

I slipped out of bed early the next morning, leaving a note for Sable folded on my pillow. The night had been pleasant, and while we hadn't done anything overly adventurous or strenuous, I could still feel our connection, our relationship growing. Every glimpse of the woman under her cool, calculated shell made me like her even more. Not that she was hiding much, she truly was as badass as she advertised. There was just a layer of softness underneath that she was only just starting to reveal.

Seeing how early it was, I made my way to a cafeteria in the vault, which was just minimally staffed to make basic food. Almost all of it was recycled back into protomatter at the end of the day, since it was more of a test bed for a fully robotic, non-AI cooking setup by Jackie and Sam than anything else. It was still handy to grab some food there, though, when Jackie was still asleep.

I grabbed an honest-to-god chocolate croissant and a bagel with cream cheese, pausing for a moment to say a little prayer to the universe that we had managed to find such a fantastic solution to this world's shit food. The fact that Jackie liked cooking and creating new food was nothing short of a blessing, since I did not have the time to develop even a fraction of what he and Frank had done.

As I munched on my breakfast, I made my way to my workshop. Samwise was there to greet me, holding a tablet as I sat down at my workstation. I spun around in my chair until I was facing him, gesturing him forward.

"Alright, buddy, lay it on me."

"The free-fall chamber is on schedule," my AI companion started. "It should be completed late afternoon on the twelfth day of your cycle. At that point, we can immediately begin creating the [polymerized lithium niobocene](#)."

"Well, today is the eleventh. That gives me a good chunk of time before that," I repeated. "I think I'll take a look at one of the more advanced Prowlers from the ship branches. How far along are you on the stealth satellite?"

"Plenty early to integrate new developments," He assured me. "What other projects are you considering?"

"I want to start looking through the tree for anything interesting in the civilian world," I responded. "I'm satisfied with the medical tree, and I think we are all set with the vehicles and weapons. I could make one of their mega vehicles just to lock in the design... but I'm pretty sure I could make all of those without the designs at all, so there really isn't a point."

"So your plan is to scan through the tree looking for smaller things you may have missed," Samwise asked, looking up from his tablet. "Are you sure that is a good use of your time?"

"Well... If I'm honest... I'm not sure there is any one large-scale branch worth tackling," I admitted. "I might take a crack at some of their drone tech, maybe look into some of the

equipment the Spartans had access to. Being able to deploy a [bubble shield](#) would be incredibly useful."

Samwise nodded in agreement, and I got to work, scanning through some branches and noting things I wanted to make. As usual, I only had access to human creations, which was to say a huge chunk of the various bits of soldier's equipment from several of the games were not on any of my branches. That said, there was still *plenty* I could make, starting with the bubble shield.

Of course, at this point, I knew the secret behind Halo shield systems, so this was really just about making a different iteration. Rather than focusing on speedy regeneration or flexibility, the bubble shield focused on one thing and one thing only, strength. While not indestructible like it was in the game, the bubble shield was tough. It could withstand various amounts of small-arms fire, explosives, collisions, and even artillery barrages, both from humans and from the Covenant. It was an interesting configuration of the now-familiar tech, and once I had completed the plans, I sent them out to the production room.

The [regenerator](#) revealed itself after I finished the bubble shield, so I quickly got to work on that as well. The regenerator was an interesting concept, working in a way that made me think it was a recovered and decoded Forerunner design. The equipment worked by creating a field that made both the creation of the quantum particle layer and the plasma injection process for Halo-style shields considerably easier and less energy-intensive. This led to rapid regeneration of shields, even if they had already collapsed completely. Unfortunately, the field required a lot of power, which was why it was a standalone unit. There was a more [compact version](#) that I could see a bit further up the tree, one designed to be re-usable and attach directly to a Spartan's armor, so I made that one as well.

After working with the regenerator, I got to work on a whole slew of movement-assisting gear. These ranged from grappling hooks to jet packs, booster packs to enhance lateral movement, and even a full three hundred and sixty degree movement gear system, all designed to clip into a Spartan's armor. Most of them could easily be beaten by the [jump kit](#) from Titanfall, but some of them actually seemed pretty helpful. I built basically all of them, and when I had finished assembling them, I figured out that some of them would work well combined with the jumpkit system, both to increase distance and precision control.

