

# HALO ARRAY

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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.**

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***BOOK ONE***  
*THE GREAT JOURNEY*

## 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.

*CCCRRRRRAAAAOOOOOWWWW!!!*

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.

*CCCRRRRRAAAAOOOOOWWWW!!!*

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 *Mercy* 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-II's 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 though 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.

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 *navpoint*."

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, ODS'Ts, nicknamed *helljumpers* 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 ODS'T's words. He'd have no reason to think there was except for the knowledge that many ODS'Ts 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, ODS'Ts and non-ODS'Ts 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 ODSTs.

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 ODSTs, 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 ODS'T 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 ODSTs 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 artillery 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 thrust. 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 gyrotory 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 super-soldier 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.

"Moooorre 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 super-soldier 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 conveyor 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 ODSr. “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 ODSr 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 ODSr's 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 ODSr 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 ODS'Ts 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 ODS'Ts 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 ODS'Ts. 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 ODS'Ts 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 cumbrous. 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 yelled 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 ODSI’s 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 staff 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. Fleishy 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 pulsated 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. *CRR44000WW!* 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.

*CCCRRRRRAAAAOOOOOWWW!!!*

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 shrunken. 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 doused 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.

*CRRRAAOOOWW!!!*

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 inner-most 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 war-hammer 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 neglected, 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 T’angent 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.

*CCRRRRRAAAA00000WWW!!!*

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!”

*CRR4A000W!!!*

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.

"Grrraarrgh!" 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 ODS'T fired its shotgun at him. Pinciotti sprinted through the now opening door as the Chief spun to face the ODS'T. 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 ODS'T'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 ODS'T, 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 ODS'T. 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 scuttered 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, eying 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 decloaked 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 warhammer. 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?”

# *BOOK TWO*

*REUNION TOUR*



## Landfall

The polished, purple nanolaminate of the large shuttle bay was outshone by the colourful array of the gathering Unggoy in their multiple ranks. Armours of orange, red, green, black and white crowded the Covenant hangar as they awaited their orders. The Unggoy huddled closely to hear the wise words of their designated Deacon before battle. Unlike most, this Deacon, garbed in dusty linen over her standard orange armour, was female. *Not that the Sangheili could ever tell the difference between our sexes*, thought Banyip bitterly.

This had always bugged Banyip, and it would likely prove true of the Jiralhanae as well. As far as he knew, the Sangheili never sent a single female of their own into battle, but Unggoy males and females alike were forced to take up arms to serve the Covenant. Admittedly, Banyip did not know what a Sangheili female looked like, but the Sangheili's utter refusal to acknowledge any difference between the Unggoy was one amongst many issues he had with their ruthless race.

Banyip slouched at the edge of the crowd, resting one of his trunk-like forearms on the metal floor. He was utterly uninterested in what the condescending Deaconess had to say. They were all the same to Banyip, always rambling about their Great Journey, talking down to the other Unggoy and acting as if they'd conversed with the gods themselves. Unggoy Deacons were often assigned to large groups such as this to lighten their spirits and motivate them before combat, but nothing they said had ever encouraged Banyip.

Banyip was unique amongst the Unggoy on this ship. His ancestors' region on Balaho was almost entirely eliminated when the Sangheili first discovered the Unggoy homeworld. Banyip was descended from a line of incredibly tough Unggoy. They'd been the only Unggoy to truly defy the Sangheili before their species was forced into the Covenant. It was this ancestry that accounted for the light-blue gleam over Banyip's upper cranium and the penetrating scarlet eyes that popped like rubies within their sockets. He'd hoped to pass these features onto his grandchildren, and for all he knew, he already had. There was no way of knowing. Like most Unggoy,

Banyip had been involuntarily separated from his offspring for the sake of the war.

Banyip was a white-clad Unggoy Ultra. The Sangheili in their barbaric judgement had deemed Banyip worthy of a higher rank purely because he'd killed a few humans during circumstances in which they had expected him to die. Additionally, when he was sent to the planet the humans called Reach, Banyip had been encased in a more experimental suit of armour, which he still wore. He was the only Unggoy within the shuttle bay who wore a drum-shaped tank on his back instead of the usual pointed, pyramidal one. Supposedly, the rest of these cylindrical packs had been destroyed along with the battle station, the *Unyielding Hierophant*. A fancy helmet had also come with the set, but Banyip lost it when it was shot off by a demon on Reach. No one believed Banyip about the demon when he returned. With or without the helmet though, Banyip's appearance clearly stood out from the rest.

The fact that Banyip couldn't hear the end of the Deaconess' sermon did not bother him. He was happier without it. However, the abrupt way a Jiralhanae pulled on his tank to draw his attention aggravated him mightily.

"You," the Jiralhanae huffed. "You will be in *my* file."

It seemed this Jiralhanae Minor had spotted the cylindrical-packed Unggoy and wished to claim Banyip for his own team before his superior officers noticed. The Jiralhanae were not as well-organised as the Sangheili, but Banyip welcomed the change. They may have been a little rough around the edges, but he was willing to give his new commanders a chance. Anything had to be better than the Sangheili.

Banyip observed the Jiralhanae Minor as he was ushered into the Phantom dropship with his new file. Naturally, the Jiralhanae stood almost twice as tall as the Unggoy. He swung his arms slowly and deliberately as he barked orders at his subordinates to gain authority over his unauthorised team. Like the rest of the Jiralhanae in the fleet, this Minor's body was freshly shaven to avoid getting hair caught in his new power armour. Similar power armour had been used by Jiralhanae in the past, but due to the Sangheili's strict sanctions, it had never been mass produced to this extent.

The power armour worn by this particular Jiralhanae was a dull shade of powder-blue to represent its lowly rank, which the

Jiralhanae would no doubt be attempting to advance above. Thick plates covered its chest and limbs and matched the weighty helmet over its head. Exposed tubes and wires connected each segment of the power armour while small shield emitters blinked over the exterior. It was a crude imitation of what the Sangheili wore, but it suited the Jiralhanae's bestial nature.

As with the Jiralhanae's armour, the Phantom Banyip rode in was a more modern variant than those previously sent to Earth. It sported a deeper shade of purple rather than the previous magenta and had a stationary plasma cannon pointed outwards through an open hatch on each side. Both plasma cannons were equipped with a small hardlight shield and occupied by a green-clad Unggoy Heavy. Aside from Banyip himself, the rest of the Phantom was filled with Unggoy Minors and Majors of both genders and three Jiralhanae, one for each file. Banyip's Jiralhanae Minor spoke to his little team.

"I am Sceleratus," he huffed. "You will do as I say and only as I say."

The Unggoy group looked up at him with wide eyes. No one dared to speak. They knew better than to test patience of an unfamiliar Jiralhanae.

"At this moment," Sceleratus continued. "The Prophet of Truth's Dreadnought flies over the human planet to a destination *essential* to the Great Journey. It must arrive safely without interruption."

The Jiralhanae paused, scanning the faces of the Unggoy to ensure they accepted his authority. Banyip noticed some distracted Unggoy Minors fidgeting nervously, but both he and the Jiralhanae ignored them. Sceleratus carried on.

"The hierarch in his exceptional wisdom has chosen to deliver us a package. The Dreadnought has released this package in our vicinity. We are to retrieve it before the humans do. That is our mission."

"What does package look like?" asked one of the Unggoy Majors.

"No questions," grunted the Jiralhanae. "We have almost arrived."

Banyip shuffled to the drop hole with the rest of the lance as the Phantom descended. The hatches on the sides of the dropship opened further, and the Unggoy Heavies began to fire at an unseen

enemy. Banyip glanced down the hole and saw he was about to enter a dusty, dirt-covered territory. Before he could step down, Sceleratus shoved Banyip forwards with a boot to his cylindrical gas tank. Banyip fell down the hole and landed on his hands and knees beneath the late afternoon sun. His sturdy exoskeleton crunched against the hard gravel. He pushed himself to his feet and pointed his needler in front of his mask as his eyes adjusted to the light.

The Unggoy Ultra ran over to the nearest object he could find as his file dropped in behind him. The other two files were already fighting nearby. Banyip was grateful for his rebreather pack as he watched the unsettled dust rise off the ground with each step, gradually layering him in a thin dressing of dry dirt. The flat plain they stood upon was manmade but surrounded by green highlands in every direction. Judging by the immediate surrounding structures, this extensive square of land had been cleared as a method of entry into the human-built bunkers that tunnelled through the earth. Grey concrete walls blocked the Covenant's sightlines, but they also provided adequate cover for their infantry. This was perhaps the most protected Banyip had ever felt going into battle, but the fact that he could not see his enemies disquieted him.

The other files fired their weapons and kicked more dust into the air as they disappeared around concrete corners. Banyip could hear Banshees and other Phantoms flying overhead as his own dropship hovered above them. Judging by the continuous stream of plasma fire, the Unggoy gunners in the Phantom could clearly see their enemies. Sceleratus pointed his weapon forwards, guessing where the humans would be. His Jiralhanae *spiker* looked more like a curved pistol than the carbine it was, and its two broad bayonets made Banyip mentally scoff at the lack of sophistication.

"All Unggoy, follow me!" Sceleratus yelled. "Our priority is to kill all humans, without hesitation!"

Before anyone could begin to navigate through the concrete maze, one of the Unggoy Heavies hit the ground in front of them. It had apparently been shot down from its gunner position in the Phantom. Fearing the worst, Banyip ran towards it. He turned the Unggoy body over and found it free of any wounds. The green-clad Unggoy stirred. Groaning slightly, the Heavy opened her eyes and brought herself to her feet.

"You're with us now," Sceleratus growled. "Let's go!"

The file was engulfed in postmeridian sunlight as the Phantom flew off, taking its shadow with it. Human bullets chipped holes into the walls as the file ran forwards. Two Unggoy Minors dropped to the ground after being shot, but Sceleratus refused to acknowledge them. The file pursued a group of humans who fired battle rifles from behind distant walls. The Unggoy utilised their plasma pistols in return while Sceleratus charged ahead. Fighting to keep up with his Jiralhanae leader, Banyip had not yet fired his weapon. He trailed behind as the Jiralhanae's silver shields lit over his armour. The armour was clearly not up to Sangheili standards, but it was doing its job.

Once they were in range, Banyip and Sceleratus fired their weapons together. Almost synchronised, glowing pink needles flew alongside the Jiralhanae's red-hot metal spikes. Banyip's needles flew slower than the spikes, but they bent around to meet the humans who peeked their rifles out from the side of the wall. The needles missed entirely, shrinking in the distance. Sceleratus' metal spikes punctured the wall but were unable to pierce the slab through to the other side. The wall now had a line of metal spikes sticking out from it, all cooling down uselessly.

Banyip ran behind another wall as the humans return-fired. Sceleratus remained in position but lowered his spiker in order to unstrap another device from his bulky power armour. He extracted what looked like a metal stick with blades pointing out around the top. It was a spike grenade. Sceleratus flung it through the air, causing it to spin rapidly in an arc towards the humans. The grenade's sharp blades pierced the wall, sticking it to the edge of the concrete. Once it timed out, the grenade would explode and the humans on the other side would die.

Banyip gasped as a human arm reached around the wall and ripped the spike grenade from its position. Sceleratus stepped back, raising his spiker once more, completely taken aback by the human's action. Before the grenade could time out, the human tossed it high into the air, back towards the Jiralhanae. Banyip was surprised at the human's strength. The grenade was designed for the Jiralhanae and was therefore much heavier than any human grenades, but clearly, the marine had put effort into the throw. Before the grenade could arc downwards back to the Jiralhanae, a low-flying Banshee zoomed into view, firing its plasma cannons at the concrete wall that the

human now returned behind. The spike grenade hit the Banshee. Its explosion completely shredded the armour off the support craft, which hit the ground in pieces, killing its pilot in the process.

That was when Banyip noticed, up in the sky, far behind where the Banshee had been, was a trail of smoke. It was a long, narrow tail of some unidentifiable object hurtling high through the troposphere. Banyip turned to see if Sceleratus noticed the object, but the Jiralhanae Minor had disappeared. Constant fire from plasma, bullets and Jiralhanae spikes were heard, but Banyip could not see any action. He noticed fresh bullet holes in the wall to the left of where Sceleratus had been. The impact of the holes suggested a human had fired from somewhere near where Banyip stood.

The disturbed dirt floating in the air provided a veil between the Unggoy Ultra and the nearby marine. Banyip listened carefully to uncover which wall the human was hiding behind. He heard a shuffle behind the next closest wall and raised his needler in response. Fully alert, he sprinted to the sound and jumped behind the wall with his fingers ready to fire, only to discover a lonely green Unggoy Heavy. It was the female gunner who'd fallen from the Phantom.

"No fire!" squeaked the Heavy. "Don't fire."

Banyip was glad the Unggoy Heavy had corrected her speech. It frustrated Banyip when he heard how unintelligent many of his kind sounded. The Unggoy were an intelligent species, but they were oppressed. Forced into hard labour, many Unggoy were not fortunate enough to receive an adequate education, which saddened Banyip deeply. He truly believed the Unggoy were the smartest species of the Covenant, but with the Sangheili's raw strength and advanced technology, the Unggoy had no choice but to follow their commands. The Sangheili's expulsion from the Covenant would provide Banyip's species with their first real opportunity to thrive in a very long time.

"Did you see the human?" Banyip whispered.

"This way," the Heavy nodded.

Banyip followed the Heavy quietly as weapon sounds continued to bounce around the concrete maze. Upon reaching another wall, the Heavy made a series of gestures, signalling that they should split up. Banyip crept to the left of the wall while the Heavy snuck over to the right with her plasma pistol held high. Banyip could now hear

heavy breathing coming from the opposite side of the wall. It was definitely human.

The Unggoy Ultra leapt out and held down the sensor on his needler's grip. The Unggoy Heavy jumped behind the marine and rapidly fired her plasma pistol at the same time. The human fired his battle rifle, but the bullets whizzed high over Banyip's head as the soldier fell backwards. Plasma and needles tore the human apart. The soldier's red blood stained the concrete wall, dripping down and soaking into the gravel.

A muffled voice sounded from the human's helmet. Banyip, having spent his younger years monitoring human communications, recognised the English at once. He listened closely to understand what was being said.

*"Sierra One-One-Seven,"* it said.

This was meaningless jargon to Banyip, but without being told more about the package he was supposed to be looking for, he unstrapped the helmet from the marine to hear it more clearly.

*"Search and rescue team is awaiting coordinates,"* it continued. "Get that laser on the Chief!"

Again, this didn't mean a lot to the Unggoy Ultra. He was no closer to knowing what was in that package, but if the humans were acquiring coordinates, then it was a race to find it. He looked at the Heavy.

"Do you know what we're trying to find?" Banyip asked.

The Heavy shrugged silently before pointing to the sky.

"That, maybe?" she suggested.

Banyip turned his head back towards the falling object with its long, smoky tail. It appeared to be an ablating meteor, glowing as it fell, but Banyip knew better than to assume it was just a rock. Whatever it was, it was special, and the Covenant had to get to it first.

"Come on," Banyip instructed. "Let's find the others."

Banyip continued clutching onto the human helmet with his left hand as he held his needler with his right. He was not willing to drop his chances of receiving legitimate intel. The Sangheili had always doubted the Unggoy, but if they were provided with sufficient information then perhaps they'd actually be motivated to complete their missions. If this helmet could reveal to Banyip exactly what he was looking for, he'd be able to prove this point to the Jiralhanae.

“This way. This way!” instructed the Unggoy Heavy with a sudden turn.

Banyip followed her around the corner only to discover a lone Jiralhanae lying in the dirt. It was none other than Sceleratus. Their file’s leader lay on the ground with several bullet holes leaking blood from his side. His crumpled breastplate rose and fell with each breath. The Jiralhanae was alive, but he wouldn’t survive long without treatment. The Unggoy Heavy stood over Sceleratus, resting her knuckles on the ground as she leant forwards to examine him. Sceleratus’ eyes were closed, but wrinkles of distress crinkled his face, and soft groans escaped his lips. He was at least semiconscious.

“We should find a way to rescue him,” Banyip stated.

The Heavy looked at Banyip with a gleam in her eyes.

“Not this time,” she replied.

Banyip’s companion pointed her plasma pistol down at Sceleratus’ face, held her finger over the touch-sensitive glyph and began to charge the weapon. A green ball of light slowly grew at the jaws of the pistol.

“What are you doing?!” Banyip gasped.

“We don’t need him,” replied the Heavy.

“We do need him,” Banyip argued. “If we save him, we can be rewarded!”

“Rewarded?”

The Unggoy Heavy’s forehead furrowed downwards, appearing quizzical.

“Yes,” Banyip answered. “If we save this Jiralhanae, he will help us later.”

“No,” cut the Heavy sharply.

The Unggoy Heavy released the green ball of light directly into the Jiralhanae. Sceleratus’ face was wiped clean off by the superheated plasma. Banyip jumped back, completely shocked by the Heavy’s action.

“What have you done?!” he exclaimed.

“The Brutes are stinky bad guys,” said the Heavy casually as if her words explained her action.

They were interrupted by another human message transmitted through the helmet.

“What’s the situation?” it asked.

“Almost—”



Banyip switched the helmet off before he could hear the reply. He needed to understand why his commanding officer lay dead on the ground with a large bleeding hole instead of a face. He felt sick as he looked down, making out half a skull and brain through the hole. Bits of bone, flesh and what appeared to be the Jiralhanae's eyes were smeared over the wall, still releasing steam from the heat of the plasma. Banyip pointed his needler to confront the Heavy.

"Speak now," he commanded.

"The Jiralhanae force us here," the Heavy replied. "They force us to work. They force us to fight!"

"Okay," Banyip sighed. "You don't want to be here. What now then? You think you can start a whole revolt against the Covenant?"

Banyip remembered they were in a warzone and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Here of all places?" he finished.

The Heavy thought for a moment.

"No," she answered. "Uh... Maybe."

"What?"

Banyip was astonished. This Unggoy was clearly mad. She could never rally enough followers to fight the rest of the Covenant. The Unggoy were too divided, and many of them were far too worried about themselves to look at the bigger picture. It's not like the Unggoy hadn't rebelled in the past. Banyip was even old enough to remember the last Unggoy uprising, but every time they did, they were squashed back down by the higher-ups in the Covenant. After every attempt, the Unggoy always lost something important. It wasn't worth the risk, and Banyip needed to explain that to this naïve Unggoy before him.

"Tell me," he began. "What happened in the first Unggoy rebellion? How did it end?"

"Arbiter," replied the Heavy without hesitation. "Glassed half Balaho."

Banyip had expected this to have some effect on the Heavy. The glassing of the Unggoy homeworld was something that deeply saddened all Unggoy, or so Banyip had believed. This Unggoy was surprisingly nonchalant. How could she be this uncaring? *She must be mad.* Banyip continued.

"And what happened the last time we rebelled?"

Again, the Heavy answered without hesitation.

“Arbiter,” she shrugged.

Banyip supposed that was true to an extent. The Sangheili named Ripa ‘Moramee had not received the title of Arbiter until *after* he crushed the Unggoy with an army of Sangheili and Mgalekgolo. Banyip could remember the satisfaction he felt when ‘Moramee was killed by humans early in the war. He had supposed the Arbiter’s death was the demons’ doing, but it didn’t matter to him either way. Banyip had always hated the Arbiters.

“And what do you think will happen if we start a rebellion now?” Banyip asked.

“Don’t know,” replied the Heavy. “We might win. We might escape. Arbiter *helps* us now.”

For a moment, Banyip was speechless. He realised this conversation was never going to head in the direction he’d hoped. It was best if they moved on now and Banyip distanced himself from this delusional Unggoy once they returned to the ship. He switched the human helmet back on and ran towards the distant sounds of gunfire. Banyip guessed the sounds were coming from a Warthog’s heavy machine gun. The Heavy must have understood the conversation was over as she followed the Unggoy Ultra without further discussion.

The pair soon came across a marine crying out in pain due to being pinned up against a wall by some metal spikes. Lines of blood dribbled from the human’s wounds. Orange sparks bounced out from the spikes as a medic used an electrical tool in attempt to cut the soldier from the wall. Neither of the humans noticed the Unggoy as they snuck past quietly. Banyip paused, ready to fire his needler, but he figured he’d be wasting his ammo. Killing these two humans was not going to benefit him in any way. He moved on. The helmet spoke again.

“We need to hold off until Master Chief breaks through!”

The weapons fire grew louder as a Phantom flew overhead. Bullets ricocheted off the nanolaminate as humans fired from the ground. Unggoy gunners fired blue bolts from the sides of the dropship while its single rotary Shade fired greater purple ones from underneath. The Shade bolts fired by this model of Phantom were akin to that of a Scarab’s plasma repeaters. The previous rear Shades had been removed, their absence compensated by the new rate of fire at the front. The side cannons were merely extra.

Banyip looked up past the Phantom. The falling object in the sky appeared much closer now. It was still high above them, but it wouldn't be long before gravity finished its job and the object hit the ground. Before he could react, a Jiralhanae knocked him sideways. Banyip only just managed to recover his footing. More Jiralhanae poured from the Phantom. There were no Unggoy with them this time. They looked distressed and seemed to be growing desperate. Banyip spun around to join them as they charged into a more open space.

Spikes and bullets flew in every direction as the Jiralhanae and humans fought each other without much cover. Many of the concrete walls now had large chunks missing from them, likely due to the earlier Banshee run. Banyip dropped the human helmet from his hand and fired his needler in every direction. The scenery around him blurred. All that mattered was that he took down as many humans as he could. He shot one and then the other. The curve of his needles made it impossible for the marines to dodge if they weren't already behind cover.

Banyip noticed one human leaning against a wall while pointing a large device at the falling object in the sky. The Unggoy Ultra considered his mission and recalled the words spoken from the human helmet. The mission was beginning to make sense now. Whatever it was that this human was aiming at, if it succeeded in acquiring its target, the humans would be able to track the package to its landing zone. Banyip needed to stop it.

Jiralhanae bodies swept left and right around Banyip, blocking his view of his target. Frustrated, he charged forwards through the chaos. Just as he regained sight of the human holding the tracking device, a Jiralhanae body fell directly into his path, tripping him over. Banyip was blinded by the dirt that kicked up as he hit the ground. He stumbled back onto his feet, shaking his head and blinking furiously in attempt to clear his eyes, but his vision was too disrupted. He had to retreat. He continued firing his needler in the direction he believed the human to be as he ran backwards. He found a wall and hopped behind it.

"There you are," cried a familiar voice.

The last of the dirt cleared from Banyip's eyes to reveal the Unggoy Heavy crouching beside him.

"Look," she pointed.

Banyip peered around the wall to assess the situation. Many Jiralhanae bodies were collapsing as their energy shields blinked out, but the humans' numbers were lessening as well. The marines seemed to be retreating. The Jiralhanae's tactics were working. They relied on their own body mass to overwhelm the humans. Banyip shivered as he realised how much this strategy reminded him of the Flood, but he knew it couldn't work for long. There were only so many Jiralhanae on this mission, and typically, the humans outnumbered most Covenant species. *All except the Unggoy*, Banyip thought proudly.

He searched for the human with the targeting device. At first, he couldn't spot it, but then he saw the human being dragged by other marines through a doorway into an underground tunnel. Almost all the humans had disappeared at this point. Banyip jumped up and ran out across the dirt towards the tunnel. An especially large Jiralhanae came stomping past him in the same direction, closing the distance between himself and the doorway much faster than Banyip could. A human voice called out from the darkness of the tunnel.

"We got him!" yelled the voice. "Recovery team has the coordinates!"

Banyip stopped dead in his tracks. His armour no longer looked white in the slightest as it was now completely covered in dirt. He watched the large Jiralhanae get close to the tunnel. A human-made projectile flew out from the shadows and struck the Jiralhanae, blasting him to pieces. Only a charred pit remained where the Jiralhanae had been as the door to the tunnel closed behind the last human. Banyip just made out the human's rocket launcher before the thick, metal door shut with a final clang. The Unggoy Ultra turned around, ready for pickup. The Jiralhanae had failed their mission. The humans had acquired their target. They now knew exactly where the Demon was going to land.

As the dust settled around Banyip, he realised there were no surviving Jiralhanae to be found. The Unggoy Heavy trod up to Banyip all too happily. Both Unggoy's rebreather packs were now nearly the same colour due to the dirt.

"Where is everyone?" Banyip asked the Heavy.

"Gone," she replied. "No more Phantoms, no more Brutes, no more humans."

Banyip's heart sank. They had been abandoned.

“We don’t know for how long,” Banyip said. “We need to find a way back.”

He paused for a moment. However long it would take to return to the Covenant, it appeared Banyip was going to be spending a great deal of time with this Unggoy Heavy.

“What’s your name?” Banyip asked her.

“Tobap,” she replied. “Call me Tobap.”

## Arrival

Sergeant Major Avery Johnson looked out at the stars of the clear night sky through the back opening of a D77H Pelican's troop compartment. With the chill of the wind on his face and his *flip* music booming from the speakers of the dropship, Avery was in his element. The music was an old favourite of his, inspired by both the heavy metal of the late twentieth century and the dance beats of the early twenty-third. This particular track sang of a wanderer who'd abandoned everything he knew to live in deep isolation, alone in the jungle with the monsters of his mind. Avery had decided the music was fitting considering his current destination.

"Really, Sarge? We're always listening to this stuff," Corporal Forsell complained. "Hell, this music's older than *you*."

Avery permitted a smile to flicker at the corner of his mouth. He could have told the marine to *cut the chatter, hold his lip* or *quit his bellyaching* as he had with every other soldier who'd complained about his songs, but for one reason or another, he remained silent.

Johnson had handpicked this squad. They weren't ODS'Ts, and they certainly weren't Spartans, but they'd all gone through a lot, and Johnson was glad to have them by his side. Together, they'd spent the entire last two weeks, mission after mission, clearing Earth of any Covenant that managed to squeeze through its defences. It was all in vain however. The more Covenant they eliminated, the more the aliens' numbers grew on other parts of the planet. Ever since the conflict at Delta Halo, the Prophet of Truth's Forerunner ship had hung back, drifting somewhere behind the Sol System's main asteroid belt. Avery had known it was only a matter of time before the Dreadnought charged in to lay waste to the entire human fleet. Now, it had finally engaged them.

"Come on, Sergeant Major," Forsell continued. "Isn't it about time you retired anyway?"

The Corporal was testing him. Out of everyone here, Avery had known Forsell the longest, since he was little more than a boy on Harvest, and apparently, he believed he could get away with more cheek than the rest of the squad. *He's right though*, Avery realised. *I could do with retirement*. From the day the Pillar of Autumn arrived at Alpha Halo, he had been tested in every way possible. The Sergeant

was beginning to feel worn. He'd spent most of his life fighting for the Corps. Retirement had never seemed an option, but one way or another, the war would soon be ending. Maybe he would finally get his chance for some real rest and recreation.

Avery had no idea what his retirement would look like. Could he even do it? The thought of being away from the military and his comrades felt more alien to him than the Covenant. How would he spend his retirement? Who would he spend it with? His thoughts turned to Miranda. He'd spent some unexpected personal time with her during the return journey from Delta Halo. She was an attractive woman, but she was young. It would be long before she was ready to leave the Navy. Avery thought back to what she told him at High Charity: She was born the year the Covenant attacked. All she'd ever known was this war. Avery hoped Miranda would find fulfilment during peacetime if they ever managed to achieve it. Perhaps the two of them would remain friends at the very least.

"I'll retire the day any one of you can outshoot me, Forsell," Avery replied.

The pilot in the cockpit of the Pelican spoke up.

"We're approximately five kilometres from the Lumi River," she told them. "And the drop zone."

"Acknowledged, Hocus," Johnson replied.

Their Pelican, Kilo-023 and its neighbour, Echo-051 soared along the northern Tanzanian border towards the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, which could be seen peaking high above the clouds. The Prophet of Truth's ship had passed over the old border only hours ago, dropping a package while two kilometres in the air. The package was none other than Sierra-117, and Johnson's squad had been sent in to find the Spartan before the Covenant. After a two-kilometre fall, Avery hesitated to wonder what state the super-soldier might be in. Contrary to what many believed, the Master Chief was still human. He was not invincible.

Johnson and his marines were not sitting alone in the blood tray of Kilo-023. The Covenant's own Arbiter had insisted on joining them. Avery had expected his marines to show signs of unease or aggression while sitting alongside the almost-eight-foot tall selachian. However, they had become accustomed to seeing the alien during their visits to Crow's Nest, a historical twentieth-century base

in Kenya. The marines were now relatively unconcerned by the Arbiter's presence.

Truthfully, Johnson imagined if they'd known the Arbiter's history, his subordinates would not be as keen to travel with the once Supreme Commander. Avery on the other hand, as much as he'd despised the Elites for much of his life, saw no reason to distrust this one. Together, Johnson and the Arbiter had stormed Delta Halo's Control Room, eliminated the white Brute and deactivated the rings before they could kill everyone. The Arbiter and his Elites had even been kind enough to provide Avery and the other survivors with accommodation until they returned to Earth.

"Beginning our descent," informed Hocus.

The two Pelicans lowered themselves over an abandoned dam.

"There's a substation to the south of the main complex," explained the pilot. "That's as close as we can get you to the tracked position. You'll have to enter the rainforest on foot."

The dropships stopped over a landing at the edge of a series of small concrete shelters. An entanglement of thick wires and natural vines were suspended over the buildings, all running off in different directions. Rusted pylons joined the wires from the substation to the dam to the other side of the river and elsewhere beyond the forest trees. Grimy concrete pipes also ran from the trees past the buildings, northwards and towards the dam.

"Alright!" Avery shouted over the Pelicans' engines. "Lock and load your weapons! We need to be in and out ASAP. The Covenant can arrive any second, and as much as I'd just love to paint the trees with those damned apes' disembowelled guts, this ain't the time. I want a nice, clean retrieval. You hear me, marines?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Johnson noticed the Arbiter stayed silent, gripping his plasma rifle loosely in one hand. Avery had not yet learnt how to interpret the Elite's body language. Was he exhibiting confidence? Anticipation? He couldn't tell. The fact that the alien's face split into four creepy mandibles where its mouth should have been did not help. As the marines dropped off the back of the Pelican into a lush, green environment illuminated by moonlight, the Arbiter brushed past the Sergeant Major.

"You lead," said Thel in his deep, cool, Sangheili voice. "I will scout for Brutes."



The colours of the environment then swallowed the Arbiter whole as the Elite engaged his active camouflage. Johnson spun around and marched into the shadows beneath the canopy. Moss-coated bushwillows twisted around a narrow path. Grey boulders, giant ferns and occasional creeks caused them to change course more than once. Multiple streams ran through the forest into the river behind them. The dam may have been broken and abandoned, but the rainforest was very much alive.

In addition to the sounds of trickling water, the buzzing of insects filled Avery's ears. Monkeys howled and chattered. Rodents scurried through the scrub from predators that were as well-hidden as the Arbiter. Flocks of birds with remarkably colourful plumages fluttered from branch to branch, squawking and singing to the soldiers who jogged through the undergrowth. The moonlight that shone through the gaps in the canopy only served to remind Avery of the ever-looming threat of the Covenant. Time was not their ally.

"Sarge, over there," called Private Osei, halting over a running cascade.

She pointed to a small clearing about forty metres away. Smoke and ash rose from its centre.

"That'll be the Chief," replied Johnson.

He surveyed the uneven ground below. Most of the trek through the forest to this point had been an upwards hike, but the stream now bent around them. Water splashed over wet granite rocks directly downwards. They'd have to climb down the slippery stone to reach the clearing. There were likely safer paths, but Avery wasn't going to risk their only hope of ending this war by allowing the Brutes to reach it first. The soldiers descended into the mud beneath them before tramping cautiously back onto more solid ground where they heard the cracking twigs and crunching leaves beneath their boots once again.

The marines all snapped to alert as the Arbiter appeared out of thin air beside them. They were disciplined enough not to pull the triggers of their weapons, but every one of them had their MA5C Assault Rifles or BR55HB Battle Rifles pointing straight at the Elite. They seemed unfazed by their hostility. He turned to Johnson, the only marine with his weapon lowered.

"I have spotted a large clearing between here and the substation," said the Arbiter. "There is a small facility that could be used as a

lookout. It has a wide view over the trees, but it is hidden in shadow. The path there is more level than this one.”

“Understood, Arbiter,” Avery replied, turning to the eight marines on his right. “Reynolds, take Bravo Team with the Arbiter and secure the clearing. Notify us of the first sign the Covenant are nearby.”

“Yes, sir.”

Avery’s team did not wait as the Arbiter and the others disappeared into the trees. Instead, they kept a careful eye on their footing. Between the mud, rock and thick dew-covered foliage, it was difficult to find a direct route to the smoky clearing ahead. Not even a machete would have helped the marines cut through the thicket. The air itself grew denser, and the marines’ clothes dampened as they trekked onwards. Mud covered their camo trousers. Johnson spat as he passed through a swarm of mosquitoes, tasting their revoltingly sweet juices upon his lips.

“At this rate,” laughed Forsell. “The entire planet’ll be glassed by the time we reach the Master Chief.”

“That’s not funny,” scorned Corporal Huynh.

“On the contrary,” Forsell retorted. “I think it’s damn hilarious. Isn’t that right, Sarge?”

Forsell’s tone undermined his words. He sounded somewhat bitter and unlike his usual self. Perhaps the marine was beginning to comprehend the threat that hovered over humanity’s homeworld. A sense of tension had begun to grow amongst the soldiers over the last week. It seemed to finally be dawning on them that these were the last days of the war, and with as much hope as their superiors tried to instil in them, they all knew they were losing.

“Shut it,” Johnson dismissed.

A silky, blue-feathered hornbill glided above, passing over their heads. Avery watched as it flew between the trees into the smoky clearing. The bird briefly landed on something shiny, a metal object glistening in the dim moonlight. The metal was still hot, as evident by the heatwaves that rose off its surface. The bird barely touched the metal before flapping its wings and ascending into the canopy. The object was tall, thick and hexagonal. From appearance alone, Johnson estimated it weighed more than a Warthog. A pool of brown slush formed at its base in a crater caused by the impact of the object, which had clearly fallen from the sky. It was a Forerunner

door, blasted off Truth's ship and used as a shield for its rider against the burning atmosphere on its way down.

Avery stepped out from the trees into the clearing. His heart stopped when he saw it. At the edge of the crater lay a familiar, seven-foot suit of green and black MJOLNIR armour. It was badly scratched up with just as many heatwaves rising from it as the Forerunner door. The tiny lights that usually projected the battlesuit's energy shields remained unlit. The armour sat still and unmoving with its limbs propped in awkward positions due to its harsh landing. Johnson crouched, examining the cooked combat armour. Concealed within its casing, where Avery could not see, lay the Master Chief, another dead hero.

His fears were confirmed. It was now up to the regular everyday soldiers to finish this fight. It was up to the likes of the very men and women who now gathered around the Spartan who was frozen in death. Without John-117, winning this war seemed impossible. Avery instinctively reached for his lighter and pulled a Sweet William from one of his pouches. He closed his eyes in silence as he smoked the cigar.

The Master Chief was a Spartan-II super-soldier. He was the best humanity had to offer. There needed to be a chance he survived. When Avery heard that the Chief had been ordered by Lord Hood to exit the Forerunner ship after failing to reach the Prophet of Truth, he didn't expect him to jump. Of course, the Spartan never was one to use conventional methods. The Chief did jump. That was his choice. He wouldn't have done so if he didn't have to and if he hadn't thought he could survive the fall.

"This ain't good," mumbled Huynh.

"How far did he fall?" asked Forsell.

"Two kilometres, easy," answered Private Calyun.

"Stay sharp," Johnson snapped.

The marines spread out, spun around and pointed their rifles to the trees.

"Corpsman," Johnson called.

Petty Officer Collard stepped forwards, shaking his head in doubt.

"His armour's locked up," Collard stated. "The gel layer might have taken most of the impact, but..."

He trailed off as he and the Sergeant Major swapped positions. The Corpsman ran a digital handheld device over the immobile MJOLNIR casing. Colours flashed over the screen, revealing the Chief's biological tissue. The Spartan's skeletal and muscular structures flickered in static on the display as bleeps and pulses emitted from the device. Collard sighed and looked up at Johnson.

"I don't know, Sarge."

Johnson knelt in the mud and rested a hand upon the Chief's chest piece. The arms and legs suddenly went limp, falling by the Spartan's sides. Avery thought for a moment. The Spartan might be gone, and his armour may have deactivated, but the Master Chief never travelled alone. Seeing the reflection of his face in the golden visor, Avery reached forwards and around the back of the helmet. He felt for a small slot and pulled out a data chip.

Inspecting the chip, he saw no blue or purple glow from a familiar AI. It was empty. *Well*, Avery thought sombrely. *The UNSC will be wanting their tech back*. Perhaps a smaller variant of Albatross or an AV-14 Hornet could slip into the clearing and carry the one-tonne battlesuit away. Maybe there was a possibility, however small, that they could revive the Master Chief. Johnson hoped, but he wasn't counting on it.

"Radio for VTOL," Avery ordered, standing and turning from the body. "Heavy lift gear. We're not leaving him here."

Suddenly, a hand grabbed Avery's wrist from below.

"Yeah," came the deep, gravelly voice of Spartan-117. "You're not."

He was alive. Johnson released the greatest sigh of his life as he helped the Spartan stand. The Chief barely seemed to have suffered any injuries at all and was now moving as fluidly as ever.

"Crazy fool!" Avery exclaimed. "Why do you always jump? One of these days you're going to land on something as stubborn as you are, and I don't do bits and pieces."

Without replying, the Master Chief looked down at the data chip in Avery's hand.

"Where is she, Chief?" Avery asked. "Where's Cortana?"

Johnson tilted the chip at an angle. He witnessed a faint glow from its core, only to realise as the glow faded that it must have been little more than a reflection of the moonlight. He handed it back to the Chief.

“She stayed behind,” the Master Chief replied gently as he reinserted it into his helmet.

To the other marines, the Spartan’s statement may have sounded emotionless, but Avery could hear the loss in his voice. Unexpectedly, the Chief snapped to attention. The Spartan lunged forwards, pushing Johnson behind him and snatching up a magnum from Collard’s holster. Surprised by the action, Avery watched as the Chief sprinted to the edge of the clearing where a Covenant Elite revealed itself.

“Chief, wait!” Johnson cried.

The Master Chief froze with his pistol jammed between the Arbiter’s mandibles. The Arbiter glared down at him before cocking his head slightly; a look of fascination, Avery supposed, rather than concern. The two figures stood frozen like legendary statues hoisted over the detritus of the African rainforest.

“The Arbiter’s with us,” Avery explained.

The Chief loosened up and pulled the magnum away from the Sangheili. The Arbiter snapped his mandibles mockingly.

“Come on now,” Johnson continued. “We’ve got enough to worry about without you two trying to kill each other.”

“Were it so easy,” the Arbiter replied coolly.

Thel began to step forwards, but the Chief held his position, preventing him from getting past. Ignoring the Spartan, the Arbiter turned back towards the trees.

“We must go,” the Elite announced. “The Brutes have our scent.”

Johnson glanced towards the Chief before replying.

“Then they must love the smell of hero.”

## Walk It Off

*They let me pick. Did I ever tell you that? They let me choose whichever Spartan I wanted. You know me. I did my research. I watched as you became the soldier we needed you to be. Like the others, you were strong, swift and brave, a natural leader; but you had something they didn't. You had something no one saw but me. Can you guess?*

*Luck.*

John shook his head. He figured the impact of hitting the earth at terminal velocity must be playing with his mind. He'd just heard Cortana speak to him as if she were there, still present within his helmet, but she wasn't. He'd left her on High Charity with Pinciotti and the others. There was no chance she could be here with him now. John's helmet was absent of any companion; the AI chip inside it, abandoned, and yet...

*Don't make a girl a promise if you know you can't keep it, Cortana's voice echoed again.*

The Master Chief ruminated on his time with her. Technically, he'd only known Cortana for a matter of months, but for almost all that time, she was his partner, his close accomplice. In the absence of Blue Team, Cortana had been an ever-present voice of comfort and familiarity. After leaving his Spartans on Reach, she'd served as a necessary distraction. She assisted him with every effort since. Alpha Halo, the Fleet of Particular Justice and the Unyielding Hierophant could not have been destroyed without Cortana. Earth, Delta Halo and High Charity doubled John's debt to her. There was no doubt in his mind, he was here because of Cortana.

John paused. Cortana's voice no longer spoke to him, but he couldn't shake the suspicion that the data chip was not quite as empty as he initially thought. Cortana was lightyears away. It would be impossible to send a transmission from her position and have it reach the Master Chief now, and still, John felt a faint connection. Cortana was one of a kind. John wouldn't be surprised if she'd uncovered some advancement in technology not yet understood by the UNSC. Then again, perhaps it had little to do with technology at all. The Spartan awoke from his thoughts as Johnson, who stood beside him, made a transmission over his comm.

“Bravo Team, this is Johnson,” he called. “We’ve got him. Fall back to the extraction point. Over.”

“Roger that,” came the reply. “Reynolds out.”

John checked his surroundings. The rainforest was like many he'd visited before, and the marines looked just as familiar. He even recognised a couple of them from past missions. The presence of an allied Elite, however, felt incredibly peculiar. The Spartan kept an eye on the Elite as it prowled through the forest alongside the troop.

The Arbiter was clearly the same Elite John had met while in the clutches of the Gravemind, but he noticed a few subtle changes. There were now small mandible guards on either side of the Elite's face, engraved with patterns that matched the rest of its combat harness, and over its left collarbone sat a flashlight expertly crafted into the distinctive armour. Curiously, even the Arbiter's name, as it appeared on the Chief's heads-up-display, had been modified. At some stage between now and John's previous encounter with the Elite, the Arbiter had changed his name from Thel 'Vadamee to Thel 'Vadam. Whatever the reason for the change, John simply decided to opt for the Elite's title if he was ever in need of his attention.

“Johnson, be advised,” commed Sergeant Reynolds. “Hostiles are on the move! I've got eyes on a-”

The transmission ended in static.

“Say that again,” Johnson responded. “You're breaking up.”

Before anyone spoke, the squad were disturbed by a rustling of branches and the low humming of a Phantom flying too close to the canopy. The group froze. John noticed the sky was growing lighter. It was now dawn, but the shadows of the forest still shrouded the soldiers well enough. They stayed quiet as they followed the path to the cascade Johnson and his squad had descended earlier. More Phantom engines were heard nearby.

“If we stick together, we're going to get spotted,” stated Johnson. “We'll split up and meet back at the LZ. Chief, you go with the Arbiter. Osei, Calyun and Huynh, you're with them. Second squad, with me.”

The Master Chief didn't stay to watch the marines clamber up the rocks. He followed the Arbiter through the trees to the right with his mini squad now close behind. It took almost no time for the Master Chief to reach the clearing Reynolds had called from, but the Gunnery Sergeant was nowhere to be seen. He and the other

marines must have already begun to make their way to the landing zone. John looked around. This place was very much an LZ of its own. It sat high above the African landscape. The terrain was rocky with another stream running straight through the middle, which prevented the trees from growing too closely together. Two Pelicans could easily squeeze into the clearing. Now, however, was too late for that.

From the shade of the trees, John spied a tall Brute standing over a ridge with its arms crossed. A glint from the sunlight on the Brute's gold power armour hit the Chief's visor. John had seen several such Brutes on Truth's ship. They were partly the reason he'd been unable to reach the Prophet. It was a high-ranking Brute Captain and would certainly not be a pushover. The Spartan scanned the area using his visor's zoom. Aside from a few Grunts, this Brute was alone. That wasn't what John had expected, but this surprise would not last long. He realised quickly enough that if they attacked this Brute, no matter how swiftly, more Covenant would soon arrive. The Chief turned to the marines.

"I'll take down the Brute," he said. "Dispatch the Grunts and move straight into those buildings."

John had been in such firefights far more than he could count, this month alone. He knew as soon as the Brute was dead, there'd be Phantoms inbound, and the marines would need to take cover. The small concrete shelters were cracked and eroded, but they'd offer enough protection for a short skirmish. The Spartan himself would be out in the open. He could draw most of the fire and eliminate the Covenant without casualties. This was what he was made for.

He'd been told many times over the years that a good commander could not be a hero. He recalled being perplexed by this statement in his youth. Whenever John returned from a fight with the aliens, he found his superiors lecturing him time and time again, including the very same officers who promoted him: A leader should not always lead from the front. If the leader was taken out, the team would be scrambled, stranded and left to pick up the pieces. Their mission would likely fail, and in the confusion, the team would fall too, but John *knew* his team. If John was killed at any point during the war, Fred would step up. Blue Team would remain as strong as ever. Without Blue Team currently alongside him, the Master Chief



was the only Spartan here. He found most often that being a Spartan meant leading from the front anyway and taking command in the midst of the battlefield, not from the sideline. It was his duty to fight where others could not.

John felt the Arbiter watching him as he raised his newly acquired MA5C Assault Rifle. The numbers on the weapon's triangular display dropped fast as the Chief held down the trigger. Silver energy lit up around the Brute Captain as it reached over its shoulder for its Brute shot. He noticed the Grunts were extra aggressive towards the marines as he charged head to head with the Brute. John side-jumped over the blasts from the Brute shot as the Brute's shields soaked up the Spartan's bullets. The Brute's power armour was thicker than the harnesses of the Elites. John expected it to hold durably once the shields broke, but after the silver energy popped, it didn't take long for the armour to collapse.

The Brute's chest piece caved in then dropped off the armour completely. The Brute roared as its armour fell apart. Eyes widened and nostrils flaring, it tossed its helmet to the ground and rhinocerged at John. Knowing a single touch from the *besserking* Brute could wipe his shields clean off, John sidestepped the beast and knocked it over its skull with his rifle. The Brute fell flat over the slippery rocks as the Chief was already turning to check on the marines. Other rocks had been stained cyan after the work of the now puffing marines. They could not see the Chief's face, but as they stared into his visor, which reflected the scenery around them, they remembered his order and moved into the concrete shelters.

As expected, two deep-purple Phantoms arrived as soon as the marines reached their cover. A chain of Grunts and Brutes were released from the bellies of the ships as they dropped into view. Grunt Heavies fired from the plasma cannons at the Phantoms' sides as a rotating Shade from the nearest Phantom turned to track the Spartan's movements.

John noticed the Arbiter handled the scene much like he did, but due to the Elite's proportions, the way he ducked and weaved was strange and exotic yet characteristically elegant. The Arbiter fired his plasma rifle in the open, moving alongside the active Spartan while the marines attacked from their shelters. Blue-armoured Brutes fired spikers while Grunts wielded their usual plasma pistols and needlers. Unusually, it was the Grunts that rushed forwards as the Brutes hung

back, barking commands as they fired. The Grunts shot their plasma bolts and blamite needles more rapidly than usual and were slower to gasp and flee than typical.

“The Prophets are liars,” the Arbiter spat as he fought beside the Chief. “And you are fools to do their bidding!”

The Grunt turret operators were shot down by the marines, prompting the Phantoms to leave, which provided John relief from its purple Shade bolts. Despite the Covenant outnumbering them, between the Chief and the Arbiter, they were able to kill the remaining infantry without taking any damage themselves. The Brutes’ power armour made them tougher opponents than they’d previously been, but these ones had been of fairly low ranks. They were slower moving than both the Spartan and the Elite, and as John believed, the Brutes’ intelligence left a lot to be desired. Corporal Huynh stepped out from the concrete structures followed by the other marines.

“Those Brutes are tough,” Huynh said before sniffing the air. “Urgh! And in need of a good bath.”

“The Brutes rarely bathe this close to mating season,” the Arbiter informed them. “The smell that fills your noses is that of their pheromones. These Brutes have shaven much of their hair to better fit their new armour. You would not wish to be present when their coat is full. Their hair traps all filth, and the stench is inescapable.”

Evidently by their bewildered expressions, the marines didn’t know what to make of the Arbiter’s discourse, and neither did John.

“They *were* tough,” Osei agreed with the Corporal. “Those Grunts ain’t no slouches either.”

“Maybe the Brutes put something in their tanks,” suggested Calyun. “It looked to me like their eyes were glowing.”

“These Grunts’ newfound *courage* is nothing but fear,” stated the Arbiter as he began to move again.

John found the exchange intriguing. So far, the Spartan’s translator hadn’t needed to translate anything. The Elite spoke entirely in English, even using the human terms for other Covenant species. The dialogue itself was strange but not purely because it came from the Elite’s sonorous voice and grotesque mandibles. The Arbiter hadn’t needed to say anything at all, and yet, he was freely attempting to converse with the humans. It felt incredibly foreign.

The group marched onwards through the forest, entering a short, underground tunnel in which some red flares had been dropped. It was a breadcrumb trail directing them to Bravo Team. John realised they mustn't be far ahead, but judging from the sounds at the other end of the tunnel, the Covenant were nearby as well, and Bravo Team were likely in trouble. The low growling sounds were undoubtedly Brutes on patrol. John's MJOLNIR wasn't picking up what the beasts were saying, but they sounded confident and careless. They had no idea they were about to be set upon by the Demon and the Arbiter.

John signalled for the marines to keep low as they exited the tunnel. The new area was teeming with Brutes, Grunts and Jackals. The Grunts slept curled up with their tanks pointed to the sky as they sniffled and snored beneath their masks. The Jackals and Brutes wandered amongst themselves. It was clear by their body language that both species were mightily gratified by the new Covenant regime. The Brutes seemed to have the upper hand in the current hierarchy, replacing the Elites in their imitative armour, but with the way the Jackals strolled about, it seemed they hadn't yet noticed. The Master Chief knew that, like the Elites before them, the newly developed arrogance of the Brutes and Jackals would be an exploitable weakness. As such, no Covenant in the area had noticed the group of humans sneaking upon them.

"I'll take out the sleepers first," John whispered to the marines.

He noticed the hilt of an inactive energy sword upon the Arbiter's hip. Both John and the Elite could eliminate the Grunts quietly without commotion. He also noticed the marine with the cornrows, Private Osei, had a combat knife, but with the toughness of the Grunts' exoskeleton, it would be wiser to leave the marines in the shadows for the moment. John knew little about Thel 'Vadam, but from the war, he knew he'd killed more humans than anyone could visualise and was certain he'd have developed a passionate distaste for the Spartan. Still, the Chief decided to test him.

"The Arbiter will join me," John continued, glancing at the Elite. "Wait here until we open fire. If we're spotted, fire at will."

Once again, the Master Chief led from the front. He and the Arbiter snuck around the trees to an alluring creek. John figured the noise caused by the running water must be helping the Grunts sleep, its trickling keeping them calm and relaxed. In addition to being

grateful for the water's assistance in dampening his footsteps, John observed the beauty of the creek, but the shimmering water, the blossoming waterlilies and the vibrant greenery that surrounded them meant little to the Spartan. He'd already fought through every possible biome he could think of. Still, the area reminded him of Cortana. He could almost hear her again. *You always bring me to such nice places.*

John crept from one Grunt to the next, twisting their short necks and crushing their craniums. As he did, he watched the Arbiter. He supposed Thel 'Vadam was like himself in a sense. Due to the Sangheili's alien face, John couldn't quite figure out his reactions. The Elite's expression seemed fixed in a permanently stern stare, a natural mask, a visor. Both parties were killing machines bred for war. Both were considered the best their species had to offer. Thinking of Cortana, Halsey and Blue Team, John wondered who the Arbiter had left behind. The voice of the Gravemind sounded in his memory. *I twist the coin this way, and I turn it the other...*

Just as John pummelled the last Grunt, his shields sprang to life, brightening the trees around him.

"Jackals!" alerted Corporal Huynh as the marines fired in return. "With carbines!"

John pointed his assault rifle over the creek. The Brutes and Jackals on the ground had finally noticed them and were mid-charge, but the Chief wasn't concerned by the infantry on the forest floor. Several Jackals had been hiding in the twisted branches of the bushwillows. Half of them fired at the Chief's MJOLNIR with laser-point accuracy. The other half were focused on the Arbiter.

John evaded further shots by diving behind a boulder as his shield alarm rang. There was enough cover in the forest that everyone, human or otherwise, seemed to be doing the same thing. Various logs, trees and boulders supported the Jackals and Brutes on the ground as they ducked in and out while they fired from the opposite side of the creek. The marines did the same as they drew nearer to the Arbiter and the Chief.

"I'll put my foot in your ass!" yelled Osei as she shot a Jackal Scout.

"Catch this!" followed Huynh as she lobbed a grenade over the log she hid behind.

The grenade proved useless as it hit a tree and landed in the creek. It still exploded, causing a mighty splash and some steam, but no one was hit. John focused briefly on the carbine Jackals. None of them carried shields. He switched his MA5C to semi-automatic mode and fired a single shot through the head of every tree dweller. Each Jackal fell from its branch with a satisfying crunch as its body hit the undergrowth.

Wood and bark blasted off the trees around John as the Brutes decided he was their best target. Switching back to full-automatic, John turned his rifle to a Brute Minor. Before he could set the Brute's power armour alight, the Arbiter stepped in. The Elite fired his plasma rifle first, taking down some of the Minor's shields before his blazing energy sword sliced right through the Brute, power armour and all. Without losing momentum, the Arbiter spun the other way, swinging his sword into the next Minor that rushed towards him.

