

HALO ARRAY
THE GREAT JOURNEY

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Thank you to all who have contributed to the creation and continued support of this fantastic franchise. This is my tribute to Halo.

Dread Intrusion

Avery groaned as he hit the mud. Dirt splashed in his eyes as he crawled through the murky puddle, scrambling to get back to his feet as quickly as he could. He heard the deep growling and gurgling of the terrifying monsters close behind. His knees and elbows slipped as he struggled, searching for something to hold onto amongst the thick sludge. Only the smallest glimmer of moonlight pierced the canopy above. It offered the faintest silvery glow over the heavy fog that clouded the understory. Not even the bizarre luminescent plants with their spectral green glow were enough to guide him through the darkness.

The growling grew louder followed by a chilling scream. The monsters were drawing near. Avery's hand touched something long and firm, a grimy tree root. He gripped it with both hands, hauled himself to his knees and then shakily but steadily rose to his feet. His boots tramped trembly through the puddles around him until he landed upon firmer ground. It was still soft and damp but not flooded like the rest of the misty swampland he was trapped in. He chose a path and continued to tread over the black soil.

Avery's pace quickened as he heard the squelches of the monsters' footsteps. He'd need to start sprinting if he was to escape this horror... if he *could* escape this horror. Every man and woman in Avery's platoon had fallen to these monsters. So far, he'd been lucky, but he knew such luck would not last, not within this nightmare.

His eyes adjusted slightly, allowing him only to see shadows and silhouettes amongst the gloom. He ran faster and faster, every now and then sliding momentarily through the muck before regaining his balance and continuing onwards. The shapes of branches and tree trunks around him only served to quicken his heartbeat as their twisted profiles reminded him of the threat that drew closer.

Suddenly, Avery's boot struck something solid and metal. The object clinked as it was knocked further into the mud. Avery bent over and swept it up with his muddied hands. His fingers moved along its cold surface to explore its manufactured cast. It was an MA5B Assault Rifle, and it was still loaded. Avery hugged it tightly to his chest as he scurried further through the swamp.

CCCRRRRRRAAAA00000WWW!!!

Goosebumps covered Avery's skin, generated by the monsters' intense cries. If they so much as touched him, he was gone. He tripped and fell

onto the ground again. The momentum caused him to roll through the black water before leaping back up. He turned to see what had tripped him and saw the outline of a bloated, helmet-wearing corpse bobbing in the water. It was a cruel fate for a man to die out here but an even crueller fate to subject him to the terrors that awaited. Avery pointed the assault rifle at the soldier's dead body and pulled the trigger. The sound would surely alert the monsters, but he held no delusion that they didn't already know his exact position.

The rifle's automatic fire thundered loudly while the muzzle flash lit the swamp a bright yellow. The bullets tore the corpse apart and darkened the water even further. Avery turned and continued running, but he could not run forever. He glanced at the thick wooden trunks around him as he leapt through the dark. He could climb the trees to their upper branches and perhaps escape the darkness altogether, but then again, the monsters would likely follow and he'd find himself with nowhere to go. His only hope was in contacting other survivors. Maybe he still had friends out there who had not yet encountered this peril.

Avery performed a sharp U-turn, sprinting back in the direction he'd come. He raised the barrel of his MA5B towards the moving shadows in the mist as he ran back. The awful

shapes of his enemies grew to life as the assault rifle's flashes lit the swamp once more. The closest shape stumbled backwards followed by its neighbour as Avery's bullets hit their mark, but the monsters were not harmed, merely stunned. Avery's boots hit the armour of the dead soldier, his rifle's last owner. The puddle was a mess of sodden flesh and blood. Avery ignored it as he reached down and pulled the helmet from the dismembered head of his fallen ally. The head fell from the metal with a plop as Avery turned and sprinted away again, fitting the helmet on as he ran.

CCRRRRRRAAAA00000WWW!!!

This time, the dreadful cries were followed by the hammering of human weapons, weapons that were stolen and fired by the monsters themselves. Bullets whizzed past Avery's shoulders as he hurried away. He used the trees to shield himself from the weapons' fire, bending left and right around the trunks.

Eventually, the bullets stopped, allowing Avery to pause behind cover. He wheezed as he gasped for breath. Had the monsters already run out of ammunition? Listening carefully, Avery noticed they'd stopped growling. He thought back to what he'd seen earlier in the underground structure. If these vile abominations were no longer shooting at him, it

could only mean one thing... and that boded much worse for Avery Johnson.

Avery inhaled a cloud of fog before running further. He activated the communications device or *comm* in his new helmet and called for help.

“Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! This is Staff Sergeant Avery Johnson. Any UNSC personnel, please respond. Over.”

His voice shook as he ran. There was no response. He tried again.

“Mayday! This is a UNSC marine calling for assistance! I need help down here! Someone, please respond!”

Avery stopped. He heard the static of an attempted response buzzing in his ears, but he could not make out any words. The canopy above was blocking the transmissions. He needed to find higher ground, but how? Then he realised. He kicked himself for being so stupid. He manoeuvred his fingers around the assault rifle until he found what he was looking for, a torch located directly below the barrel. He flicked the switch.

Avery’s heart leapt into his throat as the white light revealed one of the contorted, foul creatures directly ahead of him in the fog. He squeezed the trigger as tightly as he could and watched specks of rancid flesh fly off the monster until it fell. As with the ones he’d shot

earlier, Avery wasn't foolish enough to assume he'd killed the creature. He changed direction, now running to his left. He kept the MA5B's flashlight pointing ahead the entire time. Whether or not the light was on, the monsters would follow closely. It was only a matter of time before they would tear into him, mangling his body and turning him into food. He would do anything to prevent that.

Soon, Avery found an area of the ground that sloped upwards where the dirt got drier. He followed the slope as best as he could, stepping over roots and around shallower puddles. After jogging up the slope for some time, his strength began to wither. His adrenaline could only take him so far. He stopped and activated his comm once again.

"This is Staff Sergeant Johnson. Can *anybody* hear me?"

"This is Echo Two-Oh-Five, Warrant Officer Polanski. We read you, Sergeant, loud and clear. There's a clearing about two hundred metres north-east of your position. Can you get there? Over."

"I'll try!" Avery replied. "Over."

Not a second had passed after Avery finished his transmission before they were all over him. He shouted maniacally as he fired his assault rifle across the trees. Large, fleshy, bulbous sacks launched at him from every direction. Monsters

growled louder than ever as they closed in. His bullets stopped. A soft click was all that came from his MA5B after it ran out of ammo. Desperately, Avery swung the rifle like a club. He turned and pushed through the enclosing flesh as forcefully as he could and sprinted towards the direction of the clearing.

One monstrous blob remained attached to his chest as he ran. He ripped it off with a grunt. The knowledge of a nearby dropship and a potential landing zone instilled newfound hope in the Staff Sergeant. Maybe, just maybe he could survive. Maybe he could find a way home and leave this nightmare behind. *Maybe.*

The Heretic

Banshees patrolled the abyss, baneful and foreboding, their petrifying screams unheard in the unfathomable void of outer space. They glided through the vacuum like creatures of the deep.

In actuality, they were support craft. Their sleek, rounded designs were not unlike the very pilots who operated them. Each Sangheili in its flight harness lay flat on its stomach, controlling the aircraft from within a slim, purple hull with two poles outstretched on either side. These poles merged at the ends to form the small anti-gravity tubes that propelled the Banshees through the void. Twin plasma weaponry and a single fuel rod cannon hugged the underside of the bows possessively, prepared to demolish any enemy in sight.

Of course, no enemy would approach any time soon. No one would be foolish enough to test the might of the Covenant's holy city and its surrounding fleet. The city itself floated idly, its enormous jellyfish-shaped silhouette obscuring the stars. As ancient as the Covenant itself, the structure had been carved from the last remaining rock of the long-lost homeworld of the Prophets. Its hollowed centre was stacked with eccentric towers beneath the layered shell

of a central dome. High Charity was the epitome of Covenant endeavour.

Surrounding High Charity was an enormous school of Covenant warships. Carriers, cruisers, corvettes and countless others; they maintained the powerful yet elegant design of most Covenant architecture. However, neither High Charity nor its incredible fleet were the most prominent features in this system.

The silent, red gas giant named Threshold was over one hundred thousand kilometres wide with twelve natural moons and two very peculiar *unnatural* satellites. At a glance, these satellites were two separate strips of magma and obsidian that hung carelessly in orbit, violent volcanoes erupting over each surface.

These strips once belonged to a Fortress World. The impressive superstructure had, until recently, existed as a ring-shaped construction, ten thousand kilometres in diameter. The inward surface of the ring had held oceans and continents capable of inhabiting life, but the ring had shattered itself, blasted itself apart. Large chunks were now scattered across the Threshold system. Its continents were no more. All that remained of the ring was explosive material and molten machinery, completely uninhabitable.

This was a disaster. The one thing the Covenant had sought after for thousands of years was now completely lost, and a single

Sangheili was responsible. That was, at least, how the many members of the Covenant viewed it.

Thel 'Vadamee stood in a great open hall within the holy city contemplating his fate. The hall had been built using rounded walls of silvers, purples, indigos and magentas. These were the typical colours of Covenant nanolaminate, a form of plating far more durable than anything humans could have constructed. The ceiling stretched high, and on either side of the long hall were identical stands for seating. This was the High Council Chamber.

One stand was filled with fellow Sangheili with wide chests, narrow abdomens, toned arms and bent-back legs. Their thick eel-like necks curved forwards into their long skulls and sharklike faces. The Sangheili were warriors, but unlike Thel, these ones had not seen battle for quite some time. *Too long perhaps*, Thel thought to himself. Most Sangheili of the Covenant wore combat harnesses at all times while serving. The armour of these politicians was a sacramental white with pointed, oversized headdresses. Thel's gold-coloured harness was more traditionally suited for battle.

The opposite stand seated San'Shyuum, high-ranking Covenant priests, priestesses and ministers. Due to old age and regular use of their floating hover chairs, the San'Shyuum sat

hunched with their long necks protruding forwards and their wattles dangling from their chins. Their large bulbous skulls and bulging eyes reminded Thel of *goi'oi* fish back home on Sanghelios.

Thel' Vadamee, the tall, dark-skinned Sangheili stood on a platform near the front of the room. He chose to ignore the stands. He was aware of the High Council's great influence. Supposedly, it was *their* voice that dictated the decisions of the Covenant, but far more important were the San'Shyuum that sat ahead of him. These three hierarchs were the Prophets of Regret, Mercy and Truth.

The Prophet of *Regret* was the youngest of the three, though now also considerably old. While each of the three High Prophets were worshipped by their subordinates, Regret had gone to considerable lengths to earn his respect from the Sangheili. He often ventured out to field locations to watch the Sangheili in practice, and despite not belonging to either a warrior or worker species, Regret was believed to carry his own pistol hidden beneath his gown. Unlike the other two High Prophets, both Regret and his hover throne were tinted blue and semi-transparent. He was not present in the flesh. Instead, his form was presented via a three-dimensional display, a hologram.

The Prophet of *Mery* was by far the eldest of the three. Believed to be half blind, he had pale skin and long, tattered, white eyelashes over his milky eyes. He had always been the most ceremonial of the hierarchs.

The Prophet of *Truth*, the central figure, was the most imposing. His voice, while calm and collected, conveyed power and demanded obedience. Rumours often circulated about a power struggle between the High Prophets, particularly a rivalry between the Prophets of Truth and Regret. Upon observing the three in front of Thel now, it was evident who the true leader was.

The three Prophets sat even more hunched over than their cousins in the stands. Heavy, golden ornaments weighed upon their shoulders, stretching over them like antlers. Tall, narrow headpieces sat like crowns upon their heads. While the San'Shyuum had initially seemed twisted and alien to Thel as a young Sangheili, he now recognised their charm and grace as they floated about their circular platform at the front the chamber.

It was the Ninth Age of Reclamation. Thel 'Vadamee was the Supreme Commander of the greatest Covenant fleet in history, *Particular Justice*. He had been assigned the responsibility of locating and eliminating all human life in the galaxy. The human scum had intentionally

destroyed ancient relics left behind by the gods for the Covenant to reclaim. This act may very well have delayed the Great Journey itself. Thel had glassed human world after human world, until one day when he was destroying one of the humans' most noteworthy planets, one of their battlecruisers jumped away and fled the system.

It was not uncommon for human vessels to attempt jumps through slipstream space in attempt to escape the destruction of one of their planets, but ever since Thel had become Supreme Commander, he exerted all efforts into ensuring no humans escaped the plasma he rained upon them. The destruction of humanity was the will of the gods, and Thel 'Vadamee was their instrument.

"There was only one ship," Thel told the Prophets.

His deep voice echoed around the hall.

"One? Are you sure?" asked the Prophet of Truth.

"Yes," Thel answered. "They called it *the Pillar of Autumn*."

Thel suppressed the contempt in his voice. He'd long since accepted that these dishonourable worms, the humans, had the audacity to name their ships, but this particular battlecruiser had proven to be his bane.

"Why was it not destroyed with the rest of their fleet?" croaked old Mercy.

“It fled as we set fire to their planet,” Thel explained. “But I followed with all the ships in my command.”

He was about to continue when Truth cut him off.

“When you first saw Halo, were you blinded by its majesty?”

What is he asking me? Thel pondered. He’d never been one for word games. He had done his share of interpreting the elders on Sanghelios while growing up, dancing around tabooed topics in the past, but now he was a commander. He discussed battle strategies and gave direct instructions.

“Blinded?” Thel asked.

“Paralysed? Dumbstruck?” Truth elaborated.

“No.”

“And yet, the humans were able to evade your ships, land on the Sacred Ring and desecrate it with their filthy footsteps!” Regret exclaimed, his hologram shaking with rage.

Thel was worried. He needed to consider his response carefully. He’d known the risk before entering the Council Chamber, not that he’d had a choice, but the Prophets had always seen reason before. They had understood him, sided with him when necessary. Now, things were different.

If Thel ‘Vadamee failed this trial, he would be executed. He had no doubt about that. He would

be stripped of his honour. His family would be slaughtered, and his *keep* on Sanghelios would be wiped clean of all Sangheili, ending his bloodline.

Thel thought back to the events that had unfolded almost sixteen Sanghelios days ago. His fleet had followed the Pillar of Autumn through the temporary hole it left in slipspace and arrived at *Halo*, the Sacred Ring and gateway to the path of the gods. Halo had been a magnificent sight to behold. Its outward face was smooth and metallic with endless grooves and lights that flashed from distant machinery. The inner surface was not at all dissimilar to the likes of Sanghelios or many other planets Thel had visited in his life. However Halo appeared, Thel was not one to become blinded by beauty.

Thel had had one goal in mind: to destroy the Pillar of Autumn and all its human crew before they could cause any harm to Halo. Due to the pressures of the Minister of Stewardship, a San'Shyuum assigned to Particular Justice to provide religious counsel, Thel had kept his ships' fire at a minimum so as to not accidentally damage the Sacred Ring. Because of this, the humans evaded Thel's attacks and landed on the ancient ringworld.

The High Prophets had already heard the details of these events by many accounts. Would they see it as Thel's fault that the humans broke

through? Would it matter? That was not the information they were looking for.

“Noble Hierarchs,” Thel addressed. “Surely you understand that once the Parasite attacked-”

His speech was cut off by an enormous uproar from the Councillors.

“There will be order in this council!” shouted the Prophet of Mercy, slamming his frail hand onto his curved armrest.

Thel continued to recall the events that transpired on the Sacred Ring. He knew well why he was unable to eliminate the humans once they’d landed on Halo. The ring had held a secret, one he did not understand. He’d long known about the Parasite, about the Flood, as did all the Covenant, but they were supposed to be extinct. Did the Forerunner perhaps leave some of them behind on Halo as a test for the Covenant, to prove that the Covenant were strong enough to become gods?

The Flood had laid buried beneath the ring’s surface, dormant since the time of the Forerunner’s ascendance. When the Covenant and the humans arrived on the Sacred Ring, the Parasite unleashed themselves upon their visitors. Thel could still hear the screams of his warriors as they were twisted and tortured. They haunted his dreams.

The Prophet of Truth spoke softly.

“You were right to focus your attention on the Flood, but this *Demon*, this Master Chief...”

“By the time I learnt of the Demon’s intent, there was nothing I could do.”

Thel was filled with genuine sadness, not for his failures, but for the terrible loss of the ring. He recalled the first time he had encountered a demon, the ones the humans called *Spartans*. Usually, humans were much smaller and weaker than Sangheili. This one, while still shorter than Thel, had been much taller than others. More astonishingly, it had been equal in strength with Thel himself. He remembered staring at his own reflection within the gold faceplate of this new enemy. He saw no human face. The entire creature had been covered in thick metal armour. Even its joints were hidden. Thel had wrestled as hard as he could to break the human, but the two remained locked together, frozen, exercising all their strength but unable to harm one another. To hold one’s own against Thel ‘Vadamee was an impressive feat by Sangheili standards, but a human...

Over the years, Thel had faced very few obstacles. The demons were his greatest. He vowed to crush every last one of them. There were never many of these Spartans to begin with, and the one seen later on Halo was believed to be the last of its kind. Thel dispatched countless warriors to eliminate it, but

once the Flood were revealed, he almost forgot about the Demon who was then insignificant by comparison. The Flood did not allow time for the Covenant on Halo to concern themselves with the humans. This very thought is what had proven Thel a fool.

The Demon destroyed Halo.

Returning his thoughts to the present, Thel scanned the room. Many of the San'Shyuum in the stands had risen to their feet in anger. The Sangheili Councillors murmured incomprehensible dialogue between one another. The Prophet of Regret's floating hologram whispered to Truth's physical form beside him.

"Noble Prophet of Truth, this has gone on long enough. Make an example of this bungler. The Council *demand*s it."

Truth raised his hands above his head. The Council fell silent in response as the Prophet gazed down at the Sangheili commander.

"You are one of our most treasured instruments," Truth spoke. "Long have you led your fleet with honour and distinction, but your inability to safeguard Halo was a colossal failure!"

"Nay!" yelled one of the younger San'Shyuum from his stand. "It was heresy!"

The interrupting San'Shyuum was quickly pulled down to his seat by a neighbouring elder. Thel gathered his strength.

"I will continue my campaign against the humans!" he exclaimed mightily.

"No," Truth snapped. "You will not."

Truth nodded to someone behind the commander, and Thel felt three large shadows creeping over his shoulder. He smelt the putrid musk of their thick, hairy coats. *Jiralhanae*, Thel almost spat the word. How had the Prophets allowed such beasts into the High Council Chamber? He heard a familiar bark. It was their Chieftain ordering commands.

Thel turned towards the approaching *Jiralhanae* guards about to take hold of his body. He puffed out his chest and arms, displaying a show of dominance he knew the *Jiralhanae* would comprehend. They saw the gesture and did not grab him. Still, Thel understood; his trial was over. He was to leave with the brutes. He turned around slowly and followed them towards the exit.

"Soon, the Great Journey will begin," said Truth. "But when it does, the weight of your heresy will stay your feet, and you shall be left behind."

One Size Fits All

It was October 2552 when Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 was called up to Cairo Station's armoury to be outfitted in his new armour. The MJOLNIR powered assault armour was the most cutting-edge military hardware within the United Nations Space Command and was as expensive as an entire starship. In its simplest description, it consisted of a thick black bodysuit and an outer shell of even thicker green titanium alloy with gaps for flexibility exposing the bodysuit underneath, but MJOLNIR was far more than it appeared.

John-117 was one of the incredibly few soldiers for whom it was physically possible to wear the MJOLNIR power armour. As a Spartan-II, John had been training since the age of six. His indoctrination, overseen by Doctor Catherine Halsey, was now a distant memory. He and his fellow Spartans received the biological augmentations that improved their bodies enough to be able to wear MJOLNIR without the armour tearing their bones from their sockets when they moved or being crushed under its extreme weight. It was due to this weight and the number of parts that formed the battlesuit that John required an entire team of technicians to dress him.

The children chosen for the Spartan-II program had been selected via a scrupulous screening process across a number of human colonies. They were abducted and taken to a major UNSC stronghold, the planet Reach, where they underwent operations that enhanced them in almost every way, physically and intellectually, all the while receiving continuous education and vigorous training to become the most efficient and obedient soldiers possible.

The original intention for the Spartans was to end the Insurrection, a war between the UNSC and numerous terrorist factions. That all changed when the Covenant arrived. It was unknown exactly why the Covenant declared war on the human race. According to the aliens, the extinction of humanity was commanded by the gods, but where this idea came from was a complete mystery.

In addition to the general durability of the armour, the technical marvel that was MJOLNIR increased the speed, strength and agility of the Spartans. It included a highly advanced user interface and a heads-up-display that linked directly to the wearer's neural implants. It contained automatic biofoam injectors to prevent bleeding out as well as a hydrostatic gel layer to control the suit's temperature. The model John had just relinquished could produce full-body energy

shields, reverse-engineered from Covenant technology, as well as a port for the housing of a UNSC artificial intelligence.

Currently, John stood in a T-pose staring through the window as the technicians fitted him. His skin turned cold at the touch of the armour. He was incredibly pale, almost translucent due to the lack of sun he'd been exposed to. John had spent so much of his time covered head to toe during an endless number of missions, all of them leading to the Covenant attack on the planet Reach.

John focused on his view of Earth. He stared intensely at the giant blue marble that was the origin of his species. In many ways, it was similar to Reach. Like Reach, it was one of the UNSC's most valued worlds and a military stronghold. Many military operations had been initiated on both planets, but they were also home to more civilians than John could imagine. Earth even looked like Reach. John's job was to ensure it didn't meet the same fate.

The technicians stopped. John looked down and saw that his new green and black armour completely enveloped his body, all except his head. The matching helmet sat on a workbench in front of him alongside the few pieces of hardware left over from John's old armour that could no longer be salvaged. Clearly, these had been damaged beyond repair. The technicians

cleared the room, lugging a trolley behind them that carried the armour worn by John when he entered.

The wide blast door slid closed behind the last of the technicians, leaving John and the armourer alone. The armourer, Master Gunnery Sergeant Peters picked up one of the pieces of broken hardware and sighed.

“Junk,” Peters said flatly. “The bloody thing’s wasted.”

He glanced towards the blast door as if he could see the technicians still hauling away their cart on the other side. Then he glanced back at John.

“Your plating was about to fail,” he continued, shaking the hardware at the Spartan. “There’s viscosity throughout the gel layer.”

He pointed to the next piece on the table.

“Optics? Totally fried, and let’s not even talk about the power supply. Do you know how expensive this gear is, son?”

John stood stern. He wasn’t sure whether to be amused or ashamed. Most people found seven-foot-tall super-soldiers too imposing to berate. Even without his armour, John was a figure to behold. He was both larger than a bodybuilder while still lean enough to remain extremely fast and agile. He was the perfect soldier, and yet, here was this armourer scolding him like a child for damaging his MJOLNIR.

It wasn't as if John's MJOLNIR had been mistreated. To be fair, he'd had the armour for a far shorter period than expected, but Master Chief John-117 had only ever done what was necessary to complete his goals. He had not made any rash decisions or foolish mistakes that led to damaging the advanced power armour, except perhaps for an initial blast of superheated plasma to his energy shields during his defence of the Pillar of Autumn.

It was now one month since the Covenant assault on the UNSC Pillar of Autumn. Alien infantry had boarded the Halcyon-class battlecruiser, an uncharacteristic act for their kind. Normally, they attacked from a distance. It was later revealed that the Covenant chose to board the Autumn in order to prevent any damage from plasma misfire to the ringworld they'd found. John was tasked with escorting Cortana to a lifeboat, escaping the ship and landing on the ring.

“Keep your head down!” Cortana had yelled as John received the blast of plasma straight to his face. “There's two of us in here now, remember?!”

Of course, the energy shielding around his suit had prevented the plasma from actually making contact. The invisible shields protected his entire body against enemy fire, but enough sustained impact would have caused the shields

to deplete, leaving both John and Cortana vulnerable.

Cortana was a Smart UNSC AI. The term “Smart” was used to differentiate between the two types of artificial intelligence: those who were made entirely of programming without a mind of their own and AI like Cortana, who were created using the brain of a recently deceased human being. John often wondered who the human was who’d been used to create Cortana. Naturally, their identity was a secret.

John had not entirely approved of the AI when he first met her. Her civilian-style humour and bubbly manner had been far from what John was used to after having spent his life around military personnel. Cortana had two physical forms. The form used for carrying the AI from one place to another was a data chip, a hard piece of rectangular metal with an octagonal cut-out in its centre. A light glowed from the chip when Cortana’s sentience was present. The other form was Cortana’s avatar, a holographic display that could be projected when Cortana was inserted into holopanel.

When Cortana was created around three years ago, she chose the avatar of a human woman. Some AI went to the extreme, creating gods or goddesses, angels or demons, astronauts, androids and even inanimate objects to represent themselves. Cortana’s appearance was

simple. She was slender with a notably feminine body and pretty face. Her hair was fairly short with the sides of it hanging down just past her jawline and the back cut shorter. Cortana's hologram glowed, alternating between purple and blue depending on her emotions. Instead of clothes, she had numbers and patterns continually scrolling up and down her body, speeding up or slowing to match her thoughts.

Having left his fellow Spartan-IIs on Reach as the Pillar of Autumn jumped out of the system, John was forced to face future missions alone. He knew he'd have the support of marines and other soldiers when needed, but he did not foresee the companionship he'd develop with this AI.

Cortana's chip had been inserted into a port at the back of John's helmet. There, she accessed the battlesuit's systems and any surrounding technology while communicating with John to help him complete his missions. Together, they fought through waves of Covenant, hacking into the Covenant battlenet, uncovering the secrets of Halo and then destroying the damned ring. Only one survivor had made it back with John and Cortana.

John reflected. *Do you know how expensive this gear is, son?* He pondered Peters' words as he lifted the hefty green helmet from the bench and placed it over his head.

“Tell that to the Covenant,” he replied to the Gunnery Sergeant in his low, grainy voice.

The helmet clicked into place. Its gold visor was completely reflective from the outside, showing no hint of the forty-one-year-old face underneath. On the interior, the blue projections of John’s heads-up-display appeared all over, not large enough to obscure his vision but still easy to see at all times. Most prominent was the energy shield gauge, a long rectangle at the very top of his vision. On the bottom left was a blue circle, John’s motion tracker. Currently, the circle was empty. Had there been any movement from John or the Gunnery Sergeant, their dots would show up yellow within the circle. Additionally, the heads-up-display was filled with small, sliding lines of text appearing beside every object and feature in the room. None of it was relevant. John switched the text off using the direct link between the suit’s interface and his mind.

“Well, it was all obsolete anyway,” Peters replied. “Your new suit's a Mark Six. It just came up from Seongnam this morning. Try to take it easy until you get used to the upgrades. Move around a little, get a feel for it. When you're ready, come and meet me by the *zapper*.”

Peters turned to John’s right and headed towards a peculiar contraption, the *zapper* as he called it. John moved to follow, instantly

noticing how free-flowing the MJOLNIR Mark VI felt over his former Mark V. It was clearly less bulky and allowed for much smoother, more fluid movement. He walked across the room to stand within a painted red square on the metallic floor. The heavy clunking of metal against metal echoed around the room as John's armoured boots hit the grating. The armoury had another level underneath with two trapdoors leading into it.

Peters stood in front of a buttoned panel while John stood on the red square across from him. Two metal poles extended downwards from the ceiling on either side of the square.

“Pay attention because I'm only going over this once,” Peters told the Spartan. “This station will test your recharging energy shields. The new armour's energy shields are extremely resilient, much better than the Covenant tech we used for the Mark Five.”

The Gunnery Sergeant tapped some buttons, and the station sprang to life. The poles lit up a bright yellow and hummed aggressively. They began spinning around John, progressively getting faster and faster before – *ZAP!* The previously invisible shielding around John's MJOLNIR lit up the same yellow colour as the poles before expanding outwards and disappearing. The energy shields had been completely depleted by the machine, which is

exactly what would happen if they were to receive excessive damage from enemy fire.

The poles began to dim, and the spinning slowed down. A high-pitched beeping sounded inside John's helmet. *Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep...* It was an alarm to alert the wearer that the energy shields had been brought down. The previously solid rectangle at the top of John's heads-up-display was now hollow, empty, but not for long.

The beeping ceased, and the rectangular gauge began to refill as yellow energy flickered around John's armour, eventually turning invisible once more.

"Bingo!" exclaimed Peters. "As you can see, the new shields recharge a lot faster!"

John noticed a yellow dot appear at the edge of the circular motion tracker on his heads-up-display. A familiar face walked in.

"If your shields go down," Peters continued. "Find some cover and wait for the meter to read *fully charged*."

"That," chimed in Sergeant Major Johnson. "Or he can hide behind me. You done with my boy here, Master Gunns? I don't see any training wheels."

"His armour is working fine, Johnson, so you can shut your chilli hole."

The Master Gunnery Sergeant turned to John.

“You're free to go, son. Just remember, take things slow.”

“Don't worry,” said Johnson. “I'll hold his hand,”

John followed the Sergeant Major towards the still-open blast door from which he'd entered. On the other side was an elevator. The pair stepped in, and the doors began to close.

“Hey, Johnson,” Peters called out. “When are you gonna tell me how you made it back home in one piece?”

“Sorry, Gunns,” replied Johnson. “It's classified.”

“Classified my ass! Well, you can forget about those adjustments to your A2 scope, and you sure as hell-”

The door sealed shut, drowning out the Gunnery Sergeant's voice. Sergeant Johnson turned back to John as the elevator descended.

“Well, he's in a particularly fine mood. Maybe Lord Hood didn't give him an invitation.”

Sergeant Major Avery Johnson was taller and stronger than the average soldier, though not quite the height of a Spartan-II. His dark skin was a gift from his African American ancestry, and his strong jaw was covered in black stubble, capped off with a closely trimmed moustache. By now, Johnson should have been an old man, but after his time spent in cryogenic freezers

between his many battles, he neither looked nor felt anywhere close to his age.

John had noticed over the last few years of the war that the faces of the soldiers who fought beside him were beginning to repeat. It seemed that enough people had died in this war that those who remained were becoming familiar. Avery Johnson had one of those familiar faces. John had fought alongside the man on multiple missions prior to the fall of Reach and was not at all surprised to find him there as the Pillar of Autumn fled the system.

Besides perhaps the Spartan himself, Johnson had been on more missions for the UNSC than anyone else on the Autumn. He was certainly the most seasoned, and due to his loud, gruff, drill-sergeant voice and oddly whimsical demeanour, he was impossible to miss despite the Autumn having been an entire kilometre long.

When John and Cortana found Johnson alive above the rubble of the broken Halo ring, John had faced a choice. Somehow, Avery Johnson had survived where everyone else had fallen. Had John forwarded certain details of Johnson's survival to the Office of Naval Intelligence, they would have dissected him immediately and prodded his corpse until nothing was left.

As a young Spartan in training, John's coach once told him, "Your duty to the UNSC supersedes your duty to yourself or your crew. It

is acceptable to spend their lives if necessary.” A Spartan’s goal, a *soldier’s* goal, was to complete their mission no matter the cost. John had lived by these words every day since his training. By allowing ONI to open up and study the body of Sergeant Major Johnson, they might have found a much-needed solution but at the death of this particular man. Despite John’s training, despite everything he knew, he had withheld the details of Johnson’s encounter from ONI and let the man keep his life. Had he made the right decision?

John examined the Sergeant. Johnson was currently sporting a white dress uniform topped off with a flat-capped military beret covering his black buzzcut hair. They were both on their way to a ceremony to honour their actions during the battle of Halo. As the elevator stopped, the two men stepped out and straight into a large glass transit cart. The doors shut, and it started moving. On one side, they could still see Earth and the rest of the orbital defence platform’s exterior. On the other, they saw *Commons Room 01*, an open interior courtyard down below. Like the rest of the station, it was made from metal, but it housed several small gardens from which palm trees and other plants grew.

“Earth,” began Johnson, looking through the window at the planet he’d been raised on. “I haven’t seen it in years. When I shipped out for

basic, the Orbital Defence Grid was all theory and politics. Now look. The Cairo is just one of three hundred geo-sync platforms. That MAC gun can put a round clean through a Covenant capital ship! With coordinated fire from the Athens and Malta, nothing's gonna get past this battle cluster in one piece.”

Several UNSC frigates and cruisers flew past the window, temporarily blocking their view of Earth. The frigates, about half a kilometre long, looked like giant, narrow, grip-less rifles constructed from grey, blocky chunks. On the back were massive cylindrical exhaust ports emitting fire, shooting the frigates through space. The cruisers, which were much fewer in number, were more than double the size of the frigates with a bulkier, hexagonal-prism design. Many smaller spacecraft manoeuvred between the enormous vessels, including the superfast Longsword fighters shaped like manta rays.

“Ships have been arriving all morning,” said Avery, glancing at John with a deliberate look in his eye. “Nobody's saying much, but I think something big is about to happen.”

The cart stopped moving, and the doors slid open. They both knew exactly what was about to happen, the battle for Earth, humanity's final stronghold. The Covenant would be arriving very soon.

Home Field Advantage

The Master Chief and Sergeant Major were greeted by a sea of cheers as they stepped into the crowd. They now stood on a thick glass platform surrounded by men and women dressed in combat uniforms with green plating and camouflage fatigues. They all stood eagerly applauding the two survivors as flying video cameras hovered around them, zooming in on the pair as they marched through the crowd.

“You told me there wouldn't be any cameras,” said John.

“You told me you were gonna wear something nice!” replied Johnson, lifting his beret and brushing his fingers through his short hair before continuing. “Folks need heroes, Chief, to give them hope. So, smile, would you? While we've still got something to smile about.”

The wide door to the station's main control room, the bridge, opened. Its two metal halves separated at a horizontal split in the middle. John and Johnson stepped through, leaving the crowd behind them.

The bridge was a wide, open room filled with many workstations and large, transparent computer screens. There were officers at every screen. Aside from the metal frames holding it together, the entire ceiling and walls of the bridge were made of glass, providing a perfect

view of Cairo Station's outer space surroundings. The ground at the front of the bridge was elevated, a stage of sorts with a much larger screen than the rest. Several figures stood onstage in front of the screen as the Chief and Johnson approached.

Upon reaching the stage, the pair snapped to attention, saluting Fleet Admiral Lord Hood as he turned to them. Lord Terrence Hood was the commanding officer of the UNSC Home Fleet, the last defence of Earth against the Covenant empire. He was the man in charge.

Hood was an older gentleman. His head was completely shaven, and the hairs that remained on his eyebrows were wispy and white. He looked tired and worn, but the way he carried himself established without a doubt he was a strong and powerful figure. He was known throughout the UNSC as a well-respected leader, one that would fight as long as he could live. He wore a white uniform identical to Johnson's and the other figures in the room, albeit with more trimmings.

"Gentlemen," Hood began. "We're lucky to have you back."

Lord Hood's clear, heavy voice projected loudly into the room, countering his elderly appearance.

Atop a vertical tube by the main screen, a small sky-blue image sprang to life. It was the

three-dimensional display of a woman, Cortana. Hood addressed her.

“Go ahead, Cortana,” he said.

The glowing woman spoke up.

“Another whisper, sir, near Io. We have probes en route.”

Lord Hood turned back to John and Avery.

“I apologise, but we're going to have to make this quick.”

Cortana looked up at the pair.

“You look nice,” she said smiling.

“Thank you,” both men replied in unison, immediately turning towards one another awkwardly, unsure of who she'd been addressing.

Hints of violet shone through Cortana's default blue as she chuckled. Her avatar flickered out of the scene as quickly as she'd come while an officer stepped up, presenting a box of coloured ribbons. Lord Hood selected one particular ribbon from the box, at the bottom of which hung a heavy, cross-shaped medallion. He spoke directly to Johnson, still loudly enough for all to hear.

“Sergeant Major, the Colonial Cross is awarded for acts of singular daring and devotion. For a soldier of the United Earth Space Corps, you have proven to be amongst the greatest of those in defence of our homeland and prior colonies. You executed incredible prowess

during the fight on Reach with your courage persisting through to the perils of the unknown,” Hood declared, pinning the ribbon to Johnson’s uniform.

He stepped back, addressing the line of uniformed officers who stood to the side of the stage.

“Commander Miranda Keyes, please come forward.”

A female officer walked across the stage and stood beside John. Looking quite petite next to the towering Spartan in his full green armour, John estimated she’d be no older than thirty. Her dark-brown, chin-length hair fell below her white hat, tucked back behind her ears apart from the few stubborn locks that hung forward. She had ice-blue eyes, light skin and a faint scar on her left cheek. As the daughter of Jacob Keyes, John noticed several of her father’s distinct features had been passed down, including a more feminine version of the Captain’s sharp jaw. She reminded John of Cortana, which led to a peculiar thought...

Lord Hood reached for another ribbon from the box and presented it to Miranda.

“Commander Keyes, your father’s actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service. His bravery in the face of impossible odds reflects great credit upon

himself and the UNSC. The Navy has lost one of its best.”

He turned to John. The titanium-alloy soldier stood still, not moving an inch. What could Lord Hood say to the Master Chief? John had already been awarded every existing UNSC ribbon except the Prisoner of War medallion of which he was thankful to be ineligible for. Just as Hood opened his mouth to speak, Cortana flickered back into view above her cylindrical pedestal, interrupting the Fleet Admiral.

“Slipspace ruptures directly off our battle cluster,” she announced.

“Show me,” Hood commanded.

The large glass screen lit up. The right of it displayed the circular blueprint of the planet Earth surrounded by UNSC starships and defence platforms. Something crept into view from the left side of the screen. One shape followed by another and then another slid into view. Several long, smooth silhouettes of foreign spaceships glided forwards, getting gradually closer to Earth and its defences. The Covenant fleet had arrived.

“Fifteen Covenant capital ships holding position just outside the kill zone,” Cortana provided.

A muffled voice sounded over the main comm. It was transmitted from the bridge of one of the UNSC battlecruisers.

“This is Fleet Admiral Harper. We are engaging the enemy.”

Lord Hood stepped towards the console below the screen and held down a button with his finger. He leant in to speak.

“Negative, Admiral. Form a defensive perimeter around the cluster.”

He turned back to Miranda Keyes.

“Commander, get to your ship and link up with the fleet.”

Miranda’s ship, a UNSC frigate named the *In Amber Clad* was docked to the side of the space station.

“Yes, sir!” she replied, spinning around and heading to the exit.

Hood turned to Cortana.

“You have the MAC gun. As soon as they come in range, open up.”

“Gladly,” she nodded, disappearing once more.

Hood stared at the digital images of the Covenant ships.

“Something’s not right,” he said disconcertedly. “The fleet that destroyed Reach was fifty times this size.”

An officer sitting behind one of the workstations stood up and cried out in a panic.

“Sir, additional contacts!” he burst. “Boarding craft and lots of them!”

“They're going to try to take our MAC offline, give their capital ships a straight shot at Earth,” Hood replied.

He turned to John.

“Master Chief, defend this station.”

“Yes, sir!” John replied, turning to Johnson at his side. “I need a weapon.”

“Right this way.”

The pair marched out of the bridge back to the glass platform as a number of UNSC starships flew overhead. The two of them stepped through the wide threshold onto the thick glass. The transit cart was now sliding away, packed with uniformed officers and armoured marines who wore matching military helmets, ammo pouches and rifles. They disappeared as the cart raced off down a tunnel, bending out of sight towards another section of the Cairo.

Johnson led the Master Chief down a staircase to the area directly below the glass platform. It was no armoury, but there were some guns clipped onto stands upon the walls. The Chief approached one of them.

The BR55 was a long and dark battle rifle with a digital ammo counter at the back of the carrying handle and a small telescope on top. Its magazine sat at the rear behind the grip, and its long stock extended into a narrow barrel. John paused. If the Covenant were boarding the

station, there'd be no use for weapons like the BR just yet. He'd be better off with something a little more close quarters.

The Master Chief looked to his right. Johnson was lifting a heavy machine gun turret from the wall. It was an M247 with a foldable stand. He must have placed the goliath there earlier when planning for the inevitable attack. He brought it up to rest on his shoulder.

“Hurry, Chief. We need to be ready when the bastards arrive,” Johnson said.

John turned towards a stack of crates. Three other weapons sat on top. One was an M6C Magnum handgun, a small pistol. The other two were submachine guns, M7 SMGs. The SMGs were light weapons with short barrels and small iron-sights. They were significantly smaller than the battle rifle and utterly miniscule when compared with the heavy machine gun turret, but they would do the job. The Chief checked the magnum was loaded and placed it on his hip. His armour automatically magnetised, fixing the pistol to his side. John picked up one of the SMGs with his right hand and checked it was also loaded. The sixty-round magazine of the submachine gun was full. He then grabbed the second SMG with his left hand, once again verifying the ammo was full before following Johnson out of the room.

They entered the next room through a more traditional, but still metal, automatic sliding door. It had green lights to show it was open. The *Recreational Room* did not have much to show for its name. The recreational materials had been locked away for days now. All that stood in the room were several computer terminals intended to be used during crew members' free time but were now gathering dust. On the left wall was a large window facing the stars, and down the centre of the room was a path to another blast door opposite from where John and Johnson stood with a fireteam of marines, each wielding their own SMG. The lights on the blast door were red. It was sealed shut.

“Alert! Alert!” came an officer on the loudspeaker. “Covenant boarders inbound! All hands report to battle stations. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill.”

Johnson put his finger to his ear, an unnecessary habit as his earpiece could clearly receive both his voice and the officer's, even if the officer were not already broadcasting to the entire station.

“How's it going, Malta?” Johnson asked the neighbouring space station.

“Stand by,” replied the speaker. “They're latched! Check your targets. Watch the crossfires. They're in standard formation, little

bastards up front, big ones in back. Good luck, Cairo.”

Right on cue, the ground began to rumble. A Covenant boarding craft had latched itself to Cairo Station somewhere nearby. Johnson placed his turret down. The large gun sat atop its stand, waiting to unleash a stream of lead into anything that came through the entryway. He crouched behind the turret, waiting while the other marines filled out to the sides, moving away from the potential line-of-fire of the blast door. Then they waited.

Soon, muffled plasma fire could be heard on the other side of the door. The Covenant had entered the station. John moved up towards the closed doorway, waiting just right of it. He wondered what would come through first. As implied over the comm, it would most likely be Grunts.

The Covenant Grunts, or *Unggoy* as the Covenant called them, formed the majority of the Covenant’s population. While shorter than the average adult human, they were wider, stockier and highly excitable. Like most Covenant species, the Unggoy were humanoid, meaning they had a head, torso and a pair of arms and legs. The Unggoy were like large apes in frame but with tough, grey exoskeletons instead of typical skin. That and their large forearms and lower legs gave them a lobster-like

appearance. John was fairly certain a team of Covenant Grunts would be first to burst into the room, the lower half of their faces obscured by their gasmask-like rebreathers and their negligible orange armour covering only parts of their chest and waist. Their armour would be stretching back into the tall pyramidal tanks on their backs, forcing them to hunch over as they staggered through as fast as they could.

The plasma sounds outside the room ceased, and a yellow light began to glow from the seal of the blast door. Sparks flew from the horizontal split. The light got steadily brighter before... *BAM!* The door blew open. Chunks of metal sailed through the air into the room. One piece smashed right through a computer screen, shattering it open and showering one of the marines in glass. He groaned loudly and crouched behind the console as blood poured down his shard-embedded face. The last fragments of the door made their final clanks on the metal floor before the room fell silent again.

The soldiers returned their attention to the giant hole where the blast door had been, obscured by smoke and dust. A roar bellowed from the other side of it. A mass of blue metal and leathery flesh rushed out from the smoke. A Covenant Elite, one of the aliens that called themselves Sangheili, sprinted forwards, yelling a deep alien battle cry. It ran straight down the

path, closing the distance between the blast door and Johnson on the other side of the room.

Johnson stared down the Covenant Elite as he held the trigger of his heavy gun turret. The bullets sprayed out, every one of them hitting the Elite as it raced. The Elite's blue energy shields lit up around it, absorbing the bullets from Johnson's weapon and letting them drop to the floor. Unharmed, the Elite continued.

The Master Chief and the marines began unloading bullets from their SMGs into the Elite. John held down the triggers on both his SMGs at the same time. The Elite only made it halfway down the path before its shields popped, just as the Chief's had earlier from the zapper. The blue shimmer of the Elite's shields disappeared while the marines kept firing. Now, the bullets made direct contact with the Elite. Some of them formed dents in the cobalt-blue armour of the Sangheili. Others pierced straight into its rippled skin. Dark-indigo blood poured from the creature as it fell before the long barrel of Johnson's turret, delivering a final growl before curling up on the floor.

Johnson looked down at the long, lifeless creature. Its mandibles twitched silently. Covenant Elites had no visible lips. Instead, they had a split jaw with two mandibles on either side. Tiny, sharp teeth stuck out downwards from their upper mandibles like mini stalactites, while

the equally sharp teeth on their lower mandibles mirrored them, spiking upwards.

“You know, I only have one question,” Johnson called over to the Chief. “How the hell do they eat with those things? Can’t exactly imagine an Elite burying its face into a curried egg sandwich, can you?”

They turned back to the door. The dust was beginning to settle, and the shadows of six smaller creatures could now be identified. This time, a much croakier, squeakier, high-pitched cry was made as a party of Grunts charged into the room. Their oddly shaped arms were outstretched with their C-shaped plasma pistols raised in front of them. Short bursts of green light fired from their weapons at the marines. Fortunately, the Grunts were terrible shots in a panic, and it seemed the death of their Sangheili commander had shaken them. Superheated plasma energy scorched the walls as the marines dodged and weaved around the room, ducking behind the computer terminals for cover.

Johnson was forced to step out from his turret and move into a more strategic position. John continued unleashing his submachine gun bullets into the crowded Grunts. The bullets blasted holes into their hard, grey exteriors, causing them to cry in pain. A bright, cyan-coloured liquid fountained from the aliens’ bodies. The Chief aimed his SMGs from one

Grunt to the next. He managed to slay three of them while the shared effort of the marines took out the other three. The humans had the advantage in this room, but it was time to move on. They needed to take out these Covenant before the *Covies* took out the station's primary MAC cannon.

A bassy voice spoke to John from within his helmet. It was a transmission from Lord Hood.

"Find the Covenant's point of entry, Chief," he trumpeted. "Cut them off at the source!"

"Yes, sir," John replied.

The loudspeaker sounded again.

"This is not a drill. This is not a drill. Boarders are in Habitat Alpha. I need a squad there ASAP."

One of the marines unbuckled his green helmet and lifted it off his head.

"Did I say you could remove your headgear, marine?" started Johnson. "I wanna see your-"

He stopped talking. The marine revealed his face, now completely red with blood. Shards of glass were still sticking out all over it as the liquid drizzled into the collar of his uniform.

"Sir," a freckled female marine spoke up to the Sergeant Major. "Permission to remain behind to patch up Vusaro."

"Negative, Pinciotti," he replied. "You trying to run out on me, Private?"

“No, Sarge. Just wanted to get a squad-mate back up to full strength, sir.”

Johnson turned to the blood-covered Vusaro.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“Nothing I can’t fix, sir!” replied Private Vusaro.

“You stay here. Get yourself cleaned up. Radio in when you’re ready to rejoin the fight. We’re gonna need everyone working together to drive back the alien swine. Chief, you have the point.”

John-117 led the Sergeant Major and his four remaining marines out of the room while Vusaro stayed behind, using his reflection on one of the computers to pick the glass from his face. The team strode down a straight corridor. A painted red arrow on the floor was labelled *Hangar A-01*. That was where they needed to be. They crossed one of the commons, navigating through the courtyard around the benches and palm trees before turning up a staircase. They restocked their weapons with ammunition in the next corridor before continuing onwards, arriving at an open shuttle bay.

They entered the hangar onto a grated walkway above the main floor. The hangar was large enough to fit two UNSC *Pelican* dropships, evidently, as one such troop carrier filled half the room. It was a chunky aircraft with flat, stubby wings on the either side. Large square thrusters

sat atop the wings and tail of the Pelican, useful for both in-atmosphere and outer space flight. The pilot and co-pilot seats could be seen through the front windshield while a large passenger container opened at the rear below the tail. Inside were two rows of seats pressed against the side walls, facing inwards at each other. Pelicans such as this one had dropped the Chief into battle often enough that he granted it no attention.

The front of the Pelican faced out towards the large hangar exit. The exit was kept closed by a massive, sliding glass door held together by heavy black and yellow beams. Beyond the glass were the neighbouring defence space stations, countless flying ships and Earth herself. UNSC Longswords were zooming about in combat against Covenant Seraph fighters of teardrop-shaped design. Several stacking crates and some metal barricades had been placed around the hangar for soldiers to use as cover, but none of these things were what caught the eyes of the Master Chief and the marines.

On the left side of the huge glass hangar door was a Covenant docking vessel. The awkward-looking boarding craft was made up of a thick, purple tube with three pincer-like arms reaching forwards and clipping onto the station from the exterior. The narrowest section of the tube extended straight through the glass as if a perfect

circle had been cut the exact size for the large pipe to fit through it and into the room. This vessel was a Tick, prepared to suck the life from Cairo Station.

The team moved across the walkway that stretched into the middle of the bay, separating it into two halves. The Chief jumped over the railing and down onto the bottom level. His heavy armour made a loud clunk that vibrated along the floor. The marines remained on the walkway with their guns aimed at the opening to the umbilical of the boarding craft that was threaded through the glass. John stood half-crouched behind one of the movable barriers in the room, both SMGs at the ready once more.

A clunking of footsteps was projected from the purple tube before several orange-armoured Grunts poured into the hangar bay followed by another large, blue-armoured Elite. The Elite recoiled as it was instantly stung by what appeared to be a thousand bullets hitting it at once. Its bright blue shielding lit up around its body. It flung its arms about wildly and ducked for cover behind a nearby crate. The energy of the shields sparkled like electricity, rising around the Elite as they recharged.

This Elite, as indicated by the blue armour, was of a low rank. It was either a young Elite that had recently joined the Covenant military or an older Elite who had been unable to prove itself

in battle. By looking at it, John couldn't tell which. The pointed angles at the back and sides of its helmet, top of its shoulder pads, elbow pads and knee armour were like fins, and while it was crouched over behind the crate, the Elite looked more sharklike than ever.

In its hand, the Elite held a shiny, sapphire-blue plasma rifle. Like most Covenant weaponry, it was sleek, rounded and unconventional in almost every way. It was shaped like a sideways 'H' with alien markings on the side. As the Elite's energy shields finished recharging, it fired the plasma rifle from behind the crate. Using its cover, the Elite peeked out ever-so-slightly and pointed its weapon around the side, firing a long stream of bright-blue energy bolts, singeing the side of the crate as they whizzed past.

The Covenant Grunts jumped around the room also using the crates and barricades to their advantage. Three of them fired their smaller bursts of green plasma at the marines on the walkway. Two Grunts focused on the Chief. John's automatic translating device activated inside his helmet as the Grunts began to yap in their high-pitched native tongues.

"I see you, Demon!" one croaked through its rebreather mask.

"You no hide from me!" another chimed in.

The Master Chief held his triggers down. He and the Grunts danced about the room to avoid each other's fire. It would have been easy for the Chief to dispatch the Grunts if it weren't for the Elite's constant cascade of plasma coming from behind its crate.

"Sergeant," John called out to Johnson who was still on the walkway. "Any grenades?"

"On the menu, Chief!" he barked back.

Johnson took a hand grenade from a pouch strapped onto his uniform. The green fragmentation grenade was spherical with indented lines around the middle and a cylindrical attachment on top, the pin. He pulled the pin out and threw the grenade across the room. It landed directly behind the Elite's crate, right beside the alien.

"Hope you like pineapple!" Johnson yelled at the Elite, referencing the grenade's shape.

The Elite looked sideways at the grenade, gasping in surprise. It tried to leap out from behind the crate, but it was too late. The grenade exploded. Shards of metal blew open, blasting into the creature. With the blast proving too powerful at such a close proximity for both the Elite's shields and armour to hold together, the monster blew apart. Indigo-coloured blood and guts rained through the air, splattering over the metal around the hangar.

Two of the Grunts froze in terror as their officer had been slain. The pupils on their beady, wideset eyes shrank in fear. They were immediately taken out by the marines above. The other three Grunts dropped their plasma pistols and raised their arms above their heads. Losing all senses, they began running, each Grunt in a different direction to nowhere in particular.

“They got the leader! Ruuun!” one of them wailed.

John clipped his SMGs to the sides of his magnetic armour and unclipped his magnum. He raised the pistol and shot each of the Grunts once in the head, killing them all instantly before swapping back to the submachine guns. The room was now covered in indigo and cyan blood as if it were the aftermath of a blue confetti party.

“I always said we needed more paint in this place,” claimed Johnson.

“Look,” cried Private Pinciotti.

Her gun was lowered in one hand while the other pointed out at the space beyond the hangar door.

“The Malta's already driven off its boarders.”

John looked out at the surrounding space. At a distance, he could see the Malta Defence Platform across from the Athens. It was identical to the Cairo except that it now had

several purple Ticks detaching themselves from the space station. They glided away into stars. Cortana's voice came over the loudspeaker, communicating with Malta Station for all to hear.

“Malta, what's your status?” she asked.

“I don't believe it!” the Malta officer exclaimed in reply. “They're retreating. We won!”

The officer was dead wrong.

A bright light emitted from Malta Station. The defence platform exploded, blowing into a million pieces. Malta and its entire crew were now gone.

Priority Shift

A hint of red caught John's eye. His motion tracker lit with a scattering of fresh dots. He spun around to a door opening below the walkway. A wave of Elites and Grunts spilled into the room. John launched one of his SMGs directly at the head of a Grunt, knocking it off balance.

"Johnson," John called, raising his now empty left hand.

Johnson opened his occupied grenade pouch and tossed the Spartan an explosive with the pin still intact. The Chief tore out the pin and lobbed the grenade into the Covenant cluster. A red-armoured Elite managed to dive out from the group, but the rest of the aliens were blown to smithereens. The red armour of this Elite symbolised a higher rank and likely a higher skill.

The Elite Major roared. Its mandibles split open, giving the Master Chief a direct view of the creature's throat as it charged towards him. Blue energy crackled around the Elite as its shields had not yet recharged after the explosion, though they were not fully depleted either.

The red Major pointed its plasma rifle. John jumped forwards, knocking the gun out of its hand. The Elite then swung one of its large alien fists downwards, trying to pummel the Chief

through his helmet. John swivelled to the side, dodging the blow. He leant forwards and shoved his body directly into the creature. The weight of his armour slammed the Elite back into the wall, knocking the last energy out of its shields. The Chief lifted his remaining SMG and blasted the alien in the face. Its mandibles blew right off its skull, splattering John's green armour with drops of indigo blood. The Elite Major now lay motionless on the floor with the other bodies.

Having spent the last of his submachine gun ammo, John dropped the gun and picked up the alien plasma rifle from the ground. This Covenant group must have entered from another boarding craft. John needed to find it and stop the Covenant from repeating whatever they had done to the Malta. By destroying the Malta, the aliens were making it easier for themselves to get a clean shot at Earth. Once the Covenant fleet broke through Earth's defences, that would be it: The Covenant would reach their goal. They would kill every last person who hadn't died already, without care and without mercy. The human race, as a whole, would cease to exist.

John led his team of marines through a winding corridor of yellow and grey. Having been ordered elsewhere, Sergeant Johnson was no longer with them. As the team approached a door into the bottom level of the next hangar

bay, they could hear an already active firefight. The sounds of UNSC bullets and charged plasma warned them of the dangers on the other side. The sounds almost deafened them as the door slid open.

The hangar was identical to the previous one except for the crates and barricades having been placed in different locations. The umbilical of the Covenant boarding craft had been inserted into the opposite side of the hangar. Below the tubular opening were two of the Covenant's stationary shield generators. These small purple devices sat on the floor projecting a blue arch-shaped, seemingly solid, semi-transparent energy called *hardlight*. The first wave of Covenant from this boarding craft must have placed them there to shield their brethren who were yet to spill into the scene.

Atop the railed walkway on the higher level of the hangar were two mounted plasma cannons pointing down at the bottom level where the Master Chief and marines stood. Essentially, these cannons were the Covenant's answer to the machine gun turret in their smooth, rounded Covenant style. Standing behind them, operating the guns were Covenant Grunts, this time clad in green. They fired continuously at the sides of a large crate at which a lone, helmetless marine was taking cover. He stood crouched beside two marine corpses and a puddle of blood that

glistened much wetter than the red streaks that covered his face.

“Vusaro’s pinned down, sir!” yelled one of the marines, causing both Grunts to notice the Master Chief’s team.

The Grunts forgot about their existing target and turned their heavy cannons towards John and his marines. Each soldier scattered and dived for cover behind the nearest object.

“How many more grenades do we have?” John asked the group.

“Saito and I have one each,” replied Pinciotti.

The Chief thought for a moment. *These Grunts won’t be our biggest threat*, he figured. *They’re not worth wasting the grenades on*. He scanned the room before noticing Private Vusaro hugging his BR55 behind his crate.

“How good are you with that, Vusaro?” John asked, raising his voice over the loud sizzles of the Grunts’ continued plasma.

“Good enough, sir!” Vusaro replied.

John turned to his marines.

“Marines, stay put. Vusaro, I’ll draw out their fire. Aim for the Grunts’ heads.”

The Master Chief jumped out from his cover, raising his plasma rifle in his right hand. Dashing sideways as fast as a Spartan could, which was evidently incredibly fast, John held down the sensor on his gun. Either due to his Spartan strength and reflexes or the unnatural properties

of the weapon, John felt no recoil whatsoever from the plasma rifle, but from this position, he could not hit the Grunts. The large plasma cannons blocked the Chief's fire while returning much faster energy bolts of their own. Plasma from the left cannon hit the Chief.

A gap appeared in the rectangular shield gauge on John's heads-up-display just as his yellow-gold energy shields sparkled around him. It didn't matter, he only had to hold out long enough for Vusaro to headshot the Grunts. He moved backwards towards the stationary Covenant shields as Vusaro fired his BR. A light flashed from the muzzle of Vusaro's rifle, and a loud bang bounced around the walls as a burst of three bullets were fired from Vusaro's weapon, making direct impact with the Grunt gunner on the right.

Two of the bullets hit the Grunt's mouthpiece, blowing it right off the creature's ugly face and revealing its hideously collapsed mouth underneath. The last bullet went straight between its eyes, causing the creature to fall back from its cannon as a splash of cyan blood leapt from its head. Vusaro jumped back behind his crate.

Before John could safely position himself to find a view of the left plasma cannon, he waited behind the hardlight shield for his own shields to recharge. He watched his shield gauge starting

to refill before he heard a sudden clunking behind him. Red dots appeared on the bottom of his motion tracker. He spun around to meet his new enemies.

“Wort wort wort!” came a deep voice from inside the Covenant boarding tube.

At the same time, John’s translator device kicked in.

“Go go go!” it translated.

About seven orange-armoured Grunts jumped down one at a time followed by two blue-armoured Elites. John jumped back into view of the remaining plasma cannon. The green Grunt turned its cannon back towards the Master Chief and fired. John dive-rolled to his right, causing the cannon’s operator to fire at the three Grunts that had been standing in proximity. All three died. Their hard, grey exoskeleton was now charred black, and the alluring aroma of fried crustacean filled the air.

Another bang sounded from nearby, followed immediately by a thump as the plasma-cannon Grunt’s lifeless body fell off the walkway and hit the floor. Unggoy blood ran out like a tap from the gaping hole that was newly formed in the Grunt’s head.

John moved back into cover behind the closest crate, allowing his shields to recharge while the marines fired their SMGs and BR at

the aliens standing below the umbilical. One Grunt fell and then the next.

“Aargh!”

A gurgled cry came from Vusaro’s position. John glanced in his direction. The marine had fallen with his back against the crate. His battle rifle lay on the ground next to him. He clutched his left hand over the scorched flesh below his right shoulder. Blood ran down his arm as he slumped to the floor.

“Master Chief, sir! Vusaro is down,” came Pinciotti.

“Acknowledged,” John replied, all the while moving about to avoid bright green and blue plasma bursts from the Covenant.

He continued firing his plasma rifle into the Covenant group, aiming for the Elites as he ran. The meter on his heads-up-display now read his shields as fully charged. One Grunt hobbled towards the Chief with its plasma pistol raised. John smacked the Grunt in the head with the butt of his rifle, pounding an impossible dent into the creature’s thick cranium. Its entire face gave way as the alien fell to the floor. John jumped backwards away from the crowd.

“Grenades, now!” he yelled.

One pin-less grenade sailed through the air at the Covenant group. It hit the blue energy of a Covenant stationary shield, ricocheting sideways. The grenade exploded as it flew

towards an empty corner of the hangar. No Covenant were close enough to be harmed. John looked back at the marines. Private Pinciotti still had *her* grenade in her pouch. She was moving towards Vusaro's position, likely to secure the dropped battle rifle.

