

HALO ARRAY REUNION TOUR

DAVID CAMERON

Based on Halo 3 (2007)
Originally developed by Bungie Studios
Published by Microsoft Game Studios
Owned by Microsoft Corporation
Currently developed by 343 Industries

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

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 ODSTs, 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. Thel 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 supersoldier. 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 beeps 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 rhino-charged at John. Knowing a single touch from the *beserking* 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

wincing 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 kned 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 ODSTs 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 Arbiter-”

“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 sputtered 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.

WHLAM!

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 bugger'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, Thel '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.

HALO ARRAY – Reunion Tour

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 do 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 for 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 tunnelled 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 OOOOO WWW!

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. *CRRRAOOWW!* 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 position, 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 *my 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 ODS1 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 badassess 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

HALO ARRAY – Reunion Tour

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 ODS'T's. 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 ODST's 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 ODST's 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 ODSTs 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 ODSTs 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 ODST 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 ODSTs' 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 ODSTs 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 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 barreled 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 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 Mongooses 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. The Elite breathed steadily, unmoving as the Spartan stepped behind him.

“What is it?” John asked.

The Elite 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 sputtered 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 *Kiwis* 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.

Mendicant 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, eying 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.

“Envied 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 worthiest! 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.

“Aaaaaargh!”

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 ODST 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 Mgalegkolo 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 *laaady*.”

“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.

CRRAAA OOOO WWW!

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’t’ho 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 jetted 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 empty, 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 pummelling 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 The’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 aberrant 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

under-suit. 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 crystalised 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 pleasantly 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 barrelling 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. Gooley 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. *CRRRAAA000WW!* 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

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep...

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-OOOOOO-
AAAAAAHHH!!!”

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.

