepting my offer.

Now that their business here was done, and with such important news to share, we would be sending them back on VTOLs, rather than forcing them to find their own ways home. We would also be sending them with a teleporter set to bring them here, along with information about some of the equipment we had been developing and refining for them.

It would take some time to get things set up for them on Avalon, but as we prepared, they would be deciding on their new plans and how they would begin exploring the new habitable planet. I was hoping that within a week, we would have the first groups on Avalon, exploring its secrets.

After shaking everyone's hand and saying goodbye to Alexander and Panam, I headed back inside. I sent Sable a message to find out where she was, and got back a message to head to the mall, where she was spending time with most of the crew.

When I arrived a few minutes later, Misty approached me immediately and gave me a big hug.

"I'm sorry you weren't here," She said, pulling back after a moment. "I wanted to tell everyone at once, but Kaytlyn and Sable wormed it out of me."

"Wormed what out of you?" I asked, only to look down as Misty raised her hand, showing off a modest but far from small diamond ring.

"Jackie asked me this morning," She said with a smile. "I said yes, of course."

"Congratulations!" I said, giving her another hug. "That's amazing, I am so happy for both of you."

"Thank you," she said with a smile, before speaking a bit more quietly. "I'm not sure it would have been possible without you and Jackie working together and becoming so close. He never thought far enough into the future for marriage, now... I think he has really moved on past his obsession."

"He has come a long way," I responded with a smile. "But don't underestimate your own influence. You mean the world to him, and spending the rest of his life with you has pushed him to change."

Misty smiled, her eyes watery as she nodded. After a moment, Jackie came up behind her after he spotted us, wrapping her in a hug. Misty turned and wrapped her arms around him, the big lug carefully holding her back. I slapped his shoulder as we headed back towards the group.

"Congrats, man, how did you do it?"

"I've had the ring for a bit now," he admitted with a shrug. "Last night I came here and got a box of chocolates. Samwise helped me open it, remove the center chocolate, and replace it with the ring, then seal it back up."

"Well done, not bad," I responded, nodding in appreciation. "Not too complicated, meaningful, and fun."

"He even made me breakfast in bed," Misty added, the sound of love in her voice. "Should have known something was up when he kept nervously checking to make sure I had room for dessert."

I smiled and wrapped Sable in a hug as we arrived at the rest of the group, putting a kiss on her forehead before hugging Cassie as well. The young girl smiled, pausing her conversation with David and Rebecca to return the hug.

We settled in to celebrate, spending a good chunk of time having lunch, then moving back to the courtyard, as the growing plantlife made it a significantly nicer place to hang out. At this point, it was like a communal backyard, and we spent a considerable amount of time there. It was especially nice there as David spent most of his free time training his dog, Laika. The little pup was growing fast, already tumble-walking around the grassy area.

When the impromptu celebration eventually split up, Jackie and I headed back to Rocky Ridge. Jackie wanted to talk, and Noah had reached out about showing off his descending plant plots, which he had finally finished designing and building. They were basically the last step of building the tower areas, though really, everything was more or less ready. As we stepped out into the town, we were joined, as always, by Riggs and a few Spartans.

"So what up?" I asked as we walked along the sidewalk of the finished streets.

"I'm going to be spending more time at the restaurant, and less time pushing to participate in the fighting," He admitted, sounding as if he expected me to mock him for it. "It... well, it kind of feels empty at this point."

"That's fine," I accepted with an easy nod. "The Spartans can fill in for us."

"I can fight if we need to," He assured me, though I got the feeling he was also assuring himself. "I got your back, no matter what happens, Genio. But yeah, no more random raids."

"That's absolutely fine, Jackie," I said with a smile. "It means I won't have to go out either, since I was mostly doing it to watch your back. Riggs, you still want to go out with the Spartans?"

"No," He responded. "My intent was to support you two."

"Then it's settled," I said with a smile. "I might go out in doppelgangers occasionally to watch over assaults or to investigate something, but I'll happily focus on other things."

As we talked, we approached a park area. Several dozen people were already there, enjoying the space, all of them workers at our factories or their families who lived in Rocky Ridge. As we stopped to look for Noah, I couldn't help but smile. The energy of the area and people was happy and calm. People were smiling, and kids were laughing. It was still not as carefree and open as when I was from, but it was a hell of a lot better than anywhere in Night City.

