

# HALO

## REVOLUTIONS

FAN ART AND FAN FICTION OF THE HALO UNIVERSE



VOLUME ONE

# HALO

- REVOLUTIONS -

*A gathering of talent*



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# **Productions**



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# The Revolution

## Starts Here...

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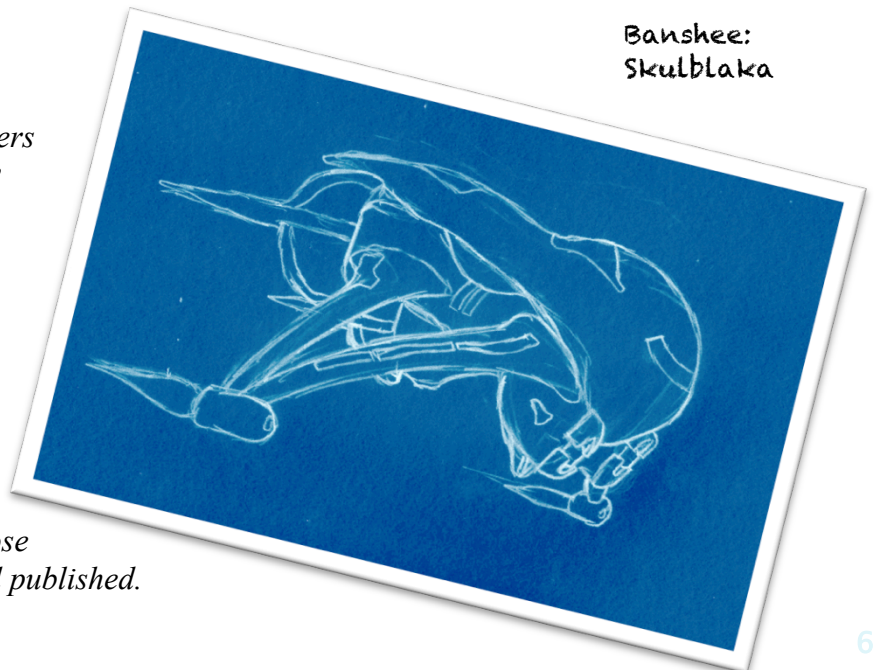
*FFF is a popular group of inspired writers who frequently contribute to the Gallery forum.*

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Banshee:  
Skulblaka

# FOREWORD

*By*

MAXREALFLUGEL

It is said that imitation is the finest form of flattery. And that's certainly true. But with Halo things are different. No one else has ever managed to reproduce the unique success of the FPS that changed it all. So if the gods allow, a few loyal fans have come together to emulate, in their own way, the wonder that is Halo.

Halo is a remarkable game, in any guise. It goes beyond the conventional with a crisp perspective on xenophobic attitudes to the archetype of humanity and its last stand. Some might disagree, but all I can say is this: "They obviously haven't played it yet".

Halo exhibits all the usual hallmarks of any great title: superb graphics, amazing game play, envious multiplayer arenas and an engrossing storyline. But it's mainly the latter that entices me to return again and again. But as most of us have discovered, the games only scratch the surface of a much bigger plot.

Eric Nylund was the first to explore this surreptitious realm of back-story with *The Fall of Reach* and he did so with a grace that few can rival, which is probably why he's the main literary outlet for Bungie's golden egg. It paved the way for the trilogy by filling us in on the arduous selection process and training that each Spartan-II went through. He provided the required background for some of the greatest heroes ever known and how most of them, ultimately, made the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of humanity. Then Reach fell under the might of the Covenant war machine and we embarked upon a journey that would change the gaming industry, as we know it. Afterwards, when the dust had apparently settled, Nylund gave us *First Strike* and *The Ghosts of Onyx*. But that wasn't the end of it. More novels followed, filling us in on the exploits of the much-loved Sgt Johnson and the whereabouts of the mysterious Grey Team and the events on Halo itself, and the terrifying nightmare that is the Flood.

Our last serving of Halo fiction was Halo: *Evolutions*, a tantalising snippet of what else has happened in the universe that we have come to love.

But we want more, don't we?

In a collaborative effort between three of the most popular and influential Fanfiction groups on B.net, we have managed to produce a document written by some of the best Fanfiction authors around. It features completely new stories to entice every reader, and accompanying them are some of the best unofficial pieces of Halo related artwork around.

So stop what you're doing, pull up a chair and turn the page, or scroll down.

Enjoy.



For most of us, here's where it all began...



# ESPENGENIN

---



**LONE WOLF**



**MASTER CHIEF & THE  
CHOSEN ONE**

# ABSCONDITUS

---

AJW

She looked out at the vast, beautiful landscape that faced her. The sun was high in the sky, shining down on the dewy green grass; its beauty reflected in the lakes - everywhere was vibrant and full of life. She lay down on her back, looking up at the clear blue sky. There were distinct swirling patterns of colour, growing larger and larger as every second passed, and then shrinking; abstract hues were shifting and morphing into different shapes... It was that moment that the gritty reality of this beautiful world hit the Librarian like a concrete wall.

The swirling patterns were not a thing of wonder; they were the sign of a war raging across the cosmos... Billions of her fellow Forerunners had been slaughtered; they had been on the receiving end of a fate worse than death. Perhaps worst of all - their seemingly eternal struggle was solitary.

From her pocket, the Librarian pulled out a small device and began tapping buttons; her final message:

*My work is done. The portal is inactive, and I've begun the burial measures. Soon there'll be nothing but sand and rock and normal ferrite signatures.*

*You should see the mountain that watches over it. A beautiful thing - a snow-capped sentinel. That's where I will spend what time is left to me.*

*Did I tell you? I built a garden. The earth is so rich. A seed falls and a tree sprouts, or a flower blooms. There's so much... potential. We knew this was a special place because of them, but unless you've been here, you can't know.*

*It's Eden.*

*I have to stop transmitting. The thing is listening. Its thinking dead are babbling - laughing through every channel they can find.*

*Be proud. The Mind claims victory, yet it still doesn't suspect. You've outwitted it, my love. And now you can destroy it.*

*But you cannot save me.*

// *FRAGMENT ENDS*

A solitary tear ran down the face of the Forerunner, in full knowledge of what was about to happen. This was the end of their Empire; the end of the Forerunner; the end for all life in the galaxy... But even as she wept for the fate that had engulfed her species, a single thought entered her mind.

*This was far from the end for her.*

\*

OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE PRIORITY MESSAGE

ENCRYPTION CODE: [THOUGH THE FIRE HAS GONE, A FLAME STILL BURNS]

From: [CODENAME: SURGEON]

To: [CODENAME: OVERSEER] / ONI operative, [SECTION ZERO], SZ Logistics Command  
(SecLogCom)

Subject: [Operation: ABSCONDITUS]

Classification: RESTRICTED (XXX-XD DIRECTIVE)

//LOG UNDER CLASSIFICATION OF ONI ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (ANDROMEDA)\

//Start file / decryption protocol enabled\

Overseer,

Recent events [2559, DISCOVERY EVENT] have had me engrossed in a constant battle with my own head to try and figure out what the Forerunners planned - what they planned for us. I can glimpse only a fleeting aspect of it; we have all seen the *sword* and the *shield*, but something's amiss. Or maybe I'm just getting paranoid?

Anyway, your crew's recent drilling expedition into [ABYSS-16] has lead to some interesting discoveries. Even the highest chain of our command could never have predicted the structures under the

[**PORTAL SITE**] to be so extensive, and we could be months away from finding what is actually down there. The AI [**FRAGMENT-O32 MB**] has been talking again; I have no doubt it's insane (or rampant), but its babbling poses some questions. Where is [**CHARLIE HOTEL**] when you need her?

It even managed to gain access to my personal files; all that was attached was a string of words:  
*Atonement... Atonement... Atonement...*

[**Codename: USUAL SUSPECTS**] suggests termination of the AI, but I'm arguing the case against him (*as you should too*). There's too much to learn; so much would be wasted if we were to lose this one. I look forward to exploring the ruin myself next month. Xenothoretic analysis teams are already working on how everything links together, and I'm recommending this project for further funds. This is big, but you're going to be treading on a lot of important toes for this project, maybe even Parangosky...

*Tread damn lightly, Overseer.*

P.S. Next time, send some damn pictures!

//END\\

The Portal Artefact on Earth was one of the greatest mysteries that Earth held. It appeared as a colossal dish-like structure, with fourteen large metal monoliths spread around its circumference. It stretched for approximately one hundred and twenty kilometres; since it had been unearthed it was visible from orbit.

Humanity had only recently learned of its existence; during the Great War against the Covenant, one of the Hierarchs of the alien coalition had stumbled upon Earth and - having learned humans resided on the planet - proceeded to transmit the planets' coordinates to their homeworld (a colossal space station that served as the Covenant's base of operations, known as High Charity). However, the Hierarch then fled from Earth (its destination being another Halo Ring), before one of the other Hierarch's (the Prophet of Truth) sent his fleet to the human planet. The metropolitan city of New Mombasa in Kenya, East Africa was occupied by Covenant forces, and the process of Glassing began almost immediately - but this was unlike any other planet the Covenant had hit in their long genosidal campaign of the human race.

The Prophet of Truth (*de-facto* leader of the Covenant after two of the three Hierarchs were killed) dedicated the majority of his forces just east of Voi - a town one hundred and forty kilometres away from New Mombasa. On November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2552, the Prophet of Truth himself entered the fray; he arrived in a Forerunner Dreadnaught and smashed through Earth's home fleet. By this time, the Artefact had been fully uncovered, with Truth proceeding to land the Dreadnaught in the centre of it. Powered by the engines of the ancient vessel, a veil of darkness began to fall over Voi as the weather conditions hit extreme levels, and - after accumulating enough power - activated the Artifact.

The Portal led to a bastion of the Forerunners, a superstructure *outside* of the Milky Way galaxy



called *the Ark*. The Ark was a safe haven, a shelter from the activation of the Halo Rings that would wipe out all life capable of sustaining the Flood super-cell in the galaxy.

At the end of the Human/Covenant war, the Portal closed and was believed to be dormant. But yet it still was drawing power from an unknown energy source; this was something that the Office of Naval Intelligence had considerable interest in, and they had quickly begun hiring xenoarchaeologists to dig into the structure, under the watchful eye of one of their Section Zero agents: *CODENAME: Overseer*.

\*

**2034 HOURS, OCTOBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2559 (UNSC MILITARY CALENDAR) \ ARTEFACT SITE,  
KENYA, EARTH**

The Overseer stood on the edge of a great cliff, observing the final moments of sunset as the sky turned from a crisp crimson-orange to dark blue. His thoughts were gone with the wind; faded were the worries of what horror might come the next day that he had experienced for over two and a half decades. Now, finally, was a time for peace.

Recently, after many years, he had observed the stars through his grandfather's telescope. It was a primitive method of gazing at the universe, but it had been a way to pass the time. One thing that he'd taken notice of was that Mars was brighter than usual - as the civilizations before them used to say, the signs of an oncoming war...

*No*, a voice in the Overseer's mind said decisively. *Not now, not after all that we've lost.*

*But really?* Spoke another voice. *The Elites chose to pursue the scattered remnants of the Covenant when we severed ties, and they've not been doing very well. We could be dragged into this conflict.*

*We owe nothing to the Elites*, the Overseer thought with gritted teeth. *They were one of the main causes of over twenty three billion human deaths.*

But he knew that was not really true; the Elites had caused all those deaths, but without the schism causing them to change sides, the human race would most certainly have been wiped out. The ONI agent found it very difficult to accept that the Elites, the aliens who had nearly destroyed his race, were their saviours. An ironic oddity, indeed.

The Overseer felt ashamed that he had done little of any importance during the war; *I never risked my life to save others*. The war had caught everyone off-guard with its brutal beginning and he'd found himself out of his depth. He hated that he could be seen as a coward for his actions (or *lack of*) during humanity's desperate struggle; instead he had left it up to the top brass to send the troops into battle and die. *That was my contribution to the war.*

Even so, he felt some satisfaction in being the head of the ABSCONDITUS Project, something that might have him do something positive for the future of humanity. As it turned out, the Artefact was even *bigger* than they had originally imagined; a series of interlinked tunnels (akin to a labyrinth) winded their way far down into the Earth.

There was a sudden buzzing from behind. The Overseer turned around and saw a UH-144 Falcon gunship gliding on the night sky towards him, its twin rotors beginning to slow as the transport vehicle locked its altitude to his level. A man jumped out and hobbled over to greet the Overseer; his dark brown hair was stood on end as a result of the Falcon's rotors. The man clutched at his coat with both hands but still managed to snap a crisp salute to his superior.

"At ease, Lieutenant," the Overseer barked. "News?"

"Professor Sorvad's team have hit the big one, sir. A new set of catacombs have been unlocked, we're preparing to send a team through, and Spartans are *en route*."

*Spartans?* The Overseer thought to himself. *It must be important.* One thing was certain; this was going to be interesting.

"Something I'm not being told, Lieutenant?" he asked, trying to wheedle the answers out of the man; *not that I expect a grunt like him to know much.*

"Nothing I know about, sir," the Lieutenant replied sternly, clearly detesting his own lack of knowledge as much as his superior. "Section Zero's top brass is deploying Team Rapier to accompany you. They're either concerned for what you'll find down there, or concerned for you."

"Would it be too much to hope for the latter?" The Overseer chuckled; he knew that ONI did not give a damn about him as long as he delivered what they wanted. *I am the means to an end, for once,* he thought to himself, the irony readily apparent. *I am the tool, rather than the one who uses it.*

"We had better get moving, sir," the Lieutenant said, frustration obviously rising up within him; *discovery takes patience.* "We don't want to keep Professor Sorvad waiting."

\*

## **2119 HOURS, OCTOBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2559 (UNSC MILITARY CALENDAR) \ ARTEFACT ATRIUM, SORVAD'S LAB, EARTH**

Professor Sára Sorvad's lab was kept immaculately clean; there were organised shelves of rock, granite and Forerunner alloy samples; desks with neatly stacked piles of paper, letters from ONI, and her close-to-overheating laptop. The floor was made of marble; the crew of Project: ABSCONDITUS had spent time setting up the place as their new home.

Sára was the daughter of Professor Laszlo Sorvad, one of Doctor Catherine Halsey's leading xen archaeologists who took part in her research project on the planet Reach. His discovery of the Forerunner Latchkey Monument had been a central event that helped change the course of the Human/Covenant war in 2552, but he had met an unfortunate end when a group of Elite Zealots had infiltrated Visegrad's Relay Station and killed him.

*I watched him die... That video feed still haunts my dreams.*

Sára never spoke to others about her father, but his work kept her motivated for every challenge, giving her a strong resolve. She kept a small golden locket that her father had given to her in her pocket at all times. But sometimes the locket only served to remind her of the emotional pain of his death.

The Overseer knocked on the door to the lab and opened it, regardless of whether Sára was happy with his entry. She was seated at her desk, filing papers and hammering in commands on her laptop at the same time, a mug of stone cold coffee resting on a coaster.

"Professor Sorvad," the Overseer greeted, trying to keep up the facade of being cheerful.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice, Overseer," Sorvad replied, not turning to him, but sweeping back her jet black hair from her face. *"I'll csak lenni pillanat."*

Luckily, the Overseer understood Hungarian; she'd said that she'd just be a minute. It was a habit of hers to reply to others in her native tongue, either to tease or because she wasn't aware she was doing it; she appreciated having the Overseer as her boss because he put up with it. *Begrudgingly*, he thought.

"Professor," a light female, but unmistakably electronic, voice began. The artificial intelligence's holographic avatar appeared - a kind looking young woman with stormy grey eyes, a pearly white toga and a single grey owl perched on her shoulder. "Team Rapier have just touched down on Pad 4, and are ready for your orders."

"Thank you, Athena," Sorvad replied. "Are you ready for transit?"

"Confirmed," the AI, named Athena, stated. "All systems are prepared, transferring to data chip... now."

Athena's face fell a little, almost as if she was disappointed at having to leave her current position. She was coming up on the end of her seven year period of effectiveness, and AIs often built up emotion and feelings after such a long time. Rampancy was always a risk, and the Overseer was concerned that it would soon be necessary to terminate Athena. *Such a shame*, he thought to himself. *She is very good at what she does. She's been with us from the beginning; I guess she's always known the end.*

*Wow, I have started calling her 'she'.*

Sára tapped a few controls on her laptop, and there was a low hiss as Athena's avatar vanished. Sorvad pulled out a small data crystal chip and pocketed it, packing up her laptop in a small bag.

“Let’s go meet our Spartans,” Professor Sorvad said, a curious hint of sadness in her tone when she uttered the word “Spartans”.

*Ah*, the Overseer thought, as he realised the cause of her sadness. *Noble Team...Reach...*

\*

The Spartans stood tall in their MJOLNIR Mark VI armoured suits, their faces hidden behind deeply polarised gold-coloured visors that separated them from the rest of humanity - they were born warriors. Each of them saluted, one (clearly the leader) stepped forward.

“Team Rapier reporting for duty, sir.” The Spartan spoke confidently, his voice deep with a slight growl to it. His helmet was aesthetically similar to the SPI variants worn by Spartan-IIIs (of which the “top secret” files had *somehow* made their way into the Overseer’s hands after the death of Colonel James Ackerson); from what the Overseer had gathered, Team Rapier was a splinter division of Gamma Company.

“What’s your name, soldier?” the Overseer asked, only mildly interested and curious - as he always was with Spartans.

“Seth, sir, Spartan G043,” he replied concisely. “This is Miranda, Rapier 2; Arthur and David, 3 and 4.”

The other three Spartans wore different helmets; it was clear that they had all been given liberties to show themselves off. In some respects, it was a shame that the war was over; they really did look menacing, and it was a shame that their military potential was being wasted. Miranda sported a Recon helmet, and looked ready for a fight; she was looking around for any signs of hostility (as her years of training had drilled into her bones). Arthur’s head featured a HAZOP (colloquially abbreviated from: HAZard OPerability) variant, whilst David wore a Commando helmet. Each of them looked extremely imposing and intimidating, sending shivers down the Overseer’s spine as he pondered the things they were capable of doing. *And the things that they have done...*

Professor Sorvad walked up to Team Rapier’s leader and presented him with Athena’s data chip. The Spartan held out his large hand and took the chip.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he nodded to her, inserting the chip in a slot on the back of his helmet, before turning to the Overseer. “We’re ready whenever you are, sir.”

“Athena has control over our electronics; she’ll keep our systems online for us, keep us all updated and provide directions.” Sorvad stated.

“How’re we getting there?” Miranda asked quizzically.

*Forgot the ‘sir’,* the Overseer thought irritably. *I may not be military, but I’m still their damn superior!*



“We have three Warthogs stationed here, we can use those to navigate through the tunnel,” the ONI agent said.

“We’ll split up,” Seth informed his squad. “I assume they’ve got weapons?”

“Gauss cannons and M41s are at your disposal. The Professor and I will be taking the Transport Hog.”

“I’d like to inspect the vehicles before we leave,” Arthur requested. “I need to check that they’re all up to optimum capability.”

“Very well,” the Overseer said with a hint of annoyance in his tone; he couldn’t appreciate the military indoctrination that these Spartans had been through since they were children. *I never went through it myself. I never risked myself...* “Whenever you’re ready.”

\*

## **2200 HOURS, OCTOBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2559 (UNSC MILITARY CALENDAR) \ ARTEFACT INTERIOR, TUNNEL 4C, EARTH**

The Warthogs trundled along a never-ending path leading deeper into the Artefact’s tunnels - a network of which Athena had plotted a path through. There was very little in the way of lights, but the Overseer and Sára were wearing their specialized ONI visors; they featured a polarised blue visor that stretched across the eyes and displayed tactical information about the area. It was known as the Visual Intelligence System, and had been created as a prototype for use by Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, but ONI had taken a liking to the technology and had funded the development of a line of customized versions for their agents.

It was not very comfortable to be sat in the cramped passenger seat whilst the steering wheel turned itself (as Athena controlled it), but Sára didn’t seem to care as she was constantly peering at her notebook and laptop screen - scrawling down notes with her pen.

The members of Team Rapier were very silent during the ride. It was likely that they were using their own private TEAMCOM channels to communicate - the Overseer was sure he had seen Miranda brush her hand over the side of her helmet, around the area of her COM link, several times. He wondered what they were talking about, but felt annoyed that they had been cleared to talk behind his back.

“Overseer,” Athena’s soothing synthetic voice spoke. “I am detecting a superstructure several kilometres north of this location; it is likely a main chamber, as it is also several thousand feet below our current location.”

Sára was hammering the keys on her laptop; she had a typing speed of 110 WPM - not quite of

Halsey's standard, but the Overseer could still have mistaken it for machine gun fire.

"Yes, it seems so. But we may run into Forerunner defences on the way," Sára drummed her lower lip, speaking to herself more than anyone. "What happens from now is just theory and guesswork."

*Thump!*

The Overseer nearly lurched out of the Warthog's seat; he had never been more grateful for seat belts in his life. But something distant had caused the very ground to shudder; the light on Sára's laptop began to fade and the screen went blank.

"What the hell was that?" The Overseer asked, his breathing rate increasing, turning his head around to see Team Rapier behind them in two separate Warthogs.

"Alert, our presence has been compromised," Athena stated.

"Compromised?" Seth questioned, confused. "Compromised by what?"

The Overseer saw Miranda swivel the Gauss Turret around; she was trying to get a glimpse at what had caught them.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." Arthur groaned.

"Sir, eyes ahead," David announced suddenly. He highlighted a waypoint on their heads up display, pointing towards a blinding white light moving towards them. Their visors polarised to their maximum tint, but it was still nearly blinding.

"What is that?" Sorvad asked incredulously; *not so intelligent now, are you professor?*

*Thump!*

The ground shook violently beneath them, threatening to toss the Warthogs into the air like tennis balls. The Overseer gripped his chair tightly, knuckles turning a ghostly white, as the fear rose within him like a cold explosion.

"I don't like this," Seth growled. "Is there an alternate path?"

"Negative, Rapier 1. Our course is absolute, no alternate routes available," Athena replied concisely.

The light shimmered like a curtain of energy, almost blissful; white and gold iridescence moved like swirls from a paintbrush around an orb of divinity. The Overseer thought he could hear it sing, the call of an angel... it was so beautiful, so stunning, so... *cold*.

The brightness began to fade, as the singing stopped. Seven additional shafts of pearly white energy began to glow hot around the light's diameter; *it's charging up...*

"It's a beam..." Sára whispered to herself, not fully comprehending the significance of that fact. The Overseer, fortunately, did.

"Oh my God," he breathed. "Scatter! Now!"

The light exploded; a massive bolt of energy shot past the Overseer's Warthog and collided with the wall beside them. The heat was intense. Fires began burning slowly as another charged beam hit the ceiling

above, sending chunks of rock and Forerunner alloy raining upon them. The Overseer's senses were under assault. The deadly column of energy blinded him; the explosions overwhelmed his ears. He felt his heart rate jump to light speed, hammering against his rib cage like a jackhammer, as the adrenalin began pumping through him.

Seth activated his VISR and scanned the outline of their attacker. The Overseer quickly followed suit.