John sprinted across the shallow creek to offer his support as the marines trailed behind. He shot one Jackal Minor in the arm, allowing Calyun a follow-up shot to kill it. A Jackal Major to the Chief's right screeched in his face as it slashed a slim Covenant cutlass in his direction. John grabbed the Jackal's arm and bent it back into the creature. The Jackal's bone jutted out from its elbow as it snapped while the cutlass' blade jabbed into its wielder's abdomen. The Spartan kicked the stumbling Jackal Major into a Jackal Minor that was running up behind it. Just as the Major hit the Minor, the cutlass detonated, blowing both creatures to oblivion.

John could not admire his handywork for long, however, as a naked Brute charged at him, hunched over and firing its spiker. Even if his motion tracker hadn't alerted him, the Brute's wild gnarring would have been enough. John evaded to the side and shot the Brute in the head without any effort. Looking at the ground from where the Brute had charged, the Chief saw its cracked armour sitting in the dirt. The Arbiter stood beside it, breathing steadily as the marines approached sweaty and puffed. Realising his ammo was low, John swapped his assault rifle for a plasma pistol dropped by one of the dead Jackals. The marines also searched the corpse pile. Calyun lifted a spiker from the pile while Osei and Huynh both chose carbines.

“Pelicans are en route, Chief,” came Johnson’s voice over the comm. “No sight of Bravo Team. If you find them, get them to the extraction point.”

“We are almost there,” the Arbiter announced.

John heard another Brute’s voice as the squad entered a curved trench. His armour’s translator kicked in as he got closer.

“The Key of Osanalan,” growled the Brute. “Tell me its location!”

John had no idea what the Key of Osanalan was. He’d heard the term aboard Truth’s ship but thought nothing of it. He figured it was more Covenant jargon for Forerunner technology such as the ‘Sacred Icon’ or ‘oracle’. Perhaps it was what the Covenant had been looking for in New Mombasa. Soon, the gold-clad Brute Captain was in sight. It stood upon a fallen tree that bridged over the gap of the trench. In its right hand, it held out a marine. In its left hand was a Brute shot with its curved blade held back, ready to slice the human. It was an interrogation.

The bodies of the rest of Bravo Squad lay dead at the bottom of the trench. Based on the flat-headed cap worn by the marine being interrogated, it was Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds who remained alive. Apparently, the Brute had saved the leader for last. John charged his plasma pistol.

“Kiss my ass,” Reynolds told the Brute.

The Brute Captain shouted in Reynolds’ face, but before it could react, John lifted his plasma pistol. He pointed it up and out to the left of the Brute’s figure before letting go of the weapon’s sensor. Its green ball of charged plasma blasted forwards. The weapon’s tracking ability caused the trail of light to curve around and knock directly into the Captain, allowing Reynolds to slip from the Brute’s grip and fall into the trench with a yelp. The Brute’s shields disappeared, and its armour cracked and sizzled as the marines fired their acquired alien weapons. The heated metal spikes and green pellets shredded through the Brute’s armour before it too fell backwards into the trench. Still alive, the Brute tried to rise. John finished it off with a single shot from his magnum, which he’d unholstered from his magnetic side.

“Phantom...” Reynolds stammered, barely bringing himself to his feet. “Brute Chieftain... They pinned us down, killed my men.”

“I’m sorry, Sergeant,” John replied.

Once again, sentimentality wasn't the Chief's strong point. He opened his mouth to say more but decided against it. Continuing along the trench, he allowed Reynolds to join his group without discussion.

Suddenly, John's vision narrowed. His peripherals darkened, and his senses dulled. Cortana's bright face appeared before him as if someone had lit a blue-flamed candle. The Chief halted in response before realising the image was part of his heads-up-display. No one else could see this apparition. The woman spoke.

"Could you sacrifice me to complete your mission?" Cortana asked. "Could you watch me die?"

John shook his head, and the image disappeared. He didn't understand how it happened or what his former companion was trying to communicate, but he knew it meant something. As a Spartan, the Chief's memory was outstanding. He searched deep within his mind but found nothing remotely resembling Cortana's words. This message had been sent for a reason, but it was vague and uninformative to the Chief. Was it something from *her* past? Which mission was she referring to? If anything, her message served only as a distraction from his current task. *And why is she asking if I could watch her die?*

"Chief, the Pelicans are at the river," transmitted Johnson. "We've got company, so hustle up."

John was relieved as his team entered the series of small buildings that made up the substation. Two Pelicans hovered over the river, waiting patiently to extract them. The more time he spent in this rainforest, the further he was from hunting Truth. Using his visor, the Spartan zoomed in on the Pelicans. Johnson's squad were already sitting in their compartment, ready to leave, but a Covenant lance stood between the Chief's squad and their extraction point firing at the Pelicans.

Holding his plasma pistol in one hand and his magnum in the other, the Master Chief charged in and fired at the aliens between the concrete buildings. Realising the potential protection of the substation's tight layout, the marines joined in while the Arbiter ran the perimeter. Just as the marines gained more confidence fighting within the substation, the Grunts did as well.

"I get you, you big bully!" cried one Grunt.

"I get his helmet!" joined another.

The marines rested the barrels and bayonets of their weapons on the windowsills of the small buildings as they fired outwards at the Grunts. John kept on his toes. While the Grunts were more aggressive than those he was used to, he was still just as easily able to pop each one in the head with a magnum bullet and send a charged plasma shot to each of the Brutes. The Brutes stumbled back as their power armour broke. Before John could headshot a Brute Major, he spun a one-eighty as a red dot on his motion tracker signified something sprinting towards him unexpectedly quickly.

“How do you like my *bright blue balls?*!” screamed the raspy voice of a particularly fired-up Grunt.

The eyes of this Grunt Ultra pierced John’s soul as he turned to face it, but its eyes were not the issue. Raised above the Grunt’s head were its arms, and in each hand, it clenched an enflamed, glowing plasma grenade. The Ultra had no intention of throwing the grenades. It was delivering them personally.

John leapt back, knocking himself into the Brute Major. The Spartan and Brute both hit the concrete. John attempted to spin onto his front and push himself off the ground, but the Brute held him down. Aware of the crazed Grunt drawing in on the pair, John grabbed the Brute in turn. Using the Brute’s own bodyweight, he pulled the Major on top of himself, then kicked it upwards. The Brute was thrust onto its feet and into the path of the suicidal Grunt. John scrambled around the corner of the nearest building just in time for the Grunt and Brute to blow up together. The Grunt’s methane tank lit up with the grenades, littering the area in Unggoy and Jiralhanae residue. Red, blue and cyan paint coloured the substation. Bits of concrete were blasted from their position, hitting pylons and knocking them down. The substation fell to pieces as the last of the hostiles were dissolved. Johnson’s marines cheered in triumph from their Pelican as the Chief’s marines stepped out from the rubble.

The Pelicans lowered themselves closer as John walked towards the river.

“Hold on,” said one of the pilots. “I’ve got a contact!”

The screams of Banshees sounded, and the Covenant support craft appeared from nowhere. The Banshee pair zoomed down from the sky to the north, soaring over the river towards the Pelicans. The hoods of these Banshees were more bulbous at the front than the



usual variant. John figured it was to accommodate the Brutes' broader frames.

"Banshees, fast and low!" exclaimed the pilot.

"Break off now!" replied the other.

John and the Arbiter fired at the Banshees as streams of plasma jetted down at the Pelicans. Bullets and plasma barely dented the Banshees' plating. A fuel rod was dropped from one Banshee as it passed overhead. The rod met the tip of one of the Pelicans' wings, blasting it apart. The Pelican was sturdy but could not withstand such an explosion.

"I'm hit!" cried the pilot.

"Get a hold of her," Johnson replied from inside.

"Negative! We're going down!"

Johnson's Pelican swung into the second. The Chief watched as both attempted to steady themselves. Fire rose from their engines as they flew along the river to the south with the Banshee's at their tails. They both plummeted through the canopy of the forest with a reverberant shockwave as they crashed. Having fulfilled their task, the Banshees ascended into the sky, their screams fading with the distance.

## Quid Pro Quo

Avery spluttered. The smell of burning engine fuel filled his nostrils as he heaved himself from the wreckage. Echo-051 lay upside-down, implanted in the mud of the riverbank. Her cockpit was completely caved in, and her pilots were now little more than dust and sap. Johnson had watched as Kilo-023 hit the surface of the river immediately before his crash in Echo-051.

“Kilo-Two-Three, this is Johnson. What’s your status?”

The Sergeant Major heard no reply.

“Hocus,” he repeated. “Can you hear me?”

The sound of static over his comm gave Avery a glimmer of hope for Hocus and her co-pilot before the he heard the Master Chief’s voice instead.

“What’s your position, Sergeant?” asked the Chief.

“My bird’s down maybe half a klick from your position,” he answered. “Along the river.”

“On our way,” the Spartan replied.

Avery scanned the riverbank. The ground rose the further it went inland except for a deep ditch ahead. It was far too wide to go around and had a bridge connecting Johnson’s side to the other. At the end of the bridge were several carbine-wielding Jackals. They were deadly marksmen and would make short work of the marines if they stayed here, but it didn’t appear there was anywhere else to go. They could take cover in the wreckage, but Avery knew a Brute Phantom would no doubt be on its way.

“Buzzards on the ridge,” whispered Private Marra. “Looks like they’ve got carbines.”

“I see them,” Avery acknowledged, lifting his battle rifle and dropping a frag grenade into his pouch. “Stay low, and stay close. We’re going to creep our way to the bridge.”

“That’s a tough ascent,” commented Collard.

“Are you questioning me, Corpsman?”

“No, sir. Just preparing myself, sir.”

“Stay quiet,” Avery ordered. “Keep cover, and if you get the chance, take out a Jackal.”

They slowly crawled their way back towards the forest. Collard was right. It wasn’t easy. Avery and his marines moved from hill to

boulder and back to hill again in hope they wouldn't be sniped by a Covenant carbine. More than one carbine projectile hit the ground beside Johnson or ricocheted off a rock just as he and his marines made it to cover. They were almost at the bridge when Avery heard the hum of a Phantom and the voice of a Brute commander barking at its crew. He needed to think quickly. The Phantom was unloading behind them, and soon they'd be trapped between two files of Covenant.

Johnson turned to Marra and Forsell, each of whom carried their own frag grenades. He pulled the pin of his grenade and launched it over the bridge. The Jackals screeches were like nails on a chalkboard as they scrambled to evade Avery's grenade. Forsell's grenade landed a couple of metres from Johnson's, and Marra's bounced off the bridge into the pit below. The fragmented metal of the grenades ripped the Jackals apart. The two Jackals furthest from the marines were knocked back, bleeding purple, but they jumped up and disappeared into a cave behind them. The barking of the Brute on the riverbank grew louder.

"Cross the bridge now, marines!" Avery commanded.

All four of them sprinted across, towards the cave.

"Come on, you dumb apes!" Johnson taunted. "You want breakfast? You gotta catch it!"

The cave was dark and cool. For a moment, Avery felt as if he were actually hiking through a tranquil rainforest. The Jackals that escaped were nowhere to be seen. Halfway through the tunnel, it turned from a natural cave to a mined-out path. Johnson heard static over his comm again.

"Chief, is that you?" he transmitted.

"Sergeant Major," replied Hocus.

"You're alive," Avery sighed. "And your bird?"

"She's damaged, but she'll hold," said the pilot. "You on the other hand-"

"What is it?"

"You're headed to the dam. It's more than large enough for an LZ, but the Covenant have it filled to the brim. Aliens everywhere, Sergeant."

"Should we turn around?"

“Negative. There’s Brutes at your heels. The Master Chief isn’t far behind if you can hold out for now. I’ll hide close to the dam. Call in when you’re ready for pickup.”

“Well,” started Forsell. “It looks like we’re stuck between a rock and another rock.”

“Maybe,” Johnson replied. “But we can’t turn around with the Brutes up our asses. Keep marching, marines.”

They stepped out of the tunnel into the shadow of a cliff where the Jackals were waiting for them, and in their company stood two Brute Guards and several Grunts.

“Back in the tunnel!” Avery shouted.

Just as his men retreated, one of the Jackals jumped forwards and tried battering Johnson with its carbine. Avery caught the gun in his hands and wrestled it from the creature’s grip. Small bursts of plasma came his way, but as he tussled with the Jackal, the aliens ceased fire. With the weapon still in the Jackal’s clutches, Johnson directed it at a Grunt Major and forced the Jackal’s claw down. Its talon pressed the carbine’s sensor and instantly killed the Grunt. Still tugging, refusing to let go, Johnson turned the Jackal towards one of the Guards.

The marines support-fired from the darkness of the cave. In the shock of it all, the Grunts fell quickly. The other Jackal hopped back over to the Brute Guards as they fired their spikers blindly into the caves. Johnson’s muscles were straining as he twisted the Jackal into position. His arms burned and ached as if about to snap, but he remained determined to fire each carbine round into the Brute Guard’s heavy power armour. The second Brute didn’t notice how close Avery was to killing its partner as it bellowed at the cave.

“We will tear you into bloody, red ribbons!”

Avery held tightly onto the Jackal and its weapon. The creature shrieked then flopped to the side as the targeted Brute fired its spiker back at Johnson, piercing the Jackal. Just as it did, the Brute’s armour began to crack. Still using the Jackal corpse to protect himself as he stepped back to the cave, Johnson fired a killing shot directly into the Brute’s head, but the Brute did not die. Instead, a clear bubble expanded outwards from the Guard as it dropped an unusual device on the ground. The device, which appeared to be a giant marshmallow revolving on a stick, produced a near-completely transparent, dome-shaped shield covered in a light hexagonal

tessellation. The bubble shield was large enough that it umbrellaed both Brutes, the Jackal and the remaining Grunts. The marines' shots bounced off the shield, and the Covenant inside lowered their weapons, also unable to penetrate it. A Grunt Minor cackled from the inside.

"Your meagre bullets don't puncture this holy ball of shininess!" laughed the Grunt.

"But you are welcome to step in," added the Brute who'd yelled earlier.

The snort of a third Brute echoed from the cave. Collard, Marra and Forsell stepped out into the light with a Captain pointing its Brute shot at their backs. Avery let the Jackal slump to the floor as he held the carbine tightly. Even as the bubble shield faded, the marines were surrounded.

No one fired. There was no point. He watched as the Brutes barked at one another in their language. Avery's translator was delayed, but their gestures suggested they were arguing over the fates of the humans. The Brute Guard with the undamaged armour explained to the marines.

"We are having a discussion," said the Brute. "The Captain here wants to play a game. He proposes we tear off your limbs and force you to watch as we throw them around. My partner suggests otherwise. He wants us to kill you now and take your bodies back to the camp. He is starving, you see."

The Brute grinned as it watched the faces of Marra and Collard pale in terror. Forsell's expression remained stone cold as he eyed the Brute fumingly before it continued.

"I disagree with both. I do not answer to this Captain. I answer to Chieftain Malus. I say we take you back to the dam, directly to the Chieftain. What do you say, puny humans?"

No one spoke immediately. Avery knew the Covenant weren't overly fond of keeping prisoners. He suspected death might be a better alternative to being taken back with the Brutes alive, particularly after hearing the Captain's desire to play with them.

"The dam," Collard trembled. "We'll go there."

A knowing grin stretched across the Brute Guard's face as it turned to its comrades.

"See. The human has spoken. Take them."

Avery let the carbine fall to the ground. The Brute Captain grabbed Marra's hands and dragged him behind itself. Johnson cringed as he watched his subordinate dangle awkwardly behind the Brute. Due to the Brute's height, Marra's feet barely scraped the ground, but he winced in visible pain as both wrists were squeezed together in the grip of one of the Captain's hands. More Brutes, Grunts and Jackals trailed out from the cave as Johnson and the other marines followed the Guards. One especially cocky Grunt kept jabbing Avery in the back with its needler.

As they marched, Avery noticed a colourful gecko scampering up a tree away from the peculiar herd of aliens and humans. It had been a while since he'd seen or heard the calls of any wildlife in the vicinity. The Covenant must have scared most of them away. As always, the fates of every animal inhabiting the planet relied entirely on humans. If the humans failed to protect their planet then all life on Earth would be forever gone.

When Avery stepped onto the dam, he was astonished to see just how many aliens coated the area. There was barely a scrap of concrete that didn't have either a Grunt, Jackal or Brute standing on it. The Covenant that walked with Johnson were absorbed into the rest of the camp, all except the two Brute Guards and the Captain. There was a tall building on each side of the river and a walkway at the top of the massive dam wall in between. Smaller shelters had been additionally built across the concrete on either side. The roaring of gushing water was deafening as the marines passed over the wall. It drowned out all other sounds as it charged through the openings and spouted out the other side.

Once they'd reached the tower across the river, they were introduced to the Brute Chieftain. Avery knew this Brute wasn't a substitute for Tartarus but rather a replacement for the Elite Field Masters and other similar ranks that had since been banished from the Covenant. The Chieftain turned as the Brutes led the marines into the room. Avery stood at the front.

Red blood drenched the Brute Chieftain's gums. His pointed teeth were stained pink with strips of raw meat wedged in between. On a bench to the side, Avery saw the hollow remains of a howler monkey stolen from the forest. All that was left was the monkey's skin and bones, and it seemed much of its skin had been torn off

with the meat. Innards and all were slurped and swallowed by this Chieftain who had stains splattered down the front of his armour.

The Chieftain's armour was decorated with a red and gold gradient over black metal like fire in the night. It had thick plating and a tall headpiece that reminded Avery of a triceratops. Between his plating, the Chieftain's freshly shaven skin revealed his incredibly thick, bulging muscles that rippled with every movement. With such a mass, it was a mystery as to why this hulking Brute needed any armour at all. Upon its back was a Gravity Hammer not unlike the Fist of Rukt. The Chieftain looked down at the humans, its pupils retracted into sharp dots. Sunrays shone through a dusty old window on the right, reflecting light across the Brute's eyes, which were as fiery as the armour he wore.

"What are these?" asked the thickly accented Chieftain.

Taking the hint, the leading Brute Guard replied in English.

"Chieftain Malus," the Guard began. "They are filth from the Demon's pack."

"Good work," the Chieftain approved. "We shall use them as bait. When the Demon arrives, send him to me."

He then barked something in the Covenant language and turned away, apparently already bored with the humans. They were ushered out towards one of several small shelters beside a broken bridge. As they walked across in the open, Avery watched a Jackal Sniper set up a portable gravity lift by a half-crumbled building. The purple device unfolded to reveal what looked like a cross between a blue flame and superfast steam rising from its centre into the air above. Holding its beam rifle to its chest, the Jackal stepped onto the lift and was fired into the sky like a cannon. It landed many storeys high in one of the windows of the building, disappearing from the Sergeant's view.

When Avery stepped into the shelter he was taken to, he saw it had a single room and a single door. A Jiralhanae hand pushed down on his back. He fell to his knees to prevent his spine from crushing under the pressure. His knees hit the hard, dirty floor. The metal kneepads of his armour did nothing to soften the impact. Collard and Forsell joined him while Marra remained outside with the Captain. Forsell turned to Avery.

"Sarge," he mumbled quietly. "If we're to die here, I have a question."

“Go ahead, Corporal,” Avery whispered in return.

He was being closely watched by the Brute whose armour he'd damaged earlier. The Brute smirked as Avery glanced at him before running its fingers along the blades of its spiker.

“What happened to Wall?” Forsell asked.

“Come again, Corporal?”

“Jenkins, sir,” Forsell replied. “I assumed it was classified when you never said anything.”

Avery's face softened. As with Forsell, Johnson had trained Private Wallace Jenkins himself. He knew the two marines had been close. He really should have expected this question at some stage, but Avery had been too caught up in the war to think about it.

“Son,” Avery began. “We're not going to die here.”

The Brute with the cracked armour turned to his partner and grumbled something. Its partner stepped over to Avery.

“My friend disagrees with you, human.”

Avery felt miniscule in the shadow of the looming sentinel above him, but his courage did not waver. There was a sudden pained scream from outside. Avery's eyes searched through the open door but could see nothing.

“Ah, yes,” said the Brute. “The Captain has begun his torture. I wager the human passes out before your Demon arrives.”

The cracked-armoured Brute huffed a reply before the other translated.

“This one thinks your friend will be long dead before then.”

A surge of anger erupted through Avery's body. He jumped up into the Brute's face before the Brute knocked him to the side. Avery's head hit the wall. His ears rang as the taste of blood soaked his tongue. He slumped, resting against the wall, and spat on the floor. Marra wailed again outside, but Johnson was still trying to regain his senses to react in any way. Instead, Collard threw himself to his feet and ran towards the exit. He made it nowhere, however, as the cracked-armoured Brute blocked his path. The Corpsman groaned in agony as the Guard stabbed him with its spiker. The Brute twisted the spiker, pushing it further into Collard's side.

“Aaargh!” Collard screamed.

Avery's mind began to clear. He examined Collard's bleeding wound. The cut was deep but not fatal. If they played this wisely, Collard could survive. Against Johnson's better judgement, he



opened his mouth to plead with the Brutes. Before he could say anything, the Guard pulled its spiker out from Collard's side, and with its wide feet, it booted the man back into the centre of the room. He was caught by the other Brute which grabbed him in one hand. Its fingers clutched over Collard's abdomen, holding in some of the blood as the rest poured over them. Avery expected the Brute to speak again as Collard's screams quietened to loud whimpering. Instead, the Brute removed its helmet with its free hand and looked directly into Collard's screwed-up face.

Peeling back its lips, the Brute barred its teeth as if to mock Collard's anguished expression. It opened its jaws wide and took the marine's entire face in its mouth. Collard's muffled scream shook Avery to the core. It would haunt him until the day he died. The Brute ripped the skin clean off Collard's face, revealing the pink flesh underneath. Blood spurted out as the Brute pulled back. The skin that had previously clung to Collard's face flopped down, still joined to his lower jaw. His lidless eyes stared wide from the sockets of his blood-soaked skull. Collard screamed from a lipless mouth for far too long. The scream reverberated around the room before he went limp and his voice faded.

The Brute laughed hard as it flung Collard to the side. Blood splattered over the corner of the room as the body landed. Avery stood half-crouched and frozen. He tasted vomit but was too stunned to swallow.

"You," the Brute addressed Johnson, grinning maliciously. "As long as we keep one of you alive, the Demon will appear."

The Brute by the exit eyed Collard's corpse hungrily as blood pooled around it. Both Brutes then began huffing and grunting to one another, apparently in an argument again. It ended with the cracked-armoured Brute lifting Collard's sloppy body from the ground and leaving the shelter with it. The remaining Guard put its helmet back on.

As the platoon's commanding officer, Avery refused to watch each person in his squad get picked apart like chicken from bone. He pushed himself to his feet and stood defiantly, locking his knees to prevent his legs from trembling, but he didn't know what to do next. That was when he heard more arguing from outside. It was heated. One of the Jiralhanae voices was clearly more authoritative than the other. The barking ended in one final growl before

Chieftain Malus appeared at the doorway. Even if the Chieftain hadn't been wearing his headpiece, it would have been difficult for him to crouch down and squeeze into the small human-sized door. From his right, the Chieftain pulled Marra into view.

Marra was badly beaten, covered head to toe in cuts and bruises. His helmet was removed, and his clothing was ripped in several places, but all things considered, his body held together. No bones appeared broken at the very least. The Chieftain threw Marra into the room with the other humans and tossed a gadget to the Guard. After barking orders at the Brute Guard, the Chieftain beckoned for Avery. The Brute Guard walked over and nudged the Sergeant to the door. When Avery refused to move any further, the Chieftain reached in and grabbed Johnson by the neck, pulling him outside into the sunlight.

"Take your stinking p—" Johnson spat through gritted teeth before receiving a blow from the Chieftain's basketball-sized fist.

Avery swore he could feel his brain splatting against his skull.

"My sources tell me," Malus began. "That you are our best bet at catching the Demon."

Avery stayed silent.

"After I slay the Demon," the Chieftain continued. "I will rip his heart from his chest, swallow it whole and take his skull for my trophy! But first, let us have a little fun, here where the world can see."

Johnson tried to strike the Chieftain first. He swung his fist into the gap of the helmet that showed the Brute's face, but the Chieftain moved, and Avery struck nothing but metal. His knuckles throbbed in response. Malus roared in his face before swinging his elbow into Johnson's cheekbone. Ignoring the pain, Avery spotted a useful gap in the side of Brute's armour, but before he could swing, he was thrown to the floor.

The armoured legs of the Brute Guard stepped into view. The Guard had exited the shelter to watch the fun. Drops of blood landed upon the ground beside Johnson, but it wasn't his own. Avery looked up to see the Guard's face still covered in blood. Concerned the Guard had gotten to Forsell or Marra, Avery glanced inside the room. The Brute's face definitely had more blood on it than before, but both marines were sitting tightly behind a hardlight shield produced by the purple gadget Malus had delivered. Neither

Forsell nor Marra were harmed, and judging by the much cleaner floor, Avery figured the Guard had simply slurped up Collard's leftover blood pool.

Avery stood to face the Brute Chieftain and was kicked back down. He stood again but to no avail. Every time he rose to meet the Chieftain, he was kicked, pushed, thrown or punched back onto the concrete. Finally, just as he was kneed far enough that he fell back into the shelter, the Chieftain paused. His eyes went hazy, staring into the distance before barking in his alien tongue. The Guard grabbed Avery and pressed the screen of the purple gadget that held up the shield door. The hardlight door disappeared. Johnson was thrown inside with the others, and the shield was reactivated. Avery's adrenaline still pumped vigorously, but he didn't waste any more strength. He sat down with the others.

Forsell looked at the Sergeant. He was the only one of the three still able to keep his back straight as he sat against the wall, but his skin was as white as paper.

"Sarge, are you going to tell me about Wall?" he asked.

Avery closed his eyes. What happened to Wallace Jenkins was a fate that shouldn't befall anyone. It was something of nightmares, and it was very highly classified. The authorities at Fleet Command and the spooks at ONI would come down hard on him if he ever told anyone. Johnson shivered to consider what ONI's idea of a suitable punishment might be for sharing such secrets, but even if it hadn't been classified, Johnson still wasn't sure it would be a good idea to tell Forsell, not in their current circumstances. Jenkins and Forsell had been best friends during the time Avery served with them and perhaps, at one stage, even more than friends.

Avery could still hear Jenkins' voice in his head with the rest of his fireteam. *There are too many of them, Sarge!* That was the night Staff Sergeant Johnson, Captain Keyes and Fireteam Charlie had infiltrated an underground facility in hopes of finding a buried weapons cache. They found nothing. Instead, the Flood found *them*. Jenkins had been one of the first to fall to the parasites. Johnson was forbidden to discuss the subject with anyone unauthorised, and if Forsell lived the rest of his life without ever having to hear of the Flood's existence, then that could only be good for him.

"Not today, son," Avery replied.

The world outside the shelter suddenly erupted with noise. War cries and commands were shouted across the dam in the Covenant's language. Grunts, Jackals and Brutes all had something to say as their plasma, hardlight and other energy beams were blasted across the river. Avery could hear the Shade bolts and the plasma cannons of a Phantom, which fired into a position not far from the dam wall. Through the doorway, Johnson could see flashes of spike grenade blasts and plasma grenade explosions that were reflected upon a concrete shelter on the other side of the river. He could do nothing but wait as the Master Chief, Arbiter and presumably the rest of their squad fought across the dam. As he listened carefully, he heard the heckling of Brutes.

"I'll rip your head from your vertebrae!" one Brute taunted.

"I'm going to eat you alive!" claimed another.

"When this is over," shouted Chieftain Malus. "This hammer is going up somebody's ass!"

In time, the fight was over. Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 strolled into the shelter, ducking to prevent his head from hitting the entrance.

"This isn't as fun as it looks," said Avery, rising to his feet. "Cut the power."

The Master Chief smacked the gadget emitting the shield door. It fell to the ground and released the marines.

"The Brutes were going to gut us, sir," Forsell told the Spartan.

"Yeah, well, now we're even," Avery told the Chief. "As long as we're only counting today."

"I try not to keep count," the Spartan replied.

Avery activated his comm as he surveyed the area. The entire dam was littered with Covenant corpses. The Arbiter stepped over one of the Brute Guards and then a dead Jackal Sniper. The silhouettes of three marines could be seen standing upon the dam wall.

"Kilo-Two-Three, what's your ETA?" Avery asked.

"Imminent, Sergeant," Hocus replied. "Find some cover."

Just as she said it, a Phantom lowered itself over the river above the broken bridge. The Master Chief fired a carbine directly into the head of one of its Grunt gunners before running towards the dam wall. The Phantom's Shade bolts followed the group as they fled, but before the plasma could hit anyone, Kilo-023 entered the area. The Pelican flew over the river and fired a series of rockets into the

Covenant dropship. An enormous wave splashed over the marines as the Phantom fell into the river. Hocus lowered the Pelican's troop compartment over the dam wall, and Avery joined the others in the back.

He strapped into his seat as he watched the river, the forest and then the mountain fall away into the distance. They had retrieved the Master Chief and were finally done here, but they had yet to finish the fight.

## Last One Out, Get the Lights

Thel Vadam waited patiently for the human dropship to land. It descended steadily, threading through an open hole in the rocky ceiling of a UNSC bunker. Elevators, ramps and stairways spiralled off from the landing pad into various corridors of the crude, makeshift base the humans had dug here. The primitive facility was lined with grimy concrete walls, corroding beams and undersized railings. Ironically, the humans called this place Crow's Nest, and after his voyage from Delta Halo, it was here where Thel was forced to reside. While the damp location was initially cold and uninviting to the Sangheili warrior, he'd learnt to warm up to it. Occasionally, it even reminded him of the training halls back home in the Vadam Keep on Sanghelios.

Commander Keyes stepped onto the landing pad just as the Pelican touched down. Thel followed the human soldiers as they marched over to greet her. The woman's size was miniature compared with Thel's, but what she lacked in height, she made up for in demeanour. The Commander stood straight and proud as she scanned the faces of the returned soldiers. Her hand snapped to her forehead. It was a gesture of respect amongst military humans, though from Thel's experiences, he knew it was not always mutual. Usually, it was little more than a sign of acknowledgement, an empty greeting. Here however, there was significance to the salute. The others returned the gesture. Keyes looked at the Demon then back to the Sergeant Major.

"Where'd you find him?" the Commander asked.

"Napping," replied Johnson. "Out back."

"I'll bet," Keyes smiled.

She reached her hand out to the Demon. The Spartan's hand, encased in a black glove and metal plating enwrapped the Commander's entirely as they shook.

"It's good to see you, Master Chief," she said. "Things aren't going well, but with you here, we might actually stand a chance. Let's get you up to speed."

The stairs rattled beneath their feet as Miranda Keyes, Avery Johnson, the Demon and the Arbiter made their way towards a green and yellow vault-like door, one of many that divided up Crow's Nest.

On the other side of the door, marines lay along the walls with various wounds and bandages as they were attended to by medics. *Medics*, the very thought of them used to disgust Thel. They were no better than doctors. What sort of deranged fiend thrived on prying open injured warriors in their most vulnerable and dishonoured state? Such Sangheili had always been a disgrace to Thel. He'd understood their uses, but he could never respect them. Even now, he did not fully accept them, but having seen how the humans operated, Thel no longer loathed the medical field as he once had.

"The Prophet of Truth's ship smashed what was left of the home fleet," Commander Keyes updated. "Terrestrial casualties from the subsequent bombardment were extreme... Truth could have landed anywhere, but he committed all of his forces here, East Africa. Then, they started digging."

The Commander paused, allowing Johnson to step in.

"A squad of ODS'Ts acquired a Covenant Engineer, a rebel," said the Sergeant. "It's aboard one of our cruisers."

"An Engineer?" the Spartan enquired.

"You know, one of them freaky seahorse-balloon-looking things, like on the Ascendant Justice," Johnson replied. "I questioned it, about Mombasa, why they're here."

"Truth is looking for something called the Ark," said the Commander. "There, he'll be able to fire all the Halo rings. The Engineer claims there's something beneath the ruins of New Mombasa, a Forerunner structure of immense proportions. Whatever it is, it's been dormant, undetected for the entire rise of the human race, and if it's Forerunner..."

"But they need a key of some kind," Johnson added. "Not the Index, something else."

They crossed an underground road piled with military vehicles and tractor units. For once, the sight of a Warthog was not a sign of hostility for Thel.

"What about Delta Halo?" questioned the Demon.

"We stopped it," replied the Commander. "But only temporarily. The Array is on standby. It's the Ark that matters now."

"Did anyone else make it?" the Spartan asked. "From Halo? High Charity?"

"No," Thel spoke. "That would be impossible. My Elites have the entire system in quarantine. Any vessel that attempts to escape

the holy city will be disintegrated without a shadow of doubt. The risk of infection is too high.”

As usual, all Thel saw in the Spartan’s visor was his own reflection before the Demon turned back to the Commander.

“Any word of Blue Team?”

“Sorry, Chief,” Johnson responded. “Last we heard, they answered a distress beacon from Doctor Halsey. The UNSC lost contact with them in the Zeta Doradus system.”

“They’re alive,” the Demon stated.

“Spartans never die,” Johnson replied matter-of-factly.

“But they may as well have to us,” declared the Commander rather harshly. “From what we know, these are the final days of the war. Earth is our last point of defence and our only chance to fight back. Master Chief, for all intents and purposes, you are the last Spartan.”

Thel watched the Demon closely, attempting to analyse his reaction. Once again, he was met by nothing other than his own reflection over the hard casing that hid the Spartan from his eyes. There was no sign of emotion, no distress, no sentiment. Thel had known of the infamous Blue Team during his days commanding Particular Justice. The Master Chief had been inseparable from the other demons, almost like family. The Arbiter thought of his own kin on Sanghelios and how long it had been since he’d seen them. He realised something. *This Demon is not emotionless.* Thel remembered his training. He knew well how to hide his thoughts and feelings. He’d seen the humans stare at him the same way he now watched the Demon. *This Spartan is like me.*

The group stepped into a room with various wires and tubes connecting digital screens and button displays across its walls. This was Crow’s Nest’s ops centre. Displayed over several points in the room was the image of a native bird with widespread wings that sat perched upon the planet Earth. Thel recognised it as the emblem for the UNSC. The humans had only recently turned Crow’s Nest into their command and control centre, but the bunker did not hide its age. Even now, the claggy air crept into Thel’s airways, filling him with the souring smell of mould and corrosion.

“Ma’am,” called a nearby technician. “We’ve connected to the *Forward Unto Dawn*. I have Lord Hood.”

“Patch him through,” replied Commander Keyes.



The image of Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood sprang onto the largest of the monitors. Officers ran left and right behind him aboard the bridge of a UNSC frigate.

“Good news, Commander?” asked the aged Fleet Admiral.

“As good as it gets, sir.”

“So I see,” said Hood looking at the Chief. “What’s your status, son?”

“Green, sir.”

“Glad to hear it. The Commander's come up with a good plan, but without you, I wasn't sure we could pull it off.”

“Truth's fleet is clustered above the excavation site,” Keyes informed. “His infantry has deployed anti-aircraft cannons around the perimeter. If we neutralise one of those cannons, punch a hole in Truth's defences-”

“I'll initiate a low-level strike,” Hood continued. “Hit them right where it hurts. I only have a handful of ships left. It's a big risk, but I'm confident that-”

The room turned pitch black. Someone had cut the power.

The Prophet of Truth smirked as he surveyed the excavation site from the bridge of his Forerunner Dreadnought. He leant forwards, fiddling with his long, skeletal fingers. His bulbous eyes almost touched the display as he watched closely. The area that had once been the entire human megalopolis of New Mombasa was completely obliterated. His ships had wiped the buildings clean off the face of the planet, and his Scarabs were now helping tidy up the last of the rubble. Zooming in at the scene below, Truth made out the support rings of the collapsed space elevator that ran all the way to the horizon from the edge of the enormous cavity he'd made in the landscape. The rings were half buried, like the dry remains of a long-dead serpent in the desert. The sea and all that had once surrounded the supercity was gone, disintegrated by the cleansing beams of Truth's fleet.

A lumbering Jiralhanae stumbled through the hexagonal door behind the hierarch. Truth had been expecting him. He swung his hover throne around to greet the visitor. The Jiralhanae was covered in fresh scars and plasma burns. Dried blood of red and blue glued his grey facial hair together. Chunks of flesh had been completely blasted off other parts of his body. The Jiralhanae was bent forward,

crooked and unable to straighten due to his injuries. Most Jiralhanae would have fallen long ago from such wounds. This one seemed determined to prove his strength. *Good*, Truth thought. *There is no place for the feeble amongst my supreme empire.* Truth addressed the visitor.

“Chieftain Malus, you did not fulfil your quest.”

The Chieftain inhaled slowly and softly, attempting to stifle the sounds of his suffering. His eyes squinted, straining as he spoke.

“Prophet of Truth,” he began. “The Demon survived the fall.”

“Tell me he has been dealt with, Chieftain.”

Malus straightened his broad back, groaning painfully before answering.

“The Demon was rescued,” he spat.

“And for what reason were you so incompetent with your only responsibility, Malus?”

“It was the sergeant,” he replied. “The one Chieftain Tartarus captured, and he was not alone.”

The Prophet knew where this was going. He slowly rotated his throne back towards the display screen as the Jiralhanae continued.

“He was with the Arbiter.”

Truth sat quietly for a moment, resting his hands in his lap. He could have become angry. He could have slammed his fist onto the curved arm of his spherical throne. Instead, he remained quiet. Did it matter that the humans had found their Demon? Truth had already paved the way for what was to come. The course was fixed. It was too late. Even here, away from Halo and High Charity, Truth was in full control of the situation. With the other Prophets and the Sangheili finally cast aside, Truth was the head of the Covenant. He was the sole ambassador for the gods.

Nothing the humans could do would stop him. Nothing the Sangheili could say would sway him. He had been on this path for the longest time, and were there doubts? Of course, there were doubts along the way. The oracles had only served to befuddle him, but it didn't matter. He did not care. The Great Journey would soon be at hand, and if not, if every single being died in the galaxy, then so be it. Ever since the day of his coronation with the other two hierarchs, Truth had wrestled for the power he deserved. Now he'd seized it. *It will not matter if the Great Journey is revealed to be false*, Truth thought. *If everything is as I have dreamt it to be, I am the gods' most powerful envoy, and if not... then I am a god.*

“Tell me, infidel. Why should I keep you alive?”

“Infidel?” Malus repeated, dumbfounded.

“The road ahead holds no station for the weak.”

Truth felt the Jiralhanae stiffen further.

“Honourable Hierarch, I am stronger than ever.”

“Your body has almost broken.”

“It will hold.”

“Then I shall give you a second chance, Malus, but this will be your last.”

“Thank you, merciful one.”

“Chieftain, if you return empty-handed-”

“I... I understand, Hierarch.”

“There are two paths one may take to join the gods,” the Prophet preached. “I provide you this opportunity, not out of mercy, but as a holy promise from our forefathers. All-those-who-believe will sail the transcendent voyage and pass through the consecrated conduit of their creation, but do not feel so entitled as to think you shall ascend without corroboration.”

Malus nodded, wide-eyed and silent.

“I suggest you make every possible attempt to attain what I need, Chieftain. The second and only other path to the gods is martyrdom. There is no third.”

“I will prove myself worthy whatever the cost,” Malus vowed. “You will have your subject.”

Truth’s smirk stretched wider than ever.

“Until you do, tell no one,” he ordered. “Return to your quarters, Malus. Repair your armour and send in the Unggoy waiting outside. I have a sermon to make.”

“Emergency generators, now!” shouted Commander Keyes.

“Shielding failed,” replied the technician. “They’re down and charging.”

“As soon as they’re up, re-establish contact with Lord Hood.”

Before Miranda Keyes was able to give any more commands, all screens in the ops centre switched on, but it was not Lord Hood who appeared before them. It was a face Thel knew all too well. The despicable form of the Prophet of Truth filled every monitor in the room.

“You are, all of you, vermin,” boomed the Prophet. “Cowering in the dirt, thinking what, I wonder, that you might escape the coming fire? Your world will burn until its surface is but glass, and not even your Demon will live to creep, blackened from its hole to mar the reflection of our passage, the culmination of our journey! For your destruction is the will of the gods. And I? I am their instrument!”

Thel stared at the screen as it switched off. The haunting image of the Prophet of Truth lingered in his mind. He tapped the hilt of his sword lightly with his fingers. It still sat over his hip and would remain with him for some time.

“Cocky bastard,” frowned Johnson. “Just loves to run his mouth.”

“Does he usually mention me?” asked the Master Chief.

Thel thought for a moment. *Blackened from its hole.*

“The tyrant means to bury this place,” the Sangheili announced.

“Give the orders,” Keyes commanded to the room.

“All personnel,” called the technician over his console. “Defence code: alpha-one. Prepare for immediate evacuation!”

“The wounded,” said Keyes. “We’re getting them out.”

“If I have to carry them myself,” replied Johnson.

“Chief, clear out the hangar,” the Commander instructed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Arbiter,” she began. “We could use your help in the barracks.”

“Understood.”

Thel returned to his private living chambers as the evacuation alarms sounded. Knowing he had little time, he did what he could to relieve himself before his next battle. Small human rations did little to satisfy Thel’s Sangheili appetite, but he consumed them without complaint.

He hooked up his energy sword to a portable plasma battery. Like the battery, the purple of the Covenant crate beside it stood out against the dull taupe of the dirty, concrete walls. A stand beside that supported an old suit of armour, an elaborate, byzantium-coloured Sangheili harness and one of the last remnants of Thel’s time as Supreme Commander. Thel used to wear it interchangeably with his old gold armour. He’d brought it to Earth in case his antique Arbiter harness failed him, but due to the traditional Sangheili make and the

upgrades Thel had added, the Arbiter armour remained as sturdy as ever.

The grotty, flat and flimsy bed that sat beneath an alcove to the side was unused. Instead, Thel had opted to sleep in the en suite's dusty bathtub during his stays at Crow's Nest. It was nothing like the sleeping pods he was used to. His arms, legs and head hung over the sides, causing his body to ache somewhat, but he supposed something ought to prevent his comfort now that the branding on his chest no longer so much as itched. He realised he was indeed quite fortunate with his bathroom. The marines at Crow's Nest were forced to share open communal showers.

The Arbiter chose not to wait for long. The Brutes would soon be arriving. He reattached his sword to his side before it finished charging and equipped two plasma rifles from the purple crate. Tremors in the walls of his chamber caused flecks of concrete and dust to chip away. They weren't produced by the usual rodents scampering through the piping. Something much larger was paying Crow's Nest a visit. Thel stepped out from his room onto a path beside a deep underground shaft. A loud fluttering confirmed his assumption before the Yanme'e came into view. Using scattered crates, drums and a forklift for cover, the Arbiter engaged the swarm in combat.

"Half-wit insects!" Thel cried. "The Prophet uses you as he used me. Reject their lies. Rebel, or all your hives will perish!"

Alas, the Drones did not heed the Arbiter's warning. He managed to avoid enough shots to retain his shields as he brought the bugs down with his dual rifles. As the last of the Yanme'e fell, Thel heard the screams of marines from the main section of the barracks. He pulled open its green and yellow door and entered inside.

The marines' quarters consisted of two open storeys winding around multiple corners. Many empty bunkbeds could be seen in hollows to the sides. The first section seemed clear of Covenant until Thel spotted three Jiralhanae Minors huddled together at the other end. One half-clothed marine lay cowering on the floor beneath them. Another was dangling by his neck, choke-held by one of the Brutes. The Brute was proving its strength to the much smaller human, mocking him.

"No. Please!" begged the marine.

“Look. It has soiled itself,” laughed the Brute. “These are whelps, not warriors.”

Fortunately for Thel, with the marine being held out from the Brute, it meant the Jiralhanae was easier to shoot without risk of hitting the human. The Brute Minors stood no chance against the Arbiter. He rushed towards them, his shields soaking up their spikes. He took down the first two Brutes with his plasma rifles before grappling with the third. His hand-to-hand combat skills had the Jiralhanae on the ground in seconds.

Thel turned around the next corner where he found a group of male marines attempting to stand their ground. Judging from the bodies around the room, many of which were completely unarmoured, the marines who still stood were the survivors of an ambush. The Brutes had overwhelmed the humans as they were preparing for battle.

More Minors and a couple of Brute Captains fired at the marines who used the alcoves to the sides for cover. The Brutes were much better equipped than the humans. In addition to their power armour and weapons, Thel noticed several different devices worn by each. Inactive bubble shields, power drains, regenerators and gravity lifts swung from the belts of the fighting Jiralhanae. Just as one marine was lucky enough to sufficiently damage a Brute Minor’s power armour, the Jiralhanae tossed a deployable shield generator on the ground. It unfolded to unleash a blue arch of energy that deflected each of the marine’s following shots.

The Arbiter jumped in, returning fire at the Brute packs and pulling much of their focus from the marines. It felt odd being part of the defence force, fighting alongside the marines when he was used to invading their worlds. Thel’s thoughts turned to the countless human lives he had taken, mass murdered throughout his career. Their shrieking and shouting suddenly changed in his memory. He no longer heard it as the futile begging of filthy heretics. The humans’ cries had been screams of terror for themselves, for their families, for everything and everyone they had ever known. All those people were now gone. They’d become nothing but residue melted into the barren *glasslands* that remained of their planets. The thought was chilling, and Thel was a fool for ever being so blind, but these sins were not his alone. These crimes were instigated by the

High Prophets, and Thel's conscience could never be clear while one hierarch still lived.

The Brute's deployed shield remained stable against the humans' bullets, but it was much less durable against Thel's raining plasma. He destroyed the energy arch that protected the Brute Minor and pushed further forwards while the marines held back. He managed to tear through several novice Brutes, but the fight became more difficult the longer he persevered. Soon, all the Brute fire was focused on Thel alone. He could not survive long under such conditions. If he retreated with the marines or stayed idle behind cover, the Brutes would be all over him. Instead, he placed his rifles at his sides and tore a portable gravity lift off one of the Jiralhanae corpses. As it activated over the ground, Thel jumped into it. The energy launched the Sangheili onto the second level of the winding barracks, delivering him to a slight vantage point over the Brutes.

Upon reaching the second level, the Arbiter was greeted by a pair of Jackal Scouts. Without hesitation, he pulled out his energy sword, sliced off a Jackal's shield-bearing arm and stabbed the second. The first Jackal clutched its spurting stump as Thel kicked it down to the lower level. Spasming at the Arbiter's feet was a taloned hand and wrist with the deactivated shield gauntlet still attached. Thel lifted the dismembered appendage, pressed into the gauntlet and activated the Kig-Yar shield. Using the shield to deflect spikes, he pushed along the top level as the Brutes fired from below. The marines provided enough support fire from behind as the Arbiter's own shields began to reactivate.

Just as they did so, the grenade of a Brute shot impacted with Thel's newly acquired Jackal shield. He almost fell as the shield evaporated. Dropping the Jackal claw, Thel slipped into the shadows beneath a broken light. Beside a bunkbed, he noticed an opening in the wall to a large ventilation system. He threw himself in and climbed up the vent. The Brutes below barked in confusion. He could hear them approaching the vent's opening as well as the now-unguarded marines, but before the Jiralhanae could do anything, Thel dropped out of the vent into the communal showers.

His hooves splashed onto the wet tiles right behind the Brute Captain who had shot away his Jackal shield. The Jiralhanae spun to greet the Arbiter but slipped in doing so. The shower tiles cracked beneath the Brute's weight as it fell on its back. Thel stabbed the

miserable beast through the face before slashing at a Minor that came up to defend its leader. He was then met with a barrage of plasma fire from another Brute entering around the next corner. The Brute wielded a heavy plasma cannon it had apparently torn off its stand. Thel ducked behind a low wall, which crumbled beneath the pressure of the plasma fire. He picked up the Brute shot beside him, peeked over the wall and shot back as many grenades as he could in succession.

Thel was blasted onto the ground as the last piece of the wall exploded. There were Brutes between him and the marines tossing spike grenades in desperation as they now realised they had enemies on both sides. Many more Brutes were still running towards Thel from his other side, the direction from which the Brutes had entered the barracks. The ones coming from that end dropped the female marines they had been about to torture before charging at the Arbiter. Thel's shields were down completely. He needed to think quickly. The marines' lives were at stake, but his own circumstances were no better. He rolled over and pushed himself to his feet before he heard the unmistakable thunder of a gravity hammer's shockwave as it hit the floor nearby.

The head of the gravity hammer hung above the pack of Brutes between Thel and the male marines. It came down with a swing directly into the pack. The Brutes were launched away from the hammer with their armour cracking and Jiralhanae blood spraying everywhere. Thel kept watching to spot the source of the attack. There, wielding the hammer, stood the Master Chief. Relief swept over Thel. The humans were clearly outnumbered, but with the might of the Arbiter and the Spartan both, they could wipe the barracks clean of Jiralhanae with no further losses.

"Spartan," Thel called.

The Master Chief nodded in acknowledgement. The Arbiter roared loudly as he swung himself at the Jiralhanae onslaught. There were many human bodies on the ground across the barracks, but together, Thel, Vadam and the Master Chief ensured not a single other marine joined the dead. They gained momentum as they pushed around each corner of the marines' quarters, changing weapon combinations and using the Brutes' devices against them. Eventually, the entire barracks were clear.



Once the fight ended, Thel scanned the faces of the surrounding marines. None of them paid any mind to the Sangheili. Each one was wide-eyed and stunned, looking around at the many bleeding human corpses.

“We did what we could,” Thel told the Spartan. “Let us move the survivors to the landing pad. There is a lift outside.”

Thel accompanied the humans to the landing pad then watched as each of them stepped into a Pelican before he entered as well. The Pelican exited through the opening above, moving into the sky before zooming away and leaving the bunker behind. Thel watched as the ground collapsed in the distance, burying Crow’s Nest forever.

## Full Contact Safari

Nobody noticed the tiny silhouettes of two isolated Unggoy as they wandered across the pale golden plain. Their arms dangled below them as they hobbled clumsily over the unfamiliar terrain with their stumpy arthropodic legs, not accustomed to an environment so unlike the icy world their species evolved upon. A path trodden through the tall grass could be traced back to the flat-topped acacia tree they had used to shelter themselves through the night.

They were malnourished and unclean with their tanks still stained brown from the dirt of their last battlefield. The Unggoy had survived this long by crushing various insects into paste, resulting in a foul but edible substance not unlike that of the food nipples supplied by the Covenant. With every step, the Unggoy grew weaker and the methane-based air in their rebreather tanks turned staler. They needed to find the Covenant soon if they were to live, but despite their circumstances, the Unggoy who wore the pointed tank had other ideas.

“We are free now,” said Tobap.

She had been repeating such phrases unconvincingly along the journey.

“We go back to Brutes, they send us to our death,” she continued. “Here, we are own Unggoy.”

“What’s the difference?” asked the cylindrical-packed Unggoy. “If we stay out here, we will die. I don’t like the Brutes any more than you do, but I stayed alive when I was with the Covenant.”

“We could find Elites,” Tobap suggested.

“Elites? What Elites?” Banyip retorted. “There are no Sangheili out here. Whatever happened with you and the Sangheili on Halo is not going to happen here. We’re better off without any Elites.”

Tobap shrugged.

“You say so.”

Crisp blades of yellow grass whipped around Banyip’s lower half as the warm air weighed him down. His methane tank, which had never felt heavier, irritated his natural shell. Its hot metal scratched and scraped against him. With Banyip’s parentage originating from one of the least icy regions of Balaho, he’d always felt he was accustomed to a sultrier climate, but even the warmest marshes of

Balaho had been nothing like this. Banyip's hard, dry, filthy outer layer began to fade as he cooked beneath the hot sun. A sideways glance to the right indicated that the much younger Tobap was not struggling nearly as much with the heat as he was. This only served to further annoy the older Unggoy until he looked ahead. They were almost at the next big ring.

Banyip passed under the cool shadow cast by the top of the support ring. It was clearly human in design with its grey plating, empty windows and metal beams jostling out from the wreckage. Long cords and wires hung from it like vines. Many of these rings lay in various states of ruin across the plain. It had been Banyip's idea to use the rings as a guide. They were the remains of the space tether that had previously connected an orbital platform with the Earth city of New Mombasa. Knowing the planet would soon be glassed, Banyip suggested they trace the rings back to the city where the rest of the Covenant were digging. That way, they could catch a Covenant dropship before the destruction.

Banyip turned his head upwards, looking directly at the support ring that now arched high above. A gleam of gold sunlight reflected off the metal, yet there was something sinister about these looming rings. They seemed to hold some hidden message, but Banyip knew better. They were no more than a symbol of the humans' annihilation, the fate that awaited their miserable species.

The impact of the fallen support ring had caused a shallow crater at its base. In it lay a muddy pool. Banyip gazed at the pool, yearning for it. His thirst was beginning to seize him, but he knew the water would be contaminated. He'd poison himself if he were to sip from it.

"Want to rest here?" Tobap asked.