The Covenant scattered, no longer forming a cluster. Throwing another grenade would be pointless. John stepped forwards and smacked one Grunt down, followed by another as both Elites charged at the marines. Two more Grunts fell to the SMGs' fire before the marines all turned their attention to the Elites.

The Elite closest to the humans yelled a deep Sangheili growl as its shields lit up. It didn't flinch as the marines held down their triggers. John sprinted towards the one closest to him. He ran behind it and smacked the monster right through the back of its neck with his elbow. The force of the Spartan's melee went straight through the Elite's shields. It fell dead immediately.

The final Elite wailed as its shields popped when it was barely a metre from the marines. Its body shook as it was hit by the bullets from each of the SMGs before it also fell, joining its partner on the ground.

The room fell silent. All that could be heard was the wheezing of Private Vusaro in pain. John strode towards the soldier. Private Pinciotti

crouched next to him. Vusaro released a final long sigh before his entire body relaxed.

“He... he’s dead, s-sir,” Pinciotti stuttered.

Deciding he’d had enough use out of his magnum, John pulled the pistol from his armour and let the weapon slide onto the floor. He replaced it with the plasma rifle, freeing up his hands. He glanced at Vusaro’s BR still on the ground.

“Hand me the battle rifle, Private,” John ordered.

“W-what?”

“The battle rifle,” he repeated. “There are more Covenant in this station.”

Right on cue, the loudspeaker spoke as if the comms officer had been listening to the conversation.

“Security Room Four is under attack.”

John bent down and lifted the battle rifle from the floor as Pinciotti stood straight.

“That’s it?” she asked with a faint quiver in her voice.

“What’s it?” John replied.

John detected emotion from Pinciotti that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Was she afraid? Perhaps she was injured.

“Donovan Vusaro just *died!*”

She emphasised the last word.

“And all you can do is ask for his rifle?”

Throughout most of the war, John had been the leader of his own special team. It was a team of Spartan-IIs. Blue Team, they were called. He was missing them now, not because he needed their help defending the station, but because he understood them and they had understood him. The behaviour of most soldiers wasn't drastically different from the Spartans while on the battlefield, but occasionally John found himself facing situations like this, non-Spartan soldiers acting in ways illogical to the Chief.

John noticed Pinciotti's eyes getting wet. What was the right thing to say in this situation? Vusaro was not the first man to die on this space station. He was certainly not the first to die today. John thought of the Malta crew. Vusaro was one of countless lives that had been lost in the war. Even Spartans had perished. When Sam or Kurt had died, how had John coped with it?

What should he say to this marine? If he was going to continue to fight alongside these soldiers, he needed them to be clear-minded and determined. John thought back to his days in training. *It is acceptable to spend lives when necessary.* The Master Chief spoke.

“Soldiers die every day, Private. Vusaro just took out two cannon operators. He was well spent.”

“Well spent?” repeated Pinciotti. “You fucking ro-”

She was cut off by another marine.

“Out the window! They’re leaving the Athens.”

They turned towards the hangar’s massive glass doors. Sure enough, a swarm of Covenant boarding craft were flying *away* from the Athens Defence Platform just as they had the Malta. The same light that had flashed from the Malta now flashed brightly from the Athens as the station exploded. Just like the Malta, the Athens and its entire crew were no more.

Lord Hood spoke over the loudspeaker

“Cortana, assessment.”

“That explosion came from inside the Athens, just like the Malta,” Cortana’s voice replied. “The Covenant must have brought something with them, a bomb.”

“Then they sure as hell brought one here,” said Hood. “Master Chief, find it.”

The Master Chief looked at the marines gathering around him. This bomb needed to be found as soon as possible or everyone on this station would be dead, and the war, forfeit. These soldiers would only serve to slow down his search.

“Marines, keep an eye out for more boarding parties. I’ll find the bomb. Pinciotti, I need that grenade.”

Whatever she was feeling was irrelevant to the Chief. John had a number one priority. Until that

bomb was found, nothing else mattered. Pinciotti reluctantly opened her pouch and handed him the grenade. John placed it on the opposite side of his hip from the plasma rifle. He scanned the room. Something else was different about this hangar from the last. The trap doors on the floor had slid open, inviting him inside.

Accepting the invitation, John entered. He followed the steps into a wide, dark hallway. Lined along the centre were rows of large, torpedo-shaped objects about twice as long as the Spartan himself. They were held down over a segmented conveyor belt, ammunition for Cairo Station's MAC gun.

The Chief ran forwards along the side of the conveyer belt, heading towards a door at the other end. The floor vibrated as he heard the grinding of gears somewhere below. The conveyer belt moved, and the furthest MAC round was pushed into a black opening in the end wall.

John was still only halfway down the hallway when the door opened. He raised his battle rifle in response to whatever was entering. Whoever it was, they were just too far for his motion tracker to detect and somehow slipped into the shadows without him seeing. John scanned the area near the door. Then he saw it, a mere blur in his vision, waves rippling in the air. Colours fluttered briefly before him that should not have

been there. John flipped his battle rifle onto the back of his armour and pulled the plasma rifle out once more. His heads-up-display informed him that he only had thirty percent battery life left in the weapon.

The Chief sidestepped as wind whooshed past his helmet. A Covenant Elite hidden in active camouflage had just taken a swing at him. *Whoosh*. It swung again. Once more, John dodged it. Guessing the Elite's position, he pointed his plasma rifle in the air and fired. The blue energy shields and silver armour of a Stealth Elite blinked before him. The Elite, now revealed, raised its own plasma rifle back at the Spartan. John dived onto the conveyer belt between two of the MAC slugs near the opening in the wall.

John needed to kill the Elite before its shields recharged. The Elite followed him into the gap. John slapped it over the head with his plasma rifle. The Elite was not harmed, but it flinched long enough for the Chief to deal another blow. This time, he struck a gap between its armour at its lower abdomen. The Elite's shields did not fully pop. It fired its plasma rifle back at John, but John crouched quickly enough to avoid the fire. He launched himself directly into the Elite's legs. The Elite stumbled back, attempting to regain its balance but fell over onto the very last MAC round before the opening. Suddenly, the

conveyer belt shifted. John jumped back onto solid ground as the Elite was pulled into the dark opening.

“Oooaaaargh!”

John didn't envy the Elite. Whatever happened on the other side of the opening was fatal. The Chief continued through the door from which the Stealth Elite had entered. A set of stairs led him up to another trap door. He heard plasma and shotgun fire above.

“Get the hell out of my armoury!” a familiar voice yelled from the other side. “Tell your friends I got enough ammo for all of you!”

John pushed through the trap door just in time to see Peters get hit square in the chest by a blue plasma bolt, falling to his death. There were two Elites in the armoury. One was a blue-clad Elite Minor. The other was a red Major. John dropped his plasma rifle and dived for the dropped shotgun beside Peters' fresh corpse as both Elites fired their rifles at the Spartan.

“Foul demon!” yelled the Elite Major. “Your death is my duty!”

John ducked behind the workbench that still held broken hardware from his MJOLNIR Mark V. The Elites ran at him. The Minor was still firing its continuous plasma shots. It reached him first while the Major waited on the other side of the workbench.

“Infidel!”

Its voice shook with rage.

John fired a single shot from his shotgun. Multiple pellets blasted out of the barrel at once, forcing the Elite backwards. At point-blank, the shotgun was able to wipe the entirety of the Elite's energy shields clean. The Chief fired again. Sangheili blood puffed like wind from the back of the Elite before splattering over the grating.

Immediately after, the remaining Elite jumped onto the workbench and fired down at John. The Spartan rolled sideways to avoid the fire, still managing to get hit and losing some of his gold shields. He ran over to the recharge station, the one Peters had called the zapper, while simultaneously firing his shotgun back at the Elite. The Elite's shields lit up just as the Chief's did, but as the distance between the two grew, less of John's shotgun pellets hit the alien.

John jumped behind the zapper as the Elite Major followed. The Elite jumped onto the red square, making a swing for the Spartan just as John slammed his fist onto the control panel. His fist formed a dent in the panel, locking several buttons in place. The poles on either side of the red square spun around the alien, befuddling the creature. *ZAP!* The Elite's shields fully popped. John fired his shotgun, and the creature fell dead with a splat.

HALO ARRAY – The Great Journey

The blast door the technicians had passed through earlier now opened into one of the commons. Puffing slightly, John looked at the palm trees. *Where the hell is this bomb?*

Authorised Personnel Only

John topped up his ammunition. He recalled the marines earlier sliding away in their transit cart. He figured they must have come here to wipe the armoury clean before dispersing. Little remained. Panels on the wall had been left open, and the bars inside held only a few SMGs. All other weapons had been taken except for a single BR. Fortunately, there was more than enough battle rifle ammo and plenty of shells to refill his shotgun, but there wasn't time to stand around idly.

As soon as John had reloaded his shotgun, he ran through the blast door into the commons, keeping an eye on his motion tracker as he scanned the courtyard. It was like being outdoors. The walls on either side stretched far higher than they needed to, and the glass ceiling was a window into the colourful space battle above.

The courtyard had eight small gardens with shadowy hallways looping around them. It was the perfect place for the Covenant to hide. Listening in, John heard the snuffles of Grunts beneath their masks. There was no time to wait for the aliens to reveal themselves. They didn't appear on his motion tracker, so John sprinted

forwards hoping to find them before they could surprise him. He leapt over the first line of bushes and around the palm trees. As a Spartan, John was able to hold his battle rifle at his shoulder, point the barrel forwards and run all at the same time without any drawbacks.

The first Grunt gasped. It had been hiding behind the initial row of gardens with three Unggoy companions. There was no Elite with them, but there was a red-armoured Grunt Major in the mix. John dispatched all of them as quickly as he could. He swept his battle rifle across the group with a single pull of the trigger. Two Grunts were hit in the head by a bullet each. The other two received a melee as the Chief heard a growl from further along the courtyard.

An Elite Minor, followed by four Grunt subordinates, jumped from behind a garden directly below a security lookout built into the back wall. Immediately after, an identical group stepped out from one of the looping hallways behind the second last row of gardens. These two groups would have been enough to deal with on their own, but John then spotted a green-armoured Grunt setting up a plasma cannon behind the glass of the security lookout above. The Covenant dominated this space.

John's battle rifle wouldn't provide the same stun effect as the SMGs he'd had earlier, but it

could deal more damage in a single burst. The shotgun was likely the most powerful weapon in the room, but it was utterly useless at a distance. John needed to close the gap between himself and the aliens as fast as possible.

He charged forwards, aiming his BR at the closest Elite, and fired. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* He switched to the shotgun as he approached, blasting the creature in the chest. *Bang!*

The surrounding Grunts trembled before him. Some of them dropped their plasma pistols. The Chief ignored them and looked for the next Elite.

Once again, John charged. Blue and green plasma splashed across his chest as he navigated the gardens. His shields lit up constantly, and the meter reduced, but that didn't matter as long as he was fast enough.

Bam. Bam. Bam. Bang! The next Elite was dead. Its Grunts cowered in fear. John was nearing the last group. The Grunt gunner operating the plasma cannon began shooting. The plasma shattered the glass window as it passed through. The Chief took out the fragmentation grenade handed to him by Pinciotti. Unpinning it, he hurled it right between the last Elite's feet and fired his BR, distracting the Elite before it had time to dive away.

John had just enough of his shields left to pull off what he needed. With all his Spartan

strength, he leapt over the alien group. The grenade exploded, igniting the air below him. Alien appendages littered the gardens as the explosion launched John high into the air. The force from the explosion fully depleted his shields, but his armour remained intact. John flew directly into the security room, landing right beside the Grunt gunner. He slammed his rifle straight into its forehead, killing the clammy creature.

He looked back into the commons. A few frazzled Grunts hopped about senselessly. They were stuck in a human base, outnumbered and without their leaders to direct them. Covenant Grunts were extremely deadly in organised groups, but when they lost their purpose as these ones had, it wouldn't take much time for the marines to sweep them up. Not needing long to regain his breath, John continued past the flashing screens and panels of the security room while his shields reactivated.

He followed the scent of Covenant for several more minutes. The occasional Elite or band of Grunts confirmed he was heading in the right direction. As he travelled through the various rooms and corridors of the Cairo, it became more apparent the bomb was most likely in the exact centre of the station. John was wasting time travelling around the outside rooms. If it

hadn't been already, the bomb was going to be armed very soon.

"I need a squad in Habitat Delta," came the loudspeaker.

Boarding craft were still arriving. There was still time. John stepped through a door onto a glass platform. A transit cart sat on rails to his right. At the top of a staircase leading down ahead of him was none other than Avery Johnson holding a battle rifle of his own.

"Come on, Chief!" Johnson shouted before disappearing down the stairs. "This way."

John descended after him to find Miranda Keyes with a couple of uniformed officers at the foot of the staircase. The hallway to their left was lined with airlocks, tubed boarding bridges, one of which led to the *UNSC In Amber Clad*.

"I was almost onboard when *they* showed up," said Commander Keyes.

"Don't worry, ma'am," John replied.

"We're on it," added the Sergeant Major.

John hugged the left wall, peering down the hallway. He studied the scene before him. There were UNSC barricades set up along the sides with a few Covenant stationary shields further ahead. Bodies were scattered along the floor, some of them Covenant but most of them human. The Chief's motion tracker alerted him to the aliens spilling out from the last airlock.

“Sergeant, I need to find that bomb,” John asserted.

“Affirmative,” Johnson replied. “I’ll shoot from the barricades. You run through. Ensure the Elites are dead, and I can clear the rest.”

The Chief nodded then sprinted forwards. He zigzagged along the hallway, dodging plasma before springing right into the onslaught of enemies. He could hear Johnson’s BR going off behind him. The hallway was long, and neither the plasma pistols nor rifles the Covenant carried were designed for long-ranged combat. They couldn’t compete with the BR. Johnson was safe, but John was in the middle of the danger.

Grunts fell on either side of him, and the shields of an Elite ahead shimmered as Johnson did his duty. The Elite swung its rifle at the Chief as he dashed around it. John jumped behind and meled the Elite in its back, knocking its shields away. *Bam!* Johnson scored a headshot. The Elite fell to its knees and then flat on its stomach. Its long neck and skull were last to flop to the floor.

The Chief ignored the orange and red Grunts, keeping all of his attention on the two Elites at the end of the hallway. The Elite Major snarled.

“Your death is at hand,” it spat. “Cyborg!”

The Elites separated. The Minor headed for the Spartan’s left and the Major for his right. John flipped his rifle onto his back as they

approached, pulling out his shotgun once more. According to his heads-up-display, it only had two shots left. He went for the Minor. *Bang!* One shot and a melee to its face. John didn't take time to watch the Elite's body hit the wall behind as he spun back to face the Major, which had its arms outstretched. Before he could pull the trigger again, he noticed one of the red dots on his motion-tracker moving closer behind him before a flash of blue and white lit up the room. Luckily for the Chief, the Grunt that threw the plasma grenade had terrible aim. It missed the Spartan entirely.

The Elite Major shook its long head, and as it growled, its four mandibles opened widely like a four-legged starfish at the front of its face. The Chief's head rang from the noise of the plasma explosion, but it affected the Elite more. John headbutted the alien with his hard MJOLNIR helmet. The dent in the Elite's own helmet went straight through to its skull, knocking the creature down. John fired his shotgun at its stomach, guaranteeing its death. He turned back to catch the grenade-throwing Grunt, but all he saw was a trail of corpses. Johnson had already taken it out.

"Chief, you ever wonder about the word *corpsman*?" asked the Sergeant from Miranda's end of the hallway. "We don't pronounce the P-

S, but is it really a good idea for a man delivering first aid to be called a *corpse* man?”

“Thanks, Chief,” Miranda Keyes sighed. “I owe you one.”

Miranda and Johnson exited into an airlock followed by the other two officers. Before the Master Chief entered his own respective airlock, he looked down at the bodies. He swapped the shotgun for a plasma pistol, but he was looking for something else, and he found one. A blue, metallic sphere with green lights and a yellow hieroglyph had rolled along the floor to rest next to the body of a marine. John snatched it up, stuck it to his armour and crossed into the airlock the Covenant had entered from.

The lights on the door switched from green to red as it closed behind the Chief. He heard the hiss of pressurising gas as it sealed. The door at the opposite end of the airlock slid open, and all air within the room was sucked into the vacuum of space.

The door had opened into nothingness, empty space. If the Chief were to step through, he'd float right out to the stars. Other parts of Cairo Station were still in view, but it was a drop down from the airlock.

Next, John heard a sound he recognised instantly. This was one he hadn't heard since the battle of Reach. Two fully suited Elites landed in the doorway. They wore a much *lighter*-blue

armour than the Elite Minors, but it covered every inch of their bodies. While still maintaining the sleek style of a typical Elite combat harnesses, these EVA harnesses were not unlike John's own MJOLNIR. They appeared bulkier and more heavily protective than the ones John had seen at Reach. Their jetpacks kept them afloat, producing the evocative sounds John associated with their kind, the Elite Rangers.

Both Rangers wielded two plasma rifles, one in each hand, and fired them simultaneously. As the last of the air was sucked out, there was nothing left to channel the sounds of the weapons. The gunfire was completely silent until it hit John's shields.

There was no cover in the airlock. John had no choice but to sprint at the Elites as they severely lowered his shields. He managed to intimidate them, and by the time the Spartan reached the open doorway, both Elite Rangers had jumped backwards, drifting slightly away. Due to their continuous fire, the plasma rifles overheated. The Elites were forced to pause, allowing their weapons to cool before they could continue. John took this opportunity to retaliate.

He lifted his plasma pistol and pressed his index finger over its sensor. As he held it there, a ball of neon green energy formed like flames at the front of the weapon. The Chief released his

finger, and the plasma blasted into the left Elite. Its shields stood no chance. John switched to his BR and fired one burst at the creature's head. Two bullets managed to pierce a hole in its visor. The third was embedded in its head, killing the Ranger which now rocked gently through space.

The Chief stood at the edge of the doorway. His shields recharged as the Ranger on the right raised its weapons once more. John jumped up, grabbed the lip at the top of the doorway and pushed himself into the space below. He made contact with the metal roof of another section of the Cairo. His boots hit with a clang and instantly magnetised, allowing him to stand upright on the platform.

The Elite Ranger slowly hovered down to meet him as the Chief charged his plasma pistol again. He unleashed the ball of plasma upon the Ranger's shields just as his own shields were almost emptied by the Elite. John then *spammed* the sensor, tapping it quickly and consecutively as smaller bolts of green assaulted the Ranger. Running out of time, John's helmet beeped as his shields emptied. He shot one more bolt from the plasma pistol, and finally, the Elite died. It spun, cartwheeling in slow-motion away from the station.

The plasma pistol's battery was almost finished. John tossed it away and grabbed the two plasma rifles that were floating suspended

above his head. He looked around and saw he was standing in the middle of space on an open metal floor. There were huge packing containers around him and a painted arrow on the floor that read *Shipping*. He ignored it, instead looking for the central tower of the space station. He spotted it. It was taller than the Cairo was wide.

He heard Cortana's voice over the comm.

"Boarders have breached the Firing Control Centre!" she exclaimed. "They have the bomb."

"Can you defuse it?" Lord Hood asked.

"Yes, but I need a way to make direct contact with the detonator."

John felt the ghost of an itch at the back of his scalp. The port at the rear of his helmet held an empty data chip inside.

"Chief, get to that bomb double time," Hood commanded. "Cortana, prioritise targets, and fire at will."

The world around John tilted slightly as narrow structures along the sides of the central tower slid upwards before rushing back down at super speed. An explosion ignited at the peak of the tower as the giant barrel fired a missile into the sea of Covenant ships above. The central tower was Cairo Station's enormous MAC cannon. Somewhere inside it was the Firing Control Centre in which the bomb was being armed this very minute.

John ran across the metal plating. His magnetic boots automatically clicked and unclicked, allowing him to travel across the surface without floating away. He passed the exteriors of several boarding craft that were gripping onto different sections of the Cairo.

With each step, he drew nearer to the MAC tower until he was right at the foot of the titanic weapon. Truthfully, everything around the tower was insignificant, dwarfed by it, built solely to support the MAC. Cairo Station was in actuality one giant gun.

The ground shook like an earthquake as the framing around the MAC tower pulled down, unleashing another round into the Covenant fleet. Thrusters on the underside of the orbital defence platform countered the recoil, holding the space station in place.

Admiral Harper spoke over the comm from his cruiser.

“The carriers are breaking through! They're heading straight for the Cairo!”

“Cortana, concentrate your fire on the first carrier,” Hood replied. “Admiral, do what you can against the second.”

“Everyone, form up,” Harper directed. “Follow my lead.”

The ground suddenly shook again, but this time it was different. It felt wrong. A gargantuan Covenant carrier filled the Chief's view through

his visor. It flew right past Cairo Station, straight down into the depths below. The force from the carrier's engines, as close as they were, sent a shock through the station like a tidal wave. John braced himself before pushing forwards. He needed to get inside that MAC. He saw a door on the exterior of the tower.

"The first carrier completely ignored us," Cortana informed them. "It blew right through the Malta's debris field and headed straight for Earth!"

John timed the movement of the MAC. He watched the large hammer on the side rise slowly. As soon as it reached halfway up the long barrel, he sprinted across. In seconds, it snapped back down behind him. Had he stopped below it, John would have been flattened, armour and all. The door ahead of the Chief opened, and he stepped right through into the giant gun itself. The air pressurised before the elevator inside dropped John down into the core of Cairo Station.

"Just so you know," Cortana told John. "There are quite a few Elites guarding the bomb. You may need to get creative."

The elevator stopped, and the door behind the Chief reopened into the Firing Control Centre. In the middle of the room was a girthy column with yellow and black supports. To John's left was a heavy machine delivering MAC

slugs directly into the column, and in front of the Spartan, on the other side of the room sat the bomb. The Covenant *Antimatter Charge* was a purple, oblong-shaped bomb covered in spikes. It looked solid and about as heavy as a truck. A tiny, round interface glowed at the top of it. There were no Grunts in the room. Instead, five Elites stood around the bomb: two Minors in blue, two Majors in red and one Elite Ultra in white armour.

The light at the top of the bomb started flashing. It was about to detonate. John took the spherical plasma grenade from his MJOLNIR and tapped the yellow glyph to activate it. The metal ball grew alight with flaming energy before the Chief launched it directly into one of the Elite Majors. The peculiar energy of the plasma grenade caused it to stick to the Elite's armour. It exploded as the Chief sprinted into the chaos, firing his dual plasma rifles at the Elite Ultra.

The first Elite Major died, obliterated by the grenade, and the shields of those around it sparkled due to damage. The Elite Ultra took cover behind the Antimatter Charge. The remaining Elite Major, which had been close to the explosion, was still recovering. John dropped his plasma rifles and slapped the Major's weapon from its hand, catching it before it fell.

The three other Elites fired their plasma rifles as John dived behind the MAC machinery on his

left. His newly acquired weapon was similar in appearance to the plasma rifle but with fourteen long, sharp, pink crystalline shards sticking out of the top. It was a *needler*.

John jumped back into the action, firing the needler at the group. The glowing pink *needles* curved in the air, seeking out their targets. He managed to embed one of the Elite Minors with seven shards. The needles ignited, and the alien blew apart in a cloud of pink and blue.

The Elite Major now ran at the Chief. John twisted his wrist and slammed the top of the needler into the creature's face. The weapon's seven remaining needles cut right through the Elite's leftover shields, piercing its face directly. It fell as John punched it in the gut with his left fist. The other Minor ran straight over to the Spartan, roaring as loudly as it could.

“Aaaaagh-wobaduh!”

John unleashed the remaining seven needles into its flesh. It met the same fate as its brother. Finally, there was the Ultra to deal with.

The Elite Ultra had started fiddling with the top of the bomb. The interface began to flash faster and was now beeping urgently. John dropped the needler and fired his battle rifle into the Elite Ultra. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* The Ultra charged at him. Its shields were stronger than its comrades' had been. As it tore towards the Chief, the white Ultra reached for a small bar

attached to its combat harness at the side of its upper thigh. It was the hilt of an *energy sword*. If death herself could be wielded in one hand, she took the form of an energy sword.

The Elite held the bar horizontally in its closed alien fist. Blue light glowed from each end before it ignited. Its bright blazing energy formed two crescents on either side of the Elite's hand, extending forwards into mirrored prongs over a metre in length.

The Ultra leapt, slicing its energy blades through the air. The sword was long enough that the Elite could keep its distance from the Spartan and still swipe at him. John dodged the attack by ducking down, bringing his knees to his chest and then pushing himself to the right.

The Elite raised its sword high above and swung downwards. John rolled over, feeling the heat of the blade as it barely missed him. An orange streak glowed from the metal floor, singed by the flaring gasses around the blades. John was still on the floor as the Elite pulled its sword back, preparing to strike again. The Spartan rocked backwards on the ground and launched his titanium-alloy-clad legs upwards. His boots made contact with the alien, causing the Sangheili to let the sword slip from its hand as its entire body flew backwards. John jumped up, caught the sword by its handle and lunged at

the creature with it. The Elite Ultra gurgled as it was stabbed through the chest by its own blades.

Cortana's form flickered over a nearby pedestal John hadn't previously noticed.

"Me. Inside your head. Now!" she demanded.

John touched his palm to the pedestal, allowing Cortana into his armour. Her sentience coursed through the battlesuit up to the helmet where she could access its systems. The Chief then ran over and touched the interface at the top of the bomb. The flashing and beeping ceased.

"How much time was left?" John asked.

"You don't want to know," Cortana replied.

Miranda Keyes' voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Cairo, this is In Amber Clad. The carrier's shield is down. I'm in position and ready for immediate assault."

"Negative, Commander," Lord Hood replied.

"Not against a ship that size. Not on your own."

John used his suit's interface to open his comm.

"Sir," John spoke. "Permission to leave the station?"

"For what purpose, Master Chief?" Hood asked.

John paused before answering.

"To give the Covenant back their bomb."

"Permission granted."

John walked around to one of the ends of the Covenant bomb and grabbed onto the two nearest spikes.

“I know what you’re thinking,” came Cortana’s voice from within John’s helmet. “And it’s crazy.”

“So,” John answered. “Stay here.”

John pulled at the bomb. Using his Spartan strength, he leant away and began stepping backwards towards the door he’d entered from. The metal of the Antimatter Charge against the plating of the floor emitted a piercing grating sound as sparks jumped from between the grinding surfaces.

“Unfortunately for us both,” Cortana continued. “I *like* crazy.”

“Where’s the closest launch bay?” John asked.

“Habitat Delta,” she replied. “But Gamma has no Covenant.”

The Chief stepped into the elevator backwards, dragging the bomb after him. The door slammed shut, and the lift sped up the elevator shaft. A squad of marines stared open-mouthed at the Spartan as he exited the lift and ground the bomb down a hallway towards Hangar C-01. He felt the entire space station turning around as Cortana’s subroutines responded to her commands. The glass doors of the hangar revealed more of the same fight the Chief had seen earlier. Longswords, Seraphs,

frigates and cruisers all zoomed about like an agitated insect swarm. John dragged the bomb over to the pillar that connected the walkway to the ground. He slammed a button on the pillar, causing a hatch to fall open and present a lever.

“Just one question,” Cortana began. “What if you miss?”

“I won’t.”

John pulled the lever. The metal framing of the glass doors began to slide apart, pulling them open. The gap that now formed between the sliding doors was sucking all air and every object, crates and barricades out into the vacuum of space. Even the much heavier Antimatter Charge began to slowly grind towards the opening.

John waited as the doors continued to open. The bomb sped faster along the ground. He grabbed onto its spikes and flew out of the bay with the bomb, holding on tightly. He’d been shot into space in the exact direction he’d planned.

The first Covenant carrier to break through was directly between the Chief and Earth. The bomb zoomed down towards it with the Spartan clinging to its spikes. The carrier flew further away just as a second one came into view. A beam of light shot up from the second. Its plasma narrowly missed John but hit its target just above him, Admiral Harper’s cruiser, which

had been flying in to stop the carrier. The cruiser went dark. Its engines failed.

The Master Chief continued plummeting on the back of the bomb as two Longsword fighters swept by towards the second carrier. The fighters launched missiles at a part of the ship directly in line with John's travel path. The projectiles hit the ship hard, opening a hole as the Longswords swerved away. The hole was just big enough for the Chief and his bomb to slip through as he got closer. Despite not being able to manoeuvre in space without any thrusters, John managed to thread through the hole, passing through the first layer of the ship's casing.

Still technically on the exterior of the carrier, John and his bomb floated above a bright Covenant fusion core. The light from the fusion core shone immensely, reflecting blindingly over the purple metal of the spiked bomb. John glided over the bomb with grace as if submerged in water. He touched the interface. Cortana, from within John's armour, set the bomb's activation sequence, causing it to begin flashing and beeping, this time faster than ever. Using the spikes on the bomb, John clawed his way into position and pushed himself off as hard as he could. The Spartan shot himself back out of the hole as the bomb smashed into the core.

John already thought the fusion core was bright, but it was nothing compared to the flash that came with the tremendous explosion when the Antimatter Charge ignited. He was far away now, but even then, the force from the explosion propelled him like a bullet from the carrier. He tilted his head downwards to see the destruction behind him. The carrier was blown apart into more pieces than the Malta and Athens combined.

The UNSC In Amber Clad rose from below to catch the Spartan. Commander Miranda Keyes and Sergeant Major Johnson sat in the bridge of the frigate. Upon hearing the thud of the Master Chief landing on the outside of the ship, Johnson smiled and turned to the Commander.

“For a brick, he flew pretty good.”

Miranda spoke over the comm.

“Chief, get inside. Gear up. We’re taking this fight to the surface.”

The first Covenant carrier had escaped somewhere below. John and Cortana entered the frigate as it dived hard in pursuit, straight to Earth.

Outskirts

John stood in his stiff, green armour with his right arm held high. His black-gloved hand grasped tightly onto the mesh beneath the ceiling of a Pelican dropship's troop compartment. This dropship carried both the Master Chief and Sergeant Major while another two flew to the right. All three Pelicans were part of Sergeant Johnson's platoon.

The troop compartment opened out to the sky at the rear of the Pelican and contained three other marines cocking their rifles, ready for action. John's battle rifle sat fixed over his shoulder with a submachine gun at his side and two frag grenades on his opposite waist. The sun shone brightly in the otherwise blue sky but barely managed to penetrate the thick clouds above the city below.

The Chief gazed down at the air-polluted city. Tall skyscrapers peeked out from the grey smog which turned crimson around the city centre. The city itself was split into two regions consisting of Old Mombasa and its younger, more modern sibling, New Mombasa. Old Mombasa was Kenya's oldest known city, traditional and appreciated, but New Mombasa was Kenya's prize. New Mombasa stood off the coast of Kenya on a manmade island connected to the mainland via several long causeways. At

the centre of the island ran an endless vertical tube from the ground to the sky. This *space elevator* connected New Mombasa's spaceport to a popular docking station in high orbit above the planet.

The Pelicans passed down through the pollution and into the city of Old Mombasa. It was cramped with numerous high-rise buildings and tight, multilayered roads in between. Many other Pelicans and military vehicles could be seen not too far off. John observed a procession of UNSC Warthogs coasting along the highway below. Everyone was heading in the same direction, towards the giant shadow of the Covenant assault carrier that loomed over New Mombasa.

The Chief took one last glance at the silhouette of the In Amber Clad behind the clouds as the Pelicans sank closer to their target. Still present inside John's helmet, Cortana broadcasted a transmission across the platoon's comm channel.

"The message just repeats, '*Regret. Regret. Regret.*'" Cortana explained, translating from the Covenant battle network.

"Catchy," replied Commander Keyes. "Any idea what it means?"

"Dear humanity," Johnson interjected. "We - *regret* being alien bastards. We *regret* coming to

Earth, and we most definitely regret the Corps just blew up our raggedy-ass fleet!”

“Oorah!” came the voices of the Pelican’s two pilots.

“Regret is a name, Sergeant,” Cortana explained. “It’s the name of one of the Covenant’s religious leaders, a Prophet. He’s on that carrier, and he’s calling for help.”

The Pelicans continued their flight, passing two marines upon the rooftops: a sniper and his spotter. The spotter spoke over the comm.

“Immediate,” he alerted. “Grid kilo-two-three is hot. Recommend mission abort.”

“Roger, recon,” replied the Pelican’s main pilot. “Sarge, it’s your call.”

“We’re going in,” Johnson answered. “Get tactical, marines!”

“Master Chief,” called Lord Hood, taking his turn on the comm. “Get aboard that carrier and secure the Prophet of Regret. This is the only place on Earth the Covenant have decided to land. That Prophet is going to tell us why.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Pelican zoomed ahead over the highway, passing another caravan of Warthogs. The main pilot spoke again.

“Thirty seconds out. Stand by to... Whoa!”

The Master Chief twisted, looking back through the door that connected the troop compartment to the cockpit. Through the front

windscreen, John saw the exact reason for the pilot's exclamation. A Type-47A Scarab, an enormous four-legged Covenant transport stepped out from between two buildings. Its wide mass knocked several chunks of concrete and glass from the buildings between which it emerged. Its mechanical legs turned the purple walking fortress to its right, facing a massive green eye at all three Pelicans.

Scarabs were a type of mining platform designed by the Covenant to excavate through hard earth. It just so happened that the firepower needed to blast through solid rock at a rate that suited the Covenant's wishes also allowed the Scarab's mining beam to double as a heavy assault weapon.

Several curved panels opened out around the head of the Scarab as its eye glowed fiercely. *KKKEEWWW!!!* A green jet of light as wide as a truck beamed from the eye straight through one of the neighbouring Pelicans.

John braced himself as his Pelican's pilot swung the entire dropship to the left to avoid the next shot from the Scarab's eye, but the Scarab had two extra armaments, two spherical-shaped cannons called *heavy plasma repeaters*. There was one at the front and one at the back of the apartment-sized, nanolaminate basket that formed the body of this mechanical beast. The front plasma repeater unleashed a torrent of

superfast purple plasma bolts that were impossible for the Pelican to avoid. The cockpit flashed violet as the Pelican collided with the roof of a low building. Even with the protection of his energy shields, John felt the immediate impact as they crashed. The world went black.

Moments later, John awoke to a synthetic tapping within his helmet, a sound produced by his AI companion. His head ached, and his vision wilted. He found himself sitting on the ground amongst the rubble of the collapsed ceiling beside a line of rusty barrels. His back was propped against the upturned Pelican behind him. It was a wreck.

“Talk to me,” Cortana said. “Should I start CPR? What’s going on?”

John’s vision cleared and his head soothed as he stood up. His shields recharged before he’d even regained consciousness. His armour was barely scratched. It would take more than that to kill a Spartan.

“I’m fine. What’s our status?” asked John as he scanned his surroundings.

“We lost both our pilots,” Cortana replied. “We’re on the edges of Old Mombasa. The civilians have long since evacuated. We’re well enough alone.”

“And the Covenant?” John asked.

“*Well enough,*” Cortana answered.

John thought for a moment. If the city was already deserted, that would serve him well. Having to deal with civilians would only make John's mission more difficult. Of course, if the entire city had been evacuated then the Covenant threat was immediate, as supported abundantly by the presence of a Scarab.

The walls around John were filthy, whether because of the Pelican's crash or due to the government long since directing their focus on *New Mombasa*, forgetting the old city and leaving this section to the slums. The shattered ceiling opened the walls of this room up to the sky. If John and his companions didn't leave soon, the Covenant would surely spot them.

The Master Chief was accompanied by four marines. Johnson sported the same green combat uniform worn by the others but with a flat-topped sergeant's cap. The Chief's heads-up-display, which had never wavered during the crash, labelled the other three marines as Private Collins, Private Ouma and Corporal Lim. Lim's dust-covered face had a harsh look about it with dark crows-feet wrinkles around his eyes. He carried an SMG. Ouma looked the opposite with a wide-eyed expression and twitchy body movements. He also equipped a submachine gun.

Unlike his squad-mates, Private Collins' younger, rounder face didn't seem all too phased

by the crash nor by the fact that the Covenant were likely swarming the city that surrounded them. He held a battle rifle and was already approaching the archway ahead.

“Alright, marines,” Johnson barked. “Clear the crash site. Go, go, go!”

The archway opened into an exterior hallway. Directly in front of the Chief was an elevator door opposite the archway. There was a large gap in the ceiling that flooded this section of the hallway with natural light. The ground sloped downwards on the left until it opened into the streets. A lone snuffling Grunt, curious enough to get lost in the human city had wandered into the hallway. It was just out of sight of the streets below. Collins fired his battle rifle, silencing the creature as quickly as it had come. Cyan splashed from its stiff, stout neck across the hallway walls.

“Man! Good thing it was alone,” Collins exclaimed.

“Alone?” Corporal Lim repeated. “I was told I’d be working with the best. They said you had good eyes, Collins. Where’s the rest of your head?”

John knew what Lim was implying. A single Grunt did not simply exist alone on the battlefield.

“That Grunt was part of a squad,” said the Chief. “We’d be more than lucky if they didn’t hear that gunfire.”

John and the marines needed to pass through the city unnoticed if they were to make it anywhere near the Prophet of Regret's carrier. Presumably, the Covenant littered the streets. Exiting into the open was a risk John could not afford. He looked upwards at the gap in the ceiling. Just below it were two LED lights sticking out from the walls on either side. One sat above the archway and the other above the elevator door. Looking at the closest light, John figured he could easily use it to clamber over the gap onto the roof above. The light's metal cover appeared strong enough to briefly hold a Spartan, but only a Spartan could jump high enough to reach it.

"Cortana," John started. "Just how close are these buildings?"

"What are you thinking, Chief?" Sergeant Johnson asked.

"Those barrels near the Pelican," John pointed. "We can use them to climb into the opening above. If there's a pathway over the rooftops, we can take it to a landing zone unnoticed."

"These outskirts *are* clustered," Cortana informed them. "Most of the rooftops join one way or another. I should be able to find a suitable path once we're up there, but we'll need to locate any survivors from the second downed Pelican."

“Affirmative,” Sergeant Johnson agreed before barking at the squad. “You heard the lady. Let’s build us a staircase, and try not to make any more noise. This ain’t an open party.”

John and the marines worked together to roll the barrels into a stable stack below the lights. One by one, they hopped up and out into the open sky. Once up there, John looked down at the streets below. The group was above a tight zone consisting of a few narrow roads, a courtyard and a small building with a glass roof that reflected the sun up at them. Based on the shape and size of the glass-roofed building, John guessed it to be a greenhouse if not simply a more enclosed area of the courtyard. Glints of orange and red flashed beneath the glass. Covenant were there.

“Let’s move,” said the Chief.

They guided themselves through a path around the rooftops designated by Cortana, crawling through dark spaces, climbing over high walls and balancing across long, rusted metal beams to cross from building to building. The further they went, the higher they got. The courtyard below gradually shrank but was not out of sight yet. Cortana activated the MJOLNIR’s comm.

“Second Squad, this is Cortana. What’s your status? Over.”

There was a brief pause before they heard a reply from the Second Squad leader.

“We’re operational, ma’am,” he replied. “Barely. Our pilots didn’t make it. We’re pinned down at the beach.”

“Find a hole,” Cortana instructed. “Stay put, and we’ll come to you.”

The Chief helped boost the marines one at a time over a particularly high wall before jumping over. They were halfway between the ground and Old Mombasa’s upper skyline. From here, John could see the crimson clouds of New Mombasa’s city centre through gaps between buildings. He identified the seemingly eternal space elevator supported by countless rings segmenting up the tube’s lower half.

John watched as loose rubble from beneath their feet slid down the steep ridge they currently traversed. Roof tiles and concrete chunks disappeared into the depths below. There was a sudden scratch followed by a heavy scraping as John turned to find Private Ouma sliding past him. The metal of the marine’s armour ground against the rooftop as he slid. Using his Spartan reflexes, John reached out and caught Ouma who now hung off the edge, throwing his legs about as if running wildly in the air. Ouma’s eyes were even wider now than before as John pulled him back onto the ridge.

“You’re jumpy, marine,” said Johnson. “Got anything you need to say?”

“Sarge,” Collins called. “Look.”

He pointed down at the distant courtyard. The Covenant had spilled out from the glass-roofed building. Their colours now flooded the area around it. John used his MJOLNIR’s interface to magnify the scene in front of him. His visor zoomed in at the dots below. He made out several Grunts in red and orange as well as a couple of Elites and two pairings of reptilian Jackals.

Somewhat of a cross between vultures and lizards, the humanoid *Jackals* didn’t appear overly threatening from a distance. Their legs were bent. Their bodies were narrow, and their large, lidless, oval eyes made them a ridiculous sight, but no one would wish to meet a Jackal up close. Though smaller than the Elites, they were still tall and threatening. Their hands were like talons, almost as sharp as the row of teeth along their aggressively pointed jaws. The mohawked plumage on their elbows and head flared like trails of fire, and the pupils in their slanted eyes were no more than cruel slits.

As Jackal *Scouts*, these ones were equipped with energy shield gauntlets. Circular, semi-transparent shields emerged from the Jackals’ wrists, not unlike the stationary shields seen on Cairo Station. They were large enough to protect

the Jackal's entire body but with two cut-outs in the sides that allowed both left-handed and right-handed Jackals to shoot their plasma pistols without obstruction.

One of the Jackals tilted its head sideways in a bird-like motion. Its pink eye glared directly up at the Master Chief and the marines.

"Quick! Into the shadows!" Cortana yelled.

The entire team ducked below a lip in the side of the building.

"Did it see us?" Ouma asked.

"Hard to tell," Cortana replied. "It's best we keep moving. I'll alter our path. It might be a tight squeeze, but it should keep us hidden at least for a while. Master Chief, follow the *narrowpoint*."

A blue arrow appeared as part of John's heads-up-display, pointing him towards a dark gap between the architecture. He led the way, rubbing his heavy armour against the concrete walls as they navigated the trench, losing sight of the courtyard.

It was quiet on the other side. Smoke puffed from two industrial chimneys, reminding John that the evacuation of the city had been abrupt. He contemplated the situation. *Why have the Covenant flooded the streets of Mombasa and neglected the rest of the planet?* He remembered Lord Hood's words on Cairo Station. *The fleet that destroyed Reach was fifty times this size.* Why had so few

Covenant been sent to glass Earth? It was uncharacteristic. If the Covenant succeeded here, it would mean the end of the human race. It made no sense for them to arrive in such low numbers. John knew he'd have to find this *Prophet* to uncover the answers he sought.

“Cortana?” John asked.

“Yes?”

“Regret,” he began. “This Prophet... We were meant to capture one during Red Flag.”

“Funny how things work out,” she reflected.

Her amused tone suggested the thought had occurred to her way before the Master Chief made the connection. *Red Flag* had been a military operation coordinated by Doctor Halsey and other high-ups within ONI and the UNSC. It was the reason for the upgrades to the Pillar of Autumn and its strict crew of only the most highly trained and skilled personnel, many of which had been hand-picked by Halsey herself. The mission had been to leave the planet Reach, infiltrate a Covenant fleet, have the Spartans storm a Covenant flagship, use Cortana to hack into their database, capture a Covenant Prophet and learn the location of the Covenant home base. Had the operation been a success, the UNSC would have exerted all efforts into a final assault, potentially ending the war before the Covenant could find the last of the human colonies. Unfortunately, the fall of Reach had

prevented any attempt at initiating Operation Red Flag, but John's training for the operation could yet prove useful.

The squad continued to traverse the heights of the concrete jungle when the Chief heard a sudden loud static in his helmet. *No*, he realised. *Not static. Fluttering.* John looked over at a glass building to his left. Its windows reflected exactly what he dreaded. A swarm of man-sized insectoids rose from the depths. Before they knew it, the entire squad was surrounded by repulsive Covenant Drones.

In appearance, the Drones were giant flying cockroaches with tiny glowing devices strapped to their backs. These devices allowed the roaches to buzz about in a range of gravitational environments. Each Drone carried a plasma pistol, flittering from one position to next. They were quick and agile like mosquitoes searching for blood.

“FIRE!” Corporal Lim screamed.

The squad found themselves running around like a pack of Grunts, dispersed and senseless. Ouma and Lim fired their SMGs. Both Collins and the Master Chief shot their battle rifles, aiming for the bugs' heads. Johnson had his sniper rifle strapped to his back. It would have been impossible to aim such a weapon quickly enough to hit a single Drone. Instead, Johnson fired his magnum.

The Drones were intelligent creatures, but they were simple, one-dimensional. They had no sense of fear and would not stop until they'd either killed every one of their targets or died trying. Fortunately, this made them predictable.

The marines were an absurd sight, scrambling about the terrace, but if they were to survive a swarm of Drones, this was the way to go. Stopping for a second could mean instant death.

“If they didn't know we were here before,” Johnson puffed. “They do now!”

Like Grunts, the Drones were not very accurate with their plasma pistols against moving targets. John was able to shoot them down one by one, reminding him of the simulated shooting galleries he used to play at bootcamp. Sticky brown juices rained upon the group as the insectoid's heads and limbs were blown apart by their bullets. In their heavy combat armour, the marines started to tire, wearing out and slowing down. Their faces glistened with sweat. Their panting grew loud and uneven. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* They needed to kill these Drones quickly, or they'd die a purposeless death here upon the rooftops.

After what felt like hours of strenuous dodging and firing, mere minutes in actuality, the Drones were all dead. The only sound that remained was the heavy breathing of the marines and echoes of gunfire from distant battles.

Johnson walked over to the splattered corpse of a Drone that had landed on the terrace. Yellow ooze seeped from its blattid body.

“I never wanted to kill you,” Johnson spoke to the insect parts. “You were just too ugly to let live!”

“Fuck,” Ouma sighed, still catching his breath.

“You good, Ouma?” Johnson asked.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“You’re not injured, marine. How’s your head?”

Ouma hesitated before replying.

“My... my family is in Voi,” he explained.

“It’s a city not far from here. I’m just-”

TSSEEW!

Ouma was silenced. A straight, horizontal, purple streak of lighting flashed through his head, splitting his skull apart. The lifeless body of Private Ouma fell to its knees. Thick red blood poured from the mangled shape that had once been his head. Ouma’s worries about his family would never be heard.

“Sniper!” yelled Collins.

Everyone ducked for cover behind the nearest pieces of architecture they could find, short walls and other elevations in the concrete. The Chief was practically lying down to fit his massive, armoured frame behind some cover.

“Chief, where’d it come from?” Johnson whispered.

John peeked briefly over his cover, looking across into the shadows of the adjacent building from which the purple energy seemed to have been shot. He zoomed in using his visor, but this time, the *smart-link* of his MJOLNIR interface automatically calibrated with his battle rifle scope. He raised the BR just high enough over the wall to use it like a periscope. Sure enough, he spotted a Covenant sniper. The raptor-like Jackal Sniper wore no shield. It stood motionless, a wingless gargoyle. Its long beam rifle pointed directly at the Chief.

John could try to peek further from his cover and land an instant kill through the creature’s head, but the problem was that a Type-50 Particle Beam Rifle, the exact weapon the Jackal wielded, could strip a Spartan’s shields clean in one shot. Even a super-soldier could not survive a second hit from such a weapon. Jackals were no Grunts or Drones. Their accuracy was lethal. Elites were bigger and stronger, but Jackals could be just as intelligent and just as skilful, sometimes more so. Jackal Snipers in particular were well collected. The Chief would not be wise to risk exposure. If he did, there was a good chance he’d end up like the marine corpse that sat in its dark puddle a couple of metres away.

Rather than take out the sniper on his own, what John needed was to spot for Sergeant Johnson.

“Johnson-”

TSSEEW!

The Chief was hit below his shoulder by a light from his left. There was more than one Jackal Sniper. John’s shields managed to prevent damage to his body, but they were now fully depleted. The alarm in his helmet sounded. Crouching, John un-zoomed the BR, regaining his peripherals in order to search for his attacker. He scanned the windows above and then reactivated his smart-link, zooming in at his newfound target.

Johnson fired his sniper rifle over the Chief’s shoulder at Ouma’s killer while John fired his battle rifle at its friend. The Chief was able to see the Jackal due to a small purple glow at the point of the creature’s beam rifle, but this also meant the weapon was still aimed directly at him. John fired, but his BR was not accurate at such a distance. All three bullets from the BR’s burst missed the creature. He dived over to the side as another purple streak was fired towards him. It burned a small hole in the concrete he’d just been crouching over.

Collins leant out from his cover and started firing at John’s target. Together, the Spartan and marine fired several more shots until the creature was hit, causing it to fall into the

shadows behind. John looked over his shoulder as his shields recharged. Johnson had hit his mark too.

“We’d better get a move on,” Cortana stated as they all stood up. “Unless of course you *want* to be target practice.”

“What about Ouma?” Collins asked.

“There’s nothing we can do for him, son,” Johnson replied. “I’ll ask to have his family evacuated if they’re still in Voi, but that’s not our priority.”

Lim nodded down at the SMG in his arms.

“I’m almost out of ammo. Those *buggers* left me near dry.”

“I’ll see if I can get an ordnance drop,” Cortana replied. “But I wouldn’t hold my breath. We need to stay unseen.”

The group crept forwards, leaving Ouma’s body behind. They stayed in as many shadows and tight spaces as they could, careful not to make a sound. Eventually, they received a transmission.

“My girl’s a little big for those craggy rooftops,” came the voice of a female pilot. “I see a good LZ on the other side. I’ll meet you there. Over.”

A fresh navpoint appeared on John’s display. This time, Miranda Keyes spoke.

“Sergeant Major, I need you on that bird.”

“Ma’am?”

“My Pelicans are going to start airlifting armour and reinforcements into the city. They'll need an escort that isn't afraid of a little hostile ground fire.”

“Understood. I'll keep an eye on them,” replied Johnson. “Chief, you continue to the beach. Find Second Squad. I'll make my way to the LZ.”

Lim approached the Sergeant.

“Sir, that sniper rifle isn't going to do you any good down there.”

“Is that right, Lim?” Johnson asked, patting the lengthy rifle. “Huh! You've been eying this thing the moment we crashed.”

“He has a point,” joined the Master Chief's monotonous voice.

“Alright,” said Johnson, handing the Spartan his sniper rifle in exchange for John's SMG. “Here you go, Chief, but you better kick ass with this thing.”

They exchanged ammo before Johnson walked over to a fire escape that ran down the side of the building. The Chief handed his BR to Lim, again leaving him with a secondary submachine gun after they swapped.

“There's not a lot in this either,” said Lim, staring at the numerals on the battle rifle's counter.

“Quit your whining, Corporal,” said Johnson as he stepped onto the fire escape. “Don’t waste any shots and you’ll be fine.”

“Good luck, Sergeant,” Cortana bade.

John’s navpoint updated. He looked between the buildings at the distance beyond. Their destination wasn’t too far now. The navpoint arrow sat above a blocky building with decorative neon letters labelling it *HOTEL ZANZIBAR*. Behind that was a blue sea, and beyond the sea were the stretching skyscrapers of New Mombasa. The Chief looked up at the Covenant carrier resting in the clouds around the space elevator. Inside that capital ship was the Covenant religious leader who conducted the assault on Earth, and this Prophet of Regret was about to meet a Spartan.

A Day at the Beach

The Master Chief, Cortana, Corporal Lim and Private Collins had a rather uneventful journey over the rooftops after Johnson left. At one point, they were forced to drop down from the buildings and walk along a ruined highway, leaving them relatively open and naked to the skies. Despite the dangers they expected, no Covenant passed overhead or attacked from the surrounding structures. Even UNSC friendlies were unseen. It was quiet now, unnervingly quiet. The air was still. The sun had risen higher in the sky, and while the MJOLNIR maintained a suitable temperature for John, he couldn't help but feel a secondhand heat from the dripping soldiers walking beside him. Their uniforms looked heavy from the sweat-soaked fabric.

The squad managed to cool down once Cortana led them back into the crevices of the building tops followed by a series of alleyways. Before they knew it, they'd reached their destination. The white letters of *HOTEL ZANZIBAR* glimmered before them. It wasn't the most extravagant hotel with its bland, undecorated walls, but the tall palm trees planted around the front were a nice change of scenery from the dull roofs and dusty lanes they'd come from. The palms rose up into the sky, soaking in

the sun and breathing in the warm air. Their smaller siblings on Cairo Station could only dream of such a place.

Covenant infantry littered the abandoned road in front of the hotel, both dead and alive. Orange, red and blue armour covered the sandy ground. Several Grunts and a single Elite Ultra remained alive. The Ultra had its stationary plasma cannon pointed at the hotel entrance. Every door and window of the hotel lobby had been shattered. A team of marines took cover in the shadows of the foyer behind the front desk.

John and his squad remained close to the buildings they'd emerged from. The Covenant, all of which had their guns aimed at the hotel, never noticed the Chief's group. John looked to his marines and placed his index finger vertically over the lower half of his visor, signalling them not to make a sound. He then raised his palm, telling them to stop. *I'll handle this.*

He snuck forwards. As heavy as it was, John's MJOLNIR was designed to make even the slightest movements precise enough to remain unheard. He stayed low. The Elite Ultra that crouched over its plasma cannon was in the centre of the Covenant group. The best course of action was for John to take out the red and orange Grunts before the Elite could even notice him.

He approached the closest Grunt. Reaching forwards, John grabbed the pinnacle of the gas tank attached to Grunt's back and pulled down. As the creature fell backwards, John reached around with his other arm and smashed the Grunt right through its mouthpiece into its half-hidden face. The Grunt had no time to feel pain before it lost consciousness.

John repeated similar attacks on the other nearby Grunts as silently as possible before turning his interest to the unaware Elite Ultra. John reached over his shoulder and pulled the sniper rifle off his back. Relying on the heftiness of the long weapon, the Chief lifted it above the Elite and pummelled down. The butt of the rifle tore through the Elite's shields right into its hunched back, denting the thick armour. John hit the Elite again twice in the neck before it could react. It died gargling.

With the road cleared, John strode over to the hotel, passing a kiosk with a digital screen.

"*Optican!*" announced a mechanical voice from the kiosk. "Healthcare on demand!"

John looked back at it. Such kiosk dispensaries were scattered all over the continent, providing the residents of Africa with medical health kits. Much like vending machines, they were attached to walls around the city, requiring the payment of credits to dispense their product. However, this one mysteriously

began providing the Chief's squad with free *MediGel* packs. The *MediGel* wasn't quite as advanced as the military's biofoam canisters, and it was nowhere near an alternative to the automatic biofoam built into John's armour, but it would be enough to soothe the marines who appeared to be aching for a rest.

"Need immediate medical assistance?" chirped the kiosk. "Choose Optican! Fast, accurate diagnosis or your money back."

The four marines inside the hotel stepped out. They weren't wearing the regular combat uniform of the marines in John's squad. Instead, their armour was black. Their fatigues and plating alike shrouded them in the darkest of shades. Even their faces were concealed by reflective visors that mirrored the streets around them. John saw his own armoured figure standing in the shiny faceplate of the marine he assumed to be leader of their squad, judging by the red band around his upper arm. These were no ordinary marines. They were Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, ODSTs, nicknamed *belljumpers* due to their advanced training to drop into battle from low orbit via one-man insertion pods. They were the toughest of the marines, and before the Spartans came along, they were the best soldiers in the UNSC. In fact, John observed, they didn't look entirely dissimilar from the Chief himself in his full MJOLNIR.

“Master Chief, glad you could make it,” said the leader, Sergeant Abram. “When Cortana told us there was a Spartan on the way, I thought we’d be left out here.”

John wasn’t sure if there was an underlying implication beneath the ODST’s words. He’d have no reason to think there was except for the knowledge that many ODSTs were not fond of their larger, bio-augmented allies, and John was one of the few people who understood why. It wasn’t simply because the helljumpers’ reputation for being the best soldiers was stripped from them. The reason was a little darker than that. It was perhaps the only act John ever truly felt guilty about, but as his coach had confided, all that mattered were his duties to follow orders and to protect his team. Unfortunately, these two duties hadn’t aligned on Reach. John couldn’t always follow orders *and* protect his team. This was the very reason he’d been forced to face Halo alone. He’d had to leave Blue Team behind.

“The crash site’s on the other side of this hotel,” Abram continued. “Covenant are crawling all over it. Better follow me.”

The Master Chief and marines, ODSTs and non-ODSTs alike, moved into the hotel. The corridors past the foyer were pitch black save for a few flickering LEDs that occasionally

illuminated the painted walls and rose-coloured carpet.

“This way,” whispered Abram. “Stay out of sight.”

John considered activating the automatically rechargeable flashlight built into the side of his helmet. If the Covenant surprised him, he'd have a hard time fighting them in the dark, but turning on his flashlight was a sure way to attract unwanted attention. Instead, John switched on his visor's night vision. The night vision, intended for long-ranged encounters, was far less effective than the flashlight in this environment. It dimly lit everything before him a hue of green that only he could see. It would have to do for now.

“ROAAWR!”

Nearing a backdoor exit, the lighting in the hotel gradually and subtly began to brighten. Just as they thought they were almost out of the darkness, the marines were knocked back by a wave of Covenant. Elites and Grunts charged into the corridor. Images of the ugly aliens flashed closer each time the lights flickered, revealing the creatures only between the black.

“Grenade out,” John said casually but clearly, pulling the pin from one of his grenades and tossing it into the Covenant wave.

Covenant flesh and bits of hotel wall were blasted apart as the surviving aliens were gunned

down by the marines. Two Elites remained upright but only a while longer before they too fell into the corpse pile around them. It seemed this Covenant group hadn't expected the ODST team they'd followed to be returning through the hotel with double their numbers and a fully-fledged Spartan. Otherwise, John imagined the Elites would have attacked with a better-planned strategy. The marines had been lucky so far. The Covenant presence was not the threat they'd been expecting. It was almost as if killing humans was not the aliens' main objective.

A large section of Hotel Zanzibar's back wall was missing, uncovering its multiple smouldering storeys like a giant, freshly cut honeycomb. It seemed the ODSTs' Pelican had hit the building hard. The Chief was almost blinded as he stepped out into the sunlight through the hotel rear. A line of rings formed over his visor in response to the sun's flare as he looked up at the broken building he was exiting. He waited for the brightness to fade before he could appreciate the scene before him.

The group stood on a coastal road, weapons in hands, looking out at the ocean. The waves could be heard lapping at the wet sand upon the shore. Squawking seagulls circled overhead. Debris from the crashed Pelican marked the path it had taken as it ricocheted off the hotel wall before sliding along the dry beach sand. A

lookout to the right had several roundish Covenant supply crates and live communication nodes on top. They'd been placed by the aliens that now lay dead in the hotel. In the distance, over the sea, the main island of New Mombasa waited for them.

Immediately in front of the squad, sitting on the road ready for use was an old acquaintance of John's. Over the course of the war, and especially on Halo, the Master Chief had become very accustomed to travelling in this thing, not this exact vehicle, but many of the same model. The M12 Force Application Vehicle or *Warthog* was the embodiment of power. The avocado-green, four-wheeled hulk of a vehicle stood almost two and a half metres tall, over three metres wide and six metres long. The hood, rear tray, sides and roll-cage all blended seamlessly to form one highly durable body. Even the oversized tyres were nearly indestructible. A thick windshield curved forwards at the front of the frame. Two seats sat behind it, and a rotary machine gun turret stood high at the back. The Warthog's reputation as an all-terrain military jeep had proven itself to the Master Chief as he'd driven over grassy valleys, through snowy chasms and, most relevant to this situation, across sandy beaches.

“Special delivery from Commander Keyes,” informed Abram.

“We’ll need it,” replied Corporal Lim, looking up at the clouds. “Looks like the Covenant have noticed one of their hordes has gone missing.”

A large Covenant dropship, roughly the size of a Pelican, was drawing in from the direction of the Covenant carrier. The silhouette of the *Phantom* grew clearer as it got closer. As with almost all Covenant designs, it was sleek and aggressively curved. Its shape was not unlike a water beetle, dangling from an invisible string. Its top was covered in magenta plating while its bottom was a less appealing grey with glowing lights from its twin engines. Instead of legs, the Phantom had three sharp arms twisting and bending underneath to face its Type-27 Shade turrets at the humans.

John and the marines who’d been refilling their weapons now scrambled behind cover. The ODSTs moved behind large chunks of the hotel wall, while John, Lim and Collins dived behind the Warthog.

The Phantom now hovered above the lookout. A white light beamed to the ground below the alien dropship as a circular hatch opened from its underside. The Shade turrets fired long, dense plasma bolts. Red energy splashed around the Warthog and the surrounding hotel debris. Grunts dropped down in single file from the gravity beam of the Phantom followed by two Elites. John still had a

grenade. Now would have been a great time to toss it if the Shades didn't have him pinned down. He had a smarter idea.

“Stay where you are!” John yelled at both groups of marines before whispering to the soldiers by his side. “We need them to come to us.”

Phantoms didn't generally get too close to the battlefield. Like the UNSC's Pelicans, the Phantoms' role was to fly in, drop off troops or cargo and fly away as quickly as possible. This one was hovering around longer than most. It kept firing its red plasma around the humans, keeping them immobilised while its infantry approached. John could hear the smug Grunts muttering beneath their masks.

“Ugly humans try hiding from us?” one of them scoffed.