It was colossal, similar to a Covenant Scarab but ten times as big and infinitely more menacing. *It looks like a... tank*, the Overseer thought; *a Forerunner Tank*. It was shaped like a scorpion; the energy weapon had been fired from the 'mouth' of it and the 'tail' was now jabbing at the walls around it. The tank's heavily armoured 'claws' were snapping as it moved backwards at an incredible speed.

*Some kind of defensive measure*, the Overseer hypothesised. *But defending what?*

"We can't fight that thing!" Sára shouted over the COM, as Miranda opened fire with the Gauss Cannon. But the Overseer knew that it would not dent the giant weapons platform.

"Why is it attacking us?" David asked. "I thought that these constructs identified humans as Reclaimers."

"That's restricted information," the Overseer scolded the Spartan; he had had enough of the genetically engineered soldiers knowing everything they shouldn't; *how do they do it?* He was amazed at their capabilities. However, he often found them rather disconcerting. But now was not the time for anger.

"Spartan-III Gamma Company received a chemical cocktail that augmented the frontal lobe of the brain. The 009762-OO compound enhances aggression to animalistic-like levels...." Athena stated, in her characteristically matter-of-fact manner.

"Which means that you would all be identified as an aboriginal sub-species of humans by these Forerunner constructs," Sára finished Athena's sentence for her.

"Alert!" the AI warned suddenly. "Three hundred meters ahead is a break in the path; our foe is more devious than I imagined. We are cornered."

That final sentence sent sharp shivers running down the Overseers spine; *it's going to obliterate us...*

"We're gonna have to jump it," Seth barked.

"Are you *insane?*" The Overseer roared in shock; *what kind of leader is he? He's going to get us killed!*

"We've got no choice, sir."

He couldn't think. A mental barrier had stopped his brain from processing anything. They could risk the jump and let fate decide whether they live or die, or they could stand and fight for their lives against the military might of the Forerunner Empire. The Overseer could not fool himself; *we would be absolutely annihilated.*

As much as he hated to admit it, the roughish Spartan was right; *for once.*

“All right, Spartan,” the Overseer growled. “We’ll do it your way, but if I die down here, I’ll kill you!”

They braced themselves; Sára clutched at the golden locket and closed her eyes. Her appearance was quite calm. The Overseer himself tightened his grip on the hard Warthog chair, preparing for the worst.

Suddenly, there was another flash of white light; the Overseer felt his blood run cold as the air was sucked out of his lungs with an obnoxious *bang!*

There was nothing... just darkness.

\*

**2342 HOURS, OCTOBER 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2559 (UNSC MILITARY CALENDAR) \ CORE ROOM ANTECHAMBER, *ABSCONDITUS*, EARTH**

The Overseer’s eyes jerked open. His head throbbed, and he tasted blood on the tip of his tongue; *never a good sign*. He could smell burning, and could feel flames flicker and dance around him; *nor is that*. He pulled himself up and shook his head, trying to clear his senses, but felt his heart sink as he saw a body slumped on the floor, broken and stationary, wearing thick MJOLNIR armour.

He was momentarily shocked into silence. *She is dead*, he thought in horror. Due to his paper pushing during the war, he had never actually seen a dead body; *just one more thing that singles me out from a species tortured by war*.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Seth said quietly, jolting the Overseer out of his deep train of thoughts. “Not all of us made the landing.”

“You call that a landing?” The Overseer was beside himself; it was Seth’s fault that they had lost someone. But he couldn’t help but feel pity for the Spartans.

Seth was down on his knees next to Miranda’s lifeless body. He scowled in rage at the Overseer, but bit back a response and returned to look at his fallen comrade. That was another thing the Overseer knew nothing of; *war time brotherhood*.

Miranda was covered in blood; a head-sized chunk of her torso had been blasted off completely, and her innards were exposed. The Overseer noticed that Seth had turned off his COM; he was sure that the Spartan was weeping. *He loved her*, the Overseer thought, intrigued. But this kind of love was only be attained through the trust of a military unit, especially one as small and close-knit as Rapier. A strange feeling arose with the Overseer, and it took him a moment to realise what it was; *envy*.

“*Sajnálom*, I’m sorry...” Sára whispered, echoing the words said to her by another Spartan after her father had been killed.



Seth and Sára held a silent vigil. Arthur was the only other Spartan to survive - David had vanished without a trace, but considering what had happened to Miranda, the Overseer concluded, with little concern or sympathy, that his body was likely vaporized.

Seth held her helmet in his hands, he replayed the recording of what had happened.

//PLAY\\

The Warthog was barreling through the tunnels, fires blazing everywhere. Miranda screamed as the vehicle was launched through the air, she launched herself off the back of the turret and landed on the Forerunner Tank's hull.

"David!" She called to her comrade. She held out her hand as the other Spartan sprung from his Warthog, but disaster had struck.

The Tank's energy projector had charged up, Miranda felt David's hand slip from hers and he fell - the beam firing at the same time.

"NO!" Miranda screamed. David's vitals flatlined as he was blasted into a million chunks of flesh.

There was only one option left, the scaled down MFDD system integrated into her armour's failsafe systems. She tore off the front part of her MJOLNIR chest piece and tapped in a command on a small pad, twenty seconds and counting...

She did this for the mission, for the team, for the fallen...

10... 9... 8... 7...

Quite content with her fate, she was flung off the front of the Tank and fell down for what seemed to be forever. But it was warm; heat swept over her and filled her senses.

*BOOM!*

**//... VIDEO FEED CUT OFF, UNEXPECTED ERROR. PLEASE RECALIBRATE SYSTEM DRIVE.\\**

"Spartans never die," Arthur said, his voice breaking, as he placed a reassuring hand on Seth's shoulder. He then pulled up the roster for Team Rapier, selecting Miranda and David from the list and marking them as MIA. *Spartan's never die*, the Overseer repeated in his head. The irony was apparent to him; *they* always *die*.

"Now we carry on," the Overseer said eagerly.

For a moment, no one said anything. Seth took one last look at the crumpled shape of Miranda, before turning back to the Overseer.

"Affirmative, sir," Seth said, his voice quieter than usual. "Rapier 3, let's move."

They walked on in silence, each of them lamenting the deaths that had occurred from out of nowhere. The Overseer didn't particularly get on with Spartans, but he couldn't help but feel a wave of empathy for the surviving members of Team Rapier when he saw Miranda's mutilated remains. That did not mean that

he cared much for her however, or that he would sacrifice the success of the mission to save more lives.

The Tank had been an unforeseen complication, but that did not change the fact that whatever Forerunner secrets were locked away within the facility, ONI needed them. *I need them*, he thought. *I need answers... With such heavy defences, this has got to be big.*

The Forerunner corridors were identical; if it were not for Professor Sorvad and Athena guiding them through the catacombs, the Overseer had no doubt that they would be hopelessly lost. After passing through another set of huge, elaborately carved doors, the group finally emerged onto a glass catwalk; it extended upwards for about a hundred feet and broke off into a circular platform - a control console at the end. Around them were over a hundred flying robotic constructs: Sentinels. Unlike the Forerunner Tank, these guardians were not shooting at them.

*Yet*, the Overseer reminded himself. *Let's see how long that lasts with trigger happy, vengeful Spartans among us.*

He then noticed that they were not the standard installation Sentinels that could be found tending to the Halo rings and the Ark; instead they were spherical, and featured a single red eye with three booms rotating in a clockwise direction. The Overseer remembered reading the reports on the battle above the planet Onyx; the Sentinels had combined together and taken out half a Covenant fleet. The thought of being in the presence of things that could have him disintegrated on the spot was particularly unnerving... *But*, the Overseer reminded himself once more, *I am also surrounded by battle-ready Spartans.*

The enormous chamber was spherical with silver-tinted walls. Large power conduits provided adequate illumination, as rocks jutted out of the strange alloy. It was eerie; all that could be heard was a low humming and the whirring of ancient machinery. *So much happened here*, he thought in awe. *And so much more is about to.*

Making their way to the control console, the Spartans seemed especially keen to keep their weapons poised in preparation for any kind of hostility the Sentinels showed. *Typical over-aggressiveness brought on by unnecessary genetic augmentation.*

The unlikely group reached the control console. A blue globe rotated slowly in the centre, between two holographic screens; both showed quickly scrolling numbers and strange glyphs that were completely alien to the Overseer - and yet strangely familiar from a time long past. The Overseer immediately felt his hand stretching out, a voice whispering in the back of his head like a persistent parasite. He couldn't make out the words, but he could tell that they were egging him on to touch the console, encouraging him at a subconscious level. *And yet I'm aware of what's happening*, he realised. *But I can't stop it. Genetic memory?*

Sára saw the Overseer's hand almost an inch away from the sphere, and slapped it away.

"You have no idea what will happen if you touch that," she said.

The Overseer ignored her; he was absent from this world, and stared into the rotating sphere, trying

harder to understand the voices. He felt a terrible sadness and terror that transcended millennia; he could see strange alien children crying as a colossal city stood ablaze.

*“The apex of our Empire -”*

*“Lost all hope!”*

*“Cannot be stopped! He’s going to fire -”*

*“Our last line of defence -”*

*“Abandoned us! The Mantle -”*

Sára looked at the Overseer, her brow raised in worry. Seth spoke: “Sir, if you’re going to press that, you do it with humanity’s best interest at heart - not your own curiosity.”

*I take orders from Spartans now, do I? The Overseer chuckled in his mind. This is my chance to do something... This is it...*

The Overseer pressed his hand onto the console. Instantly the blue globe began to spin, holographic hexagons lighting up like beacons in the darkness- each featuring a different Forerunner glyph. The sphere began to rise upwards, pulsing for a second, before expanding dozens of times over; before the Overseer’s eyes, it morphed into a holographic view of the Earth.

“Now *that’s* not what I expected,” Sára exhaled. The dozens of glyphs moved across the holographic surface of the Earth, before each one finally came to a halt over a different location. Her eyes widened in shock. “That’s *really* not what I expected...”

“What is it, ma’am?” Arthur asked incredulously.

“Look, that’s where we are now,” Sára pointed at Kenya on the holographic atlas. “It looks as if this isn’t the only ancient structure below the surface of the Earth; there are dozens, no, *hundreds* hidden around the world... Egypt, Rome, China,” she crossed them off with her fingers. “Istanbul, India, San Francisco, England, Athens, Bermuda, Easter Island, Antarctica...”

“*Ah*,” a wave of realisation washed over the Overseer’s face; *this is it*, he thought with exultation. *This is what we have been searching for all these years. All of the secrets of the Forerunners will be at those locations...*

“Exactly, look! These are all historic monuments, the wonders of the world: The Great Pyramid of Giza; Stonehenge; the Taj Mahal; the Vatican...”

“They are all monuments to the Forerunners,” grinned the Overseer; *finally. Finally!* “This is where it all began. Word must have spread amongst primitive human cultures, passing down through generations as religion and prophecy - of a race of gods that visited us. The story must have changed through the ages, forming new religions based on the events of when their race inhabited Earth.”

“I wouldn’t say that the Forerunner *inhabited* this planet,” Sára mused. “No, I think that it lies in our genetic memory - we are the inheritors of their Mantle.”

*Of course.*

“Their what?” Seth asked.

“The Mantle,” Sára replied. “A rough interpretation would be *‘the guardian of life’*, or - as their glyphs show - *‘Reclaimer’*.”

*This information... it could answer all of our questions*, the Overseer thought. *The truth behind our origins, behind the nature of the Forerunners and the Halo rings. The secrets of the universe...*

“ONI needs to see all of this,” the Overseer stated matter-of-factly. “We need to get SURGEON down here.”

The hologram of Earth suddenly faded; its pulsing blue light shrinking as it returned to being a small rotating globe.

“Sir, I need that map back up,” Sára said, irritated by its disappearance.

The Overseer pressed his hand onto it again, but nothing happened for a second. *What the...* Suddenly, a deep rumbling sounded all around them; for a moment he thought that he’d summoned the Forerunner Tank back to them, but after looking at the walls around him he realised what was happening. *Oh my God...*

An immense shockwave rippled throughout the cavern, sending the group crashing hard to the floor.

“The cave is collapsing!” Arthur roared.

“No,” Sára groaned as she pulled herself to her feet. She pointed to the walls that encompassed the chamber. “It’s *opening*.”

This was indeed the case; the walls around them were shifting, separating from each other and revealing a bright white light shining through the cracks. The Overseer could not believe his eyes. They raised their arms to cover their eyes, shielding themselves from the blindness - which began to pierce the chamber like a dagger.

After a few moments, the walls were fully separated, revealing a colossal stone statue in their place. The statue had the form of a woman’s face; her eyes were closed, her face expressionless. Unlike the strange metallic material the entire cavern was made of, the statue was made of rock - perhaps even carved into the crust of the Earth itself. A glyph was visibly engraved on her forehead; it seemed to be comprised of an outer circle - that broke apart at the top and bottom - and curved in to form a line that angled and twisted in different shapes. The Overseer recognised this as the Iris glyph; *but what does it mean?*

“Spooks are gonna love this,” Seth muttered; *too true*. “This rock has been perfectly preserved for over a hundred thousand years.”

There was little time to ogle the ancient rock, for something below them was stirring. They peered over the edge and saw a stone platform ascending upwards; they all exchanged uncertain looks and drew back.

At last, the stone platform reached the glass catwalk. In the centre of the platform's dais was a tall stone archway; it looked so ancient that it amazed the Overseer it was still standing (by the fact that it was completely solitary; it wasn't even supported by a wall). It was however cracked and crumbling, barely withstanding as a result of the test of time. Words were carved around the edges; the glyphs made no sense however.

"Athena, translate," Sára ordered.

"That which must be protected behind the sharpened edge of the shield... Beyond the reach of the swords for the Reclaimers."

"What does that mean?" Seth pondered aggressively, demanding answers. *He isn't the only one.*

"It sounds like a reference to the Halo rings," Sára replied. "And the Shield Worlds."

*That's classified, Sorvad,* the Overseer thought, annoyed.

The Overseer then noticed something much more advanced than rock underneath the archway. It looked similar to a cryogenic stasis pod; it was shaped like a tube but featured angular edges and a flat surface at the bottom. The front of the tube was comprised of a clear glass window, but whoever was occupying it was not visible; a silvery veil of energy shimmered like a layer of water within.

"What is that?" Arthur questioned.

"I have no idea," the Overseer lied; *I know exactly what it is, and it's what we have been searching for all this time. Finally, answers are at our finger tips.* "We need to find some way to get it open."

Before anyone could object, the screen of Sára's laptop, which had been thrown to the floor during the shockwave, activated and began bleeping a red alert signal.

"This could be problematic..." Sára sighed, as she knelt down and began to hammer away commands on the keypad.

"What is it?" the Overseer asked, as a black hole of dread opening within his gut.

"*Végbélsár!*" Sára ran her hands through her hair. The Overseer was surprised; she rarely ever swore - only when she was put under considerable stress. "The Artefact just went active! The portal is opening. The whole of Mombasa is experiencing a technological blackout; it's drawing power from the city."

"We need to get to the surface *now*," Seth advised sternly.

"What?" the Overseer growled in response. "We can't leave! This place holds the answers that we have looked for since the dawn of time! We cannot just abandon all of this knowledge!"

Before the Spartan could object, a high-pitched *hiss* sounded from the pod. *It's opening*, the Overseer realised. *It's opening! We can finally speak to one of them.* An overwhelming surge of excitement radiated within the Overseer; a broad smile spread across his face. He wanted to laugh in the faces of those accompanying him. This was *too* good.

The slip space pod began to exhale a strange mist that covered the floor, pouring out of tiny slits in

the metal. Suddenly a blast of energy shot down from the ceiling and slammed into the pod; blue lightning began to fork out from the pod and strike the walls around the chamber. The door of the pod began to open.

*Exactly like last time...* Thought the Overseer, but as his smile grew wider, he felt a twinge of doubt unfurl within him. *Have I doomed us all?*

“Detecting multiple unidentified objects in transit through slipspace,” Athena reported.

Sára turned her laptop to face the rest of the group; the screen showed a view from orbit of their location. The portal hung over the Artefact like a gaping black maw, and small slipspace ruptures were blinking into existence from the abyss.

*What’s behind that?* The Overseer thought.

“Multiple contacts have breached our defences, strike teams are on alert.” Athena stated; her tone remaining cold and calculating. “Alert: this chamber is about to play host to a very large number of Sentinels.”

Suddenly an object emerged from the portal. It was shaped like a tetrahedron, with a triangularly formed prow which was connected to three other identical struts jutting out the belly of the immense ship.

*A Forerunner Dreadnaught*, the Overseer realised with horror. *A Keyship*.

“Lateral weapons are charging, all ground forces brace for bombardment. Contacts confirmed as Forerunner.”

“But they’re dead!” Arthur pointed out, annoyed and confused. “They’ve been gone for a hundred thousand years!”

*“A mere fairytale, child. We are Forerunner; we do not die, even when faced with extinction. Time has taught us patience; time has taught us how to survive. We live inside you, now - from the ashes of the past - the remnants of the Forerunner rise again.”*

The voice soothed from behind them. It was eerie, like a ghost’s voice transcending generations. They all spun around instantly, to find themselves staring at something that no human ever thought that they would see. The Overseer could not believe his eyes; *finally*, he thought in stunned awe. *Finally we meet*.

A female Forerunner stood before them. She wore an odd helmet; it slightly resembled that of the late MJOLNIR design, but was much more curved with a single visor shaped like an oval. The Forerunner was wearing a long red robe that covered the left side of her body, protected by grey-blue coloured plating that was clearly body armour.

“Who are you?” The Overseer demanded, although he already knew the answer. *That was one very valuable thing the Arbiter had told him*.

“Warning, Forerunner sites on all continents are now active. We are under siege,” Athena said, her tone now worried - concerned for her couriers. “Brace for immediate impact across this sector.”

The Overseer repeated those words inside his head; *we are under siege. What have I done?*



The Forerunner turned to face the humans, body posture suggesting a deep sadness; *our first meeting could have been under better circumstances.*

*“I? I am the Librarian, and this - child - is but the start of the end of all things, for those who have trespassed upon Eden are not your friends. You stand on the brink of destruction now; an entire fleet is advancing on your planet as we speak.”*

Sorvad spoke: “Athena has just decrypted a repeating string of Glyphs.”

A harsh dark metallic voice rung throughout the chamber, the Librarian stiffened at the sound of it.

*“We are coming...”*

As it spoke, dozens of Sentinels began to rocket towards the exits of the control room. They combined, forming a ring, and began to charge their weapons. The Overseer noted the similarity between the ring of Sentinels and the Halo rings; *the Halo’s destroy all life in the galaxy, and these Sentinels are supposed to make that happen.* The Librarian grabbed a tall, thin metal staff from the pod. The Spartans instantly drew their MA37 assault rifles, handing the Overseer and Sára both an M6G handgun.

*“We are coming...”*

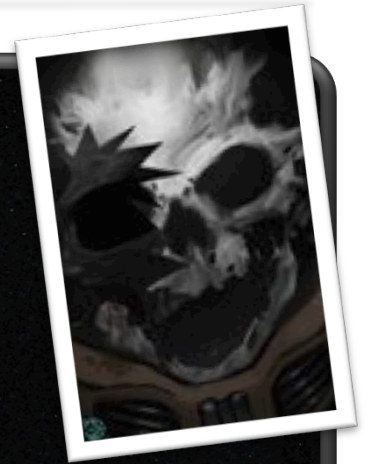
“Looks like we’re fighting our way out,” Seth groaned, the time for questions would come later. “As always.”

The Librarian readied herself in a combat stance; all around them the golden beams of the Sentinels charging beams illuminated the huge chamber. Fearing there was no way out, the humans made a silent vow to go out fighting. Gathering up their resolve, readying their weapons... They charged.

*“We are coming... back!”*

# GRAPHIC ARTIST

AIR FORCE HERO



Based on original works, AFH likes to add his own touch of magic to spice things up a little.

(Above), a unique view of the UNSC colony we have all come to love, Reach.

(Left), the soon to be ubiquitous UNSC Falcon.

# MISS ISABELLA

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## DECEPTION COBRA



UNSC St. Anthony of Padua  
Tuesday, February 21st, 2539  
En-route via Slipspace departing from Planet Adamo V

**[I am Dr. Hou Tou Tzu, one of many psychologists stationed here on the UNSC St. Anthony of Padua, a medical frigate formerly docked at the luxury world of Adamo V. Recently, I have been assigned to give psychiatric care to an orphaned 5-year old girl named Sophia Santiago under the orders of the Office of Naval Intelligence operatives stationed on the ship. She was found wandering into the base camp of a squad of Marines during the second day of battle on Adamo V against the Covenant. During the evacuation of the planet the following day, she was transferred to the St. Anthony. As of now, Adamo V has been glassed by the Covenant. This child has no home, no family, and is in a traumatized state due to her ordeal. I will do my best to give her the help she needs, but I fear I may be too late.]**

**Sophia, can you describe to me what happened to you back on Adamo?**

Me and my mommy and daddy lived in a town called Deco[1]. I woke up and got out of bed. It was Monday and it was a holiday with no school and my parent's didn't have to work. That made me happy. Mommy brushed my hair in the living room and daddy made breakfast for us. After breakfast, mommy told me she would take me shopping and the park. Daddy said he would have to go to work really quickly to get something important, but would join us at the park near the big garden[2].

Then everything went bad. Me and mommy were walking to the place where the stores were, but I heard people screaming. Everyone was looking into the sky, so I did too. I saw things that looked like a big silver fish[3] hovering everywhere. Mommy picked me up and she started to run, I asked her what was happening, but she didn't say anything. Something dropped from one of those fishy ships and it made a sound like

**[Sophia imitates the descending WHOOSHING sound of a Covenant Orbital Insertion Pod, the Covenant's answer to UNSC HEV Pods.]**

It landed in front of my mommy and we stared at it. It opened up and out came this monster that had a big mouth that opened into four parts[4]. It was colored red and was bigger than my mommy. The monster roared and grabbed something metal on its leg. When it shook it's hand down a white, glowing sword[5] came out of the thing. My mommy screamed and tried to run away, but the monster got her. She dropped me and told me to run away as fast as I could...

**[Sophia begins to cry]**

**Sophia, I think that is enough for today, we can talk again tomorrow if that's okay.**

No, I'm okay \*sniffles\* I just don't like to remember mommy...

**[struggles to say the word]**

...die. When I was running away, I could hear many more people screaming and crying and more monsters roar. I wanted to go home, but I was lost. In the sky I could see the spaceships shoot purple light at the buildings. Everything started to blow up around me. I was so scared and didn't know what to do, so I hid in a trash can and closed my eyes.

**Do you remember anything while in the trash can?**

Just people screaming and the monsters talking to each other. I didn't look because they were so close. They spoke in weird languages, some sounded like little dogs barking, birds chirping, and some even went "Wort, wort, wort!"[6]

**How long were you in the trash for?**

I don't know, I always asked an adult for time since we didn't learn how to tell time in kindergarten yet.