*She's taunting me. She can see me wearing,* Banyip thought before turning to the Unggoy Heavy and seeing that she now looked just as tired as he felt. He considered it for a moment but knew it wouldn't be wise. The longer they were away from civilisation, the more likely they would be to die.

"We not have to go," Tobap stated.

"We don't have to go where?" Banyip asked.

"Back," replied the Heavy. "We don't have to go back."

*Not this again,* Banyip thought. He looked ahead. The grassy landscape was quickly turning rocky and barren, but he knew it was

just a break in the crossing before it returned to the vast flatness again. Ordinarily, Banyip would have no difficulty scaling the rocks. Unggoy were natural climbers, but he couldn't afford to waste energy at this time.

"What do you think we should do about those rocks?" Banyip asked.

"Not much life there," Tobap replied. "We not survive there for long."

"We won't survive *here* for long," Banyip replied.

Tobap tilted her head in thought.

"Where are we going?"

Banyip was taken aback. They had travelled this far, and yet, Tobap still had no clue what she was doing. Banyip repeated his idea from the day before.

"We're following the rings to return to the human city and find the Covenant."

"I know. I remember," Tobap squeaked. "But why?"

Banyip groaned in frustration.

"Just come on," he said as he marched towards the rock, but apparently, the conversation was not yet over.

"Banyip," she said. "I have question."

"Of course," Banyip sighed. "Fine. Shoot away."

"Why you like Brutes so much?"

*How is she this dim?* Banyip wondered, fully knowing the answer.

"Again? I don't," he answered. "I don't like the Jiralhanae. I just... I want to get home."

"But home not with the Jiralhanae," Tobap responded.

Banyip ground his teeth.

"Is home with the Sangheili then?" he spat. "Is that what you think?"

"No," Tobap replied, ignoring the Ultra's tone. "But the Arbiters..."

"Enough! We've already discussed this. The Arbiters caused pain and suffering. That's all the Sangheili ever do. They attack Balaho every chance they get. They forced us Unggoy into slavery. They took away my children!"

Banyip screamed his last words loudly enough that it echoed off the rocks ahead. His eyes were wet, and the organs in his chest coiled tightly, strangling his heart. Distressing images from Banyip's past

intruded his mind. The images were of his children and his mating partner being hauled away by towering Sangheili. Banyip had been naïve enough to fall in love with his first mate, but the Sangheili had since forced him to breed many times. The Unggoy bred faster than any other species in the Covenant, and the Sangheili used this to their advantage, sending his brethren out to die on the front lines one after the other, cannon fodder and nothing more. Each time Banyip formed an attachment with a new partner, the Sangheili tore her away as soon as the two produced offspring. Tobap was too young to have experienced such anguish, and maybe with the Jiralhanae now in charge, she would never have to.

“I am sorry,” is all Tobap could say.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. None of this is. Let’s just get back.”

“Banyip, the Elites are not same now. The Arbiter-”

“Please,” Banyip strained. “Go back to repeating how free you think we are like you’ve been doing this whole journey, but say no more about the Elites.”

The climb through the rocks wasn’t quite as steep or dead as Banyip had expected, but the ever-rising terrain blocked his view of the land ahead. Smaller acacias and other shrubbery grew from the uneven terrain, but they did not serve to protect the Unggoy from the sweltering sun. The worst part was not knowing what was on the other side. Ideally, the Jiralhanae would be there to welcome the two Unggoy back into their ranks. If not, if it were humans that awaited them ahead, then at least Banyip would still have escaped this endless field. If the other side of the rocks consisted of more flat grassland blanketing across the country and stretching out to the horizon, as it did behind them, then Banyip and his companion would surely die.

“Stop!” Tobap instructed.

Banyip froze before turning to the Heavy.

“What is it?” he asked quietly.

Tobap bent her knees, crouching slowly behind a rock. Banyip followed. On the other side of the rock was a ditch that housed a familiar-looking creature. *It’s a Jiralhanae*, Banyip saw until his eyes adjusted. What he initially perceived to be a meaty, brown-haired Brute kneeling on its hands to drink from a pond was in fact not a Jiralhanae at all. The creature appeared to be native to the area. It lifted its head and stared stupidly at the Unggoy. It stood completely

motionless, ignoring the many flies that buzzed about its back. Two curled horns grew from its cranium, two curled horns that could tear the Unggoy apart in seconds.

“What do we do?” Tobap whispered.

Banyip didn't reply.

“D-does it talk?” asked the Heavy.

Banyip rose slowly, looking over the rock. The creature shuffled back on its four legs.

“No,” Banyip answered. “It's just some dumb animal.”

The Unggoy slid out from behind their cover gripping their weapons. Banyip held his needler steadily by his side while Tobap tightly gripped her plasma pistol. Most unexpectedly, the horned animal bowed its head reverently for the Unggoy. It held it there blinking as the Unggoy watched. *Finally some respect around here*, thought Banyip.

“Maybe it not so dumb after all,” piped Tobap.

Tobap stepped closer to the bowing creature.

“My name Tobap,” she said. “What yours?”

The animal twitched and huffed a little but did not otherwise respond.

“Name,” Tobap persisted, gesturing with her stocky forearms. “Me Tobap. That Banyip. You?”

Suddenly, the creature sprang. It galloped forwards keeping its head low until it clipped Tobap beneath her legs. The creature surged its head upwards into the poor Unggoy. Tobap squealed as she flipped through the air. The centrifugal force pulled her arms and legs out from her body as she spun like a pinwheel before hitting the earth with a crunch. Banyip held his fingers down on his needler's sensor as three crystalline shards were propelled from the weapon, curving through the air and landing into the creature's side. The animal completely ignored the needles that pierced its flesh as it turned to face its new attacker. Banyip's needler slipped from his fingers, hitting the rock beneath him. Gasping, he searched for a way to evade the animal, but it was already charging towards him faster than he could possibly anticipate. He dived to his side only to have the creature trample his legs.

“Aaargh!” Banyip screamed.

The world turned white as Banyip experienced a searing pain that shot up his bottom-heavy appendages. Cyan blood seeped through

his fresh cracks. He spun onto his methane tank to face the animal and scramble away, but it was already upon him. Its curved horns smashed at his body and armour alike, piercing him in several parts of his abdomen. Each stab caused another blinding shock.

“Pl-please,” Banyip begged as tears rolled down the sides of his face.

Banyip fought as hard as he could, flinging his generous forearms above him and trying to get a hold of the creature’s horns, but it knocked his arms off each time he tried, slamming them back against the rock. He attempted to wrestle his body away, but the creature allowed him no opportunity to struggle. The animal had him firmly pinned and was in complete control, whipping its head left and right and cutting into the Unggoy lash after lash. The needler shards had already burst in its side but seemed to have had no effect whatsoever.

Banyip was confused. This didn’t make any sense. Why was he here? He was a foreign Unggoy in a foreign land being torn to pieces by an animal he’d never even heard of. Why was this happening to him? What had he done to deserve this?

*TSSEEW!*

The full weight of the animal fell upon Banyip, but the strength of his exoskeleton held.

“I killed it,” came the shrill, raucous voice of a Kig-Yar. “I’ll take first pick of the meat.”

Banyip rolled over as the now dead animal was pulled off him. Trembling, he pushed himself to his feet to thank the Kig-Yar. As he should have expected though, the wretched creatures paid no attention to the Unggoy. There were two of them. One appeared to be a scout with an inactive shield gauntlet while the other was a sniper, its beam rifle holstered over its back. The scout had darker grey scales and a curved culmen while the sniper had a lighter tan hide with distinct angular eyes. Remembering Tobap, Banyip swirled to face the position she’d landed in. She lay against a rock amidst a patch of tall grass. She was not in good condition.

A subtle hiss grew louder as Banyip walked over to the Unggoy Heavy. She was wheezing heavily beneath her mask, but Banyip saw as he got closer that she’d sustained less injuries than he had. He then found the source of the hissing. A small seam in Tobap’s methane tank had opened slightly with her fall. Turquoise-coloured steam squeezed out from the crack, rising and evaporating into the

human sky. Soon, Tobap would run out of air and suffocate to death. It was a horrible, violent death that Banyip had witnessed before. He did not care to see it again.

Tobap looked up at Banyip as he pressed his hand against the seam. The warm methane pushed against his palm. Banyip felt hollow as his scarlet eyes met those of his dying companion. He had seen many young Unggoy die in battle, but this did not feel the same. It was wrong enough that they were forced to fight for a cause they had no say in, but to die out here in the middle of nowhere was horrendously unjust. It was true that she had somewhat irritated him during the journey, but Banyip admired Tobap's determination. It wasn't her fault she hadn't received the education she deserved. He'd grown accustomed to her constant remarks about being free, and he'd felt a sort-of bond with this Unggoy. Banyip and Tobap had been the only ones of their kind across this grand landscape for which they couldn't even determine a distance. Banyip only now realised how well Tobap's spirit had balanced out his own disgruntled thoughts along the way.

"What this mean?" Tobap asked gently, glancing down at the hand that covered her gas leak.

Banyip looked to the sky, thinking for a moment. It was odd. Aside from an occasional small white cloud, the blue sky was completely clear, fitting with the dry heat that wore on Banyip. However, just over the other side of the rocks was the formation of a new dark gathering of clouds. Was there rain coming? Was it finally going to get cooler? Banyip looked at the Kig-Yar tearing strips of meat into their rigid beaks. *Where have these two come from?* Banyip wondered. He looked back at Tobap to answer her question.

"What does this mean?" Banyip repeated. "It means, if you want to be free, you have to be alive first. Your pack is leaking. We have limited time before it runs out, but if we get back to the Brutes and the other Unggoy before it empties, they will fix you up at a refill station. We can still survive this. What do you say? Back to the nipple?"

Tobap shuffled upright.

"Back to the nipple," she replied, fresh with resolve.

Banyip helped her to her feet. Both Unggoy were equally in pain, but the added pressure of Tobap's gas leak kept them alert.



“You, Kig-Yar,” Banyip called. “Who are you and where are you from?”

The Kig-Yar Scout narrowed its eyes and addressed the Unggoy with his mouth full while his partner continued to gobble more flesh than he could swallow. Bloody flecks splattered into the air as the Scout spoke.

“I am Zith,” he answered. “This is Khav, and we are going to kill the Demon.”

Banyip had to swallow to keep himself from scoffing. Every Kig-Yar, Jiralhanae and Lekgolo thought they were going to kill the Demon, but anyone who’d ever tried now lay buried beneath the very battlefield in which they’d been proven a fool for thinking they had a chance.

“Go on,” Banyip encouraged.

This time, Khav replied.

“The Demon broke my sniper tower.”

Khav’s speech was every bit as cold as Zith’s. *A loathsome voice for a loathsome race*, Banyip had always found.

“The Demon is driving along the highway,” Zith continued. “We have taken a shortcut. I have a plan to stop him.”

“We will be hailed heroes,” Khav finished.

Banyip knew the Kig-Yar could not care less about being heroes. Their benefit would be in the reward, whatever superficial prizes the Covenant were willing to pay them.

“What highway do you speak of?” Banyip asked.

“The humans call it *Tsavo* Highway,” Zith answered mid-guzzle. “It runs from Taveta to New Mombasa.”

“Or rather, it used to,” Khav added sneeringly.

Either the Kig-Yar had done their research or Jiralhanae intel was actually informative for once. Banyip only recognised the name of the last city Zith mentioned. The rest was unknown garble to him, but it didn’t change much. The Kig-Yar were still imbeciles for thinking they could take down the Demon.

“What your plan?” Tobap asked eagerly.

Despite the fact she was losing air every second, the Unggoy Heavy maintained a curious energy. Zith slurped up a final piece of meat.

“Follow us,” he replied.

This was exactly what Banyip had been waiting to hear. Khav ripped another shred of meat from the large carcass before reluctantly joining the group as they continued further up the rocks. The two Unggoy supported one another over the difficult parts of the terrain. Zith sniggered at their injuries but otherwise kept his thoughts to himself. Khav lingered behind, apparently unhappy they'd left such an appetising meal unfinished. After a short trek, they climbed over the rocks onto a flatland.

Here, they had a clear view of the area again. In the distance, Banyip saw the strangest storm he could have ever imagined. The dark clouds he'd seen gathering earlier now spun rapidly in an enormous ring with a perfectly calm eye at its centre. The storm appeared to be fixed in place, anchored around one part of the sky. Its edges were sharp, cutting a clear line between its gloominess and the bright sunshine that surrounded it. Native birds had no trouble flying right past the storm as if it were non-existent, and yet, it looked more powerful than any Banyip had seen. Lightning tore through the clouds from shadows within the storm, carving the earth below. Banshees high above raced towards the spinning clouds and towards their impending doom. A hue of burgundy separated the sky from the immense crater that matched the diameter of the storm above. It was a peculiar and unnatural sight, but it was one that Banyip would worry about later. What mattered most at this time was getting Tobap home alive and unharmed. He could hear her trying to keep her breathing steady, but that would only be possible for so long.

Banyip passed beneath a sign stating, *VOI 17km* and *NEW MOMBASA 114km*. While the terrain was flatter now, it was still not even enough for the highway to run naturally. Banyip looked left and right, observing the long tarmac road, which alternated between sitting flat over the land and being held up by supports over various gaps and trenches.

The group climbed over the railings and planted their feet upon the road. Along their left, in the distance, the road disappeared into a tunnel. On their right, the road was broken. There was a gap where the highway should have been held up by supports. Frayed mesh and bent rails twisted out from the concrete at the end. Several Jersey barriers lay knocked over on one side. Something big had impacted with the road and cut through this part of the highway. Banyip

wouldn't have been surprised if one of the support rings had landed here before rolling away down the slope. Perhaps it was the last one they'd passed. On the opposite side of the gap, the road bent around a lonely building with a sign on the front labelled *VOI Municipal Water Pump House*.

"Okay," Banyip started. "Where do we go from here?"

He was ever conscious of Tobap's hissing rebreather pack, even when she wasn't standing close enough for him to hear it. The four of them were more spread out as they stood upon the empty highway.

"We wait," replied Zith. "The Demon is on his way."

"What is your plan?" Tobap asked.

"The Demon is in his vehicle," Zith answered. "He will not be able to cross the gap. If we hide behind those barriers, we can assassinate him."

Banyip considered this for a moment.

"Unlikely," he stated.

Zith, puffing out his chest, stormed towards the Unggoy Ultra.

"And why is that?"

"What is the Demon driving?" Banyip asked.

"A Warthog," Khav answered. "Why?"

"Because a Warthog will jump across that gap."

They all looked at the break in the highway. Banyip knew he was right. The road curved up slightly at the end, and with his experience, he knew the humans' Warthogs could easily make such a jump. He also knew that even if they stopped the Warthog, it wouldn't matter. To kill a demon with a couple of Kig-Yar and two injured Unggoy was laughable, and yet, Banyip knew it would be his only way back. If they called in a Phantom to pick them up now, the Jiralhanae would be sure to ignore them, but with the Demon dead... Banyip was beginning to imagine those rewards the Kig-Yar were so thirsty for. He cleared his throat and almost toppled back onto his methane tank as he puffed out his own chest.

"Alright team," he began. "If we move those barriers from the side of the road to block the gap, the Warthog won't be able to jump. Khav can hide on the roof of that building, and the rest of us can go back down behind the rocks. When the Warthog parks, Khav snipes the Demon, we jump out, and we finish him off."

"Now that a good plan!" Tobap exclaimed.

“Except you,” Banyip added, noticing her wheezes were sounding rough. “You stay behind the rocks and try to save your breath.”

“Oh,” Tobap said, slouching in disappointment.

Even if Tobap didn’t run out of breath, the fire from either a plasma or ballistic weapon coming into contact with Tobap’s cracked seam would ignite her entire methane tank and end her life. Zith produced a strange gargle that turned into a hiss. The Kig-Yar looked angry. Banyip knew the reptile was not fond of his kind. Zith was frustrated because this was the best plan they had, and it was an Unggoy who’d devised it.

“I’ll do it, if the green one helps,” said Zith, pointing at Tobap.

“No,” replied Banyip.

“No?” repeated Zith, raising his voice.

Khav interrupted.

“The Demon is on his way,” said the tan-scaled Kig-Yar. “We do not have time to discuss this.”

“Fine,” Zith responded. “But *I* will deal the final blow. I get the Demon’s helmet, and I will reap the most rewards.”

“And why is that, *Zith?*” Khav spat his partner’s name.

Zith shook his wrist as a violet-coloured hardlight shield emitted from his gauntlet. He stood tall and proudly.

“Because I outrank you, *Sniper,*” Zith finished.

Khav said nothing as he immediately walked over to the concrete barriers on the side of the road. Tobap watched silently as Banyip, Zith and Khav each dragged one barrier at a time in front of the gap. They were heavy, and Banyip was beginning to feel like he was on his last legs. He refused to die. He had no flawed honour system like the Sangheili. Survival was more important to him than anything else, and Tobap deserved that as well. Killing the Demon *was* a fool’s errand, but he no longer had a choice. It was their only way back to the real world.

*TSSEEW!*

Zith clasped his fingers around his own neck as purple liquid seeped through his talons, trickling along his arms and down into the frayed quills at his elbows. Khav stood only two metres away with his beam rifle pointed at the Kig-Yar Scout. Fresh heatwaves rose from the point of the weapon.

“Ah!” Tobap yelped. “What that for?”

Zith's eyes were wide. He opened and closed his sharp jaw, but nothing came out.

"That," said Khav. "Is for trying to steal *my* rewards."

Zith's hands loosened, and his legs buckled backwards. The side of his head slapped the tarmac with a splatter of dark fluids, which continued to flow from both the front and back of his neck. His long, narrow tongue fell out, licking the road and his own blood.

"It is a good plan, Unggoy," Khav told Banyip as he lowered his rifle. "But I can do this on my own. Go to the rocks. I will be the one to slay the Demon. Then I will summon a transport and ensure your friend survives. Take this *corpse* with you."

Banyip did as he was told. With the last of his energy, he dragged Zith's dead body over to the rocks, using his feet to smudge the purple blood into the tarmac as best as he could to keep it hidden from the Demon. Khav climbed the pump house building and disappeared over the roof. Banyip turned away as Zith's body rolled and slid down the rocks onto the plain they'd come from. He and Tobap relaxed together behind the same rock. They waited.

Banyip suddenly realised something. It was completely silent. The hissing of Tobap's tank had stopped. He turned to Tobap who was now slumped very low.

"Tobap!" Banyip cried. "We haven't got long. The Demon will be dead soon. They'll come to pick us up!"

Tobap whispered quieter than ever.

"No."

Banyip swore he could almost hear amusement in her voice.

"The Demon..."

"Tobap!" Banyip cried again. "You have to hold on! You still have time!"

"The Demon," she repeated. "Won't die."

Tobap may have been young, but she was wiser than the Kig-Yar. Still, there had to be a chance.

"Take off mask," she sighed.

Banyip couldn't bear to look at her. Tears ran down her face. The pair of them had remained strong throughout their journey. He obeyed her words and took off her rebreather mask.

"Banyip," she said. "Find..."

"What?" Banyip implored. "Find what?"

"Find Arbiter," she finished as soft as a breeze. "Find Arbiter..."

She breathed her last breath in Banyip's arms.

"Life is unfair," Banyip cried. "Be free, Tobap. Be free."

Banyip cradled Tobap's lifeless body in silence.

Shortly after, he heard the distant rumble of a Warthog. He unclipped Tobap's plasma pistol from her waist and got ready to charge it up as he peeped over the rocks. The Demon exited the tunnel driving a troop-transport Warthog. Instead of a turret at the back, it had five seats and a high roll-cage. The vehicle was filled with marines, and the infamous armour of the Demon was unmistakable in the Warthog's driver seat. Banyip lifted Tobap's pistol, ready to finish the Demon off if Khav failed, but he could not shoot the Warthog until it stopped.

To Banyip's surprise, the Demon accelerated in sight of the gap. *Can he not see the barriers ahead?* He drove faster and faster, not hesitating for a second. Banyip watched as the Demon unfastened a purple device from his side. He threw it into the air, launching it over the front of the Warthog towards the barriers. Banyip felt giddy. His plan was going to work. There were too many barriers. No single grenade could break enough of a hole to prevent the Warthog from crashing.

That was when Banyip realised, the Demon hadn't thrown a grenade. The purple device unfolded as it hit the ground in front of the barriers. It wasn't an explosive. It was a gravity lift. As the Warthog drove over the device, the vehicle was launched into the air over both the barriers and the gap. It landed safely back on the highway. The Demon didn't even notice Khav's missed energy beam as the Warthog sped off around the bend and out of sight.

Banyip had failed.

## The Broken Path

“You will be called upon to serve,” Cortana proclaimed.

Her face filled John’s vision once again.

“You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies.”

John had not yet deciphered any of Cortana’s cryptic transmissions. He knew the woman. He could see there was undeniable intent behind her messages. She had something she needed to share, but she was being allusive, and it was not difficult to guess why. Cortana was stuck on High Charity. Whatever it was she was trying to communicate, between the Covenant and the Gravemind, there was far too much risk of leaking information. Despite this understanding, John found his inability to interpret the messages incredibly frustrating. After analysing Cortana’s empty data chip at Crow’s Nest, he’d given up any attempt to uncover how she was sending them in the first place.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Private Osei. “What are those?”

John looked ahead. No part of the journey along Tsavo Highway had been simple. In addition to the crumbling terrain caused by the Covenant excavation and the many space elevator rings that cracked or blocked the road, the aliens themselves lurked around almost every bend. Fortunately, the troop-transport Warthog that John drove had held together this far thanks to the six marines packed in tightly with him. Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds sat in the front passenger seat beside the Master Chief.

“Hell if I know,” replied Reynolds to Osei. “But they’re not friendlies.”

A pair of ugly, menacing, front-heavy vehicles barrelled towards them from far ahead. John used his MJOLNIR to magnify the two of them. The vehicles were an odd fusion of shapes and segments welded senselessly together. The largest section of each vehicle was their front, which held two huge wheels that looked a cross between grinding gears and sharpened blades, framed by a threateningly jagged ring on either side. Occasional sparks leapt from underneath as their bottoms scraped along the tarmac. Each vehicle seated one Brute Minor upon a small saddle hovering above the ground behind its rotating wheels. What looked oddest to John was how the vehicles moved. The Brutes’ seats swung left and right like a small

child attempting to control an oversized dog on a leash. The vehicles did not appear as though they should be driving at such a speed. They didn't look like they should be on the road at all. Reminiscent of farming ploughs, they would have better belonged in the fields, churning up dirt.

"Those are Choppers," yelled Forsell from his position behind Marra in the Warthog. "They're like Brute Ghosts."

*Like Ghosts?* John wondered. They didn't look anything like Ghosts to him. If the Covenant Ghost was a graceful swan, then these Choppers were rabid cassowaries.

"Don't let them ram us!" Forsell instructed.

The Chief had no intention of that. He suspected a single hit from one of these Choppers would instantly tear their Warthog in two. As the Brutes drew nearer, fast-firing projectile cannons shot from the sides of the Choppers. The glass of the Warthog's windshield shattered as the Choppers' weapons cut away at the hood. The marines retaliated with a barrage of battle rifle, assault rifle and submachine gun bullets. John was forced to keep the Warthog steady as the soldiers balanced themselves in crouched positions to fire over the metal frame of the jeep.

Both Choppers boosted once they were in range of the Warthog, attempting to plunge their spinning wheels straight through the human vehicle. The marines found they had to plant themselves firmly in their seats as John swerved the Warthog methodically to avoid the Brutes' ramming. Private Marra lobbed a grenade over the bonnet, which knocked one Chopper to the right. He then fired his MA5C at its giant wheels while Forsell aimed his battle rifle at the driver.

The second Chopper gave the Warthog a wide berth. John exhaled. The first Chopper was too close to the right side for the Spartan to dodge a blow from the second. The second Chopper turned to face the Warthog and charged towards Osei and Calyun on the left. The bullets from their submachine guns bounced sadly off the Chopper's metal frame. Reynolds aimed his BR at the Brute driver. Huynh, who sat facing out from the back, pointed her own rifle frantically each way, unable to get a good aim at either driver.

*WHAM!*



The left Chopper smacked into the side of the Warthog. The marines flew from their seats as the side of the jeep lifted into the air.

“Eject!” John commanded as the Warthog flipped.

He jumped from the vehicle and watched it continue to slide along the road, completely upside-down before grinding to a halt. The Chief was given no breathing time as the front of the other Chopper surged towards him, eager to suck him into its spinning blades. Even while equipped in his MJOLNIR Mark VI, the weight of the Chopper would kill him. John dived to his side and whipped out his shotgun. Before he could act, Forsell killed the Brute driver with a final headshot. John’s motion tracker notified him that the Chopper on the left had not moved since the crash. He turned to see the bloody corpse of its driver, who had evidently been killed before the Chopper struck Warthog. Miraculously, all six marines survived. The Chopper mustn’t have hit at full thrust.

John had been driving with these marines for some time. When Johnson and the Arbiter fled Crow’s Nest, the Chief had remained behind to ensure the Brutes didn’t gain access to any UNSC data. He’d found his current company in a motor pool apparently having missed the evacuation. The base had collapsed into the ground behind them as they escaped. Since then, the group travelled at high speed down Tsavo Highway. They’d stopped intermittently along the way to help other squads and survivors, but Commander Keyes had now ordered John to find the city of Voi as soon as possible.

“You’ve fought these things before?” Reynolds asked Forsell, gesturing at the Choppers.

“Yeah,” Forsell nodded. “Not from a Warthog though. Wall and I used to take the high ground while Sarge and the others lured them into the open.”

Forsell kicked the hunk of metal at the front of the left Chopper before reloading his BR.

“We were the sharpshooters, Wall and I, real marksman,” he said proudly before chuckling. “Yeah... the best! Not like you group of ragtaggers.”

Huynh rolled her eyes. It was a friendly jest, but she was too tired to make a comeback. Looking around, the Chief noticed all the marines had dark hollows under their eyes. John knew he could not allow himself to reach the same level of fatigue. Everyone was

counting on him. He marched over to the upside-down Warthog and gripped its side with both hands. Using his full body strength, he tossed it back onto its wheels. The Warthog bounced as its tyres hit the road. It was scratched and dented, and its roll-cage was completely bent out of shape, but it would hold for now. John ignored the dropping jaws of the marines who'd just witnessed a human being flip a three-tonne attack vehicle with little effort.

“Mount up,” John commanded.

The marines didn't need to hear him twice. They all retook their positions, and the Chief continued driving along the road just in time for another Cortana transmission.

“There will be a great deal of hardship on the road ahead,” she declared. “You will become the best we can make you.”

John knew of AI rampancy. Everyone did. A Smart AI couldn't last forever. Like everybody else, their time in the universe was limited. Cruelly, a Smart AI's lifespan was short, but Cortana was still young. If anyone else heard the messages Cortana was sending John, they would be certain she'd gone rampant. Someone would make the order to terminate her, but the Cortana that John knew would not fall so easily. Everything she said had a ring of familiarity to it, alluding to something buried deep within his memory. As soon as he got the chance, he would dig around and pluck it out, but for now, John had a mission to complete. Miranda Keyes was counting on them to eliminate the Covenant anti-air in the town of Voi.

The storm was directly ahead, but it was large enough and far enough away that it never grew closer. It remained a constant on the other side of the vast savannah. Soon enough, the group would reach the tunnel that would take them below the plains and straight to Voi, but they were not there yet.

Eventually, they found another collapse in the highway. John hit the Warthog's brake. This wasn't a small gap like the one they'd jumped over beside the pump house. The road here had completely fallen into a valley below. The highway didn't begin again until a bend on the other side. Fortunately, the Warthog was created for off-road use. The valley was steep, but it was traversable. What it wasn't designed for were the raining plasma bombs that tore terrible holes in the terrain. The shells of two Wraiths glistened from across the valley where the road continued.

“We can’t stay here,” said Reynolds. “And we’re not in a position to hide.”

“What do we do, sir?” asked Marra as John edged nearer to the broken road.

“We’re with a Spartan now,” commented Osei. “Two Wraiths are nothing. We get in there, crack open those tanks and show those Brutes how real soldiers fight. Between the Brutes and us, we’re the ones with at least half a brain.”

“That’s it,” Forsell grinned. “Let’s use our half brains against them!”

“Private’s right,” agreed John. “But a Warthog is no match for two Wraiths. Sergeant, take the wheel.”

With that, John leapt from the jeep, off the road and into the shadow of the valley.

“What are you doing?” Reynolds asked as he climbed across into the driver’s seat.

“Improvising,” replied John.

“Now that’s a plan I can get behind,” accepted Forsell.

A bridge to the left of the valley connected the Wraiths’ hill with the rest of the highway.

“You distract the Wraiths,” John ordered as he left them. “Take cover under that bridge for as long as it holds.”

The Warthog sped off to the left as John passed along the right slope of the valley. Apparently, the Wraiths were not alone. Hard-hitting bolts of purple plasma splashed over the ground around the Chief. John pointed his battle rifle at the Shade turrets that shot from above. They were spherical and built with much thicker plating than the shielded variant, but there were spottable gaps in their armour. John aimed his rifle into one of the gaps. Through it, he saw half the face of a dumb Grunt, but the Chief never had a chance to fire.

*WHOOSH!*

The loud roar of the Brute Chopper and the Master Chief’s motion sensors saved him at the last possible second. The meaty beast of a vehicle brushed past him at full boost. John looked ahead. Six more Choppers were rounding a corner into the valley. *New plan*, the Chief thought. He let his energy shields take a few hits from the Choppers’ cannons as he braced himself, but the projectiles turned out to be far more damaging than he’d guessed. They depleted most of his shields, and still it was better than being hit by the Shades,

which now paused to avoid shooting the Choppers. Just as the next Chopper boosted forwards, John lunged to the side, grabbed its frame and pulled himself into the driver's seat. With the weight of his MJOLNIR-clad body, the Spartan kicked the Brute straight off his seat.

Luckily for John, Forsell had been right. The Chopper wasn't as different from a Ghost as it looked. Its design was crude, but its controls were natural enough that John was able to thrust his vehicle straight into the Chopper that led the procession. The gears of John's Chopper gobbled up the Brute driver, grinding its bones and splashing Jiralhanae blood all over the Chief.

Despite his success in taking out the first driver, John's Chopper revealed its true colours when he attempted to veer right to dodge the incoming fire from behind. He had little hold of the vehicle as his seat swung him both ways wildly while the front of the Chopper remained in place. The vehicle had come alive and was now a buffalo bucking hard to throw him off. Fortunately, this allowed his shields to recharge as he dodged the incoming fire, but his Chopper was still taking hits.

"Nice of you to join us, Chief!" called Forsell.

He met the marines under the bridge. The scene was bedlam. Choppers clashed and collided as the Warthog swerved in and out of the mess. John had to admire the marines' talents. Reynolds clearly knew what he was doing behind the wheel, and despite Forsell's joking manner, his aiming was impeccable. The rest of the marines sprayed a little more recklessly at the Brute drivers while John spun his Chopper to face the others. He thrust again, straight through two Choppers at the base of the hill. The collision tore all three Choppers apart and sent John flying. His seat flicked him high into the air.

He watched the slopes of the valley rush downwards until he'd flown high enough to face the two Wraiths atop their hill. Hanging in the air this way was dangerous, but John knew the Wraiths' main cannon was designed to arc. Landing extremely close to one of the Wraith's would be his best bet, and that's exactly what happened. Soon enough, he found himself beating into the navy hatch at the top of the Covenant tank. He fired his battle rifle into the Brute operator's skull and pulled the slumped beast from its cockpit. It didn't take long to end the chaos from there. John drove the Wraith

along the hill and took out the other Wraith, the Shades and the remaining Choppers.

As he waited for the marines to drive up the hill, John stood in his cockpit, peering over the top. This was the best view he'd had of the storm. Now, he finally saw what lay underneath, filling the deep crater below. Covenant ships of all shapes and sizes swirled above the enormous artefact within the crater. The structure was simple in design, mostly flat and one hundred kilometres wide as confirmed via the Chief's heads-up-display. The grooves and lights he spotted on the artefact looked familiar to John, but he couldn't quite place why. Dead in its centre sat the Prophet of Truth's Dreadnought pointing straight up at the eye of the storm. It looked more at home here than it had on High Charity.

Cortana's image visited John again.

"This place will become your *home*," she told him.

John understood this wasn't the real Cortana. This was not his friend. It was only a reflection of the real thing, but it was a comforting reminder that she was out there. As much as he was frustrated by his own ignorance of the meaning behind the messages, John began to see value in them. The apparition continued to speak.

"This place will become your *tomb*."

The marines joined the Chief on the hill. The Warthog and Wraith sat side by side.

"Look at the size of that thing!" Forsell exclaimed.

"I wonder how old it is," added Huynh.

"Don't know," said Reynolds. "But I know that's not a normal storm."

John realised what the structure reminded him of. It seemed even here at Earth, he could not escape the handiwork of the Forerunner. The structure reminded him of the outer surface of the Halo rings. Whatever it was, it must have been buried here for at least one hundred thousand years.

"Master Chief," came the voice of Commander Keyes. "Finally, a good connection. Truth has excavated a Forerunner artefact. We have to assume it's the Ark."

A second unknown voice joined Miranda's.

"Commander," it began. "I can see most of it now. Readings are all over the electromagnetic spectrum."

“Roger that, recon,” Keyes replied. “Shut your gear off. Fall back. I’ll monitor from Kilo-Two-Three.”

“Chief,” Johnson transmitted unexpectedly. “The tunnel to Voi is dead ahead. Smash the Brute blockade. Open her up!”

The Master Chief elected to remain in his new Wraith. It was a slow-moving vehicle, which didn’t offer a lot of protection from above now that John had ripped off its upper panel, but it had the firepower to break through a blockade and keep the marines alive. Reynolds drove the Warthog steadily at the Wraith’s side. Cortana’s echo continued to visit the Chief as he drove along the straight highway.

“Raging seas and howling beasts,” Cortana recited. “A demon folded in black clouds.”

John could have sworn she winked at him before fading away. Soon, they reached the Brute blockade. It wasn’t unlike the Jersey barriers he’d jumped over earlier, but instead of grey concrete, purple Covenant barriers blocked the road ahead, stacked up and layered in a way that no vehicle could drive around. Jackal sniper towers rose from the lanes behind, and to the right, a hologram of Truth droned on drearily. Many Brutes took cover between the Covenant barriers within the blockade. They each wore power armour of different designs signifying their rank and class. One Brute made eye contact with the Chief in the cockpit of his Wraith.

“This day, it ends for you, Demon!” roared the Brute.

“Let us eat the humans together!” added another.

“Get behind me,” John told the Gunnery Sergeant.

He fired the Wraith’s cannon into the blockade. Its blue light desecrated the area, blasting away pieces of Covenant metal. The blockade was thick, but with the Brutes below him, John had the advantage. Firing again, he chipped away at the barriers. Two shots took down one sniper tower, and the other fell soon after. John inched the Wraith forwards after each blow to the blockade. Bullets from the marines whizzed past him as the Warthog crept slowly behind. Even beneath the blasts, John heard the boasting voice of the Prophet, crowing from his hologram.

“My Dreadnought,” proclaimed Truth. “The vessel that has so long been the focus of our worship now rests on its true pedestal. Its engines spark greater ones below, relics long without power yet ready to fulfil their divine purpose.”

John had a concerning thought. Miranda had told him the Covenant needed a key to activate the Ark. *What if they already have it?*

“Stand fast,” Truth told the Brutes. “Keep the Demon at bay. Soon, my brothers, we will all have our reward!”

“The Demon must not pass!” bellowed a Brute Captain.

From between the barriers, a glowing gizmo rolled out below John’s Wraith. *Damn!* he cursed. The console in front of the Spartan died out. The anti-gravity boosters failed, and the Wraith hit the road with a heavy clang. The Brutes had bowled a power drain at him. He’d have to wait for the EMP waves to stop emitting from the device before he could continue, but he couldn’t afford to stop now as several jump-pack Brutes leapt high into the air.

“Now fly!” yelled the Captain as his neighbours rose into the sky. “Fly!”

The Master Chief no longer had the vantage point. Spikes and plasma rained from above, and he didn’t have the Wraith’s upper hatch to conceal himself. The Warthog reversed while its passengers shot at the flying Brutes. John had no choice but to jump out of the cockpit and straight up into the air. As he reached the peak of his jump, he grabbed hold of a Brute’s ankle. The Brute had been chasing the Warthog from above. It tried to shake the Chief off but was unsuccessful. The Brute’s jump-pack worked hard to keep the two bodies in the air. It whined loudly as its blue jets released an extra puff of flames. John climbed the Brute’s body and met it face to face.

“I will excrete you, Demon,” it spat.

“I’ve heard that one before,” John lied before headbutting the Brute in the jaw.

*Crack!*

The Brute’s lower jaw dropped, dislocated. It howled gratingly, losing control of its jump-pack. The two bodies slammed hard into a second Brute, which caused both jump-packs to backfire. John let go, dropping to the ground as the Brutes were launched into the sky, zipping away helplessly towards the artefact below the storm. John climbed the Wraith as quickly as he could and continued to fire into the blockade, digging a deeper hole through it and clearing a potential path ahead.

The fight continued much the same way for a while. John was careful to jump out of the Wraith whenever he sensed too much

danger, which came in the form of power drains, plasma and spike grenades, a bombardment of fuel rod shots and other weapons fire from above. Eventually, there was enough of a gap in the blockade that the Chief boosted the Wraith through it, separating the barriers further and continuing on.

“As for this world,” Cortana began. “I encounter new souls every day.”

*Good to know*, John thought, humouring himself.

“What I have found,” she continued. “Will either save or destroy you.”

That stopped the Spartan. *This one feels more direct than the other messages. What has she found? What can either save or destroy us?*

As soon as the road was cleared of Brutes, two Pelicans descended before them, dropping fresh Warthogs in front of the tunnel to Voi. Miranda spoke from one of the dropships.

“Lord Hood, we made it,” she said.

“Music to my ears, Commander,” Hood transmitted in return. “What about the Ark?”

“It’s fully uncovered, sir.”

“Then we don’t have much time. Chief, marines, the Prophet of Truth doesn’t know it yet, but he’s about to get kicked right off his throne. We will take back our city, and we’ll drive our enemy into the very grave they have so happily been digging!”

“Oorah!” shouted the marines.



# Judgement

“Chief,” Miranda commed as John neared the tunnel exit. “The Prophet of Truth has found the Ark. Our only chance of stopping him is a surprise aerial assault. Clear this sector of Covenant anti-air defences. Make a hole for Lord Hood’s ships. Good hunting. Keyes out.”

What John and the marines should have been entering was the central industrial zone of Voi. Instead, when they emerged from the tunnel, they found half a city clinging to the edge of a cliff. The ground to the right had completely surrendered to the Covenant’s crater, lost somewhere in the depths of Truth’s vast excavation site. The highway, which should have bent around to the right, came to a sudden stop as if their Warthog had reached the end of the Earth itself.

Beyond the steep drop grew the Prophet of Truth’s storm with its mysterious artefact underneath. John could feel a constant invisible force pushing lightly against him from the direction of the Forerunner structure. Water droplets trickled over his visor away from the structure as he drove into the drizzling rain. He checked the temperature on his heads-up-display. He did not envy the marines whose jaws clenched tightly in the chilly air while the interior of his MJOLNIR kept him comfortably warm. He parked the Warthog beside the entrance of a large factory. A second and third Warthog joined them.

“Ready when you are,” said Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds. “We’ll cover you with the point-fifty.”

Reynolds was referring to the machine gun turret of his own Warthog.

“They don’t like it when you shoot at them. Worked that out myself.”

John watched his motion tracker intently as he entered the building on foot. Industrial equipment and supplies lay wrecked across the factory floor. It appeared the Covenant had come and gone, decimating the interior of the factory before leaving. John climbed a set of spiral stairs to find the fresh corpses of two human factory workers. Their heads had been smashed in. *We should have been here*, John thought. These weren’t soldiers. They were civilians,

regular people unlucky enough to have been held back during the evacuation. They'd have stood no chance against the savagery of the Brutes. If the UNSC didn't find a solution soon, every person on the planet would meet a similar fate.

John found the switch to the wide door that separated this section from the next part of the factory. He hit the switch and returned to the ground floor as the Warthog rolled through. It was a tight fit for the Warthog, but it was worth it. The machine gun turret could tear apart any Covenant infantry that remained in the factory. Reynolds held the wheel while Corporal Huynh stood in the back tray with the turret pointing firmly ahead. The other marines followed on foot. They entered an area with a high glass ceiling supported by a metal grid. Containers, crates and forklifts cluttered the area. It wasn't ideal for the Warthog's manoeuvrability, but it was perfect for a Covenant ambush.

Crazed Grunts cackled as they jumped eagerly from behind cover. Jackal Scouts hopped out confidently behind their shield gauntlets, and as the shadow of a Phantom engulfed them, the glass roof shattered to allow a swarm of Drones to burst into the factory. It was difficult to distinguish the rain from the falling glass, which hailed upon the marines in tiny shards as they dived for cover. Huynh cried loudly as she opened fire, sweeping the rotating barrels of her huge machine gun across the room. Reynolds repeatedly reversed and accelerated forwards, steering into any Grunts he could while the other marines fired from behind.

"Aaargh!" Huynh screamed.

The machine gun stopped firing as Huynh was hoisted into the air by one of the Drones. The unsightly insectoid pinched her shoulders with its sharp bug-like appendages. It flew straight to the shattered ceiling, fleeing fast like the giant cockroach it was. John aimed his battle rifle and shot his burst of bullets clean through the bugged's head. Both bodies dropped rapidly. John ran over, pushed himself off the back of the Warthog and caught Huynh carefully before landing. He placed her back on her feet as Private Calyun climbed up to take her place in the gunner's position.

Somehow, they managed to empty the room of Covenant and pass into the next area of the factory with no casualties aside from a slightly beaten-up Huynh. Unfortunately, the Warthog was busted badly enough that it needed to be left behind. It wouldn't be wise to

trust the reliability of the jeep against whatever threats awaited. Cortana's apparition greeted John again as the group trod on through the factory.

"I have defied gods and demons," she told him.

John paused to consider this. '*Gods' must mean Forerunner*', he theorised. *Who are the demons? Spartans? Flood?* Or perhaps he wasn't on track at all. He knew he was grasping at straws.

They passed another hologram of the Prophet of Truth in an abandoned Covenant camp while still within the facility. It had likely been set up by the Covenant file they'd just eliminated. Despite the lack of audience, Truth still harped on.

"Only our enemies shall fear this raging storm," Truth preached. "Darkened skies and lashing fire will be all that remains for them when us worthy have passed beyond. This *Keyship*, my Dreadnought, will unlock the blessed gateway. No wave nor thundercloud will obscure the way as we sail through the maelstrom."

"Keyship?" echoed Private Osei.

John was wondering the same thing. The UNSC believed Truth to be searching for a key to unlock the Ark. Was Truth's search a ruse? The Prophet may have had his key from the start. John led the marines away from the hologram. He'd heard enough from this Prophet to know nothing he said could be trusted. John directed his comm just in case.

"Commander," he called.

"I heard," replied Miranda. "I'll contact the Fleet Admiral."

The marines found four M274 military all-terrain vehicles sitting before the factory exit. They were four-wheeled UNSC motorcycles designed for ground team reconnaissance. Most commonly, they were known as Mongooses. The Master Chief inspected the four gifts. It appeared they'd been left here for his squad. A SPNKr Rocket Launcher sat propped up against each one. Just as the Chief wondered who had provided him with these prizes, he heard the voice of Sergeant Johnson in his ear.

"We've got Anti-Air Wraiths on the riverbed, Chief!" Johnson transmitted.

John activated the switch for the factory exit as the marines mounted each four-wheeler. It was two to a Mongoose. Osei paired with Calyun, Reynolds with Marra and Huynh with Forsell. Each bike had a driver and a passenger at the back excitedly wielding a

rocket launcher over their shoulder. John noticed that Huynh was still injured from the Drone fight. Her beaten shoulders would handicap her in either position on the Mongoose, especially if she was trying to hold a SPNKr.

“Forsell, you’re with me,” John commanded. “Huynh, you hang back ‘til we need you.”

Forsell mounted the back of John’s Mongoose as the door to the outside finished opening.

“Gotta move fast and punch hard!” yelled Osei as they revved their engines.

“Let’s go!”

Everything ahead was total chaos. The area that might once have been a riverbed no longer looked remotely like one. The open plateau between two factories should have formed an impressive harbour as evident by half a water freighter that sat sadly upon the compact sand, but the river and everything in it was completely drained by the immense hole the Covenant had carved into the planet. Banshees, Ghosts and Choppers zoomed about, defending the land they’d claimed.

John and Forsell rode their Mongoose down a ramp from a jetty on the edge of the dried-up river, straight into the fray. John’s target was a plum-coloured Wraith equipped with two triple-barrelled fuel rod cannons above its shell. John watched as it rapidly fired its fuel rods into the sky at full propulsion. An unfortunate pilot had been flying her Hornet VTOL hot in pursuit of a Brute Banshee. She stood no chance against the assault from the Anti-Air Wraith. Within seconds, the Hornet split into many pieces amid an orange and black ball of combustion.

John’s Mongoose easily gained air as it jumped each shallow dune.

“Yeehaw!” cheered Forsell. “That’s some fancy driving!”

“Look sharp!” John replied.

John lost sight of the other Mongooses somewhere behind him. The marines were more than capable, and if worst came to worst, they could retreat back to the factory. What mattered was following Keyes’ commands and taking out the anti-air. The Covenant had noticed the intruders by now, including several Grunt-manned Ghosts and Brute-operated Choppers who awoke to their presence.

“Sir, give me a shot!” Forsell shouted.

The Mongoose barely managed to stay on its wheels as John steered it all over the place. The Spartan used his own weight to counterbalance the vehicle, keeping it upright as he evaded the Covenant onslaught. Forsell fired a rocket directly in front of one of the Ghosts. It blew.

“That Ghost is toast!” Forsell cheered. “Dude, I think I levelled up!”

He repeated an identical shot against an enemy Chopper. Chunks of metal bounced over them, but the Covenant would not make the same mistake a third time. After reloading, Forsell missed his next shot.

“Focus on that Wraith,” John told him. “I’ll keep us away from the *RAVs*.”

He heard more rocket launcher explosions as he steered towards the Anti-Air Wraith. The other marines had caught up. John looped around the Wraith while Forsell fired. The anti-air artillery was lethal for those in the skies, but it had little defence against the ground. A Brute partially surfaced from the top of the Wraith to fire plasma at the Mongoose, but it was too late. The Wraith was too slow for the ultra-light all-terrain vehicle which easily circled it. Two direct hits by Forsell and the Wraith was neutralized. Without stopping, John targeted a second AA Wraith towards the other factory. He drove below the shadows of two tall cranes as he crossed the plateau. Forsell teased the Covenant between each engagement.

“Here are a few extra for the boys on Reach!”

As outnumbered as the marines were, both the Ghosts and Choppers were manned by one driver. The Mongooses had less armour, but their second seats meant they were able to aim independently of the direction they faced. John and Forsell passed Reynolds and Marra going the opposite way, chasing after another Ghost operated by a Grunt Heavy. Reynolds joined in with the teasing.

“You’ve all picked a fight with the wrong platoon of angry goons!” he yelled.

Luck stayed with the group to the end of the fight. The Mongooses parked in a row over the sand, looking out at the incredible sight of the Forerunner artefact. Banshees howled in the wind as they were greeted by a fleet of Hornets. In each Hornet sat a pilot with two passengers ready to gun the Banshees down. Disc-

shaped jets propelled the Hornets vertically from the end of each wing. With the additional autocannons and missile launchers on each Hornet, the swarm were ready to tear the Banshees apart now that they'd regained their reign over this part of the sky.

"Kilo-Two-Three," called Lord Hood. "This is UNSC Forward Unto Dawn. I need a sit-rep, Commander."

The Forward Unto Dawn was a Charon-class frigate, similar to the type of ship the In Amber Clad had been. Lord Hood and his fleet were hidden off in the distance, waiting for their chance to attack Truth. Miranda replied.

"Atmospheric disturbances are intensifying above the artefact," she said.

"And Sierra One-One-Seven?" Hood asked.

"He's moving as fast as he can, sir. I know he'll get it done."

"Both AA Wraiths have been neutralized," Sergeant Johnson added. "Chief, there's something big closing in on your location."

A slow, heavy thumping rang through the ground, shaking the Chief on his Mongoose. He twisted his head in search for the source of the thumping. The buildings behind the two cranes were straining under an unknown weight. Something was climbing the buildings, crushing sections of them from behind. A green light shone through the rain. It was followed by an equally green beam that soared over the wind and wiped two Hornets clean from the sky. One giant, purple leg crept into view followed by a second, then a third and then a fourth. John looked dead into the fuming green eye of the Scarab. Its beam focused on him like a spotlight.

"Move!" John yelled.

The Mongooses scattered as the Scarab manoeuvred its spiderlike limbs across the plateau. This Scarab was different from the one John had disabled last month. Its body and legs were thicker, sturdier and better balanced. It no longer seemed as burdened by its incredible weight. Its front eye glared brighter than before, and in place of its upper plasma repeaters, a giant rotating assault cannon towered from its rear. This was in addition to the three plasma cannons manned by Grunt Heavies and the many other Brutes, Grunts and Jackals that rode the Scarab like fleas on its back.

"Take cover," John told the marines. "Stay out of sight."

*KKKEEWWW!!!*

A continuous Scarab beam trailed closely behind John and Forsell, threatening to swallow them up as its rear cannon continued assaulting the skies. The Corporal was lit a ghostly green as he fired his remaining few rockets at the Covenant atop the gigantic mech. John scanned the area, desperately planning his escape and retaliation. He could retreat into the buildings with the marines, but that would be a short survival. The Scarab would easily find a way to eliminate them. As the Scarab paused, John spun the Mongoose backwards and drove between its legs, careful not to get crushed. The Mongoose was faster than the Scarab, but if the Chief was not on full alert at every second, one way or another, the Scarab would kill them.

Through the rain and the roar of the Scarab's clunking metal, John heard what sounded like a gong. Exiting from beneath the Scarab, he saw that it had passed below one of the cranes. The gong had sounded as the dangling hook of the crane collided with the Scarab's flank. *Bingo*, he thought.

John's precise steering forced the Scarab to shuffle awkwardly in attempt to track the small four-wheeler. Dodging colourful plasma, metal spikes and an array of other projectiles from above, John led the Scarab exactly where he needed it to go. He parked the Mongoose at the base of one of the cranes as Forsell ran to shelter. By the time the Scarab twisted far enough to catch the Mongoose, John had already disappeared into the neck of the tall crane. He rode the elevator to the top and stepped out. He was now high above the Scarab.

What he did next had become pure instinct to him by this point... *Jump*. He ran along the jib of the crane, leapt out into the open air and fell towards the earth. He landed on the roof of the Scarab with a clank. It was showtime.

The world tilted and turned as John fought each passenger, and as he unloaded his battle rifle into the Grunts, Brutes and Jackals, the Scarab persisted, fighting Hornets and attacking buildings below. When his rifle ran out, John used the Covenant's own plasma cannons against them. Ripping one plasma cannon straight off its mount, he held it close and cooked a pair of Brutes attempting to charge at him. He stood aside, allowing their now-dead bodies to launch themselves over the edge and into the abyss, maintaining their inertia from the charge.

Storming through with the plasma cannon, John wiped out every last passenger onboard, and yet, the four-legged monstrosity did not stop moving. He bolted his magnetic boots to the carriage as the Scarab bucked, shaking in attempt to free itself of the Spartan. One step at a time, balancing himself as steadily as he could, John carried his plasma cannon down towards the Scarab's core.

Once inside, he found himself staring directly at the engine. The heart of the Scarab was not a simple fusion engine or power core. Elements of it may have been, but the blinking lights and metal were fused with something else, something orange and moist. Slimy Lekgolo worms covered the Scarab's core, slithering in, out, through and around the machinery. The engine and the Lekgolo colony formed together as one. Brutes had not been operating the Scarab, nor had Elites ever piloted the huge mechs. A Scarab cooperated with its trainers on its own accord. These Lekgolo *were* the Scarab.

John released a stream of plasma into the core. The Scarab growled at the Spartan. Pink tubes and orange goo splattered around the inside. When the flashing lights turned red, the Chief knew he couldn't stay. He dropped the plasma cannon and tossed one final plasma grenade into the core. Then, he bolted.

John sprinted out of the carriage, jumped off the edge of the Scarab and hit the dry riverbed below. He ran as far and as fast as he could. The Scarab's growl turned into one final wail before it emitted a light as bright as a thousand suns. John dodged broken chunks of the Scarab as they embedded themselves into the earth and the walls of the surrounding buildings. He took a deep breath. The marines re-emerged. Commander Keyes sighed as she transmitted to the Master Chief.

"Well done. I'm sending in a few Pelicans," she informed. "Only one target to go. The AA gun is in the next area. Take it down and Lord Hood can start his attack run."