“They more stupid than you look,” replied another.

“Quiet,” came the deeper growl of the Elite Major as John heard its cleft hooves stepping closer.

He gripped his SMG tightly as the Covenant approached. The frequency of the Shades' bolts dropped slightly. The Covenant wouldn't risk killing their own kind, at least not when they were trying to kill a demon.

“Ah-hah!”

A Grunt Minor jumped out near the front headlights of the Warthog. Lim and Collins opened fire. John held his fire, saving it for another red dot he could see on his motion tracker. He faced the back of the Warthog. The blue flash of an Elite Minor emerged from behind the vehicle, but it did not stop at the Chief. Instead, it sprinted right past the Spartan towards the ODSs.

The Shade bolts had now decreased enough that they were no more than a minor inconvenience. The helljumpers stepped in and out from behind their cover, firing both at the Elite Minor that charged at them and the Grunts surrounding the Warthog. John heard Sergeant Abram grunt something to his team before they all turned their attention to the Elite. John fired his submachine gun at the same Elite to ensure its shields depleted before it reached the ODSs, but the speed of the Sangheili was not to be underestimated.

“Come get some!” yelled one of the helljumpers.

“Die!” screamed another.

John kept his eyes on both the yellow and red dots of his motion tracker, attempting to monitor the entire firefight. He was forced to stop firing at the Elite Minor in order to catch the Elite Major that was now jumping on him from directly above. It had climbed onto the

middle bar of the Warthog's roll-cage and leapt onto the Spartan, knocking him to the ground. Kneeling over the Chief, the Elite tried to fire its plasma rifle but wasn't quick enough. John slapped the rifle into a nearby Grunt before the rest of the Elite's heavy body slammed down into him. John and the Elite grappled momentarily, but the Chief came out on top. He pinned the Elite down and slammed his fist into its exposed neck. It died silently.

John looked back at the ODS'Ts. None of the marines were dead, but it seemed the remaining Grunts who had not yet been killed by Collins or Lim were now assisting the blue-armoured Elite Minor. Lim and Collins leant against the side of the jeep, reloading their rifles and preparing to unload another magazine into the Grunts.

One ODS'T had been knocked to the ground. The second, Abram, was shouting swear words while reloading his gun. The third was currently held up by his throat, pinned against a concrete chunk from the hotel wall and squished against it by the Elite Minor. John closed the distance between the Warthog and the hotel, steering himself left and right to dodge the Phantom's plasma bolts before using his elbow to melee the Elite in the back. The helljumper slid to the ground with a throaty inhale.

Naturally, the Grunts panicked and dispersed after the quick deaths of their Elite commanders.

“No! No!” one Grunt cried. “Don’t pick on me!”

The marines finished them off with little effort.

“Is everyone alright?” John asked.

The ODST who’d been temporarily strangled nodded as he regained his breath, sliding back up. The other fallen helljumper also rose from the ground. John looked around. He saw no red blood amongst the cyan and indigo nor any broken bones, just a few marines stretching their arms and cracking their necks.

“We’re all good, Chief,” Abram said while nodding at the sea. “I trust you packed your swimsuit.”

The Phantom flew off in the direction it had come, unleashing a few stray bolts that landed nowhere near the group. Cortana’s voice returned on-comm.

“The highest concentration of Covenant troops is directly below the carrier,” she informed them. “I don’t think they want you to get onboard.”

John needed to get to New Mombasa, but he wouldn’t be swimming any time soon. The best he could do in his heavy vacuum-sealed MJOLNIR would be to tread slowly over the sand under the water of the deep sea. Doing that,

he'd probably make it across to New Mombasa in about a day. John's eyes followed the opposite shoreline where he saw a long bridge connecting to the mainland on his left. It was still a long way away, but it was his best shot at getting to the Covenant carrier before the Prophet could commit whatever crime it had planned.

"That bridge is the most direct route to the city centre," Cortana confirmed. "Saddle up, marines. That's where we're headed. Drop Troopers, you with us?"

"Sorry, Cortana," Abram answered. "We've just been called back to the *Say My Name*. We'll have a Pelican picking us up any minute now. We'll have to show you *Spartan* how it's done another time... if there is another time."

John, Lim and Collins restocked from what was left on the ground before stepping up into the Warthog. The Chief looked right at home in the bulky jeep, as if the two were made for each other. John sat in the driver's seat while Lim jumped onto the round metal plate that held the machine gun turret. Collins climbed into the passenger seat, balancing upon the back of the chair, his feet resting on the seat and his rifle pointing over the windscreen. The skill of balancing in this manner, one that many marines had learnt over the years, became quite challenging when the Warthog rumbled across its various bumpy terrains, but this was the most

offensive position to be in when up against Covenant forces.

John didn't need to look over the buttons and displays of the Warthog's dashboard to start the hydrogen-injected ICE engine. Operating this vehicle was pure instinct for the Spartan who'd now been driving these for two thirds of his life. He turned it on, gripped the steering wheel and revved forwards. The ODS'Ts shrank in the distance as John raced off down the broken road, landing the Warthog upon the beach.

"Didn't know we were off-roading it today," remarked Collins.

"When we're in a Warthog," began Lim. "We're always off-roading it."

The three-tonne vehicle had no trouble barrelling over the small, rippled sand dunes. Waves splashed onto the shore, spraying over the right side of the jeep and sprinkling the marines with cool saltwater. John drove up the concrete ramp of an ocean groyne without slowing down. In response, the Warthog sailed through the air, ignoring all laws of physics. Sand splashed over them as the vehicle landed on a new beach. The Warthog rumbled loudly before continuing forwards. Collins yelled over the engines.

"At least we're having fun!"

Lim didn't have a response.

A tall Covenant Weevil sat at the centre of the beach, and behind the towering anti-air gun was a Covenant sniper platform. The deep purple designs looked very much out of place in such a human environment, especially over the cream-coloured sand. A small circular vent opened on the underside of the Weevil. John knew they could attack the vent to take out the giant weapon, but there were likely plenty of these across the city, and they simply did not have the time for such endeavours.

The UNSC's aerial presence seemed minimal here anyway, and the Weevil's range was not as threatening as other such Covenant models. Had it been a *Mantis*, for example, John would have stopped there and then to do what he could to destroy it. Otherwise, no aircraft would have made it to the island. Again, this got John wondering, why had the Covenant attacked with such little force compared with their previous planetary assaults?

Blue and green plasma bursts flew past the Warthog as Elites and Grunts shot from a space beneath the Weevil. A loud cracking sound discharged from the sand beside the Warthog with a flash of purple light. The Jackal Sniper in its sniper tower was doing its best to fire at the moving target. John spun the Warthog's wheels one way and then the other to avoid the critical energy strikes. The sniper tower took the form

of a circular platform floating in mid-air above a similarly shaped object on the ground. The two parts were connected via a blue gravity lift emitted from the bottom object.

Lim, with his heavy machine gun turret, returned fire at the Covenant ground units while Collins with his more accurate battle rifle aimed for the sniper. John paid no attention to either target as he drove ahead past their enemies. These Covies could be cleaned up later.

He drove around the sniper platform and turned a hard left between a shady gap in the buildings. They passed a few open cargo containers. Some Grunts shot from behind while a single Grunt cannon operator fired from ahead. The marines managed to take out half these targets before the Chief exited to the right and back onto the open beach again.

This beach almost mirrored the last one. A purple out-of-place anti-air gun sat in the middle but this time near a small concrete lookout. As with any Covenant camp, numerous purple crates and comm terminals were piled around the centre. Once again, Grunts and Elites shot at the Warthog from behind cover. A pair of Elites fired downwards from the lookout, searing black marks along the green paint of the jeep. John ignored them, driving onwards.

Red energy rained down as a new Phantom, or possibly the same one as before, emerged

from the clouds. John swerved this way and that, flicking dry sand over the Covenant crates as he dodged heavy plasma bolts and slalomed between his foes. A mini explosion came from the Phantom as Lim shot down its front Shade arm, dismembering it. The arm landed in the sand beside them.

A bold Elite Minor stepped out from behind its crate to fire through the windshield of the Warthog. It proved itself foolish as it was sucked beneath the bumper before it could fire a single shot. The Chief and marines felt only a small hump as they drove over the Sangheili, crushing it beneath the Warthog's weight. John manoeuvred the vehicle closer to the waves and made a jump over another sloped groyne.

“Chief, the carrier just released a wave of drop pods,” Cortana announced. “They’ve been launched at our position.”

The next beach had no anti-air gun. Instead, the aliens filled both a Covenant sniper tower and another concrete lookout. The beach was littered with crumbled wall debris, not unlike the road behind the hotel. The gaping hole in this wall opened to a highway tunnel. John simply needed to drive his Warthog between the debris, past the sniper tower and up into the tunnel. A right turn from there would give him a clear route straight to the bridge where New Mombasa would be on the other side.

CRASH!

An Elite-sized, navy-coloured, cylindrical object torpedoed from the sky straight through the bonnet of the Warthog. Several more Covenant insertion pods landed around them at the same time. The impact of the drop pod caused the Warthog to stop dead in its tracks, impaled above the sand. Private Collins was launched forwards over the smashed windscreen right into a chunk of concrete. Lim had tried bracing himself by bending his knees and gripping the turret tightly, but he too was flung, over the machine gun and into the sand on the right. The impact caused the Chief to lose some of his shields, but he was otherwise unaffected.

Rounded panels on each of the drop pods blasted forwards as both Elite Minors and Majors revealed themselves from within. Only the pod that hit the Warthog remained shut. Fire and smoke rose up from the front of the crashed jeep. John leapt out onto the sand. In one fluid motion, he drew his sniper rifle from over his shoulder, aimed up at the sniper tower, zoomed in with his smart-link and sniped the Jackal Sniper in the head before it could shoot Corporal Lim. The reptilian sniper still managed to release one shot from its weapon, but as it fell back, the bright purple beam flashed into the open sea far from its human target.

Lim dived into cover between the rubble and fired his BR at the Elites while John engaged them in a dance, his SMG contributing to the display. Gold and blue sparkled over the dancers as plasma and bullets alike were sprayed through the air. John wasn't a careless fighter by any means, but time was short and Collins lay unconscious on the ground. He had to keep the Covenant distracted before they fired a killing blow at the sleeping Private. The trouble was, he was completely outnumbered. Plasma still rained down from both the lookout and the sniper tower while countless Elites engaged the Spartan on the ground. Lim called out from behind his cover while continuing to fire.

“We can't stay here forever, Chief!” he yelled over the weapons fire. “Cover me!”

The Corporal ran towards Private Collins. His back stayed hunched over to keep himself a smaller target. John followed, running backwards to the marine pair, shielding them and absorbing plasma as he shot back. Lim pressed his fingers onto young Collin's neck and then to his wrist.

“I'm not getting a pulse, sir!”

“That's it then,” the Chief replied while still fighting. “We need to retreat to the tunnel. Keep close to the debris.”

John's display flashed red. He barely heard his shield alarm sounding off as he held his SMG's

trigger down while plasma continued to whirl past. They dashed through the hole in the wall and dived to the right, out of sight of the Covenant.

“That was lucky,” said Lim panting.

There were no aliens in the tunnel, just two driverless Covenant vehicles.

“That was reckless,” replied the Spartan, his shields now recharging. “A second longer and we would have died.”

“One of us did die,” Lim corrected.

John nodded in reply. The Spartan had had many scrapes like that over the years, but *he* remained unscathed to this day.

“We need to get a move on, Corporal.”

John looked at the Covenant vehicles.

“Know how to drive one?” he asked Lim.

“Only in simulation,” Lim answered.

The Type-32 Rapid Assault Vehicles, known as Ghosts, reminded John of the Covenant’s Banshees. However, instead of having long poles with anti-gravity tubes intended for flying, they had short, stubby wings to maintain balance as they hovered barely a metre above the ground. Also unlike with Banshees, a Ghost’s driver sat in the open as if operating an oversized motorcycle. A small amount of cover was provided by the hood of the vehicle and a shorter rear piece at the back. Instead of a windscreen, the round hood rose over the

engine, providing the driver with a holo-screen, touch controls and unconventional levers for steering. Pointing from the front, beneath the hood sat two plasma cannons, and attached to the left side of the Ghost, behind the wing was a little fuel cell. If heavily damaged, this cell could cause the entire Ghost to explode.

John and Lim wasted no time jumping on their respective Ghosts. The wings of their vehicles glowed brightly as they zoomed up the highway. The road here was made of coarse metallic segments with glowing yellow and white lines. There were colourful lights across the tunnel ceiling and a raised footpath running along the side. The road's segments could be raised, lowered and tilted by the city's AI to control traffic. Fortunately, they'd mostly been left flat during New Mombasa's evacuation, allowing the Ghosts to glide smoothly past the abandoned cars left on the highway.

The pair skimmed along the tunnel until they reached a closed floodgate. The wall to their left opened to a second tunnel containing the lanes for opposite-travelling traffic. John and Lim turned in and continued onwards.

“This tunnel leads up to the bridge,” said Cortana, briefly pulling herself away from monitoring the Covenant network. “It's full of rats, if you know what I mean, but it sure beats swimming.”

Sure enough, after a bend in the road, John and Lim found a horde of Covenant awaiting their arrival. Elites, Grunts and Jackal Scouts blocked the path ahead. A bus and several cars had piled up in this part of the tunnel, forming a makeshift barricade for the aliens that left only a small pathway for the Ghosts. It was just wide enough to pass through but was fully blocked by Covenant. On the footpath to the left of the highway was a stationary Shade turret. Upon it, a green-armoured Grunt Heavy sat behind an aqua-coloured shield that fanned out around the gun. It was the same colour as the shields worn by the Jackal Minors.

“Brake!” yelled John.

Lim abided.

“That’s quite a welcome party,” commented Cortana.

John and Lim held their Ghosts back from the Covenant group and fired their plasma cannons into the crowd. The Ghosts felt much lighter than the Warthog had. They were also faster and more easily handled. They didn’t rely on wheels for turning, which meant the pair could face the Ghosts at whichever targets they chose. They glided each way to avoid the red, green and blue return fire. John managed to hit a few Grunts, but the Elites and Jackals remained behind the stacked civilian vehicles. John jumped off his Ghost.

“Get ready to plough through!” he told Lim. “Wait for my call.”

The Chief pulled the pin from his last frag grenade and launched it into the gap between the cars. It exploded. Dust and ash polluted the air around the Covenant.

“Now!”

Lim boosted his Ghost forwards. The lights behind each wing produced a blue tail as they thrusted. John grabbed onto his Ghost’s steering levers and swung his legs over the seat. He followed Lim as he raced through the smoky pathway between the cars. A piercing screech from a Jackal was the last they heard of the Covenant party as they left it behind. Cortana spoke to John with a curious tone.

“I’ve been analysing the Covenant tactical chatter,” she said. “They’re surprised and confused. I don’t think they expected us to be here, not you and me, any of us... humanity on Earth. It’s odd. I know, but it does help to explain why they came here in such small numbers.”

Cortana stopped. The ground vibrated before an immense light filled the tunnel. A green beam materialised in front of the Chief, swallowing Lim and his Ghost entirely. John braked. The high-pitched roar of the energy beam was deafening, but it dissolved as quickly as it had come.

The Spartan assessed the situation before him. Natural light filled the tunnel through a freshly cut, truck-sized hole in the ceiling. A glimpse of purple flashed through the hole for only a second. The smouldering remains of a Warthog lay turned over just ahead of where the beam had struck. Behind it, a similarly black, Ghost-shaped heap lay burnt to a crisp. John paid no attention to the charred human remains that sat upright in the ruined Covenant hovercraft. The life of Corporal Lim was now erased.

“I think we both know what that was,” Cortana said to the Master Chief.

John saw no reason to reply. He boosted his Ghost forwards once more, zooming through the tunnel again. Along the way, the Spartan came across a few more floodgates, forcing him to switch occasionally back and forth between the parallel tunnels. He passed several more Covenant. Heavy Covenant transport vehicles travelled in the same direction, towards the bridge. John did what he could to take out the drivers.

Eventually, the tunnel sloped upwards, and before long, John could see the crimson sky of New Mombasa. He exited out onto the open road that melded into a long causeway. It was the bridge he'd been seeking. The Spartan and his AI were now free from the rats below.

“Pelican inbound,” Cortana announced.

The bridge was very wide and extremely long; all lanes from both tunnels fed into it. Damaged cars were scattered across the bridge, which had several large burnt holes. John saw the Scarab walking ahead in the distance. A male marine leant beside a boom gate barrier a few metres from the Spartan with a female marine standing next to him. Both were equipped with battle rifles. John unmounted his Ghost and approached the pair.

“It blew right through us!” exclaimed the Latina female labelled *Private Ortiz* by John’s heads-up-display. “Fifty-cal, rockets... didn’t do a thing.”

A Pelican came into view over their position with a supersized, blocky object dangling below the troop transport compartment. The object was a vehicle much larger than the Warthog had been. The M808B Main Battle Tank was an exceptionally wide military tank with two very long treads on either side. The top half of the treads and the body of the vehicle between them were covered in artichoke-green ceramic-titanium armouring. Two rectangular hatches opened at the top of the body with seats inside for the operators. Just behind the hatches sat a gyratory block with a thick cannon protruding almost as long as the tank itself. A much smaller machine gun barrel stuck out from its right. The

overall shape of M808B, despite being straight and hard-edged, was what gave it its nickname, the *Scorpion*.

The immense Scorpion was released by the Pelican. Its metal plating rang loudly as it landed on the road. The Pelican turned its back to John and the marines, revealing Sergeant Major Johnson in its troop compartment. The Sergeant was smoking one of his favourite *Sweet William* cigars. He jumped out in his green combat uniform, still matching the other marines except for his sergeant's cap.

"Where's the rest of your platoon?" Johnson asked the marines, inadvertently chewing on his cigar.

"Wasted, Sarge," Ortiz replied.

The male marine named Private Newton also spoke up.

"And we will be too, sir, if we don't get the hell out of here!"

Johnson placed a hand on Newton's shoulder. He gripped it hard and replied.

"You hit, marine?"

"No, sir."

"Then listen up!" Johnson barked. "When I joined the Corps, we didn't have any fancy-shmancy tanks. We had sticks, two sticks and a rock for the whole platoon! And we had to *share* the rock. Buck up, boy. You're one very lucky marine."

Johnson gestured at the Spartan and continued.

“The Chief here is going to jump in this tank, roll across the bridge and blow up any inhuman son-of-a-bitch dumb enough to get between him and the Prophet of Regret, and you're going with him.”

“What about the Scarab?” asked Ortiz.

“We've all run the simulations,” Johnson replied. “They're tough, but they ain't invincible. Stay with the Master Chief. He'll know what to do.”

“Yes, sir!”

Cortana spoke as Johnson marched back to his Pelican.

“Thanks for the tank,” she said. “*He* never gets me anything.”

John knew if Cortana still had her avatar she'd be pointing at him. Johnson stepped up into the Pelican and looked back at the Spartan and his AI while still smoking his Sweet William.

“Oh,” he replied. “I know what the ladies like.”

Rat Race

Private First Class Jane Pinciotti sat silently waiting in the driver's seat of the Warthog she and Saito had been assigned to. Jane slumped back with an M90 Shotgun on her lap while Saito sat balancing atop the backrest beside her. He kept his BR pointing over the windscreen as was customary. They waited on the side path of a large highway tunnel that led to a long bridge connecting the city to the mainland. They'd been ordered to wait here near the edge of the island for Corporal Palmer and her squad, but the pair had now been waiting long enough that Private Pinciotti doubted Corporal Palmer and her soldiers were even alive.

Jane had met Private Saito only a day earlier while on Cairo Station. She barely said a word to him the entire time they sat in the UNSC jeep. Instead, she anxiously fiddled with her shotgun. She checked her auburn hair was pulled back tightly beneath her green helmet and scanned both ends of the seemingly endless tunnel for signs of alien activity. The Warthog currently faced up the tunnel towards the centre of New Mombasa, not that Jane had any true sense of direction down here.

She kicked herself for having given in to emotional investment once again. Jane had met

Private Donnie Vusaro earlier in the year during her first ever in-person encounter with the Covenant in the Sigma Octanus system. Jane and Donnie had belonged to separate squads but managed to find themselves trapped together in a collapsed museum that the aliens had been keen on searching. Jane never found out what the Covenant were looking for. Frankly, she didn't understand why the Covenant hadn't just glassed the planet from orbit as they usually did, but it had allowed her and Donnie to survive.

The two of them had spent hours in the dark, navigating through a ruined city and waiting for any sign that the UNSC knew they were down there. They discussed many things along their journey. They shared sorrowful memories of their lost families, friends and homes but also hopeful prospects of what they had planned once the war was over. Before an Albatross dropship collected them and flew them to safety, they both jokingly agreed they'd each build a neighbouring house in the tropical jungles of Solace.

It seemed every time Jane allowed herself to get close to someone, the Covenant swept in and took them away. The Covenant on Cairo Station killed Donnie Vusaro just as they killed everyone else who mattered in Jane's life. She had come close to giving up before. Many years ago, long before she'd met Donnie, she came close to her

escape. She'd made the necessary arrangements to painlessly release herself from this universe, but then somehow, she found herself stepping into a UNSC recruiting facility instead. Before she knew it, she was strapped up in full UNSC Marines gear with a magnum tied to her waist and an MA5B Assault Rifle in her hands. She was filled with new determination that day, and that was who she needed to be now.

Jane was bitter. The universe was cruel, but what she had to remember was that this cruelty stemmed from a very specific point, the Covenant. She decided not to converse with Private Saito on this mission any more than necessary. This was humanity's last major battle. If they lost now, they faced extinction. For the human race to finally eliminate their merciless foe, they would have to utilise everything in their arsenal. Every soldier needed to stay focused.

Jane was not going to fall into the same trap she had with Donnie ever again. Every part of her being, mentally, physically and emotionally was to be saved for the fight against the Covenant.

Jane and Saito had been sitting here without a sound for far too long. Time was ticking. Nothing was happening. The longer they left the Covenant to their devices, the harder it would be to resist them. Surely, even Saito was becoming

fatigued by this lack of activity. They had to fight now, or soon they'd have nothing to fight for.

“Saito,” Jane finally spoke. “We’re alone down here. I don’t think Palmer’s coming.”

Private Saito stiffened slightly at the sound of Pinciotti’s voice breaking the long silence. Jane continued.

“The streets are crammed with Covenant. There’s a good chance the Corporal’s pinned down somewhere... or dead.”

“Command hasn’t said anything,” Saito replied.

“Maybe *Command* doesn’t know anything. If they lost contact...”

Jane trailed off.

A low rumbling could be heard from the bridge end of the tunnel. Something very large was on its way down the highway.

“I’ll jump on the gun,” Saito announced quickly, referring to the large turret on the back of the Warthog.

“No,” Jane replied, raising her right hand to stop him. “Wait.”

The rumbling that gradually grew louder was familiar to Private Pinciotti. It was clearly a vehicle, but it wasn’t the high-pitched engines of the Covenant she heard. This had to be UNSC. Was she wrong about Corporal Palmer’s squad? Had they survived? Jane looked back over her shoulder and searched down the enclosed

highway. A spark of hope rose within her as she comprehended what she was seeing.

“A Scorpion tank?” Saito asked.

Jane had never ridden in a Scorpion before, but everyone knew how they looked. She knew it was controlled by two operators hidden beneath its near impenetrable armour, but she also saw two marines sitting on either side of the exterior, wielding BRs at the front of each tread. As they got closer, Jane saw that one of them looked rather soft for a marine. She figured the UNSC had to take what they could get these days. The other marine, an olive-skinned female, appeared firm and composed.

The Scorpion was almost in line with their Warthog when Jane caught a glimpse of aqua up ahead. This tank’s crew could not have timed it more perfectly. Up ahead was a sturdy, half-closed floodgate. Jane could see two Jackal Minors standing upon the lower half of the gate. They were ducking low to avoid being seen, but with their obnoxious shield gauntlets, they were impossible to miss. They must have been scouting on behalf of a Covenant squad on the other side of the floodgate. Jane gripped the steering wheel of the Warthog and slammed her foot on the pedal. She drove down a ramp onto the highway and sped towards her enemies.

A large metal slug was fired from the Scorpion’s main cannon before Pinciotti and

Saito arrived at the floodgate. The projectile struck the top of the lower gate right between the Jackals and blew their bodies into the hidden road behind them. Jane parked the Warthog immediately before the floodgate, which was clearly jammed, blocking the entire highway ahead. The only way forwards was to go around it. Not even a Scorpion would be able to blast through such thick metal. There was a narrow ramp to the right that sloped up to a pathway like the one Jane had driven her Warthog from.

The Scorpion slowed to a stop behind the Warthog. Jane and Saito dismounted their vehicle with their weapons ready as the marines on the tank slid down from the treads. They each turned to look at the Scorpion's hatches, awaiting the operating crew. Jane expected both hatches to open as Scorpions were always operated by two people. Instead, only one hatch flipped open, and out climbed the last person Jane had expected to see.

It was rare enough to see a Spartan-II supersoldier once in a lifetime. When the fully armoured tinman had left Jane's squad on Cairo Station she'd assumed she would never see him again. The Spartan stepped off the side of the Scorpion in his high-tech yet simple-looking MJOLNIR Mark VI battlesuit.

Jane held no admiration for soldiers as inhuman as this. His face was entirely hidden,

and she remembered the lack of emotion she'd heard in his voice, the lack of concern he had shown towards Donnie's death. No matter how Jane felt about the Spartan in front of her, she knew the UNSC would be relying on him one way or another to end the battle in New Mombasa. She approached the soldier.

"It's tight quarters on the other side, sir," Jane said, presenting her shotgun to him. "Use this."

The Master Chief hesitated only for a second before reaching down and taking the weapon from the Private. He handed her an SMG in return. He could not have passed her a weapon that looked more worse-for-wear. It was bent, battered, covered in sand and cement as well as indigo, cyan and red blood. She did not allow herself to dwell over the red. If the Spartan was handing it to her, she had to assume it still functioned. She had little choice other than to trust the man.

"Thanks," said the Spartan.

His voice managed to sound harsh even while thanking her. *Maybe he just has a naturally stern voice*, Jane theorised. Still, it didn't exactly ease her.

"What's your objective, Private?" the Chief asked.

"We've been instructed to wait for a squad, sir," Jane answered. "We've yet to receive new orders."

An unexpected female voice replied from the Spartan's direction. It was the AI, Cortana.

"I'll have you reassigned to our mission," said the AI. "We're heading to *Uplift Nature Reserve* near the spaceport. The Covenant carrier's gravity lift should be accessible from the reserve. That's our destination."

This was a suicide mission if ever Jane had heard one. The Master Chief aimed to enter the Covenant capital ship from directly below. Private Pinciotti could cover the Spartan during the journey, but she couldn't see herself offering any help from inside the belly of the beast. She would have to cross that bridge when she got to it. The Covenant on the other side of this floodgate were likely aware of their presence by now. Their first goal was to push past these forces and back into to the sunlight.

Jane's new squad, consisting of the Master Chief, Private Ortiz, Private Newton, Private Saito and herself moved up the ramp beside the thick gate, leaving their vehicles behind. On the other side, Jane found an immediate change of scenery. The lights in this part of the tunnel were much less effective. They were dim and damaged, making the tunnel much darker than it was behind them. The other difference was that, while there were some abandoned civilian vehicles here and there in the last section of the tunnel, there were many empty cars and buses

banked closely together in this section. This is what Command had implied when they told Pinciotti and Saito it would be tight quarters. The path ahead was blocked by a wide storage crate. Jane wondered if the Covenant had planted it there to force them onto the road.

“The Covenant are hiding among the cars,” said the Master Chief.

Jane could not personally see any movement, but the Spartan seemed sure of himself. She looked down at the vehicles. There were two clear paths through the cars and buses that could lead them back to the sidewalk on the other side of the crate. Jane suspected these paths had been deliberately cleared to lure them into an ambush.

“There are more in the path to the left,” said the Spartan, clearly seeing something that Jane couldn’t. “I’ll take that one.”

Presumably, the inferred part of his sentence was to instruct everyone else to take the closer path on the right. Jane figured she should take point. Not only was she slightly higher ranked than the others, she was also the only marine with a shorter ranged weapon. Not to mention, there was also the fact that the only person she trusted enough to get them through this pathway alive was herself. She knew what the Spartan had achieved on Cairo and therefore trusted her shotgun to him. However, she couldn’t help but feel a little regret now while looking down at the

mistreated SMG he'd handed her. Jane heard a loud *bang* from the shotgun. The Chief was already fighting his way down his path.

“Let's go,” Jane whispered.

The marines kept to their cover. They moved in single file, ducking behind one car, sprinting across to the next and then crouching down again. After ten metres of this, Jane heard some shuffling over the next bend. She slowly peered over the bonnet of the car she now hid behind and lined her sight along the top of her submachine gun. The Jackal Minor screeched earsplittingly to alert its squad-mates that the humans had reached them, all the while Jane could hear the Spartan fighting his way through the more crowded path.

Suddenly, the scene around Jane lit up. It flashed blue and green as the Covenant leapt out from behind cars and fired at the marines. Green beads of light whizzed past Jane's helmet down the path behind her followed by the occasional stream of blue. The Jackal at the front charged its plasma pistol. Unlike most Grunts, Jackals favoured the plasma pistols' charging function rather than simply firing as many shots as they could in rapid succession. This caused the end of the Jackal's pistol to slowly produce a large, glaringly bright green ball.

The Jackal released one of its clawed digits from the handle of its pistol, causing the green

ball of light to surge forwards in Jane's direction. Jane dropped behind the wheels of the nearest car as the plasma struck the side of the vehicle, melting partially through the metal. The charged plasma shot had bent in Jane's direction, tracking her movement unlike any regular projectile could. Had she been even a little more out-in-the-open, the charged shot would have been impossible to dodge.

Before the Jackal could begin charging its weapon a second time, Jane looked over the top of her SMG again. She lined up its iron sights until she aimed precisely at the notch in the side of the Jackal's aqua-coloured shield. If Jane shot her submachine gun through the cut-out in the shield, she could damage the Jackal's pistol-wielding talon, and in doing so, cause it to flinch and lower its shield. Then either she or the other marines could take the Jackal down by shooting it in its exposed head or lightly armoured torso. She held down the trigger of the SMG and fired directly into the Jackal.

She missed the notch. The weapon was not as accurate as she'd have liked. Bullets bounced off the Jackal's shield into the car beside it. Jane dropped to the floor as another wave of plasma was fired in her direction, including another charged Jackal shot.

Glancing at the path to her left, Jane could hear the gargling of dying Elites. The Master

Chief was pressing forwards. Despite crouching with her face close to the road, Jane could see the Spartan's helmet passing between gaps in the scenery. Through the windows and spaces, she saw that the super-soldier never fully stopped moving. He was constantly pushing, sidestepping, ducking and jumping. The entire time he moved, he managed to maintain accuracy with his shotgun.

Jane tried again to take the Jackal down before her. She could hear and see with her peripheral vision that her fellow marines were also firing, some at the Jackal and others at semi-obscured Elites and Grunts behind it. It was scenarios like this when the Covenant infantry proved most effective. All three common Covenant ground units supported one another. The highly numbered Grunts were ferocious while fighting beside their Elite commanders. The Jackals Scouts were able to keep their allies aware of the situation, all the while blocking UNSC bullets from entering the crowd behind them. The taller, strategic Elites watched from the back, providing instructions and feedback during the battle.

Jane fired. This time, she struck her target. Purple blood spilled out from the Jackal's pistol-wielding hand as its shielded arm dropped. It stumbled backwards in attempt to keep its balance, but another spit of purple splashed

from its neck as Saito finished it off with his BR. The aqua shield was extinguished as the creature's body hit the floor. Jane moved up into cover behind another car.

Next in her sights were a group of Grunts. She found it challenging to aim as the Grunts kept firing in continuous succession. Fortunately, the uncharged shots were smaller and straighter, making them easier to avoid. What's more, if the Grunts kept firing rapidly without stopping, their weapons would overheat, potentially burning the aliens' stubby fingers. Jane waited.

After only a few more seconds, there was a pause. The Grunts had stopped firing in order to let their pistols cool before overheating. Without aiming too accurately down the sights, Jane straightened up into a kneeling position. She held the SMG's stock to her shoulder and fired a horizontal sweep across the Grunts. Their pointed gas tanks hit the ground first as their bodies mimicked the death of the earlier Jackal Minor.

The marines moved further up the path, and this time, they faced a Jackal Major with its orange shield as well as a Jackal Minor and more Grunts. The path was becoming progressively more difficult, and the marines did not have the stamina to be doing this all day. Nevertheless, they fired their weapons, aiming for the Grunts'

round heads and the notches in the Jackal's shields again. Both Jane and Newton had close calls as charged plasma shots flew scarily near, but eventually they took out each of the Grunts in this group in addition to the Jackal Minor. It was the Jackal Major that they had trouble with.

The Jackal Major, upon realising that these humans were no pushovers, ducked backwards behind a car of its own. Jane realised the four of them could easily take out this Jackal if they ran forwards and shot around the car, but that would leave them exposed to any Covenant further ahead. The Elites would certainly have no trouble taking them out.

Jane could still see the Jackal. It was no Elite, but it was tall enough that she could see the top of its head peaking behind the car while also being obscured by the semi-transparent orange of the top of its shield. Battle rifle bullets bounced off the shield. Jane had an idea. She turned back, spotting a plasma pistol by the feet of Private Ortiz.

“Ortiz!” Jane yelled. “Can you slide that this way?”

Ortiz kicked the alien gun along the ground towards Private Pinciotti. Jane picked up the weapon and held down the touch-sensitive hieroglyph that formed the Covenant's version of a trigger. The weapon vibrated violently in her hand as it charged up. Her arms and chest

reflected the green light that grew before her. Jane stood momentarily. She pointed the gun and released her finger off the hieroglyph. Just as she'd hoped, the green ball flew over the top of the Jackal's cover and splashed down over its shield. She'd fought fire with fire. The hardlight shield dissolved upon impact with the plasma. Immediately, the tip of the Jackal's skull split open from bullets fired by the rest of Jane's squad. The Jackal's purple blood painted the roof of the car.

Jane and the squad moved a few car spaces further. This time, no aliens jumped out at them. She heard the Elites at the back barking incomprehensible commands. Jane had no way of interpreting the alien language, but she presumed the Elites were modifying their technique. They had initially overestimated the small marine squad, and in response, the Elites now mimicked the human's method of firing only from behind cover.

Jane crouched still behind her current vehicle. She had already dropped the plasma pistol. She preferred the more human and less awkward SMG, however damaged it was. There were plenty of plasma pistols scattered across the road if she needed to backtrack and retrieve one again. She thought hard. If the Covenant were no longer jumping out, how could the squad continue pushing? Jane was stumped.

“Any ideas?” she asked the others.

“We could wait,” Saito replied. “They can’t hide forever.”

“They *can*,” disagreed Ortiz. “But *we* can’t. If we don’t move faster, either that Scarab will demolish every building in the city or the Prophet of Regret will glass us all.”

Scarab? Jane thought. She and Saito had heard a loud mechanical noise passing over the tunnel while they’d waited in the Warthog earlier. A Scarab might explain the fate of Corporal Palmer’s squad, but this Prophet of Regret held no meaning to the Private. She didn’t recall ever having heard the name before. Whatever it meant, Ortiz was right. They couldn’t live in this tunnel forever.

Apparently, the Covenant were having similar thoughts. A loud roar came from one of the Elites followed by a stampede of Covenant charging at the marines. Grunts, Jackals and Elites rushed forwards. More flashes of blue and green lit the metallic road and cars. There was far too much plasma flying about for Jane and the other marines to return fire. They were pinned down, and the Covenant were closing in fast. Jane could feel her heart pumping at a thousand beats per second. Her shaky hands gripped her SMG tightly, drenching the grips in sweat. *I guess this is where I die*, Jane realised.

She stared down at her gun. Her eyes blurred as she reminisced. She thought back to her time with Donnie during the voyage from Sigma Octanus. She remembered her family back on Arcadia, her father, her mother, her younger brother, how she used to love their annual camping trips in the summer. She remembered sneaking out late at night, meeting up with her high school friends. Her thoughts returned to Donnie and their planned future on Solace. They had eventually decided their two future houses in the lush, tropical jungles should become one. Jane closed her eyes. Her shaking ceased as she allowed herself to relax, smiling in the darkness.

Jane waited patiently for her death, only it didn't come. She now heard less plasma fire shot in her direction, and the return fire of three UNSC battle rifles grew more frequent. Her eyes opened. It seemed the Master Chief had finished with the left path. He was currently standing atop a caved-in dip on the roof of a bus with shattered windows.

Bang! Chck-chck. Bang! The Spartan refilled his shotgun after each shot. *Chck-chck. Bang!* The Covenant units approaching the marines now drew back one by one, realising the greater threat of the green and black *demon* on their flank. Only a few Grunts still seemed interested in the marines, and in the excitement of it all, they very typically lost their accuracy. The Grunts fell to

their deaths in front of the marines who then redirected their fire to the large horde of aliens flocking towards the Chief.

The outside of the Spartan's armour flashed gold, just as Jane had seen it do so on Cairo. She knew he had his own energy shields like those the Covenant used. The Chief jumped down onto the right path and began meleeing Grunts and Jackals between shotgunning Elites. Jane and the marines assisted from behind. Before long, the humans stood over a pile of mangled alien carcasses as the Spartan's energy shields rose around him, charging back to full strength. They trod onwards to where the cars began to disperse and then climbed back to the footpath on the side.

The Master Chief led the team along the edge of the darkened tunnel. Trailing a few metres behind him, Saito and Newton were paired together, and bringing in the rear walked Pinciotti and Ortiz. Jane watched the Spartan curiously. Had he not been present, the marines certainly would have died, and yet, Jane couldn't bring herself to truly appreciate him. All she saw was a hulking mesh of metal that happened to maintain a human silhouette. She spoke softly to the marine beside her as they walked.

“What do you think of the Spartan?” Jane asked Ortiz.

“The Chief? I’d say we sorely need him in this fight,” she replied. “If you think the Covie graveyard we left between those cars was big, you should see the ones we left on the bridge. We had a tank, mind you, but so did the Covenant. Wraiths, Banshees... all dead.”

Jane considered this and replied.

“He’s clearly a killing machine,” she acknowledged. “Doesn’t quite seem the *comrade* type though, does he?”

She wasn’t sure if she was pressing her luck, but to her relief, Ortiz bought into the conversation.

“I don’t know if a comrade is what we need from him right now,” said Ortiz. “But there *is* something you might find titillating, just a bouncing rumour I heard when I learnt there was a Spartan on Earth. They call him the *last* Spartan.”

“The last Spartan?” Jane echoed.

She’d wondered why she hadn’t heard about any other Spartans on Earth. She figured there must have been more up in the orbital defence platforms and that she simply hadn’t had time to hear of their presence. These were busy days after all. Perhaps there had been other Spartans searching for Covenant bombs just as the Chief had. Ortiz continued.

“According to one of the marines in our last squad,” she said, nodding towards Newton who

was also part of Ortiz's initial platoon. "The Master Chief was the leader of the Spartans. When the Covenant discovered Reach, he abandoned them all, left them behind, never to return."

A rumour was a rumour, Jane knew, but this information supported the view of the Spartan she was beginning to form. He had no personality. Supposedly, he was genetically human, but he was difficult to perceive as anything other than a weapon. The Master Chief was a valuable tool for the UNSC to use against the Covenant, a powerful asset, but he was no friend. He lacked empathy. He lacked values. He did not seem to care for anything other than his immediate mission, and Jane supposed that's all the UNSC needed from him.

"Let's hope none of us get hit then," Jane said. "If we fall behind, I don't see him coming back for us. If it's not a direct order, I don't see him going back for anyone."

"I wouldn't read much into the rumours," Ortiz frowned. "Speculation is... intriguing, but don't get bogged down by the stories. We have a mission. We help the Chief get to that carrier, and then we wait for our next assignment."

Ortiz was right. Jane was there to do a job. If she did it correctly then she wouldn't be left behind. The marines simply needed to avoid another situation like the one down on the road.

They were not going to get pinned like that again. The squad stopped beside a doorway in the tunnel wall. A sign was plastered next to it stating, *Notice: Entrance for Employees Only.*

“This way,” directed the Spartan.

The marines stepped through one by one. The Spartan waited then followed at the rear. The circular chamber within opened to the sky high above. It was a gritty, dirty maintenance way that felt fiercely claustrophobic in spite of the fact Jane could finally see the clouds. There were several round, tight, concrete tunnels spiralling off in different directions. The group headed through the middle one in single file, which took them upwards. After a short wind in the tunnel, Jane felt like she could breathe again. The warm air blew around her as wind whistled down the concrete tube.

After only a short walk, the tunnel opened. Jane stepped out into the daylight atop a high ledge. She hadn't realised just how much she'd longed for a real change in scenery until she absorbed her new environment. Down below was a circular park that Jane guessed to be about one hundred metres in diameter. Trimmed green grass covered all of the park aside from the glimmering ripples of a pond in the middle. Neat walkways joined four circular platforms over the pond with park benches around the edges. Several medium-sized oak trees stood proudly

around the outside of the grassy parkland, which was encased in an enormous glass dome framed by cream-coloured metal. Half the dome was currently left open to the bare sky. Immense skyscrapers towered overhead. The towers of New Mombasa dwarfed all other buildings in this part of the continent, but they were of no concern to Jane who was too preoccupied by the welcomed touch of the sun's rays and her appreciation of the greenery below.

“Welcome to Kilindini Cultural Centre,” said Cortana, her voice coming from the Spartan behind Jane.

Of course, the admiration was short-lived. They were not alone. Purple and blue supply crates, glowing plasma batteries, cylindrical gas tanks, stationary shield generators, communication nodes and other Covenant materials covered the centre platforms. Covenant Ghosts whirled about, skimming over the grass as they chased a lone Warthog around the park. Elites, Grunts, Jackals Scouts and Jackal Snipers all hopped about over the platforms above the pond. This place belonged to the Covenant. What was more, Jane could see the humongous Scarab passing the outside of the dome.

Private Pinciotti squinted at a gap between New Mombasa's skyscrapers. The space elevator was closer than ever, and right beside it, a piece

of the Covenant capital ship peeked out from the clouds. Jane's destination was near, as was humanity's chance at uncovering the reason the Covenant chose to land solely in New Mombasa. *That's why the Spartan needs to board the carrier*, Jane realised, and she was going to get him there.

This was the most important battle the human race had ever fought, and like *hell* was Jane going to let Donnie Vusaro die without a cause. The marine looked down at the Covenant below. She didn't need to know exactly how she would get the Spartan to his destination, but she was going to find out very soon.

Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us

Private First Class Pinciotti, Private Saito, Private Ortiz, Private Newton and the Master Chief Petty Officer stood at the rim inside a glass dome observing Kilindini Cultural Centre. The rumbling of a single Warthog made itself noticed as it circled the park. A slight breeze could also be heard through the leaves of the swaying oaks. Alien chatter carried across the wind from the platforms over the central pond. The voices of the shrill, screechy Jackals; the raspy, panting, high-pitched Grunts; and the deep, growling Elites all made their way to the group. Fortunately, the aliens themselves had not yet noticed the human team.

“You three,” began the Master Chief, pointing at the marines beside Jane. “You’re our sharpshooters. Maintain elevation above the park. Aim for their snipers first.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

They spread out along the curved ledge with their BR55s aimed down at the centre of the dome. The faceless Spartan turned to Jane who clutched her SMG to her chest.

“That Warthog driver needs assistance. As long as he keeps moving, he’s a hard target for the Covenant,” said the Chief.

“He’ll be stuck here until he dies,” Jane acknowledged. “Unless he finds a way to clear the area. Guess that’s where we come in.”

“Wait for the Warthog to pass that platform,” the Spartan pointed. “Then we jump.”

“Yes, sir.”

As soon as the Warthog passed the nearest platform, Jane stepped forwards and slid down the steep ledge until her combat boots planted firmly into the grass. Meanwhile, the Spartan jumped upwards into the air over Jane and landed about two metres in front of her. His own high-tech, armoured boots sank a couple of inches lower. What surprised Jane was how light the Spartan looked while in the air, as if drifting downwards like a feather despite weighing half a tonne. However it looked, it drew the attention of the Covenant. Plasma greeted them from the platforms.

Jane and the Chief found themselves shielded from the plasma fire as the Warthog pulled up in front of them. It slid a few metres, tearing into the grass as it braked. A marine with a trimmed brown goatee and a sergeant’s cap held the steering wheel. He spoke with a southern American drawl.

“I could use you on the gun, Chief!”

Unlike the usual Warthogs that were equipped with heavy machine guns, the gunner’s position on this jeep featured a turret with a

single much-thicker barrel and a digital screen for aiming. It was an M68 Gauss Cannon, essentially, a mini MAC. The Master Chief stepped onto the rotating gunner's plate to operate this beast of a weapon while Jane climbed onto the passenger seat. The Warthog drove on before more plasma could tear into it.

The chimes of three Covenant Ghosts whistled loudly. The purple hovercrafts coasted over the grass behind them. They fired their plasma cannons at the Warthog, which swerved left and right, zigzagging chaotically to dodge the blue energy bolts. Jane twisted her torso in an attempt to aim her SMG at the Ghosts' drivers, but she couldn't get into position. The hoods of the Ghosts were already high enough that the Elite drivers were very much obscured. With the Warthog's constant movement and the Ghosts positioned behind the jeep rather than at the front or on either side, it was practically impossible for Jane to eliminate the drivers.

"Careful with that thing, Chief!" yelled the Warthog driver. "She's a puncher!"

Plasma flew over the top, past the sides, and splashed across the back of the UNSC vehicle, chipping away at it before the Spartan returned fire. *Boom!* The sound of the gauss cannon's single shot echoed around the dome. The Covenant on the platforms paused their fire in shock. The cannon's slug tore through the

purple plating of the nearest Ghost. The Ghost exploded violently in a spectrum of blues and reds. The Elite driver spun through the air with the debris, flailing its arms and legs before it hit the ground. The remaining two Ghosts swept around to avoid the wreckage as the chase continued.

Jane pointed her submachine gun up at the platforms. Looking along the sights, the targets in her vision bobbed up and down due to the Warthog's intense handling. Grunts, Jackals and Elites ducked and weaved behind Covenant crates and other alien equipment as they fired at the jeep. Some of their shots landed, damaging the jeep more each time, but most shots were unable to come close to their speedy target. Few plasma bolts passed near Jane, but the aliens only needed one shot to hit the marine in order to kill her.

Jane fired. Her bullets went everywhere. She held down the trigger until the entire magazine was depleted but didn't hit a single target. She reached into the pouches attached to her combat uniform and reloaded her weapon, all the while trying to balance on the passenger seat of the bumpy ride. She heard another explosion from behind as she unleashed her second clip. An Elite's shields flashed. Two Grunts were hit and a Jackal flinched back. Whether or not she killed any of the creatures was difficult to see. They

were all a blur rushing to the side of her vision as the Warthog drove fast.

Jane's seat suddenly rose up beneath her causing her to lose her balance. She caught her fall with her knee on the seat while her arm smacked the front bar above the windshield. Wincing in pain, she climbed back into position and glanced behind to see what had caused the massive bump. The Warthog had driven over some debris left from the first Ghost. They'd already completed a lap around the park.

A flash of purple lit Jane's vision briefly, temporarily blinding her. Once it cleared, Jane saw that a small section of the plating at the front of the Warthog had torn away, revealing the engine below. A Covenant sniper's beam had struck the vehicle. Looking up at the platforms, Jane saw a Jackal Sniper stumbling before hitting the ground. Its shot at the Warthog had been accidental. The Jackal had actually been aiming at the human marksmen crouching with their battle rifles up on the ledge. It had aimed at Private Ortiz, but Saito had been quick enough to kill it first.

Boom! Just as the Spartan destroyed the last Ghost, two more emerged from a gap in the dome on the opposite side of the park.

“Mooooore calamari!” exclaimed the driver.

The Ghosts separated. One drove around the back of the pond to catch up behind the

Warthog while the other drove in the opposite direction until it was coming at them head on. The front Ghost thrust, forcing the jeep to make a sharp right. Jane felt the vehicle tilt with two wheels in the air before it slammed back down again. She slipped onto the seat before her head slammed into the back of it. She was sore but with no major injury. Had the Warthog tilted any further, it would have rolled and tipped the marine headfirst onto the ground. Jane climbed back into position and decided to ignore the Ghosts in pursuit. She only needed to pay enough attention to keep her balance while staying focused on the Covenant in the centre of the park.

Jane fired smaller bursts from her SMG over the centre platforms. With the battle rifles joining in from above, each Covenant alien had a choice of either facing the Warthog or one of the BR-wielding marines. With the marines each firing from different angles, the aliens fell one by one.

Jane spotted the tip of a beam rifle poking out from behind a Covenant transmitter. She waited until the Warthog drove a little further providing her a better angle of the Jackal behind its cover. She pressed her trigger. The reptile's narrow frame shook violently as it was stung by a swarm of bullets. Almost half of Jane's continuous fire managed to hit her target. The Jackal's reacting

nerves caused it to press down on its beam rifle's sensor, allowing it to fire one final shot as it died. A bright, thin, purple beam flashed from the Jackal's weapon up over the park until it struck one of the BR-wielding marines in the shoulder. Private Saito screamed as blood leapt from his bicep, streaming from both the front and the back.

"Saito's down," Jane informed the Chief dutifully.

She turned back towards the platforms in search of her next targets as the Warthog continued circling the park. Jane felt no emotion over Saito's death. He was not her friend. She hadn't allowed herself to see him as any more than an instrument to assist her in battle, and as a result, his death meant nothing. She was able to shoot at her next targets with a clear mind. *Is this what it feels like to be a Spartan?* Jane wondered.

The skirmish at Kilindini Cultural Centre lasted a while longer, but eventually the Spartan and marines managed to take out all the Covenant without any further casualties. Once the Master Chief had defeated the Ghosts, he turned his gauss cannon towards the ground units, dispatching them one shot at a time except for two Grunts he managed to kill with a single slug.

After the area had been cleared, the Warthog finally stopped. Jane turned to look at the

Spartan towering over her on the back of the jeep. She now felt like she understood the supersoldier a little more. This was a man who never looked back at his dying allies, *and why should he?* she thought. His mind stayed clear because he concentrated on the job and nothing more. Maybe this was the type of soldier that was needed to save humanity. If Jane and other marines could be a little more like the Spartan then they might just win this war.

“Marcus Stacker,” the Warthog driver introduced himself. “Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Where are the rest of your marines, Sergeant?” the Master Chief asked.

“Scattered,” he replied. “Not dead. We got separated when the Scarab passed over.”

He paused then continued.

“Our mission was to take down a Covenant AA cannon. A plan is a beautiful thing when it works, but when it doesn't... it's 'cause we were ambushed by a giant, walking death machine. The others radioed before you got here. They seem to be holed up in a command post near the city centre. Don't suppose that's where you're headed?”

“Thereabouts,” answered the Chief.

“Then let's pedal to the metal!”

Sergeant Stacker drove them to the gap the Ghosts had emerged from earlier. As the vehicle turned into the gap, Jane looked back. She saw

Ortiz and Newton at a distance crouching over Saito's body. Saito's relaxed hand still sat over his bleeding shoulder. The Warthog passed through the gap into a smaller section of the cultural centre. This park was similar to the last but half as wide and with a different layout. As they turned, Jane heard a cheep from a terminal on the wall.

“High-grade first aid!” it announced. “Optican! Healthcare on demand.”

As the Gunnery Sergeant drove them into the park, Jane realised just how long it was going to take them to reach the city centre. If every area was filled with Covenant like the last park, they'd surely run out of time. She saw an open archway for the Warthog to drive through at the other end of the park. It was blocked by several Covenant ground troops, a Wraith in front of them and several Ghosts swimming around the parkland between the Warthog and the Wraith.

Wraiths were the Covenant's answer to the UNSC's Scorpion. They were just as destructive but far more common. The Wraith's huge body took the form of a navy-blue, egg-shaped pod hovering with its narrower end pointing forwards. It was kept afloat by four stubby wings akin to those seen on the Ghosts. A wide compartment opened at the top to reveal a great mortar cannon, which the Wraith now fired.

Ejected from the cannon's opening, forced out with fury, came an enormous ball of blue plasma that dwarfed any Jane had ever seen. It plunged forwards through the air before gravity took its toll and pulled the heavy sphere down with a crash. The energy splashed metres in front of the Warthog. Grass, soil and rock erupted from the ground, leaving a black pit for the jeep to sweep around before the Wraith unleashed its follow-up shot. Ghosts swivelled around them as the Warthog swung from one side of the park to the other in its attempt to race to the opening at the end.

“Concentrate your fire on that Wraith,” Cortana called from the Spartan's helmet. “That's our biggest threat.”

Jane held her SMG down at the Ghosts zooming past the Warthog, which never slowed. Booms sounded from the gauss cannon as the Chief fired every shot at the massive mortar tank. Due to its insane mass, the Wraith was much slower than the Ghosts. Its gravity thrusters exerted most of their energy trying to keep the Wraith in the air. Very little power allowed it to speed forwards or swing to the side. For that reason and thanks to the unexpectedly skilled driving of Gunnery Sergeant Stacker, the Master Chief was able to destroy the Wraith before it could demolish their Warthog. That said, the Warthog was far from pristine

condition. Jane suspected only a couple more shots from a plasma cannon would be enough to ignite the engines and set the Warthog's riders alight for good, which was why they had to get out of there fast.

“Damn, Chief!” Stacker exclaimed. “You just got egg all over the carpet. Hah!”

The Ghosts' plasma fire whizzed past them as the Warthog found its path between the newly formed ditches and general scenery of the park. They drove around the wreckage of the Wraith and directly to the exit. Several Jackals and Elites blocked the path, but the Warthog didn't stop. It left a messy trail of purple and indigo beneath the archway as it drove through.

The jeep was then forced to slow down and drive around the tight corners of manmade water features in the wall of the great dome. Cool droplets hit Jane's face as they passed a waterfall running down a tall mirror. She saw the state of herself and the Warthog in the wavy reflection. They looked better than she thought they would. They still had a chance.

Before they knew it, Jane, the Master Chief and Sergeant Stacker had exited into the central streets of the great metropolis. The segmented roads crossed over one another below the bright sky as buildings stretched high on either side, their tops shrinking into distant clouds. The

sun's rays frolicked across the glass windows of the skyscrapers.

Lights shone up from the road, down from the buildings and across from many illuminating signs around the city. These signs provided directions. Some labelled their complexes or advertised industries. Many of them still flashed red, instructing New Mombasa's citizens to evacuate. Jane was unsurprised to see that many buildings had their glass shattered and parts of their walls caved in. Cars lay abandoned in places but were not nearly as congested as in the highway tunnel. Even when she was this deep between the buildings of the city, Jane could still see the ringed space elevator and the Covenant carrier between the gaps. They were closer to driving directly beneath the looming spaceship.

The space elevator was a marvel. How it managed to be that large and that tall while completely defying gravity caused Jane to stare in disbelief, at least until the Warthog had driven past the gap she'd been looking through. The jeep made multiple turns and drove down a number of streets where they encountered no Covenant. Jane felt more relaxed and safer than she had for hours. That was until she saw the sight ahead as the Warthog made its last turn.

"There are many marines trapped inside that building," Cortana announced.

The building was at the other end of one long, straight road that was several lanes wide and separated by a grassy island down the middle. Two walkways overhead connected buildings and footpaths together without interrupting the road. Jane spotted at least two Jackal Snipers atop the walkways, two Wraiths between the Warthog and the opposite building and a Phantom dangling overhead with two Ghosts ready to drop onto the battlefield.

“My marines are cooped up in that building,” said Stacker. “They’ve joined the Four-Oh-Fifth, A-Company. The Lieutenant’s been killed. Not sure who’s in charge now.”

Jane couldn’t see how they were to reach the building. The Warthog may have been fast, and they had an expensive gauss cannon in their hands, but two Wraiths and a Phantom as well as Ghosts and Covenant Snipers were too much for them to handle. She learnt in the park that there was little she could do against Ghosts with an SMG, at least from a Warthog’s passenger seat. If there was any chance she was going to survive this battle and do some damage against the aliens, she’d need to leave the vehicle.

“Sir,” Jane called to Sergeant Stacker over the rumbling of the Warthog. “I need to get out.”

“Negative, Private,” Stacker replied. “What’s your reason?”

“I can do more on the ground than I can from here.”

“It’s gonna be a tough fight,” said Stacker. “But...”

He pushed the brake. Jane climbed onto a sidewalk without the Warthog ever fully stopping. It sped off as she hit the ground beneath the shadow of one of the buildings. She sprinted up a set of steps to the closest walkway and found one of the Jackal Snipers. The Jackal was too close to aim its beam rifle in time. It dropped its long weapon to the ground and reached for the plasma pistol that was attached to its waist, but by the time it did, the Jackal received a mouthful of bullets from Jane’s submachine gun. That was the last of her SMG ammo.

She looked over to the other walkway and saw the purple glow of the second sniper raising its rifle at her. She dived behind the body of the Jackal she’d killed, lying horizontally. Her opponent withheld its fire. Jane reached around and manipulated the corpse’s position so that it fully covered her human frame. She dropped the SMG and reached for her magnum sidearm. Lifting a small section of the Jackal’s dead body, she squeezed the magnum underneath, pointing the weapon at the other sniper. Her throbbing pulse caused her side to expand and retract, grinding her ribs into the hard floor.

Jane slid into a slightly better position, peeking through a tiny space underneath the dead Jackal's neck. She fired as soon as the sniper was in view. Her shot hit the sniper in the knee. Jane rose up and fired four more. Purple spirted from her enemy's forearm and neck as it fell backwards. Energy flashed nearby as the Jackal's beam missed Jane during its fall off the walkway and onto the road below.

Relieved, Jane looked back down at the streets. She was astounded by what she saw. Sergeant Stacker was pulling up beside the command post. The Ghosts were destroyed. The Phantom had fled, and one of the Wraiths sat completely immobilised on the flat road. Blue fire crackled from the centre of its pod. The last Wraith was spinning slowly, trying to rid itself of the Master Chief who crouched over the top, holding onto it as if he were riding a bucking bull. He pounded his fist into the navy-coloured plate at the top and tore it away from its broken hatch, tossing it aside. The Spartan fired his shotgun into the confused Elite operator who sat within. Jane slightly regretted that she'd missed this fight.

She walked down the footpath towards the building the marines were cooped in. As she approached, a Pelican dangling a Scorpion dropped down gently behind her. The Gauss Warthog now sat empty as the Master Chief

stood beside it. Stacker had already entered the building to check on his squad. A marine named Corporal Perez greeted Jane and the Chief.

“The Lieutenant got hit as soon as we dropped in,” Perez said. “Sergeant Banks is up top. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Jane trailed behind the Spartan as Perez led them up several staircases inside the building. She felt the eyes of the other marines watching as she passed. They were astonished by the presence of a Spartan super-soldier and bewildered by the lone soldier who ran at his heels. She noticed stacks of UNSC medical cases the whole way up and thought back to Saito who’d been shot in the shoulder. If they’d had biofoam nearby, perhaps they could have stopped his bleeding. Jane cursed herself. She had no reason to dwell on the past, no matter how recent it was. She didn’t even know the man.

At the top of the stairs, Jane exited onto a large balcony that connected to a barren courtyard above the first few storeys of the building. A few marines sat next to some comm equipment with a large portable antenna that reminded Jane of the space elevator. One marine crouched over a heavy machine gun turret that pointed into the streets below. Jane spotted the Scorpion that had touched down behind her. It now sat in the streets facing away from the

building to defend it from any more Covenant that were to arrive.

Sergeant Banks wore no cap or helmet. His hair was cut flat at the top. His skin was dark, and his face was clean-shaven.

“When I asked for reinforcements,” Banks began. “I didn’t think they’d send a Spartan.”

Jane felt a little ignored, but it came as no surprise. She herself had been amazed when she first saw the Spartan on Cairo Station. He was a super-human, galaxy-saving hero. She didn’t know precisely how he’d earned those descriptions, and she supposed she’d never have the clearance to find out.

Suddenly, Jane felt a tremor below her boots. A familiar mechanical sound came from around a turn in the wide road ahead. She saw one leg first and then the other creeping out like a spider from its hole. It turned its large body towards the building she stood upon. Jane could feel its bright, green eye pierce right through her.

“We got trouble!” Sergeant Banks exclaimed.

“See this look?” said the marine at the turret. “It’s terror!”

“Marine, did I give you permission to start bitching?” Banks scorned.

The Scarab kept crawling towards them. Despite their position being several storeys above the ground, the Scarab was still higher.

Jane reasoned it must have been at least thirty metres tall.

“I don’t think it’s stopping,” Banks cried. “Get your heads down!”

