

Watching Murtaugh and Mary work together was a thing of beauty. Sending several dozen ALEO units to a fully guarded Arasaka facility and having them roam the halls, without spooking security, had been a tall order. Even with all of the robots wearing the best stealth suits we had to offer, it was still impressive to see. Watching them both orchestrate those units as they worked their way down through the building, utterly dismantling everything they touched, was incredible, as was watching them work around the patrolling guards.

Despite the emotions of the moment, watching them stay just ahead of the guards, coming in and out of rooms like a Scooby-Doo episode, was funny.

I had to admit, despite my initial reservations, by the time they were done, I had to agree that Kaytlyn's plan had been better than mine. It would certainly have fewer repercussions, as while I would have dropped our names at Sarubo's feet and told him to fuck off, Mary and Murtaugh were much more subtle. They managed to pin the entire crime at the feet of the people responsible for hurting Sable and Cassie, with all evidence pointing away from us. At the same time, with the amount of money taken, the destruction of the Night City apartment base, and the people involved, anyone with the full story would understand what had really happened.

It was a warning that no one could directly tie to us, but was still clearly *carried out* by us. We would likely still have to keep an eye out for repercussions, but Arasaka wouldn't be able to declare full-on war against us.

At least not publicly.

By the time we were ready to put our plan into action, both Sable and Cassie had woken up. We unfortunately confirmed that both of Cassie's parents were dead, mowed down inside their apartment, almost as an afterthought by one of the mercenaries. Sable had barely even shrugged, but Cassie had unsurprisingly broken down. Sable has just enough time to approve the plan and thank the team and me for saving them before taking Cassie away to one of our empty apartments to spend some time alone with her and help her calm down.

She returned a few hours later, after Cassie had cried herself to sleep. We stuck around the control room until the mission began, and then stuck around to watch, even though it took three more hours to complete.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as she leaned against me, my arm resting around her shoulders.

"I... Numb," She admitted, shaking her head. "I'm not surprised that something like this happened, and losing my brother and his wife...I won't be losing any sleep. But hurting Cassie...They need to pay for that."

"They will," I assured her. "If Araska doesn't execute them for this, we will do it ourselves."

She nodded, and together we watched until all of the ALEO units returned. Then we headed off to bed, the night having long since taken over the day. The next morning, I woke up

to Sable already gone. After taking a shower and getting dressed, I found her with Cassie, the young girl sitting on a bench in the courtyard, staring in wonder at the flowers.

I approached slowly, not wanting to scare her. As I did, both her and Sable turned to look at me.

"Hello," I said softly, stopping a fair distance away so I wouldn't spook her. "My name is Jackson. I'm a friend of Sable."

"Hello," She said back, not an ounce of shyness in her voice. "Jackson... you're the one Auntie says owns this whole place."

"That's right," I said with a smile, sitting down at the bench beside Sable.

"Thank you. For saving us, and for letting me stay here," the young woman said, getting up and approaching me, wrapping me in a hug. "Sable said without you, we would have been stuck with those bad people."

I opened my mouth to apologize, that it was also my fault she had been taken in the first place, but Sable subtly shook her head, easily reading my expression.

"Y-you're welcome, Cassie," I said, patting her back. "I'm glad I could help as well."

She pulled away, taking a whole step back and peering at my face, as if trying to figure out some sort of puzzle. She then looked at Sable just as critically, before looking back to me.

"Are you Sable's boyfriend?" She asked, putting her hands on her hips, something I had seen Sable do a hundred times before.

"I am," I said with a smile, ignoring Sable's flustered, broken response. "Is that alright?"

"I think so. She smiles when she talks about you, so you're probably okay," she said back, flashing her own smile, though I could tell it was a bit brittle. "She says you're really smart, and she is excited to see what you can make."

I turn to Sable, only to find her covering her face with her hands. Despite that, I could see that she was blushing, and I couldn't help but put my arm around her.

"Well, I think she is really smart too," I said back, smiling at Cassie. "Without her, I would still be selling small-scale stuff, struggling to fund my projects. Without her, none of this would be possible."

"I-"

Before Cassie could finish her response, her stomach growled, and she blushed slightly. Sable, who was still recovering from our teasing, looked up at her niece, a flash of guilt on her face.