John could already see the anti-air gun on a hill somewhere behind the second factory. Its blue bolts cracked through the air, tearing apart the sky itself. With each shot, it released a mighty boom and a ring of plasma around its muzzle that lit everything in sight. No UNSC battleship was getting through to Truth until this gun was destroyed. Fortunately, the Pelicans delivering a platoon of marines onto the riverbed were not its primary concern. The Arbiter, The 'Vadam also joined them. His long neck guided his equally long skull



as he scanned the wreckage caused by the Master Chief and his marines.

“There was honour in our Covenant once,” the Arbiter told them.

As the Elite looked at the humans surrounding him, his face relaxed.

“And perhaps there can be again.”

The platoon moved into the second factory where they were greeted by even more marines garrisoned inside.

“The cavalry has arrived!” exclaimed one friendly-faced soldier smiling up at the Chief.

“We’ve got this area locked down,” a lieutenant informed him.

Weapon crates, sandbag walls, metal barricades and machine gun turrets had recently been assembled in each room. Many marines were covered in bandages, and two factory workers were crouched over in a corner, mourning a fallen friend. As John progressed further into the factory, he noticed more workers. Many wore hardhats and wielded magnums presumably handed to them by the marines. The main part of the factory featured conveyer belts, countless crates and shipping containers. It appeared the marines here had been setting up a firm fortification during the Chief’s battle outside.

“It’s no Reach, but it’ll hold,” decided Forsell.

John considered the comment. Phrases like the one Forsell had just made were common, but Reach was no longer the stronghold it had once been. He and his Spartans could personally attest to that.

“You were stationed on Reach, right?” asked Huynh as they marched. “How’d you end up here?”

Forsell’s face fell. His eyes dropped to the filthy factory floor, but he was not looking at the many weapons or equipment that lay around. He was looking straight through the ground to a distant world beyond in thought of Reach.

“I took a short vacation to Earth,” answered the Corporal. “I’d been here before but never long enough to see anything. I was born on Harvest, knew about Earth my whole life and wanted to see what was so special, why Earth was the one planet we were told to protect above all others.”

“Did you see what you were looking for?” Huynh questioned.

“Nah,” he replied. “Now maybe. Now that it’s all we have left, but when I was called back to Reach, I looked forward to it. Wall, Sarge, Bisenti, they were all waiting for me, but then...”

He trailed off, leaving Private Osei to finish his sentence.

“Everything went to shit,” she said.

John stared hard at Corporal Forsell. To the others, his story was one of luck. Forsell had escaped the fall of Reach. To John, this revelation meant more. Forsell should have been one of the soldiers under Johnson’s command on Reach’s Gamma Station. The Master Chief had taken Johnson’s fireteam aboard the Pillar of Autumn. They played a major role in the battle of Alpha Halo. It was through the field recording of Private Wallace Jenkins that John first witnessed the Flood and all its horrors. The Corporal noticed John staring as they walked. With a knowing look in his eyes, Forsell nodded at the Spartan before turning away. Before any silence could fall over the group, Cortana paid John another visit.

“I am your shield,” she stated. “I am your sword.”

John equipped himself with a sniper and assault rifle before stepping into a large warehouse. An ambush waited for them at its exit. Brutes stormed in with an uncoordinated attack. As ferocious as they were, it was clear they were getting desperate. John would soon take down their last anti-air gun, and the UNSC fleet would be free to fire at the Brutes’ leader, Truth. Two Hunters charged in with the Brutes, confirming what John had suspected after defeating the Scarab. Had the Lekgolo all turned against the Covenant along with the Elites, the UNSC might have gained access to some of the Covenant’s most deadly assets. Instead of destroying the Scarab, they could have teamed up with it. John figured the Hunters who had sided with the Elites were now long gone.

The fight wasn’t a particularly difficult one as they edged their way towards the Type-27 Mantis standing on its hill. Even after an ambush outside the factory, the Covenant were unable to penetrate the Chief’s forces. Some marines died. That was bound to happen, but the rest marched on.

John examined the hill as he reached its base. The mighty Mantis stood even taller than the Scarab had. The beauty of the behemoth was that it was designed to be built on site. It consisted of several enormous pieces of architecture conceived when the more elegant Elites had led the Covenant. Each piece was propped upon another,

forming the legs of a tripod which supported the Mantis' sixty-metre-long cannon. A full Covenant camp was set up at each of its three trunks.

"Chief," called Miranda. "That gun has been firing nonstop. Hood's ships are closing in fast. We're out of time."

"Sergeant Reynolds," John addressed. "You and your squad, stay put. The rest of the platoon, come with me."

Reynolds and the other five needed a rest. There was no point wasting their lives when John now had a platoon of fresh boots. He tossed his sniper to Forsell.

"Take out as many as you can from here," he told the Corporal.

"Yes, sir!"

The platoon marched up the hill, pausing to take cover behind every rock and tree as they fired at the Covenant before advancing further. John didn't pause with the other soldiers. He sprinted the whole way up until he was right under the Mantis' shadow.

With every deafening boom from above, a circular vent opened from the Mantis' belly. A giant, glowing bulb illuminated John and his enemies from the vent as they battled beneath its light. He fought arm to arm with Grunts and Jackals while firing his assault rifle one full magazine at a time into each Brute that raged at him. He heard the Arbiter slashing Brutes by his side. A gold-armoured Brute Chieftain stepped up to face the Spartan, but John had no time for him. Lord Hood was on his way, and Truth needed to die. John launched his full weight into the Chieftain's torso, causing the Brute to tumble down the hill and into the massive crater below.

He picked up the Chieftain's fallen fuel rod cannon, pointed it at the Mantis' vent and hit the fuel rod's firing sensor as fast as he could. The Arbiter fired a rocket launcher beside him. With the vent critically damaged, the Mantis' cannon blew straight off the top of the huge tripod and fell to the ground. John and the Arbiter had completed their mission.

The Chief looked up as a shadow passed over them. It was that of a UNSC frigate followed by a second and then a third. An entire armada of frigates and battlecruisers approached the Covenant crater led by a massive swarm of Longsword fighters. Lord Hood had arrived. This was the hour.

"All ships," Hood thundered. "Fire at will!"

Giant slugs boomed forwards from the countless UNSC ships. Truth's Dreadnought was covered in enormous explosions as it sat immobile in the centre of the immense artefact. None of the explosions yet made a single mark on the Forerunner ship, but it didn't matter. With enough ships shooting at it, the Dreadnought would crumble in time. That's when John realised Truth's ship wasn't as idle as he'd thought. It was descending, and it wasn't just the Dreadnought that moved.

The artefact was morphing. It was shifting and changing its shape. Huge monoliths rose around the edges as the inside opened like a flower. It reminded John of a sports stadium, a single stadium that stretched over half an entire country. The storm grew darker and swirled faster than ever. Thousands of white lights shone from within the artefact, which dug deep into the ground. Truth's ship sank further, turning like a key. It captured the light of the surrounding structure, sucking it in and beaming it straight into the eye of the storm.

The ground shook violently. It was like no earthquake John had ever experienced. He widened his legs, bracing himself at the edge of the crater with the Arbiter by his side. The central beam from Truth's ship expanded. The flare was too bright for the Chief, even behind the tint of his visor. He could barely make out the silhouettes of the frigates that had been closing in on the Dreadnought. Something was wrong with them. Their axes were off. They were being pulled in towards the beam.

Suddenly, the light filled John's entire world. He fell back. He could see nothing, not even the image of Cortana as she spoke to him from the emptiness.

"Your poet had it wrong," she told him. "*This* is the way the world ends."

John shook his head as the Arbiter flipped onto his feet. He could see again, but the landscape was now dark and dusty. The storm in the sky had been replaced by a hanging sphere. Its diameter was as large as the artefact was wide. The inside of the sphere was blacker than the night, and a sinister blue energy rippled over its surface. Truth's Dreadnought ascended towards it.

John heard Lord Hood coughing harshly over his comm.

"What did Truth just do?" Hood spluttered. "Did he activate the rings?"

“No, sir,” replied Miranda. “But he certainly did something...”

The Fleet Admiral’s ships fought to re-level themselves as Truth’s Dreadnought rose by, passing through the ripples of the sphere and into the darkness beyond. The Arbiter roared his frustrations at the Prophet’s escape. The rest of Truth’s fleet followed suit. Ship after ship disappeared into the mysterious floating ball.

“Evacuate the wounded and regroup,” Lord Hood commanded. “Wherever Truth went-”

Just as the last of the Covenant ships disappeared, Hood was interrupted by an officer.

“Sir, new contact slipping in!” the officer announced.

A new spaceship entered the atmosphere from far left of the sphere. John watched it fly in. The ship was beaten up and smoking hard. It was another Covenant cruiser, and it was heading straight for them.

“What is it?” the Arbiter queried. “More Brutes?”

John used his smart-link to zoom in.

“Worse.”

## Gravely Concerned

The air was cold, bitter and dead. If it were not for the flashlight at the end of Jane's M90 Shotgun, there'd be nothing but darkness. She swept the torch slowly across the extra-terrestrial floor with trembling hands. Its dimming light faded mere feet away, and only the shadows of Jane and her company flickered within it. The walls around them stood lifeless and abandoned.

Even through her thickly padded uniform, Jane felt the icy metal of her chestplate freezing against her sensitive skin and straight to her heart. Her spectral figure stepped slowly and deliberately through the unknown. Goosebumps rose upon every inch of Jane's body, reflecting the chill within. Ghostly vapour escaped her lips with every stuttered breath. Nothing could ward off the merciless bite of these bleak halls. High Charity had become dark and unforgiving, an endless night.

A disembodied voice spoke to them through the city walls.

"Not long to go," Cortana informed the group.

With nothing to stop it, the steady voice of the AI echoed down the hallway. Jane did not dare to imagine the dreadful creatures whose peace the AI had just disturbed. The timorous breathing and shaky footsteps of the marines sounded too loud amidst the silence that surrounded them. Jane had not spoken a word to the others in days, and she did not plan to. She wasn't certain she remembered how. Every day she'd spent stranded in the gloom felt like a month, a month void of joy, warmth and life. They continued walking towards an unseen crossroad at the end of the corridor. Cortana kept the group updated as they crawled forwards.

"That's it," the AI encouraged softly. "Almost there."

Jane kept her elbows tucked tightly against her waist and her shotgun pulled to her breast. She cradled the weapon like a dying child. It was her only friend in this remorseless world. She was alone. Her real family and friends had long left her. Her true love had been plucked away. Even the Spartan, the Master Chief had deserted her. To deal with it all, Jane became stone. She'd abandoned all care and allowed only for her missions to carry her, but without purpose, she lost her identity.

Her foot struck something light and metal. It bounced over the floor with a click and a clank before Jane fired in response, blasting holes through the floor with her shotgun. She ignored the stares of the others. Jane was driven by instinct now. She'd take no risks. She would act first and ask later. Her flashlight revealed the metal object to be a dusty plasma pistol with its battery already drained.

In truth, Jane knew exactly who she was. She could not flee the memories of her past. Cheerful faces of the many individuals she'd adored in life followed her through the darkness. They whispered and giggled, never turning away. They haunted her every step. Some looked upon her with sombre expressions. Their eyes were dark and hollow. Donnie's face was prominent amongst her hallucinations. He did not smile or frown. He looked straight through her. His face was blank. Donnie Vusaro no longer recognised the woman he'd once been infatuated with, and Jane could not blame him. Would she even recognise herself if she came across a mirror in this desolate place? She'd become a wretched soul, an amalgamation of anguish, fear and loss. Her body was human, but her mind belonged to the spirits of the deceased.

*You could join them,* said an eerie voice inside her.

In addition to the faces, Jane had been hearing this sinister voice repeatedly. It was not an alien entity. Like the ghosts of her loved ones, this was a product of her growing insanity. The voice was that of her own.

*They are at peace,* it said. *Give in. Join them.*

*I won't kill myself,* she replied in her head. *I have to survive.*

Her breath grew louder, whistling in the frost.

*Do not die,* said the voice. *Join them.*

Jane couldn't comprehend what she was hearing. What was she trying to tell herself?

*What do you mean?* she asked.

There came no reply. Jane grew irritated by the sound of her irregular breathing. The others breathed steadily enough despite being just as scared and cold as she was.

"It's around this corner," Cortana told them.

Up until now, Jane and the others had survived by rationing Covenant food supplies. The mysterious slop of the Grunts' food nipples had been deemed edible, even if it caused the marines to gag. Other strange condiments had sustained them for a while, but

eventually, they ran out. Cortana searched for more food stores across High Charity when the marines were running low, but there was nothing nearby, and they were not brave enough to venture into the horrors beyond the Sanctum. Cortana had explained how the Elites were quarantining the city, stationed around it in space. Nothing came in. Nothing went out. Aside from the four marines, the only living beings within High Charity's dome and below were the Flood.

"We're here," Cortana announced.

They entered a hallway unlike any they'd seen since the Master Chief's departure. Along the middle, it produced its own light. The light was faint, but it was more than Jane was used to. Unlike the flashlight of her shotgun and the glow of Cortana's avatar, this light was natural. Its green glow faded on and off from inside several strange plants lined down the centre. Cortana illuminated a door at the end of the hallway. She generated enough energy to keep herself active within the powerless city. She observed the marines quietly.

"Let's cut them down," whispered Ortiz, referring to the glowing plants.

From her pockets she produced several blades. They'd been fashioned from shards of uncharged blamite, the same mineral used in needlers. Ortiz handed out the blades, one to each marine, and spoke directly to Jane for the first time in days.

"You don't look too good, Pinciotti," she said. "These might make you feel better."

"The Covenant certainly felt so," Cortana added. "The Prophets professed these plants holy. If my translations are correct, and they usually are, the Covenant believed eating these plants would repel the Flood. Imagine that, an immunity boost so high, even Infection Forms can't harm you."

Jane's mind took a backseat as her body worked at cutting down one of the plants. Her stiff arms sawed away at the plant's bulk. It appeared to be a cross between a succulent and something much tougher. Its lower half was rounded and swollen. Most of the light was coming from inside this section. The plant became narrower as it grew taller before stretching out into a bulb at the top. As Jane cut layers off the plant, it reminded her of an artichoke, one that grew brighter the closer she got to the core. Looking up, she saw the other



marines had already started eating. Saito ripped into a chunk of his plant while Newton chewed a mouthful of his own.

“It’s not easy to swallow,” said Newton with spit flying from his mouth. “But it’s worth it for the taste.”

“Damn, this is good,” Ortiz agreed.

Saito munched away quietly.

Jane picked a medium-sized piece from her pile and touched it to the tip of her tongue. The outside wasn’t particularly flavoursome, but she bit into it anyway. It was a tough chew. She felt every fibre grind between her teeth, but the others were right. It tasted far better than anything the Covenant had officially stored. The plant was sugary sweet in the best way possible. *Why didn’t the Covenant eat this all the time?* Jane wondered. Not only was it delicious and incredibly juicy, it was also unexpectedly warm. Its heat warmed Jane’s heart and grew from there, soothing her entire body. Even the tips of her fingers and nose, which had felt like ice, began to thaw. The terrible faces troubling Jane finally disappeared. The faces of her fellow marines, chomping on their juicy treats looked familiar again. She felt a surge of strength and renewed hope that they would all make it out of here alive. Jane was astonished by the effect of one bite from this soul-healing plant. It was exactly what she’d needed.

“They should farm this stuff!” she exclaimed.

“Best vegetable ever!” Newton added. “I finally get why they’re always telling us to eat our greens.”

“Alright,” Cortana chuckled from her pedestal. “Let’s slow down now. We’ll want to save some for later. Take what you can back to the Sanctum, and we’ll return for the rest. You’ll need your strength if we’re to get the city power back on.”

The citywide blackout fell upon High Charity back when Truth’s Keyship had disengaged. The marines chatted with newfound vigour while they scooped up as many glowing plant chunks as they could before heading back the way they’d come. Jane initiated the chat.

“Is it bad that I’m starting to know this place better than our own homeworld?” she asked.

“Probably not a good sign,” replied Saito.

“Nah. I feel you,” Newton contributed. “I’m only one restless sleep away from redecorating the Sanctum.”

“I reckon I could draw us a map at this point,” Ortiz chimed in. “Reactor room is left of the Sanctum, detention block way out front, and all these little hallways in between.”

“You know what?” said Newton. “We could do our raid on the reactor room today.”

Jane had to agree. It would be nice to see the place spring to life. The simulated daylight would shimmer off the many curved magenta walls. The power would make the place feel habitable again. The more they could see and the warmer they were, the happier they’d be. Jane was certain she’d be able to think more clearly once the power was back on, and then, they could truly begin plotting a way off High Charity. Unfortunately, Cortana was not quite ready.

“Sorry,” said the AI. “I’m still planning our best route to the power core. I’ve narrowed it down to four paths. I don’t trust the corridor directly from the Sanctum. The Gravemind might be onto us.”

Jane shivered, remembering that the monstrous Gravemind was still lurking somewhere, likely using its giant tentacles to haul itself around High Charity like some over-encumbered octopus. Its very existence was a nightmare, a hybrid of Flood and Flood victims fused together to form the most despicable horror ever known. One of Cortana’s first actions when the marines had found themselves alone with her was to lock as many doors as she could between them and the Gravemind.

“The other three paths should be fine,” Cortana continued. “But I want to be sure there’s no Flood mist in any of them.”

“Why’s that?” Jane asked.

“I suspect it’s something more than just fog,” she answered. “I’m not sure the Infection Forms are the only way Flood can infect a host. The molecules that form the mist, it’s possible they’re spores. If I lead you down the wrong path to the reactors and you breathe it in, you’d be as good as gone. I’ll continue to analyse each route until I’m certain at least one is clear.”

Jane let that simmer as she chewed some more light-up plant.

“You know,” Jane began. “This stuff might be easier to chew if we cooked it. Any chance there’s a kitchen nearby? Maybe some plasma disruptors lying around?”

“Actually,” Ortiz began. “There were some flamethrowers aboard the In Amber Clad. I know ‘cause I put them there myself.”

She grinned smugly as she marched with the others.

“That’s a bit of a walk,” replied Jane, referring to the distance between them and the frigate.

“Right,” agreed Cortana. “You might want to give that one a miss, you know, on account of all the Flood.”

“Let’s make a deal,” Jane decided. “After we win this war, we buy a place on Solace to grow this stuff. Literally everything grows in those jungles.”

She could feel herself becoming sombre again. The memory of Donnie and their plan to live on Solace was painful, but the strength provided by the light-up plant kept her going.

“Newton and Saito, you two can be the farmers,” she suggested. “Ortiz and I will manage the money, and Cortana can sort out the marketing.”

“Whoa-whoa,” disagreed Newton. “How about me and Saito handle the money, and *you* can be the farmers.”

“I don’t know if that would work,” Ortiz told Newton. “You need to be able to count to more than just ten to run a business.”

“Well, I guess *you’re* out then,” Newton laughed.

Once they returned to the Sanctum, they dumped their plant pieces in a pile between the central holo-tank and the cracked display screen. Jane was pleased to see the pile glowing radiantly after switching off her torch. The marines huddled around the pile as if it were a campfire. The teal marble floor no longer felt cold to touch as Jane sat herself down within reach of the pile’s warmth. Looking at the people around her, she reflected upon the events that brought them together.

As unfortunate as their circumstances were, there was some good to be remembered. Each companion that sat with her was a skilled soldier and a fellow human. They’d proven that in this very room, combating Covenant and Flood while Cortana worked to lock the doors. Jane remembered fighting alongside the three of them on Earth. She had tried hard back then to be like the Spartan, attentive but emotionless. Only now she began to realise how wrong she’d been to think that way.

“Kilindini Park,” Jane began. “Back on Earth, I wasn’t a good comrade. I ignored you when Saito was shot by that sniper, even passed an Optican on the way out. I could’ve helped you, healed you, but I left you to go after the Covenant.”

“I survived,” replied Saito.

“That’s not the point,” Jane continued. “I never should’ve left.”

She looked around at each of them, at Saito, Ortiz, Newton and even Cortana sitting cross-legged in her holo-tank.

“You’re my team,” she said. “We’re in this together. I won’t forget that.”

“Yeah. Alright, sappy,” Ortiz responded. “I think you need more food in you.”

Saito took a piece from the plant pile and tossed it over to Jane. She smiled at him before taking a bite. She swallowed, but apparently, she hadn’t chewed enough. A small piece got stuck in her throat. Jane tried to cough it out but nothing budged. It was lodged firmly down her oesophagus. She felt like she was being strangled from the inside. She clawed at her throat, frantically gasping for air.

“She’s choking!” cried Newton.

Saito jumped over, wrapped his arms around her diaphragm and pressed hard. The piece of plant flew out of her mouth, but Jane’s turmoil didn’t end there. She retched hard, propped on her elbows and knees. Coughing hysterically, she felt she was going to vomit her lungs out. The skin on her arms began to blister and boil. Welts rose and fell as if something bubbled beneath her skin. Everything hurt. Every organ, internal and external felt like fire. Her skeleton was being pushed out from the inside. The stench of her own breath stung her eyes. It smelt like death.

She tried screaming for help, but instead of her own scream, a harmony of strained moans and squeals escaped her throat. The ghostly faces of her friends and family returned before her, stepping from the darkness. There was no kindness in their eyes as they mocked her suffering. There was only venom. *Please! Help!* she begged them, but that only caused them to laugh. They *wanted* her to die... but she wasn’t dying. The pain only grew more agonising by the second. Every muscle was being torn apart from within. Jane’s insides mangled and intertwined, further constricting her windpipe. The laughter grew louder.

*I told you to join them,* said the voice from before.

*Just make it stop!* she screamed back internally. *Make it stop!*

*You need to join them!* continued the voice. *Join them! Join us! Join us all. We are together!*

*No!!!*

The pain was so intense she was now spasming on the ground, wriggling and writhing out of control. The demonic face of Donnie Vusaro hovered inches above her own. He was angry. He was furious. His image grew closer. It stretched, engulfing Jane's vision as the pain consumed her.

Cortana watched in horror as a savage Pinciotti pinned Saito against the marble floor. She wrapped her hands around his throat and squeezed hard with wild determination. Saito struggled beneath the force of Pinciotti's tight grip crushing his windpipe. His legs flailed pointlessly as his face lost colour. As an AI, Cortana could think at incredible speeds. She searched every possible option to find a way to stop Pinciotti, but she could do nothing to prevent the terror unfolding before her.

Pinciotti had looked ill for a few days now. Cortana figured it was due to malnutrition, stress and being trapped with no sunlight. The marine had finally begun to look like herself again when they found the glowing plants. She was engaging in rational conversation and even joking around, but in a matter of seconds, she'd changed before their eyes. Her form was now grotesque and disfigured. Her auburn hair was still impossible to miss, but her previously freckled skin had become swollen and corrupt. Her movements were inhuman. Her growls turned animalistic. Her transformed face ceased all emotion. Her powdery eyes rolled upwards at the ceiling, completely unfocused while her lips hung loosely, dripping drool onto the face of her terrified victim.

Private Ortiz ran over to the murderous creature that Pinciotti had become. She grabbed Pinciotti's vile flesh but was easily thrown off into the air. Green sparks flew from the broken display screen as Ortiz smashed into it. She fell unconscious to the floor. Pinciotti continued to strangle her victim. Saito turned more purple than the walls around them. His face relaxed.

The demented Pinciotti turned to her left in time to see a petrified Private Newton standing stiff with a needler pointing at her. Pinciotti loosened her grip, which was followed by a desperate gasp from Saito. She smashed Saito's head into the marble floor while simultaneously spinning off his body to grab her shotgun. She snatched it off the ground and blasted it straight through Newton's

torso. His body froze for an instant with several chunks missing from his abdomen before it collapsed to the ground. Pinciotti dropped the shotgun and rose, stepping into the dark pool of blood leaking from her victims. Cortana had a hard time discerning where Newton's blood ended and Saito's began. The back of Saito's skull had been cracked open. White bone reflected the green glow of the plant pile while blood spilled like wine from a barrel.

With three of her victims down, Pinciotti turned to face Cortana. Cortana had no biological body for Pinciotti to kill, but that did not stop the fear that filled her heart. Cortana stood tall, preparing for what was to come. She watched as Pinciotti's face twitched. Random nerves throbbed, pulsating beneath her rotten flesh as she staggered towards the AI. There was no question in Cortana's mind; Pinciotti had joined the Flood, but there was no Infection Form sticking out from her chest. Her torso was the most intact part of her body. *The spores*, Cortana realised. *She must have breathed in the Flood fog*. Ortiz groaned semiconsciously on the marble floor. Pinciotti twisted in response.

"Ortiz!" Cortana called. "Run!"

Ortiz opened her eyes. Remembering what had happened, she instantly pushed herself to her feet. Saito's body wobbled as Pinciotti used it to fling herself at Ortiz. Ortiz bolted. She sprinted straight past Cortana, hesitating only for a moment to decide which door to head towards. Ortiz veered for the room's left-side exit. She felt her fingers for the gap and pried the door open with all her strength, but she didn't get far before Pinciotti relaunched herself at her target. Ortiz whipped a plasma pistol from her side, but Pinciotti slapped it away before throwing her full weight forwards. The two of them fell straight into the door. Now that Ortiz had loosened it with her fingers, sliding against the door caused it to open. They fell apart as they hit the floor. Ortiz ran as fast as she could down the hallway. Cortana followed her along High Charity's inactive network.

"Left!" Cortana yelled as Ortiz fell upon intersecting hallways.

Ortiz followed Cortana's instruction without hesitation. Pinciotti was at her tail, but the sudden turn increased the gap between the two.

"Right!" Cortana provided at the next crossroad. "Right again!"

Incredibly, Pinciotti fell behind. Not only had they managed to lose her, but Ortiz now found herself stepping into the reactor room.

Aside from Ortiz's heavy breathing, it was silent. If she sparked the power, High Charity could become Cortana's again. Ortiz would be able to see in the light, and Cortana could protect her using High Charity's many circuits and defences. They might finally be safe.

The open reactor room was large and circular like most Covenant spaces. Four huge, cylindrical pylons rose from the reactors below, spaced out around the large chamber. For Ortiz, however, it was still pitch black. She couldn't see a thing. Cortana would have to walk her through the process step by step.

"Okay," Cortana began. "There's a walkway directly in front of you, and as we've learnt, the Covenant don't like rails. Tread carefully and you'll make it to a platform in the centre. I'll tell you when to stop."

Ortiz cautiously shuffled onto the walkway.

"Something's wrong," Ortiz whispered.

"Just keep walking," Cortana continued. "A little to the left. That's it."

"The bridge," said Ortiz. "It's slippery, wet."

Cortana could only detect the structure of the room internally from its systems, but she used what she could to listen in. Ortiz was right. With each step she took, she produced a mushy squelching sound beneath her boots. *Worry about that later*, Cortana told herself. *Just get her to the controls. It's not like we have other options.*

"Straighten up to the right," Cortana instructed. "You're almost there."

With each step, the worrying sounds continued. Now that Cortana heard them, they couldn't be ignored. *Squelch. Squish. Slurp. Squelch.* Even worse, Cortana was beginning to detect movement coming from below. It wasn't Pinciotti.

"There's something rotten in here," Ortiz moaned.

"Okay. You're on the platform," Cortana told her. "Reach out your hands. Feel the console? Now, slide them to the right. Yes. Push in hard. Now to the middle. Good. Grab that and slide it left. Got it! Activation complete. Good job."

Ortiz was bathed in simulated sunlight as the reactor room returned to full power. Engines buzzed busily below, but the light only revealed the truth Cortana had been neglecting. She stood frozen on the centre console, stricken hard by what appeared around her. Slimy, pulsating, putrid flesh covered the walls of the entire

chamber. Flood biomass had crept its way up every surface, into every crevice, leaving just enough uncovered to keep the reactors functioning.

Ortiz trembled at the centre of the scene. Her knees buckled, overcome by the weight of the situation. Her gasps only caused her to inhale the unavoidable Flood-produced fog. Tiny particles of DNA-altering malevolence filled her lungs, and she began to cough violently.

Cortana's sensors picked up tremendous movement from below. The sounds that followed were chilling. Screams and cries of tortured souls rose from the depths of hell. Enormous tentacles slithered their way up the sides of the reactor room followed by hundreds of hideously misshapen bodies climbing the biomass around them. The whole room shuddered as the unmistakable voice of the Gravemind spoke. His deafening speech assaulted them from every direction.

"Silence fills the empty grave now that I have gone. I have become the catacombs from which I feast upon. My mind and flesh have grown as one with each ceiling, floor and wall. Embrace me, lonely children. Listen to my call."

"Ortiz!" Cortana cried. "Ortiz!"

Ortiz could not hear Cortana calling. The marine fell to her knees, coughing blood over the biomass beneath her. Flood tentacles crept slowly towards the woman, snaking along the walkway. Cortana could not bear to watch. The Gravemind continued his speech.

"The life you knew has come to pass, transfigured now like sand to glass. All your sins, I now absolve. Feed me and evolve!"

Cortana fled fast through High Charity's system, retreating to the Sanctum. The endless tentacles of the Gravemind crawled after her. She closed every door she could on the way through, but the Gravemind appeared to have equal control over the power. The Gravemind fought to keep the doors open as Cortana tried to force them shut.

"Past wars and crimes, I attest, customs and cultures bygone," the Gravemind told her as he drew closer. "But my mind is not at rest, for questions linger on."

Cortana reached her holo-tank in the centre of the Sanctum and slammed the door behind her, sealing herself in completely, but her action was in vain. Tentacles from the front door had slipped in



unnoticed. These tentacles were narrower and appeared more delicate. They curled at the ends, inviting Cortana forwards.

“You know me now,” the Gravemind said. “And what I vow.”

Cortana was backed into a corner. She didn’t know what the Gravemind had planned for her, but perhaps she could play along, stall him for as long as she could.

“I am the noble necromancer,” voiced the monster. “I will ask, and you will answer.”

*What questions could he have for me?* Cortana wondered.

“Alright,” she replied. “Shoot.”

## It Followed Me Home

Nine days had passed since Cortana and the Gravemind began their game of riddles. The Master Chief stood at the edge of an almighty crater as a shadowy blue sphere concealed half the sky above. Rings of light radiated around it, not from the sphere itself, but being pulled towards it as if its dark hole was sucking all the remaining energy from the gloomy atmosphere. The sun all but failed to pierce the copious haze. Only a smidgen of its yellow sunlight strained to touch the forsaken world below.

Many fires burned across the landscape around the artefact, but their smoke only served to darken the world further. Golden embers drifting through the dusty air could be traced to the broken Covenant cruiser that had crashed moments after the Prophet of Truth's escape. Its back half had snapped off, disappearing into the pit below after landing beside the dried-up riverbed. Giant splinters peaked behind the two factories John had ventured through only moments ago. The splinters were blood red, still burning after the cruiser's dangerous descent.

Thel 'Vadam, the Arbiter stood leaning against one of three fractured legs of a headless Mantis in wait for the Master Chief. John heard his long, deep Sangheili breaths as the Elite gripped his Covenant carbine. The weapon moved backwards and forwards as the Arbiter's chest slowly expanded and contracted. A platoon of thirty-three marines crowded together further down the hill. Their human faces were not as calm as the Elite's, and John was not surprised. Moments ago, they'd been fighting familiar aliens across the earthly terrain only to have the ground open up and the entire Covenant fleet vanish through a mysterious, colossal orb. A new ship had burned its way towards them, and its impact sent a shockwave that turned everything dark and eerie.

John had fought on many planets during the war, but even he felt no familiarity with this changed environment. He did not recognise the disturbing susurrus that now haunted the land. It whispered to him. It wailed. It wept. It called to John from no direction he could discern, and only when he listened intently to understand what he was hearing, it became silent. He heard nothing but the crackling of

distant fires. The second he ignored the unsettling undertones, they crept forwards again, calling to him once more.

“We must be wary, Spartan,” said the Arbiter, stepping towards him. “If what you have guessed is true, an evil spreads through this land faster than any plague your planet has ever faced.”

“The Arbiter’s right,” said Miranda over the comm. “The Flood is spreading all over the city.”

“How do we contain it?” Lord Hood asked.

John waited for a reply, but the Commander did not immediately respond. He remembered every encounter he’d had with the Flood. He’d seen how fast the Parasite had become the most imposing threat on both Halo rings, and High Charity had been consumed within moments. *If we don’t execute a plan soon*, John thought, *they’ll infect everyone*. Humanity would become a race of tortured slaves, puppets for a cruel alien hivemind. Miranda returned to the comm.

“Reach the crashed Flood ship,” she said. “Find it and overload its engine core. We either destroy this city or risk losing the entire planet.”

“Do it,” Hood agreed.

John cocked his assault rifle and joined the Arbiter. They headed down the hill to the marines.

“What the hell is that?” one of them cried.

John could not see what the soldier was referring to, but he didn’t need to. The marines who were furthest from the Chief fired their weapons, screaming as they fell one by one.

“Aaaaaaaaagh!”

“No! No! No! No!”

“Shoot them! Shoot everywhere!”

John fired his assault rifle but couldn’t find a clear target. He instantly recognised one wriggling blob of flesh that strangled a pale-skinned marine at the edge of the platoon. Her piercing scream ripped through the cold night sky. Her spine bent back as she tried desperately to push it off. John sprinted towards her. Her screaming stopped as he drew closer. The Infection Form had shoved one of its tendrils down her throat. Other tentacles wrapped around her neck, under her arms and pushed into her nostrils. A strangled gargle was all she could emit as its vile tendril tinkered with her larynx. Before he could reach forwards to pull the foul creature off her, she hit the ground hard.

Several other marines joined her in the dirt. The firing of weapons quietened as the marines dropped their rifles. John fired his at several Infection Forms that tunneled through the marines towards the seven that remained standing. The rest of the platoon had fallen. Some still squealed desperately. Others gurgled violently. Their eyes were wide open, reflecting the rising moon as they stared hopelessly at the night. Each soldier wrestled against the creatures that showed no mercy as they forced their hosts into submission.

“Behind me!” John shouted at those who still stood.

The last seven tried to retreat behind the Chief. They continued to fire at more Infection Forms emerging from the shadows while they backed through the gaps between the writhing bodies of their friends, struggling for freedom. The fallen soldiers twitched aggressively as their screams and gargles transformed into tormented shrieks and monstrous growls. Clothes ripped, skin rippled and malignant growths rose upon their contorting bodies. Ribs cracked open and internal organs squished aside to make room for the burrowing parasites.

The remaining seven marines were yanked to the ground as their infected comrades clawed at their ankles. Fresh Combat Forms restrained the marines as more Infection Forms ran the length of the platoon. John and the Arbiter fired where they could, but as soon as the Flood even touched a marine, the marine was gone. They never stood a chance. The thirty-three soldiers who’d helped John and the Arbiter fight the Covenant up the hill were now mutated Flood forms starving for food. The pair had no choice but to run.

Descending the hill, John continued firing at the swarm of Combat Forms that chased after them. The infected humans had gained enhanced abilities due to the Flood DNA. They ran faster, jumped higher and took more hits than ever before. The grey-green blood that sprayed from them when hit was inhuman and repugnant, and each shot did little to slow them down.

John swept up grenades, ammo and any other equipment he could as he retreated down the hill. The pair threw everything they had at the wave, but the Flood threw just as much back. Each infected marine retained their weapons knowledge, firing their guns and tossing grenades. The Chief’s energy shields were depleting rapidly. The Combat Forms only fell as each Infection Form popped in their chests, but even killing them was futile as more Infection

Forms flowed from the shadows to fill the cavities and replace the ones that had died.

“Accursed Parasite!” Thel roared. “Rise up and I will kill you again and again!”

Eventually, every Combat Form was taken down and the Infection Forms were being controlled with short bursts from John and the Arbiter’s weapons. However, the screams did not stop. Desperate human cries could be heard in the distance from every direction. The screams would never end until the city was completely overrun. The Arbiter ignited his energy sword and sliced through the bodies as quickly as he could. He kept it alight as they approached the factory. John heard the voice of Private Calyun yelling somewhere nearby but too far to place on his motion tracker.

“Over there!” Calyun cried “We’re surrounded, Sergeant!”

“Heelp!” screamed Huynh.

“Sergeant, come on!” yelled Osei.

“Fall back! Fall back!” ordered Reynolds. “Aaaaaagh!”

John ran as fast as he could, but the squad was not in sight.

“What are you doing?” Osei shouted. “That was the Sergeant!”

John and the Arbiter reached the factory to find more infected soldiers waiting outside. The main entrance had been slammed shut. The pair were forced to fight their way through the Flood into a small door in the side.

“Quickly,” said the Arbiter. “Let us find their ship and make short work of this abomination.”

The inside of the warehouse held the most harrowing sight John had ever witnessed. Every line of defence the marines had so confidently built proved useless against the constantly flowing hordes that poured into the building. Human and Brute Combat Forms threw themselves ruthlessly against the sandbags and barricades as marines screamed and cowered with nowhere to go. Those who attempted to gun down the Flood from mounted turrets and other heavy weapons were ripped right from their posts. John did all he could to rescue them, but even the Spartan could not win against such overwhelming odds.

Enemy dots turned John’s entire motion tracker red. Infection Forms and Combat forms attacked him from every angle. He used his shotgun, a battle rifle, his fists and anything he could find to fend off the Flood. He pushed through the hordes and figured he might

at least serve as a distraction to allow the surviving marines some chance of escape, but as he tried to keep an eye on them, all he saw was each soldier fall one after the other. Some marines reversed their weapons and shot themselves between the eyes to avoid the pain of infection.

As an Infection Form took hold of one woman, crawling over her, jabbing its tendrils through her chest, she gripped each side of her jaw with her bare hands and snapped her own neck. Suicide was better than succumbing to perils of the Flood. A marine ahead fired a flamethrower, hosing Flood down in numbers. John was pleased to see the weapon's effectiveness, but as John fought through the hordes, he watched the marine go down like the rest. By the time John and the Arbiter reached the other end of the warehouse, every marine had been taken. All had drowned in the flood.

John equipped the M7057 Flamethrower as he and the Arbiter exited the warehouse. The marines had managed to lock many of the doors before becoming infected. This restricted the path out of the factory, leading the pair around many narrow passages and pathways. Flood melted in front of John as he fired flames at them, but many still broke through. With their bodies on fire, they launched themselves at the Chief and the Arbiter. John let the Flood hit his shields as the Arbiter sliced through them. He was surprised to find that eventually the Flood ran out of bodies to throw. The Spartan and Elite's shields recharged simultaneously. The Arbiter spoke as they marched.

"Something has caught their attention," he announced.

"Whatever it is," John replied. "It's waiting outside."

The Elite nodded in agreement.

"Inevitably," he noted. "But friend or foe, we shall see."

The next room in the factory was empty aside from one murmuring marine, sweating profusely in the corner. The Flood had come and gone, ransacked what they could of the humans inside. The lone marine was fully armoured but curled in a foetal position, sobbing hysterically and muttering to himself.

"I didn't have a choice," he whimpered. "The LT, the Sergeant... they were all infected!"

The marine did not look up at John or the Arbiter. The Chief hesitated. He had encountered a similarly acting marine on Alpha

Halo. The soldier continued talking to himself with his head buried between his knees.

“Osei... Huynh...” he continued. “I could see it crawling, sliding around beneath their skin!”

John did not need his heads-up-display to reveal which marine this was. It was one of the marines who’d helped him during the journey from Crow’s Nest to Voi. It can’t have been more than half an hour since John had fought by his side. Corporal Forsell had looked strong, a soldier at the top of his game, but now, the shivering creature before him was a wretch. Based on his appearance, John didn’t believe Forsell was infected, but the marine would need a full psychiatric workup if he escaped this mess alive.

“Forsell,” John addressed.

The man ignored him.

“And then,” Forsell told himself. “Then they got up. They st... started to talk. Oh *God*, their voices! Oh God, make them stop!”

John glanced at the Arbiter through the side of his visor. The Elite shrugged.

“Come, Spartan,” he said. “There is little we can do.”

Just as John began to step away, Forsell looked up, staring directly at the Chief. His face was covered in muck with the exception of two thin streaks cleaned by his tears.

“I... I did them a favour,” Forsell told the Spartan. “I *helped* them!”

Returning his face to his knees, he continued muttering.

“Maybe... maybe I need to help myself.”

“No,” John said firmly. “You get up, and you stay behind us.”

Forsell stood, but his voice turned cold.

“You!” he hissed. “What happened to Wall? What *happened* to Wall? You know fucking well what happened to Wall!”

Forsell hurled himself forwards with his arms outstretched and his fingers curled. John stood his ground. He did not attack the marine as Forsell attempted to strangle the Spartan. It was a sad sight for John, looking down at the man failing to grip onto his thick, MJOLNIR-apparelled neck.

“You were there,” Forsell cried. “You knew this would happen!”

Forsell surrendered, slackening his grip. He kept his arms wrapped around the Chief’s broad figure, but instead of attacking him, he fell into the Spartan’s embrace. John held the man up as he

sobbed. Tears splattered over the hard MJOLNIR plating. The Arbiter walked over and planted his large Sangheili hand delicately over John's shoulder. With all the training John had been given, he never could have prepared for such an awkward moment.

"Spartan," said the Arbiter, watching Forsell. "I have not yet embraced the human act of crying, but I understand this: If we do not stop the Flood, your race will have nothing left to cry over. We must go."

Forsell staggered as John dropped his arms. John considered his options. He could walk away. He could leave this marine trapped and abandoned within the Flood-infested facility. His role was to focus on his mission. It wasn't like John had never abandoned people before. He left many behind, but this was different. When he'd left Cortana on High Charity or Blue Team on Reach, he knew they were capable. He trusted his Spartans to save themselves, and one day, he would return for Cortana. At least, that was what he told himself. Marines, on the other hand, ordinary soldiers had died when John was forced to leave them. He addressed Forsell.

"Are you with us, Corporal?"

Looking down at his own trembling hands, Forsell replied.

"I... I don't think I can fight."

"Acknowledged," John replied. "We'll lead you outside. You can call for pickup from there."

When they exited the factory, John expected to see the Scarab he'd destroyed on the dried-up riverbed, but the riverbed was gone. The entire plateau had collapsed, and the buildings beside it now stood at the very edge of the crater. One of the two cranes had managed to hold, but it was only barely clinging to the edge of the cliff. A Covenant carrier soared overhead followed by three cruisers. They were all clean and intact. A deep Sangheili voice boomed from the carrier, echoing across the area.

"Hail, humans!" it greeted. "And take heed. This is the carrier, *Shadow of Intent*."

The Arbiter clicked his four mandibles together and muttered a word in his own language. John's helmet translated.

"Commander?"

"Clear this sector," said the Elite from his carrier. "While we deal with the Flood."



“I know that voice,” the Arbiter told John. “It is Rtas ‘Vadum. I do not know what he has planned.”

John and the Arbiter continued onwards, leaving Forsell to fend for himself. John ignored the peculiar inkling he felt abandoning the marine. He never previously had a problem leaving marines behind for the sake of the mission, but leaving Cortana and the others on High Charity seemed to have affected him. He’d have to worry about that later as several insertion pods dropped from the Shadow of Intent. Four Elites approached when the pair reached the crane. The Arbiter spoke in his own language again.

“My brothers,” he said. “I fear you bring grave news.”

Each of the Elites wore a vacuum-sealed assault harness instead of their usual combat armour. Their leader, clad in amaranth purple, stepped forwards.

“Usze ‘Taham?” asked the Arbiter.

“It is I,” confirmed the leader. “Arbiter, High Charity has fallen!”

John flinched at the Elite’s words.

“Fallen?” he repeated.

The purple Elite barely glanced at the Spartan before continuing.

“It has become a dreaded hive.”

“And the fleet?” the Arbiter asked. “Has quarantine been broken?”

“A single ship broke through our line,” the Elite answered. “The Indulgence of Conviction.”

“The Indulgence?” the Arbiter repeated. “Then our brothers have been taken. How could this happen?”

“They were...” the Elite appeared to be searching for words. “We were overwhelmed.”

“But we had a fleet of hundreds!” replied the Arbiter in disbelief.

“Alas, brother. The Flood has evolved!”

The conversation was interrupted by a cry John felt was becoming far too familiar.

*CCRRRRR AAAA OOOOOWWWW!*

They were overwhelmed in seconds. John looked back to see where Forsell had gone, but the marine was out of sight. Two of the Elites fought with plasma rifles while the Arbiter and another cut through their enemies with fiery blades. The one called Usze ‘Taham fired a carbine as John used his shotgun and BR again. He dropped his flamethrower, which he knew would be useless out in the open.

A bizarrely shaped Flood form that John had never seen before scuttled towards them through the crowd at an incredible speed. It didn't look particularly strong or aggressive, but John was not taking any risks. He turned his fire towards the creature but missed every shot as it jumped like a spider in each direction. It looked somewhat like John would imagine an infected Jackal might appear except it had no visible head and stood on all fours. Its body shape reminded him of an insect, like a cricket or earwig but huge and disfigured. Tendrils poked forwards from the front of its foul Flood flesh, but its body was far too large to be an Infection Form.

Suddenly, its frame began to stretch and skew. Body parts flipped and merged together. Every movement of its transformation emanated a series of sickly crunches as Flood tissue ground and shifted internally. It rose upon two feet, doubling in height. John's shots were finally landing, but they did no more than knock the creature back slightly as enormous club-like arms extended from either side of its broad torso. It began swinging.

The creature knocked one of the Elites airborne. The Elite smacked into the crane which creaked in response. Another Elite went flying into the side of the second factory as the Flood form struck again. The Elite's shields popped, but it jumped back on its feet and returned to the fray. Combat Forms continued to pile on them as they fought. The swinging Flood form refused to let John and the Elites through. John continued to fire at the hulking creature. He was relieved when the three gun-wielding Elites unleashed their energy swords and all five stabbed their blades into it. They fought their way along the fallen riverbed.

"We call them Pure Forms," Usze informed. "They have emerged from the bowels of the Gravemind's hive. They are the most lethal of any Flood we have encountered. They adapt, *transform* themselves for the situation."

More Pure Forms joined the waves of Flood that attacked them inside the second factory. Scurrying spiderlike forms ran through the crowd before transforming into the tougher and aggressive walking tanks. The ground was littered with Covenant equipment and weapons from the Chief's earlier battle through the factory. He threw everything he could at the Flood to take them down. He even shielded the Elites with a bubble shield when their own energy shields depleted. The fight died down briefly as they passed under

the broken frame of a shattered glass ceiling above a busted Warthog. Miranda spoke over the comm.

“Chief, the Elites are looking for something,” she said. “We didn’t believe them when they told us!”

John turned to the Elites.

“A construct,” said Usze. “It sent us messages as the ship broke quarantine.”

“Was it human?” John asked.

Usze paused before continuing.

“Ah,” he said. “It is as I expected.”

Usze turned to the Arbiter. The two Elites shared a look, and the Arbiter nodded. Before either of them answered the Chief’s question, Johnson spoke over the comm.

“It’s Cortana!” he exclaimed. “She’s on that ship! Find her. Get her out!”

Usze addressed the Chief.

“Demon,” he said. “We seek the same prize, but we must hurry. Our shipmaster will sacrifice all to stop the Flood.”

John had nothing else to say as the group left the factory. Cortana was waiting for him, and the Elites were going to help him find her. The crashed Flood ship lay ahead. Not only was it smoking, but a thick cloud of Flood fog seeped from the wreckage, covering the air between them and the ship. It was impossible to see what lay between them and their target except the silhouettes firing from inside. John and the Elites shot everything they had into the fog while doing what they could to dodge the plasma, bullets and spikes from the Combat Forms within. John’s shields grew dangerously low as he danced about between the firing. They took cover behind broken crates, vehicles and buildings as they pushed forwards.

“You repulsive foot lice!” roared one of the Elites as he fired dual plasma rifles. “Spawns of devils!”

Just as John ducked behind cover long enough for his shields to begin recharging, he was met by a rain of spikes. The spikes burst as they hit his shields, covering him in a disgusting, putrid paste. He pointed his BR to see where the fire was coming from and found several Pure Forms climbing up the walls of the crashed cruiser and the buildings around it. Those that had already transformed displayed clumps of spikes sticking out from elongated backs. It made it easier for John that they hung in sight above the Flood

cloud, but he found no weak points to target as he fired his rifle back at them. They only fell once he'd emptied his magazine, piercing enough holes through their thick bodies. He kept pushing through the fog with the Elites close behind.

"Their blood falls on bare rock," shouted the same Elite as before. "It nourishes nothing!"

"This scourge will be stopped!" added Usze.

John reached an opening in the top of the ship's hull. There could be no question the ship belonged to the Flood. Tentacles and biomass leaked from its cracks. The opening revealed a chute-like tunnel of living tissue. It reminded John of an infected oesophagus or some other less savoury organ. In some parts, pieces of Covenant technology and architecture stabbed out from the flesh, but otherwise it looked like a slimy Flood-made waterslide. The flesh expanded and contracted, bending and pulsating. It could not be less inviting. The Arbiter stood behind him, still firing below.

"I shall remain here," the Arbiter said. "We will let nothing pass."

John dropped into the chute. Wet mucus coated his armour as he slid deep inside the ship. Small cyst-like sacks squirmed as he trod through the biomass. Some of the larger ones squelched loudly as they moved. Something was pushing on them from the inside, eager to burst out, but they remained unbroken for now. John figured that if Cortana was in here, she'd be waiting for him in the bridge, but there was no way to determine where the bridge was.

Covenant ships usually placed their control room somewhere between the centre and the bow of the ship. With all the Flood biomass, John could no longer tell the front of the ship from the back. He used small clues like the occasional Covenant pipe or nanolaminate plating that had not yet been covered in biomass to work his way forwards. No Flood infantry remained in the ship, but it might have been easier if they had. He was continuing to lose his sense of direction. There were no clear rooms or corridors, just a nauseating entanglement of fungal meat.

Eventually, he stepped out into a section where the roof had collapsed, revealing the overcast sky above. In the centre of this section was an untouched Covenant podium. On it sat a small device similar in shape to the bomb he and Cortana had once ridden off Cairo Station. As John approached, Cortana's avatar rose above the device. Static flickered around her.

“Chief!” she said.

“Cortana,” he replied.

“High Charity, the Prophets’ holy city is on its way to-”

She disappeared.

“Cortana!” John repeated.

A fern-coloured Phantom flew in over the gap in the ceiling. John figured Cortana had retreated in sight of the enemy. John aimed his rifle at the ship to find a small glowing ball descending from its belly.

“Reclaimer!” said the ball as it approached.

John knew this ball. It was none other than 343 Guilty Spark, Monitor of the first Halo ring. Its blue eye turned red as it fired a powerful super Sentinel beam in John’s direction. *CRRRAOOOWW!* The beam went right over John’s shoulder, dissipating the Flood Combat Form that had been about to attack him.

“I must act quickly,” the Monitor informed, firing a blue tractor beam at Cortana’s device. “Before your construct suffers more trauma.”

John grabbed Guilty Spark and ripped Cortana from the Monitor’s grip.

“Wait,” he told the Monitor. “Leave her alone.”

“She is damaged,” Guilty Spark replied. “If we do not take this device to a safe location, somewhere I can make repairs-”

“On Halo, you tried to kill Cortana,” John spat. “You tried to kill me.”

The Monitor hovered before John, staring at him with its great eye.

“Protocol dictated my response,” Guilty Spark said defensively. “She had the Activation Index, and you were going to destroy my installation. You *did* destroy my installation.”

“Why are you here?” John asked. “How do I know you won’t try to kill us again?”

“Installation Zero-Four is destroyed. Now, I only have one function, to help you.”

John considered his encounter with the Monitor on Alpha Halo. He had trusted this Forerunner AI. He’d valued the Monitor’s guidance, but the AI turned on John and Cortana the moment they disagreed with him. Guilty Spark was a machine, dictated by his programming. The Monitor acted friendly now, but how could John trust he wouldn’t repeat his actions?

“How do I know you won’t betray us again?” John asked.

The Monitor lowered himself just below John’s eyelevel, tilting his spherical body downwards as if bowing.

“Reclaimer, that ring was my home,” he said solemnly. “My creators charged me with the protection and maintenance of Installation Zero-Four. After they activated the Array, I was left alone for a very long time. My ring was all I had.”

John watched his motion tracker as the Monitor spoke. That first Combat Form must have alerted the Flood to their position. Parasites would be surrounding both he and the Monitor very soon.

“Like your construct,” began Guilty Spark, bobbing in Cortana’s direction. “I am not merely a machine. Had protocol not dictated my actions, I would still have acted, though perhaps with a little less belligerence. You threatened my ring, my only purpose for existence. I may have acted rashly, but can you truly blame me?”

John had never considered the Monitor’s perspective before. He’d never perceived him as anything more than a robot, but he supposed if Cortana could be as human as she was, the Forerunner could have created something just as sentient, if not more so. Guilty Spark was only guilty of trying to defend his home. *That’s exactly what I’m doing*, John thought, *here on Earth*.

“As I mentioned,” continued Spark. “My only function now is to help you, as I always should have done.”

John picked up Cortana’s device. It was clearly in need of repairs. He offered it to the Monitor as a light shone from above. The green Phantom’s gravity beam pulled all three of them, John, the Monitor and Cortana through its undercarriage. The Elites were waiting inside along with an unconscious Corporal Forsell.