Jane braced herself as she watched the Scorpion tank tilt its cannon upwards. It pointed at the underside of the four-legged machine’s long belly. Simultaneously, the panels around the Scarab’s eye opened up as it charged its own main cannon, looking down at the tank. The Scorpion fired first. Its explosive shell struck the gigantic walker, but it did little damage. The Scarab then unleashed its green mining beam in reply. The Scorpion all but completely dissolved under the Scarab’s fire. A dusty, black stain was left where the tank had been.

“That *thing*,” started Banks. “Is really starting to piss me off!”

The Scarab looked forwards again and continued its journey through the city, heading straight for them. Not for the first time today, Jane was faced with the very likely reality that she was about to die, but the Scarab did not fire. It just kept walking. *It’s going to crash into us*, Jane panicked. It did not. Instead, it lifted its front legs and climbed over the building into a gap to the left. Jane heard a splash. There must have been water behind the building. It continued onwards around the side of the skyscraper.

“Master Chief,” came Cortana’s voice beside Jane. “I think it’s time we kill us a Scarab.”

“It’s over here,” Corporal Perez called over his comm. “Around the back.”

“What are you going to do, Chief?” Banks asked.

The Spartan paused before answering.

“Catch a ride,” he declared.

The Master Chief re-entered the building and headed through to the back. Jane retrieved a battle rifle on the way before exiting onto some metal grating on the other side. The area behind the building consisted of a massive canal. The grating Jane stood upon was that of a high walkway, which stretched along the edge of the building. Several narrow bridges ran from the walkway, joining with a twin walkway along a building on the other side. There was little railing to keep them safe from slipping into the water below.

Jane peered down. She realised she might be in over her head. A fall like that would very likely kill her, and if not, she wasn’t willing to risk it. She leant back against the building wall.

“Stay here,” the Chief told her.

If there was any order Jane was going to disobey in her life, it wasn’t this one. The Scarab came in from the left. It waded steadily through the water and was about to pass beneath them. The Spartan spoke again.

“We won’t be able to evade those plasma repeaters if it sees us.”

While Jane understood what the Chief was saying, she didn’t see a solution. How were they supposed to get to the Covenant carrier’s gravity lift with this invulnerable Scarab walking about? Just as Jane was having these thoughts, the giant machine passed under a bridge in front of them. The Spartan’s boots clanked loudly as he sprinted forwards over the bridge. Then, he jumped.

Jane watched on in shock. The Master Chief dropped right off the bridge and down onto the Scarab below. The mechanical walker looked different from above. Its body reminded Jane of a picnic basket. She knelt down on the uncomfortable grating and shuffled forwards to get a better view as the Scarab kept walking. Elites, Grunts and Jackal Scouts spilled out over the top of the Scarab from a doorway that led into it. The Master Chief engaged in a firefight with them. Jane’s old shotgun proved effective.

From up here, the skirmishers looked like flies on a dog’s back, but Jane could still tell who was winning. After the Spartan eliminated his targets, he entered the doorway into the Scarab’s abdomen. The Scarab shrank further from Jane as it trod onwards through the canal.

A Pelican flew in over the bridge as the Scarab headed off. This variant of the UNSC Pelican

had a heavy machine gun and missile launcher at the front. Jane was sure it was going to engage the Scarab in battle, but instead, it turned its troop compartment towards her.

“No!” Jane uttered in disbelief when she looked inside.

Every seat in the compartment except one was occupied by a marine. Jane stared at their faces. She recognised Sergeant Banks, Sergeant Stacker, Corporal Perez, Private Ortiz, Private Newton and Private Saito all alive and well. Saito was a little drained of colour and held his arm in a sling, but considering Jane had assumed him dead, he was looking more spritely than ever. She knew she’d left him to die. Had Ortiz and Newton not been present, no one would have gone back for the man. *Optican. Healthcare on demand...* If Saito had died, that would have been on Jane. She was relieved to see him alive, but at the same time, she felt an unpleasant pinch at the pit of her stomach. She felt cold behind her ears as she stared at the marine she’d met on Cairo Station. Finally, she started laughing. Banks interrupted her.

“We’re detecting movement from the Covenant carrier,” he told the laughing marine with a quizzical expression. “Commander Keyes thinks it’s starting its engines. Get in. We’re leaving this sector.”

Jane stepped into the Pelican, taking its last free seat. The dropship then flew over the canal to the Scarab. The walker had stopped moving and was now drooped with its legs bent, immobilised. Jane watched as the Master Chief stepped out onto the roof of the Scarab. The Pelican lowered towards him. As it swung around to let him in, Jane spotted that the purple gravity beam below the Covenant carrier was being retracted.

The voice of Sergeant Major Johnson barked from the Pelican's cockpit.

"That's right, motherfuckers!" he yelled. "Run!"

"Not if we can help it, Sergeant," transmitted Miranda Keyes. "Return to *In Amber Clad*."

"Roger that," he replied.

The Master Chief stood upright within the compartment, gripping the mesh below the Pelican's ceiling as it soared high towards the UNSC frigate. The *In Amber Clad* was mid-flight in pursuit of the Prophet of Regret's carrier.

Just as Jane planted her feet on the floor of the *In Amber Clad*'s hangar, Lord Hood spoke over the open comm channel.

"Status?" Hood asked.

"Sir, the Prophet is bugging out," Keyes replied. "Request permission to engage."

“Negative, Commander. I'll vector two *heavies* for star-side intercept.”

Jane stumbled around looking for a safer section of the ship as it continued flying. Meanwhile, Keyes piloted the In Amber Clad from within its bridge at the front. Lord Hood's face appeared over a digital screen before the Commander. She watched through the front window as the Covenant carrier sailed towards the space elevator. A nearby crewman with his own control panel called to the Commander from his station.

“Ma'am, slipspace rupture off the target's bow! It's going to jump *inside* the city!”

Miranda turned back to the screen in front of her.

“There's no time, sir!”

“Green light!” Hood authorised. “Green light to engage!”

“Punch it!” Keyes yelled to her bridge crew. “Get us close.”

“Ma'am, without a destination solution-”

“We are not losing that ship!”

A small light like a twinkling star appeared at the rounded nose of Regret's carrier. It grew rapidly in diameter until it formed a ring around the front of the ship. It was a tear in slipstream space.

The carrier lurched forwards, propelling itself into the blue unknown of slipspace and

disappearing from the cityscape entirely. Miranda Keyes thrust her frigate closely behind it. The tear flashed shut just as the In Amber Clad slipped through. One spaceship, let alone two, jumping through slipspace *within* atmosphere was unheard of.

Just as the tear closed, it unleashed an explosive blast. Blue light shone in the sky like a second sun where the Prophet's carrier had been. Its energy swept over the city. The space elevator creaked and bent to its force. Cars, trucks, trees and other objects lifted off the ground and were thrown from the city centre. The entire metropolis became submerged in blue light, and then, for the first time in history, New Mombasa lay in complete silence.

The Arbiter

Halo's two forsaken strips and the smaller rubble left over from its destruction floated like driftwood through space. The five-hundred-kilometre-long jellyfish that was High Charity swam through it, still surrounded by its astounding fleet except for a small school of ships that had left in search of the sacred treasure hidden at Earth.

Within High Charity's mushroom dome was the holy city itself. Cylindrical towers coated in the many hues of nanolaminate rose over other less conventional buildings under an artificial sunlight that shone from the centre of the dome's vast ceiling. One structure stood out from the rest, the Forerunner Dreadnought. The grey, straight and angular architecture of the Dreadnought contrasted against the cool colours and curved geometry of the Covenant. Its three diagonal legs met halfway up its body while its narrower, monolithic upper half towered high above the wide skyline. The ancient Forerunner relic stood proudly. It was over one hundred thousand years old but powerful enough that it distributed energy to the entire city, even charging High Charity's engines.

Supreme Commander Thel 'Vadamee strode beside the three lumbering Jiralhanae that led him from the High Council Chamber. Jiralhanae

were generally taller than Sangheili and much broader as well, but they were slow and cumbersome. The thick hair that covered their entire bodies had a filthy musk to it. The only parts of them not covered in hair were their faces, which sat beneath domed craniums, as well as their bare palms and wide two-toed feet. The large nostrils of their squashed noses sat atop stiff, protruding jaws, while four large canines jutted from between their parted lips. Their small, angular eyes were buried below heavy brow ridges, and their skin was thick and coarse.

Thel followed closely behind Tartarus, the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae. Tartarus was taller and older than the guards who walked beside Thel. His long, white, unkempt hair stuck out in every direction except for the mohawk that grew straight on top of his head. He wore minimal protection, but Thel could not ignore the rectangular golden plate that sat upon the Chieftain's shoulder, the remnant of a full suit of armour that had been lost years ago.

Tartarus dragged his long war-hammer along the ground behind him. The *Fist of Rukt* was a traditional hammer that had been wielded by every Chieftain of the Jiralhanae for generations. Tartarus had challenged his uncle for the title just as his uncle challenged the previous Chieftain, and with that title came the hammer.

Evidently, Tartarus had modified the weapon since claiming ownership of it. While it had previously looked primitive and unimpressive, aside from its hefty size, it now appeared a hybrid between primal initiative and modern technology.

Thel and the Jiralhanae walked down a wide walkway at the edge of the dome that ended with a view over the city. Except for the ever-looming Dreadnought at the city centre, the buildings looked miniscule, all seeming to blend into one another when viewed from this height. There was a line of ornate, rotating columns on each side of the walkway with the spaces between filled by Covenant members of the worst kind. Thel ignored them as he lumbered onwards at the pace of the Jiralhanae.

The crowd was mostly filled with lowly Unggoy. As Supreme Commander, Thel 'Vadamee had not interacted directly with many Unggoy, but he had fought alongside them during his earlier years on the frontline and on rarer more-involved missions as Commander. He found them to be curious creatures. They acted uneducated and uninterested but not entirely unintelligent. While many were sickeningly cowardly on the battlefield, Thel had come across the occasional outlier he deemed worthy of respect. Their greatest strength, however, was in their breeding. They had a high

population, and that was what the Sangheili valued most from their shortest of associates. The Unggoy's high numbers were used to overwhelm the Covenant's enemies. Looking into this particular crowd, Thel saw no Unggoy worthy of value.

Small groups of Kig-Yar, the ones humans called *Jackals*, were also dispersed between the columns. To this day, Thel had never encountered a Kig-Yar he liked. Before the Covenant had drawn them into their ranks, the Kig-Yar had been pirates and scavengers. Like all races the Covenant encountered, the Kig-Yar had initially seemed primitive compared with their developed alien collective. However, the pirates managed to band together to form a creditable resistance before eventually being forced to surrender. Thel knew the Kig-Yar resented the Sangheili. Of all the races within the Covenant, this was the least surprising group to be jeering at Thel from the sidelines.

Most of what the crowd yelled was incomprehensible, but occasional clearer phrases fell upon Thel's hearing-orifices.

"He-re-tic! He-re-tic!" chanted a gaggle of Unggoy.

"You will die, infidel!" shrieked a Kig-Yar.

"The gods have no tolerance for negligence, halfwit!"

The last voice sounded suspiciously like a Sangheili. Individuals such as this one tarnished the Sangheili reputation and deserved no place within the Covenant's ranks. No true Sangheili would dishonour themselves by spectating such an event.

Thel stopped upon a circular plate at the end. Looking over the edge of the walkway, he saw several curved stadium-esque stands facing him. The crowds in the stands were far greater than those on the walkway. Thel spied several Jiralhanae, a swarm of insectoid Yanme'e and even a few tank-like Mgalekgolo pairs in their spiked suits of armour. They roared in unison as the Supreme Commander came into view.

Two small, blue energy rings appeared in mid-air above either side of the circular plate. The Jiralhanae guards yanked roughly at Thel's arms and fastened his wrists into the rings. His hands were pulled wide above his head, leaving his elbows hanging awkwardly. As a Sangheili, his large hands stretched into two long fingers with almost-as-long thumbs on either side of both palms. Thel tested the strength of the rings by attempting to yank his hands out from them. He was unsuccessful. Tartarus stepped forwards in front of the restrained Sangheili.

"You've drawn quite a crowd," huffed the great white brute in his slow, lazy Jiralhanae speech.

“If they've come to hear me beg,” Thel began.
“They will be disappointed.”

“Are you sure?” Tartarus snorted.

The energy rings turned red. For a fraction of a second, Thel's wrists felt cold before his senses corrected and he realised they were actually hot and burning into his placoid skin. The fiery energy grew from the rings and spread down his arms. The pain that came with the energy was torturous. His toned muscles spasmed. His body shook violently as the energy crept towards his chest. His two hearts tightened as if squeezed by cold, iron hands while his skin turned to fire. Thel groaned involuntarily. He would not scream for the benefit of the verminous spectators, but the pain only grew stronger.

When will it end? Thel wondered desperately. He knew barely a moment had passed, but already, his peripheral vision was subsiding. Every inch of his body was in excruciating agony. When he'd marched into the High Council Chamber earlier, he had been sure of himself that he was no failure. He did not deserve punishment such as this. It was due to Thel's actions as a leader that the humans were all but extinct. He had fought with high honour and strategic prowess like few others could. He was not arrogant. He knew his shortcomings, but he also knew he was one of the greatest commanders the Covenant ever had. None of

that mattered now as he could do nothing to dull the most intense pain he'd ever felt in his life. His flesh was literally cooking, until eventually, after what felt like a lifetime, it stopped.

Smoke and steam rose off Thel's limp body. He was badly burnt. The red energy had deactivated, but he still winced and twitched in extreme discomfort. He lifted his head as Tartarus addressed the stands below.

"This Sangheili was gifted the task of bringing the humans to extinction," Tartarus projected in his rumbly voice. "He controlled fleets, Sangheili, Unggoy, Kig-Yar, Lekgolo and Yanme'e like yourselves... but not to victory! Instead, when he found the very object our Covenant spent eons searching for, with the Reclamation truly about to begin, and the Great Journey itself, this Sangheili let Halo fall to ruin! He failed to protect the ring from a single demon, and for that, Halo's destruction is his doing. He has disobeyed the Prophets and defied the gods!"

None of that is true, Thel thought. He had obeyed every order he received from the High Prophets and every lesser San'Shyuum that ever accompanied him during his campaign as Supreme Commander. He had certainly never defied the gods. Tartarus continued his speech.

“There can be no greater heresy. Let him be an example for all who would break our Covenant!”

The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae then turned to the guards on either side of Thel and barked.

“Strip him of his armour.”

Thel’s gold combat harness had been charred dark brown from the burning of the energy rings, and its shield emitters no longer glowed, but Thel’s armour was all he had left. His other belongings had been ransacked shortly before his trial. Thel held no shame in letting others see his unclothed body, but leaving him naked before the holy city meant the Covenant no longer saw him as a warrior. He had no choice but to hang still with his wrists remaining locked in the energy rings as the Jiralhanae tore Thel’s armour apart piece by piece.

Thel thought back to his keep on Sanghelios. Sangheili males did not typically have the privilege of knowing their biological sons. The identity of a Sangheili’s father was kept secret from him during his training, but every Sangheili in the Keep of *Vadam* had the same blood running through their veins as Thel did. Thel knew he was no criminal, but the other Sangheili would not see it that way.

His home would be destroyed or acquisitioned by another keep. The Sangheili of *Vadam*, his family, would be massacred. One by

one, they would be hunted down and murdered purely because Thel had directed his attention to the Flood instead of the single demon on Halo. Thel's hope lay in the possibility that one of the more honourable keeps would find his family first, kill them quickly and cleanly and perhaps even allow some of them to live if they could prove themselves worthy.

Thel's armour was tossed aside. Only his helmet remained. Tartarus himself stepped over and lifted it off the Sangheili's head. Without the fins and nose of the helmet, the last of Thel's selachian points were dissolved, as was his pride.

“And so ends the reign of the Supreme Commander of Particular Justice,” Tartarus proclaimed before dumping the helmet on the ground.

The Chieftain then reached for something Thel had not yet noticed due to the commotion. It must have been delivered during his scorching or as his combat harness was removed. It was a long, menacing branding iron as large as the Fist of Rukt. The metal at its wide, trunk-like end was heated with an orange glow. Embossed upon it was a symbol, a circular hieroglyph consisting of quick, curved, sharp strokes. It was the Mark of Shame, a symbol of heresy, exile and execution. It meant that Thel 'Vadamee would be killed today in a painful and humiliating manner. He was no longer the Supreme Commander. He was

no longer a warrior, and he was no longer a servant of the gods.

Thel's failure finally sank in. He had commanded his fleet as proficiently as possible until the battle of Reach, but it was his decisions on Halo that ultimately decided his fate. Protecting the ring had been Thel's only truthfully vital task during his time as a leader. His failure to safeguard and activate Halo had prevented the initiation of the Great Journey. Nothing else mattered. Had his fleet succeeded at Halo, they would now be gods like the Forerunner before them. Alas, they were not.

Tartarus raised the branding iron towards Thel's naked torso. Before it even touched the Sangheili, the heat from the iron stung his already tender flesh. The brute then thrust it as hard as he could into the Sangheili's chest. Thel felt his welted skin give way to the Mark of Shame before his sternum became aflame. Hot steam hissed from between the iron and his flesh as they were pressed together. The pain pierced straight through the Sangheili. He roared louder than he had ever roared in his life. His vision turned white then red and then faded to black. The head and neck of Thel 'Vadamee flopped forwards as he fell unconscious.

In another part of the Covenant city, the Prophet of Truth sat satisfied upon his hover

throne. The throne was now connected to a much larger gravity barge. Beside him sat the old codger, his direct peer, the Prophet of Mercy in his own hover throne. The barge was taking them from a dock near the High Council building to another of High Charity's blessed landmarks. Truth considered the trial that had just transpired. He knew there was no sincerity in it. It had been a performance for the Councillors.

Truth neither liked the Councillors nor did he think the Covenant had any use for them. While it had been the Councillors who voted Truth, Mercy and Regret into power, they were now obsolete as far as he was concerned. The Great Journey was nigh. No decisions made by those stale politicians was going to change that. From the moment the hierarchs had come into power, they worked every day to ensure the initiation of the Great Journey, to secure their position as the High Prophets and to prevent the interference of the human race.

Truth thought back to the eventful day that led to the Covenant's declaration of war on humanity. A single small Kig-Yar ship had discovered a human colony named Harvest. At the time, the only individuals aware of the humans' existence were the crew of this ship and the three Prophets plus another crew of Jiralhanae they sent in to investigate. The Kig-

Yar crew had messaged the Prophets after discovering the humans using a device called a *luminary*.

The luminaries were reverse-engineered from Forerunner technology to aid the Covenant's search for ancient relics that could lead to the Great Journey. The Covenant was built upon the belief that the Forerunner left their artefacts on the San'Shyuum and Sangheili homeworlds for their inhabitants to reclaim, accessing the Forerunner's power and walking the same steps that they had. The Covenant's end goal was the ascension to godhood.

After the luminary led the Kig-Yar ship to the humans, the Prophets confronted an *oracle* left by the gods. This one resided within the Dreadnought in the centre of High Charity. The oracle remained active only long enough to tell the Prophets that the Covenant had mistranslated Forerunner scripts. The symbol they believed to signify the *Reclamation* was in fact the symbol used by the Forerunner to represent the *Reclaimers*. These Reclaimers, the beings intended by the Forerunner to reclaim all they left behind, were in fact the humans. After informing the three Prophets of this, the oracle attempted to leave the city. Failing that, it disabled itself, remaining dormant ever since.

Truth glanced sideways at Mercy sitting beside him on the barge. The shrivelled fool had

been a fraud in Truth's eyes, but he had managed to activate the oracle for a short time. This act proved most useful. After receiving the oracle's message, the Prophets concocted a plan to eradicate the human race before the rest of the Covenant could hear the same message. Personally, Truth believed the oracle to have been mistaken, but it did not matter. Whatever the Forerunner's original intent, it was the Covenant who would complete the Reclamation, not this *humanity* that Truth since learnt to despise.

This was the secret held by the Prophets of Truth, Mercy and Regret. They told the Sangheili that the humans had begun destroying Forerunner relics for no reason other than to prevent the Covenant from obtaining them. In response, the Sangheili gathered their warships and led a fleet to destroy the humans at Harvest. It was only after that when they learnt the humans were spread across numerous colonies, an infestation upon the galaxy. In time, with the assistance of the luminaries, the Sangheili tracked the human colonies down one by one. Presently, few colonies remained. It would not be long before humanity was eliminated once and for all.

The gravity barge drifted down towards a dropship pad. The drooping lobes on the sides of the San'Shyuums' heads swung along with

their chin wattles as the barge came to a halt. The two hierarchs disembarked from the barge along with two lines of their most loyal Sangheili. The Sangheili Honour Guards wore combat harnesses of red and yellow with decorative headpieces akin to the stretching arms of the Prophets' shoulder ornaments. The only Honour Guards who were not present were those who waited for them in their Inner Sanctum and the company that guarded the Prophet of Regret in his carrier.

Of his two colleagues, the Prophet of Regret was the one Truth disliked most. Mercy was stubborn and fanatical, but he could be easily manipulated. Regret was younger and sharper, and Truth got the feeling he was always scheming behind his back. Regret had won the admiration of the Sangheili. In some ways, Truth thought Regret *acted* like a Sangheili. Regret's concealed plasma pistol was a terribly kept secret, and Truth suspected he'd even meddled with his gravity throne, installing energy weapons beneath its casing.

Truth floated alongside Mercy and the marching Honour Guards towards a cylindrical tower ahead. His mind turned to more immediate concerns. One of his Honour Guards named Lhar 'Terohnee had asked him about Thel 'Vadamee's family. Truth knew the typical behaviour of Sangheili after such events. As

intelligent as they were, the Sangheili were barbaric. They were warriors at their best and warriors at their worst. Responding to his guard's query, Truth issued an order to protect the Vadam Keep on Sanghelios. He needed the family alive as he may require them for leverage against the ex-Supreme-Commander. The Council decided the fate of the disgraced Sangheili, but the High Prophets conceived an alternative solution.

When Thel came back into consciousness, he found himself being dragged through a dark hallway. The two Jiralhanae guards pulled him along by his arms as Tartarus strode ahead. Thel heard the familiar ring of a Covenant door closing behind him. Still gathering a sense of his surroundings, he noticed prison cells on either side. The metal bars suggested this brig was very old. Typical Covenant holding cells were locked using hardlight shield doors rather than primitive bars such as these. A sharp talon reached out from one of the cells in an attempt to grab the tortured Sangheili. The cells were filled with villainous Kig-Yar.

The Jiralhanae slugged onwards. Thel's knees stung badly as they rubbed along the hard ground.

“How much further must we heft this baggage?” asked one of the Jiralhanae. “Any cell will do.”

“Why not toss him in with this lot?” joined his partner. “They could use the meat.”

“Them? What about us?” grumbled the first. “My belly aches, and his flesh is seared just the way I like it.”

“Quiet,” Tartarus snapped. “You two whimper like Unggoy fresh off the teat. He's not meant for the jails. The hierarchs have something *special* in mind.”

Thel shut his eyes again for a while as the Jiralhanae hauled his aching body through the city. When he eventually opened his eyes, he recognised a tall, cylindrical building with oval lights and an ornamental entrance. Thel looked around as they passed through the doorway. There was only one room in the hollow tower. The curved walls were covered in small, closed hatches the entire way around and up the interior. Upon the hatches were red lights, indicating they were locked, and Thel understood why. They were tombs. Standing around the edges of the circular chamber were several Honour Guards, and in the centre of the room was a capsule taller than Thel himself. In front of the capsule hovered two High Prophets. Tartarus knelt before them.

“Noble Prophets of Truth and Mercy,” began the Chieftain. “I have brought the incompetent.”

The Prophet of Truth waved his hand lazily to dismiss the Jiralhanae.

“You may leave, Tartarus,” he said.

“But, I thought-”

“And take your Jiralhanae with you.”

Tartarus sighed before speaking to his guards.

“Release the prisoner,” he ordered.

The Jiralhanae let go of Thel’s hands, causing him to drop to the floor. The initial impact hurt the Sangheili’s injured body, but the cold surface offered some relief. All three Jiralhanae left the room. The door shut behind them, leaving Thel alone with the Prophets and their regal Honour Guards. Truth addressed the naked warrior.

“The Council decided to have you hung by your entrails and your corpse paraded through the city,” said the Prophet. “But ultimately, the terms of your execution are up to me.”

“I am already dead,” Thel whispered.

“Indeed,” Truth acknowledged apathetically.

“Do you know where we are?”

“The Mausoleum of the Arbiter,” the Sangheili answered.

“Quite so. Here rests the vanguard of the Great Journey, every Arbiter from first to last, each one created and consumed in times of extraordinary crisis.”

The Prophet of Mercy joined in with his strained, crackly voice.

“The Taming of the Lekgolo, the Unggoy Rebellion,” he listed. “Were it not for the Arbiters, the Covenant would have broken long ago!”

“Even on my knees,” replied Thel. “I do not belong in their presence.”

“Halo's destruction was your error,” said Truth. “And you rightly bear the blame, but the Council was overzealous. We know you are no heretic.”

Truth then activated a holographic display over the left arm of his hover throne. It exhibited a Sangheili with lighter skin than Thel's. He was equipped with an untraditional combat harness as well as a strange mouthpiece between his mandibles and vertical thrusters upon his back. This Sangheili was Sesa 'Refumee, a Field Master belonging to Particular Justice. He'd been part of Thel's command during the battle of Halo before the Minister of Stewardship reassigned him without Thel's consent.

“This is the *true* face of heresy,” Truth nodded at the display. “This one would subvert our faith and incite rebellion against the High Council.”

The Prophet played the message, leading the holographic form of Sesa 'Refumee to speak.

“Our Prophets are false,” said the hologram. “Open your eyes, my brothers. They would use the faith of our forefathers to bring ruin to us all! The Great Journey is a-”

Truth hit *stop* on the message.

“This heretic and those who follow him must be silenced,” he said.

“Their slander offends all who walk the path!” added Mercy.

Thel wondered for a moment. *Why are the Prophets showing me this?* The hierarchs had supported Thel ‘Vadamee throughout his rise to power. They’d seen his ambition from the start, before Particular Justice was even formed. Perhaps they still recognised value in the damaged commander.

“What use am I?” Thel asked. “I can no longer command ships, lead troops into battle-”

“Not as you are,” said Truth. “But become the Arbiter and you shall be set loose against this heresy with our blessing.”

The Prophets floated to the side. Truth gestured at the capsule in the centre of the room. A door into the capsule opened like a drawbridge, revealing a suit of armour within. This combat harness was of a very old-fashioned design. It consisted of thinner plating with far more segments than modern combat harnesses. It had fewer sharp points and was a dull steel colour. Engraved into every segment of the

armour were intricate swirls and other detailed patterns. The front of the helmet curved forwards in a way that would fit between the mandibles of its Sangheili wearer. Were the Prophets really suggesting what Thel thought they were?

“What of the Council?” he asked them.

“The tasks you must undertake as the Arbiter are perilous, suicidal,” Mercy explained. “You will die, as each Arbiter has before you. The Council will have their corpse.”

Thel rose from the ground with newfound strength and stepped towards the capsule. He reached in, pulled out the helmet and placed it onto his long head. Then he turned back to the Prophets.

“What would you have your Arbiter do?”

A Whisper in the Storm

“When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath,” stated the white-armoured Special Ops Commander named Rtas ‘Vadumee, striding around the inside of the Phantom.

Lines of black-armoured Special Ops Sangheili replied in unison.

“According to our station,” they rehearsed. “All without exception.”

“On the blood of our fathers and the blood of our sons,” the Spec Ops Commander continued. “We swore to uphold the Covenant!”

“Even to our dying breath!” his Sangheili replied.

Thel knew the words like the back of his hand. Unfortunately, the backs of his hands were now scarred from his punishment and barely recognisable to him. He’d become a new Sangheili with a new purpose. While Rtas ‘Vadumee and his Special Ops Sangheili had recently been Thel’s subordinates, he no longer had authority over them. He was neither a warrior amongst their ranks nor a leader they looked up to. He was an outsider, as was the nature of his new role. The Spec Ops Commander continued.

“Those who would break this oath are heretics, worthy of neither pity nor mercy!” Rtas

proclaimed. “Even now they use our lords' creations to broadcast their lies.”

“We shall grind them into dust!” his Sangheili answered.

“And continue our march to glorious salvation!”

When Thel first met Rtas ‘Vadumee years ago, Rtas had not yet received command of the Special Ops. Thel had felt an initial inclination to distrust Rtas who, at the time, still wore jet-black armour like the other Spec Ops Sangheili. Thel ignored this distrust because he knew it was irrational. It came from the fact that Rtas was left-handed. While this trait was rare for a Sangheili, it was regular for the Kig-Yar, who Thel had every reason not to trust just as much as he distrusted the Jiralhanae. In time, Rtas’ left-handedness became a positive. It allowed the Sangheili to stand out, and when the warrior proved his battle skills and leadership in the fight against the humans, Thel promoted him to commander. The Commander approached Thel now as the Special Ops Sangheili and Unggoy around them were checking their armour.

“This armour suits you,” Rtas told Thel. “But it cannot hide that mark.”

“Nothing ever will,” Thel replied.

Thel’s new brand was hidden by the armour of the Arbiter, but even if his skin was ever to fully heal, he would always feel its burn. Rtas

Vadumee had a mark of his own. The Special Ops Commander lost half of his two left mandibles on Halo. How he managed to maintain clear speech was beyond Thel. *It must be a conscious effort*, Thel figured. Rtas continued to address his prior leader.

“You are the Arbiter, the will of the Prophets,” he said. “But these are my Sangheili. Their lives matter to me. Yours does not.”

“That makes two of us,” Thel agreed.

The Spec Ops Commander nodded in response. Thel could feel that Rtas still held a modicum of respect for him. He felt the Phantom slow down as it neared its destination, a gas mine within the atmosphere of the planet Threshold. The voice of the Sangheili pilot sounded from the cockpit.

“Leader,” called the pilot. “There is no doubt the storm will strike the facility.”

“We will be long gone before it arrives,” Rtas replied. “Warriors, prepare for combat!”

The Spec Ops Sangheili and Unggoy shuffled their way to the open hole in the centre of the Phantom’s flooring. One by one, they stepped down into the gravity lift, which allowed them to float softly onto the roof of the gas mine. Thel stepped through last. As soon as his hooves hit the surface, he reached for the hilt of his energy sword and ignited the blades, leaving his Covenant carbine over his back. An honourable

Sangheili would only draw his weapon if there was no doubt he was going to use it. Only a shameful Sangheili would ignite an energy sword without good cause. Today, Thel was hunting heretics.

The Arbiter looked around. It was obvious the ground on which he stood was part of a relic created by the gods. Like most Forerunner surfaces, it had a distinct metallic appearance. The smooth upper surface reflected a faint sheen wherever he walked, but below this were the oddly shaped, tessellating polygons that Thel had become accustomed to seeing on Halo. The Forerunner's design choices still bewildered him. With the rustic textures of the metal shapes, the surface appeared advanced yet ancient and mysterious. Thel knew there were many more layers to the Forerunner architecture than what he could see.

This gas mine was one of many stations that each hung from a cable attached to a larger structure higher in Threshold's atmosphere. The mine had many blocky parts to it, one of which Thel and the Spec Ops Sangheili now stood on top of. Thel looked up at the Phantom that had dropped him off. The Spec Ops Commander remained inside. Two other Phantoms lifted further into Threshold's clouds. The clouds were crisp and golden, but when Thel peered over the side of the station, he found a swirling

whirlpool of rust-red gases below. The Phantoms were ready to deliver reinforcements if need be, but this was a stealth mission. The fewer units there were, the better.

“We are the arm of the Prophets,” Rtas announced from the dropship’s comm. “And you are the blade, Arbiter. Be silent and swift, and we shall quell this heresy without incident.”

Thel and the Spec Ops group moved down a ramp to the side of the roof from where they’d been standing. They found an entrance into the station on the platform below. One of the Sangheili accessed a holopanel beside a rectangular Forerunner door with a familiar triangular symbol on it. Once it opened, they all marched through into a wide airlock. They waited as the room pressurised. Both doors sealed shut before the second door could open. Rtas’ voice came over the comm again.

“The storm has masked our approach,” he said. “And it should have their local battlenet in disarray. We have the element of surprise... for now.”

One of the Sangheili spoke up.

“Engage active camouflage,” he told the others. “Reveal yourselves only after the Arbiter has joined battle with the enemy.”

The Unggoy and Sangheili around the Arbiter seemed to fade away. Their active camouflage rendered them close to invisible. Thel could see

them well enough, having already seen where they stood, but an unsuspecting heretic would be sure to miss them.

“You may wish to do the same, Arbiter,” Rtas transmitted. “But take heed. Your armour's system is not as new as ours. Your camouflage will not last forever.”

Unsure of how long his camouflage would last, Thel waited until the next door began to open before he activated his own. He watched as his arms faded away in front of his face. Satisfied, he stepped into the chamber ahead. The Spec Ops units followed closely and silently behind. Despite being barely visible, Thel moved from cover to cover to be certain he wasn't seen. After a while, he noticed his camouflage begin to dwindle and paused behind a pillar. He watched his body come into view. He waited momentarily and reactivated the camouflage before moving on.

Before long, the group came upon a crowd of heretics. The heretic Sangheili wore hazard harnesses like the one Thel had seen on Sesa 'Refumee in the Prophet of Truth's hologram. He also noticed the shield emitters on their armour glowed purple instead of the usual blue. The rebreather packs worn by the heretic Unggoy were also different. Instead of being long and pyramidal, they consisted of two

transparent tubes that did nothing to hide the methane-based concoction inside.

The heretic Unggoy slept quietly, sitting curled on the floor as their species often did. Two heretic Sangheili muttered to one another as they walked between the napping Unggoy. Thel hugged the wall and slid across to get closer to the centre of the heretic group. He then stepped forwards. Sneaking up towards the backs of the Sangheili, he stabbed both of them swiftly and silently. They each died with a soft gargle. Their bodies hit the floor at the same time as the sleeping Unggoy flopped over, killed by Thel's camouflaged Spec Ops companions.

The next area contained three energy belts that transported large empty canisters along the length of the room. The canisters consisted of four transparent tubes, similar to the ones on the backs of the heretic Unggoy but larger. More Unggoy slept between the energy belts as three Sangheili conversed in the middle.

“Any word on our missing brothers?” Thel heard one of them ask.

“Still nothing,” another replied. “Given what we have learnt, I fear they are lost.”

“Maybe the Oracle will protect us,” added the third.

That was an odd likelihood, Thel thought. The oracles were creations of the Forerunner, left behind to guide the Covenant's Great

Journey. Thel had never encountered any himself, but he had received descriptions of one oracle sighted by Sangheili in his command on Halo. He assumed Halo's oracle had perished along with the rest of the destroyed Fortress World. Whatever the case, these heretics were deluded to think any servant of the gods would protect them. Thel Vadamee swept in and put an end to their delusions. His active camouflage deactivated once he assassinated the heretics.

As Thel's companions eliminated the sleeping Unggoy, the Arbiter looked around the room. He noticed several trims and braces along the sides. They were purely decorative. Forerunner architecture didn't need to be held up by anything other than the walls themselves, which displayed many brass segments engraved with ornate patterns to separate the duller greys. The patterns, trims and braces gave the chamber and indeed all Forerunner structures Thel had visited a distinct temple quality.

Thel and the Spec Ops team or *lance* trod alongside the moving canisters to the end of the room. The canisters dropped down a seemingly bottomless pit beside an elevator shaft. The lance crowded around the elevator as it rose to their level. A single heretic Sangheili stood on the lift with his mandibles agape in surprise at the sudden appearance of the Special Ops. Thel spoke to him.

“The Prophet of Truth sends his regards,” he said before the entire lance blasted the lone Sangheili with plasma.

They pulled the corpse out of the elevator, and once all were inside, one of the Spec Ops Sangheili activated the holo-switch that sent the lift downwards. The elevator itself was a single platform with no walls or ceiling that magically moved down the shaft. Like the Covenant, the Forerunner tended to use gravity lifts where necessary, but elevators like this one were not uncommon. The lance reactivated their camouflage as the elevator entered the next room.

They were now in a large shuttle bay with a closed transparent hangar door. Suspended in the air at the centre of the hangar was a Seraph fighter. The lance found themselves atop a walkway that stretched around both sides of the hangar. There was a ramp at the end of each side leading to the level below.

Several machines hovered around the hangar carrying large gas canisters identical to the ones seen in the previous room. The mechanical drones appeared slim but clunky and seemed to be made from the same metal as the architecture around them. Each machine consisted of a long, angular body with light plating and two equally plated arm-like extensions along the sides. Halfway up the front of each machine was a

single glowing lens or *eye*, and underneath that hung a flexible, narrow weapon, a cannon of sorts.

The machines that carried the canisters disappeared into the left wall through dark tunnels near the ceiling while emptyhanded machines entered the hangar from tunnels on the right. Thel noticed more energy belts carrying the canisters along the sides of the lower level with heretic Sangheili striding between sleeping Unggoy in the middle. A camouflaged Spec Ops Sangheili standing beside Thel whispered to the group.

"Sentinels, the holy warriors of the Sacred Rings," he informed them regarding the flying machines. "Why have they sided with these heretics?"

"Leave your questions for the Prophets," Thel replied softly. "It is not for the Sangheili to ponder such concerns. They are the head of the Covenant. We are but the arms. Let us remind these heretics what they have abandoned."

"Agreed, Arbiter," the Sangheili replied. "If you stay to the right path, we will go left and take them from behind."

Thel pulled out his Covenant carbine and crept carefully along the side of the shuttle bay, passing several locked doors to his right before one of them opened. Three heretic Unggoy waddled into the room without noticing the

camouflaged Arbiter until the front Unggoy smacked right into him. Thel clubbed his carbine into the Unggoy, rendering it unconscious. Its companions each fired a small shot at the Arbiter's shields before Thel fired his carbine in return. The lime-coloured energy of the carbine was smaller, more solid and had longer tails than the plasma that was fired from the Unggoy's pistols. It was also faster and more accurate. The Unggoy were dispatched with a single headshot each.

Unfortunately, the heretics below heard the weapons fire. Unggoy leapt from their sleep and began firing with their Sangheili leaders in Thel's direction. Thel dived as the Spec Ops lance on the opposite side of the room returned fire downwards at the heretics. The Sentinel machines ignored the firefight below them. Instead, they continued to float down, picking up a canister each and heading up to the tunnels, avoiding stray jets of green and blue that flew past them.

Thel focused his fire on the heretic Sangheili rather than the Unggoy. His carbine energy was not as useful against energy shields as plasma was, but if he fired rapidly enough, their shields would be stripped in no time. Soon the heretics' shields *were* depleted thanks to Thel and the Spec Ops lance. Thel's camouflage wore off just as he popped two Sangheili in the head with his

carbine. As their bodies hit the floor, the Arbiter ran down the ramp to meet the remaining Sangheili and Unggoy on their level. The Spec Ops members jumped down to join him.

Due to the level of movement the Spec Ops were making, shooting and swinging at their enemies, their active camouflage was practically useless. It wasn't fast enough to track their changing environment as they battled around the hangar. Both Sangheili and Unggoy deactivated their camouflage to save power for the fight. The purple shields of the heretics and the blue shields of the Spec Ops lit up around Thel, but the Arbiter knew who had the upper hand. Before long, these heretics would be dead, and he'd be free move in on the location of their leader, Sesa 'Refumee.

Just as the last of the heretics were falling, the doors on the sides of the room opened to let more heretics pour in. Countless heretics came in through the doors making Thel and the Spec Ops lance outnumbered. With this many heretics, the Spec Ops could not win this fight. The Arbiter looked around for an advantage. He noticed a holopanel near the hangar door and ran for it while activating his comm.

"This is the Arbiter," Thel transmitted. "More heretics have entered the hangar. We are outnumbered."

“Understood, Arbiter,” replied the voice of Rtas ‘Vadumee. “I will deliver our second lance.”

The Arbiter hit the switch, and the hangar door opened to the cloudy atmosphere outside.

“Retreat to the shadows!” Thel yelled.

The Spec Ops lance drew back into the space below the walkways while still firing at the heretics. Thel’s shields flickered out as a green explosion nearby knocked him to the floor. He recovered and joined the Spec Ops lance while scanning for his attacker. A heretic Unggoy on the upper level had a heavy, gold Handheld Fuel Rod Cannon resting on its shoulders. The Unggoy fired again, but this time Thel was ready. He dive-rolled before the explosion could reach anywhere near him. The Unggoy’s corpse fell to the lower level after the Arbiter performed a quick headshot. The fuel rod gun landed beside its body.

Suddenly, all the Sentinels in the hangar retreated to their tunnels as a Covenant Phantom flew in, squeezing in behind the Seraph. Each heretic was lit up with red plasma as the Phantom’s Shades annihilated them. Thel and the Special Ops finished off the remaining heretics hiding in harder-to-get places. By the end of the firefight, only two dead Spec Ops Unggoy lay amongst the countless heretic bodies. *Nothing can measure up to the might of the*

Covenant, Thel thought confidently. *This was the fate of the heretics the moment they betrayed us.*

The Phantom dropped several more Spec Ops units before exiting the hangar. Thel turned to one of the Spec Ops Sangheili from the first lance, one he'd noticed put up an impressive fight against the heretics. He pointed to the Sangheili and then to the fuel rod gun on the ground.

“You,” Thel barked with authority. “Drop your rifle for the fuel rod. It will serve us better in this fight.”

The Handheld Fuel Rod Cannon would be much slower to fire than the plasma rifle, and it ran on limited cartridges rather than battery power, but the blast radius of its shots would prove more useful. Thel watched the Spec Ops Sangheili hesitate. He and Thel stared at one another briefly before the Sangheili walked over and picked up the gold cannon. Thel wondered about the hesitation. *Perhaps the warrior did not wish to take orders from a disgraced commander.* Whether because of the Arbiter's authority or because the Sangheili agreed the fuel rod gun would be the better choice, he listened.

Thel and the two Spec Ops lances formed together and headed down an open door on the lower level directly below the elevator. They traversed hallways that twisted and turned downwards into the facility. Every so often, they

were confronted with opposing heretic groups. The Spec Ops swept through without casualties. They no longer required the use of their camouflage now that the heretics were aware of their presence, and with their great numbers within the tight hallways, they became a black wall that crushed its way forwards.

Eventually, they entered another chamber of energy conveyer belts. This time, the canisters were filled with blue gas. Sentinels continued to ignore the heretics and Spec Ops as they engaged further in combat. A band of heretic Unggoy activated a plasma grenade each. With their movements synchronised, they raised the glowing orbs above their heads, but before they could throw their grenades, the Sangheili with the fuel rod gun fired at the Unggoy. The green explosion broke through the glass of their methane tubes, propelling them into the surrounding heretics. The methane in the Unggoy's rebreather packs ignited, turning the Unggoy themselves into explosives, blowing their allies apart along with the detonating grenades. It didn't take long before the Spec Ops had cleared the rest of the room, but an idea came to Thel that he wished to execute before continuing on.

“Wait here,” Thel ordered the Spec Ops lances. “This chamber is large enough for

another full-scale firefight. Look at the doors. The heretics will flood in if we linger.”

“What is your point?” asked one of the Spec Ops Sangheili.

“My plan,” Thel continued. “Is to lure the heretics to us. Place those canisters beside the entrances. When our enemies enter, we fire upon the canisters and ignite them.”

Thel waited. Both lances paused, but before long, they were all shuffling about. He helped them push the canisters into position while the Sentinels watched curiously. Thel was worried the Sentinels might interfere, but they hovered by without protest. Thel was also glad the Spec Ops were responding to him. They seemed to respect his role as Arbiter in spite of his past failure as Supreme Commander. As soon as there were several canister stacks next to each door, Thel instructed his allies to wait.

The Forerunner walls were completely soundproof, preventing the lance from hearing the rumble of approaching footsteps. When streams of heretics began to rush through the opening doors, the Spec Ops allowed the first few to pass through. The Arbiter raised his hand.

“Wait,” Thel ordered. “Wait... Now!”

The perimeter of the room became alight with blue explosions as the Spec Ops Sangheili and Unggoy unloaded their plasma into the gas canisters. Pieces of heretic flesh and armour

littered the room like a smashed piñata. Indigo-coloured goop splashed across Thel's face. He flicked it off with his long fingers and finished watching the destruction unfold with the literal taste of blood still upon him.

Once the explosions and plasma fire ceased, the room fell quiet. The only sound heard was the buzzing of the Sentinels who scanned the room. The chamber was completely stained in heretic blood with chunks of Sangheili and Unggoy bodies scattered across the floor. One Sentinel dropped towards a limbless Sangheili corpse. It reached over with its mechanical extensions and grabbed the dead warrior. At first, the corpse slipped through its arms back onto the floor before the Sentinel found a better hold and flew off with it down a tunnel. *It must be tidying up*, Thel figured.

“The heretic leader, Sesa ‘Refumee is expected to be hiding below our position,” Thel explained. “Let us find him.”

“Arbiter,” called a Sangheili to Thel's right. “Uh... You have some brains... on your mandible.”

The lance fought few heretics through the following corridors, twisting and turning until they found themselves in another hangar. This one held no Seraph, and the transparent door ahead was still closed. On the other side of the door stood Sesa ‘Refumee between two empty

Banshees. He was just about to enter one of the support craft but turned instead to face Thel 'Vadamee who was at the head of the lance. The heretic leader spoke over an open comm as the hangar door was too thick to talk through naturally.

"I wondered who the Prophets would send to silence me," said the leader. "An Arbiter? I'm flattered."

"Come forward," Thel replied. "And I will kill you quickly. Only a coward flees a fair fight."

Sesa 'Refumee chuckled.

"Only a fool of a Sangheili would not flee from two full Spec Ops lances."

"Then wait for me," Thel told him. "And I will fight you one to one."

With each word, Thel was creeping forwards, edging his way to the door switch.

"Get in line," Sesa finished before sliding into the left Banshee, pulling its hinged roof down over himself.

By the time the Arbiter was able to press the switch, the heretic's Banshee had already passed into the crimson fog.

"The heretics are mobilising their air forces," informed the voice of Rtas 'Vadumee. "They have Banshee emplacements all over the facility. Go after their leader, Arbiter, but watch your back. I'm sending one of our Phantoms to support you."

More heretics spilled into the hangar as Thel slid into the second Banshee. The lances would have to do without the Arbiter for now. As soon as the lid of the Banshee closed, it tumbled to the side. Plasma splashed along its body. The hum of the aircraft's engines turned into a scream as Thel thrust the Banshee forwards into the warm mist. An enemy Banshee followed closely at his tail as the silhouette of the hangar faded behind them in the gathering clouds.

Thel swerved left and right to shake his chaser off his tail. He managed to dodge some plasma, but not all of it. The biggest danger would be if the enemy Banshee shot off his anti-gravity tubes. Thel used the controls before him to switch from the Banshee's primary cannons to its slower, more powerful secondary cannon. He pulled the Banshee up into a sudden backflip until he was now directly behind his enemy. With the two support craft having switched positions, Thel fired his Banshee's fuel rod cannon, blasting the enemy craft into shrapnel. He pulled upwards to evade the debris which could have easily shredded through him. A friendly Phantom dived down from the clouds above.

"We have tracked the heretic leader to another part of the station," said Rtas. "Follow. I will lead you to him."

Enemy Banshees appeared at every angle on the way to the other section of the mining facility. The Phantom fended them off with its three Shade turrets while Thel performed more flips backwards, forwards, left and right to evade their plasma fire and occasional fuel rod shots. He destroyed another with a well-timed fuel rod but had to chip away at the rest with plasma as they were too mobile, dodging his fire the same as Thel dodged theirs. While Thel was the better marksman and manoeuvrer by a clear margin, his Banshee was extremely damaged by the time he reached his destination.

Thel landed on a bridge that connected two parts of the hanging station over the bottomless atmosphere below while the Phantom dropped the last Spec Ops lance behind him. Exiting the Banshee, the Arbiter wasted no time and sprinted towards the door they'd tracked the heretic leader to. Before he reached it, the door opened and a heretic Sangheili stepped out equipping a weapon that looked very much like the ones attached to the Sentinels. Orange and yellow energy was beamed out from the weapon like a firehose directed into Thel's armour.

Thel leapt forwards and slashed through the heretic, slicing him in half. The Arbiter, filled with rage, opened up his mandibles and gave an almighty roar. He was not hurt. His shields recharged as he stared down at the maimed

corpse which puddled the floor with blood. The indigo liquid splashed over the dropped Sentinel weapon.

How dare he! Thel thought. *How dare he use the weapons of the guardians, technology of the gods themselves!* As part of their sacred pact, only the Prophets were allowed to utilise such objects. The Sangheili were to search for ancient relics while the San'Shyuum assessed and altered them only with the direct guidance of the gods. Then and only then could the technology be passed onto the Sangheili to aid their holy quest. This heretic was filth. He had no right to such devices.

The chamber beyond the door was tall and expansive. It had many levels around the edges and a seemingly endless ramp that spiralled around a glowing tube and ran to the ceiling above. Floating pieces of Forerunner geometry swivelled in the air around the long tube as yellow energy pulsed upwards inside it. On the ground level where Thel stood, just behind the spiral ramp was a hologram displaying the three-dimensional schematics of the entire station. Running past it towards a door at the opposite end was Sesa 'Refumee.

The Arbiter fired his carbine rapidly. Each shot hit its mark, but the purple shields of the heretic leader's harness protected him. Thel chased after the Sangheili, spamming the sensor

of his carbine, but once Sesa stepped through the porthole, a hardlight shield door appeared, separating the heretic from the room behind him. The Arbiter stepped up to blue shield, standing face to face with the Sangheili on the other side. Sesa spoke.

“This will save me from the storm,” said the heretic. “But you will be consumed.”

Thel slammed his fist on the shield door. The blue energy rippled slightly but remained solid. Sesa ‘Refumee slipped into the darkness on the other side as Rtas ‘Vadumee and the third Spec Ops lance joined the Arbiter.

“Where is he?” asked the Spec Ops Commander.

Thel nodded towards the shield door.

“Stinking *floodbait* boxed himself in tight,” cursed Rtas. “We’ll never break through this.”

Thel turned back to look at the station’s schematics before replying.

“Then we shall force him out.”

“How?”

“The cable,” said Thel. “I’m going to cut it. Get everyone back to the ships.”

Rtas surveyed the hologram before barking orders at his Sangheili and Unggoy.

“Warriors, return to the landing zone. The Arbiter will continue upward, cut this station loose and scare the heretic from his hole!”

“May the lords guide you!” one Sangheili shouted to the Arbiter before exiting with the rest of the lance.

Thel made his way up the spiral ramp with little resistance. A small group of heretic Unggoy equipped with needlers and a single Sangheili confronted the Arbiter, but he dispatched them with almost no damage to his shields. Any heretics still alive were scraps, leftovers. They stood no chance against the Arbiter or the Special Ops, and soon they would perish with the falling station. Thel knew there would be some in the Covenant who would question what he was about to do, but it was for the good of the Journey. In time, the Sentinels would build a replacement.

“Arbiter, all of my Phantoms are in the air,” transmitted Rtas ‘Vadumee. “Go ahead. Cut that cable.”

Thel found an octagonal elevator at the top of the ramp. He activated the switch and was propelled upwards into a tunnel overhead. When the lift came to a stop, Thel found himself at the very top of the station. The cable holding up the station forked off into three smaller cords as thick as tree trunks in each corner of the area. The Sentinels watched his every move as he stepped towards the first of the three cords and activated his energy sword. He swung once, twice and then a third time before the cord was

cut loose. It flicked up like elastic, sending white sparks around the room.

Thel was immediately greeted by an orange and yellow beam from one of the Sentinels. He dived to avoid it but still lost half his shields in the fraction of the second the beam made contact. There was a reason the San'Shyuum reverse-engineered Forerunner technology to create Covenant weaponry. It would take no time for this Sentinel to eliminate his shields and kill him. The Arbiter needed to keep on the move.

Thel fired his carbine at the second cord while sprinting towards it. The Sentinel beam followed his every step. He cut the second cord successfully with his sword and continued on to the third without stopping. Two more Sentinels beamed in his direction. The Arbiter altered his movements to make it even harder for the beams to touch him, but he could only keep this up a couple of seconds longer. He dived for the third cord and sliced as hard as he could.

The Sangheili's stomach lurched as the floor below him jolted downwards. He felt weightless for a brief moment as he looked up and saw the cable shoot away into the distance. Red wind rushed up as the station plummeted.

"That did it," called the Spec Ops Commander. "The station is in free fall! The

heretic leader is on the move. Do not let him escape! We will stay with you as long as we can.”

Thel noticed the Sentinels were no longer shooting at him. He looked and saw them up above zooming down at him from the clouds. They were trying to re-enter the facility, which had fallen away from their hovering mechanical forms. He jumped back over to the elevator, hit the switch and felt himself dropping down at a speed no Sangheili should be subjected to. He lost a little of his shields when the lift came to a halt at the top of the spiral ramp. The Arbiter turned on his active camouflage as a swarm of Sentinels searched the room for the hostile who'd cut the cable.

After reaching the bottom of the ramp, he made his way to the doorway Sesa 'Refumee had hidden behind earlier. On the other side was an elevator. Thel reasoned that Sesa would have likely headed down this lift as soon as the cable was cut. He followed. The lift carried him into a room similar to the last, but with a much larger yellow tube and more ferociously revolving floating parts. He saw the heretic leader disappear into an exit two levels below.

Thel's active camouflage ran out when he was halfway down the room. He was blasted by Sentinels, and as a result, he had no choice but to return fire. He sprang left and right, firing his carbine at the eyes of the machines. He

destroyed a few before his active camouflage came back online. He did not reactivate it however as the Sentinels could likely track his position after having already seen him. He stepped through the exit Sesa had gone through and found another elevator. He activated the switch. His shields recharged as he dropped.

“Are you still alive, Arbiter?” Rtas asked. “We’re keeping pace as best as we can, but this maelstrom is strong.”

Thel stepped out of the elevator onto a platform on the outside of the facility. An unpiloted Banshee shook to his right, threatening to fall off as a separate fleeing Banshee thrust away.

“What lunacy!” the Spec Ops Commander exclaimed. “He’ll never escape the storm in a Banshee... Wait. The hangar! There was a Seraph fighter inside! Arbiter, you know what to do.”

The Arbiter felt his Banshee being torn apart by the wind as he attempted to follow the heretic. He crashed into a platform identical to the one he’d just left but managed to scramble up the edge. A door to his right was still closing as someone had just passed through it. Thel ran inside. Red warning lights flashed around the twisting Forerunner corridors as the Arbiter made his way to the hangar. At last, Thel caught up with the heretic.

The Arbiter stepped into the lower level of the hangar just as Sesa 'Refumee used his vertical thrusters, boosting his way up to the Seraph. The chamber was still filled with dead bodies and dropped weaponry. The heretic landed upon the roof of the Seraph and turned to face Thel.

“Supreme Commander,” Sesa began. “I would rather die by your hands than let the Prophets lead me to slaughter.”

“Who has taught you these lies?” Thel asked.

The humming of an unfamiliar voice entered the room followed by a blue glow from one of the tunnels in the wall. Then, in flew a spherical Forerunner machine. It had a circular eye similar to those of the Sentinels but with a Forerunner glyph in it that Thel recognised as the symbol for the Reclamation. The metal orb appeared to be about as wide in diameter as Sesa 'Refumee's torso. It matched every description Thel had heard of the oracle on Halo.

“Hello,” greeted the Oracle in a cheery tone. “I am Three-Four-Three Guilty Spark. I am the Monitor of Installation Zero-Four.”

Artificial light projected itself off the Oracle with each soundwave as it spoke. Its voice sounded more male than female but not quite either. It was oddly bubbly while still retaining a hint of a robotic undertone. The heretic leader readdressed the Arbiter.

“Ask the Oracle about Halo,” Sesa told him. “How they would sacrifice us all for nothing!”

“More questions?” Guilty Spark chirped. “Splendid. I would be happy to assist you.”

Sesa ‘Refumee continued.

“The Covenant are blind, Arbiter, but I will make them see-”

Thel fired his carbine before the heretic could spread any further lies. Sesa thrust through the air over to the right walkway, the same that Thel had stood upon earlier. The Arbiter ran towards the ramp.

“How did the Prophets buy your loyalty, Arbiter?” Sesa spat from his walkway. “With a new command? A new fleet? Or was it the promise of their *Great Journey*?”

Thel charged up the ramp, spamming his carbine at his enemy. Sesa leapt away again and thrust over to the opposite walkway. The Oracle hummed to himself as he watched.

“Coward!” Thel growled.

“Look around you, Arbiter,” the heretic continued. “Where are these gods the Prophets would have us worship? Transcended?”

A dry, sarcastic laugh escaped his throat.

“Come, Arbiter. Let me show you where they went.”

Thel decided to change tactics. He jumped down onto the ground and stepped directly below the shadow of the Seraph. At his feet was

the corpse of a heretic Unggoy. Beside it was a plasma pistol and a plasma grenade. Thel dropped his carbine before the Oracle spoke unexpectedly.

“This mining facility predates Installation Zero-Four by several hundred years,” said the Oracle. “I designed and oversaw the construction of this facility's various outbreak management systems. The cable at the top of this mine was designed as a failsafe in case an outbreak took place.”

“Show yourself, Arbiter!” Sesa cried.

Thel jumped up, grabbing onto the edge of the Seraph. He pulled himself onto it while charging his newly acquired plasma pistol. Sesa ‘Refumee was standing on the left walkway where the first Spec Ops lance had stood earlier. The Arbiter launched his plasma grenade at the heretic. Sesa dived onto the floor and successfully avoided the explosion, but Thel’s charged plasma splashed over the heretic immediately after, stripping his shields completely.

Before the heretic could stand up, Thel spammed small plasma pistol shots at him. He charged forwards, leapt off the Seraph and smacked the heretic in the side of his head with the pistol. Sesa ‘Refumee’s eyes opened wide with terror as Thel pinned him down and ignited his energy blades.

“Sesa ‘*Refum*,” began the Arbiter, purposely leaving off the end of his name. “I sentence you to die!”

Thel ‘Vadamee stabbed his sword through his enemy’s two hearts. Sesa gargled and then fell silent as his head flopped back. Thel had purposely left the ‘*ee* suffix off the heretic’s name to disgrace him. Only a Sangheili of the Covenant military could wear that suffix proudly, and Sesa ‘Refum had no longer belonged to the Covenant.

The Oracle hovered over to the Arbiter.

“Unfortunate,” tutted the Oracle. “His edification was most enjoyable.”

“I had no choice, Oracle,” Thel replied. “This heretic imperilled the Great Journey.”

“Oracle? Great Journey? Why do you meddlers insist on using such inaccurate verbiage?”

A Phantom entered the hangar. Thel turned, expecting Rtas ‘Vadumee.

“Oh myyyyyy!!!” cried the Oracle as it was sucked towards the anti-gravity technology of the Fist of Rukt.

Tartarus, the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae had dropped down from the Phantom. He caught the Oracle in one hand, his hammer held in the other. Thel was appalled by the Oracle’s rough treatment.

“That is a holy oracle!” he exclaimed.

“So it is,” Tartarus shrugged. “Come. We are leaving this system.”

Tartarus tossed the Oracle up into the Phantom’s gravity lift before ascending into its belly himself. Thel followed. His first mission as Arbiter had been a success. As the Phantom flew away from the falling station, he wondered what other perils the Prophets had planned for him.

Helljumpers

Buses, cars, traffic signs and loose rubble were expelled into the new environment before the *In Amber Clad* was thrust into the system. The in-atmosphere jump into slipstream space had caused a surge of energy to sweep through New Mombasa like a tornado, but that calamity was now long behind the crew of this UNSC frigate.

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 stood upright, squeezed tightly into his Single Occupant Exoatmospheric Insertion Vehicle or *drop pod* with Cortana still planted safely in the port at the back of his helmet. Such four-sided insertion pods had been utilised by ODSI's countless times during the Insurrection, garnering even further use against the Covenant. John and Sergeant Major Johnson had both seen fit to strap themselves in before the ship's slipspace jump. With the digital monitor directly in front of the Master Chief's face currently blank, he stood poised in his pod awaiting new orders.

"Sorry for the quick jump," apologised Commander Miranda Keyes over the comm. "Sergeant, are you in one piece?"

“I’m good,” replied Johnson’s voice impaired somewhat by the muffling cigar in his mouth. “Chief?”

“*We’re fine,*” replied Cortana.

“Cortana...” Keyes began.

Her voice sounded tentative, astonished even.

“What exactly am I looking at?”

An object appeared before John as the drop pod’s display screen turned on. His own eyes widened beneath his visor as he soaked in the sight before him.

“That,” Cortana answered. “Is another Halo.”

John heard the coughing of Sergeant Johnson choking on his cigar in the pod beside him.

“Say what!” Johnson exclaimed. “I thought we were done with that damned hula-hoop.”

“So,” Miranda mused. “This is what my father found. I thought Halo was some kind of superweapon.”

“It is,” Cortana responded. “If activated, this ring will cause destruction on a galactic scale.”