"I'm sorry, Cassie, I should have realized you hadn't eaten yet," She apologized. "You want some breakfast?"

"Ummm, yeah..."

"What's your favorite thing to eat for breakfast?" I asked the young girl, already getting ready to message Jackie.

"French toast and bacon," she said, sounding a bit embarrassed. "But I'm okay with cereal or eggs."

"I think Jackie would happily cook some French toast," I said with a smile, shooting the message off to the big chef. "In the meantime, why don't we have a bowl of fruit while we wait?"

She nodded, and together we got up and headed to one of the many open cafeterias around the bunker. It took a little convincing to get the girl to step through one of the teleport pads, but once we did, her eyes were filled with wonder as we walked around the vault interior.

"It's like a whole underground city!" She said, before her face scrunched up a bit as she thought. "But why is it so empty?"

"Well, it was built to house a lot more people than it is," I explained. "My friends Samwise and Noah both went above and beyond building something that could comfortably house five thousand people."

"Oh.... so kinda like a megabuilding?" She asked, peaking around the corner of an empty restaurant, the interior dark and the robots staffing the place powered down behind the counter.

"Kind of, but even more self-sufficient," I added, with a smile. "This whole place can run without help from the outside world, it doesn't even need food shipped in."

"Oh... why?" She asked, tilting her head to the side as she looked up at me

"Just in case," I said with a shrug, holding back a chuckle. "When you build something, you should always strive to make it the best that you can, and for something like this, being able to keep people safe without outside help is the best we could do."

She nodded in apparent understanding before we reached our destination and sat down. We chatted about random things, sharing a bowl of fruit and a glass of milk, which she seemed to thoroughly enjoy. Apparently, all it took to get kids to eagerly eat healthy food was a minor apocalypse that made fruit both rare and expensive.

Eventually, Jackie messaged me back and said that he had it covered, that he only needed a few minutes to prepare. We returned to the courtyard to find Samwise was already setting up a few tables under the fake sky, specifically in one of the gravel areas between the apartment doors. It was one of the more colorful spots in the courtyard, dotted with several kinds of blooming flowers.

As we arrived, Jackie pushed a cart laden with cooking supplies out of his apartment. He, Misty, and Mama Welles quickly set up a cooking station and began to prepare, with Jackie quickly mixing up the French toast custard batter, while Mama Welles was slicing a thick loaf of bread. Misty was stationed behind one of the griddles, watching over a hissing expanse of bacon.

Vik and Rebecca watched with interest, with Vik staying out of the way and Rebecca inevitably poking her head in and getting underfoot.

As we arrived, Sable introduced Cassie, who again, without even a hint of shyness, happily greeted everyone. I had expected the young girl to be nervous around at least Jackie, as the man was intimidating even to adults, but she happily accepted him without batting an eye. In just a few minutes, it was clear the young girl would have everyone wrapped around her finger.

I definitely didn't see Misty cast a few complicated glances at Jackie as well.

Cassie seemed to really enjoy the breakfast, greeting Gloria and David happily when they arrived just before it was served. Eventually, when the meal was winding down and everyone was full, David mentioned going back to their apartment to feed the puppy, and Cassie perked up a bit.

"You have a dog?" She asked, looking between Sable and David. "Like a Robo-Spot?"

"No, he is a real dog," David responded. "A golden retriever. Frank and Jackson made him from DNA they harvested from..."

David trailed off as Cassie began to almost vibrate in her seat, her eyes wide. She looked over to Sable, who couldn't help but chuckle and nod.

"Okay, you can go see, but be gentle," Sable warned, giving her a cautionary look. "It's still a puppy, so it's very fragile, like a baby."

I thought the young woman's head would bobble off her neck she nodded so quickly, before nearly falling out of her seat to follow David, who nearly shrugged and continued walking home, doing his best to keep his cool older kid exterior going.

"What's its name?" Cassie asked as she followed him.

"His name is Laika," David explained with a shrug. "I'm not sure why, but Jackson insisted. I wanted to name him Killer..."

Once they were inside the apartment, Mama Welles turned to Sable, reaching out to put her hand over hers.

"How is she doing?" the older woman asked with a frown. "How are you doing, Mija?"

"She... is putting on a brave face," She said, staring after where Cassie had disappeared. "But I'll stay close to her... help where I can. I think her biggest issue will be the guilt she is going to feel for being happier here, honestly."