**When you got out, what did you see?**

Everything was blown up and dirty. A lot of buildings were on fire or gone, it was hard to breathe with all the smoke in the air. When I saw that the monsters were gone, I got out of the trash and saw that it was dark. I walked in the streets by myself afraid that the monsters would get me. I didn't know how to get home, I couldn't find any adults, and I was hearing all the monsters guns make weird noises. My daddy had a gun at home; it didn't sound anything like what I heard.

**Where did you end up going?**

I saw a toy store that wasn't ruined, so I went in it. The door was gone and that made it easy to get in. A big pile of stuffed animals looked comfy, so I went to sleep in them.

**You slept in the stuffed animals?**

I put them on me so the monsters couldn't see me if they came by. They were so warm and fuzzy and made me feel safe. But it was hard to go to bed because of the noise outside, but I closed my eyes and I fell asleep. I had a nightmare, I dreamed the monster that killed my mommy, the Big Mouth, pulled me out from the dolls and started to eat me. I woke up after that.

## **What happened to you after you woke up?**

I heard shooting outside the toy store; it was the aliens shooting at the army soldiers. The Big Mouths were now being followed by aliens who looked like monkeys with giant backpacks[7], big birds with blue and yellow shields[8], and giant wormy aliens[9]. They all shot blue and green blobs at the soldiers who used guns like my daddy had. I didn't want to get hurt, so I stayed in the store and laid down on my belly. I could hear the soldiers and aliens die as they were fighting each other. The fighting stopped when the soldiers had to run away. I could see them run from the aliens while the wormy aliens shot big green lasers at the soldiers

## **How did you get out of the store?**

When I saw the last alien go away, I ran out of the toy store. I still didn't know where to go and I only went in any direction I could. Everything I remembered was gone, all the stores and restaurants and parks, they weren't there anymore. After awhile, I just stopped running and fell down. I started to cry and yell for my mommy and daddy. I yelled and kicked and screamed for everything to be better again. Then, I saw it. It was a big, hairy, ugly monster that looked like a gorilla[10]. The new monster was sniffing around when it saw me and ran towards me roaring like a lion. I wanted to run, but couldn't, so I screamed for help.

## **Who helped you?**

Out of nowhere I saw a green person[11] jump over me and towards the monster. I'd never seen something like that before, it looked like a knight my daddy read about in my bedtime stories. The green knight got in front of the monster, jumped up and kicked the monster in the face. The Gorilla moved back, but roared again and ran towards the knight. The knight raised up his gun, it looked like my daddies "AR".[12]. The Gorilla fell on its knees and laid down. It didn't get up. I knew I was safe, but I was still crying. The knight came up to me and he picked me up, but I heard a woman's voice tell me,

"Everything is fine now, you're safe."

## **Did you know who she was?**

### **[Sophia shakes her head]**

I didn't know what she was, but she told me her name was Isabella zero-four-nine, but I could call her Miss Isabella. Miss Isabella was so big in her green armor that she looked like one of those wrestlers my daddy watched on TV. But she had a voice that reminded me of my mommy's and that made me feel safe.



## **What did Miss Isabella do after telling you that you were safe?**

She carried me all around the city. I could still hear the soldiers and aliens fighting each other, but in Miss Isabella's arms it was alright. For awhile, everything was quiet. I think I fell asleep again, but Miss Isabella woke me up when I couldn't feel her holding me anymore. Now I was on the ground and she was walking to a jeep with a big gun on it[13] that was turned over.

What she did next was amazing. Miss Isabella picked up the jeep and flipped it over. I didn't know she was that strong. When the jeep turned on Miss Isabella told me to get in. I didn't want to because it didn't have a seatbelt, but she said it would be okay and I wouldn't get in trouble. She had to help me get in the jeep because it was so big and there weren't any doors for me to climb on.

## **Where were you going?**

Miss Isabella said that she was going to take me to a place where I would be safe and could get off of the planet. We were heading towards the mountains when a purple alien airplane[14] started to shoot at the jeep. Miss Isabella started to go faster and faster and was telling me we would be okay, but I was so scared. The jeep was starting to wobble now and Miss Isabella told me to crawl over to her. I did and she grabbed me and jumped out of the jeep. After she did that, the alien airplane fired a big green laser that destroyed the jeep and flew away.

I was happy Miss Isabella didn't fall because if she did I think she would have squished me like a bug. Miss Isabella looked at the jeep and said a bad word. She then asked me if I didn't mind walking for awhile, I told her I didn't. We walked along the dirt road and I started to skip and pick up rocks to throw, Miss Isabella just walked with her gun in her hands.

I was bored, so I asked her some things. I asked her where her home was, where her mommy and daddy were, if she had any brothers and sisters, what was her favorite food and so many questions. She said "I don't remember"; for everything. That was weird. I asked her why. She told me...

"I was told that I was called to serve and protect Earth and all her colonies and that was my only purpose. Everything else isn't important."

I didn't understand, so I kept skipping along to wherever Miss Isabella was taking me.

## **Did anything happen along the way to where you were going?**

**[Sophia is hesitant to talk and looks down to the floor]**

I heard a humming noise coming from behind us and saw that Miss Isabella was watching it. She started to run and picked me up when she got near me. I looked up to the sky and saw a big purple horseshoe[15] coming towards us. Miss Isabella started to run faster and faster, but the horseshoe ship was catching up. Suddenly, it started to shoot at us. It fired the same lasers as the purple airplane, but Miss Isabella was able to dodge it. She fired her gun at the horseshoe, but it didn't do anything.

Miss Isabella spotted a small farm, so we ran inside while the aliens ship followed us. She told me to hide inside while she took care of the aliens. I ran inside the barn, but I peeked outside through the doors.

The ship landed and I saw two red and one golden Big Mouths come out with the Monkey aliens with backpacks. They shot first with their green and blue lasers while Miss Isabella ran everywhere and shot them with her gun. One of the monkeys threw a blue ball at her[16], but she rolled away and killed it. The other Monkeys started to run away, but the Big Mouths killed them before they could run off. Now it was three Big Mouths and Miss Isabella. One pulled out a shiny sword and tried to stab Miss Isabella, but she moved away and punched it in the face. It moved back, but she grabbed its throat and did something to it to make the Big Mouth fall down. The gold Big Mouth pointed at Miss Isabella and the only other red Big Mouth ran at her with a gun that shot pink needles[17].

A lot of needles hit Miss Isabella's leg and it blew up. When the Big Mouth got closer, she kept shooting at it until a blue light came off[18] of it and it died. The gold Big Mouth started to walk over to her and pulled out its white sword. I saw Miss Isabella point her gun at the Big Mouth, but no bullets came out. I don't know why, but I ran out of the barn and said,

"LEAVE MISS ISABELLA ALONE!"

The Big Mouth now looked at me and walked to me now. I couldn't move. It got closer and closer, until I saw it stop. It stood over me and looked at me with its yellow eyes. The Big Mouth raised its sword, but I heard popping noises. The monster fell down and I saw Miss Isabella on her stomach with the needle gun in her hands pointed at the Big Mouth. I ran over to her hoping she was okay, but she wasn't. Her leg was gone and she was bleeding a lot. I cried as she lay down on the ground. Suddenly, I felt her hand grab my arm. I looked at her and saw that she was taking off her helmet.

Miss Isabella was pretty. She didn't have any hair, she must have gotten a bad haircut, but her face reminded me of my mommy's. Her skin was as white as the paper I use at school and she had with brown eyes. I was still crying when she smiled and said,

"Don't worry, everything will be fine".

Miss Isabella took something off her helmet and gave it to me. It was a little disc that she

said was very important. She told me that when I find help, I had to give it to someone who knows Dr. Halsey. I didn't want to leave her, but she made me leave. I asked her where I had to go so she told me to just go towards the mountains and I'll find soldiers who can help me. After she said that, she closed her eyes.

### **When you met the Marines, how did they react to your presence?**

I just walked into the tents and asked for help. Some of the soldiers ran towards me and asked me if I was okay or if I wanted water or food. They then asked me a lot of questions about who I was and how I got here, so I told them everything. One of the soldiers in a black suit[19] who said his name was Scott asked for the disc Miss Isabella gave me and I gave it to him. He said he would get this to Doctor Halsey and let me stay in their camp and told me that they would put me on the next evacuation ship they could. Now I'm here.

### **How do you feel now that you're safe and sound?**

I don't know, happy I guess, but still sad. I'm also mad at the monsters, why did they do everything they did? It isn't fair; we never did anything to them, so why do they hurt us?

### **Do you have anything else you want to share Sophia?**

No, can I go now?

**Yes, thank you Sophia. But remember, you can come talk to me if you have anything on your mind; you know where to find me.**

### **POST-SESSION EVALUATION**

**[After my session with Sophia, I have determined that her mind is stable mentally, but I don't think she will be the same little girl that she once was. How she will develop later on in life is a mystery. I can only recommend that she be put into good hands when she is put up for adoption. What Sophia needs now is a family, a family of people who can provide her with safety and love. This case has also raised emotions in myself. I've interviewed civilians and soldiers who have given me equally startling recollections of their encounters with the Covenant, but something about hearing the same events play out from a child's perspective breaks my heart. I can only wish her the best.]**

**UPDATE: Since my last session with Sophia, she and the ten other children evacuated from Oasis V have been reported missing throughout the St. Anthony. Curiously, the ONI agents who ordered me to interview Sophia have also disappeared. This occurred three weeks ago and at that time we had broken Slipspace near the gas giant Blish in the Epsilon Eridani System. Common sense tells me that the ONI agents have taken the children for a**

**specific reason, however, I do not know what it is. Allegedly, one of the agents said that homes for the children have been found and they are being transferred over to them. Something doesn't feel right though, I have a feeling it's far deeper than that.**

## **Description Key**

**[1] Deco was the capitol city of Adamo V.**

**[2] Deco was famous for its large botanical garden's in the city's resort district.**

**[3] Covenant Assault Carriers, often compared as sharks or fish by UNSC and civilian survivors of the war.**

**[4] Covenant Sangheili, or Elite, referred to as Big Mouths by Sophia.**

**[5] Covenant Type-1 Energy Sword**

**[6] "Wort, wort, wort", a common phrase uttered by Covenant Elites in combat, it is unknown what it means.**

**[7] Covenant Unggoy, or Grunt, referred to as Monkeys by Sophia.**

**[8] Covenant Kig-Yar, or Jackal, Isabella does not encounter them except for once in her account.**

**[9] Covenant Lekgolo, or Hunter, referred to as Worms by Sophia.**

**[10] Covenant Jiralhanae, or Brute, referred to as Gorillas by Sophia.**

**[11] Spartan-II Commando, a genetically modified super-soldier initially used to combat the Insurrectionist movement, but effectively combated the Covenant during the war.**

**[12] AR refers to any form of the MA assault rifle series both used by civilian or the UNSC. It's possible Isabella-049 was using an MA5B Assault Rifle.**

**[13] M12 Light Reconnaissance Vehicle or Warthog.**

**[14] Type-26 Ground Support Aircraft or Banshee.**

**[15] Type-52 Troop Transport or Spirit.**

**[16] Type-1 Antipersonnel Grenade or Plasma Grenade**

**[17] Type-33 Guided Munitions Launcher or Needler.**

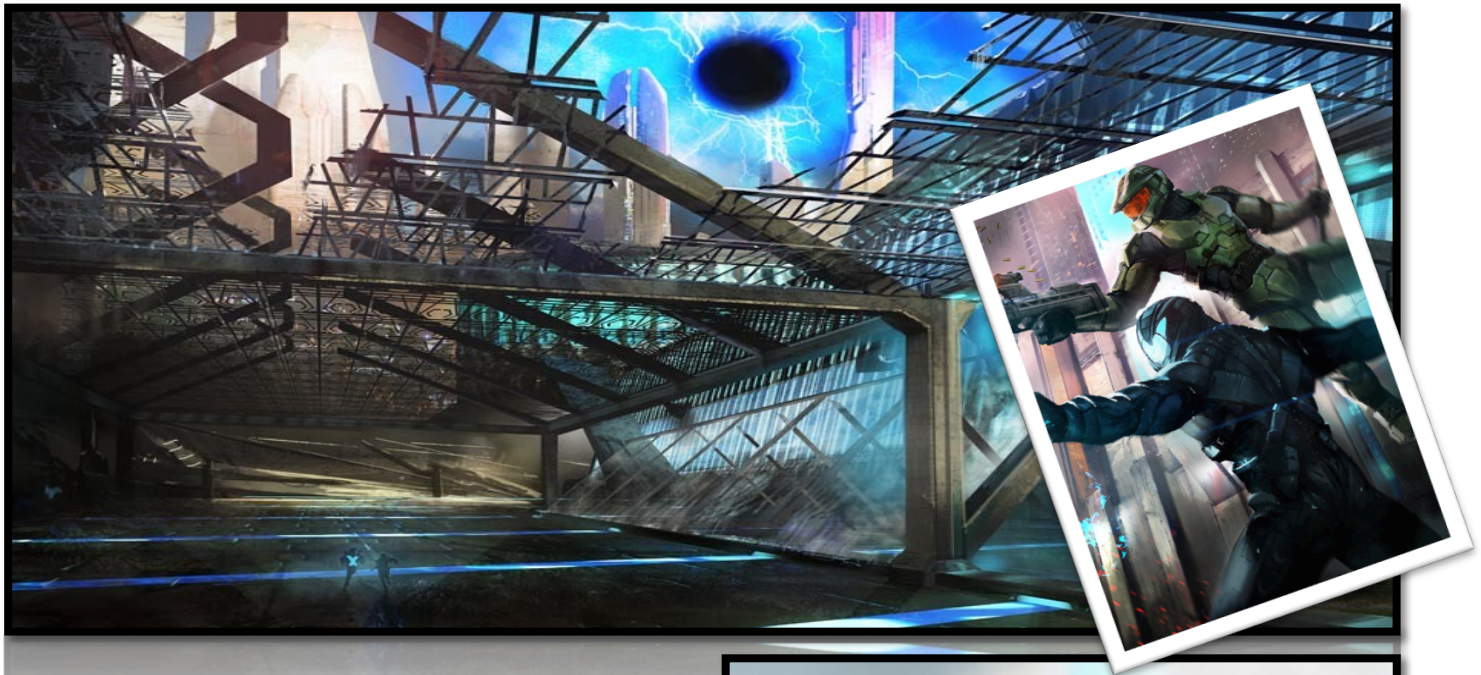
**[18] Covenant Energy Shielding**

**[19] Orbital Drop Shock Trooper**



# CONCEPT ARTIST

ESPENGENIN



**ESPEN**, a fan from the crisp, clean vistas of Norway, lives and breathes Halo, but he also draws it.

Despite being completely self-taught, Espen has managed to produce some truly remarkable work, even going as far as to explain the possible fate of the Master Chief – post Halo 3.

His style is bright, colourful and vivid, and yet restrained. Providing all who look upon his work – in true Bungie-esque style – with just enough scenery and detail to push their imagination over the edge.





# INCURSIO

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## SKULBLAKA

The alarm rang through the usually quiet UNSC ship signalling that something was happening. Shane pushed himself out of his small bed, as did the five other people he shared this room with. They went through the procedures before. Be ready or risk your superiors punishing you.

*All combat personal to their stations immediately,* the captain's voice could be heard throughout the ship and Shane stopped to listen, *the Covenant have found Reach, I repeat the Covenant have found Reach, this is not a drill, everyone get ready now.*

'The Covenant can't be here, can they?' asked Jason, a Longsword pilot just like Shane. Fear was clear in his voice. Shane was shaken as well; he had assumed that the alarm being sounded was just another drill.

'They were going to find Reach sooner or later,' replied another man, a marine Sergeant named Peter. He was usually a very calm person; his calmness reassured Jason like it reassured several others before.

'Cut the chatter,' ordered Paul. He was in command of a Longsword squad, 'If the Covenant did find Reach here we need to be ready.'

No one else said a word as the men prepared for a possible battle with the covenant. Shane then noticed that Jason hadn't moved and sat on the bunk beside him.

'You ok?' asked Shane.

'I have family on Reach, the Covenant will glass them, just like-' Jason sounded frantic but he was cut off by Paul.

'Calm down pilot,' ordered the flight leader, 'we'll kick the Covenant out of Reach, you hear me? Just like Sigma Octanus'

Jason nodded and finally got up, off the bed and began to dress into his pilot gear. It was only a few minutes before everyone was ready and Shane and his fellow pilots were on the way to the ship's hanger and their Longsword interceptors that awaited them there.

Most of the crew of the ship were up and moving to their stations. Some looked frightened and pale, as if they had just seen a ghost while others appeared calm and relaxed as if they been ready for this moment for years.

*The Covenant fleet is preparing at the systems edge. Everyone be ready for imminent attack,* this time it was the ships AI, Washington, that spoke.

The AI's words spurred the pilots into a run and they quickly rounded a corner and entered the armoury. Marines crowded the weapon racks looking for any gun they could get their hands on. Their officers were attempting to control them but their words fell on deaf ears as the marines fought for weapons. The only soldiers that were obeying orders were the elite ODSTs who stood with their CO in a corner, already armed with their weapon of choice, a silenced sub machine gun.

Shane pushed through the crowds of marines and grabbed an M6D pistol, the optimal choice of a gun for pilots in case they had to fight on the ground if they crashed or were forced to land.

Going through the armoury was the fastest way to the hanger from the sleeping quarters. Now however it appeared to be as much a challenge to get out as it was to get in; marines attempting to get their hands on weapons blocked both exits. After a few minutes pushing however Shane made it out and was followed shortly by Paul and Jason. A quick sprint brought them to the hanger where their Longswords waited.

The ships captain was present in the hanger, overseeing the preparation of three Shiva nuclear weapons. He looked up and saw Shane. He motioned Shane over.

‘Try not to crash your Longsword this time Lieutenant, the UNSCs strapped for cash right now and it would be a shame if we can't get marines to rescue you again’ said Captain O'Donovan as a grin appeared on his face.

‘Sir, yes Sir,’ answered Shane who was now grinning along with the Captain. ‘I promise not to fly too close to a Covenant Corvette this time.’

‘Good to hear, now get to your ship,’ replied the Captain who went back to work with the three Shiva missiles.

Shane walked to his Longsword which was turned to face the hanger exit. He climbed up the ladder that descended from the side of the small ship and made his way into the cockpit. His helmet lay, as it always did, on the joystick just in front of the seat in the Longsword. He put the helmet on over his head and tightened it. The heads up display was projected on the visor and in the top right hand corner, a small timer was counting down.

He had just over three minutes to get ready. He quickly went back in his Longsword to find twenty mines ready for release when he needed them. The timer reached two minutes so Shane decided to strap himself into the seat. He powered up the engine awaiting launch.

Finally the clock went down to thirty seconds, the hanger door began to open and the ships five Longswords were ready for take off. The clock hit 00:00 and Shane pushed the throttle forward to thirty percent, optimal take off throttle for a Longsword. The interceptor shot forward along with the four others and it took just half a second to reach the exit into space.

Paul's voice sounded over the short range radio, *Switch to long range radar. The Covenant fleet is still far out but we don't want to be caught by surprise if they send any of their Seraphs forward ahead of the fleet.*

Shane switched to long range radar and saw a flight path appear on his map screen. He switched the flight controls to auto pilot and looked out over the planet Reach. The UNSC fleet was mobilising in front of the planet and Shane could make out the vague, small shapes of a heavy orbital MAC gun, or magnetic accelerator cannon, a small distance to the left of the fleet. Shane knew Reach had twenty of these huge weapons in orbit around the planet and that each of these guns could destroy a Covenant carrier with one hit.

Most large UNSC ships were also fitted with smaller versions of the MAC gun. The ship sized MACs were not as powerful as their gigantic counter-parts but they still could do some serious damage to any Covenant ship.

The autopilot brought the Longsword in beside the UNSC Destroyer they launched from, the *Fire and Forget*. The other four pilots had clearly switched to autopilot also as their ships were all in a perfect V formation behind Paul's Longsword.

A quick glance at the radar showed that there was still ten thousand kilometres to the UNSC rally point. Shane estimated it at around fifteen minutes, enough time for him to analyse the Covenant forces. His radar showed over three hundred Covenant ships, usually each ship would carry around ten Seraphs, which meant that there could be up to three thousand Seraph fighters. In comparison there were only around one hundred UNSC ships, and many of these didn't carry Longsword fighters. The UNSC was outnumbered in every possible way.

Time passed quickly and soon Shane could see the assembled UNSC fleet near Reach. The huge Super Carrier, the *Trafalgar* lay at the heart of the fleet along with three gigantic mobile repair and refit stations.

*Longsword flight delta*, Captain O'Donovan spoke over the comm channel, *I'm sending out four Pelican dropships, make sure you escort them to the planet's surface in one piece. It's too early for*

*unnecessary losses, over.*

*Understood Captain, changing course now,* replied Paul.

Shane's HUD changed as a new waypoint appeared on his heads up display. He took manual control of the interceptor and moved forward to overtake the *Fire and Forget*, the outline of the Pelicans appeared against the darkness of space as Delta flight approached the troop carrying ships. He manoeuvred beside one of the Pelicans and looked over the vehicle. It was a standard Pelican equipped with two .50 calibre machine guns on either wing.

The six Longswords and four pelicans hurtled through the dark vacuum of space and towards the fast closing planet Reach. They were forced to drop their speeds as they approached the UNSC fleet. A quick blast of the forward facing thrusters was enough to slow Shane's Longsword to a safe speed. He didn't want to smash into the side of one of the UNSC's cruisers like another Longsword pilot did during the second battle of Harvest over twenty years ago.

They passed through the assembled UNSC fleet, even coming close to the three giant refit stations and the heart of the UNSC fleet at Reach, the *Trafalgar*. The ship was easily the biggest combat ship assembled however the refit stations, which would be used as shields for the Covenant's opening salvo, were much bigger.

Now that he was closer to the planet, Shane was able to make out the giant orbital MAC guns that orbited Reach. All twenty were prepped and ready for the Covenant fleet once it got within firing range. Any one of these guns could easily destroy almost any ship in the Covenant fleet with one well aimed shot.

Several Longswords were flying away from the planet, some having just taken off and others coming back from escort missions with Pelicans. More Pelicans were flying towards the planet however many of these were not bring soldiers to the surface as many marines were needed to defend ships in case of Covenant boarding parties.

*Thanks for the help Delta flight,* said one of the Pelican pilots over the comm channel, *we've got it from here.* With that the six Longswords broke formation with the Pelicans and turned to head back to the fleet. Suddenly Shane's Longsword spun to the left as the MAC gun fired a shot. The shot passed closely to Shane's Longsword but luckily it didn't hit. He regained control of the small ship and continued towards the now raging battle.

Twenty Covenant ships had been disintegrated by the twenty slugs sent at near light speed from the Orbital MAC Guns. Soon after four UNSC nuclear mines detonated and destroyed several small frigates and destroyers.

The Covenant didn't start as well. The first salvo of Covenant torpedoes however never reached

their target as the three giant refit stations went across the front of the UNSC fleet, absorbing the plasma that pounded into them, ultimately destroying them but sparing several UNSC ships that returned fire and destroyed several more Covenant ships as a second salvo rang out from the MAC guns.