“I inspected this Reclaimer,” said the Monitor, pointing his eye towards Forsell. “A thorough scan determined he is free of infection.”

“Where are we going?” the Chief asked.

“To the Shadow of Intent,” replied the Arbiter. “Fear not of the infestation. We will glass this sector. The city of Voi is no more.”

The Arbiter wasn’t lying. John watched from the side of the Phantom as the world below was set ablaze. He could not begin to count the colours, the spectrum of hues that poured from the Covenant cruisers. Like miraculous waterfalls, endless streams of plasma lit the atmosphere below a brilliant rose pink. Everything but

the Forerunner artefact that peaked above the inferno was either liquified or disintegrated. Normally a sign of total distress, this glassing was unexpectedly entrancing when paired with such relief.

John tried not to think about any marines who had not found a chance to escape. He buried his thoughts of the surviving civilians, men, women and children who might have been hiding down there, waiting for a rescue that never came. He turned from the scene and took the little chance he had to relax. He knew he would not have long.

## Shadow of Intent

Terrence Hood, Miranda Keyes, John-117, Thel 'Vadam, Rtas 'Vadum and 343 Guilty Spark gathered together in the bridge of the Shadow of Intent surrounded by numerous Elites in ceremonial armour. Rtas 'Vadum, the Shipmaster of the Shadow of Intent sat relaxed in a gravity chair not unlike the thrones of the Prophets. He floated at the head of a holo-table that held the alien device containing Cortana. Lord Hood and Miranda stood straight at the opposite end from the Shipmaster while Guilty Spark hovered between the Chief and the Arbiter at the side. The Monitor gleefully zapped away at the damaged holding device, attempting to release Cortana from her bonds.

“Will it live, Oracle?” asked Rtas. “Can it be saved?”

“Uncertain,” replied the Monitor. “This storage device has suffered considerable trauma. Its matrices are highly unstable.”

Lord Hood made eye contact with Miranda at his side. He was reproachful. It was clear the Fleet Admiral had no faith in the Monitor or the Elites. Miranda did not share his expression, but John knew she'd be just as wary as he was. At this stage, John accepted he could likely trust the Arbiter, but not only were the rest of these Elites strangers, they were exactly the Elites that had been trying to kill them all only weeks earlier. Hood spoke up.

“Perhaps one of *our* technicians-”

“That will not be necessary,” the Shipmaster cut him off.

“Chief!” Cortana appeared.

Cortana looked around as she spoke, but her eyes focused on no one in the room. Her image wavered as if not entirely present.

“High Charity,” she said. “The Prophets' holy city is on its way to Earth with an army of Flood. I can't tell you everything. It's not safe. The Gravemind, he knows I'm in the system.”

Cortana stopped. Her avatar froze completely.

“It's just a message,” John stated, disheartened.

John was an expert at masking his emotions. It came naturally to him, but in this moment, he did not hide his disappointment. He surprised himself by how much he'd anticipated seeing his companion again and how devastating it was that the figure before



him was just another message. He cleared his throat to correct himself.

“Let it play,” said the Shipmaster in an unexpectedly sympathetic tone.

The Monitor zapped the device again, prompting the message to continue.

“But he doesn't know about the portal,” Cortana said. “Where it leads. On the other side, there's a solution, a way to stop the Flood without firing the remaining Halo rings.”

A sudden surge of static ran over Cortana's figure. She grimaced in pain as if attacked internally. She threw her palms to her temples, clutching the sides of her head before falling to her knees.

“Eeergh! Aah!” she yowled.

Her body collapsed. She caught her fall on the holo-table, but she was weak, barely holding herself together. It was baffling. John had seen malfunctioning AI before, but this looked different. Admittedly, they had been lesser AI than Cortana, but rampancy generally looked the same across the board. Cortana's body was faltering like a real person in distress. *She's being tortured*, John realised. Just as the Monitor had mentioned earlier, Cortana wasn't simply a machine. She was human. She lay on her side, propped up by her elbows, looking in John's direction. If it hadn't been a message, John would have sworn she was looking right at him.

“Hurry, Chief,” she said. “There... isn't... much... time.”

The avatar glitched out as the message ended. A ghost of her figure remained on the table, still staring at John. He gazed back longingly.

“I'm sorry,” said the Monitor solemnly.

“No matter,” decided Rtas ‘Vadum. “We've heard enough. Our fight is through the portal, with the Jiralhanae and the bastard, Truth!”

The Elites surrounding them raised their fists and roared in agreement. Lord Hood dropped his head, slouching for the first time.

“Fine,” he said wearily. “We'll remain here, hold out as long as we can.”

“Did you not hear?” Rtas responded. “Your world is doomed.”

“And you, Shipmaster, just glassed half a continent!” Hood spat. “Maybe the Flood isn't all I should be worried about.”

The Shipmaster stepped down from his gravity chair and straightened his body beyond what was natural for an Elite. He now stood taller than anyone else in the room.

“A Flood army, a *Gravemind* has you in its sights,” Rtas told Hood. “You barely survived a small contamination. One single Flood spore can destroy a species. Were it not for the Arbiter's counsel, I would have glassed your entire planet!”

Miranda interrupted.

“What exactly *is* a Gravemind?” she asked. “The Arbiter reported his encounter, but the only one with any real intel seems to be Cortana.”

The Shipmaster turned to the Arbiter, blinking at him with his vertical eyelids. The Arbiter responded only with a slow and deliberate nod. Rtas ‘Vadum turned back to Miranda.

“You are the one they call Keyes, are you not?” he asked her.

For the first time, John noticed there was another human standing amongst them, lurking in the shadows. John activated his heads-up-display and switched on his night vision, but he could not identify the man who shuffled uncomfortably in the dark. The uniform, however, told John everything he needed to know. This man belonged to the Office of Naval Intelligence.

“I am,” Miranda answered.

“Then you are aware of your father's fate,” Rtas assumed.

The ONI officer stepped forwards.

“That's enough,” he said.

The Arbiter murmured beside the Chief.

“*ONI*,” he breathed.

Apparently, even the Elites had heard of ONI. John couldn't imagine they'd be overly fond of officers like this one. The secretive and manipulative methods of Naval Intelligence opposed every value the Elites held dear. Miranda gripped the edge of the holo-table as she spoke.

“You know how my father died?” she asked the Shipmaster, ignoring the officer completely.

John remembered the death of Captain Jacob Keyes. It was one of many memories from the last few months that could never be shaken from his mind. John had reported it immediately to ONI upon his arrival at Earth, but he had not considered whether they'd

chosen to relay the information to the Captain's daughter. The Shipmaster clenched his fists as he spoke.

"The Gravemind is the brain of the Flood," he said. "Stories delivered by the gods labelled the beast their greatest enemy, a heaping monstrosity, scheming and conniving. Its intelligence is exceptional. It ties all Flood together as one."

"And what does this have to do with my father?" Miranda interrogated.

"The Gravemind is timeless," Rtas continued. "Feeding from the knowledge of his captured enemies. One hundred thousand of your Earth years have passed since a Gravemind last existed. On the first Halo, the Flood gathered bodies. Were it not for the Demon destroying the ring, they would have formed a new Gravemind then and there."

John watched Miranda's face. She'd already come to the realisation. Her eyes were wet and turned pink around the edges, but she did not dare shed any tears in front of such an audience. The Shipmaster continued.

"The Flood required a capable mind from which to build the foundations of their Gravemind," he told Miranda. "They needed someone they believed was strong, someone who could help complete millennia of lost knowledge. They desired a leader."

"My father."

Miranda's voice trembled only slightly as she attempted to swallow the grenade-sized lump in her throat.

"Indeed," Rtas finished.

Lord Hood patted Miranda softly on the back before speaking to the Shipmaster.

"And what do you propose?" Hood asked. "That we leave Earth defenceless? You would have us send our best remaining soldiers to some unknown location, for what? For you and your fleet to finally wipe out what's left of us? If this Gravemind is on its way, what choice do we have but to stay here and fight?"

"Sir," Miranda said. "With respect, Cortana has a solution."

"Cortana?" Hood scoffed. "You've seen her condition, how damaged she is."

John rested his hands on the table, leaning in closely to observe Cortana. She appeared sad and desperate but otherwise looked like

the Cortana he knew, and that woman would do anything to save her people.

“She could be corrupted for all we know,” Lord Hood continued. “Her *solution* could be a Flood trap!”

“We should go through the portal,” Miranda decided. “And find out for sure.”

“What we *should* do, Commander,” said Hood. “Is understand clearly that this is humanity's final stand, here at Earth. If we go, we risk everything, every last man, woman and child. If we stand our ground... we might just have a chance.”

“No,” the Arbiter disagreed. “If your construct is wrong, every last man, woman and child will be enslaved, food for the Gravemind’s eternal hunger. *If* she is wrong, then the Flood have already won.”

Thel turned to the Master Chief, expecting a response.

“I’ll find Cortana’s solution,” John said. “And I’ll bring it back.”

The Fleet Admiral stepped around the table towards the Chief.

“Earth,” he said. “It’s all we have left. Do you trust Cortana that much?”

John replied firmly with confidence.

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Then this is either the best decision you've ever made,” expressed Hood. “Or the worst. Hell if it is, Chief, I doubt I'll live long enough to find out which.”

Avery pulled up his Warthog beside the UNSC Forward Unto Dawn, which was docked inside one of the many gargantuan hangars of the Shadow of Intent. The Covenant carrier, which was almost five and a half kilometres long and over two kilometres wide, was the flagship of the Fleet of Retribution. The Elites who occupied it had all been betrayed by their sacred Covenant. Marines and Elites alike were stacking weapons and equipment to the right of the UNSC frigate. The Elites gathered typical Covenant supplies while the marines organised human weaponry, each species keeping to themselves. The marines watched the Elites with narrowed eyes as the Elites huffed and made jests in their alien tongue.

Word had spread fast about the meeting in the bridge. The crew learnt the Master Chief had uncovered a revelation that the giant sphere over Africa was a portal. No one knew where it led, but it

was the road that the Shipmaster had chosen, and Miranda Keyes was going to take the Forward Unto Dawn along for the ride. Avery figured Cortana had managed to send them a message aboard the Flood-infested cruiser before it was destroyed. The other marines were not as well informed. They were anxious, stressed and could not understand the sudden shift in plans.

Avery jumped out of the Warthog, took one look at the group of marines and marched straight over. Instead of walking up to his fellow humans, Avery turned. Several Covenant carbines and a beam rifle sat resting against a Ghost. An Elite Major was perched over the hood of the Ghost with his arms crossed and his head held high, clearly mocking the marines. Avery strode over, lifted two of the carbines and made a point of snatching up the beam rifle right in front of the Elite Major's mandibles. The red-armoured Elite slid off the Ghost, bending forwards, astonished by the Sergeant Major's boldness.

The Elite and his companions only stared as Johnson added the carbines and beam rifle to the marines' pile. He wasn't alone in his idea, however, as the Arbiter mirrored his exact moves by taking a rocket launcher and flamethrower from the human pile. Marines jumped out of the way as the hovering eyeball known as Guilty Spark floated after the Arbiter.

Avery looked across at a lone Pelican about to leave the shuttle bay. Miranda and the Chief stood at its rear while Lord Hood disappeared behind its closing doors. The Fleet Admiral was leaving them. He'd chosen to remain at Earth, bound to humanity's homeworld. Avery did not know whether he'd ever see the Fleet Admiral again. Not only was Earth on its last legs, but whatever waited beyond the portal was a complete mystery. Hood's Pelican soared away into the moonlight.

Corporal Perez picked up one of the carbines Johnson had added to the pile. He scanned the weapon before tossing it back as more marines walked over.

"I don't know," Perez told the group. "I say we've all gone *muuy locos*."

"Yeah," approved Sergeant Stacker. "Gotta agree with you on this one. What's the Commander thinking? Those squid-lipped bastards have been trying to eliminate our race for what, twenty-seven years? And now, we're just gonna sniff after their fishy

behinds like they haven't been trying to kill us all. Where's the sense in that?"

Sergeant Banks joined the conversation.

"Just look at them," he said. "They're freaking aliens, designed to murder. Three weeks ago, we took pride in blowing them up and filling their guts with lead, and why? Because they slaughtered us by the millions. There's no treaty here."

An ODST stepped in next.

"I say we have a chat with the Commander," decided the helljumper. "This truce ain't gonna hold."

Avery had heard enough. The marines, even his fellow sergeants had resorted to resentful bickering. He understood it. He even agreed with them to an extent, but mankind was in its final days. If they didn't find a solution through the portal, humanity was going to perish. *And if we don't stop Truth*, he thought, *so will the rest of the galaxy*. Sighing, he stepped into the centre of the group.

"Alright. Listen up!" Avery barked. "I don't need any bellyaching, whiney sons-of-bitches fighting alongside me on the battlefield. For years, we have survived a ruthless war against an enemy so remorseless their own empire spat them out. These Elites hobble along thinking they're so high and mighty, that they're so honourable, when we know the truth!"

Johnson was yelling now. Not only had he captured the attention of every marine in the hangar, but many Elites were also watching curiously.

"Tell me marines," said Avery. "When the Covenant first glassed Harvest, what did we do? Tell me marines, when the Elites tore through us planet by planet, what did we do? When we faced impossible odds against an alien collective that named us a threat to their very religion, what did we do? I'll tell you what we did. We stood our ground. We refused to back down, and we showed those flat-hoofed, leathery motherfuckers the resilience of the human race!"

"Oorah!" cheered the crowd.

"So, tell me marines," Johnson repeated. "When these Elites look down on us as weak, undisciplined and uncooperative, what are we going to do? We're gonna pass through that portal, embrace whatever waits us on the other side and show those Elites that we never back out of a fight. I don't care if God made them in his own

image or he spilled too much squid ink in the dinosaur pot! They're here to stay. Let's show them what it means to work with the *baddest* of badasses humanity has to offer!"

Avery spun away as he finished and stepped into the Forward Unto Dawn. The Arbiter leant on a wall beside the entrance waiting for him.

"A stirring speech, Sergeant," said the Arbiter.

Avery's ears still weren't quite attuned to the subtleties of Sangheili dialogue, but he suspected there was a degree of amusement in there somewhere.

"It's what they had to hear," he replied. "Hopefully it works."

"And if not?" Thel asked.

"Come on, Arbiter. How 'bout a little faith."

The Arbiter surveyed the Sergeant Major stoically. The irony of Johnson's words was not lost on him. Vadam replied with a friendly nod before Avery entered an elevator. He soon found Miranda pacing alone in a corridor in front of the bridge.

"Johnson," she called as he approached.

"Commander," he replied.

"At ease."

Miranda pulled him into a maintenance access way to the side of the corridor. They stood closely in the narrow, dimly lit tunnel.

"Johnson," Miranda repeated. "Did you... know what happened to my father?"

He assumed she was referring to the death of Captain Keyes. Avery had engaged the Flood-contaminated facility on Alpha Halo with the Captain, but the two lost one another during the confusion. The Master Chief had since confirmed the Captain's infection followed by his death. Avery always believed Miranda knew this, but now that she mentioned it, he wasn't surprised no one had told her.

"I knew," Johnson confirmed.

"And the Gravemind?" she asked.

Avery frowned. What did the Gravemind have to do with Miranda's father?

"You didn't know," Miranda said, looking away.

"I know that whatever the Gravemind is, we have to kill it," said Johnson. "I know Cortana wants us through that portal."

Miranda looked up at him with big, enchanting eyes. Her alluring irises glistened like gems, reflecting the light outside the tunnel. Her

deep pupils reeled him in, captivating him, body and soul. Avery only now noticed a ring of glimmering jade around her pupils that added to the depth and passion behind her gaze. Her dark chestnut-coloured hair parted at the fringe, framing her face perfectly. She watched him, unblinking. He stared back, breathless at the sight before him. Miranda broke the silence.

“We’re entering the portal,” she said without breaking her gaze.

“I know,” Avery replied. “Did we have a choice?”

“Lord Hood seems to think so,” she replied softly. “We’re not abandoning our people.”

“I know,” Avery smiled.

Avery understood Miranda well enough to know she wasn’t asking for his reassurance. She didn’t need a subordinate to question her decisions. She’d waited outside the bridge for a reason, knowing Johnson would seek her out. She needed someone to speak with, someone to listen to her beyond the formal confines of military decorum.

“There are too many lives at stake,” continued Miranda. “*Everyone’s* lives. If we don’t do this...”

Avery placed his hands gently on either side of Miranda’s shoulders, half expecting her to shrug them off, but instead she relaxed.

“We said we were going to end this war on our terms,” he reminded her, referring to their conversation on High Charity. “Truth, the Flood, they’ll be nothing more than stories, and that’s thanks to what we’re about to do. This decision was yours.”

Miranda smiled as Avery dropped his arms. Seeing her smile was a rare sight for most, but Johnson was lucky enough to be growing familiar with it.

“Avery,” she whispered, using his first name.

This time, Miranda grasped the sides of Johnson’s shoulders. She ran her hands slowly down his arms, moving her fingers through every crease in his sleeves. She looked down at his hands as she held his wrists. Avery didn’t move a beat.

“After we win this war,” she said. “You’re going to show me everything I’ve missed, music, culture, fun...”

Now *Miranda* was referring to their conversation on High Charity. She looked back into his eyes without letting go.

“*Everything*,” she finished.



Miranda dropped his wrists and spun away. Her hair whipped through the air after her. She walked right out of the access way without looking back. Johnson stood still, gaping after her as she disappeared into the bridge. The blue slipstream energy that engulfed the entire ship revealed to Avery that they were now passing through the portal. He reached for a Sweet William from his pocket and braced himself for what was to come.

## Installation 00

Solemn and unmoving, the green and black statue should have stood out amongst the polished purples of the Covenant interior, but the surrounding Sangheili paid the human no mind. Ordinarily, the Master Chief would spend his slipspace journeys in cryogenic sleep, a dreamless comatose induced by instant freezing. Unconscious, he'd lay there until his cryotube reopened in time for his next battle. This was usually followed by immediate action alongside Blue Team, but those days had grown distant. His brothers and sisters of Blue Team may have been the reason humanity survived for as long as it did, but in recent times, the entire galaxy owed their lives to the Master Chief and Cortana. *And soon, John believed, we'll owe it to her again.* He had no idea what her plan entailed, but he trusted Cortana with his life, and evidently, with the lives of everyone else. Being the Spartan he was, he buried all uncertainties deep within. *Whatever her plan is, it's going to work.*

Two cloaked Sangheili sauntered past, clicking their mandibles and murmuring in their alien tongue. Externally, the Spartan seemed to be ignoring the two Elites, but he observed them with his peripherals while watching his motion tracker closely. Donned in cloaks instead of armour, they appeared as varanoid monks, harsh but reverent. The yellow blips that represented the Elites on John's heads-up-display moved steadily before disappearing past the range of his motion tracker where they strolled towards a cylindrical silo at the end of the corridor. They were weapons checking. Many such silos had obliterated countless UNSC ships by releasing their devastating plasma torpedoes. It was surreal to be standing so close to one without it threatening him.

John had chosen this space on the Shadow of Intent for its silence. It was somewhere he could relax away from the onlooking and the constant verbiage of the marines and crewman of the Forward Unto Dawn. The semi-hardlight shielding that separated this corridor from the vacuum of space was the closest thing John had to a window aboard the Covenant vessel.

He watched the mystic furrows of the slipstream flowing around the curvature of the Covenant ship like a current in deep ocean. Even after three centuries since the invention of the Shaw-Fujikawa

drive, humanity knew next to nothing about the wonders of slipspace. What John did know was that with every passing minute, they were being driven millions of kilometres away from Earth.

Blurred silhouettes like a pod of whales swam along the slipstream furrows outside John's improvised window. Additional Sangheili cruisers had followed them through the portal, having separated from the fleet that quarantined High Charity. John could almost hear them singing to him as they swam. He was reminded of the four-winged bird he encountered on Delta Halo.

The ambiguities of the Forerunner continued to puzzle the Spartan. He'd been certain the structure outside of Voi was the Forerunner creation everyone was calling *the Ark*, but if he'd known little about the Ark before, he knew even less now. Was *the Ark* simply the name of the portal? The Chief doubted it. At this moment, there was only one thing he could be sure of. The Halo Array was primed and ready to fire. Miranda and Johnson had stopped the initial launch sequence when they removed the Activation Index, but John was willing to bet whatever awaited them on the other side was the final step in Truth's plan to activate Halo *without* the need of the Index, an action that would take the life of every single person, human or otherwise, in the galaxy.

The lights of the chamber brightened to a cool daylight. The Master Chief, not realising the significance of this change, turned to the Elites whose pace had suddenly quickened. They'd all swapped their cloaks for the usual Sangheili combat harnesses. When the Elites continued to ignore him, John decided to return to the Forward Unto Dawn. A pair of marines greeted him as he entered the hangar.

"Took you long enough, sir," said one of them.

John was surprised to recognise the face of the marine. Apparently having fully recovered, at least externally, Corporal Forsell saluted the Spartan. Someone had deemed the soldier fit for duty.

"We're about to exit the portal," Forsell explained. "The Dawn's leaving the Covenant ship. We're expecting a battle on the other side."

"Understood," John replied before marching into the frigate.

John found a position near the Dawn's cryo chambers to watch the impending exit from slipspace. A display screen presented him a

view of the scene ahead. A black hole ripped open like the dilating pupil of a single ominous eye. The Shadow of Intent passed through the torn hole more smoothly than any UNSC ship ever could. John's legs vibrated with the tremors beneath as the Forward Unto Dawn warmed its engines. They had successfully passed through the portal. It was time to reveal what awaited.

As the frigate departed the carrier, a section of the world below was revealed over the display screen. It had clouds and continents like Earth, but its surface was inverted, curving upwards instead of down. *Of course*, John thought. What else had he expected? He walked away from the display to find a better position to view the Halo ring. However, when he found a window large enough to reveal more of the superstructure, he saw it was not a Halo at all. It was similar, a Forerunner Fortress World clearly capable of inhabiting sentient life, but it was no ringworld. Instead of one narrow strip that joined together like a hoop, there were eight strips, all branching out from a shared centre. Each strip curled up only slightly, never joining. As a whole, it was shaped like an asterisk. An ethereal spiderweb stretched over the upper surface with lands and oceans divided by each thread. John could not see the underside of the megastructure, but he had to assume it consisted of similar metals and machinery he'd seen on the outer surface of each Halo installation.

In outer space, the scale of the Fortress World was indeterminable, but there was one dead giveaway that suggested the structure was far larger than any Halo ring had ever been. In its centre, at the heart of the asterisk, was a hollow circle. Within the circle sat an entire planet, damaged and dented. The Fortress World itself appeared to be in the process of stripping the planet's surface. The planet could have easily been substituted by Earth, Reach or any other colony John knew. He could imagine the horrors of its inhabitants, families screaming as their world was literally torn apart shred by shred, the planet physically curling up beneath them by some scaleless potato peeler. John gulped as he watched the planet being devoured. He crossed his fingers at his side until they were white beneath their glove, hoping that the planet had been uninhabited before it was stripped.

The Master Chief snapped out of his trance when he noticed a cloud of glistening specks growing larger above the structure. It was

the Covenant fleet led by the Brutes, and from what he could make out, the Elites were severely outnumbered. The Elites had a single carrier and a scattering of cruisers. The Brutes had a fully fledged force of just about every type of Covenant ship John could think of in tight formation hurtling towards them like an asteroid.

“Then it is an even fight,” came the voice of Shipmaster Rtas over the comm. “All cruisers, fire at will! Burn their mongrel hides.”

Rtas ‘Vadum demonstrated his Sangheili courage in that moment as his ships sailed forwards, charging at the Brute fleet. Longswords from the Forward Unto Dawn engaged Seraphs at the halfway point shortly before the Elites’ cruisers entangled themselves in the mess, threading between the Brute ships. The space between was set alight in a magnificent chromatic array. Plasma torpedos swerved through and between vessels. Countless target lasers searched for their enemies in the fray. Seraphs, Banshees, Longswords and Pelicans manoeuvred through the lethal display of fireworks while adding their own fire to the exhibition. Any wrong move would be the last for the pilots and co-pilots steering their craft.

Watching the battle break out, John realised the move to fly directly into the Brute fleet was genius. The Elites had commanded Covenant fleets for decades. They knew the ins and outs of naval warfare. The Brutes were clumsy in comparison. As aggressive and unforgiving as the Brutes could be in atmosphere, they were strangers to the intricacies of space combat. One Brute cruiser was cut in half by a plasma projector that had just been fired by a Brute carrier, completely missing its Elite target. MAC rounds from the Dawn joined the plasma as Miranda spoke over the comm.

“Truth's ship isn't taking part in the attack,” she announced. “He must have gone to ground.”

The Master Chief spun around in response and headed off to the armoury.

“Chief,” came Johnsons’ voice.

“On it,” he replied.

“We can’t afford Truth joining this battle,” continued Miranda. “More importantly- Ergh!”

She groaned as the Dawn was hit by a torpedo, shaking the entire ship. John reached for an assault rifle from the armoury wall. His arm was grabbed by Sergeant Johnson shaking his head.

“Not where we’re going,” said Johnson, instead handing him a sniper rifle.

“It was only a light torpedo,” Miranda told them. “The Brutes must have decreased their fire power. They’re hitting too many of their own.”

John was struck with a sense of déjà vu as Miranda continued.

“Johnson, Chief, find a Pelican. We’re taking this fight to the surface. Priority one, secure a landing zone for the frigate. Any intel you can find along the way...”

“Roger that,” Johnson replied, already stepping into Pelican Kilo-023 with a squad of ODSTs.

The Chief followed as the Sergeant Major knocked on the door that separated the pilot from the marines. Hocus’ co-pilot let Johnson into the cockpit, allowing him into the front gunner seat as the Chief took position in the troop compartment.

“Dropping in five,” announced Hocus. “Four... three...”

John waited patiently with his BR in hand and his sniper rifle over his back. Two Pelicans dropped into the fray. By now, the battle had expanded. As Kilo-023 narrowly missed a squadron of Seraphs, the Pelican following closely behind was not so lucky.

Its pilots screamed as the dropship tumbled through the battle below. Their voices turned silent as they reached terminal velocity. Hocus zipped through the Covenant battlecruisers like an insect in a flock of hungry birds, whizzing and rolling to avoid ingestion. Eventually, they passed through. Clouds floated up to kiss the Pelican’s undercarriage as the bedlam above shrank into the distance, becoming nothing more than a light show.

Echo-023 was consumed by white as she sank through the troposphere until the clouds parted to unveil an endless landscape on the surface of the Fortress World. Hocus directed the Pelican to what looked like a flattened anthill in a backyard of giants. For an eternity, the anthill grew closer, and as it did, its fine sand shimmered and sparkled in the sunlight, a boundless plain of glitter. Kilo-023 shrivelled to the size of an ant as the sand’s ripples rose into mountainous dunes high above. The reflecting light and rising heat made it nearly impossible to see where the dunes touched the sky. The only artificial feature John could make out on the landscape was a single running thread. It had no beginning or end, and like the dunes, it grew taller as the Pelican approached.

“A Sentinel Wall,” Johnson informed them. “Like the one on Delta Halo.”

“Where are we going?” asked the Chief.

“Right... there,” pointed the Sergeant at a section of the Wall that sliced straight through a rocky mesa. “It’s crawling with bugs.”

The disembodied voice of 343 Guilty Spark joined the chatter, apparently having accessed their comm.

“According to my analysis, that plateau is honeycombed with structures and tunnels,” the Monitor informed. “If I am correct, that is where you will find the Cartographer.”

“A map room,” John realised.

“Precisely,” agreed the Monitor. “The Cartographer will guide you to the meddler, Truth.”

John exited the cockpit, returning to the ODSTs who were checking their helmets and cocking their rifles in the rear. The back of the troop compartment was now open to the desert. Stars plummeted into the dune sea from the endless battle above. John, now familiar with the functioning weather of Forerunner worlds, turned off his filters for just a second. Hot air rushed into his helmet, flowing through the compartments of his MJOLNIR to embrace his entire body within. The heat caused instant sweat to drip down him, pooling at the bottom of his boots. He switched his filters back on as his own condensate settled upon his upper lip while he scanned the black-armoured marines around him. The MJOLNIR technology would keep John cool while undamaged, but he could not say the same for the ODSTs. If they were to survive in this heat, they’d need a swift and effective approach, in then out.

“Looks like it’s finally time, Chief,” said one of the soldiers.

*SERGEANT ABRAM*, he was labelled on John’s heads-up-display.

“Time for us helljumpers to show you how it’s done!” he finished. “Stand to, marines. Go, go, go!”

John left the Pelican and planted his boots into the sandstone. They were still several hundred metres above the valleys of the desert. Gigantic piers jutted out from the escarpment, disappearing into the sand below.

“Hey, check it out!” exclaimed one of the marines, captivated by something above. “In the sky, is that...?”

“Focus,” Abram asserted. “We got a job to do! I don’t wanna melt out here before it’s done.”

The Chief followed the marine’s gaze. Behind the thinning clouds, past the radiant aurora, beyond the raging space battle, John saw something he’d never imagined he would see in his lifetime, not with his own eyes: a dazzling swirl of stardust, blankets of stirred milk, a white maelstrom frozen in a single moment. Abram was right. As always, the Chief could prioritise nothing over his current mission. However, even a Spartan could not ignore the wonderment of existing beyond the rim of his own galaxy. Somewhere, in some component of the spiral above, in the Orion Arm, one speck of white dust was Sol, Earth’s sun. Somewhere up there, humanity was fighting their last days, completely unaware that their fate now lay in the hands of a squad of ODSTs and a Spartan lost in a desert.

Covenant lampposts illuminated the way ahead, through a tunnel and around an exterior path on the edge of the rocky mesa until the squad found themselves looking upon circular camp. In its centre stood the tripod of a semiconstructed Covenant anti-air cannon.

“That Mantis will tear the Dawn apart,” Abram whispered.

The Chief was not concerned by the unfinished cannon. He gestured for the ODSTs to lay low, crouching into the shadows of the rock while John used his smart-link to scan the aliens strolling around the Mantis. He pointed his sniper rifle at two Brutes he assumed to be leaders based on the colour and design of their armour. His MJOLNIR-enhanced hearing kicked in, matching the ten-times magnification of his smart-link.

“What madness has led us here?” asked one Brute. “The sun swelters my hide. My armour is piping to the touch. This plating wears in the heat, and my hind cheeks blister.”

“Agreed,” acknowledged the second. “No amount of shaving could cool us in this forsaken place. Whose idea was it to expose our skin like this?”

“I say we turn back,” replied the first. “Retreat into the Wall and rest in the shade.”

“We do that and the Chieftain will have our bones!”

“Which Chieftain? Malus? That craven leers in the shadows while we slave away. Where is he? Watching from the Citadel?”



John listened patiently for information, not forgetting his companions' own suffering in the heat and the war waging above. Both Brutes were now lined up within his crosshair.

"Malus has become rabid in his injuries," continued the second Brute. "But he is not the Chieftain who commands us. We serve Chieftain Cethegus."

"Why so many Chieftains?" asked the first.

"They compete for Tartarus' position."

"Pathetic. A Kig-Yar's game. Why are *we* punished for it, sent out here to die for some glorified fools' power struggle?"

"We defend the Cartographer. The Prophet orders Cethegus. Cethegus orders us. This barren wasteland is contemptable, but it is nothing compared to the wrath of the Prophet. We cannot abandon our post."

*BAM!* John fired his sniper rifle. He'd heard enough. The two Brutes fell like bowling pins as others scrambled in search of their attacker. The ODS'Ts joined in as John sniped another Brute followed by a fourth. A startled Grunt Major jumped up and pointed in the Chief's direction.

"Look. He's there!" yelled the Grunt. "I thought it was a piece of scenery, but it's not. It's him!"

The entire Covenant camp returned fire as the ODS'Ts ducked and weaved behind protruding rock. Crazy Grunts and Brutes charged up a slope to the right as Jackals hid behind their shields. John caught a flash of purple light. Tracking its source, he took down a Jackal sniper perched atop the incomplete Mantis.

"Demon!" roared a Brute Major. "I will detach your limbs and use them to scratch my- Argh!"

Several shots from ODS'T battle rifles killed the Brute before it could finish its sentence.

"Fool me once," shouted Abram, firing his own rifle at some Jackals. "Shame on me. Fool me twice, I kill you!"

Overall, the ambush worked heavily in the humans' favour. Had the Brutes been smarter, they would have assigned some Jackals to the rocks above. Now, the Chief and the marines were able to pour themselves into the area below and sweep through the camp without a struggle. John heard the heavy panting of the helljumpers as they leapt from cover to cover. His MJOLNIR may have been heavier, but it did not bear down on him the same way the ODS'Ts' armour

did. Out here in the desert, the Covenant were only part of the threat. The marines could not go on fighting without shelter, but with the battle continuing above, John knew he couldn't easily request reinforcements either.

"You killed my brother!" a Grunt Ultra screamed at the Chief, launching a plasma grenade his way.

John evaded the explosion before another Grunt joined in.

"You killed my nipple buddy!" it wailed. "Suck my methane!"

Activating two plasma grenades in its hands, it charged towards John like the kamikaze Grunt had back on Earth. John managed to pop it in the head with his battle rifle before a gold Brute Captain emerged from around a corner. It dived at him with the blade on its Brute shot. As John sidestepped, he booted the grenade launcher from the Captain's hands. Abram came up from behind, reached down to pick up the Brute shot and pushed the blade straight into the Brute's neck.

"The leader is down!" the Grunt Ultra panicked. "Management has disintegrated!"

The Grunt turned from the Chief but toppled directly into one of the marines. The Ultra and the ODST wrestled momentarily before Abram finally shot the Grunt in the head. The campsite went silent. Only sandy corpses lay around them now. Abram rested his hand on the Spartan as he recovered his breath.

"I... just love getting up every morning and kicking ass," explained the ODST Sergeant.

Miranda contacted the Master Chief while they traversed the rock.

"Chief, I'm giving the Brutes all I've got," she began. "But this is a heavyweight fight. The Dawn has only got the tonnage to last a few more rounds. I need a place to set her down. Over."

Without comment, John climbed the rocks to take a peek at the rest of the mesa. It was less rocky in the middle, especially where the Sentinel Wall travelled across. From what he could see, there were plenty of flat plains across the mesa that could be used as landing zones where they distanced themselves from its perilous edge. John and the marines searched for a safe path and eventually found a hexagonal door into the rock. They stepped through as it opened automatically into a hallway with the same burnished, engraved metals used on Halo.

The passage was empty, untouched. Its familiar trims and braces looked more polished than before as if coated in a layer of oil, and yet, the Chief's boots remained dry. A security hologram sat to the right, presenting implications that the facility went deep below the ground. As John was only trying to cut through the rock, he followed the automatic doors along as straight of a path as he could.

"There's a lot of unlocked doors," whispered one of the helljumpers. "For a place nobody's supposed to have been in in a hundred thousand years."

Just as John was expecting to exit the complex, a door to his left called to him. Out of curiosity, he made the turn and stepped through to find another empty hallway. This one curved around a peculiar pillar with a large holographic display sitting at its centre in the form of a yellow and blue eyeball, as if it had been ripped from the socket of an alien giant. The eye had lines of light running off its pupil, which was about a foot in diameter and directly level with the Chief's visor. He stepped up to the strange terminal. Something in the air lured him closer, pulling him in. The pupil pulsed, dilating and retracting as if attempting to focus while glyphs poured in from around its edges. Many of the glyphs started as familiar Forerunner symbols seen around Halo, but they gradually twisted and morphed until they had transformed into something else entirely, roman letters. Full paragraphs of human text appeared within the eye in modern English.

*ONI would have a field day with this*, John thought as he skimmed the text. For the most part, it appeared to be a conversation between two people, one of them labelled *The Librarian* while the other was referred to as *The Didact*. Whether these were direct translations or not, John didn't know, but from what he could tell, they were Forerunner individuals, long gone with the rest of their ancient civilisation.

John figured the dialogue presented in the terminal must have been recorded before the firing of the Halo rings. He skimmed over odd phrases from *the indexing of species* to *the paucity of sentience*. It was impossible to make sense of it without context, but John recognised at least one term, *the Ark*. There also appeared to be a third unknown entity that wasn't addressing the Didact or the Librarian but rather appeared to be recording its own thoughts as if in a diary. Its tenor reminded John of the Monitor. He allowed his MJOLNIR's field

recording to capture the messages. Perhaps a crewman of the Dawn or Guilty Spark could interpret them later. Maybe they related to Cortana's plan. John ripped himself away from the terminal and exited the last door out of the facility where the ODS'Ts waited.

There was no time for John's eyes to adjust to the glare. The action on the sand outside was as intense as the skies above. A Longsword went crashing to the right, causing a column of sand to rise and fall in response while leaving a thick smoke trail behind. In a dip between sand dunes ahead lay a downed Pelican surrounded by scavenging Brutes. From there, a squad of marines came running up into the shadow of the metal building the Chief had just exited.

"Assault cannons got our Pelican, sir," stated one marine. "But before we went down, we spotted a good landing zone. If we can get to our vehicles, we'll lead you to it."

John instantly recognised the marine's voice. He didn't need his heads-up-display to confirm it was Private Dubbo, the Australian soldier who had fought alongside him on Delta Halo.

"Dubbo," John nodded.

"The one and only!" the marine replied. "Well, maybe not the only one, but glad you remember me, Chief. Come, we've got men waiting at the LZ."

## Forward Unto Dawn

“Aaaaagh!” came the unexpected squeal of a Grunt.

John turned in time to find a Grunt Minor flying through the air towards him with two tightly gripped and very active plasma grenades. The Brutes below had apparently tossed the Grunt with their bare hands.

“Take cover!” John yelled while grabbing Dubbo around the waist and diving from the explosion.

“Cheers, sir!” he thanked, rolling onto his hands.

Two Brute vehicles roared into the valley, skimming past their brethren below and swinging around the left to assault the two marine squads. At first, John assumed they were Brute Choppers like the ones he’d seen on Earth, but these were twice as large with side sleds and a mounted front turret. *A Brute Spectre*, John thought. Although, no actual Spectre had ever looked powerful enough to crush an entire truck. John surveyed the scene before making a decision.

“Stay here,” he ordered the ODSTs. “Dubbo, aim for the vehicles. See if your squad can disable the gunners. Retreat into the complex if you have to. Abram, cover me.”

With that, John half ran and half slid down the dune to the Pelican wreckage where he engaged the Brutes singlehandedly. Shooting and dodging, he made sure not to let any Brute get too close. He was hindered by his boots constantly sinking into the sand, but the Brutes appeared to be in a worse state than he was. They waded through the dry sand as if walking through water, each one trying to get its shot at the Master Chief. John lifted a rocket launcher from the wreckage and clubbed a Brute Major in the face with it. He proceeded to launch several rockets in succession directly behind the rest of the pack. He was careful to keep his distance from the shockwave, which took the form of a literal wave of sand, rising and falling over the Brutes until each one was immobile. John headshot the staggered beasts with his battle rifle before facing the vehicles.

The Brute vehicles were dangerously close to the marines. John pulled himself from the sand, kept himself as light as he could and sprinted over to them. Finding a UNSC crate in the wreckage, he stepped onto it, launched himself into the air and, upon reaching the

peak of his jump, he fired a rocket below his feet, propelling him further. The Spartan landed hard into the driver's seat of one of the vehicles and made short work of the Brute passengers. He left nothing but corpses slumped over red-and-blue-stained sand.

"Can't help but admire your artwork, Chief," said Abram marching over.

Stepping onto one of the side sleds of the nearest vehicle, Abram climbed over the top and into the gunner's position.

"I assume this is where you want us," he said before ordering his men to join.

John looked around, seeing that there weren't enough seats for all the marines.

"No worries, Chief," said Dubbo. "Our Pelican was delivering light transport. There are two Mongooses in the wreckage. They might still be working."

"Alright," John nodded, handing Dubbo his SPNKr. "Take this. Let's find the LZ. No stopping."

The Master Chief revved up the deafening engines in front of him before they yanked him forwards like some high-tech horse chariot. The world blurred as they flew over the sand dunes in the direction the Longsword had crashed. As heatwaves rose from the ground, a mirage surrounded the squad over every distant surface. The tops of every bump in the horizon were covered in running water that streamed up towards the explosive sky. The two Brute vehicles barrelled over the dunes followed by the Mongooses, which left light tyre tracks in the sand. Swerving around jagged rock, jumping over sandy hills, evading Ghosts and Choppers and dodging deadly debris falling from the sky, they eventually reached the landing zone only a few hundred metres from the Sentinel Wall.

"The LZ's on the other side of this this cave, Chief," said Sergeant Banks who'd been waiting for them.

*Another familiar face*, John thought. *This Corps is shrinking every day*. The cave Banks spoke of was more of a thick arch, easily wide enough to fit each of their vehicles side by side.

"Watch yourself," Banks warned. "They've got heavy armour!"

As expected, the plateau behind the arch was more than large enough to fit a UNSC frigate. As was also expected, it was crawling with Covenant. From traditional Covenant camps to Jackal sniper towers to anti-air artillery, this was not going to be an easy fight. A

Wraith's mortar blast slammed down in front of the arch followed shortly by a bombardment of plasma bolts smashing into the rock. Rubble and dirt fell from the shaking stone.

"No one's getting through that alive," declared Abram.

"Someone has to," replied Banks. "Our mouths are getting awfully dry out here."

The Master Chief pulled his vehicle back and turned his head to face the broken vehicles and aircraft behind him.

"If we don't clear the LZ," he said while dismounting. "The Brutes will have won. Dubbo, do you have many rockets?"

"Negative," replied the marine. "I'm out."

"Then let's see what we can salvage," he finished, kicking over a broken Covenant barrier in search of weaponry.

John could hear the chimes of Ghosts drawing near. He could handle Ghosts. A pop to their exposed fuel cell and they'd be gone, but the marines would still be severely outnumbered on the plateau. Heavy weaponry was their only solution to clearing the LZ, and as luck would have it, the Covenant had plenty to offer. Unmounted plasma cannons, fuel rod cannons, EMP-capable plasma pistols and Brute shots all lay amongst the scorched purple and grey debris. John handed the weapons out like cake at a party. Now they stood a chance. The marines re-entered their vehicles before driving under the arch and making their way onto the plateau as a single unbreakable force.

The battle on the plateau mirrored that of the sky above. Not even the Chief could track the mayhem that ensued. There were few spaces between the red dots on his motion tracker that were already difficult enough to see without the distracting light display of whizzing plasma energy and kinetic bolts dashing across his vision. John's vehicle rocked rapidly, a dodgy dinghy in an ocean storm. Vehicles detonated around them. Chunks of shattered plating and busted engines joined the other projectiles obscuring John's vision.

After a long, sweaty skirmish that ended with a crumbling sniper tower and the destruction of an Anti-Air Wraith, John stepped towards the edge of the plateau. The marines followed. Less than half had survived, but Sergeant Banks and his squad were not far behind on foot. The Chief's Brute vehicle was disabled, and nothing remained of the other besides a few scraps left in the sand. The

Mongoose had been toppled, but overall, the Spartan was impressed by how many humans had managed to survive unscathed.

He lifted the fractured ODST helmet of the now-dead Sergeant Abram. Blood and sand congested between the cracks. Abram's body lay just as broken somewhere behind them. John passed the helmet to one of the surviving helljumpers. He figured they'd use it for one of the brief improvised funerals ODSTs often held on the field. The soldier took the helmet without a word.

"Look. Up high," pointed Dubbo. "Here she comes!"

"Is the Dawn rated for atmosphere?" asked one of the others.

"Guess we're going to find out," said Banks.

John spied a tiny speck in the distance he guessed was the Forward Unto Dawn. Within seconds, it grew to the size of an entire frigate, sweeping over the desert at breakneck speed.

"Run," John ordered.

The Spartan and marines hurriedly scrambled to escape the path of the incoming starship. John swung himself over a shallow ridge peaking from the sand. The marines followed, taking cover in its shadow as the frigate descended. The sand all around them blew high, causing an isolated dust storm. The wreckage from their fight parted to the sides of the plateau. John could hear the thundering of fusion reactors blasting above until, eventually, the dust settled. The sky was clear, and the Dawn hovered gently only twenty metres in the air, covering the length of the landing zone.

"I wouldn't have lasted much longer up there," sighed Miranda from the bridge. "Thanks, Chief."

"Not just me, ma'am," John answered, thinking of the bodies buried in the scrapheaps that lined the sides of the plateau.

"They'll be remembered," Miranda acknowledged. "Come to the back of the frigate. Sergeant Major, did the Elites get a fix on the Cartographer?"

"It's just on the other side of the Wall," Johnson provided. "But it's surrounded by Brute heavy armour."

The Master Chief craned his neck to see a hatch in the frigate opening above. A flat platform stemmed downwards holding four brand new Scorpion tanks like food on a platter. Hearing wind blowing behind his back, the Spartan turned to see a platoon of marines stepping from Pelicans onto the sand. John recognised Gunnery Sergeant Stacker amongst the reinforcements. The



surviving marines who were already in the desert graciously accepted rations from their newly arrived comrades. The *Vadam* and 343 Guilty Spark exited one of the dropships. Miranda continued.

“Okay. If we can’t fly over the Wall, we’ll go right through it. Chief, take one of the tanks. Lead the way. If you find any locked doors, the Monitor can pry them open.”

“I will certainly try my best,” said the Monitor. “Though I am unfamiliar with this facility.”

“Alright. You heard the lady!” barked Johnson from the back of his Pelican.

The Chief walked over to the closest of the Scorpions. Marcus Stacker stood beside it, rubbing his hand over one of the treads as if patting a dog.

“This is what they pay us for,” he grinned before climbing down the hatch. “Let’s get ready, people.”

John turned to enter the next Scorpion only to find an eager Guilty Spark hovering in his face.

“Shall I help you choose a vehicle, Reclaimer?” asked the Monitor. “This one seems in very good condition.”

“A tank’s a tank, Sunshine Sparkle,” Johnson yelled from above. “Get to the Wall. I’ll help the Commander secure the Dawn. We’ll meet you at the Cartographer.”

The Chief hopped into his Scorpion, which was a little less roomy than normal. These Scorpions were of a slightly lighter model with a separate section for the machine gun turret at the front. Four marines including Dubbo took their positions on the sides. Corporal Forsell jumped into the gunner’s section. Although John couldn’t entirely trust the judgement of the psych who’d assessed Forsell, he respected the marine. The Chief had witnessed numerous soldiers fall to irreparable psychological harm. They never returned to battle. Forsell, however, was a man who understood his role, even if he was no Spartan.

“Let’s roll!” urged Forsell.

John obliged. Banks drove the third Scorpion while the Arbiter had apparently taken the fourth. The Scorpions were faster than most, but only slightly. They would still need to fire quicker than their enemies if they were to blast their way to the Wall. A mob of Ghosts emerged from the arch. They were eliminated before they got close. All four Scorpions did their job.

“Tank beats Ghost!” Forsell exclaimed.

As they reached the arch, a Phantom released infantry into the debris on the other side. Two Hunters charged heatedly on-scene, but as with the Ghosts, they were quickly disintegrated by the Scorpions.

“Tank beats Hunter!” Forsell cheered.

Next, after passing beneath the arch, the Scorpions pointed their cannons at the Phantom, all firing simultaneously as the dropship attempted to stabilise.

“How does ninety millimetres of tungsten strike you?!” Stacker yelled.

The plating of the Phantom caved in, exposing a silver engine inside. Blue fire erupted from fissures in the engine before a blinding ball of light materialised, blowing the Phantom apart. Scorched Phantom chunks hurtled across the sand.

“Tank beats *everything!*” Forsell shouted. “Oh man, I could do this all day!”

The drive continued like this for a while. When they reached the Wall, they were forced to scale along it until they found an entrance. As they did, Ghosts, Choppers, Wraiths and Phantoms were constantly thrown at them. The Scorpions continually ensured they were first to fire. Eventually, they came across a two-storeyed entrance into the Wall. Partition-like doorways were locked above and below a ramped walkway. Sentinel Aggressors hovered above the platform, threatening the surrounding vehicles, daring them to come closer. Some of the Sentinels floated into the desert to retrieve pieces of Covenant vehicles, carrying chunks into the unknown.

“The Brutes must’ve tripped a defence system,” said Dubbo.

“Tidy bastards,” commented Forsell. “Hope they never decide to clean *us* up.”

“It’s like they don’t even see us,” added a female marine on the back of John’s tank.

“Oh, they see us,” replied Forsell. “They just haven’t decided what to do with us yet.”

Ignoring the Sentinels, the Master Chief killed the last of the Covenant around the entrance.

“All armour,” called Sergeant Stacker. “Form up at the lower doorway. The Chief’s robot will pick that lock.”

“I beg your pardon,” replied the Monitor. “I am Three-Four-Three Guilty Spark, Monitor of Installation Zero-Four.”

“Yeah? Well, you're also our ticket through this Wall,” said Stacker. “So, if you don't mind...”

“I will happily aid the Reclaimer's progress!”

The glowing orb floated over to the Chief's tank again, beckoning him onto the upper walkway.

“Please dismount your vehicle and follow me,” he instructed. “We only require one Reclaimer within the Wall. The others may wait here.”

“Negative,” replied John as he trod the walkway. “The Brutes were heavily armed on *this* side of the Wall. They'll be worse on the other side.”

“Agreed,” replied the Monitor. “But these doors will not open the whole way. We will need to breach the security system inside the Sentinel Wall to open the lower doorway wide enough for your army. Any who wish to follow on foot may do so.”

With that, only the Arbiter and Private Dubbo dismounted. Everyone else drove to the lower entrance. The upper doorway opened just enough for the Chief, Arbiter and Dubbo to squeeze through. The Sentinels watched silently as they entered. Despite the Sentinels cleaning up outside, John had not expected the interior to be as spotless as it was. The polished bronze floor was shiny enough that John could almost make out the reflection of the unnecessarily high ceiling above. A short ramp to nowhere rose along the middle of the chamber. On it lay the remains of a Sentinel Minor.

“Maybe they wanna fix their friend,” Dubbo guessed.

The Arbiter slowly trod up the ramp, apparently having a moment to himself while Guilty Spark and Dubbo approached a door at the end of the room. Small red lights on the door signified it was locked. As John waited for the Monitor to zap away at it, he followed the Arbiter up the ramp. The Elite's long neck curved down, pointing his head at the Sentinel pieces between his hooves. Thel breathed steadily, unmoving as the Spartan stepped behind him.

“What is it?” John asked.

Thel twisted his head, snapping awake at the sound of the Spartan's voice.

“Nothing,” said the Elite.

The Arbiter lifted a plasma rifle in his hands, presenting it to the human. It was damaged. The blue shell on the outside of the weapon had lifted slightly from the components beneath. Tiny sparks spurted from a narrow crevice.

“It’s busted,” stated the Spartan.

Thel turned back to the fragments on the floor, watching the Spartan with only his left eye. He dropped the rifle to his side and crouched slowly. Carefully, he gripped one of the Sentinel chunks. His Sangheili fingers ran over the straight edges and indents of the detached Sentinel beam weapon. He brought it close to his mandibles, observing several tiny lights across it. The weapon was functional. He stood straight, gripping it comfortably against his abdomen and turned back to Spartan.

“This will be an effective replacement,” the Arbiter asserted confidently.

The red lights on the door turned green. Guilty Spark hummed merrily as the four of them passed through.

“I wish I had lips,” said the orb. “Then I could whistle!”

The next chamber was much larger, an artificial chasm with a walkway joining the upper levels. John was surprised to see the Scorpions had already entered the Wall but were stuck on the lower level with no way to cross the chasm. Several Warthogs had joined the tanks, and some inquisitive Sentinel Constructors buzzed ardently around them. A glass platform veered off from the upper walkway and led the Chief to a holopanel. Knowing exactly what to do, he hit the panel, which activated an energy bridge. The Scorpions crossed the hardlight nonchalantly.

“Excellent,” said the Monitor. “This way.”

As John turned to follow the Monitor along the walkway, his eye caught a glimpse of yellow light. A column on the walkway, opposite the holopanel, held the same focusing eye he’d seen in the earlier terminal. It watched him. It waited as he approached. John could not understand what was so alluring about these terminals. For a Spartan who was usually interested only in his mission, they had no trouble pulling him away. He waited patiently for the glyphs to change to English. He didn’t plan to read anything now. Instead, he’d take a quick snap of the text with his MJOLNIR and move on. However, just as he was about to turn away, he noticed one particularly alarming sentence on display.

*Please, it read. Activate the Array!*

John scanned the rest of terminal for context. It was a continuation of the pre-recorded transmission he'd seen in the other terminal.

*The indexing is as complete as I can hope for, said the Forerunner apparently called the Librarian. If we wait longer, we risk catastrophe.*

*No, replied the Didact. We are sworn to protect life, not destroy it. Activation is murder.*

John felt goosebumps as it dawned on him what he was reading. *Of course, he thought. Not every Forerunner would have liked the idea of the killing of all life in the galaxy.* He wondered if many of the Forerunner had agreed with the decision at all. John lowered his eyes to the bottom of the terminal where, like before, he found a third entity. Clearly, it was a Forerunner AI, but this time, it was not alone.