I would have to work on integrating them into my version of MJOLNIR when I finally get around to building it.

As I was working on various bits of attaching kit and gear for Spartans and other soldiers, I noticed a bit of a branch I hadn't spotted before. It was split off from the standalone slipspace drive branch, which at this point was completely locked in.

The branch was short, but enough of it was revealed that I could get a gist of what it was.

Teleportation.

Or rather, a device that enabled short-range slipspace jumps controlled by a drive *outside* the traveling object. With a [beacon the size of a beach ball](#), specially packed items could be instantly deployed from an appropriate facility to a significant distance, say from orbit to the planet below.

I quickly created the design, wanting to get every bit of information I could out of it. My own teleportation was already pretty advanced, especially once you get the chance to set up even a little bit of infrastructure, but I was always happy to learn another way to teleport things around.

Unfortunately, as you might imagine, when dealing with something as unpredictable and dangerous as slipspace, there were some harsh limitations. The most significant and immediately disheartening was distance. The items being sent through did not have their own thrust. Further, both of the necessary tears in slipspace were being held open by the same machine. That meant that there was a steep drop-off in viability when you started talking about planet-spanning systems. On top of that, Slipspace wasn't exactly a nice place, so anything passing through needed to be shipped in protective containers, adding another layer to the logistics.

That said, it was absolutely functional. Not only that, but it was useful, in specific circumstances, especially when set up as part of a larger structure. There were plans for a system that would extend over extensive facilities, moving cargo around as easily as we did in the vault. It wasn't as clean, nor was it as exact as the teleportation we already had, but it was still an incredible advancement. Not to mention that it was an example of in atmospheric slipspace tears that didn't have massive, horrible, city-destroying results. That alone was worth the time spent studying and putting the system together, which did take a few hours, since one end was meant to be a stationary room on a ship or inside a building, and its size and complexity reflected that.

Of course, completing the Quantum Marker and its associated systems unlocked another step, the last step on the short branch, the [Quantum Translocator](#). This incredibly advanced piece of tech created a small slipspace tear and stabilized it, allowing the user to translocate back through it to the original tear placement on command, essentially backtracking all the way back to the original point instantly.

This was astoundingly complicated and was clearly heavily inspired by Forerunner tech. It was so advanced that I could tell it was close to *not making the list* of human tech that belonged on the tree. It also had some clear, hardline drawbacks. Its range was measured in meters, not miles, and maxed out at about a hundred and fifty. There was a time limit as well, as the starting slipspace rupture could only be maintained for around two minutes before it destabilized and fizzled out to thermal energy and harmless particles.

It was also a trip through slipspace with no protective hardware beyond a MJOLNIR suit and its shielding. Beyond being just an inhospitable dimension in general... it could also get weird. I knew that from some of the books, and the data I got from working on the slipspace drives previously.

Later models were pretty stable, but the simple warning that no one should be within five feet of the drive when it was active without someone keeping an eye on them to *prevent them from disappearing* was enough for me to be skeptical of going into the dimension without some serious armor and starship between me and it.

Still, the translocator and marker both worked, and with their creation, my understanding of slipspace achieved a whole other level. I was *really* excited to examine the entire subject again when I wasn't on the clock, because I was pretty sure I would be able to do some interesting things now.

I spent lunch contemplating some of the directions I could take my new understanding of slipspace. There was no chance it would ever replace the teleport tech that I had, Fallout teleportation, along with all the work we've put into it, is just way too flexible and straightforward to be replaced. If we found something better, I would happily convert, but this wasn't even close. That said, it was my de facto FTL travel method, so having a much deeper understanding of its principles could only be a good thing.

When I finished my lunch, I went right back to work clearing up the equipment branches. This time, making a Drop Wall, a Repulsor, and a Shroud Screen. The drop wall was just another application of shield tech, though it was much more advanced than the bubble shield. The Repulsor seemed to be based on gravity tech and might have originated from research on the deployable grav lifts the Covenant had. The last one, the shroud screen, was basically just a high-tech chaff and smoke grenade. Firing it off created a holoprojection of a large bubble, meant to obscure you and your allies, while also jamming a variety of sensors, helping you vanish or attack from an unpredictable angle. It was interesting, and the jamming systems were maybe worth keeping, but using a holoprojector in place of smoke was more than a bit extra.