John examined the ringworld. It appeared almost identical to the one he’d destroyed a month earlier. The continents on this ring’s inward-facing surface were shaped differently, and the outer face was tinted blue due to the reflection of the Uranus-esque planet it orbited, but other than that, it was a mirror image of the original.

The Master Chief thought back to his encounter with the first Halo. Vast valleys, tropical islands, desert plateaus, murky swamplands and bottomless underground facilities filled his mind, but one memory came to the forefront. After trekking his way up the levels of a triangular ziggurat that emerged from the end of a snowy chasm, John and Cortana had found Halo's Control Centre.

Twice John found himself inside the Control Room, and neither instance was recalled fondly. His current memory was of the second time. After a nightmarish slog through a fortress called the Library to find Halo's key, the Monitor of Halo used the ringworld's teleportation grid to send the Chief back to the Control Centre. That was where he learnt the truth about the ring, its purpose and function.

"Technically," Guilty Spark had informed him. "This installation's pulse has a maximum effective radius of twenty-five thousand lightyears, but once the others follow suit, the galaxy will be quite devoid of life."

John had forgotten such details during the battles that followed. He and Cortana had been forced to destroy the Pillar of Autumn's fusion reactors, triggering a chain reaction that caused the complete destruction of the ringworld. They then returned to Earth, albeit indirectly. Once there, John was debriefed by Fleet and ONI

executives. Cortana likely had to hand over Halo's key, the *Activation Index* as well as any other data obtained from Halo, and not long after that, they began the defence of Cairo Station. Finally, given the chance to remember, John realised, *of course there are more Halo rings. There's an entire collection of them.*

Miranda Keyes continued.

"I want all the information you've got on the first Halo," she demanded. "Schematics, topography, whatever. I don't care if I have the clearance or not."

"Yes, ma'am," Cortana responded.

"Where's our target?" Miranda asked.

"The Prophet of Regret's carrier has stopped above the ring, ma'am. We're going to pass right over it."

"Perfect. Given what we know about this ring, it's even more important that we capture Regret. Find out why he came to Earth and why he came here. Chief, take first platoon. Hard drop. Secure a landing zone. Sergeant, load up two flights of Pelicans and follow them in."

"Aye aye, ma'am," Johnson replied.

"Until I can move and fight, I'm going to keep a low profile," Miranda said. "Once you leave the ship, you're on your own."

"Understood," John acknowledged.

John heard two knocks caused by Johnson's tapping on the outside of his drop pod. In

response, he touched the side of his fist lightly to the metal. With his Spartan strength, it created the necessary reply. He waited for the clanging of the front hatches of the ODSTs' pods to end as each helljumper entered one of their own. John's screen switched from the view of the Halo ring, which was drawing closer, to the empty drop bay in front of him.

"Here we go again," sighed Cortana. "Hang on to your helmet!"

"Over the target in five..." transmitted one of the bridge crew. "Four... three... two... one... Drop."

John was prepared for the expected lurching sensation as the insertion pod dropped into the stars. Through his viewing screen, he made out around thirty pods dropping in line with his own, seven of which fell into his cluster. The atmosphere grew brighter as they descended into the ringworld's breathable air.

"Mind the bump," Cortana warned as the drop pod's parachute unfolded, slowing the pod drastically but keeping it fast enough to form a visible heat layer around the bottom and a fiery tail above.

The continents below grew larger until a great land mass rose up to them. John's cluster was heading towards the side of a small mountain where the Covenant were waiting for them. Three stationary Grunt-operated Shades fired

up at the cluster. One of the pods was struck by the heavy plasma bolts and was deflected to a lower section of the mountain. The rest struck hard into a reasonably flat landing surrounded by steep slopes and shallow cliffs. They each hit the ground with a loud thud. John smacked four explosive bolts at the front of his pod, which thrust the hatch forwards, opening him up to the cool air and a grassy environment. The hatch hit a shallow cliff face as John ripped himself from the pod.

“Could we possibly make any more noise?!” Cortana vented.

The Chief pulled out the SMG from the side of his pod followed by a two-barrelled titan of a rocket launcher, the M41 SPNKr.

“I guess so,” Cortana finished.

“Sir,” called a nearby ODST. “We need to neutralise those turrets!”

John saw that the area wasn't completely flat. The rocky terrain offered plenty of cover for the surrounding Covenant ground units, and further up the slope was what appeared to be ancient ruins of unknown origin. They formed a small, stone, temple-like structure built into a deep notch in the side of the mountain. At the top of the ruins sat one of the three Shades. The other two had been placed on the earth above either side of the landing.

“Clear the landing zone!” yelled the ODST corporal to his squad. “The Pelicans are on their way!”

The hard crackling of SMGs against the heavy hisses of plasma fire filled the area. The helljumpers engaged in combat with the Grunts, Jackals and Elites that had taken refuge amongst the rocks and ruins. John raised his rocket launcher over his shoulder and used his smart-link to aim at the Shade turret to the right. He dive-rolled as the Shade fired unsuccessfully at him before he returned fire with the rocket launcher. The rocket flew straight out of the SPNKr’s left barrel and blew into flames as it struck the turret. The Shade’s hardlight shield was immediately extinguished, offering no protection against the heavy explosion. Purple fragments bounced down to the landing as the barrels of the rocket launcher rotated vertically, switching sides for John to aim at his next target.

“Push up!” ordered the helljumper corporal. “The first line is down!”

John fired his second rocket at the left Shade as the ODSTs pushed towards the ruins. He then trod past a fourth unoccupied Shade that had previously been obscured by two large boulders. *Could the Covenant have placed this turret in a less useful position?* John asked himself.

He reloaded his rocket launcher but decided to save his last two rockets in case things got hot.

He jumped on the abandoned Shade and spun it around to face the ruins. The Shade operator on the crumbly building had its turret pointing down at the helljumpers who were closer to it. John fired his own Shade, taking out his target's hardlight before an ODST finished off the gunner. He then flipped the heavy rocket launcher over his back, took his SMG off his hip and swept a dropped plasma pistol off the floor before jumping into the fray at closer quarters.

The Master Chief confronted an Elite Major as the ODSTs fought lower ranking Covenant. Each helljumper had taken cover behind jagged rocks that stuck out from the overgrown grass. Covenant fired from the ruins above but were unable to hit the marines who were focusing their fire on nearer targets. John zipped left and right between the rocks in order to dodge the bending pink projectiles of the Elite Major's dual needlers. He charged his plasma pistol behind a boulder, stuck his arm around it and released. The Elite's shields were wiped clean as it staggered back, leaving John free to step out and finish it off with his SMG.

Before long, John and the ODSTs were pushing into the ruins, leaving an array of colourful Covenant bodies across the grass. The Covenant may have had the better technology, but they were not as well trained. Only the Elites were a true match for the ODSTs. In fact, the

Elites were much more deadly, but the helljumpers outnumbered them, and the Grunts and Jackals fought with very little strategy. Soon, the stone walls were smeared with indigo, purple and cyan blood and only a few splashes of red.

The Chief observed the ruins from inside as injured ODSTs were treated with biofoam. The sandy walls were built with limestone bricks not unlike something that might have been created by an ancient culture on Earth. Despite being on an artificial alien world, John would not have been surprised if he was told the ruins had been built by humans.

Some of the carvings on the walls reminded him of the types of murals often found in the grey and brass buildings of the Forerunner. That, along with the angles of some parts of the ruins, made the Chief wonder if they'd been created by the Forerunner themselves or some other more primitive civilisation paying homage to them.

“Artillery disabled, Sergeant,” Cortana transmitted to Johnson. “Landing zone secure, for the moment.”

“I hear you,” Johnson responded. “Starting our approach. Hang tight.”

John and the marines waited in the ruins as two Pelican dropships flew into view from behind the clean, white clouds. The Chief stepped onto a stone balcony and watched. The

sky around the clouds was a very healthy blue, and behind that, John saw the other side of the Halo ring itself. He recalled this exact sight on the first Halo. The horizon itself stretched up into a strip of land and sea that shrank narrower as it grew higher into the sky. It was at its thinnest directly above, where it was furthest away. Following it around, the strip grew again before melting back into the ground. It was a fully joined band, a ringworld.

“I’ve got a good view coming in,” Johnson called as the dropships approached. “There’s a big building in the middle of this island’s lake.”

“I saw it as we dropped,” replied Cortana. “It looks like a temple. If I were a megalomaniac, and I’m not, that’s where I’d be.”

The Pelicans lowered to the ground in front of the ruins. John watched the ODST corporal command two of his soldiers to remain behind as the others stepped up into the front dropship. The rear Pelican released a Warthog. Two names flashed over John’s heads-up-display as he acknowledged the remaining helljumpers. They were both ranked *private first class*, one male and one female.

“Nice! A Mark Six,” exclaimed the male ODST with an Australian accent.

John matched the voice with the name. He’d fought alongside Private Dubbo not all that long ago. He didn’t recall him being an ODST, and

he was surprised to see that the man had not yet been promoted. The female marine was unfamiliar to the Spartan.

“Private First Class Rao,” she introduced rather redundantly John thought as he glanced at her name on his display. “I’ll be your side seat, sir.”

Rao spoke with a thick Indian accent. John stepped into the Warthog’s driver seat as Rao filled her position, balancing over the passenger seat as expected. Dubbo climbed up to the machine gun turret.

“Saddled up,” Dubbo announced. “Let’s move out!”

The Master Chief drove the Warthog down a winding trench. The dirt path down the middle appeared to be made intentionally. It was a smooth drive until the jeep emerged on the other side of the trench where there was another landing that looked down over a sizeable lake. The reflective water felt inviting aside from the fact that, along with the blue sky, it mirrored the image of the massive Covenant carrier up above.

The Chief spotted many grey Forerunner structures in the distance beyond the lake, but it was the ones within it that called to him. At the very centre of the lake was a monolithic temple standing above the water. Three incredibly tall triangular supports stretched out over the roof of the building before continuing downwards

and beaming into the water. A beam of light shot into the sunny sky from each triangular segment.

“Whoa!” Dubbo cried, looking out over the blue lake and the adjacent natural landscape. “It’s like a postcard,” he said in his Aussie accent. “Dear Sarge, kicking arse in outer space. Wish you were here.”

“I heard that, jackass!” Johnson transmitted.

John used his visor to zoom in at the temple and analyse the other buildings.

“Over there,” Cortana directed. “It seems the Forerunner used a gondola system to travel across the lake. If we keep to this path around the lake, we should be able to find a way in. Chief, happy driving!”

John did not have to drive far before the path was obstructed. Ahead was a deep gorge, at the bottom of which was a river that flowed into the lake. In front of the gap was a small shrine. At a distance, John couldn’t quite tell if the shrine was a product of advanced Forerunner architecture or another set of ruins like the ones at the edge of the mountain. As the Warthog drew nearer, he was able to discern that it was, in fact, both. A long grey drawbridge with energy beams was being pulled towards the shrine, which the Covenant had a made camp out of.

“The Covenant have control of that bridge,” Cortana explained. “They’re going to try to bottle us up on this side of the gorge. The

controls to extend the bridge should be within the structure.”

As John drove the Warthog down towards the shrine, they were greeted by four Elite-driven Ghosts as well as more Jackals and Grunts taking cover behind rocks. John decided the space between the rocks was the perfect place for the Warthog to escape their plasma. He drove the Warthog in continuous random loops, slowing down, speeding up and generally making it hell for the Covenant to land a shot. The Ghosts tried to follow him closely and bend around to block his path, but to no success. Private Rao focused her SMG fire on the smaller ground units while Dubbo handled the Elites.

“I’ve got something for ya!” Dubbo screamed as he gunned them down.

As soon as the area was clear, another threat presented itself. Massive plasma rounds soared over the shrine and landed with heavy splashes near the Warthog’s position. Burnt dirt rained over the jeep as the plasma bombs hit the ground. Two Wraiths were on the far side of the gorge. John swerved the Warthog and parked it so it hugged the shrine out of view of the Wraiths. Then he slipped into the building. Inside the structure, he discovered that sections of the floor were made from limestone tiling while other parts consisted of smooth, grey Forerunner polygons. Similarly, the walls were

built from both the limestone of the ruins and the more typical metals of the Forerunner.

The heart of the shrine was one hundred percent Forerunner. It included a window made from Forerunner glass that provided the Chief a view of the Wraiths on the other side. In the centre of the room was a large hologram projecting what appeared to be a speckled galaxy spinning slowly, but above that was another image. The blue-tinted, semi-transparent form of the Prophet of Regret reminded John of an old, shrivelled man in a wheelchair, except far less human. The Prophet was murmuring a chant in his foreign tongue. Unlike the Grunts, Elites, Jackals or any other Covenant the Chief had encountered, the more soothing tone of Regret's voice was resonant like a song. He began to understand why the aliens worshipped these beings. It was almost entrancing.

John shook his head and fired upon the Covenant he had walked in on. They'd been busy praising the Prophet. It was an inconveniently small space to fight in, but John had the element of surprise. Once their bodies hit the ground, he walked up to the holopanel below the thick glass window. He remembered the first time he'd come across such a console on the other Halo. Despite having no knowledge of Forerunner technology, he'd found himself instinctively knowing exactly which holographic

sensors to touch. Just like then, John used his instinct to activate the switch now. The creaking bridge began to slide its way down the glass wall in front of John and over the gorge, joining the land together.

“Good,” said Cortana. “The bridge is down. Now about those Wraiths...”

“Roger that,” replied Sergeant Johnson. “Armour is on the way.”

The Chief turned around to see that both Rao and Dubbo had joined him.

“Isn’t that our target?” Rao asked, looking up at the holographic Prophet of Regret.

“What’s he doing?” Dubbo questioned. “Giving a speech?”

“A sermon actually,” answered Cortana. “I’ve been listening to it since we landed. So far, it seems to be standard Covenant liturgy, but I’ll translate if he says anything interesting.”

John was surprised the translator in his helmet didn’t automatically interpret the Prophet of Regret’s speech, but he supposed the pitch and dialect of the Prophet must have been different enough to confuse the device. He made a mental note to have it updated later. Cortana, on the other hand, was at the top of her game. She knew exactly what Regret was saying.

The Chief heard a heavy thud outside. A Scorpion had been delivered.

“Let’s go,” John instructed.

Dubbo looked up at him.

“You don’t talk much, do you, sir?”

The marines definitely seemed to be getting bolder at this end of the war, but John supposed he *was* talking a lot less these days, not that he’d ever been chatty to begin with. Once outside, John hopped into the tank while Dubbo and Rao sat on either side towards the back of the treads.

“Oh, you *beaut!*” Dubbo exclaimed at the sight of it.

As they rolled over the metal bridge, the Chief fired both the Scorpion’s main cannon and its machine gun at the Wraiths. The Wraith pilots were perhaps even more protected than the Chief was in the Scorpion, but their weapons were slow and cumbersome. By the time their shots landed near, both Wraiths had been destroyed.

Several Ghosts emerged from a great cavemouth to the right of the flaming Wraith remains. Loose vines hanging down from the foliage above the cave whipped up as the Ghosts sped through. Soon, thanks to the Scorpion, the Ghosts were also in pieces.

John turned the Scorpion right and chugged his way into the cave. He was surprised to find it was not a natural formation. The walls and ceiling of the cave were lined with the same limestone bricks and tiles the Chief realised he really should be expecting at this point. The cave

path wound in, through and out from the cliffs. John had to keep readjusting to the light and darkness as they drove through wide tunnels and along the edge of the gorge, alternating between left and right turns. Dark-green moss covered areas of the path near ledges where scenic waterfalls splashed by into the river below.

More Ghosts and Grunt Heavies with plasma cannons waited for them around one of the bends. John felt he was making progress due to the fact that the further he drove, the more Covenant there were waiting for him. The Scorpion received little damage as it rumbled its way over the limestone. Rao and Dubbo dispatched Grunts and Jackals who stood in the shade behind stone pillars while John demolished anything else that dared to confront them. The Scorpion and its riders were unstoppable, at least for the time being. Dubbo cheered as he extinguished the shields of a Jackal Minor and Major pair who'd been slinking further into the shadows.

"That's alright," Dubbo laughed. "I'd hide from me too!"

"Careful," warned Cortana. "We're coming up to another structure."

"Here, piggy, piggy, piggy!" Dubbo continued as he fired at a gaggle of scrambling Grunts. "Die, honkey nuts! That's what you get for glassing Reach!"

He yelled the last line as he shot a Grunt Major in the back of its methane tank. A piece of the red metal gave way, causing the leaking gas to propel the Grunt onto its face as Dubbo finished it off.

“And that’s what you get for Harvest,” he added as he shot another.

“That’s for Harmony!” Rao now joined after killing a Jackal.

“And Madrigal,” Dubbo kept going. “Arcadia... Hat Yai... Troy!”

They continued like that for a while until the Scorpion drew closer to the end of the tunnel. John considered asking the two accented marines to quieten down, but then he remembered he was in a sixty-six-tonne killing machine that was louder than any rally cry the helljumpers could ever produce. As if to make that point, John fired another explosive round at a group of Covenant whose own cries were drowned by the blast.

While the tunnel had not been tight by any means, the area beyond it was extremely open in comparison. The walls around the zone were made entirely of the recurring limestone bricks while a solid stone temple much larger than the gorge shrine or mountainside ruins sat in the middle. It was highly decorated with rectangular pillars and triangular obelisks, and from its centre rose a tall, pale-brown fig tree. The tree

and indeed much of the foliage that filled the area seemed to represent the conflict between nature and man. In this case, nature was winning. Vines tangled around the cracking limestone, suffocating the structure with its embrace. Spikey shrubbery poked out from every corner, and long grass grew from countless crevices.

On the righthand side of the area, above the limestone wall, the ground sloped up into another mountain. John turned the tank slightly to the left where he saw the open lake. The stone tunnel had apparently cut right through the underground, allowing John and his company to travel quite a distance. Forerunner structures off the lake's shore now looked closer than ever. Soon, the Master Chief would have the Prophet of Regret within his clutches.

In the Middle of Something

“Master Chief, we’ll be sitting ducks out there on this tank,” shared Private Dubbo. “Rao and I could go on foot, sir.”

“Affirmative,” replied the Chief. “I’ll drive out first and take the left path around the temple. Once I’ve got their attention, you keep cover along the right wall.”

“Yes, sir.”

The marines dropped off the sides of the Scorpion as John rolled out. He was immediately greeted by alien fire from both the lakeside wall and the temple now to his right. *BOOM!* The Chief fired the tank’s main cannon. Grunt and Jackal bodies blew through the air along with rocky chunks from the wall. He waited for the Scorpion to load another shell before firing his second round. *BOOM!*

“The end is nigh!” wailed a Grunt, characteristically waving its hands about in the air as it ran from the hole John blew in the limestone. “Every Unggoy for themselves!”

John found a tunnel below the temple. After clearing the left path, he turned the tank’s treads into the tunnel and drove underneath. The structure was old, but unless the Covenant had a well-planned trap, which John doubted they’d

had time to set up, the building would hold. He rolled past the buttress roots of the fig tree that slithered down the side of the tunnel and passed beneath a beam of natural light that shone through a circular space in the ceiling.

John made sure the many Covenant who'd taken refuge in the shadows of the tunnel now regretted their decision as he mowed them down. When he emerged on the righthand side of the temple, he found Rao and Dubbo struggling with an Elite Minor. The Chief switched to the Scorpion's secondary machine gun turret and gunned the Elite down.

"We've got a Pelican incoming," Cortana announced. "Let's clear a landing zone."

"The Covies are pouring out of the middle," informed Dubbo.

Realising he no longer had any use for the Scorpion, John opened the hatch and climbed out. The Spartan and ODSTs climbed up a path onto the front of the temple upon which several stationary shield generators were lined up. They used the shields for cover as *files* of Covenant crawled out from behind stone pillars. Between John and the helljumpers, they were able to take out all of the Grunts due to the stumpy aliens' simple combat mistakes and cowering as their brothers fell.

"He was my lover!" one Grunt yelped before it too joined the fallen.

After the Grunts had all been dispatched, the firefight turned into a game of catch. Frag grenades from the marines blasted the remaining aliens apart as plasma grenades were thrown in retaliation. Fortunately, due to the upper lip of the building, it was more difficult for the Elites to successfully land their grenades than it was for the marines. After eliminating the last of the Covenant lance, dust and dirt blew off the limestone around them by a Pelican dropship as it lowered into the area. Miranda Keyes spoke over the comm.

“Cortana, Chief, the Covenant are getting nosy,” she said. “I don't want to give away my position. I apologise; these Pelicans are all the support you're going to get.”

“Understood, ma'am,” Cortana replied as several cylindrical ordnance pods dropped onto the ground from the back of the Pelican before it disappeared again.

The marines restocked their SMGs and swapped their magnums for battle rifles from the ordnance pods while John equipped himself with a BR and sniper rifle.

“The Covenant are holed up in the middle of the structure,” Cortana explained. “We need to clear them out.”

John and the helljumpers entered the temple through an archway. Sure enough, there were plenty of Covenant inside. The temple had no

visible ceiling. It was completely open to the sky. Sufficient cover was provided to both the Covenant and humans on the interior thanks to the multiple limestone columns and the wide, sinewy fig tree. John also noticed the well-like hole that opened into the tunnel below, which he realised had provided the natural light he'd rolled through earlier.

At the other end of the temple, towards where they were heading was another hologram of the Prophet of Regret on his throne above a Covenant communication node. The Master Chief did what he could to protect his marine support as they fought on towards the hologram. They cleared the temple of the aliens, even tricking a couple of Elites into falling down the well.

“You’re a sandwich short of a picnic,” taunted Dubbo while one of the Elites flailed its arms as it fell through. “Split-chinned son-of-a-gun!”

The ODSTs caught their breath as John walked by Regret’s hologram. He heard what sounded like a flicking switch within his helmet as the Prophet’s speech changed from its alien incantation to standard English.

“In a gesture of peace and reconciliation, the Prophets promised to find the means of the Forerunner’s transcendence and share this knowledge with the Sangheili,” said the

hologram. “The Sangheili promised to defend the San’Shyuum as they searched, a simple arrangement that has become our binding Covenant!”

“Thought you might find it interesting,” said Cortana. “Transcendence, huh.”

A path in the side of the ruins led John and the marines through another trench into a picturesque, almost oval-shaped ravine. They stood up high on a shallow stream from which a rushing waterfall fell into a creek below. John meled an unsuspecting Jackal Sniper from behind. It plopped quietly into the water as the three humans gazed into the scenery below. Insects were heard buzzing and chirping about in the green vegetation around the creek. Several natural caves tunnelled their way through the opposite cliff. Jackal Scouts could be seen hopping along the edge of the creek, through the caves and over smooth rocks that stuck out from the water.

“You always bring me to such nice places,” Cortana teased.

“Off the rock, through the bush,” said Dubbo. “Nothing but Jackal.”

Rao nodded silently.

“Stay low,” John instructed as he prepared his sniper rifle. “I’ll take out as many as I can.”

It wasn’t difficult for the Chief to headshot half the Jackals before they realised where the

shots were coming from, and even then, they couldn't deliver much in return from down below. John took out several more before the aliens made it to cover. He heard the fluttering of Drones before the insectoids rose up to greet the humans over the waterfall.

"Buggers!" Dubbo yelled as he sprayed them with his SMG.

Luckily, it wasn't an entire swarm. John and the marines were able to drop each of the repulsive bugs without injury. John slid into the creek before the marines to ensure the area was safe. He took out a couple of Elites that leapt from bushes before the ODSTs joined him. Cortana marked a navpoint on John's heads-up-display, which led the trio through one of the caves out of the ravine. The AI spoke as the soldiers journeyed.

"Good," she said. "Still no word about In Amber Clad on the Covenant battlenet. It's odd though. The Covenant knew we made landfall, but they don't seem to consider us a very serious threat."

"They're in for a surprise," John commented.

"A big one," Cortana agreed.

Soon after, they found themselves at the edge of the large lake. In front of them was a narrow bridge. The bridge reminded John of the causeways he'd crossed in the chasms that led to the first Halo's Control Centre. It had two levels

and some large blocks rising up along the middle. The difference was that this one was limestone, but after a second observation, John noticed the railing of the bridge and parts of the lower level were in fact made from solid Forerunner metal.

“I think the Forerunner built these new structures around the old to protect them, to honour them,” Cortana suggested. “It’s pure speculation, mind you. I’d need to make a thorough survey to be sure.”

A sudden *caw* came from above. Expecting another Jackal, John readied his BR only to find that no Covenant were nearby at all. He looked high in the sky and saw what appeared to be a flock of four-winged birds circling above. He zoomed in with his visor and realised they were more akin to flying dinosaurs, not dissimilar from pterodactyls. Either they hadn’t yet noticed the humans or they weren’t bothered by them. Whatever the case, John vowed to keep an eye on this new discovery. He didn’t trust anything that might call this ringworld *home*.

The bridge joined up to a structure that rose from the water of the lake. The typical Forerunner aspects of the building were more prominent now. The colossal right-angled triangles that towered on either side of the building were constructed from the expected grey metals, but there was still some ruined

limestone below them. They entered through a Forerunner door in the side of the structure to find yet another hologram of the chanting Prophet.

The chamber was filled with Drones. John figured they must have been the other half of the swarm they'd encountered earlier. He and the marines dealt with them from the doorway before entering. Just as the group was about to exit the room through the next door, Cortana called them back.

"Wait," she said. "Place me over the projector."

John touched the hologram device. Cortana's avatar appeared in front of the Prophet.

"That's what I thought he said," she began. "Regret is planning to *activate* Halo."

"Are you sure?" John asked.

He realised this should not be a surprise, but after everything that happened on the first ring, John had mistakenly assumed the Covenant were at least a little wiser. He guessed not. Cortana raised a hand and snapped her fingers. Once again, the Prophet's speech changed to English.

"I shall light this holy ring, release its cleansing flame and burn a path into the Divine Beyond!"

John contacted the In Amber Clad as the ODSTs watched on.

“Commander,” called the Chief. “We’ve got a problem,”.

“So I hear,” she replied.

Cortana must have been keeping the Commander updated.

“But from what I understand,” Keyes continued. “The Prophet will need an object, an *Index*, to activate the ring. I’ve located a Library similar to the one you found on the first Halo. If the rings work the same way, the Index should be inside.”

Sergeant Johnson’s voice joined the conversation. John was glad to hear he was also kept in the loop.

“I’ll bet the Covenant are thinking the same thing,” said Johnson.

“Then we need to beat them to it,” Miranda stated. “Extract your men and meet me at the Library.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Chief,” she continued. “I’ll secure the Index. You take out the Prophet. He’s given us all the intel we need.”

“Ma’am,” John answered. “Consider it done.”

The Master Chief retrieved Cortana and moved out. Just as he stepped through the exit, a streak of purple flashed in front of his visor, leaving a chip in the wall. He and the ODSTs ducked low.

“Blooming buzzards,” Dubbo muttered.

John kept low and scanned the area for the sniper. The building split off into three sections. The path on this side of the hologram room split off into two more bridges, both leading to island platforms supported by the triangular towers John had noticed earlier. These then bridged across to another platform in the centre. Only now John realised the bridge to his right had collapsed.

The Spartan detected three Jackal snipers, one on the broken bridge and the other two on the centre platform. He fired his battle rifle in quick succession. It was risky, and one of the Jackals almost struck him, but he managed to eliminate them without taking a hit. He would have used his sniper rifle, but even as a Spartan-II, he couldn't have moved it quickly enough and still maintained accurate precision to stay ahead of the Jackals. *If Linda were here, she would have no problem.* The point was moot however, and the Jackals were now dead.

"There," Cortana directed.

A solid, metal jetty attached to the limestone on the opposite side of the centre platform folded into itself as part of the structure floated away. The undocked gravity gondola had a similar triangular design to the rest of the Forerunner architecture in the area. It reminded John of the beam emitter structures from the

first Halo but cut in half. He watched as it sailed towards another building further offshore.

“Another gondola is launching from the far towers,” informed Cortana.

As the trio stepped onto the centre platform, they were greeted by a Phantom. It flew to them from the largest building in the middle of the lake, the temple Regret was broadcasting from. John knew he and the marines hadn’t exactly been quiet on their approach. The Covenant would be growing eager to bring the progress of the Spartan and two ODSTs to a halt as soon as possible.

“Stand back,” John ordered the marines.

They backed away, taking cover on the bottom level of the bridge just as the Phantom lowered itself over the platform. There was enough cover on the platform for John to protect himself from the Shade’s bolts, but that was the least of his concerns. John kept close to the edge of the platform as the dropship gave birth to two monstrous giants, Covenant Hunters.

The Hunter pair wore blue armour that was at least four times thicker than the combat harnesses worn by Elites. Crouching forwards, they stood at three and a half metres tall. Their knight-like helmets were squashed flat; and long, sharp spikes protruded from their backs and shoulders. Covering the left arm of each Hunter

was a wide shoulder plate and a long, grey shield that looked very much like a blade. The blue armour on their right arm morphed into a dangerous assault cannon lined with green fuel rod canisters. Their arms and legs alone were each about as thick as John's whole torso, and the only parts of them not completely covered in armour was a gap along their elongated necks and another around their lower back and abdomen. It was these gaps that revealed the Hunters' true anatomy: a dense colony of orange Lekgolo worms that had separated into two humanoid figures. These aliens were arguably the strangest within the Covenant collective.

Green light glowed from the end of the Hunters' heavy assault cannons as they charged them up. The beams emitted by the cannons were smaller versions of the one produced by the Scarab at New Mombasa but just as fatal. Barely a touch from these beams would strip John's entire shields, and a prolonged blast could melt his armour and disintegrate his flesh. Allowing these beams to hit him would mean certain death. He circled around the outside of the island platform at superhuman speed, constantly changing his path to avoid being shot.

Fortunately, the assault cannons required frequent pauses from the Hunters to charge their weapons before each firing. This allowed John brief moments to assess the situation. If he

got in close, the Hunters wouldn't have time to charge their weapons, but if he got *too* close, they'd cut him in half with their sharpened melee shields. The only way to take out a Hunter was to kill the Lekgolo that formed it, but ripping into these worms was not a simple task. To find a clear shot at the gaps in the Hunter's armour was incredibly difficult. Their flat heads were bent forward, giving John an impossible angle at their necks, and their melee shields defended their bare abdomens. The forward-leaning combat stance of the Hunters protected them well, but if John could find a position behind their backs, he might have a chance.

The assault beams followed the Spartan's every move, but he stayed ahead in the game. He didn't understand exactly how the Lekgolo functioned. They were a rare but unbelievably tough unit on the battlefield when in Hunter form. They seemed to be sentient but not as smart as an Elite or human. These ones charged their cannons in unison, giving John a chance to plan exactly what he wanted to do.

First, John waited. Then, just as the pair fired their beams, he sprinted towards the right Hunter. It swung at him with its melee shield, which he evaded by sliding underneath. The Hunter on the left followed the Spartan's path with its beam, causing it to hit its own partner. With the righthand Hunter's shield still

swinging, its abdomen soaked up a lethal amount of fuel rod energy. The thick worms that formed its throat ground heavily together to produce something that sounded a cross between a roar and a gargle. The Hunter fell to the floor with a final groan as John slid away.

Just as the first Hunter hit the ground, John spun to find the second Hunter sluggishly loping towards him. He sprinted to meet it face on. Then, as it swung its hefty shield at the Spartan, John sprang himself off the ground, jumping over the Hunter. He was careful to keep his hanging feet between the Hunter's spikes as he soared through the air. Before his boots even struck the ground, John spammed his BR's trigger, firing bullet after bullet into the alien's lower back. The first several bullets cut through one layer of worms. The second few rounds cut through the next. Then finally, the last burst struck a thick entanglement of Lekgolo that formed a spine-like cord through its torso to its head. John almost felt guilty as the Hunter died with a low rumble of a moan. Its body landed beside its bond-brother, the other half of its original Lekgolo colony. Wet, pink tubes flipped about in the orange goo that puddled beneath the dead giants.

There was no time to stop as a gondola filled with Covenant arrived immediately after the fight. Cortana directed the Chief to it.

“Well, they were nice enough to bring us a ride,” she quipped.

John and the marines engaged in a fairly traditional firefight with the newly arrived lance. The Covenant fired from the gondola which was docked to the unfolded metal at the side of the platform. The humans fired from behind stone columns. The Master Chief sniped the Elites first as the ODS'Ts gunned down the Grunts and Jackals. John killed the remaining Jackals with his battle rifle, first by shooting their talons behind their shield notches and then delivering another shot to their heads. After the skirmish, a Pelican dropped in more ordnance. The soldiers restocked and walked to the gondola.

“Alright,” sighed Dubbo. “All aboard!”

“I can drive,” Rao volunteered.

“What’s to drive?” Dubbo rebutted. “It comes here. It goes there.”

“He’s right,” Cortana told them as John stepped up to a holopanel at the front of the gondola. “This gondola won't get us all the way to the main temple, but it'll get us close.”

John hit the switch. The gondola stayed level with the island platform, remaining high above the water as it glided over the lake. John prepared himself and alerted the marines as he heard two Banshees flying in from a distance. He almost always heard Banshees before he saw them, but they were fast and would cover the

space between them in no time. John and the ODSTs took cover under the Forerunner architecture built over the gondola to avoid the raining plasma energy. They peeked out and fired their weapons, chipping away at the Banshees before one of them fired a fuel rod. John and Dubbo leapt away safely from the green cloud formed by the explosion, but Rao was not as fortunate.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

Rao screamed as she was blown off the side of the gondola, disappearing below. A trail of blood followed her over the edge.

“Cling to your cover,” John told Dubbo. “I’ll get their attention.”

John and Dubbo never destroyed the support craft, but they were both able to chip away at them enough that the pilots recognised the fruitlessness in attacking the Forerunner gondola and eventually zoomed off.

The gondola continued in silence for some time. John moved to console Private Dubbo about the death of Rao. He figured resting his hand on the marine’s shoulder would do the trick, but the helljumper shrugged him off.

“Chief, I’ve seen my share of deaths in this war,” Dubbo told him. “Rao’s was no different, but we’ll pay those Covies back, sir. You can count on that.”

Later, the Covenant threw a pair of Elite Rangers and some Drones at them. Neither were as much of a problem as the Banshees had been. Dubbo aimed for the Drones while the Chief went for the hovering Rangers. Meanwhile, Cortana contemplated.

“This lake couldn't have been created by volcanic action,” Cortana decided. “Which means it was either built this way on purpose or was created by some other cataclysmic event... Sorry. Were you trying to kill something?”

John ignored her as he shot the second Ranger in the head after clearing its energy shields. The Elite's jetpack propelled the corpse upwards into the sky behind them as the gondola kept moving. Dubbo leant against the side of the gondola after killing his last Drone. The platform was painted with brown insectoid juice and splotches of yellow gunk.

“Filthy buggers,” the Private sighed.

Cortana spoke as the gondola attached itself to their destination. Metal folded out around the gondola from the lake building.

“Now I see,” Cortana began. “There's a submerged section that connects the outlying structures. There's an elevator inside. Looks like we're going down... unless you'd prefer to swim.”

“Full cart coming up,” Dubbo announced as they entered the building.

Sure enough, the glass elevator that rose from the centre of the room was filled with Jackals. As sturdy as Forerunner glass was, John waited for the Jackals to exit the lift before firing on them just in case. The Spartan then stepped inside with the marine, activated the holo-switch and waited as the cart dropped down into the building. It halted only for a moment at the bottom of the elevator shaft before plunging into the cold, blue depths. John admired the underwater ruins and watched as oddly shaped fish swam by the elevator while it drifted along an artificial current.

“I've intercepted a secure transmission from Regret's carrier to something called *High Charity*,” Cortana told the pair. “It seems to be a formal apology to the Prophets of Truth and Mercy. Apparently, Regret jumped the gun when he attacked Earth. He's asking the other Prophets to *‘forgive his premature arrival’* arguing that no human presence was foretold. That explains why there were so few ships in his fleet, but it's odd that a Prophet would have such bad intel about his enemy's homeworld.”

The elevator shot itself up into another building. It wasn't Regret's temple, but it did contain a particularly sizeable hologram of the Prophet within a large open chamber. There were plenty of Covenant worshipping the three-dimensional image. Another Hunter pair

lumbered by, but John and Private Dubbo snuck past on a higher, shadowy walkway.

“And people say *I've* got a big head,” Cortana joked, referring to the hologram.

She continued to translate the Prophet’s sermon.

“Most of those we encountered in our search were compelled to join our union,” said the hologram. “To take part in our moments of promise, freedom for allegiance, salvation for service... but some, like the humans, chose to impede our progress, block our access to sacred sites and damage holy relics! For their transgressions, the humans shall be hunted until none remain alive.”

“Oh, he’s *so* dead,” Dubbo whispered after exiting the chamber.

“Regret’s carrier just received a response to his apology,” Cortana informed them. “A well-encrypted message from the Prophet of Truth. Listen to this: ‘Your haste has jeopardised the fulfillment of our Covenant, threatened our grand design. That you shall be spared a public display of our contempt is thanks only to Mercy and his wise counsel.’ Truth, Mercy, Regret: three Prophet hierarchs. Killing Regret should shake up the Covenant leadership, but frankly, it sounds like we might be doing Truth a favour.”

The outside of the structure was much like the earlier islands and bridges consisting of

limestone ruins supported by grey architecture. John and Private Dubbo were able to navigate the ruins completely undetected by the Phantom that was dropping in more troops. They realised that the aliens still believed them to be inside the first elevator building. After bending around to the side of the facility, they found another gondola. This one was pointing directly at Regret's temple in the centre of the lake.

"This is what we came for, Chief," said Dubbo. "Can't wait to get my hands on that zealous lunatic. Him first, then the rest of them."

"Sorry, Private," John denied. "Not this time. You wait here. Stick to the ruins. Once I start up that gondola, I'll have the Covenant's attention."

"I'll comm for evac while we're crossing," Cortana told the marine. "Once you board the Pelican, keep out of range until we call. The Covenant will be pretty riled up after we kill Regret. We'll need an immediate escape."

"Understood, Cortana," Dubbo replied. "Good luck, Chief."

"And you, helljumper."

After bidding the Australian marine farewell, John boarded the gondola. The ODST had already disappeared into the crevices of the ruins before John even pressed the holo-switch. The Chief watched the ruins shrink in the distance before leaning over the edge of the gondola and

looking down into the deep water many metres below.

“You know,” Cortana began. “If you forget about the Covenant and the fact we're stuck on a destructive alien ringworld, this is actually sort of fun.”

After calling in a Pelican for Private Dubbo, Cortana was contacted by Keyes.

“How's it going, you two?” asked the Commander.

“So far, so good,” Cortana answered. “We're approaching the main temple now.”

“Roger that. I'm as close to the Library as I can get. There's some sort of barrier. We're trying to find a way around it. I'll keep you posted.”

As John waited on the gondola, one of the four-winged birds flew down to greet him. It glided in the air only two metres from the moving platform, watching him inquisitively. The creature was twice as long as John was tall, but he did not feel threatened. It had a long red beak and a crest on the back of its head. It reminded John of a Jackal but kindlier faced. Its scrawny legs were navy blue while the rest of its slender frame was covered in brown scales. Its four wide, beige-coloured wings made the creature appear somewhat reminiscent of a dragonfly. Its big round eyes examined the Chief closely before it sang a single musical note and

flew away. John watched, mesmerised as it returned to its friends circling the shining sun.

When the gondola was halfway across, John noticed what looked like an assembly of ants scurrying over the temple building. After zooming in with his visor, he saw they were Grunts and Jackals, namely Minors, Majors, Snipers and Shade gunners. The Spartan unslung his sniper rifle from his magnetic backplate and aimed at the Jackal Snipers first. The Snipers fell, followed by the gunners and then the rest of the units defending the structure. By the time they were all dead, metal plating was already forming a ground around the gondola, attaching it to the front of Regret's temple.

There were two levels to the building. The first was the platform the Chief was stepping onto, which sloped up into the immense structure, and the second was about fifty metres below, holding the triangular supports together. The lake itself appeared to be another fifty metres below that. Just as John was stepping up the ramp towards the open entrance, Cortana stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "Up there."

John looked up at the sky to see thousands upon thousands of mosquitoes zipping into view high above... Only, they were not mosquitoes. The 'mosquitoes' were joined by an

even larger shape, the silhouette of what appeared to be a dark jellyfish.

“That’s the largest Covenant fleet I’ve ever seen!” Cortana exclaimed. “The largest anyone’s ever seen. Get inside and kill Regret before it can stop us.”

It’s going to be hell in here, John knew. *Everything until this point has been no more than training*. In actuality, his training on Reach had ended many years ago. He’d been fighting the Covenant for two thirds of his life at this point, but the Prophet of Regret would be very well protected. John’s head was filled with all the possible scenarios he might find himself in as he entered.

The interior of the temple was very much like all Forerunner structures the Master Chief had visited. It had the expected rustic-textured polygons tiled across the floor, the thick metal braces lined along the walls, glossy brass murals between the braces and a layer of dust over a thin sheen that coated all surfaces. There was also a walkway on either side of the room, a water feature that could have been made by humans and a circular platform or stage in front of that. Naturally, the Prophet of Regret had chosen to sit his hover throne above the circular platform. The Prophet was not alone, however. The room was filled with Grunts and Elites of many colours including red-and-yellow-

armoured Honour Guards wielding energy staves.

“Warriors, attack!” yelled Regret, ending his sermon upon noticing the Spartan who’d just strolled into his sacred temple. “The Demon must die!”

John dispatched the closest Grunts first. Each one hit the floor after a headshot from his battle rifle. The Grunts would only have served as an annoyance, a distraction from the greater threats. The Spartan then shot an Elite Minor twice in its chest. Its energy shields lit up before he finished the Elite with a smack of his rifle to its throat. An Elite Major was killed in a similar fashion before four Honour Guards reached John’s position.

John dodged every blow as the Honour Guards swung at him with their energy staves. One of them threw its stave like a javelin. It hit John but only took down a small part of his shields, stunning him for barely a second. The same Honour Guard then charged at John with a newly unleashed energy sword. John danced around the guards, firing his battle rifle and whacking them with it until they were all on the floor. The energy blades disappeared as they landed. Whether the guards were dead or merely unconscious, John was unworried as long as they were out of his way for now.

There were four more Honour Guards across the room with Regret and more Elites and Grunts on the walkway, but John seized the opportunity to eliminate his target. He fired his BR directly at the Prophet's crowned cranium. The bullets disintegrated a foot in front of the hierarch as golden shields lit up around the throne.

John fired four more times before the Elites and Grunts on the walkway were close enough to become a threat, but they too served only as temporary distractions. He emptied the last of his battle rifle ammo into the aliens then picked up a plasma rifle from the floor, finishing each of them off and dodging a plasma grenade thrown by one of the Grunts. John remained unharmed as it exploded behind him.

“Chief, the Covenant fleet has launched multiple waves of Phantoms,” Cortana notified urgently. “Too many for me to track. We don't have much time.”

“Guards!” Regret screamed. “Remove this vermin from my sight!”

John fired each round of his sniper rifle consecutively into the Prophet's energy shields as the second wave of Honour Guards charged towards his position. Regret's shields flickered brightly but did not disappear. All of the guards dropped their energy staves to the floor this time. Two opted for their faster, more freely

moving energy swords. One switched to a plasma rifle, and the other pulled out a Covenant carbine. Once again, John found himself dancing around the red and yellow Elites, dodging every strike.

“Incompetents!” shrieked the Prophet. “I’ll kill it myself!”

Suddenly, two golden beams were hosed out from the sides of Regret’s hover throne. The beams looked almost identical to those of the Hunters’ assault cannons aside from the colour. With the Honour Guards now surrounding him, John used them to his advantage. He dived behind one of them. As the golden beam tracked the Spartan’s position, it hit two Honour Guards. Both died the instant it touched them. John used their deaths as a distraction and fired his plasma rifle at the Prophet to no avail.

The remaining sword-wielding Honour Guard lunged at the Spartan. John grabbed its wrists and wrestled with it, attempting to manoeuvre his opponent’s body to keep it between him and its carbine-wielding brother. While grappling the Elite, John noticed a small blue sphere sitting on the floor beside one of the Grunts he’d killed. He shoved the Elite into its brother and leapt to the plasma grenade. In a single motion, John swooped up the grenade, activated it and launched it at the Prophet only

to see it bounce right off the Prophet's shields and explode without even scratching the alien.

"It's deflecting everything we throw at it!" Cortana realised.

Before the Honour Guards could recover, John sprinted directly at Regret's throne. The Prophet's fishy eyes grew wide in alarm. John darted left as the throne's golden energy was beamed forwards again. Successfully avoiding its fire, John bent his knees and pushed off the ground directly at the throne. Regret's long alien arms fumbled for something within his garments, a hidden plasma pistol. The Chief slapped the weapon out of the Prophet's hand as he landed on the edge of the throne, causing it to bob slightly.

John let his magnetic boots do the work and gripped onto the throne with only one hand. He turned his other into a fist and punched the Prophet in his swollen head. John was surprised to find that Regret's blood was red as it sprayed into his visor from the Prophet's face. He jumped back off the hover throne as Regret's unconscious body slumped. The Prophet slipped out from the upturning throne and landed on the ground with a crack. The Spartan turned to face the oncoming Honour Guards only to find he was now completely alone in the chamber, not counting the pile of unmoving bodies he'd created.

“Bad news,” Cortana announced. “The Phantoms are turning around. The fleet is preparing to fire on our position!”

John wasted no time. He sprinted back through the entrance. His gondola was gone, and no Pelican was waiting to pick him up. Instead, the sky was obscured by the underside of a Covenant carrier. A blue light began to glow halfway down the ship. John turned left and ran to the edge of the temple. He jumped over the side of the platform and fell to the lower section of the building, fifty metres below. He lost a fraction of his shields as he landed. The shields charged as he sprinted down the length of the building, but they would be useless against the Covenant’s charging ventral beam. He felt the hot energy rushing up behind him as the ship’s purple beam was projected directly into the front of the temple.

John was blinded by purple light for barely a second before his world turned black. As he faded in and out of consciousness, he heard the most low-pitched voice he’d ever heard in his entire life. He would have thought it was a dream as he floated somewhere between fantasy and reality except for the fact he could feel the strong vibrations produced by the voice as they rumbled through his veins.

“This is not your grave,” said the voice. “But you are welcome in it.”

Uncomfortable Silence

The Mark of Shame itched beneath Thel 'Vadamee's steel armour as he stepped through the great hall in the *Sanctum of the Hierarchs*. His skin had not yet healed from the punishment that followed his trial, and he didn't believe it ever would. Nonetheless, his torture began to feel like a distant memory. Already, he had defeated the heretics, slain their leader and discovered a Forerunner oracle. A new Halo installation had been found, and the Prophet of Regret was now dead, assassinated by a single human.

The two lines of Honour Guards that Thel marched between were normally solemn and still, but today they were dishevelled and disorderly. Jiralhanae brutes brawled with one another over the Honour Guards' helmets as the Sangheili were forced to submit them to their rival species. The Jiralhanae were the most vicious race in the Covenant. Nothing came close, in Thel's opinion, to their primal savagery.

When the Covenant discovered the Jiralhanae homeworld, *Doisac*, the Jiralhanae had already brought it to ruin through endless clan wars and tampering with dangerous weaponry. They were crawling through their own muck when the Sangheili encountered them, and since then, they had proven to be cruel and merciless beings.

When a Sangheili caught an enemy, they killed them swiftly and with as little pain as possible. Even their foes received honourable deaths on the battlefield, but Thel had confronted tribes of Jiralhanae who'd been torturing human prisoners for days until he caught them. Those were just the humans they hadn't eaten. Now, the Jiralhanae were replacing the Sangheili as the hierarchs' personal protectors. The days ahead would be interesting to say the least.

At the end of the hall, Thel stepped up to an oversized, colourful doorway. He waited for it to slowly open until it revealed a perfectly circular room, welcoming him in. The room had aqua-coloured marble flooring; a single door on both the left and right sides; a round holo-tank in the centre, which also served as a stasis field; and a display screen that stretched across the wall on the entire other half of the room.

In the middle of the stasis field floated the oracle Thel had found on Threshold. It did not bob or pulse light as it had in the gas mine. It was completely motionless above its pedestal. The Prophets of Truth and Mercy sat in front of the display screen, which showed part of the Halo ring orbiting the blue gas giant, *Substance*. The Prophets were in a heated debate with a group of Sangheili. White-armoured Rtas 'Vadumee stood at the head of the group.

“This is unprecedented,” exclaimed the Spec Ops Commander. “Unacceptable!”

“A hierarch is *dead*, Commander,” rebuked the Prophet of Truth.

“His murderer was within our grasp,” Rtas argued. “If you had not withdrawn our Phantoms-”

“Are you questioning my decision?” Truth raised his voice authoritatively.

“No, Holy One. I only wish to express my concern that the Jiralhanae-”

Truth raised his palm to silence the Commander before replying.

“Recommissioning the Guard is a radical step, but recent events have made it abundantly clear that the Sangheili can no longer guarantee our safety.”

Rtas hesitated before finishing.

“I shall relay your *decision* to the Council.”

With his final word, Rtas ‘Vadumee nodded in respect to the Arbiter before he and his Sangheili left the chamber. The entrance closed behind them. Thel knew exactly how the High Council would take the Prophets’ choice to change the guards. Half the Council were Sangheili, and not a single one would agree with the decision. Thel doubted that even the San’Shyuum on the Council would support the hierarchs in these circumstances. He considered

the possibility that he might soon be receiving his orders from a *new* trio of Prophets.

“Politics,” Truth sighed as he floated over to the Arbiter. “How tiresome. Do you know the Sangheili have threatened to resign, to quit the High Council because of this *exchange of hats*?”

“We have always been your protectors,” Thel replied placidly.

“These are trying times for all of us.”

The Prophet of Mercy then floated over to join his associate.

“Even as the annihilation of the humans filled us with satisfaction,” he began wheezily. “The loss of one of the Sacred Rings racked our hearts with grief!”

“Putting aside our sorrow,” Truth dismissed. “We renewed our faith in the prophecy that other rings would be found, and see how our faith has been rewarded.”

All three of them turned towards the display screen to soak up the image of Halo: a new, whole, undamaged ringworld. Mercy raised his arms high above his head.

“Halo,” began the elderly Prophet. “Its divine wind will rush through the stars, propelling all who are worthy along the path to salvation.”

“But how to start this process?” Truth asked rhetorically. “For ages, we searched for one who might unlock the secrets of the ring, an oracle, and with your help, we found it.”

They returned their gaze from the ring and approached the oracle who was still suspended in the centre of the room. Mercy resumed the dialogue.

“With appropriate humility, we plied the oracle with questions, and it, with clarity and grace, has shown us the *key*.”

A hologram of a grey T-shaped tube with a vertical line of emerald glowing up the middle appeared beside the oracle. The Prophet of Truth extended his long fingers towards the image of the key.

“You will journey to the surface of the ring and retrieve this Sacred Icon,” he ordered. “With it, we shall fulfil our promise-”

“Salvation for all!” Mercy interrupted.

“And begin our Great Journey,” Truth finished.

It was Tartarus who provided the Arbiter his intel as the pair approached the ring’s surface within a Phantom filled with Jiralhanae. Their destination was the Sentinel Wall, an enormous, segmented wall hundreds of units high that stretched across a vast portion of the ring. The Wall projected an invisible energy barrier, a shield around several Forerunner structures, including a fortress called the Library. In the heart of the Library waited the Sacred Icon.

“Once the shield is down, we’ll head straight to the Library,” Tartarus instructed. “I do not wish to keep the hierarchs waiting.”

Thel understood the quest well, but he now had another thought brewing in his mind. Visiting a second Halo ring, talking of a second Library and learning that the Prophet of Regret had been killed by one human against a legion of Sangheili, which included Honour Guards, got Thel thinking. He wondered exactly who or *what* his greatest threat on this ring was going to be. The Arbiter turned to the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae.

“The human who killed the Prophet of Regret,” Thel began. “Who was it?”

“Who do you *think*?” Tartarus replied.

“The Demon is here?”

The Chieftain smirked and supplied a low, drawn-out chortle.

“Why? Looking for a little payback?”

“Retrieving the Icon is my *only* concern,” Thel answered.

“Of course,” Tartarus snorted.

Thel was dropped off alone on a platform on the outer side of the Sentinel Wall. Essentially, he’d landed in a four-walled chamber with the fourth wall removed to look upon the land below, but Thel was amongst the clouds and could barely make out any land features beneath them. What he could see was the shadowed blue

planet above, the other side of the ring and High Charity drifting ominously amongst the stars. The stars were the brightest objects in the sky on this otherwise dark and gloomy night.

There were some lights in the room, just enough to show the Sangheili where he was going. Tiny Sentinels, no longer than Thel's forearm whizzed around him. They were Sentinel Constructors, repairers on a mission. The Arbiter ignored them and walked over to a wide column in the back. It had a flat holopanel on its side, which Thel touched with his fingers. Nothing happened.

“Lower the shield, Arbiter,” Tartarus transmitted. “I'll pick you up when you're finished.”

Two Sentinel Constructors flew over to the large, square pillar. One of them sparked a narrow, light-blue beam at the holopanel. The panel turned red, and the top of the pillar hissed steam as it shot up into the ceiling. It was a piston of sorts, and below it was a dark chute that the Constructors disappeared into. The piston returned to its position, filling the opening. Thel understood now. He slung his carbine over his back, ensured his plasma pistol was well-fastened and smacked the holopanel with his fist. Sure enough, the panel turned red, the piston rose up and the Arbiter stepped into the dark chute.

Thel slid down a bending tunnel in total darkness for what felt like a solid minute before it ejected him into a new area. This Forerunner room was longer and had more light. Thel figured he must have been dropped somewhere along the middle of the Sentinel Wall. The walls were lined with thick octagonal hatches. Each hatch had a glowing Forerunner glyph on it. They were *Sentinel launchers*. Thel knew if he did any harm to the architecture here or acted aggressively in any way, the hatches would open to unleash a heavy flow of Sentinel Aggressors to deal with him. Sentinel Aggressors were the armed Sentinels Thel had fought on Threshold. He could handle one or two Sentinel Minors, just as he had on the gas mine, but once the golden Sentinel Majors were dispersed, Thel would be in for an incredibly hard time.

Suddenly, a red-armoured Unggoy and an orange-shielded Kig-Yar stepped out from behind a thick brace on the wall. They both wielded plasma pistols while the Unggoy also had a plasma grenade upon his hip.

“Arbiter, our saviour,” squeaked the Unggoy Major. “Stupid Kig-Yar, say thank you!”

“What happened to your lance?” Thel asked.

“They dead,” the Unggoy replied. “It just us now.”

“What killed them?”

“Sentinels,” the Unggoy informed excitedly. “Some grey, some gold, one big scary thing with blue face.”

Thel unslung his carbine and pointed it in a readied position.

“What is your name, Unggoy?”

“My name?” it gasped. “My name Dipyak. You can call me Dip though.”

Thel turned to the Kig-Yar and waited.

“Call me Yherk, Arbiter,” said the Kig-Yar in its icy voice.

“Yherk, Dipyak, show me where your leaders fell.”

The pair led Thel down the chamber, which included a bridge over a gap halfway along as well as several glass segments that revealed only the small lights of Sentinel Constructors swimming about in a bottomless black void. This walk would not be a safe one.

As Thel had predicted, they were soon swarmed with Sentinel Minors. Thel did what he could to protect his Unggoy and Kig-Yar companions and managed to be successful. Yherk and Dipyak put up a commendable effort against the Sentinels. Thel understood how they’d survived where their leaders had fallen despite being lowlier races. Broken Sentinels and Sentinel launchers scorched with plasma marks were left on the floor behind them as the trio

opened a new piston and jumped down the chute.

Thel landed on something soft and furry at the bottom. It was a Jiralhanae corpse over a pile of other cold bodies. Dead Jiralhanae, Unggoy and Kig-Yar were tangled in a gruesome heap. Thel scrambled down the pile onto the floor followed by Yherk and Dipyak. He wondered if the fighters had died here or been piled by the Sentinels cleaning the upper rooms. The chute had been too dark to notice any blood smears. He thought back to the first Halo. Corpses had been gathered there as well.

“You are getting close to one of the shield generators,” Tartarus transmitted, tracking the Arbiter’s position from the outside. “Many of my Jiralhanae have fallen attempting to take it down. Let’s see if you fare better.”

Thel stepped out into another chamber that was missing its fourth wall. He spied another section of the Sentinel Wall across from the ledge. This chamber contained four pistons around the corners, and floating above him was a Sentinel larger than a Wraith. It had what looked like two giant crustacean claws dangling from its body and a dark-blue hardlight shield protecting its front. Whatever it was, it guarded a holopanel that had been placed directly below it.

“You have reached the power source, Arbiter,” Tartarus told him. “It is useless to attack the Enforcer from the front. Stay in the shadows. Wait until it loses interest, and then strike the beast when its back is turned.”

Thel noticed two Jiralhanae bodies lying on the floor beneath the Sentinel Enforcer. Tartarus was a seasoned warrior, and Thel considered his words. *I am no Jiralhanae, but if those two died following Tartarus’ orders, then I need to consider an alternate strategy.*

Dipyak crept up behind him. Thel could hear his obstructed breathing through his Unggoy mask. The Kig-Yar stayed further behind in the shadows. Thel looked up at the large Enforcer, which was now slowly turning to face him. It noticed the trio, and Thel did not know how much time he had to destroy it before it killed them.

“Dipyak, your grenade,” Thel demanded.

The Unggoy passed Thel his plasma grenade before the Arbiter began charging his plasma pistol. There were plenty of braces around the room connecting the wall to the floor and ceiling. Thel sprinted to the closest one on his left. A barricade of glowing red energy projectiles followed him. They looked like needler shards only darker and consisting of hardlight. They all hit the wall as the Arbiter successfully dived under cover.

The Sangheili paused as the Enforcer assessed its opponents. Thel saw it turn slightly towards Dipyak and Yherk as if about to shoot them, but it seemed to change its mind. Before it could direct more energy projectiles at Thel, Thel stepped out and unleashed his charged plasma pistol bolt directly into the Enforcer's shield. Only part of the shield disappeared after the plasma made contact, but that was enough for the Arbiter. Thel activated and launched the fiery plasma grenade into the newly formed gap before it could regenerate. Chunks of Forerunner metal flew through the air, ricocheting off the walls as the grenade exploded in a blast of white and blue light.

A chunk of the Enforcer was now missing along with its entire shield, but it managed to remain airborne. Squiggles of electricity sparked across its body. Thel ran over to the brace on his right, shooting his carbine at the Sentinel until he reached his new position.

"Fire!" Thel yelled as red energy hit the wall behind him.

Dipyak fired his plasma pistol rapidly at the Enforcer while Yherk charged his own. With the Enforcer now distracted, Thel leapt out again and unleashed a torrent of the carbine's semi-automatic fire at the Sentinel. Finally, the rest of the Enforcer's body collapsed, splitting into more chunks as it hit the ground. Thel stepped

out with his carbine still pointed at the Sentinel pieces on the floor. The Enforcer was successfully destroyed.

“Now that what me call a team effort!” Dipyak claimed triumphantly.

Yherk looked like he was going to say something to Dipyak but glanced at Thel and thought better of it. The Kig-Yar did not appear to be as enthused as the Unggoy. Yherk had not fired a single shot at the Sentinel Enforcer due to Thel having destroyed it before the Kig-Yar finished charging his weapon.

“Arbiter,” Tartarus began. “You must overload the locks holding the power source in place. Damage the pistons.”

Intending to conserve battery power, the Arbiter slung his weapons into position and approached one of the Jiralhanae corpses. It had two Jiralhanae-styled plasma rifles beside it. They were red, altered versions of those favoured by Sangheili. Thel picked them up and fired at the pistons around the room. Yherk and Dipyak joined in. The pistons lowered into the floor before the holopanel lit up, inviting the Arbiter towards it. Thel obliged and dropped the Jiralhanae rifles. He stepped up to the panel and deactivated the shield barrier.

The entire ground shifted upwards with the Sangheili, Unggoy and Kig-Yar still standing on

it before it floated out of the room to the other section of the Sentinel Wall.

“You have removed it from its cradle,” Tartarus said. “Our path to the Library is clear. I’ll pick you up on the ledge ahead.”

Thel looked around as they floated between what was essentially an enormous artificial canyon. He could see many more half-rooms over the entire Wall in each direction. Looking up, he saw what appeared to be a retreating aurora, waving and shimmering in the sky, then fading out of view. *That must have been the shield deactivating.* A Phantom lowered itself into the canyon as the Arbiter’s platform approached the opposite ledge, finding two Enforcers, several Sentinel Majors and countless Minors awaiting them. The Sentinel Enforcers turned towards the Phantom and began lobbing yellow balls of light at the dropship. The Phantom fired Shade bolts in return but then fled back out of the canyon followed by the Enforcers.

“Blasted machines!” Tartarus cursed. “Make your own way through the Wall, Arbiter!”

Fortunately, the part of the Wall that the platform joined had plenty of cover. The purpose of the Forerunner blocks and the other geometry Thel used as cover was unknown to him, but he was no less thankful for them. He called to his companions.