"We will help however we can," Misty said with a smile. "I'm already half moved in with Jackie, with the other half happening over the next few days, so I'll be around if you need someone to babysit."

"Thank you, I appreciate that," Sable said, a genuine smile curling her lips. "I'm probably going to be spending the morning working with some of my family to settle their business and work everything out, which means I could use some help."

"Of course."

"You're getting assigned a pair of Spartans as bodyguards when you leave," I said, giving her a no-nonsense look.

"I don't think they will fit in my car," she pointed out. "I will be careful, don't worry."

"Sable, we have plenty of cars for you to drive that will fit them," I said, shaking my head. "Please, for my own sanity, take the guards. If nothing else, it will impress your family."

She gave me a look, eventually rolling her eyes and nodding. Despite what she was saying, I could tell she at least appreciated I was worried about her.

"Murtaugh already has four of them guarding the Coyote," Mama Welles said. "Small price to pay for safety. Can't say I mind having extra bouncers on hand either."

We talked for a bit longer before Sable went off to talk to Cassie. Eventually, she needed to leave, as her family was already calling a family meeting after the death of her brother. As they had already said, Gloria and Misty both agreed to watch Cassie when she was away. Technically, her family had asked Sable to bring Cassie with her, but she stated, quite loudly, that Cassie was staying with her, far away from her family.

"Jackie and I will be getting the first step of our implants today, but I should be walking around in a Doppelganger in five or six hours," I explained, kissing her forehead as we stopped at the third level of the garage. "Please, stay safe, be careful."

"I will," she assured me, pressing against me in a tight hug. "I'll be here when you wake up. Now, help me pick one of these cars. I have no context for which ones are any good."

I chuckled, and together we picked a large SUV-like vehicle, which was technically designed for dignitaries and rich billionaires. Which, technically, we were, as the money we stole from Arasaka drove us well over that amount. All I cared about was that the vehicle was bulletproof and had a whole host of safety features, as well as enough room for her two Spartan guards.

After a final kiss, Sable climbed into the large vehicle and drove out of the garage, leaving me on my own. Or, quasi on my own, as while two Spartans had gone with her, two were still with me, as was Riggs, who was finally wearing his [new power armor](#). His body had been properly reinforced, raising it up to around the second level of our Project Tulip, meaning he could safely use the second level of our power armor.

We likely could have made him significantly stronger, but we wanted to keep his frame stable and durable in order to reduce the level of regular maintenance he needed. He was also determined to keep his full-body liquid-skin system intact, which reduced the available space we had to work with by a not-insignificant amount.

By comparison, the inner control robot for the Spartans was noticeably stronger than his new frame, because I didn't care at all for their looks, giving me significantly more room to work.

Rather than heading down to Frank's lab immediately, I instead headed to the campground to check in. Dakota had moved in rather quickly when I explained the situation to her. It seemed she had all but completely given up her Fixer duties, passing them on to a protege of sorts.

I suppose being offered the chance to explore the stars and planets that orbited them kind of put things in perspective for her.

Once I was done checking in, I headed back inside, my Spartan shadows peeling off to do whatever they would be assigned to, while Riggs and I walked down to Franks. Both Frank and Vik were waiting for us as we arrived at the lab, already set up for the surgeries. Jackie was nowhere to be seen, though he assured me he was still getting the surgery after I was done. Vik revealed he was spending his last hour mobile helping Misty bring her stuff to the vault.

Despite the rather intense interruption the day before, I was more than eager to get the enhancements. While I was very excited to "become" a Spartan, the process was more than that. Being enhanced would hopefully make some of the challenges we would soon face easier, whether it was being able to go without sleep, or my enhanced reflexes making designing things faster. I was most interested in the reports of increased creativity and mental problem-solving, especially since Frank had managed to push that further than [Project: Orchid](#) had.

Once I had laid back out on the gurney, Frank put me under pretty quickly, using a safe anesthetic from the Halo universe. I was out in a blink, and when I woke up, I was only slightly groggy for a few minutes.

"How did it go?" I asked, still lying back, taking mental stock of how I felt, turning my head slightly to look at Frank, who was standing by my bed.