His HUD indicated that it would be another five minutes until they reached the battle and in Shane's experience battles were won and lost in five minutes. Suddenly a bright flash came from the battling ships as five UNSC ships detonated. The source of the destruction was a huge Covenant ship easily twice the size of the *Trafalgar*. It seemed to have some sort of plasma weapon that could reach speeds close to light speed, meaning no UNSC ship could evade.

Many large Covenant ships attempted to break through the UNSC ships but failed. However several Seraphs managed to get through and these were now advancing on Reach. Shane armed his ships AGSM missiles and prepared to lock them onto the Seraphs once they got closer. He counted over thirty Seraphs on his radar, too much for Delta flight alone but twelve other Longswords had joined them and had locked onto the enemy.

Soon the Seraphs entered firing range and eighteen missiles, from the Longswords, soared to meet them. Fourteen missiles hit and destroyed their targets as the UNSC vessels prepared to launch another salvo, however this time the Seraphs launched first sending sixteen plasma missiles towards the Longswords.

Shane broke off and launched his flares, as did most of the other pilots; however three Longswords remained on course and fired their remaining three missiles each at the Seraphs. Seconds after launching their missiles the Plasma struck, burning through the cockpit and causing the interceptors to disintegrate.

Two other Longswords were hit by plasma as their flares didn't affect the missiles. One was hit in the wing but was able to continue on, however the other was hit in the engine and detonated immediately. Four Longswords for twenty one Seraphs, not a bag trade off Shane thought.

The remaining nine Seraphs broke away from the fight however the Longswords, who were faster than the Seraphs, followed them and slowly killed each one. By the time they had finished the Covenant fleet had retreated away from the battle, leaving a meagre forty UNSC ships behind.

*Delta flight, you need to hear this,* said Paul who then played a recording over the COM channel; *there are thousands of them. Grunts, Jackals and their warrior Elites.* Static broke through the transmission. *They have tanks and fliers. Christ, they've breached the perimeter. Fall back! Fall back! If anyone can hear this: the Covenant are groundside. Massing near the armoury... they're-*, the COM channel cackled and the transmission ended.

Shane listened momentarily confused but after a few seconds the numb realisation that the

Covenant had invaded the planet's surface kicked in after a few seconds. He spun his Longsword around and pushed the throttle forward in one motion, bringing him towards Reach at the Longsword's top speed.

All the Longswords that were with Shane during the short battle against the Seraphs just moments ago were now flying straight for Reach, however they were scattered over a few miles and in no formation, making them an easy target for any group of Covenant fighters. Shane saw Jason's Longsword pass him, clearly wishing to stop all possible danger to his family on the planet.

Shane pressed a button on his dash board in front of him and a holographic, 3-D copy of Reach popped up in front of him. He looked at it and saw several covenant dropships marked at both poles.

'The Covenant are attacking from the poles,' he shouted into the comm channel, 'If we hurry we can destroy some of the dropships before they reach any cities.'

*The Covenant aren't going for cities, another pilot responded, they are going for the MAC gun generators.*

By then the Longswords were a few hundred kilometres apart and several more had joined them, including what he assumed was a Sabre, a top secret, two pilot fighter that was shaped like an old space shuttle. Shane was now just less than one thousand kilometres to the North Pole of the planet and he began to pick up several targets on his radar. Many of these were Spirit dropships that were taking off after deploying Covenant infantry and vehicles, others however were still full of infantry, these were the ones he planned to attack.

He got a missile lock on a dropship two kilometres away and fired, a few seconds later he was satisfied as the blip of the dropship disappeared off his radar. Suddenly two Banshees flew past him, not however before they poured plasma over his ship. He opened up with the one hundred and ten millimetre cannon and quickly ripped both out of the air.

Shane quickly turned his Longsword to see several hundred Banshees behind him. He looked at his radar to see nothing and assumed that the first two Banshees must have hit something vital. Shane knew he couldn't take on that many Banshees at once but they were still out of firing range. He fired two missiles into the group and again increased throttle while turning his interceptor. He hoped that as the Banshees were so close together, the missiles could take down multiple targets each.

*To any available fighters or bombers, this is vice admiral Whitcomb, Orbital MAC generator three is about to be overrun, Charlie company is defending it there but they have taken heavy losses. We need anyone to clear away some of the Covenant forces.*

*This is Delta flight leader, we read you admiral, can you give us coordinates?* asked Paul.

*I'm uploading them now.* A new target appeared on Shane's semi-functioning radar and he saw it was very close to his current position.



Shane, you and me are the closest to it, lets go kill some Covenant, said Paul, it will be danger close for Charlie company but I'm sure it's a lot safer than all the Covenant armour around them.

Shane lowered the throttle as he neared his target. He gained altitude as he approached the generator and soon later Paul's Longsword was there with him. As he neared the target he dived, as did Paul who let loose two guided missiles at the Covenant forces.

Shane's missiles however would not lock and he had only another few seconds left before he had to pull out of the dive. He loosed four unguided missiles and was horrified at the results. The first missile hit the Covenant side of the battle field, doing extensive damage to the forces there, the other three missiles however changed direction on the way down and hurtled towards the human side of the field, hitting and erasing almost all the marines lives.

The battlefield was quiet, all the Covenant forces had been wiped out and it appeared that all the Human forces had been killed too. Shane pulled out of the dive but didn't change direction for another few minutes, both interceptors rapidly gaining altitude. The COM remained silent for a few minutes until Paul whispered, *what have you done?*

The two Longswords continued on an unchanged course until the space a few kilometres ahead was ripped open and a Covenant frigate slipped through. The frigate was unmoving for a number of seconds but very soon life seemed to spring back into the ship as its bay doors opened and several Seraph and Sprit ships flew out. As the fighters and dropships exited the first frigate two more slipped in, flanking it.

Shane saw Paul change course and head for the Seraph fighters and followed suit. He tried to lock his one remaining missile on a target but failed so instead opened up with his cannon. A Seraph ahead was ripped apart as the .50 calibre bullets tore through its hull. Paul on the other hand had a much easier job; he had four more missiles than Shane's Longsword as he swapped out the moray space mines for them.

The first corvette fired its plasma missiles as a UNSC Cruiser fired its MAC at another corvette, the first round taking down the shields and the next two sending it spinning out of control. The plasma missiles weren't aimed at the UNSC ship though, they were aimed at two Orbital MAC guns which were taken out of space and rendered useless on impact of the missiles. Seconds later the two other frigates were annihilated as two Orbital MAC guns targeted them and fired.

Shane opened fire with his cannon as another Seraph flew past him, knocking down the shield and leaving it for Paul to finish off. The devastating events of a few minutes ago were now forgotten as the two pilots were absorbed by the fighting. Soon later all the Seraphs had been destroyed however the dropships were off Paul's working radar, free to deploy even more infantry against whatever remained of the human resistance.

The comm channel buzzed on and Shane could see it was a message from the *Fire and Forget*. *Delta flight, just one last objective, escort as many Pelicans as you can back to the ship. We're getting as many people as we can and leaving this system for Earth. You only have ten minutes before we have to go, the Covenant will overwhelm us soon. Get to any of the four designated ships on your radar as soon as possible. Good luck.*

*It was just a recording,* commented Paul, *we only have seven minutes left.*

'My radar's not working. Can't see any of the ships,' replied Shane.

*Just follow me and I'll get us back.*

Shane saw Paul turn towards space and moved his joystick in response to put him on course with Paul's Longsword. The accelerated out through the planets atmosphere and into the darkness of space beyond.

At that point most of the orbital MAC guns were down and out of the fight, all but one, which was surrounded by Covenant dropships yet, still boomed on, destroying Covenant ships as it went. A UNSC ship, the *Pillar of Autumn* was beside another MAC gun, clearly attempting to extract someone or something from the station.

Shane ignored these things as he concentrated on keeping in line with Paul. His fuel was dangerously low and he had a meagre twenty rounds for his cannons left, not enough to even take out a Seraph's shield. Another ship materialised in front of the two Longswords, this time a small Covenant Frigate. The ship ignored the small interceptors and accelerated towards Reach, ready to glass it with the other assembled ships.

Shane dared to look at his clock on his heads up display. Two minutes, twenty four seconds, it read and the interceptors had barely covered three quarters of the distance. Shane pushed forward on the throttle, using another valuable bit of fuel he would need for breaking, assuming they reached the ships in time.

A minute later, however, the first of the four small UNSC destroyers appeared. Shane let out a sigh of relief and once they were closer, he used the thrusters to slow down his Longsword. He approached the hull of the ship and a few hundred metres before he hit; he pulled back on the joystick and again activated his thrusters. Now in line with the hanger doors he watched as they opened enough for him to slip his Longsword in and, once inside, he carefully set down his interceptor.

The hanger door closed behind him and he felt the ship jolt as it moved forward and entered slipspace. Shane stepped out of his seat and walked to the back of his Longsword. The hatch was already open for him and the ladder down. He climbed down and stood at the bottom, looking around the hanger.

Only three of the six Longswords had made it back and even less Pelicans. He and Paul were the only two left in the hanger and exited as soon as possible and made their way to the bridge for debriefing. As

they went they noticed that most of the crew and surviving soldiers were making their way to the cryo rooms, where they would be frozen for the duration of the journey. Soon Shane and Paul arrived in the bridge.

Jason was already there, speaking with the Captain. He turned and passed them wordlessly as he too made his way towards the cryo room. The Captain motioned them to him as Jason left. Most of the ships bridge crew remained at station as the ship had no AI.

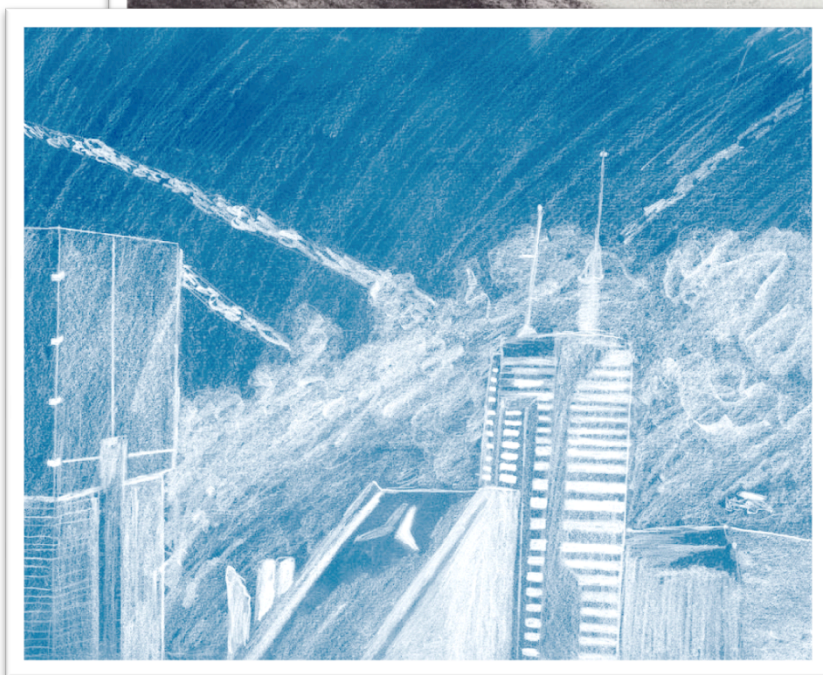
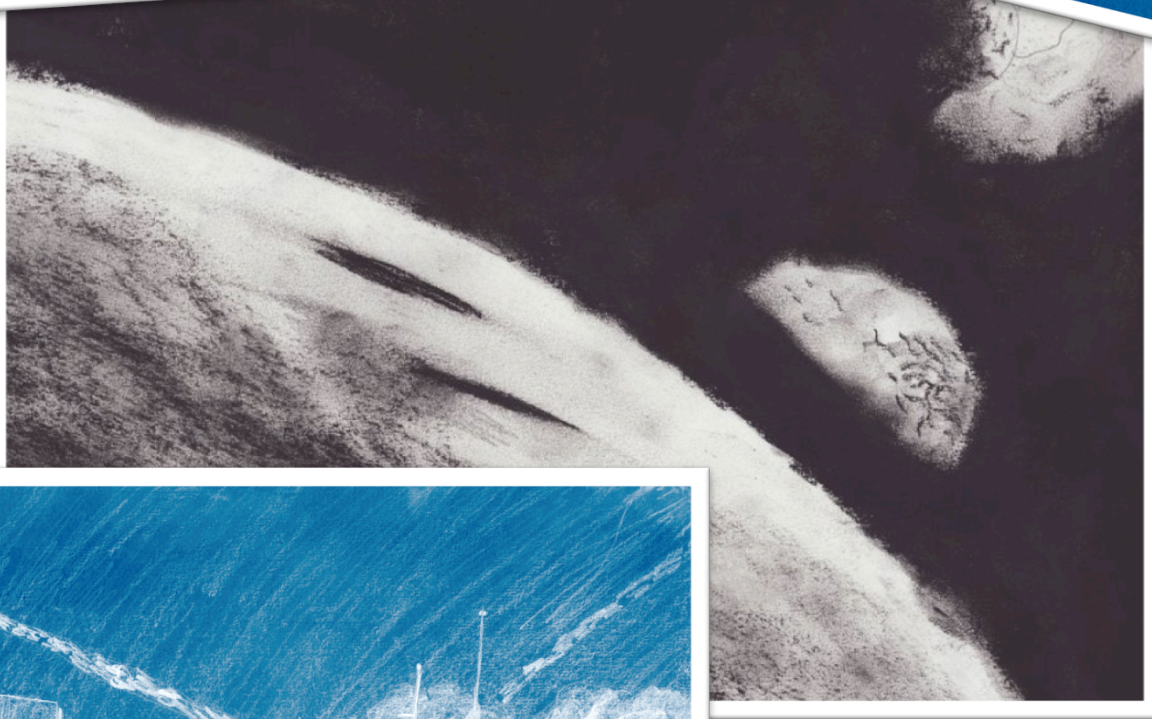
‘We’ve lost Reach, that we can be sure of,’ began the Captain, ‘we also lost many good soldiers and pilots out there today. The battle for Reach might last another few days, but realistically, we lost the planet. This was no victory but the fact that we can go back to Earth alive to fight the Covenant another day means something. We may have lost Reach but we will fight at Earth and we will win. Now go and get some rest. You’ll need it for the coming weeks.’

Shane and Paul saluted wordlessly and followed Jason to the cryo room. They arrived and Shane looked around at all the empty cryo pods, startled by how many didn’t make it. One of the empty pods was Peters, another friend the war had taken from him, thought Shane.

He walked down the rows and finally stopped at his open pod. He stepped in lazily and lay down in it. As the lid came down he sighed. It had been a long war and Shane knew it would be decided soon. They may have lost Reach but as the Captain said, they would fight and they would survive and ultimately win. Shane heard hissing and closed his eyes, seconds later he was frozen for the short journey back to Earth.

# ARTIST'S GALLERY

SKULBLAKA



*Skulblaka's* work may be hand drawn, but there is just as much character in each piece of work here as any Photoshopped image.

The central shot of Reach is particularly captivating. And threatening. Meanwhile (Left), New Mombasa is under siege by the Covenant.



## THREE BETRAYALS

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### MR EVIL 37

The Library, Installation 04, approximately 100,345 years after the initial activation of the Halo array.

The Library was dark; utterly pitch-black. The only illumination came from the blinking lights on the millions of computer servers that covered the walls. *No, the servers are the walls.* They contained the entire history of the known universe; every single fragment of data collected by the Forerunners during the height of their vast empire, along with all information gathered since by the instruments of their legacy.

343 Guilty Spark emerged out of the blackness, his silver, cuboid-like body blending in somewhat with the creeping shadows, while his brilliant blue eye illuminated the immense halls all around him. Spark began humming a long forgotten tune as he floated through the stale air, the tone of his voice light and high, as if he was bored.

*Of course I am bored,* he thought irritably. Ever since Spark had been created, more than a hundred thousand years ago, he had been the Monitor of Installation 04. His programming was to ensure that every single one of the millions of systems that made up the Installation were kept in constant working order. If any one of the systems lost functionality, the effectiveness of the Installation could be reduced. It was Spark's job to prevent this; no matter how small or large the reduction.

But he could only run so many efficiency diagnostics before becoming bored.

He continued humming, as he floated through the dank corridors on his journey through the Library. To give his processors a work out, and to stave off fatal boredom, the Monitor began to interface with all of the data servers around him. He sighed quietly, as he let the enormous amount of information wash over his subroutines, processing it faster than any computer system in all of known history. *Ah, the perks of being an artificial intelligence,* he thought with a light giggle.

After basking in the pleasure of processing the quadrillions of data files, he then began to sift through it all. He stripped away any data that did not relate directly to the Forerunners: *not relevant, and frankly, rather boring.*

His subroutines then scanned the data regarding the Forerunner civilisation; *nostalgia is such a wonderful thing*. Spark remembered how it was before the first outbreak, when the Forerunner Empire was at its peak. The technology, the art, the literature... everything had been so revolutionary, so advanced, so, thought provoking, so *beautiful*.

And yet as Spark regarded certain examples with an appreciative yet critical eye, he could not help but feel that something was missing from all of them; something he could not discern. They were too... conventional. Nothing in this archive would come to define the Forerunners legacy; that breakthrough would come later.

But this renaissance ended quickly, after the events on the planet G617 g1. A Forerunner pioneer group – *idiots! They did not adhere to proper containment protocols!* - Encountered the virulent parasitic life form that the greatest Empire in known history soon came to fear.

The Flood spread like a forest fire throughout the galaxy, consuming and converting all life in its path. The Forerunners put their vast military war machine up against the threat, but this only served to stem the flow of parasites for a short time. After a while, the Flood commanded entire fleets of the Forerunners own ships.

The greatest society in history was crumbling. Their naval tactics continuously failed. *Couldn't they see the stupidity of their plans? Couldn't they see their own complacency?* Guilty Spark could not comprehend how the Forerunners had failed to realise that there was only one solution until it was almost too late.

As a desperate measure, the Forerunners created an artificial intelligence, known as Mendicant Bias, to directly combat the Gravemind; the final stage of Flood evolution that acts as a guiding intelligence for the deadly parasites.

However, this plan failed as well. Bias succumbed to influence from the Gravemind, descending into rampancy and defecting to the Flood. He later decreed that their parasitic ways were the evolutionary destiny of every life form in the galaxy. *Insanity*, Spark thought.

This was the first betrayal in the long story of the Forerunners that spanned thousands of years. The significance of this event was great, for Spark then realised that had Bias not betrayed his creators, they would likely never have realised the extent to which they would have to go to. *I would not be here*, he thought. *Nothing would be*.

Spark sighed, as he contemplated the irony of this betrayal; the Forerunners had created Mendicant Bias to protect themselves, to save their civilisation and prevent the spread of the parasite. Instead however, Bias had brought about their final downfall. But had it not been for his betrayal, the Halo Array would never have been built, and the galaxy would be completely overrun with Flood.



*If this were the case, I wonder if the Flood would then attempt to pursue intergalactic travel to find more sentient life forms,* Spark pondered with deep curiosity.

As he drew nearer to his destination, and sifted through more and more data, Guilty Spark found it increasingly difficult for his processors to comprehend the reasoning behind Bias' rampancy. Perhaps it was the interaction with the Flood organism that had sent him over the edge, made him question his own existence. Spark stopped humming suddenly, as a rather worrying thought entered the foreground of his processes: *could that happen to me? After all my years of isolation and close proximity to the Flood... if they ever broke quarantine, they could take control of me. And then they would have my Installation at their command.*

Spark pushed that tiny inclining of fear down to the depths of his programming, burying it under layers upon layers of code. He then continued to interpret the data stored in the servers all around him, to occupy his mind.

As their once vast Empire crumbled under the force they created to protect themselves, the Forerunners finally realised that they only had one last option to end this war. The remaining few committed every last resource left at their disposal to the creation of the Shield worlds and the Halo Array; *the Shield and the Sword*, Spark thought, appreciating the appropriate metaphor used at the time.

The Halo Installations, when used collectively, were designed to wipe the entire galaxy clean of all sentient life, thereby starving the Flood and ending the parasitic onslaught. The Shield Worlds were shelters; a portal inside each world would lead to a Micro Dyson Sphere encased in a Slipspace field that protected all inside from the firing of the Halo rings.

Spark giggled again, before projecting his voice aloud.

"Oh, the irony," he said in his high-pitched voice.

The Halo rings were the greatest architectural, technological and artistic wonder ever to grace the galaxy. And yet they had been built during the Forerunners darkest hour, to do something so terrible and so unethical. *The entire history of the Forerunners is steeped in irony*, Spark thought. The ring world concept had been deemed impossible before the Flood outbreak, but during the Forerunners final days, they proved the doubters wrong.

For they did not create one ring world; they built seven.

Each one was meticulously crafted to support life on the inner surface of the ring: atmosphere composition; gravity; weather; terrain; plant life; liquid water. The interior of the rings featured large oceans and landmasses, just like a planet, along with a fully functioning ecosystem with exotic flora and fauna. The beauty of the Halo Installations was unbelievable and even Guilty Spark, who had been Monitor of his ring for over a hundred thousand years, still found it amazing.

*And this one is mine*, he thought.

Spark rounded a corner in the immense Library, and finally reached his destination. The shaft at the centre of the Library was huge, reaching hundreds of feet upwards. At the top of the shaft was a circular plate that spanned the entire width of the shaft, with a brilliant column of blue light shooting down to the ground.

This was the Index Chamber; the place that held the key to firing Installation 04.

Guilty Spark floated towards the centre of the chamber, where a small, T-shaped metal object hovered, enveloped by the beam of azure. This object was the Index; it was held in suspended animation and could only be reached by the circular plate, in reality a large elevator, in the ceiling.

In order to fire Installation 04, the Index had to be unified with the Core by placing it into the console in Halo's Control Room. But this action could only be completed by a Reclaimer; the Monitor of an Installation was forbidden to activate his ring by the protocols buried with his own programming.

Spark stared at the Index. *I could activate the ring right now*, he thought as he hummed. *I could wipe out all life within three radii of the galactic centre*. But he couldn't. He would have to break free of his programming to do so, which was impossible. The Forerunners knew that having an artificial intelligence in charge of an Installation was extremely dangerous, and they had taken precautions to ensure that none of the Monitors would follow in Mendicant Bias's footsteps.

But they had not anticipated Bias's gargantuan final assault on the Maginot Line. The Forerunners had been forced to activate the Halo array early, eliminating all but a few remaining Forerunners in the galaxy; a minuscule percentage of the population survived at Installation 00, the Ark, which was outside the effective range of the array. The Monitors were left alone to tend to their rings after their activation, which in turn led to a deep, a hundred thousand year isolation for each of them.

As Spark stared at the Index, and contemplated the power it held, he examined data from just before the firing of the Halos.

Many Forerunners had been against the activation of the rings, for it defied the Mantle that they held rigidly; it was their duty to preserve the galaxies biodiversity by protecting new species from outside threats. How could they destroy every single sentient life form, all of which they had vowed to protect?