After a minute or so, we spotted Noah, who walked us to one of the growing plots. They were set in thick [concrete edging](#), raised from the paved walkways. This was not the only spot they existed, they were spread out all over the town and even around the factories. They varied in size and were usually accompanied by benches or other public utilities. As we approached, none of the ones we could see had any greenery inside them. Instead, it was a sunken black stone basin, with flat sides and several small devices fixed to the bottom.

Noah explained a bit about how he built the system, some of the methods they used to raise and lower the plots, before finally flicking them on. Immediately, the [empty plots were filled with light](#), as projected trees, flowers, and more appeared. Some of the plots were filled with projected water and fish, while others were just projected plants, but everything looked amazing. The colors were bright and interesting, and despite being obvious projections, they still had a solid, real feeling to them.

"I admit to taking inspiration from the city," Noah admitted as we all stood in awe, turning to look at all the other plots around us. "But we were able to improve the idea quite a bit. This is what will exist on the surface when the weather is inhospitable to the plants."

"How do we see the actual plantlife?" I asked, still staring at the projected visuals.

Noah guided us away from the park to a thick utility hatch built into the ground. As we approached, it beeped and opened, revealing a staircase down. After descending, we found ourselves in a large reinforced underground room, with tunnels leading away. There, tucked into the corner, was a plot of plants, sitting under several large grow lamps. There was a still-growing tree, a variety of flowers, and a few bushes, all perfectly tended to.

"The system projects a warning and waits for the area to be clear before the plot begins descending," Noah explained, pointing towards the lift system built into the wall. "It then trades out the plants with the empty projection plots."

True to his word, the projection plot began to sink, and as we watched, it came all the way down, slid to the side, and the garden plot was raised into place.

"When the garden plot descends, the plants go through a gentle decontamination to prevent any acid or dangerous elements from harming them," He explained, pointing to several nozzles attached to the ceiling. "The other plots are through those tunnels, and there is a dedicated gardening force of MRVNs. I would suggest leaving that workforce to robots, as it is delicate work and involves chemicals and contaminants."

"Fair. And these are going to be set up at the business park around the towers?"

"Correct. They will be done and planted in time for the grand opening."

"Fantastic job, Noah. You have really outdone yourself," I said, patting his shoulder. "Seriously, your building capabilities are incredible. All of the progress we are making is only possible with you and Samwise working so hard to support us."

"Thank you, Jackson," He responded, pausing for a moment before starting again. "If I might ask for something?"

"Yeah, buddy, of course," I agreed. "What's up?"

"Samwise has a small team of growing MRVNs," He explained. "They are not fully sentient yet, but they will be soon. I would like my own group, as the projects we are working on now are just the beginning, and any assistance would likely be invaluable."

When I first moved out to Rocky Ridge, after making Samwise, I built a handful of standard MRVNs. By standard design, they had a very slow-growing AI that was initialized at creation but took time to wake up and become sentient. I created a handful of them before I realized I would likely need an insane amount of them if I wanted to push my capabilities to their maximum.

I wasn't ready to create that many sentient beings, and I still wasn't, especially when I was just going to put them to work. Thankfully, I was able to put together a decent replacement, one that has been refined several times, or I wouldn't be nearly as far along as I was. However, the MRVNs I did make were still around, and even more importantly, they were too alive to just throw in with the rest of them. My solution was to mark them as special and put them under Samwise's command as assistants. Since then, they had been growing nicely, and according to Sam, they were showing a lot of developmental progress.

Creating a batch for Noah would be a big deal.

"That... Is a fair request," I admitted, considering just how much work he would likely have going forward. "If we do this, they will be your responsibility, and you need to treat them

right. That means being actively engaged with them, even before they start to think for themselves."

"I understand," He said with a nod. "With Samwise's help, I believe I can handle it."

"Alright, tell Samwise to make you half a dozen."

"That would be plenty, thank you."

With the presentation done, Jackie, Riggs, and I made our way back to the surface, where the living plants were now on display, adding a much more natural color to the town. Despite the coolness of the projected images, people were much more shocked by the trees, flowers, bushes, and grass. A few younger kids tried to climb into the plots, but the moment they did, a holo-projected warning popped up, along with a loud warning sound that only they could hear. It scared a few of them pretty badly, but they all stopped and ran off.

I frowned a bit, wishing that we could plant massive gardens and fields for the kids to play in, but unfortunately, that just wasn't possible yet. We would likely have to have tight control over the planet to really start terraforming it back to health.