"All implants have been successfully attached, all of our scans are coming back at the levels we are expecting," he responded, holding out a tablet so I could read the readouts. "All that's left are the five days of injections and other treatments. Once that is over, I recommend a slow introduction to calisthenics and light exercise."

"Sounds like a plan," I said with a nod. "When can I move to my room?"

"As soon as Sable makes it down here to walk you up," He said, a laughing face appearing on the screen on his chest. "We fed plenty of stimpak solution into you, so technically you should be healed up and hearty, but better safe than sorry."

I nodded and carefully moved to an upright position, sitting on the edge of the bed. Once I was there, I gingerly rolled my shoulders, stretching slowly to get a feel for my body. My muscles, nerves, bones, and brain had yet to be modified, but a lot of my organs had been replaced, and I now had more than a half dozen small implants spread through my body. I trusted Frank and Vik, but slow and steady was still the name of the game until I was certain everything was right on the inside.

By the time I was confident that I didn't have a sponge stuck inside of me or something, Sable had arrived. After a happy reunion, we headed up to my apartment, with Frank following behind, pushing a cart of supplies with him. A few teleports later, we were stepping out of my personal teleporter.

"And it's okay to spend that long attached to your doppelgangers?" Sable asked, sticking close as I sat on the edge of my bed, clearly trying to resist the urge to hover.

"It's perfectly safe," I assured her. "Besides, I'll be taking breaks to eat, sleep, and use the bathroom. Not to mention it's only for five days."

"I'll be monitoring him consistently," Frank assured her. "Any abnormal reading from the monitoring equipment, and I will be here in less than a minute from anywhere in the vault."

"Right... well, in that case... I suppose I will meet your doppelganger outside?"

I nodded, and after an unfortunately short kiss, Sable left me behind, and I slid up the bed to lie down. As I did, Frank pushed his cart closer and selected an IV bag filled with a green solution. He affixed a collapsible IV stand to the head of my bed before hooking the bag to it carefully.

"Alright, so our first treatment will be focused on improving your bone marrow, then the bones themselves in a two-step process," the AI doctor explained. "Lucky for you, we don't actually have to inject anything into your bones to do that, just a solution into your bloodstream."

As he talked, he pulled out an [intravenous catheter](#), one that was based on a design from Titanfall. He carefully attached it to my arm, pushing the needle into my vein before attaching the IV drip to it. Once it was set, he nodded and stood back up straight.

"Tomorrow morning we can start working on your tendons, but that evening we can start the carbide ceramic ossification process," He explained. "With current bone weave technology, I was able to shorten the application process significantly, but you will need to be anesthetized for it. Hence why we should do it at night."

"Alright, Frank, thanks for your help," I said, glancing up at the IV. "When you're done working on Jackie, can you build a level four sleeve for me?"

"I can," he confirmed with a nod. "I assume you want a control interface in its head?"

"That's right," I nodded. "No need to rush, but having one on hand would just be nice."

"Agreed, I'll get started on it when I can."

I nodded, closing my eyes and connecting to my ALEO doppelganger, since my meat suit was still going through the enhancements I was just starting on. Leaving the storage room behind, I walked into the courtyard, just in time to see Sable give Cassie a hug, the young girl heading to follow Gloria and David.

"Do you want to hire tutors, or should I make a teacher?" I asked, approaching from behind. "I told Gloria I would make sure David got someone to teach him, it's about time I made good on that. I could make a dumb AI to watch over them and give them both classes."

"I... I don't know," She admitted, watching Cassie leave, her, David and Gloria heading to the teleporter hub. "I'm... feeling a lot less confident than I was this morning."

I frowned and moved around her, trying to get a better look at her face. She was being surprisingly open with me, a fact that I appreciated even as I frowned.

"Why is that?"

"My family, they were making a lot of demands at the meeting," She admitted. "I should have expected they would turn it into an opportunity to try and get me to make concessions... Anyway, I shut them down, told them they could take Cassie from my cold, dead hands. They... well, they made a few halfway decent points about us clearly making enemies, and her not being safe, or able to live a proper life."

"As opposed to what they would give her?" I asked, raising my eyebrow. "Crushing her soul, smother that spark? God knows how you made it out with yours, but Cassie... She is young, but it doesn't take much to see she doesn't have the same bite you do to defend yourself. As for keeping her safe... I feel bad for getting her involved and for what it cost her, but she is safe now, with people who will treat her kindly. Who else can claim that out there?"