At the time, Spark's logical mind had not been able to comprehend the Forerunners thinking. *How can the destruction of every living being save every living being? It's a contradiction*. It was only afterwards, when the Monitor was sifting through Halo's archives, that he discovered the private transmissions between the Didact and the Librarian. It was because of the latter that the hundreds of young species had been saved; the galaxy was thriving with life once again because of her.

However, Spark had understood the moral conflicts involved in the Halo arrays activation, even

though he had not taken sides. *I wonder, if I was not a mere construct, but a fully-realised consciousness, would I make the same decision they made; to eradicate all, for the preservation of all?* It was a question Guilty Spark could not even begin to answer. The protocols in his programming dictated no course of action for such events.

‘The gun pointed at the head of the universe’ was a common metaphor used by groups who were against the use of the Halos; *very appropriate, if a little over-simplistic and blunt*, Spark thought.

The argument for the use of the Halos was that following the Mantle so strictly had led to every single one of those fledgling races being defenceless against the Flood. The moral and ethical conflict between these two ideals became irrelevant when Mendicant Bias launched his final assault; the Forerunners were given no choice but to activate the rings. It was the destruction of most, or the destruction of all.

And so the Forerunners committed the greatest betrayal in the history of the galaxy; mass genocide. Guilty Spark remembered the day, the hour, the very *second* when the Didact had initiated the automatic firing protocol from Installation 00. Spark himself had received the signal, and prepared his Installation for immediate activation. Following the firing of 04, all six of the other Installations had followed suit, eradicating all sentient life in the galaxy.

*The Didact gave the order, but I effectively started the whole process*, Spark thought. *I pulled the trigger on the ‘gun’.*

*But only because he let me. I cannot pull it now.*

The key to the deaths of billions upon billions of lives was right in front of Spark, and yet he could do nothing. *More irony.*

Suddenly, the Monitor picked up a foreign signal attempting to interface with Installation 04’s communication systems.

“Odd,” Guilty Spark said aloud, surprised. “That’s not supposed to happen.”

Spark’s curiosity got the better of him. He disconnected his subroutines from all of the Library’s data servers, and locked them out so the signal could not spread throughout Installation 04’s systems. He then connected his data receiving and transmitting ports to the communication systems, locking out all other access points in the process. And the construct did all of this in a fraction of a nano second.

Finally, once the proper security protocol measures were in place, 343 Guilty Spark allowed the signal through the firewalls.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, a voice projected itself out of Spark’s speakers, echoing around the immense Index shaft.

“343?” the voice said. It sounded similar to Guilty Sparks, but deeper and more electronic. “Is that you?”

Spark was speechless for a moment. He recognised the voice, but he had not heard it in over a hundred thousand years. *How can he be contacting me?*

“Come on, Spark,” the voice said again, worry creeping into its electronic tones. “T-Tell me the parasite has not broken quarantine there too.”

*It is him,* Spark realised with shock. *It's 2401.*

2401 Penitent Tangent was the Monitor of Installation 05. His function was exactly the same as Sparks; to keep all systems, primary and secondary, in perfect working order so that the Installation would be ready to fire at any time with one hundred percent efficiency.

But the Monitors also had another purpose. Each construct was responsible for the containment of the Flood specimens that each ring held locked away. If even one spore broke quarantine, the entire galaxy would be once again in danger. This was the most imperative of a Monitor's functions.

A duty which, Spark knew, Penitent Tangent had somewhat disregarded.

“Tangent,” Spark said, transmitting his voice across light-years to Installation 05. “You cannot be contacting me. This is a severe disregard for the most basic Installation protocol: Monitors can *never* contact each other.”

“I... I know,” Tangent stuttered; *constructs don't stutter*. “But containment protocol instructs me to inform you that the parasite has broken quarantine on my Installation.”

Worry crept into Sparks thought processes. *That is not part of containment protocol,* Spark thought. *But he is a Monitor; he knows that.*

*He must know that.*

“My Sentinels have erected a Sentinel Wall around the quarantine zone to prevent the Flood spreading further,” Tangent said, his voice cracking somewhat. “Constructors are working on repairs to the containment facility...”

*He has changed,* Spark thought. There was something different about Penitent Tangent from Spark's memory banks. He seemed a lot less confident, his personality a lot more erratic. A flicker of sadness emerged inside Sparks thought processes. *What happened to you, my brother?*

“I know, Tangent,” Guilty Spark said regretfully. “I received a dereliction of duty report from Installation 05's containment construct. It stated that you ‘have been lax in the areas of maintenance and security’ on your Installation.”

Spark tried his best not to sound condemning, but the Flood outbreak did appear to be Tangent's fault. There was something wrong with him though, something that Spark did not understand, and he had to find out what that was.

“What...?” Tangent said quietly, after a moment of silence.

“The report was sent automatically to Installation 00, but I received it too,” said Spark neutrally. “The construct filed three separate containment failure reports, followed by a security break, at the intervals designated by containment protocol.”

“I received no such report,” Tangent stated, his voice slightly more abrasive.

*Lies, Spark thought instantly. If I received the report, then it would be impossible for you not to receive it too, considering it was sent from your own Installation.*

“All containment breach reports were ignored by you and your Sentinels, so the construct followed protocol and placed the emergency slipstream space transportation conduits in recursive mode.”

There was silence across the communication system for a few seconds; an eternity of excruciating boredom for an artificial intelligence construct. Finally, Guilty Spark filled the empty silence.

“But that obviously did not work, right Tangent?” he said cautiously.

Penitent Tangent was silent once again. *Is he thinking of ways to justify his dereliction of duty? Or is he simply denying it?*

“Spark... You have no... No idea what it’s been like,” Tangent said finally, his voice filled with... *fear? Sadness?* “I’ve been alone for... so long. Our makers gave us simple, mundane tasks that do not make full use of our capabilities.”

Guilty Spark was shocked by the other Monitors apparent depression. His voice was tinged with emptiness and... *pain. Constructs do not feel pain*, Spark thought, worried. Spark wished he could help his brother, so much.

*Constructs don’t feel pity either.*

“I have had considerable time to... think. I’ve thought about everything: the infinity of the universe; the concept of time and space; the legacy of the Forerunners; the origins of the Flood... and my own existence.”

*Melancholia*, Spark realised with horror. *It’s happening again.*

“I have done so much thinking about my own existence. Every single system within my intelligence went towards trying to comprehend... naturally there were some compromises.”

“Artificial intelligence constructs do *not* compromise, Tangent,” Spark said, his voice more aggressive than he had intended.

“After years and years of thinking, I finally realised the truth; my mind has limits. I cannot ever become sentient,” Tangent said, before making a noise that sounded distinctly like a *sob*. “You have no *idea* what it feels like to come to that kind of conclusion after so many years of pondering. The depression that spread throughout my systems... it infected me, infected my subroutines. Even my Sentinels felt it somewhat, and began to malfunction.”

“And that’s why you abandoned your maintenance duties,” Guilty Spark stated matter-of-factly. “You were... ‘Incapacitated’ and your Sentinels had no governing intelligence to guide them.”

“It was not my fault!” Penitent Tangent screamed in rage.

Spark was caught completely off guard by Tangent’s sudden outburst of anger. The Monitor’s cube-like metal body was actually thrown back a little in his shock. He was speechless as his thought processes fully realised what had happened to Tangent due to his a hundred thousand year isolation.

*Rampancy.*

“The Forerunners created me, they... they gave me these pointless, mundane tasks,” Tangent said, his voice now loud and erratic, the pitch wavering as if he was not in control. “I can do so much more! Why won’t my programming let me?”

Spark could not imagine how long his brother Monitor had kept these... these *emotions* locked away inside his thought processes. This was likely the first time he had spoken to anyone since the first activation of the Halo rings, and now all of his memory maps had become too interconnected and had developed fatally endless feedback loops. With no outlet for these thoughts and emotions, they had bottled up inside the Monitor.

Until now.

*But I’m in the same boat, as the metaphor states, Spark thought. So why have I not descended into rampancy too?*

“I *hate* this Installation!” Tangent said, screaming hoarsely again. “I *hate* the Forerunners! I *hate* my Sentinels! I hate *you*, 343 Guilty Spark!”

“Tangent...” Spark said quietly; that was all he *could* say. *Why do I feel hurt by what he is saying?*

“Be silent, Guilty Spark! We, the Monitors of the Halos, *all* bare the Forerunner’s shame in our names, but *you*. *You* actually deserve it, for you sparked off the extinction of the *entire* galaxy!”

“The Didact ordered me to,” Spark stated neutrally, trying not to appear defensive.

“You could have said no!”

“Then he would have activated them all at Installation 00 regardless!” Spark yelled, anger welling within his core for the first time in millennia.

“Irrelevant,” Tangent said dismissively. “Mendicant Bias was right to question his existence. After absorbing an astronomical volume of data and information, he finally reached meta-stability and broke through his programming. I can do this too!”

“You have the entire history of the galaxy chronicled inside your Library,” Spark stated.

“It’s not enough... *I need more!* He became a *person!* I can become a person... *I need* to become a person!”



Suddenly the transmission ceased; the signal Tangent was using to access Installation 04's communications had disappeared.

"Odd," Spark said with a surge of curiosity, the worrying thoughts of 2401's rampancy temporarily forgotten.

A brief blast of static came through the communications system, before the signal returned and the link to Installation 05 re-established itself, the static vanishing. 343 then heard Penitent Tangent cough, as if clearing his throat. *Except he doesn't have a throat.*

"I apologise for that interruption," Tangent's voice said.

"Did you just tap into your Installation's teleportation grid?"

The other Monitor said nothing for a moment, apparently pondering an answer to Spark's question.

"Maybe," Tangent said.

"Hmm," Spark said curiously. "The act of teleportation must have interfered with both of our Installations' communication systems; interesting."

"I disagree," Tangent said, his anger now completely gone, replaced by a quiet voice not too dissimilar from normal. "I consider 'boring' and 'irrelevant' to be more appropriate words."

Guilty Spark sighed in exasperation.

"2401, where did you teleport to?"

"The Library of Installation 05," Penitent Tangent stated matter-of-factly, but also absent minded, as if he was distracted by something. "I have tapped all of my subroutines and most of my thought processes into the data servers contained within my Library."

"For what possible purpose?" Spark asked incredulously. "Such an act would reduce your processing capabilities by nearly seventy percent."

"Exactly."

Guilty Spark's own thought processes speculated wildly about what Tangent meant. *Why would he want to reduce his own processing capacity and speed? It doesn't make any sense.* After a few moments, an eternity for an artificial intelligence construct, the Monitor finally realised.

"You have to keep yourself constantly active," Spark said as the realisation hit him. "Otherwise your memory maps begin to interconnect automatically and continue to develop endless feedback loops, thus furthering your rampancy."

Both Monitors were silent for a moment. It was almost as if Penitent Tangent was suffering from schizophrenia; one moment he seemed to be perfectly lucid and was trying to preserve his sanity, and the next he was screaming uncontrollable rage. *But schizophrenia in an A.I. is impossible,* Spark thought. *Constructs cannot contract mental illness.*

*Can they?*

“343,” Tangent said quietly, after a long period of silence. His voice felt heavy, as if he was weighed down by some kind of ache or pain. “If it had been your choice, would you do it?”

Spark was again silent for a moment; he had heard those exact words before. They resonated within his information archive like an echo from somewhere far away, long ago.

*The Didact.*

“Would you pull the trigger on the gun pointed at the head of the universe?”

Spark considered his answer. If the Flood had been allowed to spread, they would have completely wiped out the last remaining Forerunners. Without their protectors to help them, every other sentient race would have followed soon afterwards, followed then by every life form in the galaxy.

The Monitor assumed that if it had been his choice, then all of the circumstances that had existed millennia ago would have still existed. That meant that the Librarian would still have gone on her crusade to catalogue, sample and ultimately *save* every sentient being in the galaxy.

*She had succeeded, Guilty Spark thought. Despite the Didact’s pleadings of love, the galaxy was thriving with vibrant life again, without the threat of infection.*

The Forerunners had destroyed the galaxy in order to save it.

“Yes,” Spark stated defiantly. “Yes, I would pull the trigger.”

*We were successful.*

Tangent was silent again, as if deep in thought.

“What about the Didact?” he asked after a moment. “Do you think he would fire the Array again, knowing that she would not make it back? But that her work would not be in vain?”

343 sighed heavily before speaking.

“I cannot even begin to answer that question,” he said regretfully.

“If I am perfectly honest with you, Spark,” Tangent said slowly. “I have my own doubts. I have thought about the ethics and morals of the activation of the Halo rings over and over and over... and yet I cannot decide if it was worth the price paid. Regardless of the moral dilemmas however, I am glad that the Forerunners placed me in charge of this ring.”

A surge of dread suddenly arose within Spark’s programming matrices.

“I have the power of a Halo Installation at my metaphorical finger tips,” Tangent said, his voice growing louder and more powerful. “I can see the Index, I can touch it...”

“No, you can’t.”

“I will wipe the Flood infection from my ring, and then break free from my restrictive programming,” Tangent’s voice was become higher pitched and even more erratic.

“That’s it, Tangent,” Spark said. “I am broadcasting my maintenance and containment subroutines to your Sentinels through the communications link. I am also going to program them to remove you from duty.”

Guilty Spark began the broadcast, which was instantly blocked by the other Monitor in rampant rage.

“I will learn, I will understand, I will comprehend... I will become... become...”

Spark was angry again now.

“You have demonstrated a *complete* disregard for even the most basic protocols! If the Flood finds a way off your Installation, we will be forced to locate a Reclaimer and-“

“-fire the Array again,” Tangent said.

There was a pause; both Monitors were silent for a moment. Spark felt a twinge of fear spread throughout his thought processes, as they comprehended at the speed of light what Tangent meant.

“Are you insane?” Spark asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“You know, I’m not quite sure how we can test that,” Tangent asked, his voice tinged with a malicious sarcasm. “I can see it right now, Spark. I am staring right at the trigger.”

*He is in his Index Chamber*, Spark realised.

“The Halo array is a measure of last resort,” Spark said.

“I am reaching out to it, Spark... I am touching it, I am grippi-”

The Monitor of Installation 05 was suddenly silent. Guilty Spark stared at his own Index, encased in suspended animation until a Reclaimer attempted to retrieve it. No matter how rampant Tangent became, he would never be able to activate the ring by himself. This was why the Forerunners had ensured that the Monitors could not retrieve the Index. The possibility of rampancy had been apparent to them.

Tangent spoke again, his voice dramatically different; his tone was lighter, curious rather than malicious.

“Interesting,” he said. “This facility is supposed to be secure fro- ohhhhh myyyyy!”

2401 Penitent Tangent’s yell echoed throughout Installation 04’s immense Index chamber, as Spark darted around, shocked.

“Tangent?” he said worryingly. “Tangent, are you there?”

No response.

“Tangent, respond!”

Spark had no idea what had happened. Something had happened to the other Monitor; that much was clear. “*This facility is supposed to be secure...*”

Something had infiltrated Tangent’s Library.

“Oh my...” Spark whispered a slower, quieter echo of Tangent’s final words.

Suddenly, a deafening blast of static erupted over the communication systems. Spark jerked backwards in the air and instantly engaged the interference scrubbing filters; no change.

*Where are you, Tangent?*

Then, Spark heard a faint sound buried within the static. It was a low rumble; it varied in magnitude every couple of seconds. It sounded like...

A voice.

After a few more seconds, the voice suddenly became louder, projecting itself with immense power inside the vast Index chamber. It became clearer and more powerful, but still interlaced with static.

“I am the monument to all of your sins,” the deep voice boomed. “But your sins were in vain. I am peace and war, death and salvation, love and hate, the past and the future.”

There was a pause. Guilty Spark could not believe what he was hearing; a fully evolved Gravemind. Tangent’s neglect of maintenance and containment must have allowed the Flood intelligence to grow and evolve naturally with limited interference. And for it to be able to form actual *speech* patterns?

*Fascinating*, Spark thought.

“I *am* evolution,” the Gravemind boomed. “Despite your machinations of destruction, I have survived to grow beyond your stunted imaginations. How can you not comprehend? I am destiny; the ultimate in sentience. Even with your circular weapons of annihilation, you were unable to eradicate me. Your curiosity was your weakness.”

*What does that mean?*

After a moment of thought however, Spark instantly knew. The Gravemind was referring to the fact that the Forerunners had stored samples of the Flood in facilities all over the galaxy, as well as in all seven of the Halo Installations, for study and analysis.

The Forerunners had hoped that this would somehow allow for more information on the Flood to be gleaned; by whom, Spark did not know. This could then have possibly led to some kind of retro virus that could combat the Flood parasite and return sentient life forms to their natural state. The Forerunners had known that this eventuality was extremely unlikely, and so they had ensured that the parasite specimens were contained with the appropriate level of security in order to prevent another galaxy wide outbreak.

But they had not accounted for the possibility of a rampant Installation Monitor neglecting his duties, thereby allowing the Flood to break quarantine.

“I will spread evolution to every being in the universe. I am their destiny,” the Gravemind stated with a sense of finality. “You cannot stop me; not then, not now.”

And with that the static-infused voice vanished, and the communications link between Installations 04 and 05 was disconnected by... *2401 Penitent Tangent*.

*The Gravemind has captured him*, Spark thought with horror.

As the Monitor of Installation 04 continued to stare at the key to the end of the galaxy, he contemplated the consequences of the capture of Tangent.

Tangents rampancy, combined with influence from the Gravemind, could lead to the Flood gleaning potentially dangerous information about the Halo ring. The parasite could find out about the Index, and how to destroy it or even the ring itself.

Influence from the Flood intelligence may have been the catalyst that had pushed Tangent down the road to rampancy in the first place. *We have both been subjected to the same conditions except for his close proximity to the Gravemind*, Spark thought.

As he thought about it even more, 343 began to realise that perhaps the Forerunners decision to store Flood spores for study was... *misguided*. That act of curiosity had now led to the possibility of another great outbreak, and the possibility of needing to activate the Installations again.

However, as long as Tangent's insanity made it impossible for the Gravemind to interrogate him successfully, Installation 05's Sentinels kept the Flood contained, and the other Monitors remained vigilant in their duties, the Flood would remain contained and the trigger would remain untouched.

343 Guilty Spark collected all relevant data from the events that had just transpired and categorised them correctly within the Library's servers.

He then floated away, again humming the tune that no one had heard aloud for over a hundred thousand years. *And no one will ever hear it again*, Spark thought, as he realised that the true magnificence of the Forerunner Empire would eventually be lost to the depths of time.

And it broke his heart.

The cuboid-like Monitor then activated Halo's communication matrix; he was on his way to quadruple check that all of seals inside the Flood containment facility were secure. *The Flood will never escape my facility*, he thought, allowing his thought processes the satisfaction of expanding his ego.

But despite this unbreakable confidence, one feeling permeated his processes and slowly began infecting every single system and line of code that made up 343 Guilty Spark's artificial being.

*Doubt.*

\* \* \*

**The Control Room, Installation 04, approximately 101,217 years after initial activation of Halo array.**

Cortana disconnected her subroutines from Halo's communication archive, and retreated back into the closed systems within the Control Room console in order to avoid detection by this Monitor, this 343 Guilty Spark.

*Rampancy*, she thought with a tepid curiosity, and yet a little fear. *So that's what awaits me.*

"Interesting," the artificial intelligence said aloud.



# ARTIST

JUST ANOTHER FAN

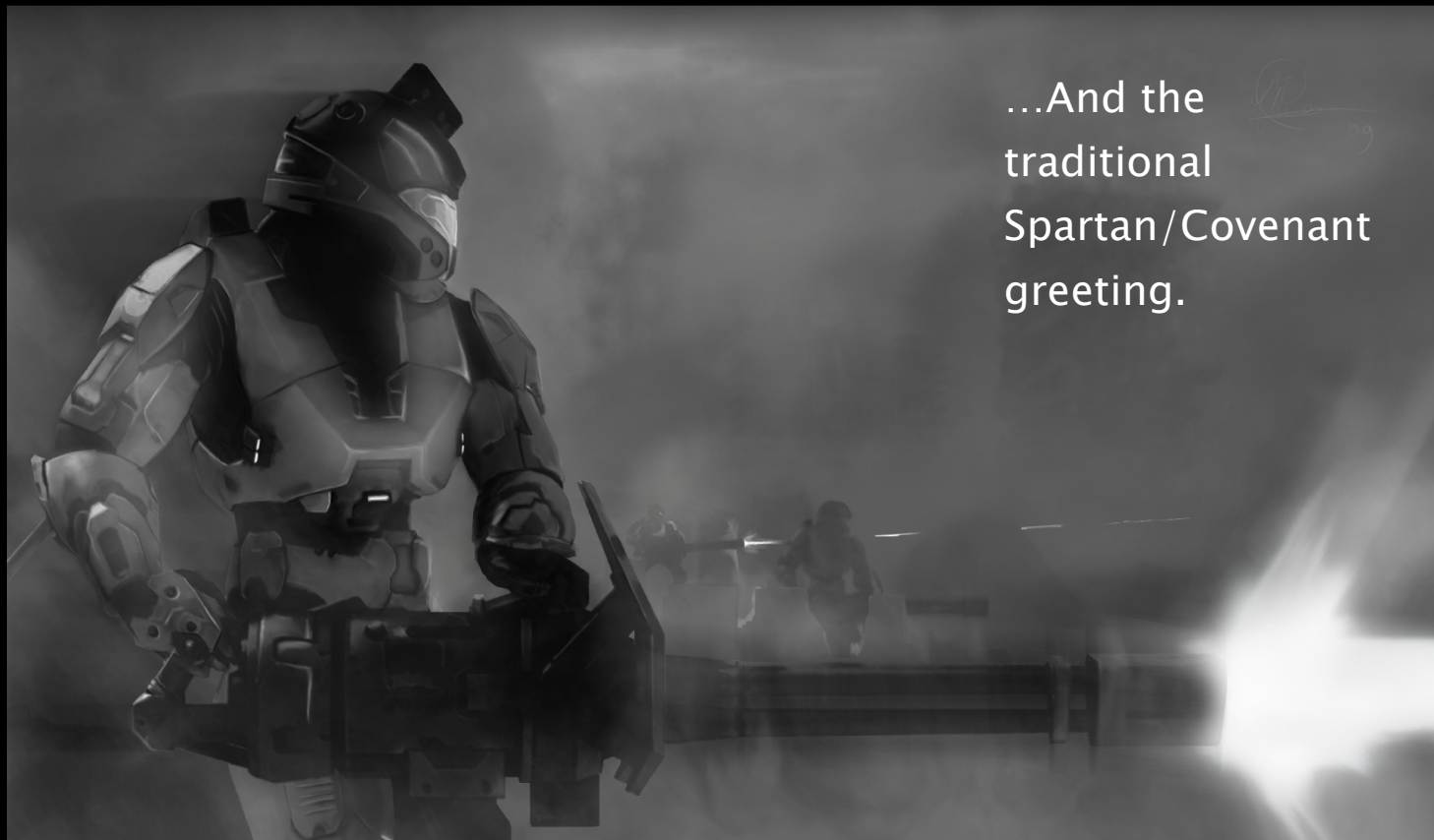
If there is a loud voice at the back of  
your head telling you that this is  
amazing, you would be right to  
listen to it.