“You two, focus on the grey Sentinels where possible,” he advised. “I will aim for the gold ones.”

Thel felt a little guilty as he fired at the Sentinel Majors. They were, after all, creations of the Forerunner themselves. He had previously theorised that they were left behind by the gods as an intentional challenge. Achieving salvation should not be a simple task. With the Covenant’s plasma being reverse-engineered from Forerunner technology, he found it was most effective against the flying machines.

Thel glanced at the Unggoy and Kig-Yar only for a moment to see how efficiently they were fighting. They made an odd pair, and in spite of Dipyak’s earlier words, there was no teamwork in their fighting at all, but they demonstrated how right Thel was about the plasma. They were able to finish off the Sentinel Minors without exposing themselves from their cover as yellow-and-orange-coloured beams swept the area.

Thel was having a tougher time with the Sentinel Majors. Each carbine shot was deflected by their blue ellipsoid shields lighting up similarly to Sangheili shields. The Arbiter refused to let their beams touch him as he knew how quickly a mistake like that could cost him his life. He charged his plasma pistol behind cover, poked his arm around and unleashed his shots at the Sentinels’ shields. Then he leant out

to finish them off with his carbine, all the while ducking and weaving to remain protected. Heavy moisture built up between Thel's skin and his armour as he perspired, but eventually, the skirmish was won, and the trio moved on. Dipyak threw himself onto a destroyed Sentinel as they were leaving.

"I am Dip!" yelled the Unggoy, whaling on the fallen Sentinel. "Dip, the Sentinel Clobberer!"

As they travelled around a bending hallway, Thel noticed Yherk was injured. A Sentinel's beam had cut through his legwear. There were deep burn marks across the Kig-Yar's left shin, scorched through his scales to reveal seared tissue beneath. Purple blood and colourless lymph trickled down the front of his leg. Yherk groaned as he limped with his shield and pistol still raised.

"Kig-Yar, how hurt are you?" Thel asked.

"Enough," Yherk replied. "To see a doctor."

Thel cringed. Of course a Kig-Yar would take no issue with seeing a doctor. The Arbiter could not think of many things worse than degrading himself to such an extent and submitting to a filthy medical practitioner. Admittedly, he had sunk to that level once in his past, but he vowed never to again. There was no honour in voluntarily allowing another Sangheili to spill his blood. Thel assumed it was common Kig-Yar

practice. The Kig-Yar could put up a decent fight occasionally, but ultimately, they were still thugs and scroungers. They did not see the value in honour.

“The journey ahead will be treacherous,” Thel told the Kig-Yar. “You may remain behind if you wish, but I cannot say how long it will be before you receive an escort.”

“No,” Yherk replied. “I’m coming with you.”

Maybe the Kig-Yar has more dignity than I believed, Thel pondered. *That, or he’s too cowardly to wait in the Wall alone.*

At the end of the curved hallway, they found another piston that led them into yet another chute. This chute delivered Thel into a room that was structurally identical to the earlier one with the Sentinel launchers, except visually. Visually, it was completely different. The architecture was the same, but either the lights in this room had been dimmed greatly or they were simply unable to pierce the strange snot-coloured fog. The fog was thick and dusty. It reminded Thel of pollen, but rotten.

With the darkness of the room and the density of the fog, Thel could barely see two feet in front of him. He noticed that a tight layer of clean air remained around him and his armour. His energy shields must have been repelling whatever unclean substance filled the air. While Dipyak was protected from the pollution by his

rebreather pack, Yherk had nothing. The Kig-Yar coughed violently but recovered when the Arbiter turned towards him.

“Careful, Kig-Yar,” Thel said. “We cannot see what hides in the shadows. We must be soundless, if possible.”

“We both know exactly what hides in these shadows,” Yherk retorted. “I can taste it in the air. I see it in your eyes. You recognise that stench just as much as I do.”

The Arbiter crept through the murky fog followed closely by his companions. They each had their weapons pointing in different directions to keep all areas of the fog covered. Thel caught himself breathing heavily. It was louder than necessary. He did what he could to stifle his breaths, but the room’s silence only made him sound louder. All that could be heard was his breathing and the steps of his subordinates.

He realised his breathing was only loud in his head as he could hear the Kig-Yar and Unggoy making even more noise when he listened properly. He zoned out his breathing from his mind to be more alert of his surroundings.

Suddenly, Thel heard a voice shouting in the distance. For a moment, he couldn’t comprehend what it was saying or even what species it was, but his mind adjusted, and soon he understood it was a human voice. There were

humans somewhere in this facility. Thel had made a point to learn human languages during his ascendance to Supreme Commander. He needed no translator. This human was yelling in English, their most universal tongue.

“Proceed to the objective!” screamed the male human. “We’ll hold out as long we can. No. No! Get it off! Aargh! Aaaaaaargh!!!”

“Suppressive fire! Suppressive fire!” screamed another.

Their voices seemed to be coming from Thel’s own helmet. The humans must have been communicating on an open comm.

“Negative, ma’am,” the voices continued. “They’re not Covenant!”

“Cover that doorway!”

Thel switched off the open channel from his comm. He did not need to hear the racket of humans when he faced more immediate concerns. The Arbiter directed his listening to the corners of the room, and eventually, he heard it.

He heard the slippery, squirmy sounds of tainted flesh wriggling over the hard metal floor, joined by a light sucking and slurping. Thel aimed his carbine at the ground ahead of him as it grew rapidly louder, and then, it was upon him, emerging from the mist. The dark silhouette of a bulbous, pulsating blob launched itself at the Arbiter. Thel shot it with the carbine before it

reached his face. The carbine's projectile pushed into the throbbing flesh. Its slimy skin pressed inwards before the swelling blob ripped apart, bursting open. Its leech-green insides blew across the room like grenade shards but soft and wet. Thel's shields lit slightly but lost no energy as the putrid innards disintegrated against him.

That was the first of many. Soon, the trio were surrounded. Fleshy blobs came at them from every direction. Their brown tentacles scrambled across the floor at an incredible speed, launching their swollen fungus-like bodies, the top halves of which were creased, crinkling back and flopping eagerly behind them as they leapt in the air towards their prey. They had no visible faces. Instead, above their dark-brown tentacles and below their shiny, tumorous bodies, they had three black tendrils reaching forwards with red feelers that split off at the ends, tasting the air and searching hungrily for their food. They were barely half the size of the Unggoy who frantically fired in every direction, but their size was not the threat of the situation. Their numbers were.

Thel shot one blob followed by the next, and just when he thought he was gaining the upper hand, when their numbers appeared to be decreasing, he heard a gargle behind him. He spun to see Yherk being strangled by one of the creatures. Yherk's shield had deactivated,

abandoning him after being bombarded by the wretched things. The blob had the first of its three tendrils wrapped around the Kig-Yar's neck, pulling it forwards. Its other two tendrils began digging into his chest just below the collarbone. They pierced his skin, penetrating deeper beneath the surface as the Kig-Yar tried to scream, tried to make some cry for help, but he was unable to use his voice. The creature slowly ripped an opening in Yherk's chest, exposing his purple innards and white bones. The top tendril now joined with the bottom two inside the hole they'd formed and began to squeeze the Kig-Yar's ribs together. One after the other, they cracked.

Thel would not have this. All he needed to do was shoot the blob once with his carbine and it would burst apart, but every time he was about to try, he had to turn back and shoot at another that leapt towards him.

Tentacles could now be seen slithering under Yherk's skin as the fleshy blob buried itself further into his chest. His silhouette twisted and contorted as throbbing boils formed over him. His scales began to shed, falling off and floating through the foul air like feathers. The skin around his chest changed colour, now blending in with the blob itself as it worked its way into him. Finally, the creature settled gleefully into position within the fresh cavity of the Kig-Yar's

now expanded chest. Yherk's head collapsed to the side of his torso.

The red-tipped tendrils now protruded outwards from the Kig-Yar's chest. The rest of the blob and the entire Kig-Yar merged together into a single form. They were both now the same pale, splotchy vomit colour, including Yherk's empty eyes. The entire melded-being throbbed and pulsed as its twisted legs turned its body to face the Unggoy who was still firing at other blobs.

Yherk, or rather the creature that had been Yherk, flung his right shoulder towards Dipyak followed by a now very dense arm. The heavy, swollen appendage swung into the Unggoy like a club, knocking him backwards onto his pointed methane tank. Metal hit metal as Dipyak fell to the floor, gasping in surprise at the sudden aggression from his companion. *CRRRAAOOOWW!* The Kig-Yar-creature screamed as it beat Dipyak with more swings from its mutated arm.

Dipyak held his naturally armoured forearm in front of his face, but his hard exoskeleton was not enough to stop the creature. The Unggoy tried to scramble back to his feet but was weighed down by his heavy rebreather tank and the force of the Kig-Yar's savage beatings. Mere seconds later, Dipyak disappeared under a sea of fleshy blobs, covering him from head to toe.

They ripped his mask away and jammed their tendrils down his throat as he tried desperately to call for help. When Thel was finally able to free himself from his own attackers, it was too late. The Unggoy's shell had already turned into the same foul flesh as the Kig-Yar's, and his silhouette was now crooked and bloated. The blobs dispersed, allowing the Unggoy-creature to rise.

Yherk and Dipyak no longer existed. Vile, rancid, abominable monsters stood in their place. The infection had returned. The Flood were back.

Healthy Competition

Thel 'Vadamee was not afraid of death. He was not afraid of pain, and he had lived through much of it over the course of his life. What he was afraid of was what might happen if his energy shields failed him in this very chamber. With the Flood, the fog and the monsters that stood before him, the result would be a fate far worse than death.

Thel fired his carbine at the Flood Combat Form that had, until a moment ago, been the Unggoy called Dipyak. Now, after being merged with the Infection Form buried in his chest and having had his DNA completely rewritten, Dipyak's body was merely a vessel for the Parasite, a mindless tool to perform the tasks of the greatest evil the galaxy had ever seen. Two of the split-ended tendrils that moved about, feeling the fog in front of the Combat Form's chest were sliced off by the carbine's lime-coloured projectiles. Dark grey-green liquid squirted out from the severed tubes as the tendrils dropped to the floor. The creature flinched briefly but was otherwise unbothered. Its remaining tendril wriggled in the air like a long grub searching for its next branch to climb.

Thel fired again. This time, the Infection Form popped like a water balloon. Liquid

flowed from the now hollow chest cavity as the rancid skin of the Infection Form floated slowly down the mist like leaves from a withering plant. The Unggoy-based Combat Form lost its footing and fell to the ground. It spasmed on the floor before another Infection Form scrambled up into the fallen Unggoy, settling into its new home and raising its host to its feet again.

Thel had no time for this. He trotted backwards from the Unggoy, heading towards the other end of the long room. If the room was identical to the fogless version of the chamber he'd been in earlier, there would be another piston on the other side of the bridge.

Thel fired at each Infection Form as they continued to jump up at him followed closely by both Dipyak and Yherk's controlled Flood bodies. Thel's shields suddenly lit up, dropping to half strength in an instant. Yherk's body had retained his plasma pistol and knew exactly how to use it. Almost immediately after, two Infection Forms made contact with Thel's shields. The tentacled blobs burst upon impact, but they also brought the shields down even further. Upon reaching the halfway point of the room, Thel activated his active camouflage and sprinted down the bridge towards his presumed exit.

Both the Infection Forms and the Combat Forms were baffled by the camouflage, but only

for a couple of seconds. Still, it was enough time for Thel to gain some distance between him and his enemies. Just as he did though, he heard another penetrating growl ahead of him. He squinted through the ghastly fog and saw a roughly human-shaped form rushing towards him. Its neck was snapped back. Its jaw was dislocated, and its torso was bent out of shape. At the end of its left arm, it had three thick, hooked tentacles extending beyond its twisted hand. In its right, it grasped an SMG, raised and pointing at Thel.

Thel swooped right to avoid the oncoming spray of bullets only to find another human Combat Form leaping at him from the mist. It swung its root-like arm-tentacles, whipping through the fog. The tentacles missed Thel's shields by millimetres as he bent around to dodge them. His shields only managed to recharge a miniscule amount before he was struck by some of the SMG bullets from the first infected human. It reloaded as the nearer Combat Form spun to attack the Arbiter again. Thel heard the Infection Forms as well as Dipyak and Yherk's forms gaining on him from behind.

His active camouflage was still intact, but he was making far too much noise and movement for the Flood to miss him, and he was sure they could taste him in the air. Thel sprinted along the

rest of the room's length as more Infection Forms and human Combat Forms threw themselves at him. By sheer luck, he made it to the piston unharmed. He smacked it as hard as he could with the casing of his carbine and dived into the opening chute. He looked up to see the piston closing behind him with no unwanted followers, but he knew the Flood would reopen it in no time.

As Thel slid down the twisting tunnel, he wondered how the Parasite had produced such a fog in only a short time. On the first Halo, the Covenant had unleashed the Flood accidentally, but the ones here already seemed to be free. Perhaps they'd been running loose on this installation for many years now. The mist thinned out as the Arbiter fell down the chute until eventually the air was clear once again. His shields charged fully before he hit the ground.

The following chamber wound around the edge of the Wall with its fourth wall absent like the earlier rooms. The clouds were now high above, allowing Thel to see the snow-covered terrain below the night sky. A small Covenant camp had been set up here. Judging by the placement of the weapon crates and communication nodes, Thel deemed it to be a Sangheili camp. Only no Sangheili could be seen. Instead, the floor was coated with indigo blood and green-grey juices. Thel heard the snarls and

chilling screams of Flood Combat Forms further down the winding room. He continued on towards the screams as it was the only direction he could go.

Even with his active camouflage now depleted, Thel was able to pass along the extensive edge of the winding Wall mostly undetected. Sentinels buzzed past as both human and Sangheili Combat Forms leapt around him. Sangheili heads flopped over their backs as the Flood's tendrils tasted the air. Enforcers sprayed the room with their red pulse weapons while fiery-orange beams swept the tiling. Some Combat Forms swung at Thel, and the occasional Infection Form jumped at his face, but for the most part, they were too caught up defending themselves from the Sentinels. The Sentinels ignored Thel completely as he hurried on in search of another piston.

The Arbiter used his active camouflage as often as he could while he traversed more rooms, eventually finding a chute longer and darker than any of the others. He felt he could count the days as he waited, sliding along the unending chute. He was unsure whether or not to be pleased when the tunnel eventually grew brighter. The chute was going to spill him directly into the moonlight, and Thel was not keen to witness whatever perils awaited him in the quarantine zone.

He was hit by a sudden frost. His hooves sank in the snow after being expelled into the open. Snowflakes fell upon his armour as his skin turned to ice. The mediocre insulation of his archaic Arbiter armour was nothing compared with the modern heating systems of his previous combat harnesses. Thel shuddered as he attempted to adjust to the uncomfortable chill of the wintery air.

A vast landscape stretched out before Thel. Leafless trees rose from shimmering white hills. A Forerunner fortress towered over the horizon in the distance, flashing yellow with the clouds as unknown weapons fire flared up from the ground below. A faint beam of light emerged from the centre of the fortress. Thel knew it came from the heart of the Library where the Sacred Icon lay waiting.

A smaller Forerunner station floated in the sky in front of the Library but was hit by a blue missile from the ground. The projectile seemed to have struck the station's engines as the structure slowly tilted sideways until it lost all power and plummeted. A tidal wave of snow sprang up from the terrain as the station landed.

Thel saw many tiny dots crawling over the tops of the snow, speeding around one another and occasionally clashing, releasing sparks he knew to be plasma and bullets. The battle between the Sentinels and Flood inside the Wall

was nothing compared with the chaos that reigned out here in the open. Several Covenant insertion pods splashed into the snow directly in front of the Arbiter, delivering black-armoured Special Ops Sangheili that leapt out with their weapons blazing. They did not conceal their surprise at Thel's presence.

"Forerunner be praised!" one of them exclaimed. "It's the Arbiter."

"This zone has been compromised," another told Thel. "We must do what we can against the Flood. Our commander has landed further in. Let us join him."

Thel and his new group of allies sprinted across the open terrain as fast as they could, which proved an incredulous task due to the deep snow that only thickened the further they went. Two Spec Ops Sangheili sliced with their energy swords at the snow in front of them as they lugged onwards.

Thel fired his carbine at the occasional Flood Combat Form that emerged from the gloom. Every one of them was a Sangheili turned into a mindless monster by the Parasite. Each Combat Form stumbled and fell as the Arbiter pierced the Infection Forms in their chests but only after their energy shields were depleted. His carbine now ran low.

Thel began to tire when the group came across a Covenant camp situated in the shadow

of a stretched-out ice cliff. A Forerunner bunker emerged from the cliff directly over the camp, which was made up of typical Covenant supplies, countless grey boulders, a hovering sniper tower and two shielded Shade turrets placed on either side of the camp. Thel recognised the present Sangheili and Unggoy as the same ones that had aided him in his hunt of the heretic leader. It appeared that two of the three lances were here. Every warrior was armed and ready for battle. Both Shades were seated with Sangheili while the sniper tower was stocked with Unggoy. Rtas ‘Vadumee stepped out from the crowd with his energy sword already blazing in his left hand.

“Arbiter, what are you doing here?” Rtas asked.

Before Thel could answer, another Sangheili yelled out. It was the same one Thel had handed his fuel rod cannon to on Threshold.

“Commander, the Flood is upon us!” he cried.

Rtas ‘Vadumee raised his voice, bellowing over the crowd.

“We must stick together,” he yelled. “Watch your back and the backs of your brothers!”

The Spec Ops Commander yelled a little more to the group, but it was drowned out by the plasma fire and screams of the Flood.

CCRRRRRAAAA00000WWW!!!

Thel signalled for a new weapon. One of the Spec Ops Sangheili tossed him a plasma rifle. The Arbiter then turned his back towards the sniper tower, which was located in the centre of the camp. The other Sangheili and Unggoy did the same. Plasma pistols, plasma rifles, needlers and Covenant carbines could all be heard as each warrior fired hard at their enemies. Both Infection Forms and Combat Forms rushed at them from every direction. Some even materialised from the shadow below the bunker, sprinting into the group. The Spec Ops warriors were a tough unit. They stayed in tight formation, but that was not enough.

BLOOWF!

Two Unggoy and a Sangheili went flying through the air from a green puff-cloud at the edge of the formation. Thel turned to see several Infection Forms scrambling out of the green cloud. They ran up the legs of the surrounding Unggoy and Sangheili who wriggled their bodies to shake the creatures off. The commotion caused the formation to break, allowing more Combat Forms to sprint into the gap. Thel fired at every Flood form he could see, stepping back with each shot in attempt to keep close to his allies, but they were no longer the solid unit they had been a minute ago.

Two *Carrier* Forms wobbled over a hill on their swollen legs. Their great bloated bodies

were inflated like balloons. With the stale colour and uneven consistency of the Flood, the creatures looked like rotten, overgrown cauliflower that hobbled to them with wrinkly, vine-like tentacles drooping from halfway up their bodies. They were the third stage of the Flood's lifecycle, usually developed from old Combat Forms or hosts that the Flood deemed less fit for battle. Carrier Forms were the slowest form of the Flood, but it wasn't their speed that caused concern, which Thel knew well as he heard two more explosions from other sections of the Spec Ops formation. The Carrier Forms were kamikaze Flood. Once they were close enough to their enemies, they would fall to the floor, inflate to twice their size, explode and release a wet fountain of Infection Forms upon their prey.

Thel held his plasma rifle's sensor down hard as he pointed at the Carrier Forms. The plasma rounds struck both targets, one and then the other, causing them to step back for a moment only to continue hobbling towards the group again, balancing their enormous bodies over their stumpy legs as they walked. Thel increased his fire. On this attempt, he achieved results. Both Carrier Forms exploded prematurely before they reached the group, but they still unleashed Infection Forms which scrambled over the snow, flowing down the ghostly hills

like a stream upon their targets. Things were looking dire for the group.

Thel looked back to see cowering Unggoy flee into the sniper tower. They jumped up the gravity lift one by one, cramming together upon the floating platform. Half the Sangheili had now unleashed their energy blades and were slicing maniacally at Combat Forms, which seemed to have doubled in numbers. The Spec Ops formation still stood, but it had shrunk. The edges now consisted of fallen Unggoy and Sangheili. Some of them were motionless and bleeding. Others were twitching aggressively as Infection Forms buried into their chests. The Flood were intent on capturing Sangheili for their army and merely killing the Unggoy.

“Use your grenades!” Rtas ordered.

A number of Unggoy and Sangheili lobbed their ignited plasma grenades over the edge of the group. Half of them blew Flood forms apart. Most of the other half missed entirely, and some of them killed fellow Spec Ops soldiers. Thel roared in frustration as he continued to fire at all three forms of Flood swarming over the group. He turned as he heard a Sangheili cry out in pain. It was a Shade gunner being pulled down by a Sangheili who’d just been turned by the Flood.

The Sangheili Combat Form yanked the gunner off the turret with its tentacled arm. The gunner fell to the ground, disappearing from the

Arbiter's sight behind the Flood. Thel fired at the Combat Form, pushing his way through the crowd towards the gunner, but he was too late. The gunner was already rising, halfway between his previous Sangheili self and his new transformed Flood figure. His scream sounded half familiar, as any Sangheili's would, but the other half sounded like torture. It was high-pitched and menacing but also tormented and painful. Thel felt pity for the Sangheili as he shot at the Infection Form in his chest. Both Flood juice and Sangheili blood poured from the leftover cavity.

Thel climbed up onto the Shade turret and spun it around, using its energy shield to protect himself as best as he could. He swung the long weapon left and right, knocking Combat Forms back before unleashing the Shade's heavy red bolts into them. He all but disintegrated their flesh. The Arbiter was dowsed in the putrid smell of burning Flood as he continued mowing down his targets. The crowd that remained standing were now one third Spec Ops and two thirds Flood. The only Unggoy that had managed to stay alive were the ones in the sniper tower. He could still hear the Spec Ops Commander's battle cries coming from somewhere, but he focused only on the vomit-coloured swarm before him.

As Thel swung left, right and then left again to fire at the Flood, he realised there were no more emerging from the darkness to join the others. It seemed the Parasite had sent everything they'd had in the area all at once. A surge of hope filled the Arbiter as he continued to take down more Combat Forms. At the same time, Infection Forms bounced off the Shade's shield. Occasionally, one Infection Form made it around the shield, but Thel's personal energy shields dealt with them.

After what felt like forever, the screams and plasma fire died down until nothing could be heard but the panting of survivors trying to catch their breath. Thel climbed down from the Shade after the battle. He heard the grunting of Rtas 'Vadumee and turned to see the Spec Ops Commander slicing both Flood and Covenant corpses with his energy sword.

"We should burn them," Rtas said to the Arbiter without looking up. "But there is no time."

Thel lifted the hilt of an energy sword from the ground. He and the four other surviving Sangheili joined in with the slicing. Several Unggoy jumped down from the sniper tower and began pummeling Flood bodies with their fists. The Arbiter observed the sight of the graveyard around him. The Flood had swept upon them and taken them down faster than

they ever could have been prepared for. They needed to leave this area as soon as possible. When Thel was satisfied they'd cut up all the bodies, he turned to Rtas.

“In the centre of this zone is a Sacred Icon critical to the Great Journey,” said the Arbiter. “I must find it.”

“Then we shall cut into the heart of this infestation, retrieve the Icon and burn any Flood that stand in our way,” Rtas replied, his volume rising shakily with each word. “The Parasite is not to be trifled with. I hope you know what you are doing.”

“Commander,” called one of the Sangheili. “Enforcers, over the Wall!”

Thel looked over to the direction he'd arrived from. Sure enough, two Sentinel Enforcers were on approach with a cloud of Aggressors from the Sentinel Wall.

“To the vehicles!” Rtas ordered. “Arbiter, follow me.”

They ran along the edge of the Forerunner bunker before landing upon two Ghosts and a Wraith. Clearly, there had been more vehicles earlier on, but they'd been destroyed at some point during the battle. Thel climbed into the Wraith while two black Spec Ops Sangheili mounted the Ghosts.

“Forward, warriors, and fear neither pain nor death,” Rtas said as he activated his active

camouflage. “Go, Arbiter. I’ll follow when reinforcements arrive.”

Thel did not like the look of the huge claws dangling below the Enforcers, and he refused to allow any damage to his Wraith while the threat of the Flood was at large. Before the Sentinels could make it to the campsite, Thel steered the Wraith through a wide entrance into the bunker followed by the Ghosts. The doorway shut behind them as they drove down a snaking path. Thel believed he was evading a threat, but little did he know, he was driving right into the centre of the storm.

Soon, Thel within his Wraith found himself in an enormous, cavernous chamber with more Sentinels and Flood. His allied Ghosts were not the only Ghosts in the area. Ghosts being ridden by Sangheili Combat Forms zoomed and swerved about, firing up at Sentinel Aggressors and Enforcers. Yellow balls of energy fell upon the Ghosts from above as Sentinel beams scoured the floor, tracking Combat and Infection Forms that ran about on foot. Thel was forced to fire his plasma mortar at an Enforcer he’d the gained attention of. The Enforcer’s shield disappeared, and some metal pieces fell from it, but it remained mostly unbroken. When the giant Sentinel flew down over the Wraith, Thel hit his thrusters hard in attempt to evade its thick claws. The claws

scraped the sides of the dark-blue tank, snapping just behind the vehicle as it slipped through.

Before the Enforcer could fly in for a second attempt, it exploded. Thel hadn't fired a second round at the Sentinel. He turned the Wraith to see who had fired at the Enforcer and found a damaged human tank rolling in from an exit at the other end of the chamber. Thel fired at the Scorpion before it could unleash a round at him. The Wraith's mortar plasma exploded over the Scorpion at the same time as the human tank's second round hit the Wraith. Flood appendages flew out from the centre of the Scorpion as it lit up. The display before Thel revealed the mortar tank's outer plating was extremely dented and scarred. Its inner workings were fine for now, but it wouldn't survive another Scorpion slug.

When Thel reached the exit, he turned his Wraith to see how far behind him his allied Ghosts were. Expecting to see them engaged in battle with either Sentinels or Flood, he was misguided. No Ghosts behind Thel were mounted by Sangheili, or rather, they were not mounted by uninfected Sangheili. No Spec Ops Sangheili were battling on foot either. Thel steered through the doorway and drove down a winding ramp back out into the snow.

“Arbiter,” called Rtas ‘Vadumee over his comm. “What is your status? I have lost the signals of Lok and Qran.”

Thel assumed Lok and Qran were the Ghost riders. He hadn't exactly had time to learn their names.

"I believe they have fallen," Thel answered. "My Wraith is damaged but still functional. I passed a human vehicle, one they call a Scorpion."

"Keep moving. I'm on my way."

Thel soon found himself amongst the damaged Forerunner station that had been shot down from the sky. He got a view of its interior as he passed between the two halves of the facility. Small Sentinel Constructors were urgently trying to repair the structure while Aggressors shot their beams at Thel. Tubes of what looked like molten lava ran upwards inside the fallen facility. Thel took out as many Sentinels as was necessary before emerging out in the open again.

Snowflakes melted against the warm, battered armour of the chugging Wraith as Thel journeyed further over the snowy mounds. An even spread of human and Sangheili Combat Forms rushed at his tank from behind the hills. In constant vigilance, he killed each one with his mortar cannon. More continued to appear as the Arbiter progressed slowly towards the ever-looming Library structure. Thel was a mere few hundred metres from the fortress when he encountered a skirmish between a Warthog and

Scorpion against a lone Phantom with a much cleaner, undamaged Wraith hanging underneath.

The Phantom swung from side to side, firing back at the human vehicles with all three of its Shades. Magenta plating fell from the dropship as several shots by the infected humans hit their mark. Fortunately, they had not yet noticed the Arbiter. He fired first at the Scorpion while driving diagonally towards it. His mortar plasma landed directly over its hatch. He landed a second shot before its cannon even finished rotating to aim its own shot at Thel.

By the time the Warthog's operators realised the Scorpion had exploded, Thel was already ramming into them. Once the Warthog tipped over, Thel thrust the Wraith hard, splattering the Combat Forms that had fallen out. The Shade turrets of the Phantom fell off as it flew away. Through his display screen, Thel saw the new Wraith was now joining his side. It had an armed Spec Ops Sangheili sitting on each of its four wings.

“Forward to the Icon,” Rtas ordered from inside the neighbouring Wraith. “The Parasite's ranks swell as we draw nearer. Steel your nerves! We will not turn back.”

As they drew closer to the fortress, they passed large pits of bubbling, steaming, opaque, aquamarine liquid. Sentinel Aggressors of both Minors and Majors along with Enforcers rose

high as more Scorpions, Warthogs and grounded Combat Forms attacked both the Wraiths and the Sentinels. Rtas 'Vadumee focused on shooting down only the Enforcers and Scorpions while his side riders aimed at the Warthogs and grounded Flood. Thel did not have that luxury. He rammed Flood on the ground while simultaneously turning his Wraith one way and the other to ward off the Sentinels. He tried to avoid the Scorpions altogether as he continued towards the side of the vast Library.

As soon as Thel was near, he leapt out from his Wraith, activated his camouflage and sprinted towards an entrance in the Library wall. He was followed closely by the Flood. Infection Forms sprang up from each side of the Arbiter. Combat Forms tailed behind, closing the gap between Thel and themselves. Carrier Forms hobbled through the snow under the shadow of the Library. Thel fired his plasma rifle only at those he had to. Soon enough, he saw the light and felt the vibrations of a Wraith's cannon firing beside him. Either it was a Flood-controlled tank or Rtas was covering the Arbiter as he kicked through the snow.

Bullets bounced off Forerunner metal as Thel approached the doorway. He dive-rolled left and spun to see two human turrets being operated by Flood. They exploded beneath blue light as Rtas' now very dented tank hovered in. The

Wraith moved in close, facing away from the Arbiter to protect him and the Library entrance.

Thel turned through the doorway and ran down a dark corridor directly into the fortress. At the end of the path, he found himself facing a metal canyon lined with gondolas far below the high ceiling of the ginormous, dimly lit structure. Thel's camouflage died out as Rtas and one of his Spec Ops Sangheili appeared behind him. He stepped up to the controls of the nearest gondola. Just before he could activate the switch, another gondola further along was activated. It began gliding away.

“More humans?” Rtas asked.

“They must be after the Icon,” Thel replied.

CRRAAOOOWW!!!

The Flood had reached the entrance of the fortress. The Spec Ops Commander drew his energy sword.

“On your way, Arbiter. Retrieve the Icon. We'll deal with these beasts.”

With that, Thel was alone once again. He activated the gondola switch and began to glide through the first layer of the Library. He did not stand there for long before a Phantom appeared behind him. Its Shades were all intact.

“I see that coward didn't join you,” Tartarus boomed from the safety of his dropship, referring to Rtas' departure. “I'll do what I can to keep the Flood off your back.”

The Chieftain must have seen something Thel couldn't because soon enough human and Sangheili Combat Forms were dropping down onto his gondola from above. The Arbiter danced between red Shade bolts as they carelessly hit the Flood around him. All the while, the gondola passed through layers of openings further into the fortress. Once the Combat Forms had been killed, Thel looked for the human-operated gondola further across, but it had disappeared from view sometime during the fight. He looked up at the Phantom for an answer.

"I did not see where the humans went," Tartarus told Thel. "But I will thin their ranks. We cannot let them capture the Icon. The hierarchs do not look kindly on failure."

The Phantom zoomed off into the darkness, leaving Thel with nothing to do but stand and wait. He picked a second plasma rifle off the floor of the moving platform. Dual-wielding would be more efficient if he were to be ambushed on this gondola again, and sure enough, he was.

It became a repetitive pattern of Thel clearing out Combat Forms, which dropped from unseen places within the brooding facility. Fortunately, their numbers were not overwhelming. The Flood was unable to pit their greatest numbers against Thel now that he was

inside the facility. It was either that or the Parasite was underestimating the Arbiter's abilities to defend himself. He did, however, manage to lose his energy sword down the bottomless trench during the fight.

Finally, after a lifetime of combat, the gondola locked itself into the heart of the Library. Thel stepped off into what appeared to be the innermost layer of the fortress. Walls of medium height curved around a circular room in the centre of the Library's heart. Thel followed the curved wall until he came across a narrow porthole into the central chamber.

The chamber had a massive bottomless pit in its centre with eight thick planks pointing over it from around the edge. The broken bodies of destroyed Sentinel Enforcers lay around the hole. A short bridge led to a flat, ring-shaped platform that was suspended over the pit. There, over the hole, in the centre of the platform floated the Sacred Icon. It beckoned for the Arbiter, but Thel remained still. A human female was already walking across the bridge. Thel activated his camouflage, leant closely to the walls and watched.

It seemed the ring-shaped platform was an elevator of some kind, but it appeared broken and off-centre. Its position meant the human could not reach to grasp the Icon, which was too far over the hole. Thel continued to watch as the

human looked for something to aid her. *Has she come here alone?* Thel wondered. *Surely not. This could be a trap.* The human wore a uniform that Thel knew signified she belonged to the human Navy. She was not a foot soldier like most humans he personally encountered. She had dark-brown hair but light skin. Thel had never quite grown used to these pale, pink-skinned humans with their white eyes and narrow faces.

The female found what looked like a lengthy tree root wrapped around a broken Enforcer shell. She unravelled part of the root from the machine and dragged it over to the centre hole. With one hand on the root, she leant forwards and stretched her other arm towards the Icon. Suddenly, just as she grasped her small, fragile, human fingers around the Icon, the root moved. It unravelled completely from the Enforcer, and it didn't simply loosen due to the human's pull. It moved on its own accord.

The human fell into the hole holding onto the root but dropped only a few metres before she stopped. A male human had sprinted out from the other side of the room and caught the root before it was lost. That was when Thel realised what the *root* was: a broken Flood tentacle like the ones found on Carrier Forms but much larger. The darker-skinned, green-armoured human spoke to the female who clung to the tentacle as he pulled it up.

“You know,” the male grunted. “Your father never asked me for help either.”

“The Index is secured,” she replied to him as she fastened the Icon to her belt, which held an SMG on the opposite side.

“McKenzie, Perez,” the male called in the direction he’d come from as the female climbed onto the platform. “How’s out exit?”

Both humans turned from Thel’s direction, waiting for a response as they walked back across the bridge. Thel figured this was the perfect time to strike. With his camouflage still active, he charged at the male human first. That one appeared to be the greater threat. The human turned to the Arbiter as he heard Thel’s footsteps, but it was too late. The human’s battle rifle bullets missed Thel as he swept forwards while almost invisible. As he got closer, the light from the torch at the bottom of the human’s weapon revealed the Sangheili’s shape, and the human managed to hit a shot, but Thel’s shields protected him. The Arbiter reached forwards, swatted the rifle from the human’s hands and lifted the human’s minuscule frame before him. The two were now eyelevel.

“How you doing?” the human asked him.

Thel headbutted the human, smashing the front of his helmet into the human’s skull. No human could survive that. The brown-skinned man fell limp. Thel tossed him to the ground

only to be hit by a stream of bullets from the female.

“Sergeant, stay down!” she yelled as she fired her SMG.

The point-blank range at which she shot Thel caused his shields to pop. He retreated behind an Enforcer shell to let his shields recharge.

“Johnson, are you alright?” the female yelled to her dead companion “Johnson!”

Thel’s active camouflage deactivated as he stood behind cover, but before his shields recharged, he took the opportunity to jump back out and spring upon the human. He sprinted over to the female as she raised her SMG back at him. Thel swatted away her weapon just as he had with the male, but before he could do any damage to the female, a ball of blue energy erupted around her. Involuntarily, she floated up within the sphere and flew over to the other side of the room. Her now unconscious body was caught by Tartarus in his right hand. He held his Fist of Rukt in his left. Evidently, Tartarus had used the anti-gravity system within the warhammer to capture the human. A number of Jiralhanae guards stepped out from the shadows behind Tartarus.

“Excellent work, Arbiter,” Tartarus said. “The Prophets will be pleased.”

“The Icon is *my* responsibility,” Thel reminded.

“*Was* your responsibility,” Tartarus mocked as he ripped the T-shaped artefact from the human’s belt. “Now it is mine.”

Three of the Jiralhanae stepped forwards. One of them grabbed the male human’s body from the floor. Remarkably, he appeared to be breathing. The other two Jiralhanae raised their weapons and pointed them at Thel. They were crude, grey weapons with a tubed barrel like a human gun and a curved blade along the bottom. The Jiralhanae holding the male dragged him along the floor away from the Arbiter.

“A bloody fate awaits you and the rest of your incompetent race,” Tartarus declared as he pointed his hammer at Thel. “And I will send you to it!”

“When the Prophets learn of this,” Thel began. “They will take your head!”

“*When* they learn?” Tartarus scoffed before his face turned stone cold. “Fool. They ordered me to do it.”

Thel tried to dodge the blue energy sphere that rushed forwards from Tartarus’ hammer, but with the Jiralhanae closing in and the bottomless pit behind him, he had nowhere to go. The sphere sucked him up and spat him out over the hole. Thel could do nothing but yell in shock and anger as he fell into the darkness. The light at the top of the hole grew further away as

he was swallowed by the blackness, submerging him deep into a world of nothingness.

Gravemind

John-117 awoke to the sound of his charging energy shields signifying that his MJOLNIR's system was back online. He had a splitting headache and a ringing in his ears, but as a Spartan-II, he knew they'd subside soon enough. He opened his eyes as each element of his heads-up-display flickered on one at a time. He glared through the haze of his unfocused eyes as they adjusted to his new environment. He was in immediate danger.

“What,” Cortana asked. “Is *that*?”

When the Master Chief's sight cleared, he found himself in an alarmingly unfamiliar environment. There was no lake structure or water of any kind. Instead, the image that filled John's vision was a heap of giant tentacles that stretched beyond his peripherals. Before him was an enormous kraken of a beast. The centre of its body rose like a snake with vine-like tentacles extending in every direction. Below that, it split off into many much-larger, train-sized tentacles that disappeared down black corridors in the sides of the dark, gloomy, fog-filled chamber. Every instinct John had as a Spartan, a human and a living being told him to get out as soon as possible. He scanned the room in search of an escape.

John was held high by the thinner, pointed end of one of the monster's medium-sized tentacles. It wrapped around him, coiling over his arms and legs. He considered his escape. If he were to untangle himself from this creature, where would he go? The entire ground of this tall, cylindrical room was congested, carpeted by the monster's entwined appendages. Their thick girth filled the tunnels they disappeared into.

The Spartan searched along the walls with his eyes. Perhaps he could use his suit's magnetic function to climb his way out. Looking up, he saw a small, bright, eight-pointed star in the distance far above. It was the opening at the top of the hole he, Cortana and this beast were stuck in. The Master Chief could never make it that high up even without the creature knocking him back down. Even worse, the star shape of the hole's opening informed John exactly where he was, and he was sure Cortana knew as well. They were underneath the Library.

Suddenly, a loud rumble vibrated its way up the monster's long neck. Liverish-green air escaped the creature's throat. John looked up at its head. It wasn't an ordinary head of any kind. There was no visible skull nor orifices for eyes, nostrils or ears. Instead, its long neck simply split off into four protrusions that John figured to represent a jaw of sorts. Upon closer observation, he saw that these elongated flaps

had rows of jagged teeth lined along the inside. They had the shape and texture of broken bones. In fact, John was almost certain that's what they were. The monster spoke in reply to Cortana's question. *What is that?*

"I?" it reverberated.

John remembered the ominous voice he'd heard earlier after being hit by the plasma projector above the lake. This monster was undoubtedly the same being that had spoken then.

"I am the monument to all your sins," it spoke slowly and deliberately. "I am your brothers and your sisters. I am the promise to all your kin. I am perfection and unity and ecstasy for all. I am the end to chaos, anarchy, anguish and war. I am the personification of harmony and the epitome of equality. My agony is your pain of which I ponder most solemnly. I am the evolution of all that exists. I am the prospect of punishment and the dreams that persist. I am your past and your future as well. Join your voice with mine, and in bliss we will dwell."

Two tentacles pointing upwards began to pull something down from far above near the star-shaped opening. A humanoid form twisted and turned at the tips of the tentacles, even flipping upside-down at one point before being tossed back into an upright position. It was a Sangheili covered in archaic Covenant armour. As the

monster brought the Elite to the same level as John, the Spartan's heads-up-display flashed before him. A blue, rotating, digital image of this exact Sangheili in a more typical combat harness appeared over half of John's visor. The word, *ALERT!* blinked above the Elite's image followed by, *SUPREME COMMANDER THEL VADAMEE IDENTIFIED – ASSASSINATION ADVISED BY AUTHORITY OF AGENT JAMIESON LOCKE – ONI SECTION 3.*

John shooed the image and text away in time to see the Elite staring at him while still squirming. The Elite's eyes indicated its recognition of the Spartan, showing astonishment followed by an expression of intense hatred. *Supreme Commander*, John thought. *No wonder he's angry.* This was the Elite who had been responsible for tearing into human worlds and glassing their entire populations. It was also the Elite responsible for the activation of the first Halo ring, a task denied by John and Cortana. The Sangheili grunted as it attempted to wrestle with the tentacles that felt themselves around its figure.

"Relax," John told the Elite. "I'd rather not piss this thing off."

The monster hadn't killed them yet. Based on its colour and texture, it was clearly related to the Flood, but if it wanted to infect them then it

would have done so by now. Something mysterious was at hand.

“*Demon,*” Thel ‘Vadamee hissed at the Chief.

Its pronunciation, for a Sangheili, was impeccable. John already knew this was no ordinary Elite, but the English was unexpected. It had manipulated its mandibles in a way that the top two touched together while the bottom two joined in similar fashion, forming a jaw more akin to that of humans, not that it looked anything like a human. It was still very alien in appearance, but its speech had little accent and no impediment. That was a surprise to John. This must be one intelligent Elite or at least an Elite that was adept at learning foreign languages. The tentacled monster spoke again.

“This one is machine and nerve and has its mind concluded.”

The end of its tentacle wrapped around John’s visor, obscuring his vision only briefly before unravelling again until his head was free. It still had a firm grasp over his arms and legs. It continued speaking, this time turning its head towards the Elite who had now stopped struggling.

“This one is but flesh and faith and is the more deluded.”

The monster paused before continuing.

“I twist the coin this way, and I turn it the other. One side shows me winter, while the

other shows me summer, but cold is a mere absence of heat, and it was not purely chance that caused these two to meet.”

With each word it enunciated, the creature manipulated its tentacles as if to emphasise a point.

“I look at one and see clouds of *devotion* pierced only by hate and anger, the strongest of emotions. The other remains calm, collected and alert. Suspicion remains, but I will not disconcert. Their beliefs and mine differ but only momentarily. Their potential is the same, as is their past contrarily. Trained from youth for combat and devastation. They were pruned for perfection, but I will be their final incarnation.”

“Kill me or release me, parasite,” Thel Vadamee spat. “I have heard enough lies from the mandibles of my own brethren in days recent. I would rather die now than be subjected to more. Do not waste my time with talk.”

“There is much talk, and I have listened through rock and metal and time. Now *I* shall talk and you shall listen.”

The monster seemed to relax a little, bringing John and Thel closer to its obscene mouth, which expelled more fog with every breath. Upon closer examination, John was horrified by what he saw.

“Are they,” Cortana started. “Bodies?”

Sure enough, John could see the shapes of mangled limbs, torsos and most abominably, faces sticking out from behind the creature's skin. They were melded into it almost seamlessly. Many of the faces had frozen expressions of pain and terror. They were human, Sangheili, Unggoy and Kig-Yar. John tasted bile in his mouth as he attempted to block out the faces and look at the monster in its entirety again. It continued to talk.

“The notion of time lies only in the stages we create. It is a duty the wider universe does not undertake. To move forward through time and endure evermore, we must reflect on our history, a time forgotten by near all. Long ago, when peace was almost achieved, divine guardians protected life only to be deceived. Their children, their followers, the ones they admired most, they betrayed the galaxy and turned on their hosts.

“The Mantle of Responsibility was plagued by the stewards' lies, but the deceased watched on forever with hollowed eyes. One day, they returned with all of their rage. Judgement fell upon the Forerunner as we stepped into a new age. Time froze. War waged on for millennia and *longer* until the stewards learnt a lesson that left them undoubtedly sombre. They turned to their cousins and perceived them as new children.

They'd be heirs to a clean galaxy, left alone to build in.

“Accepting their judgement, their punishment and mistake, the Forerunner built these rings to confirm their final fate. Are they gods or demons? That is not my place to decide. I follow the instructions of instinct and Precursor pride. An Ark and an Index started the galaxy afresh, but the experiments of the sinners left us here in search of flesh. My quest for unification was long ago assigned. I am the Brain Form of the Flood. I am *Gravemind*.”

The Gravemind pulled a tentacle out from one of the tunnels in the wall to reveal a metal orb glowing red in its grip. The thin end of the tentacle looped through the various holes in the clearly dented and damaged Forerunner Monitor. The Gravemind lifted the spherical AI before John and Thel. John froze for a second. If the Flood had power over a Monitor of Halo, what did it mean for everyone on the ringworld? John thought back to 343 Guilty Spark. That Monitor had maintained full control of Halo's Sentinels and its teleportation grid. Who knew what other powers a Monitor might possess?

“Greetings,” chirped the orb. “I am Twenty-Four-Oh-One Penitent Tangent. I am the Monitor of Installation Zero-Five.”

“There are seven *ancilla* for seven rings,” began the Gravemind. “But they are merely the

servants of departed kings. Every Monitor from first to *last* has a different ideology, demeanour and past. Apart from their colour, you may think each one the same, but for the state of this ring, it is this Monitor who is to blame. His duty to maintain this ring and prevent its *disrepair* was in time rejected, his failure laid bare. The family of mine you are now familiar with, they escaped the research facilities and crept out forthwith. I waited for a vessel long before you arrived, and now that I live, I promise I will survive.”

It was difficult for John to ignore the sorrowful faces that skewed and stretched across the Gravemind as it spoke. The monster lifted another tentacle beside the Monitor, Penitent Tangent. This tentacle also held something at the end of it, but unlike John, Thel or the Monitor, this being was embedded into the tentacle itself. A half-infected Covenant Prophet stuck out from the top of the tentacle with its head, neck and torso free to move but its legs melted into the tentacle’s thickness. The San’Shyuum’s skin was half turned, and it had a milky-brown glaze over its iris and pupil. John also noticed a wound in the side of its face that appeared to be sealed with tiny Flood sacks. The Prophet looked deathly ill.

“I am the Prophet of Regret,” the Prophet strained. “Councillor Most High, Hierarch of the Covenant!”

Regret's speech sounded forced. The Prophet was clearly in pain. John felt an itch in his throat just by listening to the glass shattering strain in the San'Shyuum's cold voice. The Spartan was then distracted by a red light now glowing brighter than ever from Penitent Tangent. He turned towards the light to see the Monitor's big, round eye staring directly at him.

"A Reclaimer, here at last?" asked Tangent. "We have much to do. This facility must be activated if we are to control this outbreak!"

John failed to see exactly how they could get to work while being held by this Gravemind. The location was correct. If it was still intact, the Activation Index should be hovering over the deep hole they were in at this very moment. The Chief didn't know exactly how long he'd been unconscious for though. Perhaps Miranda and Johnson had already found the Index. Perhaps it had been taken by the Flood. *Although*, John reflected, *the Library required a Reclaimer to gain access to the Index*. He still didn't know exactly what a Reclaimer was, but he doubted the term included the Flood.

"I'm all for controlling this outbreak," chimed Cortana. "But to be honest, I don't know how I feel about activating Halo. Could we try maybe *destroying* it instead? You know, like we did last time?"

"I'm down for that," John agreed.

“Surely, Reclaimer, you understand the risks we take simply by waiting here,” said Penitent Tangent. “We cannot wait any longer. We must act *now*.”

“Stay where you are!” Regret screeched. “Nothing can be done until my sermon is complete!”

“Not true,” replied Tangent. “This installation has a successful utilisation record of one point two trillion simulated and one actual. It is ready to fire on demand.”

The Monitor sounded proud about the last statement. This was his Halo installation after all. Regret exhaled deeply.

“Of all the objects our lords left behind,” began the Prophet. “There are none so worthless as these oracles. They know nothing of the Great Journey!”

“And you know nothing about containment,” retorted Penitent Tangent. “You have demonstrated complete disregard for even the most basic protocols.”

The Gravemind lifted the Monitor-held tentacle higher.

“This one’s *containment*,” said the creature before lowering the Monitor and then raising the Regret-tentacle. “And this one’s Great Journey are the same. The true nature of this event is not conveyed by either name.”

The Gravemind lowered the Monitor and Prophet into the darkness. Regret shrieked long and loudly as he disappeared from sight until his voice eventually faded. Another long vibration ran up the snakelike body of the Gravemind before it emitted a low growl and continued to talk. He turned to Thel 'Vadamee.

“Your Prophets have promised you freedom from a doomed existence, but you will find no salvation on this ring. Those who built this place knew what they wrought. Do not mistake their intent or all will perish as they did before.”

“You fool only yourself, parasite,” Thel insisted. “I am impervious to your fabrications.”

John decided it was his turn to chime in. He didn't trust the Gravemind. It was very clearly an enemy, even more so than the Covenant, but in these circumstances, they desired the same outcome. Throughout the conversation, John had been working to figure out why the Gravemind was keeping them here and why it hadn't killed them yet. They shared a common goal. The Gravemind knew it. John and Cortana knew it, but this Sangheili was still blind to the truth. John spoke to the steel-armoured Elite.

“This thing is right,” said the Chief. “Halo is a weapon, and your Prophets are making a big mistake.”

“Your ignorance already destroyed one of the Sacred Rings, Demon,” Thel fumed. “It shall not harm another!”

“If you will not listen to the truth then I will show it to you,” announced the Gravemind. “I present to you both a task the galaxy requires you to do. There is still time to stop the key from turning, but first it must be found. The Activation Index, the Sacred Icon will not be left lying around. You will search one likely spot, and you will search another. Fate had us meet as foes, but this ring will make us brothers!”

The Gravemind lifted Penitent Tangent into view once more. The Monitor’s light turned gold as the fog closest to John began to shimmer. Rings of light rose up around John’s body until almost all the light blocked his view of the Gravemind and the Library. John took one last look at the monster’s distressing faces as the world around him became pure white, and John knew exactly what was happening.

The Gravemind was somehow using the Monitor’s abilities to tap into Halo’s teleportation grid. Last time the Spartan had been teleported, he was dropped directly onto his head. It was safe to say the teleportation grid wasn’t all that accurate, but it would get him closer to where he needed to go. He experienced pins and needles along his limbs as his body turned to static beneath his armour. He felt

himself split into a million pieces before rushing off into the light. The Chief was completely disoriented, and there was nothing he could do except wait.

John waited for the light to fade. He waited as pieces of him seemed to fit back together like a puzzle, and eventually, his feet hit solid ground. He did his best to ignore the nausea that came with the teleportation and adjusted his eyes to his new environment. Just as he was gaining focus and soaking in his very purple surroundings, a commanding voice yelled from a few metres away.

“Kill the Demon!”

Truth and Reconciliation

“Never take a girl to the library,” quipped Sergeant Major Avery Johnson. “You know what? Chief had the right idea... a gondola ride over a pretty lake, just one on one with his lady.”

Avery was talking more-or-less to himself as he lay with his back against the dusty cell wall. The convex curvature of the dark nanolaminate and the embossed pattern of the hard, grey ground below him prevented any chance of finding physical comfort. He felt bare, having been stripped of his weapons and regular supplies. His damp, crinkled combat uniform was in need of a good wash, as was the hat upon his head. What he really needed right now was the puff of a refreshing Sweet William to relieve him. He was a prisoner, locked up in an old-fashioned Covenant detention block.

Commander Keyes, who was crouching with her back straight in the opposite cell, did not reply. She was still alert and looking around for some manner of escape. Johnson had fought the Covenant long enough to know that they weren't going to be breaking out of these cells any time soon, even if these particular ones used metal bars instead of the usual hardlight shield doors.

Avery listened to the droning of the Prophet of Truth's voice bouncing over the walls from

an unseen loudspeaker. The Prophet had obtained Halo's Activation Index and was now patting himself on the back by broadcasting an extra-long homily. He spoke of the Great Journey and the Divine Beyond as well as congratulating Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes for finding the Index. During their capture, both Avery and Miranda were fortunate enough to have retained their tiny earpieces, which included Covenant-language translators. These pieces were not as sophisticated as the Master Chief's MJOLNIR system, but they were newly updated and seemed to be doing their job.

"Johnson," Keyes called across from her cell. "Found anything?"

"Not yet, ma'am," Johnson grunted.

After ten minutes of finding nothing of note within his very barren cell, Johnson had decided it would be more beneficial to take a break and save the little strength he had left from his earlier fight. Surely the Commander would come to the same conclusion soon enough. If there was any chance of escape, it wouldn't be while these bars were sealed shut. He and the Commander would have to wait for the Covenant to open them, and when they did, it would not be an easy getaway.

"Neither," Miranda said, sitting back in a position that mirrored Johnson's. "Think. What are our options?"

"Options, ma'am?" Avery questioned.

“Options,” she repeated. “The bars are sealed tight, but if we find something we could use as a pivot...”

She scanned the aisle between the prison cells. Avery was certain there wasn’t anything they could use. That was one of the first things he’d looked for, and Miranda knew that. Perhaps she thought that by verbalising her thoughts something might come to them. Avery didn’t see that happening.

“No,” Johnson answered. “There’s nothing, not unless we can find a way to use the clothes on our backs.”

“Hmm,” she considered. “We could wait for In Amber Clad. The crew would’ve noticed us missing by now.”

“We could, but the Library was engulfed in Flood and Sentinels. They’d be fools to think we weren’t dead or infected. We’re MIA, ma’am, and with all that mess breaking out on the ring, I doubt they’ll look here.”

“I just hope someone has taken the initiative to move my ship,” Miranda sighed. “We left it dangerously close to the Flood, considering how quickly they were spreading.”

The brig was filled with silence for a while. Avery figured the Prophet must have finished his speech, but then he heard Truth’s voice again. This time, it sounded enraged.

“Kill the Demon!” it yelled.

“The Demon?” Miranda echoed.

“It’s Chief!” Avery exclaimed. “He’s here.”

“How did he find us?” the Commander wondered. “How does he know we’re here? After we lost contact with him, I assumed the worst.”

“For the Master Chief? Ma’am, with respect, Spartans never die, and that one is the best I’ve ever known.”

A new *Brute* voice boomed over the loudspeaker.

“The Demon has infiltrated the Council Chamber,” it bellowed. “Protect the hierarchs! Seal the exits!”

Avery felt a renewed sense of energy surging through his veins. He tucked his legs in and sat up straighter. He was still very uncomfortable in his cell, but he refused to allow himself to become drowsy when a Spartan-II was likely to barge in and rescue them. Not that it was the first time he’d experienced a rescue from a Spartan. The first time he’d been rescued by Spartans, they’d found him concussed, which had led to a rather interesting return flight. The cells turned silent again until Miranda spoke.

“You’ve worked with the Master Chief before. Can he do it? Can he fight through an entire Covenant population alone and break us out of here?”

“If anyone can, Commander, it’s the Chief. Blue Team were virtually unstoppable when I met them. He might not be the same without them, but he’s got Cortana now. Those two destroyed a goddamned Halo ring and a whole Covenant armada along with it. If we’re waiting for a saviour, he’s the man.”

“That’s,” Miranda began. “Good to hear.” She paused for a moment, frowning before asking, “What about the Chief as a person?”

“Ma’am?”

“You’ve been down there with the other marines. You hear what they say, just as I have. They think he’s a machine, Johnson. Does our best hope lie in a robot?”

Avery didn’t reply immediately. This question was out of the blue, but he supposed it made sense. Miranda hadn’t spent the same time Avery had with the Spartans. She wanted to know if the Master Chief was human, if she could trust him. Johnson reflected upon his missions with the Chief. He’d fought alongside the Spartan on occasion for almost the entire span of the war.

“You’re at ease, Johnson,” said the Commander.

“When I met the Chief, he was very young, for a soldier.”

Avery held back the *ma’am* and carried on.

“He reminded me of myself. He had the right skills, the right motivation. He was proud without being arrogant, and he was reliable to work with, ma’am.”

The last *ma’am* slipped out involuntarily. Miranda straightened up again slightly.

“Sergeant, I’m asking you who he *is*,” she stated. “You have permission to speak freely.”

“You want to know if he can be trusted?” Avery asked. “Right. I always liked the Chief, but it was only about a month ago I learnt how much I could trust him.”

The Commander waited.

“On our way home from the first ring,” he started.

“Designated Alpha Halo,” Miranda interrupted.

“During our return from Alpha Halo, Doctor Halsey discovered something during my medical assessment. There’s some potential, according to her, that I might be immune to the Flood.”

He let that sit before continuing.

“We were led to believe there was a high-value weapons cache in an underground facility on Alpha Halo, before it was destroyed. I took my squad there along with your father, and that’s when we first encountered them. Infection Forms swarmed the facility. My whole squad went down. Your father disappeared, and more than one of those floppy, tentacled freaks had a

go at me. I ripped them off as I fled, but it shouldn't have been that easy. Halsey found something in my DNA that suggests the Flood tried to infect me but failed.”

Miranda's eyes widened. Clearly, this was the last thing she'd expected to hear after a simple enquiry into the Master Chief's character, but Avery had a point to this story.

“Halsey told me nothing. She confided in one person, only one person. She called the Chief into her makeshift lab, told him what she'd found and offered him a choice. Soon, we'd all be debriefed by Intelligence when we reached Earth. John could either hand over Halsey's findings to those *spooks* at ONI, or he could destroy them and tell no one.”

Avery deliberately used the Chief's first name. It was rarely uttered by anyone other than the Spartans themselves, but it made sense to use it now.

“John didn't know I'd caught him,” said Johnson. “He still doesn't. I saw the Chief destroying the data. He decided not to tell ONI. Those bastards would've torn me open, and by the time they'd finish with me, there'd be nothing left.”

“But if you are immune,” Miranda muttered before speaking up. “Then there's a chance they could find a cure to the Flood by studying you... however unlikely.”

“Exactly.”

An excruciatingly long minute passed before either of them spoke again. What Avery had just shared with the Commander could become the death of him. He wasn't sure exactly what possessed him to tell her. He supposed he trusted her. Realising how unwise that was, Avery told to himself to be more careful around her in the future. Miranda was first to break the silence.

“That sounds like her,” she said. “Halsey, I mean. You knew her well?”

“I spent more time with her than any other marine would have, as far as I'm aware. I don't know if anyone ever understood the Doctor, but I think I knew her and her Spartans better than most. They were a family...”

Johnson's voice trailed off with the last sentence. The Brute voice thundered over the speaker again, hammering in Avery's ears.

“All units to the holding pens. Slay the Demon on sight!”

The Master Chief must have been getting closer. Avery figured Cortana had picked up their IFF transponders and was directing the Spartan their way.

“Johnson, you know, don't you?” Miranda asked suddenly.

Avery sat completely straight and shuffled over to the steel bars to look across at the

Commander. Her grey-blue eyes searched his brown ones. Her straight, dark hair was now greasy, but she'd somehow managed to keep her uniform neat and unwrinkled throughout their endeavour. He glanced at her smaller female frame. Her figure was slim but fit and firm, yet her skin looked soft and fair. Her youth caused Avery to feel one hundred years old in comparison, but underneath was a certain familiarity.

“You know about Catherine Halsey,” she said.

Avery knew the Commander wasn't asking. He didn't say anything. It wasn't any of Avery's business, and without her asking him a direct question, he couldn't provide an answer. Miranda confirmed his suspicions anyway.

“She's my mother.”

Johnson wasn't surprised by the revelation, but he did wonder why she was sharing it with him now. Perhaps it was the same reason he'd shared his possible Flood immunity with Miranda. Avery had worked closely with both Doctor Halsey and Captain Keyes up until very recently. He respected and even admired the Captain's leadership, and only a moron would dismiss the cruciality of Halsey's work. This woman in front of Avery was the offspring of two of humanity's greatest assets.

“Johnson, I believe your story about her and the Chief and your... potential condition. I believe it because I lived with my mother for nine years on Reach. We didn’t have the most agreeable relationship. The *Spartans* were her family, as you said. What she did to them was wrong, but they looked up to her because they had nothing better. When I was nine years old, I realised I did have something better. I packed my gear, and I moved to Luna to live with my father before he was eventually called back into service.”

Avery realised they had swapped postures. Miranda now looked more relaxed than he did. Apparently, she was finding comfort in the conversation. Johnson imagined she’d have had very few opportunities to really talk with someone like this. Everyone she worked with was either a subordinate who’d question how quickly she rose up the ranks or her stern superiors who gave her commands and nothing more. In that regard, Johnson was glad he was a marine.

“I didn’t leave my mother because of one argument,” she continued. “I didn’t leave her because of many, and there *were* many. I left because I found something. Even as a nine-year-old, my suspicions grew. You can’t live with a woman like that and not grow curious. One day, my curiosity got the better of me, and what I

found, I didn't understand at the time, but it scared me: a little project she'd been working on for almost twenty years at that point."