"I... yeah, you're right," She agreed after a moment, shaking her head as if to knock the doubts away. "I guess I just let them get into my head. You'd think I would have learned better by now."

I pulled her close, my arms wrapping around her. She rested her chin on my shoulder as I swayed a bit, almost like I was rocking her around.

"Family has a way of getting deeper than anyone else," I pointed out. "And after what happened, being a bit unstable is expected. No one would judge you. Well, no one that matters at least."

She snorted, giving me one last squeeze before pulling away, turning around for a moment, and touching her face. I knew she was taking a moment to compile herself, but I didn't call her out on it. After she was done, she turned back to me.

"I'm going to be spending the rest of the day checking in on the workers and new hires. Somehow, Mary managed to get them all moved properly by herself, but I want to shake hands

with the managers and lay some ground rules," She said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with a flick of her finger. "I'll... be home for dinner?"

"Sounds like a plan," I said with a smile. "I'll be around, so if you need something, just call."

She nodded, and after sharing a kiss, we both made our way to the teleport hub, where she headed to the Ridge with a pair of Spartans following after her. Meanwhile, I headed down to our main massive production facility. As I stepped out of the teleporter, both Samwise and Riggs were waiting for me.

"Alright, Sam, how are we doing?" I asked, letting the AI lead the way. "How's our 'fleet?'"

"We currently have thirty of the probe ships completed, hooked up, and ready to go," Samwise responded as we stepped through another teleporter. "I suggest we launch these towards the closest potential locations, so that we can stagger the search."

The second teleport deposited us in one of the many observation rooms built into the large, man-made cavern. It was built in a curve around one of the massive pillars, with windows overlooking a huge section of the cavern. As we stopped, I could see our probes lined up and ready, but as I looked around the room, I discovered that it was a monitoring location for the probes themselves. No doubt that info could be routed all over the vault, but this was essentially the primary hub for that link.

"That sounds like a good plan," I agreed with a nod. "Alright, I'm ready when you are. Lead us off, Sam."

My AI assistant nodded, and with a simple command, one of the ships slowly began rising into the air, leaving scorch marks on its previous resting place. Finally, once it had risen a good thirty meters upward, it stopped, remaining nearly perfectly in place.

"Slipspace drive charged.... Coordinates locked...Opening the tear now," Samwise said. "Probe one away."

Just as he spoke, a large slipspace tear opened, forming a few meters in front of the probe. It was just large enough to fit the probe, a slowly spinning hole in the fabric of this dimension. A split second after the tear was formed and stabilized, the primary thrusters of the small, unmanned vessel flared, the ship moving forward with a surprising burst of speed. It vanished through the tear, which then fizzled and faded to nothing just seconds after the probe was gone.

"Cavern readings are good, no radiation, no anomalous energy readings of any kind," Samwise reported, looking down at a nearby console. "Temperature dropped two degrees around the tear, but the thrusters are going to drive up the temperature higher than that. The climate controls are already compensating."

"How's the probe?"

"The probe is reporting all systems normal," Samwise responded, nodding at the data he was reading. "Slipspace barrier is active and fully charged, thrusters are drawing normal power, and the fusion core is handling the load."

"That's good," I said with a smile. "Let's give it five minutes, and then we can launch the second one."

Samwise nodded, and we settled in to wait, checking readings and discussing the target planets. Eventually, when the allotted time had passed, we launched the second probe. After that, we continued the process for a dozen more probes. When no issues arose for all of them, I thanked Samwise for his hard work before leaving him to it.

While the concept of launching a probe into space from an underground facility was certainly cool, after the fourteenth time, over the span of an hour, it got a bit repetitive.

While Samwise continued his extremely important work, I headed back up to the living quarters to check in on Jackie. The poor guy was enduring the same process I was, except he couldn't just take control of a doppelganger to keep himself busy, he was actually bedridden.

Thankfully, he was keeping himself pretty busy coming up with recipes and other things. Amelia was there, as were several other robots, all working in his kitchen to test some of the things he came up with. I half expected him to be cooking in his bed by the end of the week.

After that, I planned to head down to the workshop. My Spartans needed equipment and vehicles, and I was eager to make it for them.