When I was done exploring the various bits of interesting equipment the UNSC produced, primarily for its Spartans, I debated what I should do for the remainder of the day. Rather than get a significant project started, like the Prowler I intended to make, I instead strolled through the tech tree, looking for anything interesting that I might have skipped over or missed.

Due to my work with the various starships, whole swaths of tech were already exposed and locked in, having completed enough of their higher-level versions that I now knew how to make the lesser versions as well. Even more of the tech tree was openly visible, but not complete, simply because I knew all of the principles and methods that went into making them, I just didn't know how to make this specific version.

I finished the day by making a few dozen bits of small tech, just to further expand what I had locked in, before I finally called it a day. It was earlier than I would have normally called it, but the tree had definitely started to slow down. There were only so many ways to make a microwave, after all.

Heading out of the lab, taking a moment to check on Frank and our still-growing puppy, I made my way to the Ridge. First, however, I stopped at the living space, just long enough to

change into one of my doppelgangers, and have them put on the lesser form of my corpo outfit, though this time instead of gold, the accents were a metallic burgundy.

By the time I started looking through our cars, Riggs, Jackie, and David were waiting for me. Riggs was, as usual, in his power armor, while David and Jackie were dressed more casually.

"Not sneaking away, are you choom?" Jackie asked with a smirk.

"No, I wanted to take a closer look at our progress on the skyscrapers," I responded, rolling my eyes. "Did Sam rat me out?"

"He didn't nark, just thought you could use the company," David added with a shrug. "Plus, I've been dying to get back to the city."

"I know, I was just kidding," I assured him, patting his back. "I was going to see if Sable wanted to meet me there, but you're welcome to come as well."

"I'm going," Riggs said, clearly not considering the idea of letting me out alone. "Even if you're in a doppelganger."

"Alright, then come on. We can't all fit in one of these," I said, gesturing to the various cars we had acquired. "May as well make a statement."

The parking structure and teleport hub consisted of three floors and a basement section. The teleport hub was obviously in the basement, where it was secured safely behind thick doors and a small army of robots. The ground floor was normal parking, where visitors parked and where our standard vehicles were kept. The second floor was empty, but the third floor was locked off to the public, as Samwise had been keeping some of the choice vehicles I had made during my exploration of the vehicle branches of this tech tree. I would probably keep any future vehicles I make here as well, unless it was something particularly crazy.

At the moment, it held a few civilian sports cars, a few different versions of the Mongoose, and a few civilian Warthogs, as well as a single M831 Troop Transport Warthog. This particular version was the very peak of what the Halo universe had to offer, meaning it was the absolute latest version of the vehicle I had access to.

"What are these?" David asked as we stepped out of the elevator on the third floor. "I don't recognize any of them..."

"That's cause they are all made by me," I explained with a smirk. "brand new, never before seen. We are going to turn some heads."

"I call shotgun!" David called, beating out Jackie by a half second, pumping his fist when he did. "Yes!"

David climbed into the Warthog eagerly, having to drag himself up into the cab, as he was a bit too short to just step in. In fact, I had to drag myself up and into the seat. The vehicle

was large enough to fit a Spartan in full gear, so I suppose it made sense. It would be a bit tight, but Riggs could have probably fit in the driver's seat. Luckily, the interior was adjustable and comfortable for a normal human, meaning with just a few button presses, everything was in reach.

"This is a lot of buttons," David said, reaching out to console, which did, in fact, have a lot of buttons. "Why not just have a control screen?"

"Durability," I responded, slapping his hand away. "If the screen takes a bullet, everything is fucked. If this console takes a bullet, you only lose what's actually broken. Plus, an analogue problem is easier to repair in the field."