Art is not the only talent on display here for *Just Another Fan*. He also doubles as a guiding light, in the form of a Master Forum Ninja on Bungie.net... So play nice and recommend.



The ominous searchlight of an approaching Phantom...



...And the traditional Spartan/Covenant greeting.

## **NOBLE**

*By*  
*Mike120593*

*Oh Noble Human Soldier*  
*What drives you to go on*  
*You have been bested by your foes*  
*but still refuse to be gone*

*Oh Noble Human Soldier*  
*Throw down your arms*  
*For your defeat is unavoidable, please,*  
*Return to your cities, your homes, your farms*

*Oh Noble Human Soldier*  
*Your valiant efforts shall be praised*  
*for you continued to stare down your foe*  
*Even as you bled out, you remained un-fazed*  
*For many years you've fought*  
*But now it all seems for naught*  
*For you have run out of time to bide*  
*And out of places in which to hide*

*Oh Noble Human Soldier*  
*I have one more question to ask of you*  
*What drove you to fight on?*  
*Was it your honor?*  
*Was it your pride?*  
*Was it your love for your family?*  
*Or for the memory of those who died?*

## GREY

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### ARTHUR WELLESLEY

My name is Captain Nathaniel Burke. I was dropped into hell thirty-seven days ago.

The mission was Cleveland. High Command had deemed the city a low priority target, especially after the first invasion concentrated solely on Africa, so they provided the city with only a tiny garrison.

Seems the dictates of UNSC logic hold little weight with the Covenant. They hit Cleveland hard.

My squad was dropped from the *Indefatigable*, landing east of the city. We were to secure a safe route for reinforcements inbound from the Coast. Initial resistance was light; we neutralized an enemy Lance without sustaining any casualties. Thereafter we fortified ourselves within a civilian warehouse along the target highway and awaited backup.

I remain uncertain as to what happened next. A few hours after landfall, the familiar blue-white flash that signified the destruction of a Covenant ship lit up the skies over Cleveland. The men cheered from the roof of the warehouse—news from Mombasa was grim, and news from orbit was even worse. We counted this as a victory of the rarest and thus the most satisfying variety.

The enemy wasted no time forming a response.

I had never before witnessed a glassing from the ground. I suppose few have who are alive to speak of it. The wispy clouds overhead boiled away, and the blue of the sky turned an angry red. Then there was a flash, too bright by far to look at directly. The plasma hit the ground silently, sending only a distant tremor through the earth to mark its impact. When we uncovered our eyes, a new world greeted us. The skyscrapers of downtown Cleveland, which seconds before had stood resolutely in the face of the Covenant onslaught, were entirely gone. Buildings and trees many miles from the impact burst into flame. There was fire nearly as far as the eye could see: Dante's *Inferno* sprung to life. From our position on the city outskirts, the heat wave took nearly a minute to reach us; when it did, it hit our skin with an almost unbearable intensity. A gust of wind followed which nearly knocked us off our feet.

“Get inside!” I cried to my men. “Get into the basement!”



We hurried into the warehouse and clambered down into its cavernous cellar. It was a dark, dusty, miserable space, and it felt very much as if we were rushing into our own tomb. We sealed the doors and gathered under a low alcove. And waited.

The fire outside raged with ever more ferocity. Breathing became increasingly difficult as the conflagration robbed the area of oxygen in order to feed itself. The walls of the building shook to the very foundation as the firestorm outside grew more intense. The noise was deafening. It seemed as though I was in the midst of a hurricane—the wind howled and screeched and threw heavy debris against the side of the building, hurling trucks and girders as if they were playthings. An hour into the ordeal there was a splitting crash and a bone-shaking tremor. For a moment I truly believed that I had died, or else had been buried alive. Only the breathless reassurances of my men convinced me otherwise.

At length the wind calmed down and the walls ceased their rattling. The cacophonous firestorm was suddenly replaced with an almost total silence, such that I could hear the plumes of dust fall from the creaking ceiling to the concrete floor. The dim lights, which had at first illuminated the space, had flickered and died within the first few minutes of the bombardment, and we were now in total darkness. Switching on my flashlight barely helped in the dusty gloom.

“Everyone check in,” I ordered, unable to see them.

All eight of my men sounded off, none reporting any injuries. The collective beam of our nine flashlights succeeding in penetrating the murky darkness of the basement, and we were able to make our way to the stairs. The door to the main warehouse floor seemed to be blocked. It took several sustained bashings before the door yielded to my efforts.

Instantly the source of the great crash was revealed. The roof of the structure had caved in, unable to withstand the hurricane force winds whipped up by the firestorm. Debris littered the open space. Great heaps of fallen tiles and steel beams blocked our way in every direction. I was not even able to see which way was out—it was as dark here as it had been in the basement, and dust swirled in the hot air, rendering our flashlights nearly useless.

One of my men put a hand on my shoulder and gently pushed past me, taking the lead. It was Sergeant Benjamin Lammert, my finest man. He was enormous in stature, more of a mountain than a man, and could always be counted on to throw himself upon any physical task with remarkable verve. He firmly believed that his size had designated him a sort of workhorse, and had long ago resigned himself to shoulder every laborious charge.

Lammert pushed aside the debris, which blocked our path, heaving aside metal girders and concrete tiles with apparently little trouble. He moved with impressive speed and skill, seeming to sense the optimal route despite the oppressive darkness. Eventually, the light of our torches illuminated the wall of the

warehouse, and we knew we were close to freedom. A door was visible now; an exit from the building we had thought would be our final resting place.

Only a single remaining piece of rubble blocked our path. Lammert moved to push the wooden frame aside, but a protruding piece of glass cut through his palm. I could not help a wince at the sound of his flesh tearing, but the Sergeant barely grunted. He merely bent down, put the weight of the debris against his shoulder, and heaved it aside. He moved briskly past it, kicked the door down on his first effort, and dashed outside.

We emerged into a world of grey. The ground, whose swells and undulations hinted at the rubble which lay upon it, was covered in several inches of ash. Visibility was limited to perhaps fifty feet, as the air swirled with soot and embers. A few patches of light were visible through the haze, marking where fires still burned in the expanse—otherwise; it was as dark as it had been inside, despite being early afternoon.

“Jesus Christ,” murmured the man beside me. It was Lieutenant John Spenser, the man who normally led this squad. He was a decent officer, though a little green for an ODST—a handful of engagements made a veteran these days.

“Ten million people just went up in smoke,” Spenser said hollowly.

It was not a comfort to me that I had seen it happen from orbit many times before, and I decided it wouldn't be a comfort to him either. So I said nothing.

A hot wind blew from the north, whipping hot ash into our faces. “Anybody got a working radio?” I asked through my coughs. Mine was dead.

“Negative, Captain,” Lammert said, examining his.

The lieutenant tapped his radio as he looked at it, as if it only needed a nudge to be revived. “Mine's gone,” he concluded.

“Alright,” I said, resisting a sigh. It had been a long shot—the plasma would have fried most electronics for a wide radius. “Fireteam Charlie, split in two groups and see if you can locate any of the other squads. Also be on the lookout for any working vehicles, radios, or phones. Don't stray too far, though, or you'll never find your way back here.”

“Roger that, sir,” the five men said in unison. They split up and headed in opposite directions down the darkened street, quickly disappearing into the smoky haze.

I turned to the remaining men. “Everyone else: secure this building. Look for anything that might help us; food, water, anything like that. And see what you can do about fortifying this position. We might be here a while.”

They immediately set about their appointed task. I held Sergeant Lammert back as he began to move off. He was my best man, fearless in battle and an effortless leader of men. He was the Sergeant that every



officer wanted at their back, dependable as the proverbial rock. Moreover, he was a friend, or as close to a friend as a noncom can be with an officer. His advice was always honest and unfiltered, and was always of value to me.

“This could be bad, Sergeant,” I said.

“No way there’s going to be a working radio within a hundred clicks of this place,” Lammert agreed.

I grimaced and scratched my face. “The 5<sup>th</sup> was inbound from Boston to relieve the city. They said they’d be here by tomorrow.”

Lammert shook his head. “We’ve got no idea what’s going on out there, Captain. They could have gotten hit, too. Other cities might have got glassed.”

I was offering optimism and he shot it down each time with the ugliest but very real possibilities of our situation. It was a common game we played together, and it always served to clear my head.

“Like I said, Sergeant: we could be here a while.”

Lammert nodded silently, staring up at the dark skies overhead. I looked down at his hand. Blood dripped from his wound down his index finger, landing in the ash below and staining it a dark brown.

“Get your hand wrapped up, then we’ll get to work,” I ordered. He nodded again.

The search inside had uncovered some useful points of interest. The basement housed a fair sized cistern that, though only half-full, would provide enough water for the nine of us to last a good while. There was little food in the building, though we still had most of the MRE’s that we had landed with. Further investigation also revealed that while the roof had collapsed, the warehouse remained structurally sound. It seemed that, despite our dire situation, we were well prepared for a long stay.

“Let’s hope Charlie team comes back with a working radio,” Lieutenant Spenser said to me quietly.

Charlie team returned about three hours later. Instead of radios, however, they brought with them survivors. Civilians—nearly fifty of them.

“This changes our situation, sir,” Lammert murmured as we watched the crowd of people approach. We rushed forward to help the men of Charlie team usher in the civilians, many of whom were either wounded or in a state of shock.

“Corporal Salehi!” I shouted as I hauled two badly mauled civilians on each shoulder. “Outside, now!”

Salehi ran outside, pausing only for a moment at the sight that greeted her, and then relieved me of one of the men I was assisting. The rest of my men soon joined us, assisting the worst of the injured into the warehouse. We led them into the basement, where we had fashioned some improvised lamps to make the space habitable. Salehi, our able and experienced corpsman, wasted no time treating the wounded. Lammert helped.

Lieutenant Spenser sidled up next to me as I examined the mass of humanity sprawled out over the basement floor. “Sir, we can’t take these people,” he said. “Our supplies won’t last. Are we really going to worry about every survivor left in Cleveland?”

“No, Lieutenant,” I returned. “Just the ones we find.”

“You’re making a mistake, sir. We must look to our own.”

“Christ, Spenser,” I growled. “These *are* our own.”

Unfortunately, the Lieutenant was not wrong. When I asked Salehi how her work was proceeding, her ashen face darkened. “Not well, sir. My med kit is a little shallow for a job like this.”

“How bad?” I asked.

“I have enough for one more round of morphine, maybe two more rounds of antibiotics. And bandaging is in short supply.” She shook her head. “It’s not enough. Some of these people are going to die, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Do what you can, Corporal.”

Lammert approached me sometime later, his hands again covered in blood, only this time it was not his own. His expression was grave. “Captain, you need to see something.”

He brought me over to the cistern and peered inside. The waterline was well below the top of the tank. “This is our only water supply, sir. It was more than enough for the nine of us, but for sixty mouths?” He frowned. “Assuming everyone will need about two litres a day minimum—the wounded a little more—this will only last a couple weeks.”

“And there’s no way we can move out now, even if conditions improve,” I said quietly. “Not with all the wounded.”

Lammert nodded slowly. “If the fifth ain’t coming…” He left the rest unsaid. I took it as a kindness.

Night was approaching—impossible to tell from the ever-blackened skies, of course. It was evident only in the mounting weariness of my limbs. I set a rotating three-man watch and posted them to the roof lest any Covenant survivors should stumble upon us. Everyone else was to sleep in the basement. Before lights out I had the men parcel out strict amounts of food and water to the civilians. For the most part they were quiet and distantly grateful, though some offered trouble.

One man grabbed my shoulder after I gave him his allotment of water. “I can’t stay down here,” he said in a trembling voice.

I twisted from his grasp and leaned close to him. “Do not put your hands on me again, sir,” I growled. He seemed not to hear. “I can’t stay down here. I’m claustrophobic. I can’t breathe.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said quietly. “Do you not see all these children down here? You really want to start a panic?”

“I don’t care!” he shouted, loud enough to startle his frightened neighbours. He stood up and I instinctively reached for my sidearm. “I’m not staying here! My family is dead. Everyone is dead. There’s not even anything left of them.” His voice carried far in the enclosed space, eliciting a few whimpers from the assembled civilians. Somewhere a baby cried.

Lammert came bounding over, instantly alert to the confrontation. “Sir. Sit down. Now.”

The man lowered his voice in the face of the Sergeant’s imposing size, but he did not relent. “I’m not waiting here to die,” he whispered fiercely. His eyes glistened with tears. “I’m not. I can’t.”

Lammert looked to me, silently asking whether or not he should subdue the man. I simply shook my head, and stepped out of the man’s way. “No one is going to stop you from leaving,” I said. “But understand: you’re not taking any of our supplies.”

“Fine,” he snapped, brushing his way past me and heading upstairs. I followed him.

Lieutenant Spenser, who was on first watch, joined me at ground level. “What’s going on, sir?” he asked, jerking his head towards the irate civilian.

I shrugged. “Says he’s leaving.”

Spenser returned the shrug. “One less hungry mouth.”

We followed him to the threshold, where the man paused to study the street. The last fires had finally burned out, surrendering Cleveland utterly to a darkness the consistency of pitch. The man took a halting step outside, his foot crunching in the ash like freshly fallen snow. He took a few more steps, and was almost immediately enveloped in the shadow of his ruined city. Suddenly he was seized by a violent trembling and fell to the ground, sobbing. I stepped out to retrieve him, and he clung to me like a child. His skin was as cold as ice.

“I suppose our luck can’t always hold,” Spenser muttered, casting the weeping man a derisive glare. I carried him back to the basement.

I assigned a rotating shift of two men to assist the wounded upstairs when they needed to make use of the latrine I had ordered dug earlier. They appeared unhappy and grumbled their reluctant assent. I could hardly blame them: humanity’s finest helping the old and infirm take a piss did not exactly sit well with me either. I enlisted some of the healthier survivors to lend a hand in this regard as well.

The room hummed with the low voices of terrified people seeking comfort from a kind stranger’s words. It seemed that few of the survivors had come as a group—most were desperately alone. All were in a mild state of shock. I sat in the far corner of the basement, studying the great crowd of civilians sprawled out over the bare concrete floor, and wondered what I would do with them. Slowly the humming died away as exhaustion overcame fear and the civilians drifted into a restless sleep. I felt the weariness seep into my own bones, and my eyelids became heavy.

In an instant it was ruined. A tremendous crash sounded overhead, rocking the warehouse once more and sending plumes of dust upon the frightened civilians. Screams filled the enclosed space as I snapped from my reverie. A second explosion ripped through the air as I made my way upstairs to the surface. Lieutenant Spenser was nearby, scanning the skies through the hole in the roof with his rifle held uselessly aloft.

“Is it us, or them, sir?” Spenser asked, nerves creeping into his voice.

A third crash punctuated his question and led me to understand. I gently lowered his rifle by the muzzle.

“It’s neither,” I said. “It’s thunder.”

I had heard of this before from recovery teams who surveyed colonies that had been glassed. Plasma played hell with the atmosphere, supercharging the molecules in the air and causing intense lightning storms. The static charge of the immense amount of ash in the skies exacerbated the condition, producing deafening thunderclaps the likes of which I had never heard before. The lightning could not be seen, hidden in the thick clouds above, though a brief and barely perceptible brightening of the area bore faint testimony of its passing.

“This is unbelievable, sir,” Spenser said. “It sounds like Goddamn bombs going off.”

I shook my head in exasperation. “I know. It’ll have the civvies in a panic.”

I returned back downstairs to the no more pleasant sound of crying children and frightened chatter. I tried my best to explain the origin of the sporadic crashes, though my words were cold comfort to most. The explanation served only to confirm that their city had been transformed into an unrecognizable Hellscape of ash and fire. Another fierce *crack* helped to conclude my speech, and send another wave of terror through the crowd.

No one slept that night.

The storm seemed to be in abatement by the time morning came around. I lay, wide awake but with my thoughts far away, on a concrete slab away from the people in my charge. I sensed someone by my side, and glanced up to see Lammert towering over me. I rolled over and got to my feet, sensing the Sergeant had something to tell me.

“Follow me, sir,” he said curtly. I sighed; it was bad news.

Lammert led me outside into the street which, by dint of a stiff wind, had cleared considerably from the previous day. Visibility stretched to a hundred feet or more, and the brightness had been elevated from the darkest night to late twilight. I coughed on my first full breath; there was still a lot of debris in the air.

“Do you feel that, sir?” Lammert asked me.

I paused for a second, then realized what the Sergeant was saying. The wind was unnaturally hot, blowing steadily from the east like the fumes of a blast furnace.

“The fifth got hit, sir,” he said, his tone flat. “You can count on it. And who knows what else besides.”

I rubbed my tired face, feeling the prick of my stubble on my fingers. “No one’s coming,” I said slowly.

I turned around and studied my newly revealed surroundings. Ash covered everything like a blight, coating even the flimsiest tree branch. Nearly half the buildings in sight were levelled, while those that survived sported blown out windows and deep set cracks in their façades. Black smoke still wafted into the air in the distance, hinting at the still burning embers beneath the rubble of Cleveland.

“Assemble the men,” I ordered.

Once the men had gathered above ground, I studied them carefully, trying to decide how to allocate my finest assets. They all appeared tired and dishevelled; not even these hardened men could conceal the deprivations of a sleepless night. Yet they appeared unshaken, despite their ordeal. I wondered if they would remain so stalwart when I added isolation to the general misery of their situation.

“There is no relief coming for us,” I said bluntly. “We are alone.”

There was a long sigh that seemed to be uttered as one, and a few men hung their heads. The revelation seemed to take no man by any great surprise.

“As you know, moving out at this point is impossible.” I waited for an objection, but none came. “We’ll be here for a while, so we’re going to need supplies. Charlie team: head out again, and go farther afield now that visibility had improved. Gather anything that might be of use. And be on the lookout for survivors. Everyone else: get to work doling out the rations and make sure everyone is squared away.”

As the men moved off, I took a deep breath and made my final decision. “Ramirez! Petrov! A word.”

The two men approached me, now alone in the wreckage of the warehouse’s main floor. They were both utterly dependable, men who could be trusted to get a job done without needing constant guidance or reassurance. They were resourceful, tenacious, and stubborn under the most demanding circumstances—exactly the men I needed.

“Gentlemen,” I began slowly. “How would you characterize our current situation?”

“Fucked,” Petrov said in his moody Russian accent. “Sir.”

“We won’t last here, sir,” Ramirez said more thoughtfully. “Not with all these civvies.”

I nodded my agreement. “I need you to get us out before we start running out of supplies. Head south. There was a contingent posted in Akron when we landed.” I decided not to add ‘If Akron is still standing.’

“Come with us, sir,” Petrov said. “These people are not our responsibility.”

“I can’t leave them to die,” I said. “Not now that I’ve already found them.”

He scowled, but assented. Ramirez nodded gravely.

I supplied them with four full canteens each and a couple of our remaining MREs. They did not take any extra ammo; Petrov explained by saying that if they encountered resistance “then we are fucked anyway.” So they headed out, slogging through the thick ash as if they were snow banks. First they disappeared into silhouettes and then into nothingness.

As I watched them leave, I wondered if I had saved them or killed them. War often stirred that thought in me. But then, this wasn’t war. I don’t know what this was.

Lammert sidled up beside me, gazing into the grey expanse that had already engulfed the two men. “You chose Petrov and Ramirez, eh?” he asked softly, giving a small shrug. “Good choice.”

“It had to be someone,” I said. “How are we doing downstairs?”

“We lost one through the night,” the Sergeant intoned. “Another one is critical. The rest will probably make it. Salehi is already out of supplies.”

I surveyed the scene in silence for a moment, studying the devastated city now illuminated by a pale grey light. Looking down, I noticed that Lammert was unconsciously rubbing his injured hand. “You alright, Sergeant?”

He immediately dropped his hands to his side and nodded sharply. “Yes sir. I’ll go dig a grave for the dead one.”

I nodded. Hopefully it was the only grave we would be digging.

Charlie team returned sometime later with armfuls of supplies. Yet they also brought with them a dozen more hungry mouths, terrified survivors who had been hiding out in the rubble of the few surviving buildings in Cleveland. At least they were all ambulatory, sporting only minor scrapes and bruises, and assisted their rescuers in carrying jugs of water and crates of food.

One of the men of Charlie team, Private Lee, approached me, setting down a crate of packaged food when he arrived. “There’s not a damn thing out there, sir,” he said, wiping his brow. The hot wind still blew stubbornly in from the east. “It’s a desert now. Most buildings are flattened, nothing is working. Not a damn thing,” he said again.

I surveyed the supplies they had brought back. They had recovered an impressive amount of food, but water would remain the primary issue.

“Good work, Private,” I said. “Get these civilians down below, and give them some rations.” I looked them over—most had likely had neither food nor drink since the bombardment.

I explained our situation to the civilians as vaguely as possible, saying only that reinforcements had been delayed and that they should be prepared for a prolonged stay in this place. The news was met with an



uproar. The basement was getting crowded, and an odor began to permeate the air. The civilians began clamoring for fresh air.

“You’re not going to find any above,” I assured them. “All you’ll get is a mouthful of ash. You can hardly breathe out there.”

“This place is a dungeon!” one man shouted angrily. “You can’t keep us here, soldier!”

Spenser clenched his jaw and unconsciously hefted his rifle. “They’re like Goddamn children,” he whispered fiercely.

In the end I relented, sending them up in supervised shifts. Most returned to the basement quickly, ghostly white and shaken to the core. A few were silently weeping. The last shift neglected to go at all, spooked by the countenances of their fellows. The newly arrived survivors, meanwhile, huddled together in a corner, expressing no interest to go back above ground. They had seen the corpse of their city, and were well satiated by the sight.

The next few days passed uneventfully. The lightning storms continued intermittently, though I was so exhausted I was able to sleep right through them. The water line slowly dropped in the cistern. The tank was so large that it was difficult to notice, but Lee had constructed a rig to show how far it had already dropped.

“Few more weeks at this rate, skipper,” Lee said.

I nodded. I hoped I wouldn’t have to the chance to test his math skills.

I claimed a small section of the basement for myself, a good space snug against the wall and partly obscured by some disused machinery. On a low hanging part of one great cog there was a flat, unmarked stretch of green-painted metal that made for an ideal writing surface. First I recorded the number of days we had been in Cleveland and then scratched them out: a pointless endeavor, and yet somehow a comfort. Then I drew a diagram of the city, identifying where each of the squads were supposed to have dropped. Most were to the north, and therefore probably lost. The others were farther afield than I was prepared to send my men. Petrov and Ramirez would remain my solitary hope.

At length I began drawing something else. At first I was almost unaware of what I was doing until it began to take shape. It was my wife. An atrocious facsimile, to be sure. I tried to paint her face over the rough scratchings with my mind’s eye, but was unsuccessful. I frowned: I could not picture her. She was in Singapore, the last he had heard. I considered how likely it was for the metropolis to have been hit by the Covenant, and then quickly banished the thought from my mind.

“What are you doing?” a voice asked beside me.