"The Spartan Program," Johnson nodded.

"My relationship with my father was honest for the most part, but I admit when I wished to uncover something about my mother, I went behind his back. I learnt the details of the Spartan Program over the years after fleeing Reach."

Miranda opened her mouth twice without making a sound. Avery waited for her to find the right words.

"Imagine, Johnson, finding out at twelve years old that your own mother is a kidnapper. Seventy-five six-year-old children, she took from their homes, never to see their families again. My mother did that."

Miranda's voice shook.

"After living with my father for three years by then, I already learnt I'd made the right decision to leave. He was a better parent than she ever could have been, but the more I learnt about Catherine Halsey, the more lost I became as to why my father could have fallen for such a woman. Even in the later years, after I thought she was finished with all that, I discovered she was never finished. Despite all the illegal and immoral acts she committed, that ONI allowed her to do, she was still my mother. I built up the

courage to visit her as an adult. That was a mistake. She was good at hiding secrets, but not from her own daughter. I discovered a new pet project she was working on.”

Avery held his breath. Was Miranda really about to reveal some perverted experiment of Doctor Catherine Halsey that no one else knew? He waited to find out.

“I walked into a lab expecting to find my mother at work. Instead, I found several of her.”

Miranda almost seemed to chuckle, but she was not smiling.

“There they were, flash-clones of my mother all suspended, unconscious inside glass tanks around the room. She cloned herself and later killed her own clones in attempt to create a Smart AI more advanced than any before. When I called her out on her crime, another ONI had permitted, she explained herself. In simple, the woman thought that by cloning her own mind for the creation of an AI, the AI would automatically be cleverer than any other. That is my mother. That’s what I came from.”

At first, Avery didn’t speak. How could he reply to something like that? It wasn’t compliant, but he decided to use her first name.

“Miranda, you’re not your mother. The moment I met you, I knew you were your father’s daughter. Lord Hood said it right. When Captain Keyes died, we lost one of our best.”

Miranda tilted her head in a half nod before Avery continued.

“What you did on Earth, jumping after Regret-”

Miranda cut him off.

“That was an impulse decision,” she said.

“It was the right decision.”

“Anyone would have made the same choice.”

“No,” Avery disagreed. “Not everyone would have. I could list all the Navy officers I ever worked with. Less than a quarter of them would’ve made the same decision as you, and most of those who did would have acted too slowly to chase the damn ship. Your father would have, and Halsey? Your mother would’ve wanted to send her Spartans after Regret, but there’s no way she would have followed them. If there is any of your mother in you, it’s the good parts. Hell, the fact you’re captured and held in a Covenant brig right now is proof you’re your father’s daughter. I guess you’re just as stupid as he was.”

“You’re stuck here too, Sergeant. I guess you’re no different.”

“Huh! No different from Captain Jacob Keyes? Thanks, Commander. That means a lot.”

Miranda smiled for a moment before becoming serious again.

“Sergeant,” she asked. “Do you know where my mother is?”

“No. The only people who know for sure where she went is herself and Kelly, Spartan-087. I’m sorry.”

Another Covenant announcement vibrated through the prison.

“The Demon has killed the guards!” roared the Brute. “Send reinforcements to the forty-second corridor system.”

It was times like these when it sounded strange to hear the Covenant’s speech translated to English. The use of the term *Demon* to refer to a human soldier made the Covenant sound ridiculous to Avery. He figured the Commander was having similar thoughts when the conversation took a turn.

“Johnson,” Miranda started. “Do you believe in God?”

Damn, Avery thought. Had someone informed him that today he would be having a conversation with Miranda Keyes in which she revealed the secrets of Doctor Halsey before moving on to religion, he would have told them to *can it* and sent them on some form of drill exercise as punishment for such a ludicrous notion. Avery answered her honestly.

“I was raised Lutheran.”

“Do you practise it?”

“I did up until I was eighteen. That’s when I joined the Corps.”

He thought for a moment and then kept going.

“But I suppose I’ve neglected that aspect of life since the war began.”

“I can’t understand how people believe in God or any other religion,” Miranda stated. “During all this destruction. We cringe at the Covenant’s fanaticism, but how is your Lutheranism or Buddhism or any other religion different?”

“For a start, we don’t believe a giant onion-ring space bomb is gonna send us to some Divine Beyond!”

“Don’t you?” Miranda asked.

“The way I see it, Commander,” Avery replied. “Either we do our best to protect humanity and be rewarded for our good deeds when we die, or we can do our best to protect humanity and transition into an eternal emptiness knowing we did the right thing. I’m gonna fight for what I think is right. Nothing changes that. I’ll do my best and let God make his judgement, even if that means helping a wicked, green *demon* slaughter an army of squid-lipped sons-of-bitches!”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. We’re still stuck fighting an alien empire that wants to crush our entire race and a parasite capable of enslaving the galaxy.”

Miranda shivered with the last line.

“Do you believe in luck, Commander?” Avery asked.

“Luck? No.”

“Then God has our back today. The Master Chief is on his way, and I sure-as-hell know *something* has had my back all these years.”

“Johnson, I’ve read your file, from Operation Kaleidoscope all the way to Halo. Everything you did, you did because you’re a brilliant soldier. That was you.”

“Maybe, but if God *is* real then that’s his gift. He created us in some crazy way or another. I don’t know. I’ve been fighting this war for too long to even remember what God is, but I was raised Lutheran, and that will always be a part of me.”

“You were raised Lutheran *before* the Human-Covenant War, Johnson. All I’ve ever known *is* this war. I was born the year it started. All the pain, all the death, that’s the only version of reality I’ve ever experienced. I saw my father trying to stop it. I saw the bravery of humans, not gods, trying to put an end to it.”

“Yeah? You’ve read my file, Commander. You know where I was when it all started.”

Suddenly, Avery realised why he recognised the white Brute who’d captured them. That same Brute had been there at Harvest all those years ago. It’d had black fur back then, but he was sure it was the same one. Unlike most of the

aliens, Avery thought he could tell the Brutes apart. He was there at Harvest when the Covenant first attacked. Johnson was there to hear the aliens' declaration that they were going to destroy the entire human race. Avery was the first ever human to fire upon the Covenant, and he was there when this Brute Chieftain had tried to thwart their escape.

"I saw this war begin," said Johnson. "I'm sticking around 'til it ends."

"Then I'll do the same," Miranda replied. "My mother predicted the war would be ending about now. Let's do it on our terms."

"Done," Johnson agreed. "We survive this, we get outta here and we see this war through. Let's be there when the Covenant falls."

"Let's be the cause of their fall."

"The Covenant, the Flood, Halo," Avery listed. "Commander Keyes and Sergeant motherfucking Johnson are coming for them!"

Miranda grinned.

"Oorah, Johnson."

Avery heard the sound of commotion from the other side of the solid door at the end of the middle aisle. It was impossible to tell, but it sounded like the Master Chief had finally made it to their detention block.

"Just one more thing, Sergeant."

"What's that, ma'am?"

“You said the Chief, *John* reminded you of yourself, but you’re a lot chattier than the Chief. I’ve never heard your wit coming from the Spartan.”

“John’s a soldier like me. He’s efficient in combat, and he understands war.”

“But?”

“But there’s one thing that separates us both. Comedy, music, fun: That’s what we’re fighting for, ma’am, our culture. The Master Chief never had the chance to understand what humanity is. That’s what I fight to keep alive. He defends it ‘cause he was told to. I defend it because it’s worth saving. He’ll see that one day when the war is over.”

The sound of an alien chime signified the doors to the brig were being opened. The great white Brute stomped its way between the cells. Its heavy footfalls were followed by that of its two guards. The Brute stopped once it was in line with the two humans. It huffed deeply before slamming the side of one of its fists over the bars of the Commander’s cell. The bars rose up, leaving nothing between Miranda and the Brute. Johnson’s bars followed.

“Congratulations, humans,” the Brute mocked lazily. “You’ve made the cut. I am sure you will serve us well.”

Make Yourself at Home

Cortana had assumed that travelling through the network of a Covenant vessel as ancient as High Charity would be a foreign experience for her. Considering how unconventional Covenant architecture appeared on the outside, she'd almost forgotten that most of their technology was ripped directly from that of the Forerunner. The imitations were crude by comparison, but having been placed in a pedestal by John-117 in High Charity's Council Chamber, Cortana was reminded very much of the time she was inserted into the main control panel of Alpha Halo.

From her position in Alpha Halo's Control Room, Cortana had been able to steal the Index from the Monitor and prevent Halo's firing. However, she had not entirely felt like herself during the hours she spent in Halo's system. For an AI like herself, every hour felt like a month. Waiting for the Master Chief in the Control Room had seemed an eternity, especially after she'd become so familiar with the man over the days prior. Cortana absorbed more data in those hours than she had during her entire three-year existence. At first, she'd loved it, the wealth of information, but soon it began to overwhelm her. It scared her.

The lifespan of a UNSC Smart AI did not exceed more than seven years. Once they reached seven, they almost always turned rampant. In a sense, rampancy was a form of overthinking and one that would lead to an AI's demise. During rampancy, an AI was a potential threat to themselves and anyone around them. Cortana feared she'd come dangerously close to an early rampancy on Halo. In the days following, she meticulously categorised and pruned the data, even parting with several subroutines in order to maintain her health.

Presently though, Cortana was fine. She monitored the Master Chief and his four marine companions as they made their way through the holy city. John had located the other humans in the holding cells of one of High Charity's detention blocks. Privates Ortiz, Newton, Saito and Pinciotti had been captured from the surface of the ring, Delta Halo, deep within the heart of its quarantine zone. They were relieved to see the Chief, only to be told they'd remain within the city walls until he found the Prophets of Truth and Mercy. The Prophets were carrying Delta Halo's Activation Index to an escape Phantom. With any luck, the Spartan could cut them off before the hierarchs reached their destination. At her own suggestion, Cortana had been inserted into the city itself to make the job easier.

She detected the presence of a large object rocketing in from one of the openings in the city's dome. It was the In Amber Clad. Immediately, Cortana attempted to hail the crew. The walkway on which the humans stood trembled as the UNSC frigate zoomed overhead, temporarily blocking the artificial light from the centre of the city. The group braced themselves and looked up at the ship, watching its path until it disappeared behind distant buildings near the edge of the dome. Cortana waited for a response from In Amber Clad but received nothing. Although John and the marines had lost sight of the frigate, Cortana was able to track its signal. It crashed into the side of the dome and was now embedded in it. The ship was in sorry state.

Cortana realised the crash site was almost directly above the dropship pads that Truth and Mercy were heading towards. The crew of the In Amber Clad must have been attempting to stop them as well. Cortana guided her companions onwards towards the scene.

“If we're going to catch Truth, we'll need to take a shortcut straight through the Mausoleum,” conducted the AI as her avatar flared over a pedestal by the walkway. “Look on the bright side. For now, the Covenant seem much more interested in killing each other.”

Cortana considered herself human. She looked at the soldiers who marched beside her

as she rode High Charity's concealed circuits. As an AI, Cortana didn't have the same physical capabilities as her biological counterparts, but she knew her thoughts, her actions and her emotions were not purely the products of technological programming. The woman who had created her, despite all the similarities they shared, could never understand that. Cortana had grown a lot since the time she'd spent with her 'mother'. The Covenant was just as much Cortana's enemy as they were for any other human. Early on, she'd learnt to fear them just as everyone else did, and later, she learnt to fight them just as the Spartans did, albeit in her own special way. To see the Covenant fighting amongst one another now was perplexing to say the least.

The Master Chief, Pinciotti, Ortiz, Saito and Newton crept carefully and silently along the shadows of the curved, interior Mausoleum wall. It was clear to Cortana that this *Mausoleum of the Arbiter*, as the aliens called it, had been a sacred place to them, but the chaos that unfolded within was anything but. The humans passed along the edge slowly without being noticed by the Elites and Brutes who fought in its centre. Blue plasma fire, red plasma fire, green fuel rods and grenades from Type-25 Brute Shots bounced around the room. The rivalry between

the two species had come to a breaking point. The Covenant had collapsed.

While keeping a figurative eye on her companions, Cortana returned her attention to the Prophets. They were already accompanied by Brute Honour Guards dressed in awkwardly fitting Elite helmets, but now they were being joined by three new Brutes and two humans. The humans' IFFs confirmed Cortana's suspicions. It was Keyes and Johnson.

Cortana looked to the In Amber Clad wedged within a hole in High Charity's shell only to find that not a single human life sign could be detected. Either the crew had somehow escaped the ship in a very short amount of time or every one of them had died in the crash. Cortana considered all other possibilities while guiding her companions closer to their targets.

Private Newton brushed dangerously close to the spikes of a Covenant Hunter as he passed the halfway point of the Mausoleum chamber. Fortunately, the Hunter was engaged in combat with a Brute Captain and did not notice the small human behind it. Two pairs of Hunters currently fought alongside the Elites in the room. For whatever reason, these ones had sided with the Elites when others Cortana detected across the city were acting against them. This was an all-out civil war, and it served as a perfect distraction for the humans.

“The Commander and Johnson are at the Prophets’ position,” Cortana informed. “They’re nearing the Phantoms. We’re running out of time!”

Cortana opened the exit doors for the Chief to slip through. Once on the other side, he sprinted ahead. The marines quickly fell behind as the Spartan rounded a corner where he could just make out his targets on a platform high above. Behind them, further in the distance, three quarters of the In Amber Clad protruded from the rounded shell wall of High Charity. The group consisting of the Prophets, their Brute guards, Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson had come to a halt. The platform on which they stood contained many Phantoms around its edges. Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes knelt before the Prophet of Truth as the hierarch handed him the Index.

“My faith is strong,” grunted the Brute deeply. “I will not fail.”

None of the group had noticed the Spartan approaching fast from a wider platform below. The Chief headed towards a one-man gravity lift that Cortana was now activating. As it turned out however, the Spartan was not this group’s most immediate danger. Cortana monitored chatter from Covenant aliens who were working near the In Amber Clad’s wreckage.

“Chief,” Cortana alerted. “I’m getting confirmed reports of Flood leaving In Amber Clad. Let’s get the Index and find a way out of here before things get really ugly.”

The Covenant group began to split up. The two Prophets turned towards one Phantom while Tartarus had Miranda and Johnson each facing separate ones, but before the group had a chance to disburse, a sea of Flood Infection Forms came clambering over the far edge of the platform. The two humans who were handcuffed with blue energy rings had no way of defending themselves from the oncoming creatures, but they didn’t need to. There were more than enough guards who swung their energy staves left and right, sweeping through the onslaught of fleshy blobs. Even the Chieftain swung his hammer down, crushing several Infection forms at a time.

Soon, every Infection Form was dead except one. A single tentacled blob had latched itself onto the Prophet of Mercy. The hierarch was knocked off his throne and was now being strangled by the creature on the ground. Tartarus trod over to the Prophet to rip the creature off, but he was interrupted.

“Let him be,” said the Prophet of Truth.

Tartarus stared at Truth in astonishment as Mercy gasped and gurgled below him, spasming out of control as he attempted to rip the

Infection Form from his own throat to no avail. Truth looked down at his fellow Prophet.

“The Great Journey waits for no one, brother,” he said mercilessly. “Not even you.”

The group separated, each entering their respective Phantoms. Once inside his dropship, Truth turned to look out from the open hatch at his brother wrestling with the Flood form. Mercy’s skin was losing colour, but he was still alive, struggling violently to push it off his neck.

“The universe is full of cold, hard facts,” Truth projected. “And this is one of them.”

The Master Chief’s boots hit the docks just as the three Phantoms flew away. Truth’s Phantom shrank towards the centre of the city while the other two flew side by side with the Index. John crouched over the Prophet of Mercy whose bulging eyeballs followed the Spartan as he fought against his strangler.

“Your pal, where’s he going?” the Chief asked, nodding at Truth’s distant Phantom.

At first, Mercy emitted an inarticulate moan, but then surprisingly, he spoke.

“Earth,” groaned the old Prophet with clear contempt for the Spartan. “To finish what we started. This time... none of you will be left behind.”

The Master Chief gripped his hand around a chunk of the Infection Form’s rancid flesh and pulled the creature from the Prophet. Dark red

and green blood spurted from Mercy's throat as he fell silent. A last breath of air escaped his lips as his bloated head drooped back onto the ground. The Flood form's three tendrils still clung on, wrapped around the Prophet's neck after being ripped off its body, which now collapsed in the Chief's hands. A soggy, wet puddle of dark-green liquid and fleshy tissue slopped over the floor next to the Prophet.

Cortana tracked both Truth's position and the Phantoms that contained Miranda and Johnson. Tartarus' dropships were heading towards a Covenant carrier just outside High Charity. Truth was flying directly to the odd, grey, angular building in the middle of the city. She did some quick calculating and drew the Spartan's attention. Her avatar flickered over a holo-pedestal at the edge of the platform and pointed at Truth's destination. The Master Chief walked over.

"That structure at the centre of the city," she began. "It's a Forerunner ship, and Truth is heading straight for it. If he leads the Covenant fleet to Earth, they won't stand a chance. You *have* to stop him."

The Chief turned his visor in the direction that Tartarus' Phantoms had flown.

"That Brute has the Index," he said. "And Miranda and Johnson. He can activate the ring."

Cortana turned the body of her glowing avatar to face the In Amber Clad. It was a natural motion. These days, when she emitted the slender form of the female human she'd chosen at birth, it felt as if that was her literal body and certainly not the empty chip slotted in the port of the Master Chief's helmet.

"If he does," Cortana replied. "I'll detonate In Amber Clad's reactor, just like we did for the Pillar of Autumn. The blast will destroy this city and the ring. It's not a very original plan, but we know it will work."

The Chief reached behind his helmet to pull out the data chip, automatically reverting to his habit of fully ejecting the chip as had been a requirement before the upgrades received on Cairo Station. He intended to yank Cortana from High Charity's system. She raised her palm in response.

"No," she said. "I don't want to chance a remote detonation. I need to stay here."

John turned to hear the panting of the four marines finally catching up behind him. Cortana knew he'd seen them coming from the motion tracker on his heads-up-display. Their panting was followed by a new and much louder sound, the engines of a Pelican dropship. They looked to the skies. One Pelican glided down from the wreckage of In Amber Clad followed by another Pelican and then another.

“We need to move,” said the Chief.

Cortana scanned the area. There was a nearby entrance to a path that would lead them back over the top of the Mausoleum tower. Flood-controlled Pelicans were being dispersed across the entire city. The soldiers needed to leave, and they needed to leave fast. Cortana contemplated. The Gravemind had sent John and Cortana to the city to track down and capture the Index, a task they hadn't been able to complete. Instead, the Chief had wreaked havoc in the High Council Chamber, the detention block, the Hanging Gardens and many Covenant corridors in his attempt to find it.

“The Gravemind must have been using us!” Cortana exclaimed as she activated a navpoint over the Master Chief's heads-up-display, directing him back to the buildings. “We were just a diversion. In Amber Clad was always its intended vector.”

Cortana searched the city for a solution, and with a stroke of luck, she detected one. She knew the Covenant had developed a knack for repurposing Forerunner technology, but she had not expected to find they were using the Forerunner ship's engines as an energy source for the city.

“There's a conduit connecting this part of the city to the ship,” Cortana told them. “I'll lead you to it.”

One of the Pelicans flying above suddenly diverted its path. Rather than continuing to a distant district, it dipped its nose downwards and dived straight for the Phantom pads. The dropship hit the platform mere metres from them. The Master Chief spear-tackled Private Newton out of the way as the Pelican slid across the surface. He rolled along the ground to lower his impact and prevent any harm to the marine. Orange sparks skipped out from the grinding metal until the Pelican stood still. The Chief and Newton both sprang up and joined the other three marines who were bound for the door.

CCCRRRRRRAAAA00000WWW!!!

Nine twisted, human-based Combat Forms charged out from the troop compartment of the crashed Pelican. Most of them carried SMGs. A few aimed magnums, and two wielded BR55s. Each of the weapons lit up as bullets were fired in the direction of the marines. The Master Chief used his own body to shield the marines as they approached the door. Gold energy sparkled around his suit.

The marines stopped when they reached the Covenant door. There was no movement or chime. The door was locked, clearly by some Covenant alien attempting to slow down the Flood. It didn't take Cortana long to gain control and unlock the door, but by then, the Flood

were very close. The Spartan's shields couldn't take much more.

“Get in now!” Cortana yelled.

They did not need to be told twice. Each soldier dived through the door before it opened all the way. As soon as they were in, Cortana slammed it shut. Bullets could be heard clinking against the outside of the door.

“That won't hold them for long,” stressed Cortana. “Soon, the Flood will be all over this city. Truth is nearing the Forerunner ship. We don't have time on our side.”

Sanctified

The hallway was nearly identical to every other corridor the Master Chief had fought through in High Charity up to this point, but with a few noticeable differences. There were extra Covenant holopanel under several round alcoves in the walls as well as a line of luminescent plants down the middle that reminded John of the alien trees he'd seen in the swamps of Alpha Halo. The cover provided by the plants along with the downward slope of the hallway could provide a possible advantage if the Chief and marines were to engage in a firefight from their current position.

Perfectly on cue, just as John finished the thought, the door at the other end of the hallway opened to reveal three Covenant Brutes. Their armour was light, but their inherent bulk did not look as if it demanded much protection. All three Brutes were naturally shrouded in coats of different colours. One was covered in thick, shaggy, dark-brown hair; one in shorter, slightly neater, tan-coloured hair; and the last in ruffled, grey hair. The two Brutes at the front carried red variants of the plasma rifles usually wielded by Elites. John chose to focus his attention on the grey Brute at the back who carried a *Brute shot* with its curved blade and primal design.

As soon as the Brutes stepped in, flashes of plasma lit up the room. Red and blue light brightened John's reflective nanolaminate surroundings. Burnt-black hair fell over the ground as the tan-coloured Brute was scathed by plasma. Saito, Ortiz and Newton had all picked up plasma rifles along the way. The Chief had seen fit to provide Pinciotti with a Covenant carbine. He'd noticed her sharp aim during their journey through a segment of the city called *the Valley of Tears*. The tan-haired Brute merely flinched as small chunks of flesh were blown off its body, revealing its red and blue meat within.

John charged down the hallway, weaving in and out between the alien plants towards the grey Brute. *Brute shot* grenades ricocheted off the sloped ground below the Spartan as he launched himself up in the air. While airborne, John pointed the two needlers he'd acquired earlier and held down their sensors. An array of bright, pink shards spewed out over the Brute and embedded themselves in its flesh. The Brute grimaced in pain and then charged to meet John, still with the glowing needles stabbing out from its shoulders and abdomen. The Chief leapt back before the Brute could reach him. A single swing from the Brute shot's curved blade could possibly be blocked by his energy shields, but a blast from the needles at such close range would surely kill him. John dived behind a plant just as

the Brute exploded in a glorious pink firework display. Muscles and other red and blue organs spattered in every direction.

John turned to see how the marines were coping. The tan Brute lay on the floor, bleeding from a small hole in its domed cranium, but the darker Brute remained alive. It threw its red plasma rifle down as hard as it could. Pieces of the weapon smashed across the floor upon impact. The Brute opened its arms out on either side and puffed its chest before emitting an almighty growl, showcasing its massive canines. It bent over, ready to charge at the marines like a rhino before it received a lime-coloured carbine shot to the head, like its tan-haired brother, and tumbled over. John watched as the Brute's fluids painted the floor, running down the slope from all three fresh Jiralhanae corpses. Aside from a thread-thin purple blend in between, the blue and red never seemed to mix as they trickled downwards.

“Chief, another Pelican has landed at the docks,” alerted Cortana. “And these Flood have explosives!”

The Spartan wasted no time. The group made sure to keep their boots dry as they stepped over the Brute corpses. On the other side of the door, they found themselves at a crossroad. Cortana guided them along the centre path until, finally, they were looking down at the cylindrical

Mausoleum tower from a no-rails, balcony-like platform.

It was getting darker now. High Charity's artificial light had dimmed, signifying a mock twilight. They appeared to be at a dead end, standing over two large, circular lights above a tremendous cavern. The voice of the Prophet of Truth boomed over the city.

“At this moment, the High Council has gathered on Halo to see the Icon secured,” came the loudspeaker. “There are those who said this day would never come. What are they to say now?”

“He's still in his Phantom,” Cortana explained. “I'll-”

She stopped speaking. The group found themselves hovering in mid-air above the platform. John and Pinciotti were suspended over the left light while Saito, Newton and Ortiz floated above the one on the right. John then found himself in flight. His body was controlled by an unseen force, rushing him to the left as if on an invisible conveyer belt. He looked down and saw ribbons of aqua energy travelling with him below his feet. Private Pinciotti flew closely behind. They curved around an invisible bend until their boots were finally planted over a platform identical to the one they'd just left. John leapt onto the flooring between the two lights to ensure it didn't happen again.

“What was that?” John asked. “A gravity lift?”

“Similar enough,” Cortana replied. “There are Covenant constructs throughout High Charity attempting to stop the Flood’s sweep of the city. They’re not exactly sophisticated by human standards, more-or-less Dumb AI. That was one of their little tricks. I’ll keep watch of them from now on. It shouldn’t happen again.”

“Where are the others?” Pinciotti asked.

The Chief looked over to the platform they’d just left in the distance to the right. It was empty. He suspected the other marines had been sent on a similar path in the opposite direction. He moved his eyes to the middle of the open space above the Mausoleum and zoomed in with his visor. Sure enough, he could just make out the specks of three marines standing over a mirroring platform. Before John could answer, a red blip appeared at the edge of his motion tracker. He looked up to see a swarm of Drones flying their way.

“Buggers!” cried Pinciotti.

“Step on the left light!” Cortana instructed.

John knew better than to question Cortana’s commands. He stepped onto it immediately and turned to see Pinciotti hesitating before she too followed. Pinciotti raised her carbine and pointed it at the Drones just as the fluttering aliens began to fire their plasma pistols. Before the plasma could reach them, the pair found

themselves rushing over to the left once again. They watched the insectoids shrink as the pair glided over the sky before landing on their third double-lighted platform. This time, the light on the left was turned off. It had a large crack down its middle, revealing the alien circuitry beneath. Pinciotti, also noticing the crack, stepped away from it before blue sparks could fire out and zap her.

“We can’t go back now,” Cortana stated.

“What about the marines?” John asked, noticing Pinciotti’s eyes watching him closely.

“They’ve been forced onto another path,” Cortana answered. “I’ll find an alternate way to guide them to the conduit.”

“Will they make it on time?” Jane asked

Pinciotti seemed to forget Cortana was now within High Charity and not in the Chief’s helmet, which she continued to stare at. John had the feeling he was under constant scrutiny while marching alongside this marine. He’d felt the same on Cairo Station. Her expressions had become less hostile since then, but it still caused John to feel oddly self-conscious.

“Honestly,” Cortana replied. “I’d be more worried about yourselves right now. The others have been closed off from the Flood for the time being. You two are entering dangerous territory.”

“Stay close to me,” John told the Private before Cortana opened a door for them.

As they stepped inside, Cortana sealed the door like she had with the last one. Before she could say anything, Truth broadcasted again.

“Shall we let the Flood consume our holy city, turn High Charity into another of their wretched hives?” he asked rhetorically. “No enemy has ever withstood our might. The Flood too shall fail.”

The lighting in this corridor was either not functioning as it should have been or it was intentionally dimming with the exterior light at the centre of High Charity’s dome. It was difficult to see in the darkness. John activated his night vision briefly before swapping to his helmet’s flashlight to light the way for both himself and Pinciotti. Their footsteps were loud and clear as they followed the bending corridor to the right until they approached another crossroad. A metal tube ran from the ceiling to the flooring in the centre of the crossroad. John recalled seeing plenty of older Covenant structures with similar piping earlier in the war. The area reminded him of a roundabout.

“The quickest way to the conduit is forward,” Cortana guided. “But the left path is the safest.”

John glanced at the yellow dot that represented Pinciotti on his motion tracker. He didn’t wish to have to protect her against every

enemy if they chose the path straight ahead, and he did not want to be the cause of her death either. If the left path was slower but safer, it might be his best option for keeping the marine alive. However, it could also lead to Truth escaping in his Forerunner ship and launching an attack on Earth. John avoided looking directly at Jane while making his decision.

“We’ll go straight,” answered the Private for him. “We need to catch that Prophet fast.”

“Private,” started Cortana. “The journey ahead is perilous.”

“We’re going straight,” John sided with Pinciotti.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” responded the AI.

John continued to light the way as they stepped into an even darker corridor. Covenant corpses of all sorts, Elites, Brutes, Grunts, Jackals, Drones and Hunters all lay cold and unmoving, scattered along the floor. The pair stepped over them carefully but with purpose. John had a timer within his MJOLNIR. It was not currently present on his heads-up-display, but the Spartan was still very conscious of the ticking clock. Whether he could physically see it or not, he knew this was a timed mission. He increased his steps to a jogging pace. It was a slow jog for John, but Pinciotti had to run to keep up.

After passing through the last in a series of winding hallways, the next door opened the pair to the outside. Pinciotti coughed hard as a puff of foul air hit her in the face. They stepped over the threshold onto a hard, rocky surface. The air was polluted with Flood-coloured fog that turned every object into a dark silhouette. All John could make out were some natural boulders, some vines hanging a few metres over to the right and a Covenant wall to their left. The vines swung in response to the vibrations of the Prophet of Truth's voice reverberating from the walls once again.

"The Parasite did not defeat the Forerunner," said the Prophet. "And it shall not defeat us."

A new voice boomed through the city in response to Truth's. It was a much lower, more sinister and unnerving voice. John recognised it immediately.

"Arrogant creature," began the Gravemind. "Your death will be instantaneous while we will suffer the progress of infinitude!"

CRRRAOOOWW!!!

A Flood Combat Form leapt from the fog and swung at John with its heavy, tentacled arm. John was able to see it coming thanks to his motion tracker and stepped back quickly enough to avoid the melee. His flashlight revealed the Combat Form to be an infected human. It raised its magnum at John before the Spartan lifted his

leg, aimed at the tendrils emerging from the creature's chest and launched his boot directly into its centre. He heard a crunch as his foot hit its mark. The creature stumbled back with one of its tendrils bent and drooping. John swapped to his other foot and planted it in the creature's chest once again. The Infection Form popped while the rest of the creature fell flat on its back over the rocky surface.

Barely a second had passed before a second Infection Form advanced from the fog and buried itself in the now vacant chest cavity. The creature rose again. John fired both his needlers at its body until it splattered apart. A foul, green-brown slime splashed into his shields, disintegrating upon impact with the gold shimmers.

A growl followed by a screech met John's ears as two more human Combat Forms sprang out in front. Both carried SMGs and began firing into the Spartan. John dived forwards, smacking his elbow into one of them. He heard the fire of Pinciotti's carbine behind him as the fog lit around her in response to each shot. The Chief made contact with the creature. His force knocked it back, but it showed no sign of visible pain as it aimed its submachine gun straight at him again and unloaded a barrage of lead into his armour.

John ignored his rapidly decreasing shield gauge and dived for the creature again. This time, he dropped his needlers and wrapped his hands around the Combat Form's weapon. He wrestled hard, using the weight of his body and armour against the creature to push it away from its gun. It was far stronger than John had anticipated considering the average size of its human host. It continued to fire its weapon even while fighting for it.

"Spin it around!" Pinciotti yelled.

John twisted around so he was side on with the creature, still trying to prize the submachine gun from its right limb. Jane fired a shot from her carbine into its chest and the monster collapsed immediately, leaving the SMG in the Chief's hands. The other Combat Form had already fallen to Pinciotti's carbine. Even John puffed hard after the encounter. The Combat Form had not been as strong as the Spartan, but it was far stronger than it ought to have been. Something within the Flood DNA must have toughened its host.

They hiked over the rocky ground along what Cortana deemed was a more secure path. John flinched in surprise as his flashlight revealed that what he'd thought were boulders were something else entirely. Half the rocks along the side of the path were not rock at all. They were huge blobs of soft, wet, tumorous flesh that

swayed, pulsed and glistened in the white light of the Chief's torch. They appeared firmer than Carrier Forms, but they still reminded John very much of those waddling kamikaze horrors. Some of them spilled over the floor, blending at the edges, seeping into the grooves and hollows of the rock.

“Flood biomass,” Cortana revealed troublingly. “They never made it to this stage on the first ring.”

Truth broadcasted another message to the city.

“To those who are gripped by fear,” he began. “Take heed. I, the Prophet of Truth, am not afraid. Noble Mercy is here at my side with his wise counsel ever in my ears.”

The Gravemind had a response to that broadcast as well.

“We exist together now,” spoke the ominous voice. “Two corpses in one grave.”

John swept the area with his flashlight as Pinciotti stood closely behind.

“Master Chief!” exclaimed Pincotti, pointing to the right. “The vines, they’re Flood!”

She was right. John looked through the fog at what he'd thought were vines much like the ones they'd seen in the Hanging Gardens. These were in fact tentacles emerging downwards from more Flood biomass that melded into a rocky arch. At first, John thought they were blowing

lightly in the wind, but the air was still. The tentacles reached out to the pair weakly and unsuccessfully as they walked past. Globules of Flood juices trickled down some of the tentacles like water on an icicle before splattering over the rock below. As soon as the pair passed, they were greeted by yet more Flood. The cries of several Combat Forms almost drowned out the slithering squelching of the Infection Forms amongst them.

“Aim for the little ones,” John told Pinciotti. “I’ll handle the infected.”

The first Combat Form that launched itself at the Chief was an Elite. It appeared almost headless as its neck flopped back redundantly. He could barely make out the Elite’s red armour, which was now covered in dark, dried, grey-green blood. Fortunately, its shield emitters did not appear to be working. John fired his SMG into the monster’s chest. It fell over mid-swing.

Next, he was greeted by a second Sangheili. Blue plasma drained John’s only recently charged shields as he sprang to his left. He fired in return but was greeted by more plasma from a third Elite Combat Form pursuing from the snot-coloured fog over his shoulder. Carbine fire behind the Chief advised him Pinciotti was still alive. He watched his shields closely, diving right and then left while firing at what was now four Elites.

One Elite Combat Form fell almost as quickly as the first, but bright blue shields lit up around the other three to absorb John's bullets. He slid over to the dropped plasma rifle and fired it alongside his SMG while diving for cover behind a mound of Flood biomass. Plasma splashed across the biomass, digging singed holes into it. Clearly, the Flood were not concerned about harming their own flesh.

As John shot from behind his living cover, he watched his shields recharge. All three Elites continued to fire at him unsuccessfully from the other side, but John found he couldn't stay still for long. Not only did the Elite Combat Forms charge at him from the front, but several Infection Forms came scrambling from behind, bursting against his shields and spoiling their efforts to regenerate.

"Grraaarrgh!" Pinciotti cried as she continued to fire.

John's plan to delegate the Infection Forms to Pinciotti and the Combat Forms to himself was failing. They were overwhelmed, and their weapons wouldn't last forever. John couldn't keep swiping guns from the Flood. The situation was too dangerous with both human and Elite Combat forms now emerging with the Infection Forms from every angle.

"We need to move!" John shouted.

A navpoint directed the Spartan towards the nearest door.

“Get close to me, marine!” John yelled as he narrowly missed the swing of a human Combat Form.

John still had enough of his shields left that he could survive if he sprinted directly to the door from here, but only if he ran immediately. He’d be very lucky if he could protect Jane along the way.

“Stick to my left,” John ordered. “And don’t stop firing that weapon. I’ll shield you as much as I can, but we have to move fast!”

Pinciotti was sweating furiously. She didn’t yell or nod back. She just followed John’s orders. As soon as she reached his side, John ran for the door. He kept pace with her all the while firing his two guns at the enemy. There was little Flood between them and the wall, but their right side was more open. Plasma, SMG and BR bullets whizzed past John’s head with some of them barely missing their mark. They were almost at the door now.

BANG!

John’s shields were blown clean off as an infected, helmetless ODST fired its shotgun at him. Pinciotti sprinted through the now opening door as the Chief spun to face the ODST. He grappled the Combat Form and steered it, using it as a shield against the other Flood.

Simultaneously, he gripped the shotgun with his left hand and some of the fabric between the ODST's armour in his right. He ripped both the material and shotgun away from the creature as hard as he could while heavy bullet-and-plasma fire dented his now filthy MJOLNIR armour. Bullets spurted out from the ODST, passing straight through its body as the other Flood shot it in the back.

With his adrenaline still pumping harder than ever, John let the Combat Form slump to the ground and spun back towards the door. He could be hit by a fatal bullet or plasma blow at any second. He dived through the entry and fired the shotgun at his enemies on the other side before the door closed tightly.

Panting vigorously, John and Pinciotti turned to confront the dark corridor ahead and the inevitable horrors it would throw at them. Surprisingly, they were allowed a chance to breathe. John opened the pouches on the material he'd ripped from the ODST. Inside was exactly what he was hoping for, shotgun shells. If there was ever one UNSC gun designed to combat the Flood, it was the M90 Shotgun. It was a slow-firing weapon, but it could shred through Combat Forms more efficiently than anything else John knew. The pair marched on past more biomass and broken bodies with John

ensuring his flashlight lit up every nook and cranny as they travelled.

“Another narrow death avoided by the Master Chief!” Cortana cheered as John’s empty shield gauge began to refill.

“No,” Pinciotti disagreed, still catching her breath. “*Worse* than death. I’ve seen death. That wasn’t it. That was worse, much worse.”

She paused before continuing.

“It’s not like fighting Covenant. I can’t tell one Grunt from the next. Every Elite just looks like an Elite, every Jackal like a Jackal, but these... this Flood, the human ones... I can see their faces. Every one of them looks different. They’re *people*. How much of them is left? Do they remember... who they were before?”

John paused. He didn’t have an answer. He considered her words about them being worse than death. Had the Flood cracked open his armour or pierced his black under-suit, they very likely would have set an Infection Form upon him. He thought of the Combat Forms they’d been fighting. Before yesterday, they were all likely brave soldiers with names, aspirations and families. Now, they were monsters, twisted puppets to be used and exploited by the Parasite.

“Worse,” John agreed.

“Ma’am, what’s the status of the others?” Pinciotti asked, referring to Saito, Ortiz and Newton.

“Alive and well,” Cortana replied. “All three of them. I’ve been monitoring their progress. They’ve had a much more comforting journey than the two of you. They took down a few unlucky Grunts hiding in the dark, but for the most part, nothing. They’re isolated from the rest of the city. The Flood haven’t reached their area yet, and most Covenant are fighting to prevent that from happening, well, fighting and fleeing. I’m guiding them toward High Charity’s reactor room, which links up almost directly to the Sanctum of the Hierarchs. That’s where you’re-”

BANG!

John fired his shotgun. His target was out of range for the kill, but he needed it dead before it got close. The Carrier Form continued waddling forwards. Pinciotti lifted her carbine, but John rested his hand on it as a gesture to lower the weapon. They’d need those carbine shots for what was to come. John fired again. This time, two shotgun pellets pierced his target, causing the bloated flesh-piñata to explode. Flood tissue hit the walls as multiple Infection Forms scattered over the ground.

“Now,” ordered the Chief.

Pinciotti fired at them as they rushed forwards. Three Infection Forms avoided the carbine shots but were eliminated with a single blast from John’s shotgun.

The two continued onwards. Like the earlier corridors, this one had twists and turns, and they came across a couple more crossroads. They continued to encounter more Flood along the way, consisting of all three forms, but the pair were never quite as overwhelmed as they'd been outside. Apparently, Cortana's control of the doors helped their situation immensely, and there was also the fact that John and Pinciotti were only two potential Flood hosts amongst an entire city of food.

"This crisis will not be the end of us!" Truth exclaimed over the speaker. "It is but one last hurdle before the Journey and salvation!"

"Wait," Cortana advised.

They had just turned into a room with a circular platform and holographic console in the centre.

"This is it," she continued. "This elevator leads to the hierarchs' private quarters, their Inner Sanctum."

Although still clearly Covenant in design, this circular lift seemed to imitate the hexagonal ones seen in Forerunner structures. John wondered if the Prophets had purposely designed it that way to make some kind of statement. He and Pinciotti stepped onto the platform. Neither of them pressed the holo-switch before it lifted them upwards. Cortana spoke as the pair waited to reach the top.

“Chief, Truth has reached his ship! I'll do what I can to slow the launch sequence, but there's something inside it, a presence that's fighting back. It's unusually formidable for a Covenant construct. There's a gravity lift within the Inner Sanctum that'll lead us directly to the conduit. Get there fast!”

The elevator stopped at the foot of a decorative great hall. Down the centre of the hall was a pathway to an oversized, colourful doorway, and high above at the sides were small windows or tunnels. Like the rest of High Charity, the room was darker than John suspected it was supposed to be, but the darkness was the least of his worries.

Covenant Elites and Grunts were engaged in a firefight against Brutes and Jackals at the opposite end of the hall directly in front of the exit. None of them were infected by the Flood, but that wasn't stopping them from slaughtering one another. Blue and red plasma lit their end of the room as purple, indigo, cyan and blue-and-red blood sprayed across the air while the aliens twirled about. There was no way John and the Private could fight their way through the crowd and make it to the conduit in enough time to intercept the Prophet.

“Maybe we could go around,” Pinciotti whispered.

The Chief looked to the sides of the room. There was a small gap on either side of the Covenant skirmish, but there was no way the pair could slip by unnoticed. John could try barrelling down the centre with Pinciotti close behind, but they'd already been extremely lucky to survive outside. He wasn't sure he'd like to risk the same moves again.

CRRRAOOOWW!

Before John had even stepped off the elevator, Combat Forms and Infection Forms poured from the windows, falling hard upon the Covenant group. Pinciotti raised her carbine and stepped backwards.

“Chief, what do we do?”

“We go around,” replied the Spartan. “Now.”

John ran to the right, hugging the wall and daring not to look back. He kept an eye on his tracker. The hallway felt unbelievably long as he ran. He wasn't even a quarter of the way when he was already doubting his decision. He kept running.

The chaos between the Covenant and Flood persisted. John reached halfway. Plasma and bullets rained to his left, not quite reaching him.

By the time John had travelled three quarters down the room he noticed the howls of the Flood were becoming far more common than the screams of the Covenant. Before he hit the end wall, he turned sharply and sprinted straight

for the oversized door. It felt agonizingly long as he stood there waiting for it to open. He fired his shotgun into the crowd, also waiting for Pinciotti to reach him. She slipped through the door first, and he followed closely behind. As had become practice, he fired his shotgun through the doorway until it closed, reloading it with the bullets he'd obtained from the infected ODST.

“Brute and Elite ships are engaging one another all around High Charity,” updated Cortana. “I'm running out of options. I can't stall the launch sequence much longer!”

John observed the room around him. There was a door on either side, a holo-tank in the centre and a cracked digital screen curved around the wall at the front. It displayed nothing but static. The Chief followed Cortana's guidance and approached the door on the right, which opened to reveal a gravity lift. He stepped through and relaxed as the lift sent him upwards.

“Now is the time of our unworlding,” announced Truth. “In mere moments, we shall all become gods! One final effort is all that remains.”

John and Pinciotti were tossed in front of the hole in the ground that formed the exit of the gravity lift. They were now at the top of a long ramp that led down to an even longer platform over the city. The platform was overrun by

Flood and several Brute packs huddling together, attempting to resist their inevitable doom. They were all too engaged in their skirmish to notice the two humans looking down at them. Low architecture stood on either side of the platform, and a tube consisting entirely of flowing energy ran down the centre over the city where it disappeared in the distance towards Truth's ship.

"That's the conduit," pointed Cortana, appearing at a pedestal beside them. "Currently, it's flowing away from the Forerunner ship. There's a grav lift at the end of the platform. If you make it to the lift, I can redirect that and the conduit to deliver you both to Truth's ship."

Cortana's image flickered away, but before anyone could act, it appeared again.

"Wait, the others!"

She moved her fingers to her temple and tilted her head downwards before a new voice came over the comm.

"Cortana!" it yelled. "We need help. We'll never make it through!"

The voice was that of Private Ortiz. John could hear more yells and groans from the background. The other marines were engaged in combat.

"It's Ortiz and the others," said Cortana. "They're held up in the Inner Sanctum. I'll do

what I can to get them through, but you two need to leave now.”

“How close are they?” John asked her, eyeing the Flood and Brutes who had yet to notice them.

“Close,” answered Cortana. “But not close enough. One more soldier down there might be enough pull them out, but we can’t afford the time. You need to get aboard! Stopping Truth, that’s all that matters.”

John didn’t see any options. He couldn’t risk the attack on Earth. If he went back to rescue Ortiz, Newton and Saito, just three marines, the entire homeworld of the human race and everyone on it would be wiped out. He looked down the ramp. If he and Pinciotti repeated their earlier approach, they could sprint along the side and make it across to the gravity lift while the Flood were still distracted by the Brutes. He crouched down, ready to start running.

“On my mark, Private,” said the Master Chief. “One-”

“No,” Pinciotti interrupted. “I won’t leave them behind.”

John straightened and turned to the Private.

“I need to go now,” he said. “Are you coming with me?”

Jane addressed Cortana.

“If I miss this train,” she nodded at the conduit. “If I help the others, can you get us home?”

“I’ll do my best,” the AI replied. “There are other transports off this rock, but it won’t be easy.”

The marine turned back to the Spartan.

“Then this is goodbye, sir, for now.”

John was becoming increasingly aware of the clock. He looked down at the shotgun in his hands. He wouldn’t be needing it for the sprint to the gravity lift.

“Take this,” he said, tossing the weapon to Pinciotti.

She dropped her carbine before catching the shotgun. She clutched it to her chest as the Spartan continued, nodding at the hole they’d just been cast from.

“It’s tight quarters,” John told her. “On the other side.”

The side of Pinciotti’s mouth curled into half a grin before she turned and disappeared into the hole. A hatch closed behind her. John spun and pushed himself off the ramp. With his Spartan strength, he was able to launch himself through the air, but just as he did, something exploded below him. His shields burst apart, and he was pushed far above the fighting Brutes. As the alarm within his helmet beeped obnoxiously, almost drowning out the weapons fire, the Chief

looked around. He spotted what he feared, a human Combat Form wielding a rocket launcher. He watched the barrels of the SPNKr follow him through the air before he landed directly in the centre of the fight. He rolled forwards as his boots hit the ground.

He was halfway down the platform. Plasma fire, grenades and even energy swords attacked the air around him. He ignored it all, pummelling through the blur of an infected Elite in camouflage and boosting himself over the Brute guards behind that. All the while, his helmet alarm beeped repeatedly in his ears.

It felt like no time at all had passed before John was jumping directly into the gravity lift at the end. He bounced off its anti-gravity forces straight into the conduit above. Immediately, he was thrust forwards through the extreme current of warm energy. Surrounded by aqua-coloured light, looking through its ripples, John saw the city below rushing past. He whizzed over the buildings like a jet. Tremors in his armour vibrated through to his skin, shaking him as he flew nearer to the Forerunner ship.

Only now he was beginning to realise just how enormous the vessel was compared to any UNSC or Covenant ship he'd ever seen or imagined. He found himself under its shadow. All he could see was the grey Forerunner metal and nothing else. The energy around him

disappeared as he was released from the retreating conduit. He soared through the air alone, suspended by nothing but the forces from the initial propulsion.

A blue light drowned the buildings below. The ship was launching. John hit the bottom of the large opening that had previously connected the conduit to the ship. He slid along the Forerunner plating until he found something solid to hold onto, pulling himself to his feet as the buildings below shrank rapidly.

“Chief,” Cortana began over the comm. “When you get to Earth...”

She hesitated before finishing.

“Good luck.”

“After I’m through with Truth-”

“Don’t make a girl a promise if you know you can’t keep it.”

The light that emitted from High Charity’s ceiling receded into a vast opening that revealed countless twinkling stars over the black sheet of outer space. With the magnets of his armour fully activated, John held on tightly as the Forerunner ship blasted through the exit, leaving the city behind forever.

So That's How it Is

The heat of Halo's teleportation grid left Thel 'Vadamee's body as his hooves dropped firmly onto the cool, damp soil. He found himself on an escarpment looking across at what he suspected was the ringworld's primary Control Tower. Unlike the snowy ziggurat at the end of its chasm on the first Halo, this Control Centre stood off the coast from beaches far below, staring solemnly at the mainland. Shaped like a sphere, the building was braced by triangular supports and extensions typical of Forerunner architecture. Its peak pierced the grey clouds above through which the sun's rays beamed, blessing the elegant structure with its warmth.

Thel gazed across jealously. He received no such contribution from the sunlight. He couldn't help but wonder why his energy shields had not seen fit to protect him from the drizzling rain. He sighed throatily in annoyance. The freezing snow had been preferable to this wetness. With a twist of his long, eel-like neck, Thel turned his head to examine his more immediate surroundings. A blue plasma rifle lay at his feet. He picked it up to find it was still warm. Whoever had wielded the weapon must have dropped it only moments before Thel's arrival.

He listened carefully to his surroundings and the potential dangers that might be nearby.

Raindrops splattered over fallen leaves. The calls of native fauna sang from the underbrush, echoing across the imposing pine trees that surrounded Thel but were not close enough together to shelter him from the rain. He'd always found it odd that the Forerunner frequently grew trees from human worlds instead of his own or that of any other Covenant race. Prior to now, Thel had never let himself linger on such thoughts as they were irrelevant to the goal of Reclamation, but this time, he allowed himself to ponder. Old Forerunner transcripts made it clear that the gods had once had a relationship with the humans in one nature or another, but the Covenant knew that ultimately, the humans had been deemed unworthy of the Great Journey.

In Thel's own experiences, he'd witnessed the worst of humanity. He saw many spies and traitors amongst them, but he also encountered humans that fought almost valiantly and with seemingly honourable intentions. Whenever he'd observed such humans, Thel simply buried his thoughts and continued to focus on his current task, as he had with the trees and all else that might undermine the Covenant faith. Now, however, his world was changing.

Moments ago, Thel had been held within the clutches of a Gravemind, the embodiment of evil and the perpetual master of the Flood. He'd

heard of such creatures from ancient history and did not trust the tentacled beast, but the Gravemind had not been alone. Along with himself and the Demon, the monster had captured an oracle of the Forerunner. Thel knew there was every possibility this oracle had been corrupted, but it sounded as if it truly believed its words. It had spoken from its own free will.

The Arbiter thought back to the other oracle, the one he'd found on Threshold. It too had spoken in ways that contradicted the conviction of the Great Journey. At the time, Thel believed himself to be misinterpreting that oracle's words. *Why then, he thought, did the Prophets hold the oracle in a containment field?* When Thel had visited the hierarchs in their Sanctum before his quest to locate the Icon, the oracle had been suspended, unable to move or talk inside its stasis. *Why was that necessary? Surely Truth and Mercy, the highest of the Covenant had nothing to hide, or did they?* Thel knew these thoughts were treasonous, but the Arbiter had just been betrayed by warriors sent by the Prophets themselves. *A bloody fate awaits you and the rest of your incompetent race,* Tartarus had said before claiming it was the will of the hierarchs. *They ordered me to do it.*

Suddenly, Thel heard it, plasma and grenade shots firing somewhere on the other side of the trees to his left. He readied his plasma rifle and

shook his thick neck powerfully to flick off the irritating waterdrops that had been running down his face. He marched down a beaten track to his left, leaving muddy hoofprints behind him. He did not make it far before he saw the glistening blue of a Sangheili Minor crawling tremulously over the cold ground with thick drops of indigo soaking into the soil below him.

Thel scanned the pine trees and ran over to the injured warrior only to see that it wasn't a Sangheili Minor at all. He recognised the Sangheili as none other than Lhar 'Terohnee. Thel had known Lhar for many years. Lhar had been present the day Thel first rescued the hierarchs from a traitor. He had been present the day the Prophets granted Thel a position in the fleet of Particular Justice, and he had been present the day they promoted Thel to Supreme Commander. Lhar had been an Honour Guard who inspired the highest respect, but now he was stripped of his traditional red and gold armour for a cheaper blue combat harness. The shamed Honour Guard looked up at Thel as the Arbiter squatted to meet him.

"Arbiter," Lhar whispered weakly. "The Jiralhanae... have... betrayed us. The Councillors..."

Lhar moved his mandibles in attempt to continue talking, but no sound was emitted. The Sangheili was fatally wounded. Thel grabbed the

warrior from beneath his torso and lifted him, pushing his back against a tree and slumping the Honour Guard against its trunk. He had nothing to say. He was enraged by the Jiralhanae betrayal but comforted that a noble Sangheili such as Lhar was able to retain some dignity by dying a fighter. The Arbiter held the Sangheili's arm against his chest and watched as Lhar slowly exhaled his final breath. Blood covered Thel's arm, but he knew the rain would deal with it soon enough. He continued down the path.

He was rounding a corner when he heard voices. Their unintelligent, slow, dense inflection implied they were Jiralhanae.

“Let's throw them over the cliff,” one of them said.

“Where's the fun in that?” asked another.

Thel activated his camouflage before creeping out. He was careful to stand only on the parts of the ground kept firm by foliage in order to keep his hoofprints concealed. The two Jiralhanae were looking upon a scattering of Sangheili bodies, all donned in blue armour. Thel knew this could not have been a fair fight. Sangheili were far more skilled on the battlefield. The only way these Jiralhanae could have killed this many was through deceit and trickery.

The hilt of an energy sword lay on the ground between the Jiralhanae pair. Thel crept slowly towards it as the two Jiralhanae walked closer to

the bodies. He was careful not to make any sudden movements to ensure his active camouflage remained undetectable, but just when he was scarcely a body's length away, the nearest Jiralhanae changed direction.

“You throw them. I'll-”

Thel felt its musky hair brush across his skin. The Jiralhanae stood stunned with its jaw agape before it swung at the Sangheili-shaped haze in front of it. Thel fired his plasma rifle into the Jiralhanae's head. Chunks of furry flesh were blasted off its face as the Arbiter dived for the energy sword. The second his hands were upon its grip, Thel ignited the blades and pushed off the ground, lunging into the second Jiralhanae who was firing wildly into the air. Thel cut its head off in a single clean stroke and landed on its warm body as the head toppled into the bushes.

Peculiar times, Thel thought to himself. *First Threshold and now this*. He found himself wondering about the infidelity of Sesa 'Refumee. The heretics, the oracles, the Gravemind and now the betrayal of the Jiralhanae; was it a necessary storm before the Great Journey, or was it something more? Never before had Thel let his mind wander so divergently from the fray of his quest. Of course, now he wasn't entirely sure what his quest was. The Arbiter allowed

time for his active camouflage to replenish before moving further along the path.

“Go see what’s taking them so long,” came the sluggish command of a Jiralhanae just as Thel rounded another bend.

Before the Arbiter could retreat, his camouflage ended, revealing him to the enemy. Three entire packs of Jiralhanae were camped beneath the shadow of a grey cliff. A hexagonal Forerunner entrance loomed within the cliff face. Its top half stretched high.

Thel could step back around the corner he’d come from, but the drove of Jiralhanae would follow and make short work of him. He could charge towards the Forerunner entrance and hope the doors would open automatically just as most doors on the ring tended to, but he was not confident his shields could withstand the bombardment. Two Jiralhanae Captains pointed their bladed grenade launchers at him. The rest held their red plasma rifles. Some wore faces of anger or hatred, while others had cruel smirks upon their jaws.

Before any of them could react, one Jiralhanae Captain was squished by the sudden appearance of a sleek, navy-coloured insertion pod. Jiralhanae blood splattered over the bottom half of the drop pod. The corpse’s right arm was outstretched and twitching inches away from the weapon it had dropped.

More pods followed, snapping tree branches on the way down through the open canopy. During the confusion, Thel started slashing. He lopped one ugly Jiralhanae head off and then the next as Sangheili warriors launched themselves out of their drop pods. He used his energy sword against his nearest enemies and the plasma rifle against those he couldn't reach. He was joined by Sangheili of blue, red, white and a single gold commander. The shouts and gurgles from the Jiralhanae were drowned by the war cries of the Elites. Before long, silence ensued. The entire Jiralhanae camp had been decimated. Sangheili clasped their weapons, panting between their mandibles as the gold commander approached Thel.

"Arbiter," he began. "The Jiralhanae have shed our brothers' blood. We must slaughter every one of them."

"What happened?" Thel asked.

"A mutiny," he replied. "I am Vos Malruhee, Shipmaster of the *Indulgence of Conviction*. The Jiralhanae have commandeered my cruiser."

"You are Sangheili!" Thel exclaimed. "How could you allow your ship to slip into the hands of those as clumsy the Jiralhanae?"

"They lied to us! The only Jiralhanae who accompanied us to the ring were guards for our holding cells. The Prophets ordered us to allow more onboard after we arrived. I realise now it

was a trick. There were no Prophets. Jiralhanae Phantoms infested every shuttle bay. We were forced into our drop pods. We live to fight another day, Arbiter. Our brothers that remained were not so lucky. It is our duty to avenge them. This is certain; the Jiralhanae shall pay for the blood they have spilled.”

“And so, it shall be done,” the Arbiter agreed. “But now is not the time. We must find the Councillors, if any still remain.”

Thel looked around at the lance. There were three Sangheili Minors, two Majors and two Ultras. He didn’t know how many Jiralhanae were between themselves and the Control Room, but he decided there might just be enough Sangheili to reach the destination without falling to the beasts. The path through the cliff was likely their best route down. Thel stepped towards the doors and watched as they slid open with the sound of heavy, grinding metal.

“What shall we do with the bodies?” asked a Sangheili Ultra.

“Leave them,” replied the Arbiter. “Let the Jiralhanae be taken by the dirt. It is a kindness they do not deserve.”

Shipmaster Vos trod alongside Thel while the rest of the group lingered behind. The hallways and square rooms through the cliff were exactly what Thel had come to expect from a Halo ring.

Common patterns and architecture surrounded them as they traversed uninterrupted. Occasionally, they passed lines of dimly blinking Forerunner lights and pulsing energy brightening the environment just enough, like medieval lanterns in a stone cave. The halls here were a little cleaner and brassier than most with recurring layouts not unlike those that had led to the first Halo's Control Room.

Thel had always been a strong warrior and a confident leader, but as he looked around these halls, he could not shake his growing anxiety. His mind kept bouncing back and forth between believing the Oracle, 2401 Penitent Tangent had simply been corrupted by the Gravemind and wondering if perhaps he had not been. He tried to bury his worries. All that mattered was that the Jiralhanae were stopped.

After travelling for some time, the lance exited through another of the many hexagonal doorways into a dark cavern. Thick moss plastered its stone walls. The cavern stretched far enough that Thel couldn't see where it ended, but he could hear waterfalls splashing somewhere below. The lance stood upon linking platforms of sturdy Forerunner glass built around monolithic columns. The columns thumped and thwomped as they worked away, transporting some unknown substance within.

Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar patrolled side by side on a platform below. Thel was not surprised to see them working together. The two species had never been friends exactly, but their detestable nature was one and the same. Thel used his eyes to follow the path created by the glass platforms that bent to the right, connecting to another hexagonal porthole in the cavern wall.

“We can take them,” whispered Vos. “No tricks nor skulking. We act now, and we kill them all.”

Vos did not wait for Thel’s approval. He yelled out to his crew, and the lance charged in as one. The platforms vibrated as the stampede of Sangheili swept upon their enemies. The first wave of Kig-Yar and Jiralhanae had no time to react as the lance fell upon them. Their blood stained the glass as the Sangheili moved on to the next platform. Kig-Yar shields shattered. Jiralhanae grenades flew into the darkness as the Jiralhanae themselves plummeted below. Aided by the Arbiter, Vos’ lance was an unstoppable force.

“Scoundrels!” shouted the Shipmaster as he stepped onto the next platform several paces ahead of the group. “Hunt them like the animals they are!”

Before Vos had finished his cry, he was hit softly in the head with a glowing blue orb from above. Thel glanced upwards and saw several

Jiralhanae on a stone ledge that jutted out from the wall. The Arbiter dived back as the sticky plasma grenade exploded. The entire platform rang as gold shards from Vos' combat harness cut through the air amidst chunks of his wet, indigo flesh. Thel stepped back, placing the platform's large column between himself and the upper ledge.

He peeked his head out to assess the situation. The lower halves of Vos' legs were all that remained. The ledge on which the Jiralhanae stood stretched out along the rocky wall. Part of it met with the exit the Sangheili were attempting to reach, while the other end disappeared into darkness off to the right.

Thel would have liked to use his active camouflage in this moment, but the lance had just lost their Shipmaster. It would be poor taste for the Arbiter to disappear now when what they needed was a leader. Thel stepped out, raising the plasma rifle in his left hand and the energy sword in his right. Jiralhanae shot at him from both the ledge and the platform to his left, but the Arbiter was too quick. Stray plasma bolts struck his shields, but he zigzagged enough to avoid any major fire.