I snap up a couple of switches before pressing the engine starter. The powerful machine whirled to life, emitting the nostalgic whine of its engine. At idle, as I flipped a few more switches to adjust the vehicle's settings and optimize it for the roadway, the engine was a steady, rapid whirl. But I knew that would change shortly.

"You guys ready? I asked, looking back at Jackie and Riggs. "All buckled up?"

"All set!" Jackie shouted, and when Riggs and David nodded, I couldn't help but smirk.

"Alright... hold on!"

I threw the vehicle into reverse and tapped the pedal, and the all-terrain vehicle jumped to move as I wanted, pulling out of its parking spot aggressively. I turned to look at David, chuckling when I saw his eyes were wide.

"Oh yeah," I said, openly laughing. "It's going to be that kind of ride."

The tires screeched as I accelerated, heading to the spiral ramp at the back of the parking structure. Down and down we went, the transport's impressive steering taking the turn easily. When we finally reached the ground floor, the impressive shocks absorbed the change in pitch as we got off the spiral ramp, enough that we were barely jostled, though I still slowed down a bit. Anyone could walk in on the ground floor, and I didn't want to hit anything with this thing, as there wouldn't be much left.

We pulled out of the garage and around the dirt roads. I idly wondered just how much longer there would be dirt roads here, seeing how fast the town was being built up. Eventually, we finally crossed out of the town walls, and I could lean back on the accelerator. As we did, the engine's relatively quiet whirring and whining shifted. As I cut loose, its whine turned into a roar, a deep, gravelly cry, as the vehicle pulled back under the power of its own acceleration.

We kicked up dust as we hauled ass down the road, tearing across asphalt, all alone on the road that connected Rocky Ridge to the Highway. When we finally pulled onto the highway, I was forced to slow down to keep from running people off the road. Thankfully, we were still making *really* good time. The Warthog is more than capable of keeping up with my Courser level reflexes, and I am more than happy to put that to them both to the test before we get into the actual city limits.

As we crossed into the city, I slowed down again, unwilling to risk running into some idiot not paying attention. The Warthog was wasted in the tight city streets, but it was impossible not to enjoy how eager it was to leap off the line every time a light turned green.

The sun was starting to set, but I couldn't resist taking the scenic route, driving through the city center, then over the bridges and through to Watson, all on the city's raised roadways. Unsurprisingly, even on elevated roadways, we still got a lot of looks, driving something that looked like it was designed to run over most of the cars on the road. The rubbernecking and attention only got worse once we pulled off and made our way through Watson itself, crossing through streets and across intersections.

Eventually, we pulled up to the construction zone entrance. Surprisingly, there were still plenty of people with cameras and more, recording and watching the entrance, as if they would eventually uncover all our secrets with patience. I suppose they were partially correct, as they managed to snap a barrage of pictures as we pulled in. As we left the road behind, we were greeted by a waiting group of shades and a pair of heavies defending the entrance. As we moved, they stepped past us, pushing the crowd back, moving to let the large vehicles pull into the construction yard.

To say that the construction process was going well would be an understatement of unbelievable proportions. The grounds were still rough, but it was clear that the area was being leveled and graded in preparation for finalizing the mall and shopping area. The difference in elevation had been smoothed out in some places, while in others it was more cut and lined in preparation for staircases, walls, paths, and more.

The skyscrapers themselves were already incredibly large, the first layers covering a third of the land each. The first layer of the northern building was spread out and comprised of eight floors, serving as a "base" for the taller sections. This base was almost completely finished, while the higher parts were still being assembled. Even now, as the sun was starting to set and the amount of light was starting to decrease, the MRVNs worked tirelessly.

As we drove around the site, we moved under the northern tower, the one closest to the water treatment plant. A large chunk of that building's [ground floor, specifically the northeastern](#) part, would be a large covered section of the mall, filled with more open-style markets and shops. I was even considering having a section for a sort of community market, where people could sell their crafts or used stuff. It was large enough for that, plus a lot more, and that was just the part under the building.

"The scale kinda catches you off guard, neh Choom?" Jackie said, looking up and around the area. "These buildings are huge. And one of them is going to be just offices and stuff?"