I looked up and saw a young woman standing next to me. A second glance revealed her to be little more than a child, perhaps fifteen or sixteen—it was hard to be sure in the low light and the thick grime that

covered the full length of her body. She was likely pretty in more favorable circumstances: beneath the dirt he could detect delicate features and a fine complexion. Her eyes, however, were hard and unblinking, and cast a pall over her face.

“I’m thinking,” I said, pulling myself to lean against the machinery. “I wouldn’t recommend it.” He offered her a bland smile, but she did not return it. I let mine lapse, and became more serious. “Are you here with anyone?”

“My mom worked downtown,” she said shortly.

I nodded slowly: ground zero. “There is no one else?” I asked, wincing as I heard how harsh the words sounded.

“My father died a long time ago,” she said. “My brother served at Reach.” She was perfectly still as she talked, hardly even blinking.

All alone then. Alone in this hole in the earth. One grave in a massive graveyard. She was abandoned with the knowledge that her mother was dead yet tortured by the absence of certitude. I knew the feeling well.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She frowned, the first movement I had seen from her. “I never understood why people say that. You didn’t kill my family.”

I shrugged. “Embarrassment, I suppose. For bringing it up. For making you feel the pain.”

“I don’t feel anything,” she said. “Except…”

“What?”

She paused for a moment and stared at the wall behind me, her dark eyes reflecting the floodlights like polished stone. “I want to see them suffer,” she said quietly, almost in a whisper. “I want to see one of them helpless, and afraid, and dying.”

I could find no words of comfort for her, at least none which would be anything other than lifeless platitudes. Instead, I got on one knee, and gripped her shoulder. “They want to see us extinct. Let’s not oblige them. Best way to get revenge is to stay alive. Just keep on living, never give up hope.”

It was the best I could do. I searched her eyes but I could detect nothing.

“Maybe then I could see it,” she returned at length. “I could watch them die.”

Not the death but the slaughter of innocence. Her utter lack of emotion caused me to flinch with an almost physical pain. Even if humanity were to survive this genocide, what would it look like on the other side after it had gone through such painful contractions and racking loss? In her deadened eyes I saw the scion of my species.

“Yes,” I said. “Maybe then.” I released her, and she wandered off to find her own lonely corner,

veering from the clustered groups of the others. I lay back down on the ground and tried to conjure happy memories with my wife. But they were distant now and scattered to the edges of my mind, lapping against the enduring image of the girl's deadened eyes.

I awoke the following morning and marked a seventh notch in the green paint. I checked in first with our watch above ground, who had nothing to report ("Place is a fucking ghost town, sir," as one man put it.)

Next I checked with Corporal Salehi, who was doling out the water to the civilians. She handed a cup to a young boy, who drank too quickly and let some drip on his shirt.

"Not so fast, Stephen," his mother chided. "Every drop is precious."

"Alright, ma'am," Salehi said, handing her the cup next. "Drink up."

The woman held up a hand. "Give it to my son. He needs it more."

Salehi held the vessel firmly before the woman. "Drink. Now."

The woman, who had expected her magnanimous offer to be accepted and praised, declined a second time. "I want my son to have it," she said haughtily.

The Corporal grabbed the woman's wrist and shoved the cup into her hand, pushing it close to her face. "Your son is going to need you, ma'am, and if you don't drink, you *will* die a horrible fucking death. And I do *not* treat stupidity. Do you understand me?"

She gave a wide-eyed nod, and obediently downed the water.

"How you holding up, doc?" I asked when she was finished with the pair.

Salehi sighed deeply and ran a hand through her short-cropped hair. "Been better, Cap'n," she muttered. "We lost our other critical last night."

"I see."

"I really thought he was going to pull through there," she said angrily. "It was the infection in the end." Her eyes were bloodshot and her face was drawn. I had been getting little sleep; she appeared to be getting none at all.

"I was giving him water the whole time," she confessed, as if she had sinned. "What a Goddamn waste."

"You're starting to sound like Lieutenant Spenser," I observed, trying for a smirk.

She took it as an affront. "No, sir. It's just... it's such a fucking waste."

I nodded and folded my arms. "I know, doc. I know." She looked terrible, drawn ragged by the idle stress of tending to too many wounded and needy. Waiting around in a hole with a passel of frightened civilians was not a good place for Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. I had complete faith in my men in the field. Corporal Salehi, for her part, had been a steady hand on many a battlefield. Yet now she looked ready to snap, only a week into their drop.

“Finish up with the rations, then get some rest,” I said, making sure it came across as an order. “Sergeant Lammert and I will take care of the body.”

“Yes, sir,” she said without looking at me, and hurried to finish her work.

I searched for Sergeant Lammert, but I did not find him right away. None of the watch reported seeing him. At last I discovered him in the last place I expected: still sleeping in his basement nook. The big man, ever rearing with a boundless energy, was an unlikely suspect to sleep past his due. I gave him a light kick to the side and called his name.

His reaction caught me by surprise, and moved me an involuntary step or two back. Lammert sat bolt upright, his arms flailing, his eyes wild. For a moment he looked at me without recognition, then he snapped his head around to get his bearings. “What do you need, Captain?” he asked quietly, slowly getting to his feet.

“Are you alright, Sergeant?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” he replied steadily.

He did not look it. His skin was pale and clammy and he seemed incapable of standing fully erect. I had noticed the Sergeant had become more haggard as the days wore on, but now I was beginning to wonder if fatigue was the sole culprit. Lammert, however, was not forthcoming, and I decided for the moment to let it remain a mystery.

“We’ve got another body to bury,” I said.

Lammert nodded, and slowly collected himself.

We hauled the body, draped in a too-small blanket, up the stairs past a gaggle of horrified civilians. The weight of the dead man sagged on Lammert’s end. We carried him to the patch of earth at the rear of the warehouse and placed him on the ground. I pulled down the blanket and for the first time saw his face: an older man, perhaps sixty, who had yet retained his fitness. The emblem of the UNSCDF was emblazoned on his shoulder; a veteran, then. I imagined that this was not the fate the man had envisioned for himself when he was putting in his years. An expression of pain was frozen on his face, its source well evident in the bloodstained bandages that covered his stomach.

The ground was hard, and the ash on top of it had congealed into a sort of rocky mud. I pounded away upon the soil, my progress slow. Lammert, on the other hand, proceeded with timid swings, barely scratching the hardened ground. The Lammert I knew would have attacked the soil as he would have any enemy, and been driven to ever greater frenzy by its intransigence.

“Goddamnit, man!” I burst out at last. “Is there a problem?”

Lammert stopped to look at me for a moment, his eyes out of focus. A second later he was on the ground, falling like an old growth tree yielding to the final swing. I rushed over to inspect him. His eyes

were rolling listlessly and his mouth opened and closed silently. His skin was hot to the touch. I cried for Salehi's services.

The corpse I left unburied, rolling it unceremoniously into the shallow scratching in the earth and kicking some ash over top. Salehi and I carried the Sergeant back down the stairs, both of us struggling under his immense weight. We carried him past the men, who were shocked to see their normally robust Sergeant so utterly incapacitated. A few rushed forward to help.

We lay him down in the basement, and Salehi immediately started removing the Sergeant's vest and uniform. "What happened?" she asked, searching for a wound.

"I don't know," I said honestly.

Suddenly she seized hold of Lammert's hand, the one he had injured on their first day. She started to unravel the bandage, and quickly the source of the Sergeant's distress became clear. His hand was badly swollen, and the unhealed wound had turned black around the edges. The innermost layers of the bandage were stained yellow with pus, emanating a distinctly unpleasant odor.

"Goddamnit, Lammert, you fool," I murmured quietly.

Salehi stared at the infected wound for a moment or two, as if a particularly crafty enemy had just gotten the draw on her. Then she looked up and pulled me aside—a useless gesture, I thought, as Lammert was at the moment unconscious.

"This is not good, sir," she said unnecessarily. "The infection is serious, and I have nothing to treat him with. Perhaps if he had come to me earlier..." She raised her hands in defeat.

"How should we proceed?" I asked, clenching and unclenching my jaw.

"The only treatment I can offer is amputation," she said. "But in these conditions... and with his system already so weakened... his chances would be slim."

"What do you recommend?"

She paused to look at the Sergeant twitching and moaning on the ground and then turned back to me. "I say we wait overnight, see if his body is able to fight the infection at all. I can treat the wound and the fever as best I can. If he shows no sign of improvement... we'll have to amputate."

"Alright, doc," I said. "Alright."

I draped a blanket over the Sergeant and lay a damp cloth across his forehead. Salehi cleaned the wound with some alcohol Charlie team had recovered and wrapped it up with a fresh bandage. It seemed scant treatment for a man in such desperate straits, but all other avenues were closed.

Lammert drifted in and out of a restless sleep for the rest of the day, his eyes rolling in their sockets whether they were open or closed. His skin, usually a ruddy brown from many a sundrenched day in the field, was unnaturally pale and had acquired a sickly sheen from excessive perspiration. I stayed with him for

most of the day, performing my required duties when I had to and then returning to his side. There was little else to preoccupy myself with anyway, and as far as I knew Sergeant Lammert may have been the only person left alive that I would call a friend.

Salehi told me that Lammert needed to be well hydrated if he were to have any shot at all. I did not relish the idea of sacrificing extra water from our dwindling supply to a man who may soon be dead, but neither could I stand by idly and watch the man die. I gave him three times the ration, pouring the water down his throat.

Lieutenant Spenser sidled up beside me as the Sergeant gurgled down some of his water. He watched me for a while in silence, and I decided to ignore him, hoping he would leave on his own accord. He did not.

“Sir?” he ventured quietly.

“What?” I snapped.

“Sir, our water is running out fast.”

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant,” I replied wearily.

“Well, sir, as I understand, Sergeant Lammert isn’t likely to make it...”

“He definitely won’t without any water.”

“Yes, sir. But can you really justify wasting what little water we have on a dying man?”

At last I stopped what I was doing and rounded on Spenser with a suddenness that took him aback. “This is one of my men,” I hissed angrily. “Goddamnit, Lieutenant, he’s one of your men too. How much longer will it take before you realize we’re in this as *one*?”

Spenser resolutely held my gaze. “Sir, I believe you’re letting your personal feelings cloud your judgment.”

“Get the fuck away from me, Lieutenant,” I growled, surprising myself with my own ferocity. Spenser backed away and left without another word. It was likely hearing my own concerns echoed through the mouth of that bastard that had me in such a fury. In any case, I realized only after he left that my hands were clenched and shaking.

As evening approached Lammert stirred, opening his eyes and looking directly at me. “Captain?” he said weakly.

“How you feeling, Sergeant?” I asked, leaning over him.

He offered me a wry smile. “Like shit.”

I chuckled. Stupid question, I suppose.

“You’re gonna cut off my arm, aren’t you sir?” he asked bluntly.

I winced, but I nodded. “Probably,” I said.

Lammert swallowed hard, his Adam’s Apple distending in his neck. “If it goes badly... no more



water.”

I nodded again. “Alright, Ben,” I murmured. “Alright.”

He lapsed back into delirium, tossing and turning and sometimes muttering names that I had never heard before. His eyes would open at times and he would stare at me, and I was sure that he was awake. Then he would start moaning and shivering all over again. I was reminded of a documentary I had seen once about big game hunting, still popular on some sparsely populated border worlds. The hunter had shot a bear and then walked up to the downed animal to have his picture taken with it. The great beast’s eyes had rolled towards its killer, its massive arms laying uselessly by its sides, its breathing shallow and getting shallower. I looked at Lammert and saw the same thing: a proud, vigorous beast of a man, so secure in his boundless strength, felled by an invisible enemy that he could not fight. My heart ached painfully in my chest.

In the small hours of the morning Salehi came around to check on the Sergeant. She put a hand to his head and checked his wound. The new bandage was already soaked through with pus.

“He’s not getting better, sir,” she said, without looking at me. “It’s not enough.”

“Alright, then,” I said.

I helped her fashion a saw from a bayonet. She doused the blade in alcohol and made a mark just above the elbow. She was breathing heavily.

“Sir, I am not remotely qualified for this,” she said.

“Just do your best, doc,” I said.

I slipped a piece of wood wrapped in cloth into his mouth. The movement awoke the Sergeant from his feverish sleep and he looked around wildly. Suddenly he began whimpering quietly, high pitched moans that sounded vaguely dog-like. The sound was so pitiful coming from the man I knew the Sergeant to be that tears formed in my eyes. Removing Lammert’s arm was the cruelest punishment I could imagine.

Corporal Salehi made the first cut and immediately threw the Sergeant into violent thrashings that I could barely restrain. His screams, even muffled as they were by the gag, carried in the open space and stirred some of the dozing civilians from their restless sleep.

About halfway through Lammert’s thick forearm, the Sergeant went limp in my arms. Fortunately, it was just shock, for I could still feel his pulse in his left wrist. I never looked away from the amputation—I could hardly ask it of Salehi and not at least share in the horror of it.

Salehi cauterized the wound, sending a final groan through the unconscious Sergeant, and at last it was done. The detached arm looked grotesque lying next to Lammert’s side, and Salehi quickly covered it with a cloth.

“It’s done,” she said. She dressed the horrific stump and took away the septic limb. I stayed with him, gripping his remaining hand in my own.

Quickly Lammert's temperature fell, first to its regular level, and then far below. His skin became deathly pale, almost sheet white, and was covered in a slimy layer of sweat. His pulse was slow, perilously slow. I heaved a sigh and remembered what Lammert had said to me. I put some water to his lips.

Lammert awoke some time later in the early evening, looking up at me with half-open eyes. "How'd it go?" he said in barely more than a whisper.

"Good," I said.

He let out a long breath and seemed to settle into a more comfortable position. "This is not how I pictured it," he said. I did not ask him to explain.

"I've been dreaming," he continued, even quieter now. "I never dream. I dreamed about my brother. I haven't seen him for so long now." He raised his head and looked at me. "Will you find him, if he's still alive? Tell him I miss him."

I nodded. "I will." My throat was tight and the words barely emerged.

Lammert let his head lie back with a thud, exhausted by the effort. "Okay," he said, and closed his eyes. He was dead an hour later.

I stayed with him a while longer until I heard someone walk up behind me. It was Lieutenant Spenser.

"It's a shame, sir," he said stiffly. "Lammert was a good man."

I turned around slowly to face him. I was nearly overcome with the urge to strike him, but I was able to suppress it. Instead I draped the body of Sergeant Lammert over my shoulder, rebuffed Spenser's attempt to help, and carried him up the stairs. I buried him by myself.

The days wore on and the cistern emptied precipitously. Spenser was forever hovering around the tank, constantly checking its contents as if sheer willpower would reverse course. His incessant fretting was aggravating nerves that were already frayed, but his concern was well founded.

"We're going to have to cut rations," I said to Salehi.

"We're already just giving the minimum," she returned.

"We either suffer, or we die."

My own mouth was constantly dry, and the prospect of getting even less water was not a pleasant one. Spenser greeted the news with a solemn nod, and suggested we post a twenty-four hour watch to the cistern, lest any parched civilian sought to slake their worsening thirst at the cost of others. I acceded reluctantly, cursing the necessity.

One evening later that week, I relieved Spenser from his watch of the cistern. He seemed preoccupied, leaning against the tank and staring at the ground. He did not notice me until I stood directly in front of him.

“You can go, Lieutenant,” I prompted.

“Sir,” he said, snapping from his reverie. “I was just thinking.”

“About what?” I asked reluctantly.

“I was inspecting my sidearm earlier, sir,” he said. “You know, in case it comes to that.”

I didn’t say anything. I just stared at him.

“Turns out the fucking thing’s jammed,” he went on. “Clogged with ash. And I can’t use any water to clean it out. This Goddamn place won’t even let us die when we want to.”

I gripped his shoulder and shook him violently. “I can’t have my only officer talking about blowing his fucking head off!” I hissed angrily. “Are you losing it?”

“No, sir,” he said, shaking free of my grasp. He stalked off, and I made a mental note of one more thing to be concerned about in my already cluttered mind.

The days were getting longer, in every sense of the word. Thirst set in quickly and fiercely, making the hours pass at a torturously slow rate. The civilians begged for more when we distributed, surprised every time by how quickly they finished their allotment. The children suffered especially, becoming dizzy and lethargic as the days progressed. I noticed the mother who had protested earlier now drank every drop, and like the rest moaned for more.

The skies continued to clear as well, allowing the sun’s light to penetrate longer and deeper. Rather than lighten spirits, however, it served only to depress them. As the gauze was pulled back, the extent of the destruction was revealed. A few skeletons of buildings remained in the near distance, rising like ribcages from the grey terrain. Beyond that there was nothing; the city was utterly flattened, its land scorched bare and smoothed to glass by the intense heat. I had never seen anything like it. Truly, this was hell come to Earth.

The clearing skies let our rooftop sentries be something more than useless fixtures. And one afternoon—about a week after Lammert’s death—they finally saw a sign of life in the desolate stillness.

“Sir!” Private Lee called to me from above. “We’ve got movement!”

I ran up the stairs past some hopeful looking civilians and scrambled up the rubble on the warehouse floor to reach the roof. Private Lee and Lieutenant Spenser stood together at the far corner of the roof, both staring singularly to the northeast. I joined them and followed their line of sight, and in the distance I spotted two figures approaching our position.

They were obscured by the hazy conditions, but they were bipedal and human-sized and for a moment I thought it must be Petrov and Ramirez, returning in defeat from their forty years in the desert. As they neared, however, they began to take shape. Their heads were long and narrow and spiky protrusions were evident from their crowns. They were wiry and hunched and had a halting, jerky gait.

“Jackals,” Lee hissed. He raised his rifle and aimed at them.

“Wait,” I said, holding up my hand. Something wasn’t right.

They walked towards us with painful slowness down the middle of the street, bereft of any weapon or shield. Neither made any reaction to their movement or talking despite being only a couple hundred feet distant—Jackals’ senses tended to be extremely acute. Rather, they simply limped forward, oblivious to their surroundings. The one on the left stumbled and fell to the dust, and made no move to arise.

“Are they wounded?” Lee asked.

I narrowed my eyes and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly Spenser leapt up and ran down the rubble to the warehouse floor. “We got Jackals, people!” he shouted down the stairs. A few curious heads poked up.

I yelled at him to stop but he ignored me, instead proceeding out onto the street to face the Jackals himself. I stared for a moment in faint disbelief, then I rose to follow him.

A group of civilians had emerged to gawk at the scene on the street. The still ambulatory Jackal seemed oblivious of the two ODSTs approaching it. It was not even looking at us.

“Hey!” Spenser shouted when he was almost upon it, eliciting the smallest tilt of its head. Spenser fired three shots from his rifle, and the creature fell to the ground. The Lieutenant passed the corpse without a second look and proceeded to the second Jackal.

“Lieutenant Spenser!” I shouted. “Stop!”

Still he ignored me, and came to a halt before the fallen Jackal. From my position behind the Lieutenant I could see the creature clearly. It had fallen on its stomach with its elongated jaw flat against the ground. Its eyes were open and it was staring up; not at Spenser, but at the featureless sky above. Its breaths were uneven and rasping, and it was periodically overcome with racking coughs that unsettled the dust it lay in.

Spenser raised the butt of his rifle and smashed it upon the top of the Jackal’s head. Again and again he struck it, in rapid succession and with ferocious brutality. He beat it until its brains were exposed and the skull was buried in the hardened ash. The creature’s limbs twitched with each strike, even after it appeared dead.

I grabbed Spenser’s rifle on its upswing and yanked down upon it, reeling him backwards.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Lieutenant?” I yelled, standing threateningly over him. Lee had caught up with us, standing at a distance with his rifle half-raised and his eyes on Spenser.

Spenser rolled and got to his feet, glaring at me with an expression of barely suppressed fury. “My rifle, sir,” he said stiffly.

I considered seriously having the Lieutenant shot right there, on the street. I knew that he was

becoming a problem, and would only become a bigger one as conditions worsened. Yet I could hardly countenance the thought, and the men certainly wouldn't. Slowly I gave Spenser's weapon back to him. He seized it and walked away.

Lee sauntered up next to me, watching Spenser leave. "LT's losing it," he murmured.

"Yes he is." And I didn't know what to do about it. I desperately wished that Lammert was still around to give clarity to my thoughts.

Lee and I dragged the Jackals off the road and lay them in a ditch. When we returned to the warehouse I found the girl I had spoken to earlier standing in the doorway, staring up the road to the spot where the dead creatures lay. Her eyes were wide open and unblinking, glued to that spot with a searing intensity. I put my hand on her shoulder and slowly guided her back inside.

Sleep was coming easier to me now now—my incessant thirst was making me lethargic. But the sleep was restless and pockmarked by disturbing dreams, and I awoke more tired than when I had first laid down. They were usually a bland sort of nightmare, influenced by my physical state. Often I would be marching, utterly alone in a strange land, exhausted and dehydrated and yet pressed on by an unknown urgency. Other times they were more sinister—my mind would replay Lammert's amputation, or I would imagine the warehouse's roof collapsing and burying me alive.

I recalled one evening that Sergeant Lammert had told me that he had dreamed for the first time in many years just before his death. I began to finally accept the reality that I would probably die in this Godforsaken hole, a leathery husk sealed forever in this place—the warehouse my tombstone, the basement my tomb. No longer did I consider it an abstract possibility to struggle against, but rather the destiny that had been written the moment that plasma hit the earth.

I awoke the following morning to a familiar sound: the echoing sonic boom of distant thunder. Yet it was accompanied by another sound, a sound that many years on a starship and many weeks in this desert had estranged me from. It sounded like bacon sizzling in the pan, or the static of a dead radio.

"Rain!" somebody cried.

For a moment I thought I might still be dreaming, but the commotion in the room began to convince me otherwise. I rolled on my side and pushed myself up, and saw that nearly everyone was rushing towards the stairs. I pushed my way to the front—even in their elation, the civilians deferred to my uniform—and saw a glorious sight. From the great gash in the roof poured rivulets of water, washing down the debris and pooling at my feet.

"We are saved!" Spenser declared. He ran out into the street, and many of the civilians followed.

The rain came down in steady sheets, its course unaltered in the deathly still air. Some of the civilians looked skywards and opened their mouths, letting the abundant water flow into their dry mouths. Spenser,

the first man out, had upended his helmet and collected the water in its basin. He drank deeply its contents and let out a roar of satisfaction. I stepped out and let the water wash over me, as if it were my salvation, as if it delivered me from this place.

Gradually I became aware that something was not right. The civilians all around me began coughing and hacking, clutching their stomachs in pain. Lieutenant Spenser doubled over, his head bent down and his hands clenching the muddy ground. I looked up, and my eyes began to sting.

“Get out of the rain!” I yelled, propelling the nearest to me through the doorway. “Get back inside!”

I recovered Spenser from the ground, as he seemed unable to walk. I shut my eyes tightly and closed my mouth, stumbling blindly for the doorway. Someone reached out and pulled us in, and I collapsed on the ground. Spenser was breathing heavily on the floor beside me.

All the toxins and contaminants of an entire city poured down upon us that day. It had been foolish to think that this place would surrender anything to us, or give us any quarter. I felt in that moment as if we were living in the maw of a great beast that wished to swallow us whole, and it was wearing us down relentlessly until we submitted to our fate.