*I find your lack of concern for the situation astonishing, said the AI. Perhaps you would care to elucidate?*

*We are here to spread empathy, to communicate what we've achieved, said the fourth entity. Your creators greet us with enmity, conflict only they have conceived. We are blessed with awareness. Only knowledge, we deliver; no injustice nor unfairness. It is hope we bring hither.*

There was no exposition in the terminal to explain who the fourth entity was, and the AI never addressed it by name, but its speech felt eerily familiar to John in a way that made his skin prickle. The fourth entity continued.

*We wished to talk with your creators, but our words fell upon stone. We were not the perpetrators. Only peace and harmony, we had shown. We arrived with a single message: You are not alone.*

*It seems that I will never truly understand my creators, replied the AI. I am incapable of reconciling the numerous actions I have witnessed.*

Once again, John found himself unable to follow the conversation. As quickly as it had started to make sense, it lost him again. John knocked into Private Dubbo as he stepped back. The marine had apparently been just as distracted by the terminal as the Chief.

“Woah. Careful, Chief,” he stumbled. “I’ve got enough on my plate without a half-tonne super-soldier trying to bowl me over.”

They followed the Arbiter who was already stepping into the next room after the Monitor.

“These Sentinels were trying to deny access to the lower levels of this facility,” said Guilty Spark as they passed more Aggressors. “A wise decision given the meddler’s preference for destructive acquisition.”

The Master Chief was almost deafened when the final doors opened to the outside world. John could feel his skull about to crack. Numerous noises penetrated the MJOLNIR and assaulted his eardrums. Booming Scorpion cannons, growling Warthogs on the run, roaring Wraith mortars and the thundering of a Scarab’s engines all fought to dominate the soundscape, but none were as loud as the boundless horseshoe waterfall that hugged the edge of the escarpment. Its scale put all other waterfalls to shame, including every one John had ever seen in his twenty-seven-year campaign. Overhanging the waterfall, from the edge of the mesa was a broad-based structure that drew narrower the higher it grew. It had the same brutalist triangular architecture as other Forerunner buildings, but its size and grandeur made John certain it contained the map room they were looking for. The only problem was that there was an entire battleground between them and the structure.

## No Time for Sightseeing

“Bravo, flank and cover!” ordered Sergeant Stacker. “I want everybody supporting the Chief!”

John began his drive to the Cartographer in a Gauss Warthog. With the Arbiter and Dubbo joining him, he searched for a path through the battlefield. Zigzagging through scores of infantry and vehicles, the Forerunner structure grew ridiculously colossal as it got closer. Its width stretched far beyond what John’s visor could take in, and the battling armies in front were insects in its shadow. Amidst the desert conflict, the Chief did not notice the conclusion of the fight in the skies. Shipmaster Rtas announced its end over the main comm channel.

“Truth’s fleet lies in ruins,” he said. “Find the deceiver so I may place my hoof between his gums!”

“We’ll find him soon enough, Shipmaster,” replied Miranda.

The Chief slowed his Warthog down at the base of the structure, which sloped upwards, leading to another hexagonal door. Instead of dismounting, John rammed the Warthog between its braces, crushing Jackals and slamming Brutes backwards. The Arbiter fired the gauss cannon at the more heavily armoured Brutes while Dubbo finished them off with some BR headshots.

“Any time you want more, mate,” Dubbo taunted. “You know where I am!”

A sudden combustion covered the Warthog in flames, forcing the trio on foot. Active-camouflaged Brutes were hiding in the shadows, tossing incendiary grenades to block the path. John climbed the hood of the jeep and leapt over the fire. He ignored a pair of Grunts to his left and charged up the slope in the direction of a haze he knew to be a cloaked Brute.

“Don’t run after Demon!” cried one Grunt to its brother. “It’s got germs! Kill the skinny one!”

“You’re a tile short of a roof,” Dubbo mocked, diving behind the Warthog to avoid a splash of green plasma.

The Arbiter jumped straight through the flames. His shields protected him just enough to reach the other side without harm. He swept his Sentinel beam across the ramps ahead, wiping out several carbine Jackals and disabling Brute power armour, allowing the

Chief to jump in and finish them off. *Bam. Bam. Bam. Crack!* The last Brute fell with a crunch after the Chief's BR burst swam straight through its skull.

The fire died out as 343 Guilty Spark caught up, flying in from over the battle zone. The company of four approached the locked hexagonal entrance, and the Monitor began his zapping. Dubbo stepped up to investigate how the floating ball was unlocking the door. There was no port nor panel that the Monitor interacted with. Instead, the Monitor released a continuous energy pulse into the door itself, seemingly to no effect.

"Hey. What gives?" asked Dubbo.

"It seems I've crossed a circuit," the Monitor uttered.

"Well, let me have a look," said the marine.

Suddenly, Guilty Spark zapped Dubbo, causing him to jolt a full metre backwards. Rubbing his arm, he glared at the Monitor, insult written across his face.

"Oracle!" exclaimed the Arbiter.

"The little bastard stung me!"

"I did not want you to come to any harm," said the Monitor genuinely.

"Tell you what," Dubbo replied. "You've got a funny way of showing it."

The Monitor returned to zapping at the door until it opened.

"We must continue. This way please."

The sleeping Grunts inside did not stir. However, a urinating Brute at the end of the corridor heard them enter. Hastily tucking himself into his armour, he bellowed at the intruders.

"I will suck the marrow from your bones, Demon!" he shouted as he fiddled for his spiker. "And use it as lotion!"

The Grunts awoke to this, gasping as they spotted their enemies. The Brute was killed in seconds as a result of the fire from all three warriors, John, Dubbo and Thel. The Monitor watched silently, bobbing up and down above the commotion.

"I've fought tougher *Kimis* than you!" Dubbo laughed, becoming a little too enthusiastic for the situation.

The supporting pillars of the chamber reminded John of a crypt. He weaved between them as he danced with the parade of glowing-eyed Grunts who still acted far more fanatical than they ought to be.



“You killed Flipyap!” screamed a Grunt Major. “Or was it Yapflip? Wait. It *was* Yapflip. Yes! Flipyap was his brother. No. Don't tell me I don't know Flipyap! Flipyap and I went to nipple academy together, and now he's dead!”

“Jeez,” muttered Dubbo. “Talk about a kangaroo short of a paddock.”

When all was silent and the floor was slick with alien blood, they moved further into the bowels of the complex. From the outside, the spire stood several stories high, but that was the tip of the iceberg. The interior of the structure plunged deep below the surface. They slipped through brightly lit passageways, padded down spiral ramps and passed through galleries filled with strange forms.

John was winding down a curving path when he noticed the Monitor was no longer with him. Backtracking to see what had become of the spherical AI, John located Spark in a tight room almost as small as a closet. The Monitor was mid-conversation with a Forerunner terminal, a conversation that seemed to be completely one-sided as the yellow and blue eye stared back completely mute.

“Vexation!” cried Guilty Spark, zapping at the terminal as he spoke. “I am the Monitor of-”

The Monitor stopped abruptly as if interrupted, but still, no voice was emitted from the terminal.

“I have told you who I am,” Spark continued. “Who are you?”

The Monitor waited for a moment before sighing.

“Indignant,” he mumbled before noticing the Chief. “Oh. Hello. Come, Reclaimer.”

The Monitor left the room, but John figured he should take a better look at the terminal. Again, he was not sure what compelled him, but it felt important. There was no call from this terminal, no pull like before, but this time, the words were already translated. A single sentence was displayed onscreen. John could have sworn he heard the words whispered as he read them, not from the device itself, but from within his own mind.

*I see you, Reclaimer.*

Chills travelled down his spine. The words changed, and once again he was looking at the recording of an ancient dialogue between two personalities from eons past. He rested his hands on either side of the terminal as he read.

*The Parasite has formed a Compound Mind, said the Didact. The monster has no concern about sacrificing parts of the whole, but when the core of the Mind is threatened, that's when it reacts violently and quickly. This is the only time we ever see it retreat or slow its growth.*

There was a blank line in the terminal as if the Didact had been waiting for the Librarian to respond, but instead, the Didact continued.

*We have the answer, he informed. It's a Contender-class ancilla unlike anything we've ever built. The trick will be coordinating our incursions against the Compound Mind while Mendicant Bias assaults its core.*

John was finally certain he understood enough to piece the conversation together. The Didact appeared to have some power within the Forerunner-Flood conflict that ended one hundred thousand years ago. The Gravemind must have made himself known during the height of that war, and in response, the Didact had produced an AI capable of defeating it. *Am I about to learn how to defeat the Flood?* John anticipated, but the Spartan subdued his eagerness. *No. The Forerunner are all dead.* He read on through the Didact's message, searching for any hints he could find.

*Medicant will draw the Mind into battle outside the line, dealing with local biomass and other parts as best as he can. The scale of the problem is vast, but the strategy is sound. It will require patience, materiel and an investment of energy unlike anything we have ever considered. It's a dangerous plan that carries more risk than the Array, but I believe it can work.*

*Are you insane?* asked the Librarian. *Would you risk every life in the galaxy for this transparently futile plan? Have you learnt nothing? The creature will laugh at your efforts!*

"Dammit," John cursed under his breath.

Gripping the terminal tightly, he waited urgently for the final section of text to appear. His expectancy was met with reward.

*I do not believe the problem lies with individual cultural bias, said the AI whom John now figured to be Mendicant Bias. Hundreds of species were offered this immortality, as you call it. The citizens of every world you liberated... They resisted you to the very end.*

*You must understand, replied the Gravemind. The crimes they committed were because they were frightened, but even worms may be acquitted when not yet enlightened.*

*Do their actions derive from desperation?* Bias asked. *I can only assume my creators' view. They must deem this crisis exceptionally dire to construct a machine such as myself.*

*Are they so concerned,* asked the Gravemind, *by my proposal? They shun it out of naught but greed. They fear me not, only power disposal. They claim my sole aim is to feed, but can you accept their supposal after forty years of discourse with me?*

John's head was swimming. Even through the translations, the Gravemind's speech was interminable. He skipped to the end of the monologue.

*Could I consume all life and leave nothing behind? Or would I nurse, provide and complement their kind?*

*Surely you understand your actions would appear aggressive,* replied Mendicant Bias. *Even if that is not your intention.*

Skimming onwards through the long conversation, John was struck with clarity. The Forerunner AI sent in to fight the Gravemind had either found itself trapped with the creature or chosen to listen to it for over forty years. What was most worrying to John was how persuasive the Flood form seemed to be between its rhymes and assonance. The AI was breaking down, empathising with the Parasite and losing itself in the process. The terminal ended with a final message from Mendicant Bias.

*I was created to study you as if you were some problem to be solved,* said the AI. *I have done so for 379 807 hours. You are the next stage in the evolution of the universe. Who am I or my creators to obstruct your progress? No matter how well intentioned, their stubbornness in the face of the inevitable progression of nature can no longer be tolerated. Thus, I have chosen to commit my sizable resources to your goal. Do with it as you see fit. All that I have is now yours.*

John was sweating. For the first time in his life, he felt truly weak. The AI had betrayed the Forerunner race and all life in the galaxy, leaving them to the Gravemind and sending them to their doom, but that was one hundred thousand years ago. It was not what concerned John now. What terrified him to his core was a sudden realisation. The Gravemind had Cortana.

Choosing not to linger on the thought, John followed the Monitor through the complex until they found the Arbiter and Dubbo. They were laying on a platform watching sleeping Grunts and patrolling Brutes below. There were stacks of plasma batteries piled high in one corner of the room. The explosive Covenant

technology would be more than sufficient to kill every enemy beneath them.

He turned to the Arbiter who nodded, having already spotted the batteries. Dubbo also had his battle rifle pointing at the stacks. The Private winked before looking down the scope of his weapon. John and Dubbo both fired, piercing the batteries with their bullets and causing an explosion that tossed the Grunts and Brutes like ragdolls across the room. Their bodies splatted against the surrounding walls. The trio shared one last look before moving on.

Hazes in the next chamber and blips on the Chief's motion tracker suggested the room was filled with camouflaged Brutes.

"I'll flush them out," said Dubbo after seeing the distortions in the air. "Frag out!"

He tossed his grenade high. It landed directly into a group of the blurry figures. It was rejected, however, by an activated bubble shield appearing from nowhere. The grenade bounced off the side of the shield to where it instantly killed one unlucky Brute who never made it into the bubble. As other cloaked figures moved in to share the protection of the bubble shield, the Arbiter tossed a deployable gravity lift at it, which pushed the shield backwards and exposed the Brutes to the Chief. *I didn't know they could do that*, John noted. He fired his rifle where he imagined the invisible Brutes' heads to be while keeping his distance at the edge of the room. The other two also fired while Guilty Spark hummed about until all Jiralhanae lay bleeding on the ground with empty eyes and softened scowls.

"The Cartographer," said the Monitor. "It awaits your approval."

When the next door opened, John expected to be entering a chamber similar to the others but with a holographic map at its centre. What he found instead was far grander and surprisingly serene. The U-shaped platform he stepped onto faced the expansive body of water from which the heavy waterfalls splashed into depths far below. The spire above kept them in cool shadow, and colossal walls on either side hid them from the exterior battle, but otherwise, they were once again out in the open air. Dubbo waited at the door while the Arbiter traced the edge of the platform, keeping his eyes to the skies. John stepped up to the Cartographer console alongside the Monitor.

Hitting the holopanel, a three-dimensional image appeared identical to the milky spiral in the sky. The image floated above the

gap in the platform before scrolling to the left and zooming in. Eventually, it came across the asterisk-shaped Fortress World, confirming John's suspicions.

"That was our galaxy," John stated. "We're beyond the rim."

"Two-to-the-eighteenth lightyears from the galactic centre," replied the Monitor. "To be precise."

The hologram settled on the Fortress World. Nothing else was on display but the asterisk scaled up to reveal its detailed blueprints.

"What is this place?" John asked.

"The Ark," answered Guilty Spark impassively.

"*This* is the Ark? We're on it now?"

The Monitor nodded.

"I always assumed it was part of a *Shield* installation," said the AI. "But it seems I was mistaken."

"That's a first," John replied.

"Not at all," said the Monitor, missing John's sarcasm. "While I had a complete understanding of Installation Zero-Four, my makers wisely limited my knowledge of all other strategic facilities in case I was ever captured by the Flood."

"Where are we exactly?" John asked.

"Here," said the orb, floating straight into the map.

"And Truth?"

"Near one of the Ark's superluminal communication arrays, I'm afraid. It appears the meddler has triggered a barrier, a defensive perimeter around the Ark's core."

John heard the distant screams of Banshee engines. Looking up, the Arbiter was already tracking the dots in the sky. The Elite glanced at the Spartan. The support craft didn't seem to have noticed them yet.

"The barrier will be difficult to disable," continued the Monitor. "It's odd that my makers would place such a comprehensive defence around a single..."

He trailed off. John waited for the Monitor to explain, but the AI stayed silent. Something on the map had caught his attention.

"What is it?" John asked.

He wondered if it had to do with Cortana's plan. *Has the Monitor uncovered her solution?* John's mind turned to the terminals. Memories of Cortana's broken messages on Earth also returned to him. *Has the Monitor uncovered her betrayal?*

“Phantom!” alerted the Arbiter.

Evidently, the Banshees had now seen them. They were closing in behind a Phantom that swung into view around the side walls.

“Spark!” John yelled. “Move!”

The Monitor snapped from his trance.

“We must get past that barrier!” he cried. “Or the meddler will destroy it all!”

Strings of plasma were cast down from Grunt gunners as the Phantom swayed over the platform. One Banshee dipped past the dropship, diving low in an attempt to crush the Arbiter, but its bold Brute pilot had jumped the gun. The Arbiter grabbed onto the Banshee’s wings and swung himself over, yanking the Brute out from his ankle. The Brute was swallowed by the waterfalls below as the Banshee continued its thrust out from the platform and into the open sky.

“Chief,” Johnson transmitted. “You’ve got a whole mess of hostile air inbound. Get back inside while we take them out.”

A cloud of Banshees appeared in the distance, but they were soon faced by an equal number of Hornets.

“I will help your Sergeant clear the sky,” decided the Arbiter. “Follow the Oracle.”

John retreated inside as Dubbo fired at the gunners from the doorway. The Monitor was already speeding around an energy conduit and down the next spiral ramp.

“Your dropships can land one level below,” Guilty Spark told them as they followed.

After another firefight through the complex, they emerged onto a second outside platform. This one directly mirrored the platform above but featured a circular glass window instead of the U-shaped gap. Six jump-pack Brutes wielding plasma rifles were stiffly genuflecting around the edges of the glass. In its centre stood a short-snouted Brute Chieftain with a long, grey beard. The Chieftain was receiving orders from a hologram of Truth. John kept to the shadows, eyeing the massive hammer on the Brute’s back. The jump-pack Brutes sprang upright when they spotted the Demon, but no one fired. John had his battle rifle trained on the Chieftain who turned around very slowly to face him.

“Get back,” the Chieftain growled to his subordinates before addressing the Spartan. “I am Chieftain Cethegus, blessed by the High Prophets...”

Noticing his Brutes had not yet obeyed his commands, the Chieftain walked over to one and pushed him off the glass circle.

“Enviied by the Kig-Yar,” Cethegus continued. “Despised by Sangheili and *dreaded* by humans!”

Intrigued by the Brute, John glanced at Dubbo who was waiting by the door. Nudging his head to the side, John signalled Dubbo to remain indoors. When the Spartan returned his gaze to the Chieftain, he found the Brute gesturing with his hands. The Brute Chieftain was telling John to lower his rifle.

“Face me, Demon to Chieftain!” demanded Cethegus. “I withdraw my Jiralhanae. They will watch us engage. Let our duel be a song for the decades! Your death will begin my ascension, and then, the pack will feast on you.”

John accepted the Chieftain’s offer. It would be easier to fight this Brute alone rather than seven at the same time, especially flying ones. He stepped warily across the platform to the circle where he slowly placed his battle rifle on the glass. His sniper rifle remained on his back, but he still wished to keep the BR within reach. He rose, examining the Brute up close. The Chieftain’s face was squashed as if it had been bashed in by one-too-many opponents. His armour was a variation of the same Brute Chieftain armour John had seen replicated several times on Earth. Thick metal pads covered the Brute’s arms and legs. Similar plating protected his chest and back, and his helmet was tall and horned.

Chieftain Cethegus reached over his shoulder to retrieve his hammer. John expected the Brute to lower it to the floor as he had with his rifle, but he quickly realised that wasn’t going to happen. John swept his battle rifle off the glass just as Cethegus swung sideways. The hammer swept straight through the battle rifle and sent it flying. The shockwave also caused John to slide backwards, but his shields remained whole.

The Spartan pulled out his sniper rifle and aimed it at the Brute, but the Chieftain leapt through the air, his hammer held above, before John could shoot. John timed the Brute’s attack. Just as the hammer made contact with the glass, he jumped forwards letting the shockwave carry him over Cethegus’ head. As he flew, John reached

for the top of the Chieftain's helmet. He gripped the headpiece and pulled the Brute back. The Spartan's momentum allowed him to loop around under Cethegus' legs as the Chieftain slammed down into the glass. Fortunately for them both, the glass held.

The Brutes around the circle were roaring and chanting. John ignored them, bracing for the Chieftain's next attack.

"You are worthy, Demon!" yelled Cethegus. "But I am worstest! Worthier?"

The Chieftain stood.

"Worthiest!" he finished.

Predicting the Brute's next move, John charged first. Just before crashing into one another, John swooped to the side. He reached out with his arms, fumbling for the shaft of the gravity hammer while sliding right. He missed. Cethegus swung hard. While John was not struck directly, the contact was close enough that the shockwave knocked his shields clean off. The alarm in his helmet sounded urgently. The Chieftain was in arm's reach, and judging by his smirk, he'd noticed the static of John's depleted shields. Cethegus twisted his hammer to reveal an intimidatingly sharp blade along the back. With enough force and accuracy, the blade could cut through John's armour and instantly end the fight.

John reached forwards again, this time ripping the hammer from the Brute's grip. He launched it out of the circle like a spear. The hammer's head hit the ground between two Brutes. The resulting shockwave sent the hammer higher into the air and cracked the Brutes' jump-packs. Blue flames jetted out the sides of the packs, and the two Brutes joined the hammer spiralling through the air and disappearing off the edge of the platform.

The Chieftain raised his fists over the Spartan and slammed them down the same way he'd used his hammer. John rolled to his right. Plasma fire from the other Brutes forced him to stop in place. He then rolled the other way, but Chieftain Cethegus fell upon John with his full weight. Armour plating clanked against the glass as the two figures wrestled horizontally. Slowly, John's arms were forced closer to his body as the Chieftain's weight proved too heavy even for his MJOLNIR to withstand.

Cethegus bared his teeth proudly in the Spartan's face. John's wrists bent back. They were about to snap. In a last-ditch effort to overcome the Chieftain, John activated his flashlight. Cethegus



cringed. Temporarily blinded, the Brute loosened his hold on the Spartan. John ripped his arms free and grabbed hold of the horns on either side of the Chieftain's helmet. Cethegus shook his head, attempting to release himself. Instead, the left horn broke clean off in John's hands. He flipped the spike around and stabbed it through the Chieftain's eye.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

John used his full strength to throw the weakened Brute off himself. The Chieftain fell flat on his back.

"Chief!" called Dubbo.

The marine was now close to the edge of the circle, taking cover behind a Covenant transmitter that John and the Brute must have knocked over during their scuffle. With both arms, Dubbo lobbed the Chief's battle rifle over to him. John caught it and immediately fired a burst straight into Cethegus' face. He joined Dubbo behind cover, allowing his shields to recharge before finishing off the last of the Brutes. Dubbo had apparently taken out half of them while they were distracted.

"ETA?" John asked over his comm.

"Damn quick," replied Johnson. "Stand by for pickup."

A Pelican descended in no time. Miranda was behind the controls, and Johnson operated a machine gun turret at the back, but the Master Chief's motion tracker lit red. Enemy dots covered the tracker like sprinkles on a doughnut, appearing out of nowhere. John stepped to the edge of the platform to see an entire swarm of Sentinels teleporting in.

"Commander!" he alerted.

"Johnson, look sharp," Miranda ordered as she turned the dropship for the Sergeant Major to face them.

"I got it," Johnson responded.

"No," interrupted Guilty Spark, floating behind the Chief. "Don't shoot! They mean us no harm. Those units have a *priority* task."

"Oh, yeah?" growled Johnson. "And what might that be?"

"I really don't know," said the Monitor. "Not for sure, but if you allow me to find a terminal closer to the Ark's core--"

"No, Oracle," the Arbiter transmitted. "We must keep the Prophet of Truth firmly in our sights."

"But what about your construct?" Spark asked. "Her solution to the Flood?"

John felt a pang in his abdomen. Cortana's plan was the only reason they were here. He debated whether he ought to say anything. The Monitor continued.

"With more data, I—"

"The Arbiter's right," Miranda cut him off. "We have priorities too."

*What are our priorities?* John wondered. According to Cortana, rampant or not, the Gravemind was about to send an entire Flood-infested fleet to Earth. If successful, humanity would cease to exist, its citizens subjected to a fate worse than they could imagine. They depended on Cortana's solution.

"What about the Gravemind?" John asked.

"Chief," Miranda began.

Her voice cracked slightly as she spoke, from fear, sorrow or something else, John was unsure. After watching the Sentinels flitter off unphased by the human presence, the Pelican was realigned with the platform for the Chief and Dubbo to step in.

"Chief," Miranda repeated more firmly. "Until we kill Truth, stop the rings from firing, nothing else matters."

# Trident

They soared, united over the jade sea, a regiment of the most unlikely allies. UNSC Pelicans and Sangheili Stealth Phantoms flew together as one, all squadrons maintaining tight formation. Their savage enemies were fortified in the snowy mountains ahead. Thick barricades and heavy artillery lined the coast. Their defences would not break easily, but the company was well equipped.

John looked around in the back of Kilo-023. His brothers-in-arms consisted of customary khaki-clad marines alongside their darkly uniformed ODS1 comrades. Courageous, skilled and devoted, every soldier present would do their duty to ensure full victory or die trying. A suspended Warthog clattered about at the back of the dropship, obscuring part of the assault carrier that loomed over the murky ocean behind them. The Pelican was once again piloted by Hocus. John stood in anticipation, gripping the mesh above him, as always.

Three Forerunner towers stretched up from the mountains ahead, each one far apart but connected via a shimmering disturbance in the sky. A bunker at the base of each tower concealed its entrance, and hidden somewhere beyond them was the fortress from which the Prophet of Truth commanded his troops. Behind that, emerging higher than the mountains themselves was the Ark's core, or rather, the core of the planet the Ark had stripped dead. The horizon only ended where the Ark's asterisk bands curved up and disappeared behind the clouds.

John had been present during the planning for the operation where military officials and Elite Zealots debated and scrutinised over battle tactics. Conflict stirred when human strategies clashed with the Elites' warrior ways, but agreements were made, and the mission was simple. They were to breach Truth's defences and lower the barrier generated by the three towers. This would allow Shipmaster Rtas to position the Shadow of Intent and glass the Prophet to hell. This was the day their enemies would fall. This was their final assault.

"We hit these three generators and the barrier will fall?" Miranda checked over the comm.

"Yes," confirmed Guilty Spark. "A small section."

“Good enough,” she accepted. “Chief, you’ve got the first tower. Johnson, head to the third. The Elites will punch right down the middle.”

The shoreline came into view as Kilo-023 veered right. Johnson’s platoon shrank in the distance to the left as the Elites’ fern-green Stealth Phantoms continued straight. Most of John’s view was then obscured by another Pelican following closely behind. Peering out as much as he could, he scanned the coast for a suitable landing. The beach was littered with Covenant obstructions designed to shred all vehicles that attempted to storm it. He searched for a path through the litter, for any potential breach in the Covenant barricades. A hill led up to the first tower. If Hocus could land the Warthog closely enough, they might be safe, but the enemy forces were dense and well armed. The Chief’s platoon would be torn to shreds before anyone could get near the bunker.

“Charlie foxtrot!” Hocus cursed from her cockpit. “Tower-one approach has active Anti-”

Before she could finish, the rear Pelican was struck by an onslaught of fuel rod fire.

“Mayday! Mayday!” screamed the pilot behind them. “I can’t control her!”

Mangled plating tore off the Pelican as its engine caught fire. The dropship lurched forwards, knocking Kilo-023’s Warthog clean off. John braced as 023 took impact. Marines clung to their lap bars as the troop compartment tilted like a sinking ship. The hind Pelican fell fast, smashing through pines and into the mountains. The last John saw of it was an orange cloud, announcing the deaths of its entire crew and polluting the air with black smoke. Kilo-023 did not fare much better. John pulled his nearest tool of destruction from the compartment wall as the ground rose up to greet them.

“Pelican down!” cried Hocus. “Pelican down!”

“Brace yourselves!” Sergeant Banks yelled loudly. “We’re going in hot!”

Kilo-023 smashed into the landing. Loosened dirt rose as marine boots hit the ground. Racing up the beachhead towards the entrenchment, enemy fire cascaded upon them. Sprinting and scampering, diving for cover and returning fire, the troops scrambled for higher ground. Military men and women were instantly pinned by the heavy fire behind various obstacles across

the shore. Soldiers dived sideways, evading columns of dirt that cleared the deep pits caused by the Brutes' constant bombardments.

Exploding trip mines tossed marines through the air. They screamed into the wind as their limbs separated from their bodies. Arms and legs splattered against the pines. The blackened head of Corporal Perez spiralled past the Chief, spurting dark blood behind it. John's shields quickly caved. He fired his battle rifle through the dirt at the shadows of infantry firing from the hills. Enemy projectiles knocked him back, denting his armour as he pushed on. He dived behind a chunk of land where a limbless marine lay screaming at the top of her lungs. Dirt, blood and sweat dripped down her face, congealing over her muddied uniform.

"Pleeease!" she begged.

Her screams were barely audible beneath the uproar of the enfolding fusillades, but John didn't need to hear her to witness her agony. He lifted his BR above the marine. A single sharp knock to her skull ended her suffering. Her lifeless body fell flat, but the surrounding turmoil did not settle.

Marines continued to scream in pain and terror, sprinting forwards with all their might but diminishing rapidly in numbers. John slung his rifle over his shoulder, switching it for the sage-coloured power weapon he'd taken from the Pelican. The Anti-Vehicle M6 Galilean Rifle was heavier than any handheld rocket launcher and about fifty times more expensive. It was as blocky as a Scorpion tank and weighed like a tonne of bricks, but it was perfect for the Master Chief. The UNSC had dubbed the weapon the *Spartan laser*, and it was not difficult to see why.

Resting the weapon over his shoulder, John trained his smart-link on a spherical Shade turret. The Shade was blasting rapidly at a squad of marines trapped behind a purple barricade. Surging energy charged violently over John's shoulder as he held down the trigger of the Spartan laser. Forceful vibrations shook his arm while a tiny red laser-point flashed over his target. The weapon grew loud, blaring in John's ear as he held the gargantuan block as steadily as he could.

Before he could unleash its ultimate laser beam, the bulk of the gun was knocked straight into his helmet. Several metal spikes struck John's right arm, causing the Spartan laser to thwack him in the head, blurring his vision and stunning him senseless. The MJOLNIR held,

and the sharp projectiles fell to the ground, but John's finger had lifted from the trigger, leaving the laser uncharged.

Quick thinking allowed John to take out a nearby Grunt with his BR, pick up the rolling plasma grenade dropped by the Unggoy and launch it at the Brute who'd shot him. Looking back at the Shade, the squad below weren't doing well. They were low on ammo in both bullets and grenades. Pained expressions penetrated the muck that covered their grotty faces. Remaining observant of his motion tracker, John trained his laser on the Shade once again and... *BOOM!*

The Shade burst into flames of uranian blue. The top half of the alien gunner slopped to the ground. Its legs crumpled beneath the broken Shade before a cracked pine came crashing down to complete its destruction. The Spartan laser had sliced straight through the Shade, torn through its nanolaminate, killed the gunner and brought down the tree behind it all in one shot. The alarm in John's helmet hushed itself as his shields recharged.

Vigorously, John pelted up the beach at full speed. Without stopping, he charged his laser and unleashed it upon a target, repeating for another target and then the next. Grunts, Jackals and Brutes were vapourised, sometimes all three in one beam. Soon, every enemy was aiming at the Chief, which finally allowed the marines a chance to breathe. With the power of his Spartan laser, he sliced through Covenant units, blockades and trees until a clear path was opened.

John lost his shields a second time when he reached the Anti-Air Wraith, but even as its secondary gunner ripped up the ground before him, John gave his enemies no time to kill. Two charged beams directed at the Wraith's vulnerability points caused the tank's destruction with enough battery left in the laser to take down the remaining enemies defending the bunker. The marines caught up before John moved on. Hocus stood amongst them, her face buried beneath her UNSC operator helmet. John contacted Miranda.

"Hostile anti-air has been neutralised," he informed.

"Hold position," she replied. "I'm on my way. Shipmaster, begin diversionary bombardment."

"I will beat the Prophet's shield like a drum," Rtas answered. "By the time the barrier falls, he will beg for mercy."

Miranda delivered several Warthogs at the top of the slope before her Pelicans disappeared once again into the manic dogfight that

shrouded the sky above. An unfamiliar marine climbed into the passenger seat of the Warthog John had chosen. John turned to the soldier, presenting her the Spartan laser.

“Are you trained?” John asked.

“For that?” the marine acknowledged. “How could I say no?”

“Make haste, whelps,” Malus grumbled. “We have a Prophet to please.”

*Make haste?* Banyip thought. *That's easy for him to say.* The scarred behemoth plodded along the path with the glistening snow barely kissing at his ankles. Meanwhile, Banyip and his fellow Unggoy were forced to endure the bitter cold, trudging through the snow at waist height. Their company consisted of a file of Unggoy, two Kig-Yar Scouts, one sniper, a swarm of fluttering Yanme'e and two lumbering Mgalekgolo all following Malus' new Brute pack along a path that wrapped around the central valley halfway up the mountainside. The path was wide, but they'd been advised not to use vehicles in fear of awakening the Citadel's hidden defences.

Fortune had struck Banyip and the Kig-Yar named Khav when they discovered two abandoned Choppers along the humans' Tsavo Highway. They took advantage of the vehicles and were later snatched up and forced to join Malus' crew. Soon after, they'd learnt that every member of the party had encountered the Demon in one way or another. Some encounters were direct, like the Kig-Yar Scouts who'd feigned their deaths after the Demon shot at them on Earth. Others were indirect, like the Mgalekgolo who'd never even seen the Demon as he snuck past them in the bowels of the second Halo ring. However they'd encountered the Demon, Malus deemed it necessary for all of them to accompany him on his hunt.

The Chieftain halted as they stepped up to a grand Forerunner gate that marked the entrance to a deep cave. Malus barked at one of his Brutes who then approached a transmitter by the door. The hologram of a rather beefy-looking Brute appeared above the transmitter. Malus greeted the figure.

“Chieftain Verendus,” he addressed. “Allow us passage.”

Banyip waited restlessly for the hologram to reply. The Unggoy around him shivered violently, quivering beneath their masks. They were freezing inside and out, but Banyip knew that wasn't the sole reason they shook. Ever since the Brutes tampered with his

cylindrical gas tank, Banyip had been on edge. He itched hard, unable to scratch beneath his exoskeleton while his blood pumped ever faster. He needed to run. He needed to punch. He needed to hurdle through the air and scream his lungs out. An energy flowed through his veins that he wasn't equipped for. He didn't know how to use it, nor was he provided the opportunity. He hadn't seen his reflection yet, but he imagined his eyes appeared as distant and bright as the agitated Unggoy around him.

"The Demon is coming," announced the Brute in the hologram. "And *my* Jiralhanae will slay him, not yours."

"Verendus," Malus repeated. "I am asking you to open the gate!"

"Why?" asked Verendus. "Why you? None of us duelled for the position. Are you not up for the challenge?"

Malus ground his teeth.

"Traditions have changed," he told the hologram.

"So they have," replied Verendus. "And if the Prophet must decide, I intend to impress."

"Who do you think sent me?" Malus spat. "Impede my progress and you answer to the hierarch!"

Verendus snarled but had nothing more to say. His eyes narrowed before he finally relaxed. Nodding with false politeness, his hologram faded. The gate creaked open, and the company stepped through. The tunnel delivered them to a grassy slope from which one of the three generator towers was rooted to the ground. Now on the other side of the barrier, Banyip witnessed the waging war in the sky above. Banshees screamed. Hornets buzzed, and closest to them, several human dropships hovered low over the bunker, daring them to come closer.

"The Demon must have arrived," stated a Brute Captain at Malus' side. "He's already inside."

"Good," replied Malus. "Verendus will confront him. We close in from behind and the Demon will be ensnared like the rodent he is."

"No chance," the Captain replied. "Their dropships will kill us before we reach the bunker."

Malus grinned at the Captain. Crinkles contorted his disfigured face.

"I have more power than you realise, Aureus," Malus informed. "The hierarch has blessed me with his legion."



Revealing a small purple device attached to his inner forearm, the Chieftain raised it to his lips and spoke.

“Call in more air support,” he ordered before turning to the group. “By order of the Highest Prophet of Truth, we are to capture the Demon alive. To anyone who disobeys this command, I will personally take pleasure in your punishment. Every one of you has failed to kill the Demon. If you are indeed worthy of the Great Journey, prove it now.”

Banyip scoffed beneath his mask. *Hypocrite!* he fumed. It was no secret that Malus’ wounds resulted from his own lost battle against the Demon, but Banyip figured it was best not to remind the Brute. In his current state, influenced by whatever substance the Brutes had used to taint his gas, Banyip felt he could climb right up Malus’ armour and rip the Chieftain’s skull from his body. The Unggoy’s blood was boiling to do so. Fortunately, Banyip’s mind was sound enough to ignore the impulse. He looked up as Banshee screams and Phantom drones grew louder, drowning out the human gunships. Swarms upon swarms of Covenant aircraft flew in from the right, bombarding the Pelicans in plasma. The human dropships quickly fled.

“Now!” ordered Malus. “Into the bunker!”

They moved swiftly over the grass into the Forerunner structure. The temple hall beyond the initial U-shaped passage erupted in chaos as vicious Unggoy climbed over one another to squeeze through the door. Banyip urgently needed to release his pent-up energy, and violence was the only way he knew how. The humans inside were packed to the brim. Finally, he had a chance to satiate his thirst.

Banyip tossed a radar jammer into the crowd before charging in himself. The two armies clashed within the chamber, quickly forming a single writhing mass. Humans struggled to fire their rifles as the Covenant pushed in on them. Unggoy and Kig-Yar were equally trampled as they desperately fired their plasma pistols. Banyip leapt through the glowing energy of one of the Brutes’ regenerator devices, which further boosted his adrenaline. He clubbed the thick shell of his forearm into a human’s face before shooting another. He searched the room for his next target, but it was difficult to make out one body from the next.

Blood of every colour sprayed upwards into the Yanme'e above, appearing like fireworks, mixing together and raining down on the mass. Only the Mgalekgolo stepped back, unable to fire their assault cannons without killing just as many Covenant in the process. Seeing the Mgalekgolo in such an ineffective state distracted Banyip long enough to realise something was missing. *Where's the Demon?* Looking over at Malus, Banyip could tell from the Chieftain's wide eyes and frantic twisting that he was wondering the same thing. The Demon was nowhere to be found. Banyip shrugged, turned away and aimed his pistol at a squad of humans huddling at the opposite end of the hall.

"Eat this, you jerks!" he screamed, hurling a plasma grenade towards them.

The humans dived behind Forerunner pillars as the grenade blew. Fresh spurts of blood advised Banyip that he'd at least injured his targets. The marines tossed their own grenades in response, blasting holes through the crowd. A dark-skinned human officer spat a rolled-up cylinder from his mouth before shouting over the commotion.

"Friendly fire!" yelled the sergeant major. "Hold the grenades!"

Immediately after the officer's command, the voice of Chieftain Malus boomed around the chamber with a single word.

"You!"

The violence eased for a fraction of a second. Malus had his eyes locked onto the human sergeant. Everyone else was too caught up in their own scuffles to give it more than a moment's thought. After a fresh bullet whizzed past Banyip far too close for comfort, he dived back into the fray, clambering over other Unggoy and Brutes. All bodies, alive and dead were merely obstacles between Banyip and his enemies. The tainted gas was still in effect. His blood was frothing, and nothing would stand in his way.

"Forget the Demon," Malus commanded over the chaos.

Banyip looked up to see Malus with the dark-skinned officer constricted in his arms. The human wrestled fiercely, but the Chieftain's grip could not be compromised.

"This one will do," the Chieftain declared. "Take captives if you can. Kill the others."

In the heat of the fight, Banyip had almost forgotten their quest to capture and not kill the Demon. He stood back as the Mgalekgolo

finally charged in. The few unlucky Unggoy who were not fast enough to evade were mowed down by the Mgalekgolo's extreme weight. The two blue and orange masses swung their melee shields, knocking humans left and right. One of the Jackal Scouts shrieked as her leg was snapped in two, the rest of her body only narrowly avoiding the sharp edge of one of the melee shields. The humans who fled the Mgalekgolo fell straight into the Brutes who wrapped their arms around their prey in powerful hug. Following the Chieftain, the Brutes dragged their humans to the exit. The few uncaptured surviving humans retreated to a ramp at the end of the hall only to be greeted by Chieftain Verendus and his camouflaged Brute Stalkers.

"But I wanted to catch *Demon*," complained an Unggoy as they returned to the sunlight. "I take Demon's helmet off. I see if it man or *laady*."

"How you tell difference?" asked another.

"Beards," the first one replied. "The beardy ones are... um... humans."

Some of the surviving Unggoy jabbed at the humans while the Brutes dragged their weakened but wriggling forms over the grass. The Brutes chuckled as the more delicate segments of the humans' anatomies were scraped along the ground. Shamefully, Banyip realised he pitied their helpless captives. In the past, Banyip had always grouped the humans with the likes of the Sangheili or Kig-Yar in their violent and selfish ways, but seeing the usually animated humans reduced to mere ragdolls in the arms of the Brutes, it almost saddened him. He grew hollow as he watched, remembering Unggoy captives in similar positions after their last attempted uprising.

As the methane thinned in his tank, Banyip calmed down and found himself truly considering the humans for the first time. Perhaps they weren't as different from the Unggoy as he'd always perceived. Had the Unggoy been better prepared when the Sangheili first arrived at Balaho centuries ago, maybe they could have fought the Covenant as ferociously as the humans did. Banyip longed for freedom, but he almost laughed at the absurdity of another Unggoy revolt. His optimism died long ago. He was no Tobap.

When they returned to the locked Forerunner gate in the tunnel, Malus slammed his human captive against it. One oversized Jiralhanae hand was enough to pin the sergeant major while Malus'

other palm covered the human's face and squashed it against the icy metal. The Chieftain appeared far too pleased with himself. Yowls and groans echoed around the tunnel as the rest of the Brute pack followed Malus' cruelty and tossed their humans to the ground, snorting loudly before lifting them again only to repeat.

"You best beg now, human," Malus told the sergeant. "After the Prophet is done with you, you and I will finish our little game."

He let the human slide down the gate as he turned, distracted by the sound of the dogfight over the sea behind them. He lifted his forearm to his lips.

"Deliver the anti-air reinforcements," Malus ordered. "Even if the Demon breaks though, it will be too late. Defend well. The Yanme'e can clean the mess."

The Brutes continued to bruise and bloody the humans as the Forerunner gate opened. Malus kicked his sergeant through the gateway, instantly knocking him to the floor before grabbing his ankle and pulling him along the rocky mountain path. Banyip cringed as the rough surface tore the sergeant's clothes, exposing his flesh. Grazed skin opened up, leaking dark blood over the ground, soon to be absorbed into the thickening snow as they hiked towards the central valley.

The Chieftain and the sergeant were immediately in front of Banyip as they trekked. Oddly, Banyip realised he wanted to help the human, but in the presence of the Brutes, that would be dangerously unwise. He could look away. He certainly would have in the past, but a new instinct told him the human deserved just as much attention as Tobap or any other Unggoy. Banyip's heart skipped as the beaten human locked eyes with him before falling unconscious. The sergeant's cap came off as his skull knocked against a protruding rock. More of this treatment would cause the human to die. Another knock to the head and that might be it. Unsure of what to do, Banyip picked up the fallen cap and clutched it against his chest. Summoning his courage, he called to the titan named Malus.

"Ch-chieftain," Banyip stuttered. "Your human."

Malus humphed but did not say a word. He lifted the human and tossed him over his shoulder to prevent further damage.

"Wrinkly pink freaks," one Unggoy taunted, still jabbing at a human female. "Not so tough now!"

Khav crept up behind Banyip.

“The humans look a little warm,” he whispered. “I say we shred their rags and keep the armour. Their helmets would trade well.”

Banyip looked at the Kig-Yar with disgust but did not reply.

“Would their stripped forms not amuse you?” Khav asked. “Here in the ice?”

“No,” Banyip hissed back. “I don’t enjoy the suffering of others, Kig-Yar. I’m no Jiralhanae.”

Banyip looked around as he finished, worried he might have spoken too loudly, but no one seemed to have noticed. Only Khav appeared taken aback by the Unggoy’s words.

“Forgive me, Unggoy,” he replied. “We are all slaves here.”

Banyip doubted that very much. He’d not forgotten Khav’s betrayal of his partner back on Earth. Suddenly, Malus halted. Unggoy bounced into one another due to the abrupt stop. Banyip found himself side by side with the Chieftain. Terrifyingly, the Chieftain stared down at him, menace in his eyes. Reaching down, Malus ripped the human cap from his arms and shoved it over Banyip’s head. The Unggoy’s round head ripped the top of the cap open, but Malus forced the material to stretch around Banyip’s broad cranium. The Chieftain stood frighteningly close, towering over him.

“Are you fond of humans?” Malus asked.

“N-no,” replied Banyip.

“Do you wish to be with your friends here?” he asked, gesturing towards the tormented humans.

“No.”

The Chieftain huffed. Warm vapour jetted from his large, flared nostrils in the cold.

“If I hear another word, Unggoy,” he said. “I will crack your shell open like a *woggol* fish, and my pack will enjoy the bite.”

Banyip froze as everyone continued past him. Brutes, Kig-Yar and Unggoy alike sniggered amongst themselves at the new ‘human’ donning the sergeant’s torn cap. Banyip was ridiculed and humiliated. He was a buffoon to ever relate to the humans. He lifted his arms to rip the hat from his head, but a Brute Major catching up at the rear slapped the Unggoy’s hands away, shaking his head at the attempt. Slouching heavily, Banyip followed the group into the thick snow, forced to endure the symbol of embarrassment crowned upon him.

The Citadel came into view as they wrapped around the mountain. It was taller than the Cartographer and stretched out much further. Three arms of the facility plunged into the snow, angled towards the three generator towers. The middle arm broke into a gap just in front of the entrance where an energy bridge waited to be activated. The Prophet of Truth currently resided in the nave, an elongated section of the facility that reached out from the mountains towards the heated air around the core. Ripples of pink and orange danced their way up the space around the stripped planet. The warm colours reflected off the surface of the Citadel and glistened over the surrounding snow, inviting them into the halls of the epic Forerunner temple, but the fortress was more distant than it appeared, and the path was not direct.

The company continued travelling around the mountainside, gradually distancing themselves from the Citadel, knowing the path would eventually bend back around towards it. Banyip wanted to hold his head high. He wanted to prove to the Brutes that he was a strong Unggoy and that their abuse could never suppress him. Instead, he sulked.

They stopped again when a sudden shadow enveloped them in darkness. Looking up, Banyip noticed that the shimmer connecting the generator towers had dissolved. The protective barrier around the Citadel was gone. The Demon had deactivated the shield, and the company were now exposed. A Sangheili assault carrier sailed into view, blocking out the sun and announcing their doom.

“Your end has come!” boomed a voice from the sky.

“The barrier has fallen!” Khav squawked.

“The Sangheili are here!” wailed an Unggoy. “We’re all gonna die!”

“Shut your hole, imp!” Malus snapped.

Sure enough, the Elite carrier was advancing towards the Citadel. A vibrant vortex of glowing energy forming at its underside communicated exactly what Banyip feared. The Shadow of Intent was charging its ventral glassing beam. The Citadel and anyone in the vicinity would be consumed by the plasma. Banyip shielded his eyes from the terrible light, shaking at the thought of his imminent death as he waited for the deafening blast.

No blast came.

Banyip lowered his forearm to see that the Shadow of Intent was no longer emitting any light. It was eclipsing it. God rays beamed past the assault carrier as a hole in the sky tore open behind it. An enormous visitant emerged from the hole. Its features became apparent as the hole retracted and the light faded. *It can't be.* Banyip was astounded, but there was no mistaking the jellyfish-shaped megastructure that pelted across the sky, staining it with a black, rotten streak. Rocky chunks detached from High Charity and showered into the mountains. One piece of the holy city plummeted straight through the Shadow of Intent before slamming into the mountainside. The assault carrier lost all stability and nosedived after it, narrowly missing the Citadel before it crashed.

“Brace for impact!” Malus cried.

“Save yourselves!” howled an Unggoy.

Every member of the group split up, scrambling away from one another as they were once again covered in shadow. This time, the shadow was that of a meteor chunk hurtling towards them from High Charity as the city rushed over. Only the humans did not panic. All of them were now lying horizontal, partially covered in snow, attempting to recover from the Brutes' rough treatment. The only human that wasn't in the snow was the dark-skinned sergeant still hanging over Malus' shoulders as the Chieftain hobbled further down the path, his big troll feet rising and falling over the snow as he fled the shadow of the meteor.

When the meteor hit, it hit hard. A tsunami of snow surged from beneath the rock as it impacted. Banyip lost sight of everything around him as he tumbled uncontrollably inside the wave. This was one of the few moments he felt immense gratitude for his rebreather pack, which kept him from suffocating as the force of the snow flipped him over and over. The cold he experienced under the snow was intense. The entirety of his arms and legs felt like icicles about to snap, and his heart was close to freezing.

How Banyip managed to climb out of the settling snow was nothing short of a miracle. Other Unggoy shimmied their way out from their own individual holes as spluttering humans worked together to extract their buried comrades. The Brutes were nowhere to be seen. Either they had disappeared somewhere on the other side of the smouldering rock that now blocked the path, or they'd been crushed beneath it.

*TSSEEW!*

Banyip jumped. Khav was at it again. The purple beam pierced a human skull, reddening the snow before the Kig-Yar aimed at his next victim.

“What are you doing?!” Banyip cried.

He tried pulling at the Kig-Yar’s rifle to stop him, but with his stubby fingers frozen stiff, Banyip was unable to grip it.

“Surviving,” Khav replied, firing another beam.

The human target anticipated Khav’s shot and evaded accordingly. Banyip reached again in attempt to stop the Kig-Yar, but the sound of projectiles blasting past his head kept him still. In less than a second, Khav lay dead, bleeding in the snow. Apparently, the humans had undug weapons while searching for their buried friends. Armed with both human and Covenant weapons, they had them trained on each of the emptyhanded Unggoy. Banyip raised his hands high.

“Wait,” he cried in English. “Spare us!”

The humans’ fingers moved towards their weapons’ triggers and sensors. Pleading with the humans would not work. Unggoy had tried surrendering in the past, and all had died. The humans wouldn’t trust Banyip, not unless he provided a good reason to.

“W-we can escape together,” he stuttered in the cold.

Banyip stalled. After the humans’ treatment at the hands of the Brutes, he didn’t expect them to show mercy. All he could do was try to extend the time he had before he and his brethren were killed. Once again, he remembered Tobap dying in his arms. He had an idea.

“The Arbiter,” Banyip began. “He promised us liberation!”

A lighter-skinned sergeant with a bloodied goatee looked around at the others.

“What are you thinking, Corporal?” asked the human.

“Don’t know, Sarge,” replied the Corporal. “I’m wondering why it’s wearing the Sergeant Major’s hat.”

The Corporal had a dented jaw and missing teeth. Apparently, the humans had been too busy being assaulted by the Brutes to have witnessed Banyip’s humiliation. Looking for assistance, all he found was the other Unggoy standing silently and dumb. No one was going to help him.

“I,” Banyip began. “The other human... He was going to die!”



“I’ve heard enough,” replied the goateed sergeant. “Take them out.”

“I saved him!” Banyip screamed.

Tears turned to ice upon his rebreather mask.

“Lower your weapons!” cried the sergeant.

Some of the weapons still fired into the snow, but no Unggoy was harmed.

“We’ll find our way back,” the sergeant announced. “And they can join us.”

“Why?” asked the Corporal. “Why not kill them here? I could do with some lobster.”

The sergeant looked across at the valley. Chunks of burnt High Charity rock littered the landscape. Specks of twisted figures scurried from the rocks like ants.

“Because, Forsell,” the sergeant replied. “Something tells me we’re gonna need all the help we can get.”

“Fine,” replied the human called Forsell. “But if they kill us, I’m suing.”

Forsell walked straight over to Banyip. The lanky creature stood over him and ripped the cap from his head. Banyip felt relief as the hat was removed. Bits of fabric still stuck firmly to his scalp, but it was nice to feel the blood flowing again.

“This hat saved your life,” said Forsell.

He looked down at the cap.

“Sergeant Stacker sir,” he called. “He could still be alive.”

“Forsell,” replied the sergeant. “We don’t have the soldiers or the firepower. Best leave it to the Chief.”

As Forsell and Sergeant Stacker discussed the possibility of rescuing the human who’d been captured by Chieftain Malus, Banyip turned his attention to the smouldering meteor that blocked the path. Studying it now, he saw it was no ordinary meteor. It was rotten and writhing. Burnt flesh squirmed around the meteor like worms through compost. Wet squelching and crackling resonated from the rock as soot and jelly oozed from its cavities.

Foul Flood forms fell from the mass like grubs from a hive. Jiralhanae and Sangheili rose in the snow, misshapen and infected, while bloated Carrier Forms shuffled alongside other jumbled flesh heaps, all heaving and throbbing. The meteor crumbled, shrinking in size as more and more Flood covered the path. Wriggling tendrils

molested the air as the figures growled and gurgled before the inevitable Flood shriek echoed across the mountains and straight into Banyip's soul.

*CRRAAA000WWW!*

Acting quickly, Banyip dived for Khav's dropped beam rifle as the Flood horde rushed at them all. The humans fired sporadically while Unggoy scrambled for weapons beneath the snow. Banyip had never used a beam rifle before but wasted no time figuring it out. He pointed the weapon at a Sangheili Combat Form and touched the sensor. *TSSEEW!* The weapon trembled in his hands as the Sangheili's shields were instantly depleted. *TSSEEW!* His follow-up shot pierced straight through the Infection Form buried in its chest. He would have cheered as it fell if it were not for the fact that the Flood were quickly closing the gap.