"Yeah, this one," I said, gesturing upwards as we turned around, coming back out from under the first building. "And you're gonna have your own office too. Gonna need a whole bunch of staff to keep track of your business."

"My business?" Jackie asked. "What do you mean?"

"You sandwiches...?"

"That's all under your business!" He said, shaking his head. "I'm just making food, you're the one selling it!"

"You think you can offload all that onto Sable and me?" I asked, looking back at him with a raised eyebrow. "Absolutely not. Welcome to the corpo life, Jackie. Amelia is your secretary and..."

I could only hold myself for a few seconds before I started to laugh at the look of horror on his face. He had clearly gotten lost in the cooking and cheffing he was enjoying, and didn't realize what he was doing. After a moment or two, I put him out of his misery.

"I'm messing with you, buddy. Sable is going to have a blast working with your creations, driving all sorts of business bankrupt, selling your food," I assured him. "All you have to do is keep making food, and occasionally do some PR or name something. Speaking of which, did you get around to that...?"

"Welles Family Meals," Jackie responded. "Frank didn't want his name on it, so I figured I would use the family name."

We pulled out from under the northern building, coming out just where we had entered. In front of us was the southern building, which was just around the same level of progress as the northern one. Where the northern building had a broad base, the southern tower was more pulled together, with a more square feel. Its base was twelve floors, but the sections above that were only slightly smaller than the layers beneath it, giving it a much more gradual change in floor area. This was to maximize apartment space around the building while also providing space for internal courtyards and more.

As we drove to a nearby parking spot, I spotted Sable pulling into the construction yard as well. She parked alongside us and climbed out of her fancy sports car, eyes following the Warthog.

"Well... It's certainly unique," she said as we stopped, watching as we hopped out. "I'm not sure how it will catch on..."

"If I told you the specs for it, you wouldn't be saying that," I responded with a smirk, meeting her with a hug. "Its fuel source alone would make every Nomad on the planet want one."

She gave me a look that told me we would definitely be talking about that little drop later, before she turned to look at the buildings. I tugged her forward a bit, following after David, Riggs, and Jackie as we walked to the front entrance.

"It is incredible how much progress they have made," She said, unable to stop from smirking. "This is all incredible work, I can't wait to see the final product."

"I didn't think you were that into architecture."

"Not usually," She admitted with a shrug. "But with how many times I've been able to tell my family to fuck off when they ask about it has definitely changed my opinion. I've been asking Noah for more info just so I could enjoy *not* sharing it with my family."

"Are they trying to get involved?" I asked, all of us moving towards the northern building, where Noah was waiting to give us an abridged tour of what they had so far completed.

"In any way they can," She responded, shaking her head. "They are assuming that Tinker Tech is just a front for another company, and any company that can do what we are doing here is one they want to be a part of. They see me as an in, so they've been trying all sorts of things to get me to nepo them into the deal."

I couldn't help but chuckle, knowing that Sable would never allow that, not to mention that there was nowhere to put them, since our group was so small. After a moment, my smile faded, and an unfortunate thought popped into my head.

"What about Cassie?" I asked, knowing that if there was any way to convince Sable to betray us, it would have to do with her niece. "Have they...?"

"No, thank god," She responded, her eyes betraying her worry and fear on the subject. "Nobody's picked up that... I wouldn't be able to say no."

"I wouldn't expect you to," I say, stopping just short of the front doors to the northeastern building's entrance, turning to her so I could look at her directly. "If they start threatening Cassie, you tell them whatever little tidbits you need to keep her safe, then you call me. Assuming you implanted that chip...?"

"Yeah, it's in."

"Then with the chip I would have her sitting in the living room before they could touch her," I assured her, my hand giving her shoulder a slight squeeze.

"Thank you, Jackson," she responded, leaning forward and putting her head on my shoulder for just a moment. "Just... Thank you."

"Of course. Our people have always come first, and as far as I'm concerned, Cassie is one of our people," I explained with a smirk. "We just haven't met her yet."

Sable summoned a smile, though it was a bit watery, before leaning up and giving me a kiss on the cheek. Then, after a moment, we followed the others inside, Jackie and David already testing the main entrance's acoustics by hollering upwards and listening to the echo.