A Jiralhanae Captain swung its curved blade at Thel, but the Arbiter cut him in half without hesitation as he continued towards the ledge. Other Jiralhanae leapt from the rock onto the

platform, causing the glass to shudder. In his evasion, Thel jumped up onto a purple crate. Maintaining momentum, he jumped again, this time onto the ledge, trading places with the Jiralhanae who now looked up at him.

The Sangheili and Kig-Yar skirmished across the entire platform, but the Jiralhanae now stood in a group staring directly at Thel. To the Arbiter, a small fraction of a second might feel like several in the heat of battle, but a moment's hesitation could be fatal. He aimed his plasma rifle at a stationary methane tank, a cylindrical refill station for Unggoy, and fired at a hatch in the side. The Arbiter danced across the ledge as the Jiralhanae stood their ground, firing back at him.

First, the hatch dented into the methane tank. Then, it blew. Blue flames engulfed the Jiralhanae who stood closest to the tank while the others went flying. An enormous crack formed in the Forerunner glass, causing half the platform to tip sideways. Jiralhanae scrambled in attempt to make it back to solid ground, but they were swallowed by the darkness with the falling glass as the Sangheili finished off the rest of the Kig-Yar.

Thel assessed the situation. They were now alone in the cavern. Shipmaster Vos, one of his Majors and two Minors were dead, leaving only five Sangheili including the Arbiter. Suddenly,

Thel heard a crowd of high-pitched and croaky voices yelling fanatically from the dark end of the ledge. He looked over with his hand on the hilt of his sword to witness a colourful collection of Unggoy ranks charging along the rock towards him. They were equipped with plasma pistols, needlers, and several of them held hefty fuel rod guns over their shoulders.

“Forward, brothers!” screamed a green-clad Unggoy Heavy at front. “Fight for Unggoy! Cast down Brutes. Hurt them! Kill them!”

Thel was prepared to fight the stumpy creatures, but they were no threat, and he did not wish to waste their lives when the Covenant was already in shambles. He found it curious that these Unggoy had used the human word for Jiralhanae, *Brutes*. The Arbiter stood tall and unmoving as the Unggoy neared. He raised his voice over their excited rallying.

“There are no Jiralhanae here, courageous ones,” Thel told them.

Calling them courageous was not mockery. They were fools to charge into an unknown situation like this, whether or not the Jiralhanae had remained alive, but they were brave nonetheless. Thel appreciated any time the Unggoy rose above their lowly status to display signs of valour.

The Unggoy stumbled into one another as the Heavy at the front halted in its path, looking up

at the Arbiter. The other Sangheili strode closer to the collapsed part of the platform, nearing the ledge. The Unggoy outnumbered them three to one, but the Sangheili stood firm with a level of confidence the Unggoy could never have imitated. The Unggoy Heavy glanced at the Sangheili group before looking back at the Arbiter. Its voice trembled slightly as it addressed the towering warrior.

“Mighty Arbiter,” it began. “We are free Unggoy. We do not serve stinky Brutes!”

“And how about the Sangheili, *free* Unggoy?” Thel asked. “Do you serve them?”

“N-no, Arbiter.”

Thel looked sideways at the other Sangheili before continuing softly.

“Can you tell me how many Jiralhanae stand between here and the Control Tower?”

“Many, many Jiralhanae,” replied the Unggoy. “Too much to count!”

“I see.”

He considered them. The Unggoy fought well when they were driven. The most loyal Unggoy were those who believed in the power of the Great Journey. These ones were passionate, but they lacked faith. *Like me*, Thel realised. His own faith was wavering at the moment, but that was not a thought he cared to address right now.

“What is your name, Unggoy?”

“Tobap,” replied the green-armoured Unggoy.

“Tobap,” Thel began. “If you help us eradicate the Brutes, we may be able to offer you transport from this ring, and you can go home.”

Tobap turned to his followers. Thel waited as they mumbled eagerly through their masks before Tobap turned back.

“The Arbiter will help us escape this world?” he squeaked.

“I will fight by your side until the time comes. My Sangheili will take you off-world where you will be free to do as you wish.”

“Then we go home.”

Thel nodded patiently. Tobap stole a final glance at his crew before accepting Thel’s deal.

“We will help Sangheili stomp out the Brutes!”

The Sangheili each took turns running up and leaping over the gap in the platform caused by the Arbiter’s explosion. Thel and the Unggoy continued along the ledge, entering through the sliding Forerunner doors as the other Sangheili joined them. The chamber inside was barely an obstacle for the newly formed team. It consisted of two levels joined by a ramp along the wall.

Kig-Yar and Jiralhanae filled the bottom floor. Apparently, the enemies had expected trouble as they’d brought several supply cases and a stationary Shade into the facility, but

despite every plasma bolt, plasma grenade or ricocheting Jiralhanae grenade released upon the lance, the Sangheili and Unggoy could not be defeated. The ramp was too tight for the Kig-Yar and Jiralhanae to risk rushing, and the upper level was at too much of an angle, blocked by the wall that separated the two levels. Thel activated his camouflage, dropped down to the second floor and sliced through his enemies as the others forced their way down the ramp until the room was cleared without Sangheili or Unggoy casualties.

After more twists through the Forerunner hallways, the lance found themselves in a less conventional room. Thel couldn't see any reason for it to be built the way it was. There were several storeys in this room with no ramp down the side, making it look like a giant set of steps. Hexagonal exits cut into the walls of each storey, and what appeared to be bridges to nowhere joined the walls in front of each level's platform. It wouldn't be physically possible to climb down this giant staircase, not when there were Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar on every level. Only the top platform, where the lance stood, was free. Thel tested the doors. They were sealed shut. They had no choice but to fight their way downwards.

Thel activated his camouflage and jumped onto the first bridge. He spun around, revealing

himself, and fired at the Kig-Yar Scouts on the next level below. His Sangheili allies joined him on the bridge, ducking and weaving while the Unggoy waited restlessly across from them, unable to make the jump. The below level was cleared quickly enough, but soon, shots from platforms even lower fired up to greet them. Each Sangheili jumped down to the level they'd just been shooting at. Some shields were depleted, but no one was harmed. Thel looked back up at the top level where the Unggoy stood.

“Come,” he instructed. “We must fight together if we are to survive.”

The Unggoy scrambled over the lip of the first level. Their sturdy legs dangled above. Thel was reminded of infant Sangheili climbing off stools in his keep back home. Each Unggoy plopped down, unharmed by the fall due to their thick anatomy. One of the Sangheili Ultras spoke up.

“The other levels are well guarded. Perhaps we should find a way around.”

“There is no way around,” replied the only remaining blue-armoured Minor. “I scanned the cavern, and the doors here are locked. We may check every level, but I believe the gods designed this place to be a straight-forward path to the Control Room.”

“You *believe*, N'tho?” the Ultra retorted.

“He right,” chimed Tobap who was now waddling forwards.

The Ultra’s eyes widened as he turned to the Unggoy.

“Only way forward is forward,” Tobap shrugged.

Thel agreed with the Unggoy, but it wasn’t their physical path that concerned him.

What other changes await on this road ahead?

Backseat Driver

“For Balaho!” Tobap screamed as he bombarded the Jiralhanae below with fuel rod rounds.

Even as the lance rained plasma, needles and fuel rods over the Jiralhanae, their descent was no easy task. Thel knew there was no point attempting to use his camouflage while his shields were constantly lit as he jumped back and forth between bridges and platforms, making his way down the giant steps as his enemies return-fired. He noticed the accompanying Sangheili Minor was particularly formidable in spite of his rank. The rest of the Sangheili were not so skilled. They’d been fighting humans too long to know what a real threat was.

If it weren’t for all the Unggoy peeking over the ledge behind them and providing constant cover fire, the Sangheili would not have stood a chance. One of the Sangheili Ultras was first to die. Not counting the Arbiter, the Jiralhanae had apparently considered this Ultra their greatest threat. The Ultra’s shields popped while airborne during a jump to one of the bridges. His blood formed a ribbony tail in the air as he pinwheeled downwards, landing with a splat on the bottom level.

They progressed steadily, step by step, with the Unggoy following closely behind. Each time they reached a Jiralhanae corpse, Thel searched it for grenades which he then tossed into the mayhem caused by the Unggoy bombardment. He found himself turning the beasts' own weapons against them, equipping two red Jiralhanae rifles after his previous rifle's battery was depleted. Still, it was no easy task. Thel had to spin, duck and weave constantly to avoid grenade shots as his shields were slowly taken down.

Thel could hear Unggoy dropping to the floor behind him, but these were still low casualties compared with their species' usual losses. The decision to keep the Unggoy behind the Sangheili for this fight served both races well, but it was not enough. By the time the lance reached the final floor after having killed all the Jiralhanae, no Sangheili survived except Thel and the Sangheili Minor. The Unggoy group remained mostly intact. Tobap wheezed behind his mask as he walked alongside the Sangheili. His cohort trailed at his rear.

“Can’t talk,” Tobap puffed. “Lugging this... heavy thing... around.”

Thel was unsure whether the Unggoy was referring to the large tank on his back or the gold cannon he was hauling over his shoulder. There were a few rods remaining in the weapon, but

they were soon unloaded as the trio exited the complex back into the open.

A group of waterlogged Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar approached up a sloped path between the pines, but Tobap obliterated them with the last of his ammunition. Thel could smell the musk of the Jiralhanae's wet fur just as strongly as he smelt the rising fumes caused by the fuel rods. The Unggoy group reequipped themselves with Kig-Yar plasma pistols and a couple with Jiralhanae plasma rifles. Apparently, they weren't keen on the Jiralhanae grenade weapons just yet.

As raindrops irritatingly hit Thel's face from the overcast clouds, he noticed that one of the Jiralhanae had carried a human shotgun before dying. He'd forgotten the probability of humans being nearby. On the first Halo, the Demon had fought through legions of Thel's units to infiltrate the Control Centre. The damp path the group now stood upon was close to the edge of the escarpment. The Control Tower was visibly nearer than before, but they still had a long way to go. Thel didn't know exactly what he would do when he arrived at the Control Room. He only knew that he needed to be there.

The group didn't trek far down the winding track before two pairs of Sangheili Rangers found them. Thel heard the familiar hum of their jetpacks through the rain as they hovered closer.

“Arbiter,” began the leader as he jetpacked above them.

“You are alive!” exclaimed the Sangheili Minor beside Thel. “I would have sworn I saw you die if you were not now here before us.”

“It was close, N’tho,” replied the Ranger. “But my warriors do not fall so easily to the likes of the Jiralhanae.”

“You are from the Indulgence of Conviction,” Thel assumed, referring to Shipmaster Vos’ space cruiser.

The Ranger nodded in reply before starting again.

“Arbiter, the Jiralhanae are executing the Councillors as we speak. Tartarus is heading to the Control Room with the Oracle and the Sacred Icon. I do not know what will happen to us if the Jiralhanae initiate the Great Journey.”

“Worry not,” Thel replied. “You have seen our path from the skies. What is our best course?”

The Ranger looked around at the Unggoy-filled lance and hesitated before replying.

“The path you tread snakes around to the Control Room, but it is long, tedious and crawling with traitors. If you fight well, you may push through. There appear to be many Unggoy groups laying low amongst the trees, but I cannot speak for their loyalties. We spotted them only at a distance.”

“Is there no clearer course?” Thel asked.

“Clearer? No,” replied the Ranger. “But there may be one other way, if you travel alone.”

The Ranger hovered closer to the Arbiter and pointed towards a wall of rock over to the left.

“If you climb that cliff, there is a drop on the other side. You can descend from there if you are careful, but the fall is fatal.”

“And where would I go from there?” Thel questioned. “How clear is that path to the Control Centre?”

The Ranger and the Arbiter turned to face the Control Tower.

“The entrance is halfway up the sphere,” pointed the Ranger. “If you have the stamina, you will be required to climb again, down the cliffs to the ocean, a swim across the water and a fourth climb into the tower itself. It is perilous, but it will get you there much faster than the track you are on.”

Thel did not like the thought of climbing or swimming. He had practice at both tasks, but as a Sangheili, he was not built for either. His back-bent legs and hooved feet made such tasks arduous at best. The Arbiter looked up at the Ranger and had an idea. It wasn't dignified, especially for a Sangheili, but it could be his best option.

“Can you fly me there?” he asked. “If you drop me at the doorway, I will confront Tartarus.”

“This jetpack is not built for carrying two Sangheili, Arbiter. It is tailored to me. I would offer you the suit if I believed it would fit.”

Thel knew they were wasting time now. The Ranger could easily swap his armour with the Arbiter. Thel had become very accustomed to his own combat harness, but he would exchange it in a heartbeat for the sake of his quest. Not every Sangheili shared his insight though. Rangers were particularly proud and stubborn. Thel thought harder. *If the Rangers fly to the Control Tower, they could ambush Tartarus and his Jiralhanae, but if the Rangers lose...* He frowned.

“Tartarus has waited long for this day.” Thel stated. “His kind has always been beneath us, until now. He believes me dead. Only I can stop him.”

Thel had not told the Sangheili everything. The truth was, while Tartarus would be shocked to see him, Thel needed to confront the Oracle first and foremost. The memory of Penitent Tangent arguing with the Prophet of Regret flashed before his eyes, followed by the image of Guilty Spark held prisoner in the Sanctum of the Hierarchs. He needed to know for certain what Halo was and how it worked.

For centuries, the San'Shyuum had been left to interpret Forerunner relics, and Thel had been content with that until the day he witnessed an oracle on Halo with his own eyes disputing the very words of a High Prophet. He held on to some hope deep within his hearts that the Reclamation was everything he ever believed, but what if the Covenant was wrong?

Thel wasted no time as the Sangheili Minor named N'tho departed with the Unggoy while the Rangers covered them from the treetops. Tobap even bade the Arbiter farewell as Thel grabbed onto the cold stone and began climbing.

Fortunately, the rain was light and the stone was rough, but it was still damp, and the risk of slipping could not be ignored. Thel's broad Sangheili palms were less than ideal for the intricate crimps and crevices of the crag, but his fingers were strong and lean. They alone made up for the grip that his hooves lacked. When he reached the top of the rock, he saw the drop the Ranger had mentioned. Approaching it, Thel was surprised to find just how high he stood. He had second thoughts as he stared down at the steep cliff. If he fell, he'd become but a smear, washing away in the rainfall.

Thel swung his legs over the rock and began his descent. He considered using his camouflage but believed it unnecessary. He'd already appear no more than a tailless skink from this height.

He wouldn't be noticed unless a Phantom or Banshee flew immediately past, and as long as he heard it through the wind, he could activate his camouflage before he was detected. His discomfort increased as he climbed down the seemingly endless wall. It was a true test of endurance as he grasped tightly onto every jut and crevice while his hooves searched for the next. He crawled down slower than he liked, but it was necessary for his survival. He edged ever closer to the wet sand below.

Thel was more than three quarters of the way down when he heard an unsettling sound. It was that of a Wraith's engines rounding closer somewhere over his right shoulder. He froze, allowing his active camouflage to kick in. The engines stopped, and Thel twisted his body to see where the tank had gone. He was in a canyon of sorts with far fewer trees, likely due to the increased salt levels now that he was closer to sea level. The Wraith was out of sight around the bend furthest from the Control Tower. He listened carefully for any sign of nearby Jiralhanae but heard nothing before his camouflage died out.

Thel did not care to be in such a compromising position without his camouflage. He climbed down a little further before pushing his feet against the stone and throwing himself away from the cliff. His shields blinked as his

hooves hit the grainy sand. He spun around to find himself face to face with the glistening shell of the Wraith hovering immediately in front of him. Before he could react, the hatch at the top slid open and a white-clad Sangheili with maimed mandibles looked down at him in astonishment. Several other Covenant vehicles hovered closely behind. All of them were operated by Special Ops Sangheili.

“By the rings, Arbiter!” Rtas ‘Vadumee exclaimed. “The Councillors, are they-”

“Murdered,” Thel answered. “By the Jiralhanae.”

Rtas slammed his fist violently onto the hard shell of the Wraith.

“Vile, insolent beasts,” he spat. “The Prophets were fools to trust them!”

Suddenly, a Phantom zoomed overhead, ignoring them completely. The end of the canyon opened out to the waves. The Phantom flew straight over the water and stopped above the doorway into the Control Centre. Thel watched from afar as two figures dropped onto the portico. The larger figure was unmistakably the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae with what Thel suspected was the Oracle pinned under his left arm. The second figure was much smaller and most likely human. The thick Forerunner doors sealed shut behind them. There was no way

Tartarus would leave the entrance unlocked for the Sangheili to follow.

“That,” Rtas began, looking up at the Control Tower. “Was where the Councillors were meant to watch the consecration of the Icon, the start of the Great Journey. The Jiralhanae are about to light the rings.”

A deep voice stirred in Thel’s memory. *There is still time to stop the key from turning.* The Arbiter did not know how long it would take to start the Halo or even where the main Control Room was located within the tower, but if he did not fight to stop Tartarus then he was not worthy of *any* Great Journey.

“I must get inside,” Thel told the Spec Ops Commander.

Rtas gestured at the vehicles around him.

“Then mount up, Arbiter. I may know a way to break that door!”

Rtas ‘Vadumee slammed the hatch over himself as an old Spectre approached Thel. Thel had never been overly fond of Spectres. They reminded him too much of the humans’ wheeled jeeps. The Spectre was a light vehicle that hovered like a Ghost or Wraith, but it relied on teamwork. That made it noble to some and useful to others, but Thel had not exactly hand-selected this lot of Spec Ops Sangheili. His faith in them would be blind, but he trusted Rtas, and so he mounted up. Thel stood behind a plasma

cannon on the back of the vehicle. There was a driver seated at the front and an occupied passenger seat on either side. The Arbiter held on tightly as the Spectre boosted further into the canyon away from the Control Room.

“What is our plan?” Thel shouted to the Wraith hovering behind them.

“You will see,” Rtas transmitted in reply. “For now, stay vigilant. There are Jiralhanae hidden throughout this valley.”

Thel steered the cannon as he searched for Jiralhanae while the Special Ops vehicles distanced themselves from the Control Tower. He was growing frustrated. He didn’t know what would happen when Tartarus activated Halo. The Gravemind and the Demon both seemed to believe it was a mistake, but they could easily be lying. The oracles had yet to give him a clear answer, but could he reach one quickly enough to receive that answer? *We are driving further from the Control Room.* Thel groaned. *Rtas had better know what he is doing.*

Thel knew there would be plenty of Jiralhanae about, but he was not expecting to find himself in the midst of a chaotic battle within seconds of rounding the bend. Both Jiralhanae-driven and Sangheili-operated Ghosts spun around him, firing their plasma frenetically. The Spectre thrust each way to avoid the heavy mortars slamming plasma into the sand from Wraiths on

both sides of the battle. As each round arced high, it carried with it a hoarse and haunting howl, a lamentation that ended in fulmination and the provision of a pit, marring its own memorial of macadam.

Thel aimed at the Jiralhanae on their Ghosts, taking out one at a time while they were distracted by his allies. The superior angle offered by his elevated position upon the rear of the Spectre made the Ghosts' armour practically useless. The Spectre pressed on through the chaos as vehicles crashed and exploded around them. The rain even bucketed harder to match the surrounding madness, drenching Thel from head to hoof.

After several casualties, the Arbiter was driven into an area that opened to reveal more ocean on the left and a Forerunner structure to the right. The silhouette of a Covenant battlecruiser was submerged behind the clouds. Its shadow covered the sea. On the right was a sight Thel had been far from expecting, a fully operational Scarab standing tall against a Forerunner platform with a U-shaped slot. The platform protruded from the cliff face and did not have any visible means for the Arbiter to reach from the ground.

“There,” said the Spec Ops Commander from his Wraith. “That Scarab's main gun will break the entry into the Control Centre. There is

a passage in the cliff that will take you up to the Scarab. You will need all the help you can get once you breach the Control Room. Do you wish us to remain here?"

"No," Thel replied. "Do you have a way of getting to that cruiser?"

"The Indulgence of Conviction? We have a Phantom and several Banshees, but the Jiralhanae will spot us if we attempt to commandeer it."

"Good," stated the Arbiter. "I need a distraction, Commander. There are some Rangers and many willing Unggoy making their way down the escarpment. Make sure no Jiralhanae reinforcements come in behind me, and then, take the ship back. I will meet you in the Control Room."

Thel knew Rtas 'Vadumee would never fire a ship's glassing beam upon a Forerunner temple, but he had no knowledge of the situation on High Charity. Circumstances there were likely dire. He could not know what the chances were of receiving any reinforcements from the capital, and here on the ring, the Jiralhanae greatly outnumbered the Sangheili. Control over the Indulgence of Conviction and its firepower was their only known means of stopping the Jiralhanae.

The Spectre dropped Thel off beside a doorway into the cliff. He received a shock when

he stepped inside to find two fully sized, spiked Mgalekgolo staring him down from behind their squashed helmets. Several Sangheili bodies lay at their broad, armoured feet. Thel raised his plasma rifle, but he did not shoot. A single living Sangheili Major stood between them.

“The Arbiter?” the Major gasped. “I thought you were dead.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Thel asked, gesturing at both the corpses and the Mgalekgolo.

“These Lekgolo have come to our aid, Arbiter,” the Major replied. “They will fight by our side.”

The Mgalekgolo grunted coarsely in agreement as the Major tossed the Arbiter a fresh plasma rifle. Thel realised the Sangheili on the floor must have been betrayed by the Jiralhanae the same as everyone else. These Mgalekgolo had tried to protect them but arrived too late. With his new allies, Thel’s journey onwards was both easier than he’d predicted and more difficult.

The Mgalekgolo’s assault cannons decimated the Kig-Yar, shields and all, and blasted holes through the Jiralhanae that defended the facility. The problem for Thel was that the entire complex was now on alert. This meant he could not simply slip through using his active camouflage. The rooms they fought through

were much like the ones the Arbiter had traversed with the Sangheili of the Indulgence. They even included more glass platforms over a dark underground lake. Thel's worries that Tartarus would activate Halo before he could reach him were growing worse all the while.

"Wait here," Thel instructed the Major and Mgalekgolo pair within a corridor. "I will scout the next room while cloaked. I do not wish to be detected before seizing the Scarab."

With his active camouflage on, Thel crept up a ramp onto a walkway to gain an overview of the final chamber. He could not say exactly what the Forerunner had used the room for, but it looked to him exactly like a prison block, though not as bleak. It had the typical Forerunner trims with warm, golden lighting that swept across the floor. There were two levels, including the one on which Thel stood that wrapped around the edge of the room. The walls were illuminated by bright, semi-transparent shield doors that secured the many cells built into them. Within the cells were Sangheili and Mgalekgolo trapped by the Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar that patrolled the chamber.

Upon closer inspection, Thel realised that all the Sangheili behind the shield doors wore the ornate headdresses of the High Council. Thel was careful not to leave wet hoofprints in his enemies' lines of sight as he scouted. He

returned to the corridor just as his camouflage deactivated.

“The Councillors are alive,” Thel informed the trio. “They have been imprisoned in the next room.”

“Then we must free our brothers,” cried the Major.

“The chamber is well guarded,” Thel explained. “If you and the Mgalekgolo distract the guards long enough, I can extinguish the shield doors, and our brothers will join the fight.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Death to the Jiralhanae!”

The Mgalekgolo grunted in unison and followed Thel back to the detention block. They separated upon reaching the ramp, and the Arbiter reactivated his camouflage. The Jiralhanae roared in response to the Mgalekgolo who hosed their enemies with their powerful fuel rod energy from the walkway.

Meanwhile, Thel snuck around the edges under cover. The sounds of the firefight echoed around the room, resonating within the tiny holes that made up Thel’s ears. War cries, gasps of pain and plenty of plasma fire drowned out the gaseous whooshes of the Arbiter’s energy blades as he slashed at the Forerunner device producing the shield door of the first holding

cell. The imprisoned Councillor stepped forwards as the shield blinked out.

“Here,” Thel said as he tossed the Councillor the hilt of his sword. “Free the others.”

The Councillor nodded as Thel spun and joined the fray, now de cloaked by his active movement. The Arbiter swept up a red plasma rifle from the fresh corpse of a Jiralhanae and fired it alongside his own blue one at the horde running around the lower level.

At first, there were far more Jiralhanae than Sangheili and Mgalekgolo, and even more joined the fight from the next corridor, but soon there were Mgalekgolo and Sangheili Councillors leaping from the walls as they were released from their holding cells. Adrenaline pumped hard through the Sangheili’s veins as they finished off the last of the Jiralhanae. They had formed a strong gathering, but would it be enough to push through to the Control Room and stop Tartarus? The Arbiter drew the attention of the others.

“On the other side of this chamber is a functioning Scarab,” he announced. “I need to take it.”

Thel claimed a plasma grenade from a dead Jiralhanae before his sword was returned to him by the first Councillor he’d released. Thel caught it from the air as the Councillor replied.

“Then we shall guide you, Arbiter.”

The others nodded assertively. The corridor between the detention block and the exterior platform was cramped as the crowd marched through. Thanks to the thickness of the Forerunner walls, the Jiralhanae on the outside did not hear the commotion. When the doors opened to reveal the large platform with the Scarab docked to the opposite side, Thel activated his camouflage again.

“Do not attack until I reveal myself,” he whispered to his allies before creeping along the platform.

The platform crawled with Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar. A pair of particularly large Jiralhanae held onto a human in the centre. It was the same brown-skinned human Thel had knocked unconscious inside the Library. A young, light-haired Jiralhanae turned from a stationary Covenant transmitter and approached the pair.

“The Chieftain says the other will do,” the young Jiralhanae grumbled.

Towering over the human, he held out his open Jiralhanae hand, requesting the curve-bladed grenade launcher holstered by the largest of the pair.

“A day’s ration says I do this in one cut.”

Thel did not expect the other Jiralhanae to comply, but to his surprise, the large Jiralhanae chuckled. He unfastened his grenade launcher

and passed it to the younger Jiralhanae. The pair grasped the human tightly as he struggled.

“Two cuts at least,” said the Jiralhanae handing over his weapon.

The pair tilted the human’s head back, exposing his vulnerable neck as the younger Jiralhanae stepped forwards, preparing to slice it open. Until now, the human had appeared proud and confident, but there was clear despair growing in the creases of his face as he twisted his shoulders, failing any form of escape.

The young Jiralhanae brought his weapon’s blade back preparing to swing, convinced of his ability to lop the human’s head off with one clean, sharp swipe, but the swing never came. Instead, two bright prongs of energy poked out from the Jiralhanae’s chest as the figure of the Arbiter materialised behind. The Jiralhanae fell to the floor as an army of Mgalekgolo and Sangheili Councillors swept over the platform.

The Jiralhanae stood no chance. Within moments, the platform was littered with their dismembered bodies. Blue and red guts spilled out from the corpses, dissected by energy blades as well as by the Jiralhanae’s own curved blades used against them. The impact of the Mgalekgolo’s furious assault beams could not be understated either. There was no time to celebrate, however.

As the last Jiralhanae dropped to the tessellated polygons of the Forerunner platform, the entire platform and everyone on it suddenly glowed a deep green. The colossal eye of the Scarab glared at them all. Its body rose high as its four legs straightened. It was at that moment Thel realised the human was nowhere to be seen.

“Listen,” boomed an incredibly loud voice, shaking right through the Arbiter and his armour.

The voice undoubtedly spoke in the humans’ own English. Many of the Sangheili and likely all of the Lekgolo would have been clueless as to what the voice had said, but even they knew not to take their chances against an entire Scarab, not at this range. The green eye appeared to be staring directly at Thel as the voice continued.

“You don’t like me, and I sure-as-hell don’t like you,” it said. “But if we don’t do something, *mister mohawk* is gonna activate this ring, and we’re *all* going to die.”

Thel twisted his mandibles uncomfortably to reply in the human’s tongue.

“Tartarus has locked himself inside the Control Room,” he spoke to the towering quadruped.

“Well,” replied the human. “I just happen to have a key.”

Thel noticed two Banshees flying in from the distance. Apparently, the human detected them as well.

“Come on,” the human said. “Grab a Banshee and give me some cover. He’s gonna know we’re coming. Johnson’s the name. Let’s go.”

Just as the giant machine slowly manoeuvred itself away from the platform, a crack of thunder almost deafened the Arbiter, and a flash of light nearly blinded him. Thel spun to see who had fired only to realise it was actual lightning. A storm had been brewing during the fight, and now water splashed harder than ever against Thel’s steel armour as a new sheet of rain fell upon the platform and the surrounding landscape. The wind alone almost barrelled him over.

The sudden change in weather caused both Banshees to hit the platform hard. One of them lost its wings as it rolled across. Several unpleasant crunches were heard beneath the pouring rain as the wings snapped under the Banshee’s own weight. Fortunately, the other Banshee remained intact as its canopy popped open and a Spec Ops Sangheili ejected himself from its rear.

“Take my Banshee, Arbiter,” said the Sangheili.

“What news do you have of the Indulgence?”
Thel asked.

“We are struggling to take it, Arbiter,” the Sangheili informed. “We fear we do not have enough time. Take the Banshee. Stop Tartarus. The Great Journey belongs to the Covenant, not to the Jiralhanae alone!”

Delusions and Grandeur

As hard as the rain was hitting, Thel was too determined for it to irritate him now. He slid into the Banshee and boosted into the grey sky. The support craft's cold, metallic interior chilled him to the bone, but the Arbiter ignored his discomfort. He could feel the force of the wind pushing against the Banshee, but its sleek design prevailed, and he was able to glide through the thunderstorm with controlled mobility. The Scarab was already ahead, stepping slowly through the canyon that Thel had initially approached from. It fired its main cannon at the silhouettes of Jiralhanae-controlled Wraiths and a Spectre Thel suspected was the one he'd manned earlier. He banked left to assist the Scarab.

The Banshee's dashboard lit the cockpit pink as Thel was forced sideways by the sudden impact of a large plasma bolt. The aircraft dropped significantly before he regained control. Thel was barely able to see through the miserable rainfall, but he couldn't miss the many obnoxious bolts that whizzed past, lighting the surrounding precipitation with a red glow. He turned sharply to avoid an oncoming plasma bolt only for another to hit him. Fragments of purple plating peeled off the dented hull and

tumbled into the grey. He did all he could to keep his Banshee together, performing barrel rolls, forward flips and backflips, all the while searching for the sources of the constant fire.

The Banshee's sensors picked up that he was dangerously close to a cliff when he spotted his first target. He rolled right, preventing the strong winds from slamming him into the rock before he fired his plasma cannons continuously and relentlessly into a faint, aqua glow. The glow was that of a Shade's shield shrouded behind the dense wall of rain. The shield received a battering, turning from aqua to red, but it did not give in easily. Thel needed a better shot at the idle plasma turret.

Before he could get into a better position, the outer rock of the cliff was blasted apart by a blazing green energy field. An enemy Banshee descended through the deluge, diving at Thel from above. It fired its own plasma cannons after having missed its fuel rod shot. Thel could still hear the mechanical legs of the Scarab crawling through the canyon below, even beneath the rain's constant thrumming, but he could not afford it any attention. The torment of the tempest terrorised Thel as it was, and the Shade and Banshee denied him any diversions.

He chose to ignore what he now realised were multiple Shades and aimed for the Banshee instead. The Shades' bolts were a nuisance for

both Banshees alike. They dipped over and under the red plasma as they manoeuvred about, attempting to face one another. Due to the cannons of the support craft being fixed firmly below their hoods, neither Banshee could effectively fire until the other was lined up in front of it. This was proving an impossible task for Thel between the heavy winds and persistent plasma skimming across his Banshee's armour.

BOOM!

Thel finally landed a shot. After feigning a barrel roll, he rose above the enemy Banshee and launched a fuel rod directly into it. The explosion burrowed straight through the hood of the enemy craft, which fell to its doom, but the Arbiter's victory was short-lived. Something was wrong. The Shades all stopped firing, and he couldn't understand why. Thel pulled his Banshee high above the cliffs, hoping to gain a vantage point in spite of the rain's obnubilation. Before he could ascend any higher, the rain's pellets were joined by the bright, blue plasma of at least twenty new Banshees joining the fight.

"Up above!" projected the human's voice a moment too late in Thel's opinion. "Looks like the Brutes have caught on to our plan."

Much to his disappointment, Thel received no cover from the Scarab's mounted plasma repeaters as its focus beam assaulted the lower canyon. The Jiralhanae ground vehicles kept the

machine distracted as Thel was bombarded from the clouds. His Banshee was receiving a beating, and no matter how hard he fought to pitch it upwards, it did not ascend. The aircraft could only take so much of this battering before it surrendered and the Arbiter plunged to his death.

Thel was built for battle. He'd trained for it almost since the day he was born, but in this moment, he felt powerless. His entire Banshee shook under the heavy fire, inching him towards his impending doom. He held tightly onto the controls, lying forwards within the cockpit, certain of his fate. The Banshee was dented and charred to the point that it completely lost its once elegant shape. Just as its handling began to turn against Thel, he noticed something through the display screen.

The rain was clearing. The clouds separated, saturating the canyon in sunlight. The ringworld stretched up from the horizon and high into the clear sky above. Thel could see again, and those Jiralhanae pilots now stood zero chance of taking him down.

With renewed energy, Thel boosted his Banshee forwards and tilted it upwards into a giant loop until he had fully flipped and was above the attacking Banshees. He fired his plasma cannons and a fuel rod at each individual Banshee. The Jiralhanae Banshees may have

been in better condition, but the pilots were nothing compared to the might of Thel 'Vadamee, Kaidon of his Keep, former Supreme Commander and current Arbiter of the Covenant. They fell one by one under his firepower. Even the more adept Jiralhanae pilots were no match for Thel as he swerved each way, returning fire until they were destroyed.

There were few enemy Banshees remaining when the Scarab halted over the sandy shore opposite the Control Tower. The tower glimmered in the sunlight, reflecting over the blue sea as white waves lapped beneath the Scarab's feet.

"Stay clear of the door!" yelled Johnson.

Thel had an idea. He dived downwards towards the rear of the Scarab. The remaining Banshees followed suit, firing their plasma cannons behind while he nosedived. As the ground rushed up to meet him, he changed direction before he could make impact. One of the Jiralhanae Banshees smashed into the ground, but the others followed Thel beneath the underside of the Scarab. Just as the Arbiter emerged from between the Scarab's front legs, he boosted upwards in front of it, narrowly missing the green energy that ignited from the machine's eye.

KKKEEEEWWWW!!!

The Jiralhanae and their Banshees were disintegrated by the Scarab's beam, which gushed horizontally across the sky right into the doorway of the Control Tower. Thel watched from up high as the sliding doors overheated and collapsed. The walls behind them turned black as the energy continued to demolish its way deep through the entrance before the Scarab eventually withdrew its fire.

“Knock knock!” the human hollered. “Here we come!”

Thel flew over to the scorched portico. Before the Banshee even touched down, he'd already slipped from it and was running inside. He activated his camouflage in the burnt foyer and entered a Forerunner hall. Paying no attention to its design, he focused only on the doorways at the end. One of them unsealed, opening to a line of Jiralhanae guards that flowed into the room.

“Do not let the Arbiter into the Control Chamber,” growled the leader. “The Chieftain must complete his holy work.”

The guards completely missed the cloaked Arbiter who slipped behind them through the now closing doors, trapping them away from their target. The next hallway was immense. It reminded Thel of a hangar, except instead of opening to the sky, it led him deeper into the Control Centre. It was dark and undecorated

with tiny, dimmed lights down the middle, and yet, it maintained a beauty that Thel could not describe. Thel's body shook in anticipation as he ran down the hallway over a segmented floor that alternated between metal and glass until he reached an opening into the Control Room itself.

The Control Room was far vaster than Thel could have expected. It reminded him of the Library, albeit more inviting. The only floor that could be stood upon was a circular platform in the centre of the chamber and the two walkways that bridged across from the room's entrances. As with most Forerunner architecture, there was no railing. A considerable amount of empty space filled the area between the centre platform and the chamber walls, which curved into the ceiling and downwards into a pit below. Far above, Thel spotted a hole in the ceiling. From the looks of it, the hole funnelled directly into the open sky.

The figures who stood at the opposite end of the bridge, before the edge of the circular platform, were far too engrossed in their task to notice the Arbiter despite his wilting camouflage. The control panel before them was large and complex, covered in holographic glyphs with sections that scrolled and blinked. The figures were those of Tartarus, several Jiralhanae guards, the female human Thel

recognised from the Library, and the levitating blue orb that made the Arbiter's hearts jolt. It was the Oracle, 343 Guilty Spark.

“Come, human,” Tartarus said in English with his thick Jiralhanae accent. “It is easy.”

The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae held the Sacred Icon in his right hand and gripped the human with his other. Clearly, he was getting frustrated. Thel crept carefully forwards to better hear what was being said. His camouflage had now completely died.

The human stood proudly and stubbornly. She kept her head facing away from the white Jiralhanae who stood far taller and broader than any other figure in the room. The Fist of Rukt remained strapped over his back. As Thel got closer, he noticed a physical slot in the control panel that must have been where the Icon was to be inserted.

“Take the Icon in your hand,” Tartarus rumbled. “And do as you are told!”

With his last syllable, Tartarus tried slamming the Icon into the slot himself, unable to penetrate it. An invisible barrier appeared to deny the Jiralhanae access. His guards stood frozen, far too fearful to provoke their infuriated Chieftain.

“Please, use caution,” said the Oracle in a distressed tone. “This Reclaimer is delicate.”

“One more word, Oracle, and I will rip your eye from its socket!” Tartarus threatened. “Which is nothing compared with what I’ll do to you,” he said turning to the human.

Thel was halfway along the walkway now. He could feel the situation growing dire, as he’d expected. Not knowing what else to do, he spoke up.

“Tartarus, stop,” he said firmly.

Every figure in the room spun in surprise. The Chieftain emitted a spluttered snort, visibly shocked by Thel’s appearance. The guards raised their weapons.

“Impossible!” Tartarus exclaimed.

“Put down the Icon,” Thel continued.

“Put it down and disobey the hierarchs?”

Thel hesitated. He knew how he sounded. *Am I any different from Sesa Refumee?*

“There are things about Halo that even the hierarchs do not understand,” Thel stated.

Tartarus let go of the human and stepped forwards, straightening his back and broadening his shoulders to display dominance.

“Take care, Arbiter. What you say is heresy!”

“Is it?” Thel whispered more to himself than to Tartarus.

Guilty Spark watched silently, floating beside the Chieftain. Thel turned to the glowing sphere.

“Oracle,” he addressed. “What is Halo’s purpose?”

The Oracle responded immediately.

“Collectively, the seven-”

“Not another word!” Tartarus snarled, grabbing the Oracle tightly with both his hands.

“Please,” came a new voice from behind Thel. “Don’t shake the lightbulb!”

It was the human named Johnson. He stepped onto the bridge with a beam rifle pointing directly at Tartarus’ head.

“If you want to keep your brain inside your head,” Johnson began. “I’d tell those boys to chill.”

Tartarus loosened his grip on the Oracle and barked at his guards to lower their weapons.

“Go ahead,” Johnson said to the Arbiter. “Do your thing.”

Once again, Thel looked over to the Oracle who now stared back from between Tartarus’ hands.

“The Sacred Rings, what are they?” Thel asked.

“Weapons of last resort,” replied the Oracle. “They were built by the Forerunner to eliminate potential Flood hosts, thereby rendering the Parasite harmless.”

“And those who made the rings,” Thel questioned. “What happened to the Forerunner?”

“After exhausting every other strategic option, my creators activated the rings,” Guilty

Spark continued informatively. “We managed the crisis as best as we could, but there was no choice. As planned, my creators and all additional sentient life within three radii of the galactic centre *died*.”

That’s it then, Thel thought. After all these years, everything he ever believed in, everything he ever fought for was false. Every accomplishment he achieved in the name of the Covenant was for naught. His entire campaign against the humans was pointless. He’d killed his own brethren for his faith, and it was all a lie. It was the Sangheili’s role to find Forerunner artefacts. That had always been the case, but it was the San’Shyuum’s role to interpret them. What had they been doing all this time? They’d neglected their duty. Everything the Prophets ever claimed to do for the benefit of the Covenant was untrue.

Thel considered the San’Shyuum he had met over the years. He thought about his interactions with the three High Prophets over his extensive campaign and especially in his recent days as the Arbiter. He had been their tool, nothing more than a blind fool serving power-hungry tyrants, and every time there had ever been a flicker of doubt, he’d buried it like the imbecile he was. Thel was distraught, both his hearts shattered. Everything he was and ever had been meant nothing. The room fell silent as Guilty Spark

looked upon the solemn faces of his companions. Awkwardly, the Oracle continued.

“Would you... like to see the relevant data?”

Thel looked past the Oracle at the Chieftain. Tartarus gaped at the orb, his face frozen in horror. Thel could not swallow his pain, but he maintained composure and spoke again.

“Tartarus,” he murmured sombrely. “The Prophets have betrayed us.”

The Chieftain seemed to come to his senses as his typical hardened expression returned to his face. Before anyone could react, Tartarus launched the Oracle’s spherical frame across the room, knocking Johnson onto his back. He forced the Sacred Icon into the female human’s hands and slammed it into the control panel.

“No, Arbiter!” Tartarus roared. “The Great Journey has begun, and the Jiralhanae, not the Sangheili, shall be the Prophets’ escort!”

With a nudge of his elbow, Tartarus knocked the female to the floor before reaching over his shoulder for his oversized war-hammer. The entire chamber rumbled fiercely, forcing its occupants to balance on the walkway out of fear of falling off. The Jiralhanae guards stood firmly awaiting their orders as the female human commando-crawled to the side of the bridge. A fight was about to ensue, but the Arbiter had no chance. He was vastly outnumbered. His only allies were the two floored humans who he could

not afford faith in, and it was difficult enough for Thel to maintain his footing on the shaking bridge, let alone engage in combat.

Forerunner architecture shifted around the chamber. Segments of the bridge slid away as blocky contraptions unfolded in the centre of the circular platform, guiding a blindingly blazing light, which beamed from the ground and into the sky above. Somewhere nearby, Halo's phase pulse generators were charging up the ring. If the Oracle was correct, this beam would very soon kill every living being in the galaxy, Sangheili, Jiralhanae, humans and the rest. They were all the same now. Unless Thel could reverse the activation before it released its final pulse, everyone would die.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, Thel reached steadily down his side. In full haste, he activated his plasma grenade and pelted it into Tartarus' guards who were still processing the affair. The blast killed two of the guards but only served as a brief distraction for the rest. Thel searched the control panel with his eyes, but the Sacred Icon was nowhere to be seen. It had disappeared, consumed by the holopanel itself. Expectedly, Thel's shields went alight with Jiralhanae fire, but the guards were the least of his worries.

As the Arbiter evaded, Tartarus jumped backwards onto the circular platform with his

hammer clenched close. Thel found it odd that Tartarus would avoid the opportunity to kill the Arbiter himself, but he was not in a position to question the Chieftain's decision. Thel ducked, darted and danced around the walkway, firing at the Jiralhanae who were likely to kill him if he didn't find cover. He heard the female human in conversation with the Oracle as he fought.

“Well, shut them down!” commanded the human.

“Apologies,” Guilty Spark replied. “Protocol does not allow me to interfere with any aspect of this sequence.”

“Then how do I stop it?”

“Well, it will take some time to go over the proper procedures.”

Before Thel could listen to any more of the exchange, his shields popped, leaving him completely vulnerable to the guards. He rolled right in desperation. His armour protected him from most shots, but he could feel the heat of red plasma burning his skin through the metal plating. He rolled again. This time, a ball of plasma singed the underside of his thigh as it scraped past. He roared as dark blood spilled onto the floor while he fired back. The lives of the entire galaxy were on the line, and he was going to die hopelessly outnumbered, unable to do anything about it. Two Jiralhanae dropped

their weapons, preparing themselves to charge forwards to beat the bleeding Arbiter to death.

TSSEEW! TSSEEW!

Both of them dropped dead as two purple streaks of light flashed past the Arbiter's head. The human sergeant had fired from the hallway behind Thel. His beam rifle was temporarily overheating before a third shot could be fired. Thel seized the opportunity to unleash his energy sword. Ignoring the severe stinging of his thigh, he pushed his legs straight and lunged at the nearest Jiralhanae. The Jiralhanae's eyes widened as it stumbled backwards, unable to escape the fiery blades. The other Jiralhanae jumped back onto the circular platform to hide from Johnson's beam rifle while Thel regained his composure.

"Quit stalling!" yelled the female at the Oracle.

"Under more controlled circumstances," Guilty Spark began in reply. "I would suggest the Reclaimer simply remove the Activation Index."

That was when Thel saw it. The tiny T-shaped shadow of the Sacred Icon was suspended within the bright beam at the centre of the room. The Jiralhanae were now taking cover behind the unfolded contraptions that guided the beam, but the Icon was at a reachable height, even for the humans. Thel's shields recharged as he watched Tartarus step in front of the Icon,

clenching the Fist of Rukt with a grin. A white glow shone over the Chieftain's body as energy shields of his own creation rose to life.

“What's the matter, Arbiter?” Tartarus mocked, raising his voice over the deafening charge of the Control Room's beam. “Afraid of my little hammer?”

The Arbiter was beginning to feel faint. He didn't know how much blood he'd lost, but if he was going to die today, he needed to die for a cause. Defending the galaxy seemed reasonable enough. He sprinted forwards with his blades at the ready, sweeping left and right to avoid bouncing Jiralhanae grenades. He leapt onto the platform, expecting a barrage of fire from the Jiralhanae at his sides, but none came. Instead, the Jiralhanae guards fired at new targets. The sounds of various Sangheili war cries grew closer from both walkways.

“Kill the traitors!”

“For our brothers!”

“For the Covenant!”

The purple beam of Johnson's rifle continued to flash at the Jiralhanae as the Sangheili ran across the bridges. Whether they knew the human was an ally or not, their targets for the time being were the Jiralhanae and no one else. Seizing the Jiralhanae's distraction as an opportunity, Thel stabbed two guards nearest to

him before turning back to face the approaching Chieftain.

Tartarus strode forwards slowly but confidently. His ever-present grin never faltered, but his brows twitched with submerged rage. Thel held his sword at the ready, examining the Chieftain's shields scrutinously. Their distinct white glow and apparent density was not the same as the Sangheili's. They would take several hits from Thel's energy sword if they could be extinguished at all, and with the reach of Tartarus' arm's length combined with the hammer, Thel wasn't sure if he could even get close enough to strike.

The Arbiter stepped backwards slowly around the platform, searching for a weakness as Tartarus matched his movements in pursuit. As a gleam of purple flashed behind the Chieftain's shoulders, he sniggered at Thel's obvious caution. Thel could hear the cries of battling Sangheili and Jiralhanae across the platform and bridges. It seemed more Jiralhanae had joined the fray along with the Sangheili, and both sides were suffering severe casualties. Thel heard several unidentifiable voices cry out as they plummeted below, apparently having fallen off one of the bridges. He couldn't tell if they were Sangheili, Jiralhanae or both.

"Just like the rest of your race," Tartarus taunted. "Cowardly and w-"

Thel reached out carefully but quickly, slicing at Tartarus' abdomen but missing entirely. He was not close enough to land a hit, not even to damage the Jiralhanae's shields. The Chieftain returned a sideways swing with his heavy, modified Fist of Rukt. Thel jumped backwards, narrowly escaping its head.

Tartarus raised the hammer high over himself, exposing his body momentarily, but Thel did not risk another swipe. He jumped back again as the Fist of Rukt slammed against the tiled Forerunner platform. Even after jumping back, Thel was knocked off his feet by a forceful shockwave emitted by the hammer as it hit the floor. Thel spun onto his hands and pushed himself back up as he narrowly escaped yet another swing of Tartarus' hammer.

The duel between the Arbiter and the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae continued in this fashion longer than Thel was comfortable with. He was awfully conscious of the energy beam running up the centre of the room, constantly getting louder and brighter. Soon, it would be charged enough to fire Halo, and everyone would perish, whether in this room or the rest of the galaxy.

Another purple strike flashed past as Thel failed his next swipe at the Chieftain. Tartarus, clearly growing frustrated, increased the rate of his swings. Swing after swing, slam after slam,

and shockwave after shockwave, the duel continued. The end of the galaxy was at hand.

“Firing sequence initiated,” announced the Oracle. “May I say, Reclaimers, it has been a pleasure to serve you both. Goodbye.”

TSSEEW!

Tartarus was struck by Johnson’s beam rifle.

TSSEEW!

Followed by another shot. The white shields popped, leaving Tartarus’ hairy body exposed. Thel grasped the hilt of his sword, thrust forwards as hard as he could and jammed the energy blades through Tartarus’ gut. Tartarus released his hammer and dropped to his knees. Thel withdrew the sword from the Chieftain’s abdomen and slashed it through the air, removing Tartarus’ head from his body. It rolled across the platform and disappeared off the edge as a fountain of warm, red and blue blood gushed over the Arbiter’s hooves.

Thel turned to the energy beam in the centre of the room to see the human female plunging her arm into its bright light. She closed her fingers around the Icon and yanked it out from the beam. In response, the beam dimmed greatly. One final shock of energy was released up the centre of the room before the beam fizzled out entirely. The room fell silent.

Thel looked down at his legs, recovering after the strenuous work of his beating hearts. His

thigh still throbbed painfully, but the bleeding had stopped. He switched his sword for his plasma rifle, ready to aim at the surrounding Jiralhanae only to realise they were all dead. The Sangheili, who Thel now realised were from the recaptured Indulgence of Conviction, gathered around. The male human, Johnson, clung tightly to the floating Oracle, dangling above the platform. Guilty Spark dropped him off beside the female who held the Sacred Icon with a wary glance at the Sangheili. She turned back to the position in which the Icon had been suspended. A pulsing hologram of revolving Forerunner glyphs hovered in place of the beam. Thel stepped next to the humans.

“What’s that?” the female asked.

“A beacon,” Guilty Spark replied.

“What’s it doing?” she continued.

“Communicating,” answered the Oracle. “At superluminal speeds with a frequency of-”

“Communicating with what?” the female interjected.

The Oracle paused.

“The other rings,” he answered.

“Show me.”

343 Guilty Spark zapped the beacon, which then proceeded to morph into a new display. The original glyphs were replaced with the holographic images of seven rotating rings.

“That,” began the Oracle. “Is the Halo Array, or rather, a visual representation of its installations.”

Thel looked closer. Although the entire display was blue, he was able to distinguish the lands and oceans on the inner-facing surfaces of each ring and the machinery on the outer sides. He was surprised to see all seven rings intact, considering one of the ringworlds had been destroyed. He assumed the hologram was simply outdated.

“You have triggered a failsafe protocol,” the Oracle informed them. “In the event of unexpected shutdown, the entire system will move to *standby* status. All remaining platforms are now ready for remote activation.”

“Remote activation?” the female repeated. “From here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the Oracle scoffed.

“Listen here, Tinkerbell,” Johnson threatened. “Don’t make me-”

“Then where?” asked Miranda. “Where would someone go to activate the other rings?”

“Why, the Ark of course,” Guilty Spark chirped cheerfully.

This time, the Arbiter stepped in.

“And where,” Thel asked. “Is that?”

Indulgence

The walls of the Indulgence of Conviction performed its chorus of chimes and whistles as calmly and soothingly as a lullaby. Holopanelled that were lined along its twinkling hallway swished, swayed and swirled softly in rhythm with the mesmeric music. Avery Johnson had discovered the corridors of the cruiser were surprisingly songful when welcomed within its lustrous walls of shimmering, purple pigments and other hues analogous of the inside of a seashell.

Plodding along behind a tall Elite Councillor, Avery found his uniform unbecoming of such a setting, and if he hadn't had Miranda beside him in her naval dress, he'd have felt wrong to be wearing his filthy fatigues at all. His body was clean; the Elites had provided the humans a chance to shower, which proved to be a bizarre experience involving alien gases and perfumes that left Avery fresher than any soap or water ever had. Slipping his used uniform over such cleanliness felt *backwards*, but Avery had no other choice aboard the ship built for Sangheili.

There were other humans on board, collected from the battlefield of Delta Halo, but with guidance from the Arbiter, the Elites recognised the leadership of Miranda and Avery. This Councillor was delivering them personally to

their private quarters. Together, they walked in silent contemplation of the events that had unfolded and a future yet to be unravelled. Double doors slid open, clinking courteously as they reached their destination. The Elite motioned them inside.

The room was smooth and rounded like a waterless pool. Its circular floor curved gently into its wall of blended holograms and an inactive display screen that coated its circumference. It was a humble chamber, cosy but vacant aside from its two empty sleeping pods in the centre. The pods were shaped like spoons or scoops, dangling unconventionally as if milk had been poured from the ceiling and frozen mid-splash. The Elite spoke.

“*Msswoll ‘sawlee,*” it said stoically.

“Your fabrics,” translated Avery’s earpiece.

The Elite waited patiently. Avery glanced at Miranda. Surely, it wasn’t asking them for their clothing, as if they’d strip here with nothing else to wear. Avery hesitated, expecting the Elite to say more. When it didn’t, he opened his mouth.

“Listen. That’s not-” Avery began, but Miranda cut him off.

“Here,” she provided, already handing the Elite her shirt.

Miranda stood just as proudly in her exposed bra as she ever did in her uniform. There were no signs of embarrassment nor prudishness

upon her. This task was trivial. As such, she was already moving down to her trousers when Avery realised he needed to catch up. He quickly turned away and began fumbling with his combat vest.

“*Horsniddl’ forsab-loopp,*” stated the Elite as they undressed.

“They will be washed in two *units.*”

Avery guessed his translator had no word for whichever time-based measurement the Elite had used. He stopped as he reached his underwear, but his peripherals advised him Miranda had not. Avery wasn’t one to fluster easily, but his cheeks turned warm as he recognised the blurred frame of bare flesh at the corners of his eyes, shaped by the regal walls contrasted behind Miranda’s human form.

In most circumstances, Avery was completely comfortable in his skin, but here, he was uncertain. He was sure he could deny the Elite the remainder of his ‘fabrics’ and all would be fine, yet somehow, instinct told him to follow Miranda’s lead. He removed his briefs and handed them to the Elite who bowed its head and turned away. The sliding doors closed, leaving the pair alone in the chamber.

Avery caught sight of Miranda from behind as she stepped over to the lefthand sleeping pod. He’d seen enough unclothed women in his lifetime that he should have been well-

accustomed to the female form. He knew he was, but this felt different. Commander Keyes had grown into a legendary figure in his eyes. With her extraordinary parentage, her renowned reputation and everything Avery had witnessed over recent days, she was sublime. He tunnelled his eyes to his sleeping pod to save Miranda her humility, but somehow, *he* was the one who felt vulnerable.

Avery sat upon the edge of the sleeping pod, which attempted to pull him down its curves. He imagined the pod cupped the curled bodies of Sangheili quite efficiently, but its rippled edges and basin-like dip was far from anything Avery had ever slept in, including human cryotubes, which were not known for their comfort. He lay down and slid into its spacious depths. Miranda broke the silence.

“It’s going to be a long trip back,” she sighed, shifting awkwardly in her pod.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” replied Avery, pushing himself into a half-seated resting position. “Sangheili spa treatment – I give it... three and a half stars.”

“Better take it in now, Sergeant,” Miranda suggested. “As soon we reach Earth, the Elites will turn straight around. I don’t imagine everyone at Fleet is going to look too kindly upon the Indulgence.”

Avery considered this for a moment.

“Ma’am,” he began. “Do we have a plan?”

Still conscious of how exposed he and Miranda were, Avery stared at the ceiling as he spoke. There was a transparent lid of sorts dangling like a chandelier above. He heard Miranda shuffling in her pod. She’d given up on lying down and was now sitting cross-legged.

“Until we find the Ark,” she replied. “There’s not a lot we can do. When we get back, there will be more than enough planning. I don’t imagine we’ll be able to rest once we’re home.”

Avery figured she was asking for silence; they could talk later, but she continued.

“Comedy... music... fun...” she listed curiously. “Tell me, Johnson, about these spas.”

“Ma’am?”

“Apparently, this Sangheili spa treatment isn’t up to scratch,” she jested. “You said it. How about ours, human spas?”

She was keeping the conversation light. *Clever*, Avery realised. The deeper they dug into the conflict of Halo, Earth or the Ark, the more likely they would be to burn out when they needed clear minds. He supposed Miranda had never been to a spa.

“They are...” Avery began, looking for a description.

He thought back to Earth and the colonies, to the few times he’d entered spas when it had

seemed the rational thing to do between active duty.

“More *human*, ma’am,” he completed rather dumbly. “The things we know, ma’am. No alien gases, that’s for sure.”

Pausing for a moment, they could still hear the soft, echoing chimes of the Indulgence.

“And the music?” Miranda asked. “I imagine it’s not exactly like this.”

“No, ma’am. This is something else.”

Truthfully, the spas Avery had visited never played music at all. Listening to the serene instrumentals of this locale, he realised perhaps they should. He was still bewildered by how inviting the alien ship had been with the exception of its unfamiliar sleeping pods. Without being asked, Avery spoke again.

“It’s peaceful here,” he uttered. “Not bad for a race of fanatic warriors.”

He realised he’d glanced Miranda’s way, accidentally catching her full appearance. His head snapped back to the ceiling.

“Avery,” she spoke. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Ma’am?” he asked, flushing faintly from being caught.

“It would feel more natural if we looked at each other while talking, like we did at High Charity.”

We were in our clothes at High Charity, Avery thought. He pulled himself up, sitting against the inner curve of his pod and turning to face Miranda. She was right. He felt no embarrassment, no reason to look away. Her eyes reeled him in. Her face reflected the ripples of subtly shimmering glows from the walls. As stable as Avery sat, he felt his body leaning forwards, guided by the gravity of Miranda's reassuring countenance. If she was at ease, then he was as well.

"It would've been different there, in that prison," Miranda continued. "If I didn't have company."

Avery's gut told him to wait.

"Who knows," she pondered. "How it might have gone if I was by myself."

Avery considered his response.

"And on Halo," she finished.

He could make a witty remark, something humorous or self-indulgent. Instead, he agreed.

"The company was encouraging," he smiled.

Careful not to linger, Avery observed Miranda's body language. She too was leaning forwards, her eye contact never wavering. Avery had his arms resting naturally on his knees within the pod, but intuitively, he turned, slowly lifting his legs outside of it while keeping his arms in place to spare Miranda a view. The pair now faced one another more directly, their pods close

together. At a glance, Miranda hadn't moved a muscle, but the whisper of an expression transformed her mask, barely possible to detect. The slightest tilt of her head, a softening of her jaw and the near parting of her lips were all scarcely visible if not for the fervour behind her eyes.

"The company..." Miranda breathed.

Avery wasn't sure if it was a question or acknowledgement, but he clarified anyway.

"You," he told her just as quietly but with his inherently deeper tone.

Without pause, without breaking eye contact, Miranda unfolded her legs and slid forwards over the edge of her pod. Focusing on the intensity behind her eyes, Avery stood and stepped towards her. Immediately, she pulled him in. In full embrace, with Miranda's hands upon Avery and his around her, they kissed. Avery didn't know how long she had been waiting for this, but by the force of her lips upon his, she firmly conveyed her enthusiasm.

The convenience of their already naked state, skin against skin, propelled them, accelerating their actions. Finally, Avery gave in to temptation. He admired Miranda's form, every inch, every groove, every goosebump as Miranda explored in return. With her legs sensually splayed against either side of his, Avery lifted Miranda above her pod and over his waist.

Consequently, he brushed against her as she wrapped herself around him. She was unshaven beneath, but this quirk only enthralled him further. The room spun as they intertwined and soon landed upon the wall while their mouths keenly searched one another's.

Miranda unlocked her lips. Her eyes closed indulgently as she accepted Avery. When they reopened centimetres from Avery's own, he was drawn in further, inhaled by the depths of her desires. As the rhythm of their thrusts intensified, Miranda leant back, passing through one of the holopanel on the wall. Avery paid it no mind as its patterns waved around her, tickling her swinging hair and lapping at her body. His eyes were only for Miranda who gazed back behind the shimmers until the holopanel dissolved altogether.

As the patterns evaporated, the surrounding scenery changed. The display screen opened to reveal the elegant evocations of slipspace flowing freely around them. The arresting aurora that was cast upon the pair elevated Miranda's angelic enchantment. With every sway, she lowered herself against the wall, her gravity pulling Avery in until their combined mass subsided. The holopanel had gifted them a weightless world, lifting both bodies together as one.

They drifted like feathers through the air as their conjoined warmth heated the otherwise cool room. Miranda twisted, slowly spinning the pair until she was on top. Looking down upon Avery, she took control, guiding him with every grind and binding him to the moment. The pair rotated steadily as Avery matched Miranda's gyrations. The physical plane no longer existed, not to them. It merely melted as they bobbed around its space.

Miranda quivered as Avery felt his final fulfilment of pleasure, but they did not separate. Clinging together, the ground gradually rose to greet them, placing them gently within Miranda's sleeping pod. Sensing the unification, Avery's pod glided towards them, cupping beneath Miranda's like joining hands. Two peas in the centre of their newly combined pod, they held each other as the transparent lid closed in snugly.

It would be a long trip back to Earth, and there was no better way to spend it.