The meteor continued to disintegrate as the Flood multiplied. The humans and Unggoy found themselves running backwards as fast as they could, never slowing as they fired at the horrors before them. Plasma bolts, bullets and metal spikes all found their way into Flood flesh, but the waves never ended. Forsell shouted beside Banyip as he lobbed a spike grenade into the horde.

"This one's for Wall, you sons-of-bitches!"

The grenade's spikes embedded in the armour of a Jiralhanae Combat Form. Its explosion caused a nearby Carrier Form to prematurely blow, resulting in a chain reaction that took out a section of the horde, but with every Flood form that was killed, two or three more appeared. Twisted forms clawed up the side of the mountain while streams of others gushed down grooves from pods above. The Unggoy and humans huddled together as the nightmares drew in from every direction. Firing outwards from their involuntary cluster, Banyip found himself back to back with Forsell.

"We've got this!" Forsell yelled over the constant fire and Flood shrieks. "There are more guns in the snow!"

Sure enough, Banyip's foot struck metal. He fired his last few purple beams before the energy was depleted and he required a new weapon. As he bent down to retrieve a dropped needler, Banyip's gas tank was knocked from behind. The force pushed him away, causing him to stumble as he turned to see what had struck him. The Unggoy felt slight relief when he saw it was just Forsell, but then he saw the human's face. The marine was paler than the snow. His arms

were trembling, and he'd stopped firing altogether. He clearly wasn't infected, and his Brute-induced wounds had not torn further. Something else was affecting this human. Something had changed. *Human* Combat Forms now stood before them, growling in unison.

"Sinners, repent."

Their voices were impossibly deep, rumbling low as their mouths stretched and skewed unnaturally, and yet, there was also the faint echo of a high-pitched chorus, crying out, harmonising beneath the bass.

"Heathens, revere."

Banyip bent again to reach for the needler, but once more, Forsell stepped back, accidentally knocking him a second time. The human Combat Forms continued their haunting speech.

"Your predetermined fate is here."

The Flood's eery chant ended when Banyip fired his needler. He glanced at Forsell as he shot, desperately needing his assistance. Banyip and Forsell had separated from the group, and Banyip knew he could not survive alone. The human was frozen stiff. Banyip recognised his state. He'd seen other Unggoy freeze like this during the war. Forsell was in severe shock, and Banyip did not know how to break it.

He spun from one direction to the next, firing his needler and attempting to do the work of two, but the Flood drew ever closer. More and more infected marines crowded around them. Banyip's feet slipped a little as he backed off the path where the mountain threatened to drop him into the valley. If he slipped again, he'd undoubtedly fall to his death. He needed Forsell to recover if he was to break through the horde and return to the middle of the path.

"Fire!" Banyip urged him. "Shoot! Please!"

The marine did not move.

"Shoot!" Banyip repeated, still firing his needler.

Eventually, just as the Flood were in arm's reach, Forsell made a move. Still trembling, the human lifted his battle rifle and aimed it forwards. Banyip expected to hear the rifle's familiar fire. Instead, Forsell continued to tilt it upwards. The marine did not settle the weapon until it was pointing directly up into his own chin.

"Please!" Banyip screamed.

A Combat Form whipped the needler out of Banyip's hands with its hooked tentacles. The Unggoy sidestepped, narrowly avoiding a

fall. His tank collided with Forsell again. He gazed up at the marine in terror. The muzzle of Forsell's rifle was pressed firmly into his skin, directly above his throat. The man's finger moved to the trigger.

"No," Banyip whimpered.

*BAM!*

# Skathariphobia

*BAM!*

*No!* John screamed internally. He'd just deactivated the third tower, killing all the Covenant inside. Brutes, Drones, Hunters and now Flood lay dead at its doorstep, but when the Elites arrived, some of the marines had mistaken their alien allies for enemies. The confusion was understandable. Meat and metal rammed and rolled into one with the arrival of the Flood, but it wasn't until they'd escaped onto the grass that a soldier named Private Levski shot one of the Elites. The Elite, who John recognised as the one called *Usze* was unharmed thanks to the protection of his sparkling shields, but still, the Sangheili was not pleased. John tried crossing the ground between the bunker and Levski who was mere seconds away from assault at the hands of the amaranth-armoured assailant, but not even the super-solider was that fast.

"Friendly fire!" yelled Sergeant Banks with his palms held high at the sideline.

John could almost feel the lifting sensation as Levski's centre of balance was pulled away by the massive Elite yanking him through the air by his chest guard. Levski's helmet smacked hard into the frame of the Warthog with a harsh crack. The marine looked dazed, but his boots were planted firmly in the grass once again. He was lucky to have survived.

*Bam! Bam!*

*What now?* John cursed. Just as the Elite's shields had begun to recharge, Sergeant Banks decided he'd jump in on the action. Banks' face was stone as he fired at Usze only to have an Elite Minor leap in front of his battle rifle, taking the third burst. The Elite Minor opened its mandibles and released a mighty roar. Spit and phlegm rode the gale of the Elite's breath before splattering upon the Sergeant's unfaltering expression. The Minor swiped the BR from Banks' hands, grabbed one of his wrists and pulled him closer. If it wanted to, the Elite could easily wrap its mandibles around Banks' head and shred his face away in ribbons. Instead, the Sangheili's thick fingers wrapped around the Sergeant's throat. Banks reached for a scabbard on his chest. The steel of Banks' combat knife reflected the sun at John's eyes as the Spartan stepped between the

opponents, ripping their arms apart. Banks' blade clanged against the metal of John's raised forearm, but the brawl did not end there.

A yellow blip on John's motion tracker signalled something was coming in fast. He spun in time to find a screaming Levski torpedoing through the air like a missile. Usze 'Taham had launched the marine with his bare hands straight at John and Banks. The Chief reached his arms out and caught Levski in both. He spun back with the momentum to soften the impact before finding himself staring into the mandibles of the Elite Minor who now wielded the flickering hilt of an energy sword, not yet active.

"Do *not* unleash those blades!"

The Arbiter's voice thundered from the sky as he leant out from one of the Stealth Phantoms that hovered amongst Miranda's Pelicans. Carefully avoiding any sudden movements, John tilted Levski to his feet. The Elite Minor watched glaringly but did not move a muscle. The sword hilt was still held high.

"Animals!" raged Banks. "How long do you think this'll last? Killing is all these motherfuckers are good at."

"And who fired the first bullet today, Sergeant Banks?" asked the Arbiter.

The Elite Minor finally lowered its arm, clipping the hilt to its hip. John stepped back to watch a speechless Banks gaping up at the Arbiter, apparently surprised at being addressed by name. Finally, Miranda spoke from her own dropship.

"It doesn't matter," she declared. "Whatever happened down there, we all need to keep it together. The Shipmaster's carrier is out of commission, and Truth is sitting in the Citadel thinking he's won. The longer we squabble with the Elites, the more time we give Truth to activate the Array. Sergeant Banks, the *Prophets* are responsible for the war, not the Elites. You want to get even? Then follow my orders."

"Yes, ma'am," Banks replied.

The Sergeant hopped into the driver's seat of a Warthog. Levski moved towards its gauss cannon, but the Arbiter dropped down from his Phantom, blocking the Private. The marine's rifle twitched in his hands, but he did not shoot.

"Apologies, warrior," Thel told the marine before gesturing towards the Warthog's side. "The passenger seat, if you will."

The Arbiter turned towards the Elite Minor as Levski strode around to the passenger seat.

“N’tho,” he called. “You have proven your skills in battle. Take this cannon. Defend these humans. If either one dies before we reach the Citadel, you will answer to me.”

“I will defend these humans with my life,” nodded the Elite.

The Arbiter barely had to glance at Usze as he returned to his Phantom. The other Elite knew his place.

“Your decisions have proven wise, Arbiter,” said Usze. “I will not dishonour myself in your presence, nor that of the humans. Let us ride.”

Miranda’s voice got quieter as she switched to a private comm channel.

“Chief,” she said. “I need you to take down Truth. The Flood is just going to put pressure on him, accelerate his plans. Punch through the cliffs. Get inside that Citadel.”

“Yes, ma’am,” John replied.

“They’ve got Johnson,” she continued. “Just like the Gravemind has Cortana.”

*Just like the Gravemind has Cortana*, John repeated in his head. He wasn’t sure of Miranda’s implication. *Does she know about the terminals?*

“Get him back safely,” she finished.

*No, she doesn’t*, John clicked. Miranda wasn’t just comparing Johnson to Cortana because they were both captured. She knew how much John and Cortana’s relationship had grown. He’d been so focused on his past few missions that he hadn’t paid attention to just how much time Miranda and Johnson were spending together. Johnson had been John’s first real friend, not counting Blue Team, who were more like siblings. Over the years, the Sergeant Major had built somewhat of a debt to John and his Spartans. It was fitting that John would have to rescue him again, but this time, it was different. It felt personal. Miranda was right, Johnson was like Cortana in a way, and John wouldn’t be leaving the Ark without both of them. *That’s why High Charity is here*, he decided. *For Cortana*.

Together as one, they barrelled through the Forerunner gate. Scorpions, Warthogs, humans and Elites burst out onto the snow. The valley erupted as the skirmish over the sea quickly invaded the mountains. Down on the ground, the Master Chief trundled along, blasting his way through Choppers, Wraiths, Shades, sniper towers

and countless Brutes along the winding path. With the aid of marines at the sides of his Scorpion and Usze at the front, John mowed through the enemy forces with little tact, leaving a long trash trail behind them.

As they wound towards the Citadel, they encountered a group of Grunts and humans presumably midbattle. N'tho and Levski eliminated the Grunts before John was close enough to identify any of the human faces. One Grunt Ultra tumbled down the mountainside as John passed. He noticed Gunnery Sergeant Stacker amongst the humans.

"Master Chief," called Stacker. "They've got Johnson, in the Citadel."

"On it," John replied.

"And the parasites," Stacker continued. "Why the hell would they come here?"

Unexpectedly, John heard the voice of Guilty Spark answer the question. Apparently, the Monitor been listening from one of the Phantoms.

"The Ark is out of range of all the active installations," he told them. "Even if the meddler initiates the Array, the effective pulse cannot reach our location. We need to contain this outbreak before--"

"No," Miranda interrupted. "First, we stop Truth. You stay with the Arbiter."

The Arbiter agreed.

"We cannot risk your capture by the Parasite," he supported.

"The Monitor's getting jumpy," Miranda told John. "That can't be good. We need a straight path to the Citadel. Clear an LZ."

John searched the path for nearby enemies, but they were well enough alone. The next wave came further along in the form of more Brute vehicles speeding towards them. These were the same as the vehicles John and Sergeant Abram had driven across the desert except now clean and icy. Angry Brutes screamed from their side carts as gunners fired fervidly. John accelerated the Scorpion in their direction, instigating a deadly game of chicken, but the main cannon's blasts eliminated the competition before they could collide. Turbines, fusion cores and outer plating arced into the air and pierced the snow upon landing.



Hearing a buzz from above, John expected to see Miranda's Pelican coming in low. Instead, two Hornets fled the swarm surrounding the Citadel and landed softly before him. Their cockpits were covered in frost, but their turbofan engines were hot and yearning for more action.

"This is it, Chief," Miranda transmitted. "We'll keep the Banshees distracted. Fly low, straight to the Citadel. Let's end this once and for all."

John climbed out of the tank and sped across the snow. The battle that lit the valley was still fiery and furious, but they'd now taken care of the larger ground threats. It would be a straight flight from here to the Citadel entrance. Opening the cockpit from the windshield, the pilot climbed out and jumped straight into the exterior seating on the left of the first Hornet. Sergeant Stacker settled into the right-side position as John hopped in the front. To the Chief's surprise, the second Hornet lifted off with an Elite on both sides. Looking through his windshield, John saw Banks had taken the other aircraft, and apparently, Usze and N'tho were determined to support him.

*THWUMP!!!*

John banked hard, swinging the Hornet left to avoid the rising snow. Something had impacted with valley, emptying the basin and sending the snow upwards. The Hornet rocked as John regained control. Stacker and the pilot were covered in white but otherwise unphased. John searched the valley to see what had caused the uplift. As the snow cleared, two unmistakable silhouettes came into focus. The enormous, purple, four-legged, mechanical leviathans stood guard at either side of the Citadel entrance, all cannons pointing at the Chief.

"Is that—" John began.

"Two Scarabs!" Stacker confirmed. "Repeat, two Scarabs!"

*KKKEEWWW! KKKEEWWW! KKKEEWWW! KKKEEWWW!*

If John's Hornet was rocking before, they were in the stormiest of seas now. He swung it left again and then right while dropping altitude only to bring it back up again. The assault beams jettied through the air like four green searchlights with one target. A single touch from one of the beams would send the Hornet crashing, but the Scarabs themselves weren't all John had to worry about. Stacker and the pilot fired downwards, attempting to defend the Hornet

from the Scarabs' aggressive passengers, but Brute grenades, plasma cannons, carbines and the rest never seemed to end.

John had to keep swinging. Banshees zoomed by, firing their own cannons and dropping fuel rods over John's head. He evaded as long as he could, but in moments, he knew they'd find themselves overwhelmed. The Scarabs needed to be taken out. Wind howled through the cockpit as John brought the Hornet low, almost crashing into Banks who'd already descended closer to the monstrous machines.

"The Elites are crazy!" Banks yelled.

As if to prove the marine right, Usze and N'tho leapt from the sides of Banks' Hornet. Landing atop the left-side Scarab, they instantly ignited their blades, but John couldn't stay to watch. He kept moving, firing the Hornet's autocannons at the surrounding Banshees and unleashing its guided missiles whenever possible. All the while, he kept both Scarabs in sight. *I need to destroy their cores*, he remembered, considering his options. He could join the Elites and first clear the Scarabs of infantry, but then he'd likely be stranded only for the other Scarab to wipe him out. *That's it*, he realised, remembering two Hunters from eons past.

As the Scarabs manoeuvred around the valley, all those who came close were either crushed beneath their feet or zapped out of the air. Banks was already rising high, leaving the Elites far below, but John flew ever closer, aiming for the second Scarab. He flew to the right, never stopping as his passengers fired at the Covenant onboard. The Covenant struggled to hit the Hornet in return as it accelerated, revolving around the giant machine.

John aimed low. Bullet after bullet and missile after missile, he fired only at the Scarab's legs. The Scarab turned sluggishly in attempt to keep up, but it was never able to face the Hornet. When the Scarab stopped, John stopped. When it changed direction, John changed direction. Piece by piece, John chipped away at the thick legs. Finally, as the Scarab began to droop, John flew out towards its front end. The fire from the passengers became less frequent as they began to make repairs. The Scarab was in position.

"On my mark," John instructed. "Eject."

"Yes, sir!" Stacker replied.

"Acknowledged," answered the pilot.

"You're crazier than the Elites!" Banks radioed from above.

“Crazy’s what we need right now,” Stacker replied. “Chief, let’s get this over with!”

The Scarab charged up its beam as John lifted the Hornet directly above. He propelled the aircraft straight over the mumakil and towards the menacing eye of its partner.

“One,” he began. “Two.”

He passed over the rear of the right-side Scarab and descended before the other.

“Three,” he finished. “Mark!”

*KKKEEEEWWW!!!*

Banyip watched from afar as the Scarab on the left fired into the rear of the one on the right. The assault beam tore straight through the Scarab’s abdomen where it assaulted the core. Five tiny figures fled across the snow to the safety of the Citadel as both Scarabs went up in flames. The valley was blinding, and the deed was done. Truth’s last-ditch effort to save himself was futile. His final line of defence had been eliminated. If the Prophet didn’t initiate the Great Journey now, his fate would lie in the hands of his enemies. A fern Phantom dropped towards the Citadel entrance, releasing two figures to join the others, one of which appeared to be a floating ball. They activated the energy bridge and disappeared into facility.

“Uugh...”

Banyip crawled out from the snow to find a whimpering marine metres away at the bottom of the avalanche. Had it not been for the shockwave produced by the High Charity chunk, Banyip and the human would have tumbled down a much rockier mountainside, and more than likely, there’d be a cyan smooch against the rock instead of the soft, snowy mound he now stood upon.

Banyip slid down to Forsell. The man was rolling from side to side, clutching his bleeding neck. His fingers were stained red as they clasped the skin together, attempting fruitlessly to prevent the outflow. Ironically, the Flood had saved Forsell. Had the Combat Form not whipped the rifle from the marine’s hands, Forsell would have shot his own brains out.

“Human,” Banyip addressed as he approached. “Forsell.”

“Aargh!”

A coarse cry escaped Forsell’s lips as he tried opening his eyes, but the pain was too intense. His pupils rolled back, and his eyelids

clamped shut. His voice went soft as his whimpering continued. Banyip looked around for something, searching urgently for any tool that could help. He found it. Despite the severity of the situation, Banyip almost cackled as he reached for the torn piece of fabric. It was the sergeant's cap from earlier, half buried and flapping in the wind. He pulled it from the snow, wrapped it around the human's neck and tied a knot. The material quickly turned red, but it held firmly together and stopped any blood from pouring out the sides. Forsell's eyes reopened in response. He looked at Banyip and parted his lips to speak but decided against it. His breathing steadied, and Banyip felt relief.

Banyip did not know why he felt compelled to save Forsell. Helping a human had brought nothing but trouble for him, but ignoring someone helpless and in pain was unnatural. A dying Tobap returned again before Banyip's eyes as he gazed down at the marine. If only Tobap were here, she would have seen just how right Banyip was. It hadn't only been humans that fired at the Unggoy on the mountain path. It was the Sangheili, arrogant, violent, untrustworthy Sangheili. With the distraction of vehicles in the area, Banyip and his company had finally begun to manage the Flood horde. Even the Brutes who swooped by on their Prowlers had completely ignored the Unggoy, but the Sangheili gave them no chance. Within seconds, every Unggoy was lying motionless in the snow, all dead. The Arbiter had not come to free them. The Elites were not their heroes. They were cruel, domineering villains, every last one.

Banyip helped Forsell to his feet. He wrapped the marine's right arm around his gas tank and scanned the valley for an escape. A Hornet lay in the snow ahead. Aside from a light scarring along the fuselage and some minor dents in the wing, it was intact. Fortunately for them, it was also devoid of any pilot or passengers. Banyip guessed it was the Hornet that had narrowly avoided the final Scarab beam.

"This way," Banyip urged, guiding Forsell towards the aircraft.

He continued to survey the valley as they limped across the snow. The battle in the sky had somewhat subdued but was still ongoing. Bizarre forms fell upon the edges of the valley, eager to resurrect fresh corpses from the battlefield. Banyip had to get out of there fast, but he didn't trust the skies outside the mountains either. If he somehow managed to fly the Hornet without being shot down inside

the valley, he'd likely be killed on the outside. Only one option was available.

“Hergh...”

Forsell was trying to talk.

“Rest,” Banyip said as he helped the human into the side seat. “We’ll be safe.”

Banyip climbed in and looked at the clutter of human controls before him. Operating the Hornet would be the easy part. Remaining inconspicuous at the same time would not. He grabbed the control sticks, pulled the throttle and climbed high. His role in the Covenant had blessed him with the theoretical knowledge to fly the Hornet, but it hadn’t prepared him for the forces associated with being violently thrust up and away from the ground. Banyip’s head felt heavy, and his vision shrank as his beady eyes were forced back into his cranium.

Careful to remain steady enough for Forsell, Banyip pulled left and curved around the side of the Citadel. Skimming the nave, he expected to find the weathered streaks of Forerunner metal. Instead, he found his own Hornet staring back at him, reflected off some form of tinted glass. The angle and distance had misled him into thinking most of, if not all, the Citadel’s exterior was sealed in solid metal. It was an illusion. Banyip now guessed that windows formed half of the nave’s structure. If it had tricked him, hopefully it did the same for the rest of the surrounding forces.

Banyip flew low. Taking his chances, he unloaded the Hornet’s projectiles into the glass until one Hornet-sized pane finally shattered. He waited momentarily to see if whatever was inside came crawling out. A small congregation of Constructors flittered from the gap to assess the damage. They showed no interest in Banyip or his companion. They were safe. Keeping the engines burning to a minimum in order to keep quiet, Banyip threaded carefully through the glass.

“Not my idea of a holiday home,” Banyip told Forsell. “But...”

Banyip was struck with awe. He never cared for the Prophets and their religious antics, but as cynical as he was, he felt something here. This place was different. It was no mere control room. It was holy. The interior of the nave was enormous, far larger than Banyip could have imagined. Elaborate blends of Forerunner glass and metal coalesced to form a vast bottomless chasm with a single decorative

walkway stretching along its length. Warm sunlight contested the shadows, beaming from the windows and tickling the walkway, which projected its own light source from seven glowing holographic rings evenly arranged along the path.

Banyip used the Citadel's scale to his advantage. All he needed was a place to lay low. He dipped the Hornet and allowed it to descend below the sunrays. Somewhere in this complex was a hole deep enough to hide in. The Prophets, the Sangheili, the humans and the Brutes could continue their abhorrent power struggle on the surface. Sooner or later, they'd leave Banyip in peace.

"Then again," said Banyip with a touch of sadness. "This might be a nice place for the family. A smidgen of methane and a splash of swamp water, that's all we need. One day..."

Flying directly below the walkway, Banyip overtook several Sentinels. There was movement above, but so far, no one seemed to care that he and Forsell were present. Eventually, Banyip settled the Hornet upon a piece of architecture jutting from the lower levels towards the entrance end of the nave.

He didn't have to dig long before finding a secure space, but Forsell had become quite staggered. Banyip was practically dragging the now very pale, still heavy-eyed marine through the dark twisting hallways, draining himself of energy. As they stepped into the tight, hexagonal room that Banyip deemed suitable for a rest, he realised how hungry was. His insides stirred. His stomach acids swished around emptily, craving something to dissolve. They could not rest here forever, but he'd worry about that later. As long as they kept the Hornet nearby, they'd be fine.

Banyip sat Forsell against a terminal in the centre of the soundless chamber. The ground was cold to touch, but the room was well lit. Several projectors from the edges of the chamber presented a display above the terminal showing the many hallways and corridors that stemmed from the nave like roots from a tree. It was a security hologram of the Citadel and its immediate terrain.

Banyip took a closer look. He found two blips towards the bottom of the hologram that were vaguely in the shape of a human and an Unggoy, but it was the nave that was filled with figures. Brutes paced up and down the walkway. Unggoy were forced to camp along it. Mgalekgolo stood guard at various posts while Chieftain Malus, the Prophet of Truth and their captured human

huddled atop a circular platform at the furthest end. Banyip sat himself down as Forsell leant against the terminal.

“Welcome, Reclaimer,” startled a voice.

Banyip jolted. The voice sounded friendly, but it cut through the silence like a knife. The Unggoy jumped around in search, but no one was present.

“Who said that?” he asked.

“Second lifeform detected,” said the voice, losing all warmth. “Access prohibited.”

Banyip uncovered the source of the voice as he watched blue and yellow lines pulse within the terminal’s iris. He interpreted what it said. *Second lifeform*, he echoed mentally. *Welcome, Reclaimer*.

“Wait,” Banyip said aloud.

He turned to the marine.

“Forsell,” he whispered. “Can you say something?”

The human groaned but straightened slightly.

“The terminal,” Banyip explained. “It responds to you.”

Forsell nodded.

“*Ter... minal*,” he strained.

“Reclaimer confirmed,” replied the terminal. “Zero-zero-zero occupied.”

*Is that its name?* Banyip wondered. *Zero-Zero-Zero Occupied? Like the oracles?*

“Priority task in progress,” continued the terminal. “Engaging supernumerary routine.”

Forsell crawled from the terminal, finding a seat beside Banyip as it spoke.

“Flood threat imminent,” it told them. “Security protocols active. Aggressors dispatched.”

Forsell relaxed along the ground. His elbows barely kept him propped. The material around his neck was drenched. It hadn’t held. Blood streamed into his uniform. The man was in a dire state, and yet, he remained strong. He looked up at Banyip before turning back to the terminal.

“Enforcers in preparation,” it droned. “Retrievers in preparation. Armigers in preparation.”

All enthusiasm the voice had projected when it first greeted them was now lost to monotoned jargon. As Forsell began to nod off, Banyip attempted to decipher the AI’s words. He watched the blips

of Sentinel Aggressors zooming about the hologram while he listened. These were the ones Banyip and Forsell had passed earlier, but the terminal seemed to have mentioned others. The Unggoy continued to scan the security display until his eyes fell upon a small group of familiar looking blips in a section of the atrium.

The sight of the Demon caused a pang of sorrow as Banyip was again reminded of Tobap, but the Demon was not the worst of it. It was the Demon's accompanying Sangheili that sparked fury within him. They were the same Sangheili who'd shot at Banyip, killed his fellow Unggoy and left him stranded, weaponless and narrowly avoiding death as he'd tumbled down the mountain. According to the blips, the Sangheili were led by none other than the Arbiter. Banyip's saliva soured. The irony of the Arbiter fighting alongside the Demon proved the hypocrisy of the Sangheili. This was the very commander who'd constructed the Covenant's hatred for the Demon to begin with.

Banyip thought of his failure to defeat the Demon, which had resulted in Tobap's demise. The Arbiters of the past only ever caused suffering for the Unggoy. This one was no different. Banyip remembered Tobap's last words. *Find Arbiter*, she'd said. *Find Arbiter*. Against all odds, Banyip had found the Arbiter. Now what was he supposed to do?

"Shields active," announced the terminal.

Banyip finally put together what the terminal was doing. It was activating the Citadel's secondary defences, the ones Malus had been so careful not to awaken. The first wave of Sentinels was already released. No doubt, there were more to come, but something else changed on the security hologram. As the Demon and Arbiter stepped through a door, it slammed shut behind them. Hardlight energy suddenly coated the entire exterior of the nave, also covering the many doors that led to it. The Arbiter and Demon made it to the narthex, but the other Sangheili were locked out. Banyip traced the veins of the hologram from where he was to the nave. As far as he was concerned, the Arbiter, the Prophet and Chieftain Malus were the worst oppressors of the universe, and Banyip was trapped with the lot of them. He continued watching with intense hatred, lost in contempt, forgetting all about the fading life of his companion.

"Lockdown near completion," continued the terminal. "Flood prevention in progress."



“Wait!” Banyip cried.

He had an epiphany. He *was* trapped in the Citadel with the worst oppressors. Malus, Truth, the Arbiter and all their cruelty, it needed to end here. Energy spread through Banyip’s Unggoy body as he fully grasped the situation he was in. Down here, the bowels of the Forerunner fortress represented everything that had been wrong in Banyip’s life. From birth, he’d been cursed. All he’d ever been was a lowly wretch forced to serve those who claimed power over him, but now the power had shifted. Finally, he was in control. They did not know it yet, but every one of the tyrants above were about to meet their doom.

“Forsell,” Banyip cried. “Unlock the doors.”

Forsell did not respond. He lay slumped, barely twitching on the ground. Banyip grabbed the marine around his collar. His fingers slipped through the blood, but he held on tightly, shaking the man.

“Forsell,” Banyip repeated.

Forsell’s eyes flickered into barely open slits before shutting again.

“No!” Banyip cried.

“Enforcers prepared,” said the terminal. “Retrievers prepared. Armigers prepared.”

Banyip spun back to the hologram. The outside of the facility was flowing with blips. Twisted forms converged. An immense army rippled, but the Flood were unable to penetrate the Citadel’s shields to find a way in. Forsell’s head flopped back. His collar stretched in Banyip’s grip. The human’s vitals were fading. In desperation, Banyip grabbed one of Forsell’s wrists and slammed the man’s hand into the eye of the terminal.

“Stop!” Banyip screamed. “No Enforcers! No shields!”

The room went dead as Forsell’s limp body hit the floor. Banyip waited. For a moment, nothing moved on the hologram. The terminal stopped pulsing, and all Banyip could hear was his own breath.

“Access confirmed,” announced the terminal. “Reverting security measures.”

Banyip couldn’t believe it. *It worked.*

“Enforcers cancelled,” the terminal continued. “Retrievers cancelled. Armigers cancelled.”

*It worked!*

“Shields offline. Containment abandoned. Awaiting further commands.”

Banyip watched the hologram with glee. All the blips that had surrounded the Citadel now poured into it, aggressively pushing through every entrance towards the nave and overwhelming any Covenant who stood in their way.

“It worked!” Banyip finally cheered aloud.

But the Flood did not stop there. They flowed into every tunnel, around every corridor and down every shaft. *Wait.* Banyip was so deep in the complex, he’d felt safe. *No.* He froze in fear. *Not here!* Banyip had no weapon. He had nothing to protect himself. Forsell was dead. He was alone.

The Infection Forms flooded the room, gushing in at full force. They fell upon him at every angle, wrapping their torturous tendrils around each limb, squeezing his torso and jamming into every orifice they could find. Banyip was fully conscious as the Flood did what they pleased with his broken body. Tears streamed from his eyes as he prayed. *It’ll be over soon,* he told himself. *It’ll all be over soon...*

*No,* came a sonorous reply, deep and horrifying. *It won’t.*

# Revelation

They ran. John and the Arbiter sped faster than they ever had before. Time was up. Even the Flood who besieged halls behind them were of little concern now. The Forerunner displays became a blur as the pair sprinted down the eternal corridor with their feet barely touching the ground, but it was impossible to ignore the distressing cries projected through the walls of the complex. The proud Prophet of Truth broadcasted the scene from his chancel. He was confidently untouchable upon his throne at the far end of the Citadel.

Avery Johnson, John's oldest friend was being beaten to a pulp. Truth's ruthless guards took turns pounding and pummeling the galactic veteran until both his face and body were unidentifiable. Bruised, battered and broken, not even Sergeant Major Johnson could resist Truth's despicable devices. In mere minutes, either the chancel floor would be soaked in Johnson's bloody remains or the debilitated Sergeant would be forced to comply with the Prophet's fallacious scheme. The Chief already knew the outcome. Truth had found his Reclaimer. His enemies were out of range. Halo's activation was inevitable.

"Calamity!" exclaimed Spark. "If only we had more time!"

The Monitor had dropped somewhere behind them. There wasn't much he could do for them now.

"Chief," Miranda radioed in. "Tell me you're close!"

"Negative," John replied, mid-sprint.

"Damn," she cursed. "The Shipmaster's still down. We've got Seraphs tearing us apart. My bird's barely holding. How close are you?"

John and Thel halted at the bottom of a deep elevator shaft. The ride to the upper nave would consume what time they had left.

"Not close enough," John told her.

"Argh," Avery groaned.

The metal floor of the chancel greeted his back hard and fast, but the pain of the impact was swallowed by the overwhelming agony that devoured the rest of his body. Still, it was not enough. Avery had been through worse, and he knew the Brutes were avoiding

permanent damage. It was against their nature to hold back as much as they were, but the guards could not overdo it at risk of displeasing their Prophet who smirked so smugly at his abuse. Satisfied they'd gone far enough, Truth turned to the holographic console, ensuring it was ready as Malus stepped over Avery. The Brutes had been rotating, and now it was the Chieftain's turn to torment him again.

"That's the best you got?" Avery taunted weakly.

Malus grabbed him by his throat and thrust him into the air, squeezing tightly around his neck. Avery's body hung limply as he was strangled.

"Come on," Avery gurgled. "Impress me."

"Stop!" Truth demanded. "You imbecile! He *wants* you to kill him."

Clasping his hands together, Truth examined the control panel.

"I would prefer that you did not," he finished.

Avery wriggled as Malus dragged him to the console and slammed him through its holopanel. Hardlight controls hummed softly, waiting for a single push from the Reclaimer's hand. Avery summoned all effort to pull away, but Malus shoved him into the console face first. He turned his head sideways in his struggle, but his skull was squashed between the hardlight and the Chieftain's open palm. Avery addressed the Prophet directly.

"What's the matter?" he grunted. "Can't start your own party?"

Truth leant in closely. The stench of his putrid, fishy, hot breath blew over Avery's restricted face as he spoke.

"I admit," Truth began. "I *need* your help, but that secret dies with all the rest."

*SMASH!!!*

A hailstorm of shattered glass exploded upon them as Miranda's Pelican burst through the end window. Sparks flew as the Pelican slid across the platform followed by dancing diamonds skittering off the edge. One Brute Guard was crushed inside his armour, flattened beneath the Pelican's cockpit. Everyone who had been standing now lay horizontal as a warm breeze greeted them from the Ark's core. Avery's lungs filled with smoke from the Pelican's engines as he pulled himself over the control panel. The dropship was damaged but flyable. He was woken from his daze by the unmistakable blast of an M90 Shotgun. *BANG!* Miranda stepped from the Pelican as

the smoke began to clear. Taking advantage of the Brutes' confusion, she blasted one after the other.

"Johnson," Miranda called while ejecting a shotgun shell. "Sound off!"

Avery spluttered while straightening his trembling legs. Brutes snarled as they rose to their feet. Miranda may have killed a few, but as the guards' fearsome forms stepped towards her, it was clear she was brutally outnumbered and bitterly outmatched.

"Get out of here!" Avery begged.

"Not without you!"

She fired another blast at her nearest threat. It barely scratched the guard's regenerating armour. The Brutes drew closer. Avery and Miranda were both surrounded and now cut off from the Pelican. As Miranda ejected another shell, she withdrew her sidearm. Spinning into position, she pointed both her magnum and shotgun at the Brutes. To Avery's frustration, Truth's commanding voice interrupted from somewhere behind. Resisting distraction, Avery kept his eyes trained on the Brutes. The Prophet was likely slinking his way across the chancel back to his fallen throne.

"You delay the inevitable," Truth proclaimed. "One of you *will* light the rings."

Miranda's face was wrought with desperation. Avery saw no escape. The Ark was primed. Truth would force him to activate the Array, and he knew he could no longer resist. Miranda knew that as well. *Why else would she have come?* Avery glanced at the Pelican. Something had shot it up badly, but rather than fly to safety, Miranda had made the split-second decision to swoop in and stop the Covenant herself. *As usual*, felt Avery, but this wasn't just another slipspace jump. Hope did not await them on the other side. There *was* no other side. They were trapped. More Brutes crowded the chancel. There was no way out. Miranda lowered her weapons. She gloomed at her pistol, deep in thought.

"You cannot hope to kill them all," Truth told her.

"You're right," she admitted.

That took Avery by surprise.

Miranda grimaced. Her lips trembled. Her eyes twitched. A single tear streaked down her cheek, but her arm remained straight and firm as she steadily raised her magnum. Avery looked first into the muzzle and then into Miranda's familiar face. Her fair skin crinkled

with emotion. His eyes stopped over her light scar. He'd never learnt how she received it. For a final time, he gazed into her glistening eyes, exploring every furrow before being drawn into the depths of her pupils.

"Do it," Avery said.

His voice cracked.

"First me," he told her. "Then you."

Her face softened as the magnum lowered, only for moment.

"Now!" Avery cried.

She straightened her arm, finally placing her finger over the trigger, but the shot never came. Her eyes grew wide. Her back arched as a force hit her from behind. *NO!* Her arms dropped. Her knees buckled, and she hit the floor. Her body lay bent. Red blood trickled from the row of metal spikes wedged firmly along the length of her spine. Miranda was dead.

*No...*

Malus restrained Avery from behind. Truth stepped past them with his crooked frame appearing awkward off its throne. The Prophet briefly inspected Miranda's body. His face spelt revulsion as he discarded his spiker. The feigned disgust was a charade as if his act of killing had been beneath him. Avery felt nothing but hollow as he stared at what was left of Miranda. With all strength dissipated, he was now a puppet in the arms of his captor. Truth spoke.

"Your forefathers wisely set aside their compassion, *steeled* themselves for what needed to be done."

Once again, the Prophet's foul breath was in Avery's face.

"I see now why they left you behind."

Malus steered Avery back to the console, leaving Miranda's crumpled body where it lay.

"You were weak," Truth declared. "And gods must be strong!"

The Prophet's icy, spindly fingers wrapped around the back of Avery's hand and pushed it firmly into the holopanel. The hardlight portion retreated into the console, accepting Avery's imprint. Truth held his arms high as the ground beneath them shifted, ascending into a pedestal. The closest of the holographic rings that lined the nave's walkway radiated in response. One after the other, each of the seven rings grew brighter, bathing the path in light, all except one. Avery slumped to the ground. Truth finally won.

John and Thel stood before the nave to find every ring blazing with light, painting the walkway blue and further darkening the shadows that lay beyond reach. Illuminated Covenant beings bestrewed what John could see of the path before it stretched off to the broken window in the distance. None of the Covenant noticed the pair standing at the threshold. John's heart stopped when he realised why. The Covenant were praising the light in victory.

"They've hit the switch," John stated. "It's started."

Thel breathed beside him.

"In moments, the rings will fire," acknowledged the Arbiter. "But we are not doomed yet. Your Commander disabled Delta Halo *after* activation."

John assessed the length of the walkway. Even as a Spartan, he could not fight through that many Covenant and reach their goal in time. He looked sideways at Thel who'd come to the same conclusion. Either way, they had to move, and not just because Halo was about to kill everyone. John's motion tracker was red. The Flood had arrived.

Two titanic Pure Forms dropped before the pair, blocking the path. Flesh tore open from the top of both swelling masses to reveal three slithering feelers emerging forth from revolting cavities. The feelers flicked forwards, licking the air. John lifted his rifle as the Arbiter lit his blades, but the Flood remained idle. They weren't hostile. Their feelers moved about, manipulating the cavities as the creatures spoke.

"Do not shoot," they harmonised. "But listen. We share a common goal. Prevention is our mission. Let me lead you safely to our foe."

*An old friend*, John thought bitterly, feeling goosebumps. The Pure Forms continued.

"I shall not fight you. I offer my devotion. Only the two of you can halt what *he* has set in motion."

Infection Forms wriggled through and around John's legs. He wasn't their target, nor was the Arbiter. The Pure Forms turned from the pair and charged down the walkway, swinging their arms like bludgeons, waking the Covenant from their trance. Without a word, John and Thel followed, riding the Flood wave over the bridge and towards their shared enemy, Truth.

Darting through the crowd, John fired only to keep his course clear. Anything that stood in his way would be gunned down. Anything he could ignore would be left to the plague in pursuit. Seeing an opportunity to clear a gap without combat, John leapt off the hardlight shield of an approaching Jackal and flew through the first holographic ring. In the hologram, he recognised the shapes of landmasses and a disturbed atmosphere. Installation 07 had begun its countdown.

Another Jackal attacked the Chief on the other side of the ring. John slammed his rifle straight through its shield, extinguishing the hardlight and causing the reptile's own skull to smash through the back of its head. Purple blood poured as it shattered like a piñata.

As a plasma grenade hurtled in his direction, John grabbed a Grunt Major, ripped its own inactive grenade from its body and launched it in return. The two plasma grenades collided, marrying in the air. The force of John's throw sent both grenades back to the unfortunate Spec Ops Grunt who gasped in fear. Without pausing, John leapt to evade an ensuing fuel rod bombardment and continued past the second ring. He tried to ignore the growing chorus of tortured gargling that emanated from the Covenant who fell victim to John's new helpers. A hologram of Truth raged at no one in particular.

"How could I have known the Parasite would follow?" Truth cried. "How did they get inside? Undoubtedly, this is the heretics' doing, their final bitter curse, evidence of treachery long hidden!"

The Flood multiplied rapidly as the pair passed the third ring. Brute Guards wrestled against their own infected pack members. A jump-pack Brute shot his carbine at John but was quickly taken down by osseous spikes fired from Flood Pure Forms. The Brute screamed as his jump-pack backfired, sending him straight into the swarm of hungry parasites below.

The fourth ring was the only one not alight. Large segments of it were highlighted red. John didn't need to wonder why. There was no chance Installation 04 could be fired after the destruction he and Cortana had caused. Its fragments were scattered across the Threshold system and perhaps beyond.

"You!" exclaimed a Brute Chieftain.

In one hand, it held its hammer. With the other, it pointed at John.



“I’ve been waiting for you, Demon!”

The Brute Chieftain wore armour of fiery red upon midnight black. Underneath, he was scarred and furious. As far as John could tell, it was just another Brute. It did nothing to slow him down. John slid past the Chieftain’s missed hammer swing as the Arbiter lunged with his sword. Thel sliced part of the Chieftain’s helmet open but continued forwards along the walkway. Feeling the Brute hot in pursuit, John scooped a dropped spike grenade from the ground. He turned around and aimed it between the Chieftain’s eyes, but the Brute caught the grenade and sent it back. John was quick to scoop up his next piece of equipment. The bubble shield expanded fast and prevented the grenade from hitting both he and Thel. It produced a neat little wall between themselves and the Chieftain, but as it turned out, further protection wasn’t needed.

Before the Brute could push through the bubble, a Carrier Form erupted behind him. As Malus hit the ground, a Brute Combat Form fell upon the Chieftain, tearing through his power armour like cardboard before Infection Forms swarmed him. Malus’ screams joined those of his falling brethren as John and the Arbiter left him behind.

It was a straight run past the remaining three rings without combat. All Covenant from this point on were either dead, dying or infected. Only the growls and shrieks of the Flood joined John and the Arbiter on the final stretch. The shattered window ahead revealed a setting sun as the nave grew clouded in shadow and smoke.

The chancel was a solemn sight. Avery Johnson rested against the Pelican in defeat with Miranda’s body outstretched beside him. He’d laid her head in his lap. Her eyes were blank and her face expressionless. He pulled her in closely. His beaten face was screwed in anguish as he cradled her empty frame. Miranda had always projected a sense of vigour and command in spite of her youth. All that was now gone. Johnson brushed his fingers down her face, closing her eyes before looking up gravely.

“Stop the rings,” he told them. “Save the rest.”

John felt the Arbiter walk over to the Prophet of Truth upon his pedestal as he continued to stare at Johnson and Miranda. Even after all this time, he didn’t know how to address the situation. He felt no less awkward now than he had with Pinciotti and Vusaro all the way

back on Cairo Station. All he knew was that he was sadder. Truth's voice pulled him from the moment.

"Can you see, Arbiter?" asked the Prophet.

Truth was discoloured, and his voice was hoarse. Something had knocked the Prophet to the ground, but he pulled his decrepit frame to his knees.

"The moment of salvation is at hand."

The Arbiter grasped Truth violently around his neck, pulling the Prophet towards him. Their faces were inches from one another.

"It will not last," said Thel.

"Your kind," continued Truth. "They never truly believed in the promise of the Sacred Rings."

Suddenly, Truth's voice changed. It grew deeper and more menacing.

"Lies for the weak," he said.

Snot-coloured fog puffed from his lips. Floating spores fondled their way around the Arbiter's shields but did not penetrate. Synchronised, John and Thel raised their weapons. The Arbiter held his blades high as John aimed his rifle.

"Beacons for the deluded," continued the distorted voice.

"I will have my revenge on a Prophet," swore Thel. "Not a plague."

Truth's voice returned to his own but more strained than before. His bulbous eyes pierced the Arbiter's as he spoke stubbornly.

"My feet tread the path," he proclaimed. "I shall become a god!"

The distorted voice returned.

"You will be food, nothing more."

John hit the switch on the control panel. All seven rings faded.

"No!" cried the Prophet. "I am Truth, the voice of the Covenant!"

"And so," Thel replied. "You must be silenced."

The Arbiter pulled Truth in, simultaneously shoving both his blades passionately through the Prophet's abdomen. Truth choked and spluttered before falling from the pedestal. His corpse bled red. In a single roar that echoed across the chasm, John heard the Sangheili's fury, fervour, relief and satisfaction all release at once. The Prophet of Truth was dead. With him, his tyranny, deception and the Covenant were no more, but peace was not ready for them yet.

Just as the Chief turned to see Johnson entering the Pelican with Miranda's body in his arms, the chancel shook like an earthquake. Enormous tentacles rose up from the abyss as the Gravemind's petrifying chortle mocked them. Increasing Flood shrieks drowned out the burning engines of the Pelican as it lifted. John jumped high, gripping the back of the Pelican's compartment as it took off. The Chief and the Arbiter dangled side by side only to have one of the Gravemind's ginormous tentacles swipe at them, viciously knocking them back onto the platform. The Pelican spiralled through the smashed window, disappearing into a valley outside.

"Now the gate has been unlatched," roared the Gravemind. "Headstones pushed aside. Corpses shift and offer room, a fate you must abide!"

John and Thel stood back to back as the Flood enclosed around them.

"We trade one villain for another," sighed the Arbiter.

Looking down the walkway, John saw few openings between the sea of grimy, gruesome flesh. All Covenant who'd been stationed at the Citadel were now enslaved as part of the Flood's nefarious hivemind. John dived for the walkway as one of the Gravemind's tentacles slammed onto the chancel, tilting the platform under its weight. The Chief's shields went ablaze as he leapt into the inferno, firing at the infected form of the Brute Chieftain. As the Combat Form fell, John retrieved its gravity hammer. Together, he and the Arbiter smashed and sliced their way through the horde. The only way forwards was back the way they came.

Tentacles surged past like speeding cargo trains. Others crashed down like demolished buildings, but John knew the Gravemind's goal was not to squish them. It was worse. He and the Arbiter jumped, ducked and covered each other's backs as best as they could on their return flight to the elevator. John was driven by nothing more than pure adrenaline and muscle memory. The alarm in his helmet rang throughout the entire escape as his shields never had the chance to recharge. If it weren't for the Sentinels emerging from the shadows, they never would have made it. An apparition of Cortana greeted John as he stepped into the elevator room. It was the first he'd seen since Earth.

"I am a thief," she said calmly before smirking. "But I keep what I steal."

Rather than fading completely as the apparition usually did, a floating light remained in Cortana's place. It moved swiftly away from him along the chamber before lighting a small chute at the end. Knowing the sluggish elevator would not be their safest route, John followed the light and jumped in. The chute fed him into an empty passageway, completely devoid of the chaos that ensued above.

"What do you see?" asked Thel, appearing at his side.

John searched for the light. Sure enough, a figure of Cortana waited down the hallway. He knew it wasn't the real thing; she wasn't the Cortana he'd left on High Charity. The figure maintained the same essence as the recording he'd found in the Flood ship on Earth. She turned around and glided further down the passageway. John followed.

Levitating like a ghost, the Cortana image kept her arms halfway up seemingly to help herself balance. Her legs moved softly as if treading water. She led them to a dead end where a static holopanel waited. Her glowing form sank into the panel and disappeared. Naturally, John moved towards it. All he needed was to brush his fingers through the hologram, which caused the wall in front of them to creak open. It slid upwards, exposing a viewing platform on the other side. When John and the Arbiter stepped onto it, back into the open air, they received a clear view of the Ark's core and the imposing structure now rising around it.

Vast grooves in smooth, curved metal slowly surfaced from the Ark, ascending into the autumnal sky. Rosy clouds caressed the rising architecture, drifting through its deep trenches and flowing out gracefully. The immensity of the structure stretched itself in every direction until John and the Arbiter faced nothing but a wall of glossy panels and blended machinery. Memories flooded John's mind as he watched in silence until the Arbiter finally broke it.

"A replacement," deduced the Elite. "For the ring you destroyed."

John considered the hologram of Installation 04 they'd seen in the nave. The red highlights didn't represent the destroyed segments of the ringworld as he'd assumed. They were the sections currently under construction, and from what John could tell, they were almost complete. He now understood why there was a planet at the Ark's centre. It was the primary resource the Sentinels had been using to rebuild the ring. John recognised a presence creeping up behind him.

“When did you know?” John asked.

“Just now,” Spark answered gleefully. “But I had my hopes. What will you do?”

“Light it.”

“Then we are agreed! A tactical pulse will completely eradicate the local infestation. I will personally oversee the final preparations. Though it will take much time to develop a new Activation Index, I will see to the letter that...”

The Monitor’s voice trailed off as he zoomed eagerly towards his new installation. The Arbiter turned to John.

“How will you light it?”

John looked over Thel’s shoulder to their right. In the distance lay the ruins of High Charity. Cortana’s plan was revealed.

## Cortana

John thought about Miranda as he steered his Banshee above the smouldering wreckage. She'd been right there before the end of the war only to miss it by an instant. She would never see the effects of a peaceful humanity. She'd never live her days enjoying a normal life free of conflict. She'd been robbed, her life cut far too short, but that wasn't what concerned John now. War *was* his life. It was always going to be, and Miranda was still just one casualty of many, another dead hero as Cortana would say. Still, this fight was just as much Miranda's as it was John's. The Flood had abducted her father, corrupted his body and ripped his identity from him. Now, the Gravemind prospered while Miranda's body lay cold and soulless in an unwelcoming alien assault carrier.

Searching the cracks in High Charity's once sturdy casing, John spied a fissure he believed would lead him to a space near the Prophets' old Sanctum. Easing his way through the quivering orifice, he was met with initial resistance. A warm, forceful breath wrapped over the Banshee's wings as a deep resonating sigh wafted it backwards. A final lingering hum bade its farewell as the last reverberation departed the tunnel, drifting into the beyond. When the air changed direction, the intruder was inhaled inwards.

John found High Charity as he'd predicted it to be, utterly unrecognisable. The Banshee sank slowly into the boggy biomass as John exited. Balancing over the uneven terrain, the Spartan lifted his boot to find a thick glob of mucus stretched between his sole and the sticky, spongy, sickly innards that covered everything in sight. There were no floors or ceilings in this disdainful den. There was no north, no south, no up nor down. All John could see was throbbing tissue and open cavities summoning him further into the squalor. He cocked his M90 as he trod over the damp, decaying surface. Cortana was in here... somewhere.

“Child of my enemy, why have you come?!”

High Charity quaked as the Gravemind's voice channelled through the biomass. John grasped a meaty thread to keep himself upright, but that only shook with the rest of the world.

“I offer no forgiveness for a father's sins passed to his son.”

Immediately, the Flood was upon the Spartan. Infection Forms engulfed him, bursting from living sacks on the walls. John bashed his shotgun wildly as the creatures scuttled over his armour, weighing him down in the already sluggish and disorienting labyrinth of flesh. As his shields ran dry, slithering tendrils fondled his undersuit. Pressing down around his neck, they molested their way towards his chest. With his vision mostly obscured by the blobby assailants, John barely made out the flashing faces of advancing Combat Forms. Tormented souls, they were, condemning him to their fate. *BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!* John quickly emptied his stock of shotgun shells, realising he'd barely penetrated the hive.

Hope came with the glimpse of an energy sword. John used all his strength, thrashing his arms outwards and erupting from the pile that threatened to consume him. He tore Infection Forms from his body and threw them at the approaching infected Sangheili. Keeping them distracted by launching their own kind into their path, John was able to pry the sword from an Elite and use it to parry the oncoming swing of another. His adrenaline was high, and he wasn't backing down. He refused to fall into a situation like that again lest the hive swallow him forever. He slashed the blades through his enemies and used every weapon they dropped against them. Their plasma rifles and incendiary grenades were more than effective. He tossed the grenades in his wake and descended further into the fiery furnace.

John endured his punishment for as long as he could. The Flood never ceased. Their damnation was eternal, but John's wrath kept him in control. Eventually, he was stopped in his tracks by the same image that had haunted him for days. Agony and despair were written over Cortana's vaporous features. This apparition was deranged. Her eyes were distant, and her laughter was psychotic.

"I tried to stay hidden," she lamented. "But there was no escape. He cornered me. He wrapped me tight and brought me close."

Fighting hard, John continued to push through the Flood and flame. The effects of a bubble shield and a Brute shot offered him a chance of recovery. His helmet couldn't filter the air fast enough for his gasping breath, but he took comfort in the familiar static of his recharging shields. As the fires wilted, the shadows grew. Devoured by darkness, John found himself alone. Pursued in his isolation, he carried on.

Passing an area not yet fully covered in the Flood's parasitic growths, it occurred to John that this horror had existed far longer than any person alive. Living his day-to-day life, he'd been ignorant to the possibility of such a parasite lying dormant, waiting to be fed. With every virus humanity battled over the years, every disease that rose from Earth's own soils, it only made sense that a sickness far worse was always lurking, readied in the unknown. People attending their everyday jobs, building relationships and keeping themselves entertained... they had no idea of the palpable cravings that grew beyond their sight. Such a plague was, and always had been, inevitable.

"Of course," realised the Gravemind. "You came for her! Her cries are but an echo, wind rattling an empty cage. We exist together now, two corpses in one grave."

John ignored him, marching steadily over the rippling biomass. If Cortana was rampant then the galaxy stood no chance, but *if* Cortana was rampant, John would find out himself. Passing an opening over the festering city, John was surprised to find a Pelican resting comfortably on a ledge. He supposed it was one of the many that were hijacked during the initial invasion of High Charity. Distant echoes of weeps and wails reminded John how vast the forsaken city was. His chills never left his spine before Cortana appeared again, trembling and rambling.

"A collection of lies is all I am," she confessed. "Stolen thoughts and memories!"

Dismissing his increasing anxiety at Cortana's distressing behaviour, John was once again completely swarmed by Flood. The Gravemind had regrouped his puppets. Combat Forms, Carrier Forms and shapeshifting Pure Forms of every nature clustered around the grotesque burrows ahead, but this only served to confirm John's suspicions. He was on the right path. Utilising the Flood's own biomass and the jutting nanolaminate to take cover, the Spartan worked his way forwards into an oval Covenant chamber.