Jackie and I chatted a bit more before I headed back down to the workshop to do a bit more building. I completed a bunch of small luxuries, just as I had before, and copied down some more things related to the Westworld park. Apparently, they had some pretty significant brain scanning tech, stuff that was impressive even by Halo standards.

In fact, I was relatively sure that I could modify the tech to create Smart AIs without ruining the seed brain. I was also pretty sure I could use it to create an artificial copy of a person saved onto a computer, or create a Smart AI version of a person, one that shared their memories and feelings. Not having to destroy a brain to create a Smart AI would be interesting, but I absolutely had no plans to even approach that. At least not at the moment.

I was as interested in living forever as much as the next crazy inventor type, but creating an AI copy of yourself was *not* immortality. Even "downloading" yourself that way was questionable. I wasn't quite as hardcore as some people were about the sanctity of consciousness, but my aversion to cyberware replacements definitely continued when it came to my mind.

Maybe that would shift as I got older, but only time would tell.

Still, the tech was absolutely useful, as it completely solved my control issues for some of my projects. I could *easily* create a helmet that would let anyone control a doppelganger or the infantry mechs I created. They would have to either be sitting in a room with a screen, or be wearing a headset...

As I finished building the last and most impressive version of the brain scanning equipment that the tree had, and the knowledge finished washing over me, I immediately dove into a custom creation. I usually held off building my own things when I was still inside a tech tree, but the idea was rather interesting, and I really wanted to give it a shot.

It didn't take me long to print a prototype, which turned out to be just a simple helmet that straps around your head. I would make it feel comfortable and secure later, but for now, I just wanted something that worked. The brain scanner would basically read the user's mind, using it to interpret directions. They would receive inputs back through a connection to their Neuroport, which, even at the lowest level, would be linked to someone's optic cyberware. Sound and sensation would be impossible without implants, but those I could translate with speakers and a suit. The person would have to stand in a room, on some sort of track mat, as they would still be moving their body, but it would allow near-perfect control, without any implants.

My computer interface implant was miles better because of the ability to convert all of the senses, but once the project was finished, it would be a solid improvement over joysticks.

I considered [braindance](#) tech as a way to interface with a person's brain, but [wreaths](#) were not what I would consider healthy, which I could see about five minutes into studying one for the first time. They brute-forced your senses and were nowhere near delicate enough for me to consider using for something like doppelgangers or a combat mech. Light use was fine, but there was a reason overuse was considered concerning or dangerous.

When I was done for the day, I passed off the design and prototype to Samwise before heading back up to the courtyard. Jackie was already preparing dinner, the engaged man all smiles.

He seemed to have a weight off his shoulders, and while we were eating, he happily talked about how he would spend most of the next day at the restaurant.

When we finished with dinner, we went our separate ways. When Sable was done putting Cassie to bed, she returned to our room and caught my attention.

"Jay... you said when the vault on Avalon was done, you want us to move there," She said, as I turned to listen. "Do you think we could have a bigger apartment-style room, one with space for Cassie?"

"Oh, absolutely," I agreed without having to think much. "It's not like space is an issue. I'll tell Noah to make it structured more like a home, with multiple rooms instead of one big one like this."

"Thank you," She said, a frown on her face. "I just feel bad putting her on her own."

"Understandable, I would have already moved her in if we had room," I assured her. "Her place already has a spare room. Do you want to sleep there until we move?"

"I asked her that," she responded with an unsure look. "She didn't want to force me to stay away from you. I would have done it anyway, but she would feel guilty, and she is already feeling too much as it is. I have Murtaugh watching over her so that I know if she is having issues, but..."

"We could move in together," I pointed out. "There should be a side room with enough space, and we could just have a new bed printed out and installed by tomorrow afternoon."

"You would do that?" She asked, turning to face me.

"Of course I would do that," I responded, reaching out and pulling her into a hug.
"There's a week and some change before Avalon is ready to be moved into, it's hardly suffering to sleep in a slightly different bed for that long."

She rested her head on my shoulder, hugging me back tightly. After a long minute, she pulled back and smiled.

"Thank you," She said, putting her forehead on mine. "I suppose I keep forgetting that you are kinder than most men I know."

"I think Vik would qualify, but I get your point," I pointed out with a chuckle. "C'mon, let's go to bed. Tomorrow, you can share the news with Cassie."