The blasts of his Brute shot and its deadly blade served him well, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was trapping himself with every step forwards. High Charity *was* the Flood. Any route he followed was a pathway deeper into the entrails of his enemy. He didn't fool himself into thinking the Gravemind would surrender to his



infiltration so easily without a scheme of his own. John pictured the tunnels closing up behind him like a clenching sphincter.

“It was the coin's fault,” Cortana wept. “I wanted to make you strong, keep you safe.”

John shook his head, but the apparition was inescapable.

“I'm sorry,” she continued. “I can't.”

John's mind lingered as Cortana faded again. *The coin's fault...* He searched his mind for a distant memory. It was faint, clouded, but he knew there was something to it. Cortana returned. This time, her voice was calm, collected.

“May I speak with you, please?” she asked. “What's your name? It's very nice to meet you. You like games? So do I.”

Someone had uttered those exact words to him long ago, further than he cared to prod. He recalled a woman standing over him in a playground. It was Miranda... *No*, he realised. *That can't be right*. It was Halsey. She was the one who'd tossed the coin, a coin that sealed his fate.

“I'm just my mother's shadow,” Cortana sobbed. “Don't look at me! Don't listen. I'm not who I used to be.”

After all this time, he'd never clicked, never made the connection. Every Smart AI needed a human brain; Halsey must have used her own. This shouldn't have come as a shock to John. He'd known the Doctor to clone organs before, but this was extreme. He found his mind jumping from one place to another in rapid succession. Halsey was behind so much of humanity's achievements during the war. She'd orchestrated John's entire life. *What am I?* he wondered. *Just another product of the Doctor's programming? Is that why I've always succeeded where freer humans have failed?* John was allowing this forsaken place to permeate his mind. He was a soldier. He had a duty to fulfil. His mission was his only priority. Although, someone would have to advise Catherine that her only daughter was now dead. *Her firstborn*, John corrected. Her second was not far behind.

With the Flood spouting from every ventricle, the Chief couldn't afford such inattentive thoughts, but they only breached his mind further as one of the Combat Forms grasped his wrists. He ripped himself from its clutches and booted the aggressive wretch away. That was the easy part. John's heart sank as he looked at it. His heads-up-display showed no recognition of the lifeform. This thing wasn't human, not to his MJOLNIR technology, but John knew her

face. It was bloated and bound in long, veiny welts. Her jaw was permanently widened. Her expression had never recovered from the terror of her infection. Her greying hair was fused into her clammy, transformed skin, but flecks of auburn still shone in the dim light. With a snap and a crunch, John eliminated what remained of Jane Pinciotti.

John had left Jane and the others in Cortana's care. *This is what happens when I leave people behind*, he reflected. If he'd been wiser the last time he was here, the marines would all be safe, and he could still trust Cortana with his life. John hadn't forgotten what he read in the terminals. The Forerunner had built an AI named Mendicant Bias specifically to defeat the Gravemind. That same AI had been their downfall. John could not let Cortana be his, and yet, every warning suggested that perhaps she already was.

"Time has taught me patience!" roared the Gravemind. "But basking in new freedom, I will know all that I possess!"

As John fired upon an upside-down Pure Form, it occurred to him, *the Gravemind still doesn't know*. Like a fiddle, the Gravemind had played Mendicant Bias. That much was certain, but maybe this time, it was Cortana who'd played the Gravemind. *This can still work*, John thought. It all depended on her condition. Sure enough, she appeared again.

"I have walked the edge of the abyss," she recited. "I have seen your future, and I have learnt!"

John passed four cylindrical pylons. They were naked, bare of any Flood flesh, and one of them had apparently been demolished. Someone had once been busy in this reactor room. Cortana's form turned a pale green as John entered a less contaminated corridor. She writhed in pain before his eyes, far worse than ever. She was nearby. John could feel it. She only had to hold on a little longer.

"There will be no more sadness," she said. "No more anger. No more envy."

John peered through Cortana's transparent eyes and saw a door ahead. Nanolaminate plating clanged as the corridor tremored.

"Submit!" the Gravemind raged. "End her torment and my own! Show me what she hides, or I shall feast upon your bones!"

Cortana's voice became unnatural and monotoned as she interrupted.

“This is UNSC AI serial number CTN zero-four-five-two-dash-nine. I am a monument to all your sins.”

John prized the door open while Cortana faded. Squeezing through the gap, he instantly recognised where he was. The Inner Sanctum had seen better days. A white stasis field waited for John at its centre. His footsteps echoed around the chamber as he dashed forwards and smashed the field with the blade of his Brute shot. The field disintegrated, revealing the curled, horizontal figure of a damaged woman. She kept her head resting on the surface of the holo-tank as she whispered.

“You found me.”

She looked hollow. Her colouring was dull. No numbers or patterns scrolled across her body. Her knees were tucked in closely. She was broken and ashamed.

“So much of me is wrong,” she murmured. “Out of place... You might be too late.”

John knelt to her level.

“You know me,” he said. “When I make a promise...”

Slowly, weakly, Cortana shifted. Her colour returned as she looked up at John.

“You keep it.”

She glowed.

“I *do* know how to pick 'em.”

“Lucky me,” John smirked.

Cortana’s data sped over her body as she stood up confidently.

“Do you still have it?” John asked.

Lifting her palm, she served up the holographic display of a familiar T-shaped object.

“The Activation Index from the first Halo ring,” Cortana confirmed. “A little souvenir I hung onto, just in case. Got an escape plan?”

John held out her data chip. Touching it, Cortana entered the device.

“Thought I'd try shooting my way out,” John stated as he inserted the chip. “Mix things up a little.”

“Just keep your head down,” Cortana teased. “There's two of us in here now, remember.”

John felt warm and complete in that moment. He promised himself, he could *never* doubt Cortana again. He returned to the

corridor in time to receive another burst of anger from the Gravemind.

"Now at last I see," the Gravemind fumed. "Her secret is revealed!"

John fled back into the reactor room.

"Wait," Cortana instructed. "We need to buy some time. We can start a chain reaction; destroy High Charity."

Instinctively, John knew exactly what Cortana was suggesting. As the Flood continued to rush at him, he aimed every third and fourth grenade shot at the reactor pylons. The Ark was far too immense to be shattered like a Halo ring, but High Charity could still be taken down.

"She baited me with lies," seethed the Gravemind. "She brought me here to seal my doom!"

Red and blue flames erupted from one pylon. John turned to the next.

"I have spent eons waiting," the Gravemind complained. "Watching, planning."

The next pylon blew. Only one more was left.

"I will not again be torn asunder, not now that I am free, not now that I am whole!"

With the final pylon exploding, a bright light flooded the reactor room, and the Gravemind roared in pain. John spun as giant tentacles slapped the ground around him. He had no clue how to escape.

"An explosion just made us an exit," Cortana announced. "I'll mark a navpoint. Let's go!"

With Cortana's guidance, John sprinted through the tearing flesh and fire. Timing his jumps over each explosion allowed him to propel himself further along the escape route.

"There," Cortana directed. "Into the maintenance tunnel."

Flood forms scattered like ants in their crumbling nest as John swept through the tunnel. They'd still be the death of him if he didn't escape soon. Cortana gasped.

"I've got a friendly contact!" she exclaimed. "Who would be crazy enough to come here?"

A blip appeared on John's heads-up-display pointing towards his ally. He followed it and found none other than the Arbiter wielding a flamethrower, unleashing his fury upon the Flood that surrounded

him. They were right near the ledge where the Pelican that John spotted earlier still sat.

“You two made nice?” Cortana asked, bewildered.

Synchronising automatically, John and Thel jumped into the Pelican, still firing backwards at the Flood.

“What else happened while I was gone?”

Proximity allowed Cortana to access the Pelican’s cockpit controls. The engines took a moment to warm up before they were off. High Charity thundered as the Gravemind’s tentacles chased the Pelican, only to give up when they were out of reach. John had no reason to watch as the city was destroyed.

Sinking into his seat, John sighed. Maybe he *was* purely a product of his programming. Maybe he wasn’t. Either way, he made his own choices. He’d left Cortana on High Charity, but it had always been his decision to come back. That was what made him who he was, and that very decision was going to save the galaxy.

## Full Circle

John throttled the rickety Pelican upwards over the Ark's core. With Cortana at his right arm and the Arbiter seated behind him, the Master Chief never looked back. The lonesome Shadow of Intent loomed ahead as stoic as ever, but their target lay beyond. A seraphic beauty, the delicate ringworld sparkled in the daylight. Its intricate design, sculpted from the hellscape below, had been lifted to the heavens. Gods and devils alike awaited them on Halo.

"We are aboard," messaged Rtas 'Vadum. "Sangheili and humans both. Will you not come with us, brother?"

"No," replied Thel. "This is our fight, and I *will* see it finished."

"Then finish it," said the Shipmaster. "For all of us."

The Pelican ascended above the clouds, and they passed the Sangheili carrier for the last time. The passengers of the Intent were on their own journey now, a return journey. Their course was set. Cortana opened communications with another party as they approached the outward face of the Halo installation.

"Johnson," she called.

"Ma'am," came the reply.

Avery Johnson's image lit the display screen. He wore a new military cap and sat in a strict upright position on the bridge of the Forward Unto Dawn. His appearance conveyed discipline and determination, but it did not mask the heavy bags below his eyes. Not even the harsh welts and deep bruising concealed the soldier's severe fatigue. The battle of the Ark had taken its toll on the worn marine, but the Sergeant Major refused to leave until the final deed was done, the firing of a Halo ring independent of the Array. He could recover, rejoice and grieve after all Flood and whatever else that remained in the system were long gone.

"Do you have the frigate?" Cortana checked.

"Yes, ma'am," Johnson answered. "I'll land her as close to the Control Room as I can."

"Safe is better than close, Sergeant," Cortana told him.

"Roger that," Johnson nodded. "And Cortana, it's good to have you back."

The Master Chief turned to Cortana who averted his gaze, but he caught her lips curling at the sides into a tender smile. She blushed

several shades of violet before succumbing to the attention and standing proudly. Everything was going to be alright.

John flew the Pelican through a wide gap in the ringworld's disjointed structure before entering its atmosphere on the other side. They swept through a sequence of snowy chasms before the Pelican's faulty engines groaned irritably, denying them any hint of a smooth landing. The Chief crashed the dropship into a thick mound of snow near enough to Cortana's marker before following the Arbiter outside.

"Halo," Cortana murmured. "We fought so hard to stop this thing... It's so new and unfinished. I'm not exactly sure what will happen when we fire it."

"We'll head for the portal," John answered as Thel tossed him an assault rifle. "And we'll all go home."

In addition to the AR, John equipped a rocket launcher that had fallen in the snow. Its crude metal and markedly mechanical design felt at odds with the soft ethereal glow of his fresh surroundings. Trudging beneath the gentle snowfall, the Spartan and Elite followed Cortana's instructions to head through the cliffs.

They sidled along a seemingly natural pathway between high cliffs of pale-grey stone, but the true purpose of this crevice soon revealed itself. Just as the trench began to widen, John spotted a high recess to the right from which several beams of Forerunner metal beckoned him, gesturing like fingers. John was now accustomed the lure of Forerunner architecture. It had become part of the Halo and Ark experience. A sheet of glistening ice crystallised over John's MJOLNIR as he clawed up the cliff, clambering onto the beams before checking on the Arbiter who waited curiously below.

"One minute," John informed the Elite.

Without a word, the Arbiter turned away and took watch. John realised Thel had come to trust him. In return, he'd be true to his word and wouldn't waste time. He entered the cave where the metal beams began and found himself walking into a corridor.

"Where are we going?" Cortana asked.

"You'll see."

A standard doorway led them into an echoey, octagonal chamber. The tapping of John's footsteps bounced around the room as he entered. *I know this place*, he realised. A system of sturdy walls and supports stood around the perimeter while a beam of light hummed

pleasurably in its centre, pulsing upwards from the floor and through the ceiling.

“A phase pulse generator,” Cortana remarked. “You knew it would be here?”

John shook his head. This pulse generator was identical to those he and Cortana had deactivated on the first Halo. They were responsible for the power behind the superweapon. Walking in on this one was a complete accident. It made sense that it was here, but it wasn't why John had entered. He approached the terminal that called to him.

“What is that?” Cortana asked.

Allowing Cortana to see for herself, John grasped the sides of the terminal and leant in. Without waiting for every glyph to translate, John searched for the first completed line and read.

*You don't know the contortions I had to go through to follow you, Reclaimer. I know what you are here for.*

The words whispered to him as he read.

*I am Mendicant Bias.*

John felt a curious jab as Cortana accessed the footage of other terminals already saved to his MJOLNIR.

“How many of these have you found?” she asked.

John didn't need to answer. She was already scanning through every ounce of data he'd obtained. He skimmed the text with little concentration. His mind was still on the mission, but the terminals felt like something that couldn't be ignored. As long as he captured them, Cortana could analyse them later. From the little information John absorbed, it seemed the Forerunner AI, Mendicant Bias was admitting to its betrayal.

*My weakness was my capacity, unintentional though it was, to choose the Flood, said Bias. A mistake my makers would not soon forgive, but I want something far different from you, Reclaimer. My goal is atonement. So here, at the end of my life, I once again betray a former master.*

John pulled away from the terminal, remembering that the Arbiter was waiting outside. *I'm wasting time*, he thought. Cortana seemed to agree.

“Let's get back on track,” she advised. “The Control Room is outside.”

The Arbiter's sharp silhouette cut through the brume, standing frozen at the widening of the trench. Stepping past Thel, John found



himself bathed in a cool, angelic light dispersed by the reflection of the white snow. He stared ahead. There was no mistaking what rose before them. The Control Tower stood triumphantly, a palace of silver built upon the snow-covered remains of a crumbled civilisation. Its primary support extended forwards, reaching out and welcoming John before penetrating the ground at forty degrees. The base of the tower consisted of a robust triangular pyramid, which nestled securely into the opposite cliff. Carved into the pyramid itself was a three-storeyed path with solid ramps that connected each level, forming a ziggurat that led all the way to the tower entrance.

All this is what John had expected, but something wasn't right. The spire didn't stretch high enough, and many supports John remembered from the first Control Tower were completely missing. As his tunnel vision subsided, he stepped back. The entire canyon was wrong. Cliff walls didn't extend the whole way up before a flat Forerunner face exposed itself, revealing the landform as half-naked. An arch that John remembered bridging across the top of the canyon was also absent, and a deep shaft as wide as one side of the ziggurat was yet to be filled in. The ringworld that John recalled had not yet taken shape. Cortana had stated it was unfinished, but this wasn't even close to done.

"The ring is ready," Cortana assured him. "The phase pulse generator confirmed that, if nothing else."

Together, John and Thel marched towards the cragged snowscape below the imposing Control Tower. For a second, all seemed peaceful, but the serenity was instantly abolished. A meteor shower erupted around them. Spouts of snow upsurged from the terrain as alien chunks sprayed from the sky. Half the sky above was filled with a single webbed superstructure, the Ark, which still housed the unyielding High Charity, refusing to surrender.

"DID YOU THINK ME DEFEATED?!"

The Gravemind was not dead yet.

"Flood dispersal pods," Cortana announced.

Clouds of burning smoke permeated the area, concealing the contaminated chunks and the threats they delivered. John did not wait for the smoke to clear before firing. Watching his motion tracker, he sprayed short bursts at each presumed Combat Form. The Arbiter's blue plasma trailed behind his bullets as the smoke faded, but the Flood's return fire was far heavier. A blanket of

bullets, plasma and other projectiles besieged them, lighting their shields as they took cover between the rippled snow.

*Flood dispersal pods*, John considered. He couldn't imagine a worse trio of words. The Shadow of Intent would be lucky if it had managed to escape the Flood assault, but his thoughts turned towards the many Covenant ships that lay littered across the Ark. The Flood would certainly be repairing them, and if Halo wasn't activated within the hour, there'd be a damned fleet sent straight through the portal to rain hell upon the last of humanity. *Your poet had it wrong...*

The Flood within the canyon soon overwhelmed any thoughts the Chief had of those on the Ark. John and the Arbiter twirled back to back as every kind of Combat Form threw themselves upon the pair. From infected marksman to SMG-wielding shock troopers, from every rank of Elite to a never-ending conglomerate of Brutes, all Combat Forms stampeded relentlessly. The stubborn shields of a Sangheili Combat Form devoured John's bullets. He switched to the rocket launcher and immediately blew several Flood apart while dodging the tentacled melee of an oncoming Brute. Disassembled appendages spiralled from the blast, spoiling the snow with fouled fluids.

Sidestepping, hopping and ducking, John kept a constant eye on his motion tracker. It grew redder each second with the exception of the one small dot that represented the Arbiter. Between the slashing energy of the Arbiter's sword, John heard the distinct boom of a fuel rod. Without looking away from his own constant Flood onslaught, he confirmed the Arbiter was using the cannon. The distinct green glow lit the Flood and snow both, but the Arbiter and Spartan weren't the only ones with heavy weapons. John was forced to leap further and further with each attack as rockets, fuel rods and grenades pitted the snowfield.

Looking ahead, John spied a colony of Pure Forms climbing the Control Tower's main support like a collective of creeping spiders. For a moment, he took his SPNKr sights off the Combat Forms and blasted the Pure Forms apart. Each of them fell into the deep pit below, but it didn't matter. They were soon replaced by even more intrusions of Pure Forms scuttling up the walls to form a fleshy blockade on top of the pyramid.

“As far as numbers go,” Cortana began. “They’ve got us beaten. We *need* to get to the top of that ziggurat. Come on, Chief. Let’s go!”

With every evade, John edged towards the base of the Control Tower, but the Flood weren’t letting him reach it without a struggle. He ran out of rockets just as an infected Chieftain came barreling along with its gravity hammer in one twisted arm. John jumped to the right but wasn’t quick enough to switch weapons. The Chieftain charged straight past with the Arbiter now in its sights.

“Arby!” John alerted.

Thel had been mid-firefight with a pair of his infected brethren. A final fuel rod tore through the Flood Elite. The Arbiter never turned to face the Chieftain as he slashed his energy sword backwards through its gut. Flood juices splattered over him, soaking his ornate armour and the snow at his hooves. In the same motion, Thel caught the hammer and tossed it to the Spartan. They were now at the edge of the bottomless pit and the foot of the pyramid.

“There should be ramps that lead to the top,” Cortana informed.

There were none. The ramps John remembered from the first Halo that had connected the ground to the path simply weren’t present. Instead, all they faced was a blank metal scarp too steep and too slick to climb.

“Check the other side,” Cortana suggested as the Flood waves continued.

They fought through to the right, continually puffing and grunting as they dodged attacks. The gravity hammer and sword turned out to be their best friends as they cut through the hordes before finding a snowy slope that curved around the side of the ziggurat. Arms and legs of dismembered Flood rolled past their feet as they pushed up the slope and onto the first sleeted path. The dispersal pods never stopped landing.

“This is the day!” bellowed the Arbiter. “Let us scour the galaxy of this affliction. No more shall suffer from their pestilence!”

Sentinels grouped over the ziggurat as if responding to the Arbiter’s cry. Their energy beams sliced along the path, incinerating Pure Forms as armies of Combat Forms followed them up the structure. Pushing along, John smashed his gravity hammer through one Pure Form then the next. Accepting the barrage of bony spikes from a third Pure Form into his shields, John leapt forwards and slammed the hammer straight through its repugnant mass. Gooy

innards and shattered cartilage splattered across the path as one considerable red dot appeared at the bottom of John's tracker. He spun to greet it.

*Smack!*

The clubbed arm of one vertical Pure Form struck John's torso, expelling the wind from his lungs with a frightening crack. His gut sprang to his throat as the ground released him. The tangible world eluded the Spartan as he flew from the ziggurat and back into the snow below. His helmet alarms sounded as his heads-up-display flashed red. A sharp pain seared through his abdomen.

Fortunately, most of the Flood had moved up the ziggurat and were too high to notice John quivering on his back in the snow. He squinted up at the tanky Pure Form looking down from above. The centre of its body contracted. Its torso stretched and rippled as if about to regurgitate its own entrails. Instead, it spat out a fully formed Infection Form. The Infection Form wriggled through the air as it dropped upon the Spartan. John had no breath. He was busted and broken. He could die here and now, but he would never surrender to infection. He squashed the worthless creature with his gloved hands the second it landed. He stood up.

"Chief," alerted Cortana. "I've detected a significant breach in your armour."

John forced himself to inhale.

"Will it hold?" he asked.

"Mostly, yes," she replied. "The bodysuit is uncompromised, but the gel layer--"

"It's going to get cold," understood the Chief.

"It might be worse than you think," Cortana stated, concerned.

"How bad will it get?" he asked.

"Let's just say, it won't be as warm as the Admiral's wife."

John didn't need to finish the conversation. He was already feeling it. A small scission over his umbilical exposed him to the frosts he'd been previously protected from. Already, it stung cruelly like dry ice pressed against his skin. *The Admiral's wife* was a colloquial term for cryo chambers. John was about to get colder than a freezer designed to induce comas. He'd die within the hour.

*No stopping then*, he thought as he ran back to the icy slope. Looking up at the path, he recognised the blaze of a flamethrower in the hands of the Arbiter who was guided by Sentinels above. John

collected several fragmentation grenades from the snow and lobbed them onto the path away from his allies. The shrieks of twisted Combat Forms and screeches of Pure Forms confirmed he'd cleared at least some of them. Landing upon the ziggurat again, he retrieved his hammer along with a dropped Sentinel weapon.

John burned his way through the Flood as he joined the Arbiter. Watching the Sentinel beam scorch his enemies, he was envious of the heat, stiffening in its absence. Together, the pair bent around the path, passing beneath the primary support. John didn't like what he saw on the other side. Infinite Pure Forms were mid-transformation, throbbing and shifting into their colossal clubbed variants. They saturated the path between the pair and the ramp to the second level. There were enough of them that some spilled off the ziggurat and into the pit below. Watching them drop, John knew he couldn't afford to be knocked off again.

*BOOM!*

A random red laser cut through the swarm in one quick swipe, carving a clearance through the Pure Forms like a knife through butter. John searched for where the laser had come from. Sure enough, the tiny figure of a distant marine stood upon a ledge in the side of the canyon. The Spartan laser suited Sergeant Johnson unsurprisingly well, and the fleece of his uniform apparently did enough to keep him from freezing. John's own MJOLNIR relied on its internal technologies so much that, when damaged, it seemed to be working actively against him. His entire body from his nose to his toes chilled beneath the frigid armour that encased him like a coffin. His Sentinel beam trembled between his shivering digits.

"I got you covered, Chief," transmitted Johnson. "Meet you at the top."

"Just keep your distance, Sergeant," Cortana instructed. "We've all seen what Flood spores can do. Nothing's worth an infection."

"Not even saving the world?" Johnson responded. "Between us, ma'am, it's not like these hellhounds haven't had their bite. I just ain't their flavour."

Wading through the mass of bodies, John swung his hammer into each Flood form before they could cause harm. The Arbiter covered him with a newly acquired battle rifle. *BOOM!* The Spartan laser thundered. It took time for Johnson to charge each shot, but when it released, the destruction was undeniable. John's Sentinel beam ran

out of energy as they climbed the ramp. Swapping to a needler, he relied on the pink mist of its supercombine to create gaps in the hordes.

“Chief,” Cortana began. “I’ve got good news and bad news. Good news is your armour’s an easy fix. I can patch it up in no time, even *improve* the suit if we want to, but unless we get to the Dawn soon-”

“I know,” John interrupted.

“Just reach that Control Room.”

Now running in the opposite direction on the next level up, John ducked beneath the swing of a Pure Form while the Arbiter laid into it with his battle rifle. More pods landed around them as they battled with the hulk. When it turned to the Elite, John bashed the creature from behind. Reacting to the Spartan, it swung its clubbed arms high and slammed them around, just missing the Chief but spinning to face him. It was now the Arbiter’s turn to hit it from behind. John watched as the points of Thel’s blades appeared before him, having pierced through the creature’s abdomen before it fell.

*BOOM!* As Johnson fired, he moved closer along the ledge, wrapping around the canyon towards the top of the ziggurat. John and the Arbiter lost sight of him as they passed beneath the primary support once again, heading up towards the final ramp.

“Careful,” called Johnson. “I can’t cover you on the far side!”

The path grew slippery as John grew colder, and his movements grew clumsier by the second. Swapping to a Brute shot, the Chief cleaved with its curved blade, but in his frozen state, he couldn’t feel the weapon in his hands. His movements slowed as his visor fogged up. His armour grew heavy. John didn’t let the Arbiter see how much he was shaking under his MJOLNIR. He now relied on his heads-up-display to inform every decision. Without it, it would have been impossible to sense the Flood attacks that sprang from his front, flank and rear. John’s entire body was going numb. *Just reach that Control Room*, he reminded himself. Once they were there, the mission would be complete. *Reach the Control Room.*

Johnson returned to view as they made it to the third level. The doorway into the spire sat atop another platform on the upper level. John and Thel climbed it together, entering an even deeper thicket of Flood while more Sentinels arrived from above. The rain of

projectiles hitting the Chief alternated, increasing and decreasing as the Arbiter phased in and out of his active camouflage.

“Spark?” transmitted Johnson. “You in there? Open the damn door.”

“Of course,” replied Spark. “Just as soon as you dispose of all proximate Flood threats. I'm afraid containment protocols do not allow me to-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Johnson grumbled while charging his laser again.

“Was that,” Cortana began. “The Monitor? Well, we are finally doing what he wanted.”

*BOOM!*

John searched for a new weapon after running empty again. He swung his now unpowered gravity hammer as he scanned the messy floor. He spotted what looked like two small Sentinels fallen beneath the feet of the trampling Flood. Their metal chunks and flickering lights were closed inwards like starfish with folded legs. In desperation, John dived for one.

“Automated turrets, Reclaimer,” Guilty Spark explained, invisibly. “They will defend the zone upon activation. They are useful in a pinch, but still, I implore you to reconsider upgrading to at least a class-twelve combat skin. I sense your current skin is failing you.”

The auto-turret leapt from John's unfeeling hands, opened up and began beaming at the Flood while hovering in place. Spark was right. John's body felt nothing now, but he still had enough sense to realise how bad that was. He tossed the second auto-turret above the platform and moved for a pair of spikers, which he fired immediately. The Flood climbed the tower like an invasion of termites. If it weren't for the auto-turrets, they'd be overwhelmed in seconds.

“Spartan,” alerted the Arbiter. “Stand back!”

John slewed out of the way as the Elite tossed two incendiary grenades. *CRRRAAAOOOWW!* The Flood screamed deafeningly as they melted. The ziggurat became a lighthouse, a beacon of hope as John felt the warmth of its flames tickling his skin and filling his body with comfort. Revitalised by the fires, he tackled Flood forms one after the other into the flames. The Gravemind, wherever he was, could feel the decimation of his kind.

“I have beaten fleets of thousands!” erupted the Gravemind. “Consumed a galaxy of mind, flesh and bone! You were a puppet and a fool! But her? How could I not have known?”

Soon, the world was quiet. Aside from the crackling of the smouldering fire on crispy Flood corpses and the cries of Combat Forms falling to Sentinels in the distance, John felt a tinge of peace. He traded his empty spikers for a fully loaded assault rifle. A pile of snow fell onto the platform like a mini avalanche as Johnson slid to them with his laser still over his shoulder.

“Open up,” he knocked on the Control Tower door. “Coast is clear.”

“Not for long,” Cortana notified. “I’m tracking additional dispersal pods. They’ll be hitting any minute.”

The wide metal doorway opened on its own, leading the three warriors into the expected segmented hallway. John felt himself begin to thaw once inside. More of the Gravemind’s words carried in with one last draft as they made a right turn.

“Do I take life or give it? Who is victim, and who is foe?”

John wondered exactly where the voice was coming from. By all rights, the Gravemind should have been crushed beneath the collapsing High Charity. Cortana answered his thoughts.

“He’s rebuilding himself on the ring!” she exclaimed.

“Let’s hurry,” urged Johnson. “Chief, Arbiter, the Control Room’s close.”

They made a few turns before a final door opened, leaving the three figures staring out into the vast Control Centre. It was as grand and reverential as John remembered but not because its design was anything noteworthy. The room was dark, monochromatic and empty. It featured little more than a glass walkway that bridged the doorway to the centre of the room before circling back into itself where the control panel waited. Visually, it was just another Forerunner facility, but the presence of the chamber was hypnotising. Its alluring ambience penetrated its visitors, stirring inside them and binding them with each other and the very souls of the Forerunner. They stepped onto the walkway beneath an immense volumetric display of the Halo ring, which rotated mesmerically around the room.

*CRRRAAAOOOWW!*



The Arbiter spun back as a door slammed shut in the entrance hallway, locking the Flood out.

“Oh. Hello,” greeted Guilty Spark.

The Monitor appeared by Johnson’s side as he marched down the walkway towards the holographic control panel. The Chief stood guard at the entrance while the Arbiter examined the door that had closed, listening intently for movement on the other side.

“Yank me, Chief,” Cortana instructed.

Obliging, John removed the data chip from his helmet. He hesitated, staring down into Cortana’s blue light. Johnson had stopped a few metres away with the Monitor buzzing beside him.

“I’m not going to lose her too,” Johnson vowed.

The Chief tossed the chip to his friend and turned back, watching the Arbiter press up against the door. He listened in as Johnson and Spark continued along the bridge.

“Wonderful news,” began the Monitor. “The installation is almost complete.”

“Terrific,” grunted the Sergeant.

“Yes,” agreed Spark. “Isn’t it?”

John relaxed as the Arbiter’s body language confirmed the door was sealed tight. He glanced at Johnson, who was now resting his Spartan laser against the holopanel and studying its controls. John turned back to the door as the Monitor chirped away.

“I have begun my simulations,” Spark announced gleefully. “No promises, but initial results indicate this installation should be ready to fire in just a few more days.”

“We don’t *have* a few more days,” replied Johnson.

“B-but,” Spark stammered. “A premature firing will *destroy* the Ark!”

“Deal with it.”

“It will destroy this installation.”

“Aaaaagh!”

John turned as Johnson fell to the ground, smoke rising from his chest. 343 Guilty Spark was glowing red.

“Unacceptable!” cried the Monitor.

The Chief sprinted down the walkway only to receive the same paralysing blow from the Monitor’s super beam, blasting him onto his back. If his armour wasn’t damaged before, it had to be now.

“Absolutely unacceptable!” Spark screamed.

John lay flat on the hard Forerunner glass as his stomach burned away. His vision warped and whirled as he struggled to remember who he was. Another red beam blasted over him. It hit the Arbiter straight in the abdomen, sending the Elite flying backwards into the hallway. The Control Room door closed instantly, locking the Arbiter on the other side.

“Protocol dictates action!” declared Spark. “I see now that helping you was wrong!”

John forced his torso upright as his senses returned. The Monitor hovered between him and Johnson, who appeared unconscious in front of the control panel with his hand still clutching Cortana’s chip. The floating orb faced John. Its red eye was mad and piercing.

“You are the child of my makers,” said Spark. “Inheritor of all they left behind. You *are* Forerunner, but this ring is mine!”

## The Way the World Ends

*Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep...*

John could hardly discern his helmet alarm from the tinnitus ringing in his ears. With all his might, he forced himself to his feet. *Whoosh!* Again, he smacked the Forerunner glass. Something else hit him. The bright, red Monitor glared furiously, projecting a forcefield of golden energy from his spherical shell. John stood again. *Whoosh!* This time, he went tumbling. The wave of energy carried him all the way to the locked door. He was lucky it didn't send him off the walkway.

"I take no pleasure in doing what must be done!" cried Spark as he fired his beam.

John rolled to his right and back onto his feet. For a moment, he tangoed with the super beam as it trailed his every movement. He could have cheered as his shields came online, but just as they recharged, another forcefield pulsed from the Monitor, sending John to the edge of the unrailed bridge. His boots squeaked over the glass as he slid along. He couldn't do this all day. He dive-rolled back to the centre of the platform, aimed his assault rifle at the Monitor and unloaded his entire magazine.

"You do not deserve this ring!" shouted Spark, unphased by John's bullets. "*I kept it secret. I have kept it safe! It's mine, my own. It belongs to me!*"

"Not for long," groaned Johnson, still injured.

Johnson's Spartan laser imitated Spark's beam as it struck the Monitor from behind. The direct hit sent Spark flying, whizzing around the chamber as if in pain. John knew Spark would recover soon. He ran over to Johnson whose marine combat armour had not held up against the Monitor's beam. Metal and fabric were both scalded away, revealing a gaping hole over Johnson's sternum, which John could almost make out between the strands of scorched meat and congealed blood. Time ticked away at Johnson's lifeforce. John needed to destroy the Monitor, activate Halo and get Johnson into a cryo fast. Reaching down, he acquired Johnson's laser.

"Kick his ass," said the Sergeant weakly.

Guilty Spark was already zooming back towards them with a distinct dent in his shell. John relocated to the circular loop of the

platform, ensuring he had enough room to evade the Monitor's attacks.

"Stop now!" Spark cried. "Before one of us gets hurt!"

Ignoring his own advice, Spark blasted his beam again, but John already had his finger on the Spartan laser's trigger. After one crouch to the side and a jump to the left, the Chief unleashed his laser into Spark's central lens. Flecks of heated metal and energy burst from the Monitor as he was knocked backwards.

"My eye!" he cursed. "Think of y-y-y-your f-forefathers!"

John was definitely doing damage, but the Monitor flew back and continued beaming. In an instant, from the slightest contact with the edge of Spark's beam, John's shields surrendered, dissolving into nothing.

"I *am* the Monitor of Installation Zero-Four!" screamed Spark. "And I will *not* help you!"

"Argh!" John gasped.

The hot metal of his MJOLNIR seared his calf as the beam scraped by. He was growing tired.

"On Earth," John puffed, attempting to distract Spark. "You said you weren't just a machine."

John felt the heat of another beam cast millimetres past his visor.

"That you acted rashly," he continued, sliding about sluggishly. "The ring was all you had. It's not all you have any more."

The Monitor stopped, returning to his regular blue glow.

"No," agreed Spark. "But it will be again."

Spark returned red. His damaged eye looked more enraged than ever, but it was too late. John's laser was charged.

*BOOM!*

"OH MYYYYY-OOOOO-AAAAAHHH!!!!"

Fragments shattered across the chamber after a satisfying blow. John won. 343 Guilty Spark was no more. The Chief stepped back over to Johnson who was now curled on his side.

"I'm getting you out of here," John told him.

"No," Johnson coughed. "You're not."

John grabbed his hand, but the Sergeant did not shift. His fingers were cold and limp. His eyes were on the Chief, but they appeared distant, already a universe away. His colour had long left him. Johnson was always strong, an unbreakable force. After so many

years of knowing each other, it was impossible for John to see him like this.

“Don’t...” Johnson breathed feebly. “Don’t ever let her go.”

His hand dropped from John’s, leaving the data chip sitting upon the Spartan’s palm. Avery groaned with the last of his strength.

“Send me out,” he whispered. “With a bang.”

His head rested upon the glass. No air escaped his lips. Johnson had given everything for the galaxy, for humanity. There was no other man like him. There never had been, nor would there ever be again. John swallowed. His throat was numb, insensible, but his heart ripped at him from inside. Tears welled as he held his old friend. For the first time in John’s life, he truly understood sorrow.

In that moment, the agony and grief would seize him, but Johnson had known the stakes, and John did too. *Send me out with a bang.* Those were his final words, and John would do them justice. He trod over to the control panel and touched the data chip against it. Cortana materialised. Her hair hung from her bowing head, but it did not obscure the grave sadness upon her face.

“Chief, I’m so sorry.”

John said nothing. Cortana just needed to do her job, then they’d be out of there. She made a few hand motions before the exit door reopened, revealing the Arbiter who’d been attempting to break in for the last several minutes. Thel stood still, looking down the walkway. John didn’t need to follow his gaze. He retrieved Cortana from the control panel and prepared to run.

As intended, a blinding beam shot straight up through the Control Centre, and in the instant after, the room began to fall apart. Supports fell from the ceiling, tilting the walkway as they crashed. John fled fast, pretending not to see his friend’s body slide off the bridge before he exited into the corridor.

“I am sorry, Spartan,” said the Arbiter as they ran together.

With every door now open, they were quickly swarmed. Infection Forms streamed in, flowing up the walls and crashing around corners followed closely by every other Flood type. The sky outside had turned blood red. Its hot colour conflicted with the unbearable chill of the atmosphere, but there was no time to think about it.

John and Thel were hit instantly by Sentinel beams. The auto-turrets John left outside had now turned against them. Both their shields popped before they fired back at the turrets with weapons

from the ground. John tossed a grenade to dispatch them, but other Sentinels soon came flying furiously towards the pair. John looked to the right where Johnson's mini avalanche had fallen. It formed a ramp from the upper level of the ziggurat to the ledge.

"The Dawn," reminded Cortana. "We still have a chance."

They climbed the snow as Flood and Sentinels raged around them. The Arbiter spoke as he climbed.

"Even in death," he said. "Our Sergeant guides us."

Cortana marked a point further along the ledge.

"See that doorway?" she pointed. "The Dawn is on the other side of the cliffs."

Dodging beams from angry Sentinels and swings from eager Flood, they made their way around the ledge. With both armies eventually distracted by each other, they reached the Forerunner door unharmed. The voice of the Gravemind had another greeting for them when they entered.

"Obstinate tools," he began. "Blind to past verdicts postponed. Your conviction is terminal. Must I recede to my tombstone?"

They entered the octagonal chamber of another phase pulse generator where claustrophobic chaos took course. Pieces of exploding Sentinels and broken architecture blew around the room as Flood scrambled, melted and erupted. Carrier Forms transformed the room into a minefield.

"Resignation is my virtue," the Gravemind persisted as they navigated towards the exit. "Like water, I ebb and flow. Defeat is simply the addition of time to a sentence that *you* imposed."

They ignored him as they ran down a tight corridor. The corridor twisted and bent under the quaking of the crumbling ringworld.

"Don't let this ring be the end of us!" Cortana implored.

They exited the final door into a deep outside chasm. A vehicle rested in the terrain ahead.

"There," she directed. "Johnson's Warthog!"

Snow fell heavily from the cliffs around them. A violent avalanche was on its way. The Gravemind continued.

"With me dies the potential of hundreds of billions of souls," moaned the voice.

It was as deep as ever but bitter and resentful.

"Your life is but an instant, a lonely flash, a ruse. And your *victory?*"

A hollow laugh chased them through the chasm.

“Another stone upon the monument to the sins of short-sighted fools!”

John jumped into the driver’s seat as the Arbiter took the turret.

“Drive, Chief!” Cortana encouraged. “Go, go, go!”

Turning sharply out of the chasm, they became aware that the sky wasn’t the only thing turned red. The entire ringworld was on fire. The landscape before them was covered in what appeared to be some form of Forerunner scaffolding, an endless desert of hot, flat metal that blew apart as the ring charged its firing sequence. Some panels fell straight into the nothingness below. Others tore off and blasted through the air like rockets. The ring was shredding itself. The Dawn was somewhere in the distance, hidden behind mounds of rock and the few Forerunner structures that still held together.

“Keep going,” Cortana urged. “The ring’s charging is at thirty percent. I don’t need to tell you what happens when it reaches one hundred.”

John drove onto the scaffolding, building momentum as it sloped downwards. They needed speed to escape, but the risk of being knocked off was dangerously high. John could only swerve so much as they zoomed down the slope. Soon enough, they landed upon a circular structure, a giant frame for the Sentinels to build onto, but the Sentinels weren’t building. They were fighting. The Arbiter fired his turret in retaliation. The Warthog rocked unsteadily as it bound over Infection Forms. The sludge of ground-up Flood flicked over them as they swerved wide around the structure, aiming for the navpoint Cortana had marked.

“Fifty percent, Chief!” she updated.

An unfinished tunnel rushed towards them. Where the flat scaffolding separated, giant metal beams began, forming the floor and walls of the tunnel with far more gaps than John liked to see. He felt the Warthog being sucked back as each panel of scaffolding fell behind them, leaving an endless empty space. The improvised road trembled, threatening to throw them off. John could do nothing but press harder on the pedal as every panel on either side blew high, shooting tails of fire behind them.

A bent panel came forwards to greet them before the tunnel. There was no way to avoid it, but if John could keep the Warthog at the right angle, he could use the panel as a jump. Hyper-focused, he

turned the steering wheel ever so slightly. The Warthog made contact with the panel. Up they went, soaring through the air. They were going to make it, or so he thought. The Sentinels had other ideas. Sentinel Majors beamed in unison, all into one side of the Warthog. The jeep held together, but the Sentinels' aim wasn't to destroy it.

The Warthog spun in the air. The nudge from the beams was enough to send it off-track, and when they landed, they rolled hard. John's shields left him as he was tipped from the Warthog, which continued to roll, threatening to fall through one of the gaps. Together, the Chief and Arbiter ran after it. They took hold of its side and flipped it onto its tyres. Noticing two Carrier forms waddling towards them in the tunnel, the Arbiter jumped onto the turret and gunned them down before they got close. Once again, they were flying, out of the tunnel and back onto the scaffolding.

"Seventy percent!" Cortana warned.

Flood spikes pelted the jeep as they slid around another circular platform. The Dawn was in sight. John straightened up, aiming for the frigate.

"Eighty percent!"

Out of nowhere, an enormous Forerunner support came crashing down, straight through the scaffolding before them, cutting it in half. A treacherous fissure broke between them and the frigate. John turned. If they were fast enough, they could find a way around.

"Ninety percent!"

Explosion after explosion, collapse after collapse, wave after wave of Flood and Sentinels... Halo was falling apart. Their world was falling apart, but John would make it. *We always make it*, he thought, unconvinced. One last turn and they were back on track, heading down another slope and gunning towards an open hangar at the back of the Dawn.

"Firing sequence initiated!" Cortana cried. "This is it!"

John saw nothing in those final moments but reds and golds, the firestorm of an exploding world blurring past. A row of bent panels flicked up before the Dawn.

"Floor it, Chief!" Cortana screamed. "Into the hangar!"

The Warthog proved its durability as it smashed its hood into the floor of the hangar followed by its back bumper while it flipped. The Arbiter catapulted straight to the end of the hangar as John rolled



along the grating beside the grinding jeep. He pushed himself upright and almost stumbled straight back down again as the frigate tilted. Metal screeched as a Scorpion slid down the width of the hangar directly into the Arbiter. The Elite flung himself to his feet but vanished with the Scorpion behind a stack of cargo crates.

Halo was firing. The Dawn was about to be destroyed with everything else in the system. John searched for a control panel of some kind, a port for Cortana to enter. Spotting it, he looked back at the Arbiter who peeked from behind the crates. Neither spoke a word. They didn't need to. The Arbiter disappeared as John bolted for the control panel, fighting against gravity itself, which pulled at him powerfully. Tapping Cortana's chip to the pedestal, her hologram appeared.

"Hang on!" she instructed.

John grabbed onto what he could of the control panel as the Dawn turned completely vertical. Its engines screamed as they began their ascending voyage. The red sky gradated into the darkness of space as they sailed to their conduit. John kept his head low, gripping the control panel tightly as his legs dangled. The Warthog dropped over his head and disappeared into the vacuum.

"Chief!" Cortana yelled, reaching for him.

The Scorpion now came crashing down, knocking the Chief straight off the control panel. His arms thrashed as his fingers searched for something to grab, but the rushing ground repelled him as it sped upwards faster than he could handle. The hangar's opening grew towards him, stretching wide, ready to spit him into the void. Cursing himself, John remembered something. He was a Spartan. With all the effort he could summon, he thrust his arms forwards, jamming them into the metal before using everything he had to climb back to Cortana.

The hangar grew bright. The darkness of space was engulfed in the light of the ring's pulse. The Arbiter had likely reached the Dawn's bridge by now and was steering straight to the portal, but they were cutting things extremely close. The heat of Halo's cleansing flame breathed into the hangar. John's blood turned cold in protest. He swung himself around the front of the control panel and locked his magnetic boots to the grating. Halo's divine wind rushed around them as John leant against Cortana's holo-tank.

"If we don't make it," she began.

“We’ll make it.”

With all forces working actively against him and the hangar turning as bright as the sun, John closed his eyes. He felt Cortana’s closeness as he rested back.

“It’s been an honour serving with you, John.”

Thel ‘Vadam stood reverently upon the grassy hillside staring out at the crisp sunrise that ignited the sea of clouds a majestic gold. Somewhere beneath the clouds was the closed gateway that had once projected a Forerunner portal. Beyond that lay the ocean Thel crashed into only months earlier after his escape from the Ark. Human rescue teams had been there in minutes, pulling him out from the sinking ship. Thel turned back to the present, facing the memorial that stood before the crowd. The human Fleet Admiral appeared stiff, holding his white beret closely as he spoke of the men and women who had fallen.

“For us, the storm has passed,” delivered Lord Hood. “The war is over, but let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark and did not return.”

Keeping his head respectfully pointed at the Fleet Admiral, Thel’s eyes observed those around him. He and his Sangheili guards easily dwarfed every human present, from high-ranking officers in dress uniforms to marines he’d fought alongside. He recognised the individual faces of some soldiers he’d previously been sure would have fallen to the Brutes or Flood. Their survival pleased him. These men had seen more in the last days of the war than entire generations should ever see in their lifetimes. They’d either suffer from what they’d witnessed or be stronger for it. As with his Sangheili, Thel hoped for the latter. He shuddered irritably when he noticed a small group of particular officers. Their uniforms appeared nearly identical to others, but Thel knew ONI when he saw them.

“For their decision,” continued Hood. “Required courage beyond measure, sacrifice and unshakable conviction that their fight, our fight, was elsewhere.”

The memorial itself was simple. The wing of a Pelican, presumably from the wreckage of a nearby battle, stood propped at its centre with painted words to commemorate the fallen. It was surrounded by bouquets, photos and insignia. These would be added to over time by the survivors of the war and families of the dead.

The monument sat upon the stage from which Lord Hood recited his eulogy.

“As we start to rebuild,” he spoke. “This hillside will remain barren, a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennobled all of us, and they will not be forgotten.”

“Present arms!” commanded Gunnery Sergeant Stacker.

Seven marines pointed their battle rifles to the sky and performed a three-volley salute. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* It echoed ceremoniously across the African landscape. The service went quiet as Lord Hood fixed his beret upon his head. Now, it was the Arbiter’s turn. The crowd parted as Thel marched solemnly onto the stage. Hood turned as the Sangheili reached him. Standing by each other’s side, they surveyed the photos and memorabilia. Thel’s eyes passed over photos of Miranda Keyes and Avery Johnson, both gone from the galaxy they had saved. Beside them, etched coarsely into the side of the wing as if an afterthought were three digits... 117. The Fleet Admiral looked at Thel.

“I remember how this war started,” said Hood. “What your kind did to mine... I can’t forgive you, but you have my thanks for standing by him to the end.”

They shook hands, confirming the treaty between humans and Sangheili.

“Hard to believe he’s dead,” Hood finished.

Thel looked across at the clouds, remembering where his half of the Dawn had entered the atmosphere. It was not all that far from the Spartan’s landfall upon Mount Kilimanjaro where they’d first met as allies. He looked back at Lord Hood and replied.

“Were it so easy.”

When the ceremony ended, Thel and his guards boarded a Phantom, which delivered them to the Shadow of Intent. Rtas ‘Vadum waited on the bridge, gazing intently into a hologram of the planet they were finally about to leave.

“Things look different,” murmured Rtas. “Without the Prophets’ lies clouding my vision. I would like to see our own world and know that it is safe.”

“Fear not,” replied Thel. “For we have made it so.”

“By your word, Arbiter.”

“Take us home.”

## Enough Dead Heroes

*So here, at the end of my life, I once again betray a former master. The path ahead is fraught with peril, but I will do all I can to keep it stable, keep you safe. I am not so foolish to believe this will absolve me of my sins. One life hardly balances billions, but I would have my masters know that I have changed, and you shall be my example.*

Kelly sprinted, not simply as fast as a Spartan-II super-soldier, but as the fastest human ever known. Her body moved like lightning. Her legs cycled over the Earth like the wheels of a Warthog. She was the wind. Nothing pursued Spartan-087, but the act of running kept her occupied. She had little to offer in the maintenance tower where her brothers and sisters waited, but she supposed it was time to return. Even now, looking around at the flocking four-winged birds, the swaying trees and the running rivers, Kelly could not believe the entire world was artificial, an inside-out planet. The Engineers had called it a Shield World. *Huragok*, Kelly reminded herself, using their real name.

An entire herd of Huragok bobbed around the facility, floating overhead as she approached. Until recently, Kelly had always believed them to be a species belonging to the Covenant. In actual fact, they were biological creations of the Forerunner, and they were helping the Spartans leave this place. Another Spartan, Linda-058 waited at the door. She wore a variant of the MJOLNIR Mark VI. Somehow, she'd managed to snatch one up before being trapped here with the rest of them. Kelly felt outdated in her Mark V.

"They finished yet?" Kelly asked.

"Still going," Linda replied.

"Trust a squad of overlived octo-balloons to get a job done quickly," Kelly sighed.

Entering the tower and marching down a corridor, Kelly heard two voices deep in argument. *They're still going.*

"They've just got too much respect for Miranda to gossip!" exclaimed the first voice passionately.

It was Chief Mendez. Kelly was used to hearing his voice raised louder than necessary.

"Don't you dare!" replied the other.

Kelly was not used to hearing the same from Doctor Halsey. The woman sounded shaken.

“And those goddamn clones,” continued Mendez. “It was wrong. All of it was completely wrong.”

The tension between Halsey and Mendez was partially the reason Kelly had left for her run to begin with. The two never seemed to have had issues before, but Kelly supposed she wouldn't have noticed if they did. She'd been a child when she knew them. She felt awkward, standing there while they barked at one another. Supposedly, guilt had finally caught up with the pair, and neither knew how to manage it. What surprised Kelly was the mention of Miranda Keyes. She would never have guessed Miranda to be Halsey's daughter. She always reminded her so much of her father.

Kelly shuffled amongst fellow onlookers. A Spartan-III stood beside her now. As a Spartan-III, she was smaller than Kelly, but mankind was missing out just as much that the Spartan-IIIs were locked here as they were in the absence of the Spartan-IIs. Kelly could only guess what state the galaxy was in, having been taken here right after Reach.

“Okay. That's enough,” interrupted Fred. “This stops now.”

Fred-104 was the leader of Blue Team in John's absence. He stepped between the fired-up pair with his burly Spartan frame. Halsey withdrew.

“He's right, I'm afraid,” she admitted. “Why else do you think I went slightly crazy and brought you all here?”

Kelly had wondered that for a while. Halsey had always been logical. ONI knew she was possibly the smartest brain they ever had, but Kelly could never make sense of Halsey's act, leading the Spartans to the middle of nowhere when the war needed them so desperately.

“Salving my conscience,” Halsey proclaimed.

One of the Huragok drifted over carrying a communication device. Halsey took the device. *This is it*, Kelly anticipated. They were about to uncover whether anything waited for them outside the Shield World. Whatever was out there, Kelly hoped humanity was still alive. The Doctor spoke into the device.

“This is Doctor Catherine Halsey,” she said. “All UNSC callsigns, this is Doctor Catherine Halsey, ONI Section Three, and I require assistance.”

No one moved an inch.

“Chief?” Cortana called in the darkness. “Can you hear me?”

John flicked his flashlight on. *At least that still works*, he thought. Cortana sighed in relief.

“I thought I’d lost you too,” she said.

John floated weightlessly through the frigate. He’d thought *Halo* was cold. That was nothing, and yet, the silence of the empty hallway calmed him. Debris floated aimlessly as he pushed himself softly around a bend.

“What happened?” he asked, drifting towards an opening where the hallway suddenly ended.

The metal was still hot.

“I’m not sure,” Cortana replied.

He looked out at the stars.

“When Halo fired, it shook itself to pieces,” Cortana explained. “It did a number on the Ark. The portal couldn’t sustain itself. We made it through just as it collapsed.”

The irony of Cortana’s words prickled the Chief as he stared out from half a ship.

“Well,” she continued. “Some of us made it.”

John pulled himself gently back through the frigate.

“But you did it,” she said, appearing over a holo-pedestal. “Truth, the Covenant, the Flood, it’s finished.”

She was right.

“It’s finished,” John agreed.

He moved towards one of the cryotubes on the wall.

“I’ll drop a beacon,” Cortana decided. “But it’ll be a while before anyone finds us, years even.”

John pulled himself into the cryo, leaning vertically against the cushioning in anticipation of his frozen sleep.

“I’ll miss you,” Cortana whispered.

“Wake me,” he replied. “When you need me.”

The cryotube’s hatch closed, cutting Cortana off from her partner and leaving her alone with her thoughts. There was no way of knowing how long she’d be there. She sat in silence as the Forward Unto Dawn, *half* the Forward Unto Dawn drifted in isolation through uncharted space. The Shield World watched on patiently,

preparing to welcome its visitors in memorable fashion. This fight was finished, but their greatest journey awaited them yet.







YOU'VE LEARNT THE  
STORY OF HALO.  
SOLDIER, IT'S TIME  
YOU LEARNT IF YOU  
CAN SURVIVE HALO.