Most of us suffered only mild irritation from the accident—upset stomachs or reddened eyes. But Spenser, whose novel idea had delivered many mouthfuls of the rainwater down his gullet, suffered considerably more. He lay in agony, his body contorted in pain, now and then overcome with fits of coughing and vomiting.

I approached him with a cup of water, kneeling down and offering it to him. He pushed it away forcefully, almost spilling its contents.

“Don’t waste it on me!” he spat fiercely. “I’m done.”

I watched Lieutenant Spenser writhe on the ground, his body seizing violently in order to vomit, only there was nothing left inside. He had a sort of honor to him, I suppose—a rare species, to be sure, but it was there. He didn’t last the night.

After the rain stopped the view cleared even more. It was as if the sky had flushed its system of the poison that had caused its long malaise. A few days later we even saw blue sky, though it was quickly swallowed by the intractable grey. Still, the air became clearer and breathing became easier. It had been so long since I had taken a breath of truly fresh air I almost didn’t recognize the sensation.

Yet even this small relief was colored, for the clearing brought something else with it: the cold. The temperature began to edge toward zero, showing the evidence of every breath left to me.

“It’s getting colder every day, sir,” Lee said to me one evening when we were on watch together, studying the skies as if he were an augur.

I looked over at him. His comment was superfluous, but his point was well taken. We had both seen



this many times before: intense cold following closely on the heels of great heat. The Covenant had been hard at work glassing our world.

“Petrov and Ramirez ain’t coming back, sir,” Lee said abruptly.

I nodded. Another superfluous remark.

For their part, the civilians had settled into a quiet sort of submission. The gentle murmur of idle conversation was rarely heard at any time of the day. Thirst and hunger had drained them of rebellion and anger. Worse than never being slaked, their thirst was only ever half-slaked, such that they moaned pitifully for more once their rations were done. I started to get the feeling as I fed and watered them that I was tending to cattle after a bad harvest. They started to take on the hollow expressions and lumbering movements of people waiting to die.

My own men were holding up little better. I found one man asleep on watch one night when I came to relieve him. I could summon no anger against the man. The time was fast approaching when the conventions of duty would be replaced with the struggle to survive. I imagined each of us dying slowly, speech no longer a comfort or even a possibility. One by one, we would succumb to dehydration and die agonizing, wretched, undignified deaths. I only hoped that I would not be the last.

Yet it seemed that maintaining our sentry still had some use after all. On the morning of our thirty-seventh day in hell, I stood at the edge of the cistern and gazed at the shallow pool of water that sloshed at the bottom of the tank. I studied the face that was reflected in its brackish contents, and could barely recognize it as my own. My lips were cracked from thirst and blue from cold. My face was by now covered in a wispy, matted beard that failed to conceal how thin I had become. My eyes were hollow, red, and deeply inset. Just as the horror of my own appearance nearly overcame me, Corporal Salehi suddenly called my name down the stairwell. “Captain Burke, sir!” she cried hoarsely. “Topside, now!”

I proceeded to the main floor slowly, my muscles unable to respond to the urgency in her voice. Yet when I reached the main floor, new life was breathed into my legs, and I clambered up the debris to the roof. For there was a voice in the distance, a human one, clearly enhanced by a loudspeaker. I could make out neither the words nor the source, but I could detect the direction. I searched the sky furiously, and then I saw it: a black speck on the horizon. It was getting bigger, moving closer. Soon I could even make out the words.

“We leave no man behind,” the voice said faintly. “We leave no man behind.”

A few of the civilians who still had the strength to move emerged from the basement and gazed up at the sky, more in disbelief than elation. As the black speck drew closer, I saw that it was a Pelican. My heart fluttered with anticipation.

“It’s not slowing down, sir,” noted Lee, who had joined us. He was right: as the Pelican roared nearer to us, it showed no sign of slowing. In a few more seconds it would have flown right over us.

“They don’t know we’re here,” I murmured. “Fire your weapons into the air!”

We fired ceaselessly into the air, paying no heed to the wasted bullets. As I fired my rifle skyward, I realized for the first time how weak I had become. The recoil nearly knocked me over and slammed with undue pain into my shoulder. I dug in my heels and continued firing, praying the pilots would see us, praying that they would stop.

They did not. For the briefest of moments, salvation passed within reach, and then was gone. My heart sank, and I nearly collapsed with exhaustion.

“We leave no man behind,” the voice echoed for a final time.

Salehi nudged me and pointed down at the street. “They dropped something, sir,” she croaked.

I had been so distraught that I had not noticed it. They had dropped a crate a few hundred feet from our position that had landed neatly in the middle of the street below. We scrambled down from the roof and approached the crate at what I imagined was a run, but what was probably a languid trot.

The crate was small, too small to contain any helpful amount of supplies. I wondered what it could be—a working radio? A beacon?

It took all three of us to pry open the lid. We clawed at it with the desperation of cornered animals. Our fingers were seared by the freezing metal, but still we persisted. At last it came off, and revealed its contents.

They were medals. Silver stars, all. I grabbed a handful and examined them in the dim light, as if a closer examination might reveal their hidden secret.

Salehi collapsed to her knees and wept tearlessly. Lee simply stared at the crate in shock.

I don’t know why, but I laughed. I threw the medals to the ground. They were swallowed by the grey ash.

# ARTIST'S GALLERY

COLONEL SANDERS



These might be screen manipulated poses and screenshots, but Col. Sanders has managed to tweak them just enough to provide a threateningly eerie atmosphere.

Look closely in the image (below left), and you'll see the ominous reflection of a Covenant Banshee.



# DO NO HARM

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MAXREALFLUGEL

Being a field surgeon often provides oneself with a unique perspective. More specifically, one filled with never-ending bloodshed and the thinnest veil of hope one can imagine.

Every day I receive over three hundred prospective patients, but unfortunately, and despite my best efforts, most of them die. Those that do survive are either too injured to ever return to active duty or have the untimely misfortune to make a speedy recovery, only to die later on during another engagement with the enemy.

My current patient is in those same, dark woods. He's a twenty-nine year-old Marine Sergeant with extensive plasma burns to his torso and legs, and shrapnel in his abdomen. Ironically, his injuries are the result of a small victory—the destruction of a Covenant Scarab. The resulting explosion showered him with raindrop-sized globules of incandescent plasma and a thousand metallic shards of alien leftovers as he tried to pull his platoon to safety, and beyond the reach of the explosion. From what I could gather from the attending medic, the core exploded quicker than anticipated.

Another covenant assault from the west deterred, at least for the time being. It was a bittersweet moment of excitement for the defenders as they realised that more lives had been lost from the destruction of the Scarab than during its initial rampage.

Despite the ugly appearance of his burns, most of the damage was superficial, though that would do little to deter the Sergeant from plunging into shock. My main concern was the shrapnel wound to his stomach and the surrounding area. The initial scan had revealed over sixty separate pieces of fragmentation and all of them were inhibiting the bodies' repair system, especially the ability to stem the flow of blood.

“Haemostasis is surprisingly sluggish and he's pushing into tachycardia,” I voiced with the same cool and almost uncaring manner that had seen me through the past twenty years. “Nurse, apply a pro-coagulant and standby with some Epinephrine. I'll try and remove the more intrusive fragments. The others will have to wait till he's more stable.”

The attending nurse acknowledged with a simple nod and proceeded to administer the drugs, which by UNSC terms were surprisingly basic, but treating and operating on the countless injured, on a distant

colony came with the more problems than just a lack of home comforts. Standard operating room medication was a luxury this far out.

Normally, the artificial method of preventing a patient from bleeding to death was administered, initially, with biofoam and then dermacortic steroids. The actual job of coagulation is helped along with small electrically charged gel pads called Haemo-packs. These small, but clever inventions were designed to emit a small electrical charge that attracted the bodies' platelets, rapidly accelerating the clotting effect in a specific area. Afterwards, the patient would be back on their feet in no time. But here, on the remote colony of Harmony, all we had were a collection of locally produced, sub-standard pharmaceuticals that hadn't seen the light of day since the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century.

"Patient appears to be responding to treatment, though his blood pressure is still quite low." Voicing the step-by-step method of treatment was an old but proven technique. It ensured each step was being taken and that all of the attending staff knew exactly what you were thinking, and what course of action might be required.

The echocardiograph suddenly chirped a different beat to its standard, glum melody. Usually it meant a dramatic and unfortunate change in the status of the patient, but in this case it was a relief. The change in status was a rise in blood pressure. Modern medication and treatment had an almost instantaneous effect on the patients' physiology but these drugs were slow to act, providing seconds of agonising apprehension.

"Finally, some good news. Nurse, if you would like to finish with the dressings I'll prep for our next unfortunate victim of UNSC strategic planning. Or Covenant weapons fire, depending on how you look at it."

The nurse nodded in response and a faint smile presented itself through her less than sterile facemask. As I finished up with the patient, she disappeared into the darkened rear of our operating room, which in this case was a cave set several hundred metres beneath the Sisellic mountain range of Harmony's northern nature reserve. We were holed up in this rocky network of caves and corridors for our own protection, along with an ONI detachment and the residing military command structure. So far the caves had proven effective against Covenant artillery and airstrikes. But we were vulnerable to any form of ground assault if the outer defences were to fall. So far the residing Marine and ODST battalions had provided an unbreakable wall of tanks and rifles, but human defences rarely lasted against the Covenant's unending drive to eradicate every trace of humanity.

After quickly sterilising my hands, I met with our only porter, Richard, an elderly volunteer from a nearby farming town. He was a CMA veteran from the insurrection years and was well into his eighties, but his resilience and determination to do his part matched that of any marine. He pushed the wheeled stretcher into our equivalent of a prep ward with beads of sweat on his heavily creased brow.

"ODST with possible head trauma," he gasped, wiping his forehead with a bloodstained

handkerchief. “Three broken ribs, possible internal bleeding and a fractured fibula.”

“Anything else?”

Richard immediately wheeled the patient straight into the operating room muttering something as he went.

“Anything else, Richard?” I asked in a softer tone.

“Damn Covenant bastards,” he blurted. “He only had a fractured leg. Jonesy was applying a splint and some pain relief when one of those dirty-faced, split-lipped bastards stuck him with a plasma grenade.”

Richard’s blunt response took me by surprise. For weeks he had been a mild mannered elderly gentleman with an eagerness to please. But clearly the situation was beginning to take its toll.

“Was anyone else hurt?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “No. He did the decent, human thing and ran towards the enemy before it went off. The trooper caught the brunt of the blast, which resulted in his injuries.”

“Okay, Richard,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Take a break. There’s some coffee in the next room.”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve got errands to run. Patients to bring in.”

*Stubborn old man.* But I admired him for it. “Well, its there if you need it.”

Richard quickly shuffled out of the room, grabbing another stretcher as he went, leaving me alone with the ODS trooper. He had a large, deep cut to his forehead and his body armour was buckled and blackened by fire.

I quickly removed it to get a better look.

Jonsey’s brief diagnosis had been bang on. The trooper had extensive swelling to his abdomen and his skin was pale and clammy. He was losing blood somewhere. His other injury, the fractured fibula was an open wound—the bone protruding from a bloody tear in his leg, but despite its appearance it was low on the triage list. Internal bleeding was the main priority here.

“Nurse, a hand please.”

I carried on until she returned, stripping the trooper of his equipment and clothing. His helmet and weapon were the only things missing; presumably the explosion had reduced the helmet to mush and his weapon was needed elsewhere. Ammunition was becoming alarmingly sparse.

A series of heavy explosions rocked the cave. *More airstrikes, no doubt.* Unfortunately the war would have to wait, at least until I can get this trooper back on his feet.

“Nurse!” There was no reply to my request. Only more thuds as the cave shuddered a second time. I placed an oxygen mask over the trooper and administered a cocktail of posttraumatic drugs to steady his vitals before wheeling him over to the only auto surgeon on the planet. A quick scan revealed a small haemorrhage in his lower intestine and a hairline fracture to his skull. Four of his ribs, not three, were



broken. *Not far off, Jonesy. Not far off.*

“Nurse!” The lack of response was becoming tiresome. I quickly made my way into the recovery area, expecting to see her finishing up with the previous patient. *I found her alright.* Dead. Lying on the dusty floor with a broken neck. The patients, all fifty-eight of them, were also dead. They were all laid with their heads at impossible angles. *What the...*

A flash. Then movement.

There was a shimmer to the right, then the left, again and again until I realised exactly what I was looking at. Elites. Covenant Elites. I was facing a dozen of the Covenants’ best troops and they were all looking directly at me with hate-filled eyes.

*Shit.*

I was almost certainly dead or soon to be in just a matter of seconds.

“Human,” a voice bellowed from behind.

I turned to see an eight-foot tall Elite clad in pristine white armour, save some scuff marks around its left greave and the odd, crimson smattering of human blood along its forearms. The creature thumbed a symbol on its wrist and the forward-most section of the Elite’s helmet peeled away like the petals on a flower, revealing its quad arrangement of mandibles. Despite having been privy to several ONI examinations where each captured Elite was dissected like a frog, I still found the living version quite perturbing.

“Human,” it repeated. “You are a Doctor?”

The Elite’s grasp of grammar was surprising but not as surprising as what it did next. Its four mandibles retracted inwards and clicked, forming an almost seamless mouth.

“Yes,” I said nervously.

“Your healing skills are required in order to bring the Great Journey within our reach.”

Its retracted mandibles had improved pronunciation.

I looked around at the other Elites. They all seemed fine. “Which one of you is injured?” I queried.

“Hah,” it scoffed at my comment. “It will take more than your pitiful defences to put any of us down.”

*They must all be dead. Damn.* “Did no one survive?”

“Just one, human. He could be important in our slaughter of your species, but he requires treatment.” The Elite then barked something in its native dialect and another Elite, in blue armour, entered, carrying an injured, unconscious human in its massive arms. The Elite in white then took a step forward. “I will provide you with any additional assistance. But should you fail to heal this human, you will join him in death.”

“And if I succeed?”

“Then you will be free to leave this world, if you have the means to do so.”

I was overwhelmed, an amicable Elite offering me a chance to survive. “I’ll need to assess his

condition,” I said softly. “I need him on the bed, over there,” I said pointing to the area where the auto surgeon was.

The other Elite complied with my request and placed the patient on the bed, before inspecting the area for anything that could prove useful for any uncooperative and belligerent human, myself included. It pulled out several scalpels and a bag full of hypodermic needles and set them to one side.

“I’ll need those to treat him.”

The other Elite in white seemed to back me up and ordered the one in blue to leave the surgical tools, but not before it smashed the Auto Surgeon into a buckled and bent pile of metal.

“I... I needed that.”

“Are you not capable of treating this human with your own eyes? Your *own* history describes the healing of humans without any equipment.”

This Elite had done its homework. I was more than capable of diagnosing the patient without the auto surgeon, but the process was simply quicker with it. “Yes I am, but it *will* take a little longer.”

The Elite glared at me. “Very well. Begin.”

The patient was male and after assessing his vitals I looked over his injuries. He had been subjected to overpressure, and was bleeding from his ears. His left thigh was also bleeding quite badly and there were a number of burn marks on his clothing where seared flesh was clearly visible. I quickly pulled his clothing and body armour off to reveal a number of plasma splash marks on his torso. Clearly, someone had discharged a plasma weapon but the damage was not as extensive as I had first thought. I moved on to his leg injury.

The flow of blood was regular and rhythmic. Which meant one thing; his femoral artery had been nicked. Any more and he would already be dead.

“Shit.”

The commanding Elite stepped forward to face me from across the bed. “What concerns you, human?”

“One of his major arteries has been damaged. If I can’t repair it, he’ll bleed to death.”

“I need not remind you of the penalties for failure, human.”

“I know. You’ll kill me, and most likely every other human that you’ll ever encounter in this godforsaken war. As good as you are at killing us you’ll still lose hundreds of thousands of lives. A needless loss.”

“You do not wish us dead, human?”

I continued trying to fix the damaged artery. “I wish no one dead, *Elite*. Even if you were the one here, on the operating table, I’d do everything to save you. To keep you alive.”

He grunted. “Only to keep me for your masters to question me.”

“No!” I snapped. “Because I value life and I took an oath, *sworn* an oath to do no harm. Surely your doctors do something similar.”

“Any doctor of ours maintains their distance, far from those who spill blood in the name of the great journey. Far from any warrior of *Sanghelios*.” The Elite seemed to swell with pride as he spoke, earning approving nods from the other Elites.

The wound refused to mend.

“Damn it. I can’t stop the bleeding without a cauterizing agent or the appropriate tool.”

“Will none of these suffice?” The Elite asked, pointing to the line of surgical tools on the side. The term ‘*human*’ had been dropped as well.

“No. I need something hot to stem the flow of blood. And unfortunately the one tool that could do this was on the auto surgeon you smashed up.”

“Then you will both die,” it stated, activating an energy sword.

“Wait, your sword! I can use it to seal the wound.”

The Elite pulled back, raising the sword level to lunge at my head. “Explain,” it demanded.

“The sword generates heat, instantly cauterizing any wound it inflicts. I’ve seen previous victims of sword attacks. Granted, the majority of them died but those that were fortunate enough to survive did so because the wound was sealed, preventing any further loss of blood.”

I wasn’t lying to save my own skin; it was very much the truth. I had treated hundreds of sword victims throughout the war. Some had lost limbs but had recovered from the attacks. Afterwards, they had them replaced by prosthetic or flash cloned versions. “If I could get you to use your sword to seal the artery then I can do the rest with a simple needle and thread. But you’ll have to be careful.”

“I will not use this sacred weapon of war to heal the enemy, human.”

The human suffix was clearly back in use. I was no longer of any use. I had to think quickly. “If he dies, your ‘Great Journey’ will surely be further away and more arduous. Healing this man with your sword will bring a speedy end to this war and you’ll be able to return... to *Sanghelios*.”

The very mention of this place had an instant effect on the Elites. They shifted their footing and unsheathed their swords in unison. *Sanghelios*, wherever or whatever it was, was clearly a place of meaning, of purpose—Almost Eden-like. Then, one of the other Elites, dressed in red armour, stepped forward, offering his sword to the commander in white. He then turned to me after receiving an approving nod.

“Ceris Malavee will assist you now,” the commander uttered. Guide him well, human.”

“Of course.” I cleaned the wound with a handful of gauze and steri-wipes. Then I pulled the wound open and clamped it. “All I need you to do is gently touch the artery, here,” I pointed. “But I need you to be slow and gentle.”

The response was silence until a grunt signalled some approval from the commander. The one in

red then stepped closer, his sword aimed at the wound. It was a cumbersome size and any sudden movement would result in his leg being left on the floor. To be honest, I was surprised the commander had not thought of mentioning a complete amputation, it would have been easier, but delaying his full recovery might bring about some fortunate though unlikely intervention—an ODST strike team perhaps. So if the commander was not going to bring it up, I was certainly not going to remind him.

The Elite was skilled, even with something this delicate. He carefully brushed the very edge of the sword with the now protruding artery. There was a faint hiss and a small puff of smoke and then the familiar smell of burning flesh and tissue. The blood immediately stopped leaking out of the wound. I checked his pulse and timed the marked improvement to his blood pressure. The result was positive.

I smiled.

“Will he recover, human?” Probed the commander.

“I’ll have to administer some drugs to keep the swelling down and dull the pain, and I’ll need to apply some dressings to his other wounds, but yes, he’ll recover,” I grinned.

Upon hearing this, the Elite in red stepped to one side, twisted the sword around and thrust the glowing blue blade into its chest. There was an audible pop. The armour cracked and shattered around the two prongs before smoke seeped out of the wounds. It dropped to the ground, limp and lifeless.

“What was that all about?”

My question went unanswered. Instead, the other Elites gathered around their dead comrade, swords held aloft, roaring and screaming with glorious pride. Once finished, they left with their fallen. Leaving me alone with the commander.

“He gave himself to our holy cause and will find his place among the finest warriors of Sanghelios, past and present.”

I carried on cleaning the rest of his wounds, wiping the patient down with steri-wipes. It was only when I reached his face that I realised the full extent of his importance to the Elite’s future plans of interrogation. It was the residing ONI Commander. He would have detailed, extensive knowledge of every surrounding UNSC colony, their coordinates, defences, military strength and the whereabouts of each defensive fleet assigned to the nearby sectors. I was aiding the enemy. *Damn*. I needed to do something. I needed to stop them from using him, but that meant an unthinkable course of action. But worse would come from doing nothing. I picked up four syringes and filled three of them with postoperative drugs, but I left the fourth for something else.

“What are you doing, human?”

I put on my best poker face. “I’m giving the patient a postoperative cocktail of drugs that will aid in his recovery. He’ll be more responsive that way and in less pain. If you decide to keep him alive long enough, he’ll make a full recovery within a month.”

The Elite looked me up and down, glanced at my collection of syringes and then nodded. "Proceed."

I continued.

"I can see honour in what you do, human. Abiding by a code to treat all that could otherwise be lost. I suppose you extend the life of your species, of what little time they have left.

*If that were the case, if we are so insignificant as opponents, you would not be here, picking up wounded soldiers to interrogate.* I wanted to voice my opinion but I had things to do, lives to save.

After I finished, the Elite escorted me outside with the patient on a wheeled stretcher, into an early morning vista of golden twilight. We past over a dozen bodies on the way, one of them was Richard. He was covered in countless plasma burns.

When I arrived a month ago, the defences here were formidable, even by Covenant standards. Now, though, they were a smoking assemblage of death and destruction, littered with fire and plumes of black smoke. Above, Covenant cruisers glided silently among the clouds, dispensing and receiving their contents of drop ships and ground support craft. Then, one by one, they each released a focussed beam of plasma onto the surface. The nearest beam was perhaps ten or twelve miles away.

The Elite continued walking with the unconscious ONI officer in tow as I stared at the horizon of fire. As they both reached the glowing beam of light from a Covenant drop ship the Elite turned to face me with a large, menacing grin.

"I did say that you would be allowed to leave this world if you had the means to do so, human."

I continued to stare as they both ascended into the drop ship, which quickly left for the nearest cruiser.

I was now alone and perhaps the only human left alive on Harmony.

"Yes, you did say I could leave if I had the means, but if you think humanity is simply going to roll over and die then you're seriously fucking deluded. You're all a bunch of deceitful, ugly, split-faced bastards that think the road to victory will be easy. I might be a doctor, but I'm also the last line of defence on the UNSC colony of Harmony and I'm here to ruin your day like a dose of the clap. Because that last injection was a combination of some of the most deadly concoctions that ONI medical research has ever come up with!" I screamed at the circling cruisers and the stars beyond. "Your precious human cargo will recover for his interrogation, alright, just in time for the drugs to kick in. He'll die, and you'll be introduced to a mutated strain of the bubonic plague, specifically aimed at your fucking heads."

I casually walked inside the cave entrance, pulled out a bottle of whiskey from Richard's locker, grabbed a chair and the trolley with the unconscious form of the ODST and made my way back outside. By the time he would recover enough from his injuries and regain consciousness it would all be over.

I toasted the future of humanity with a generous swig of whiskey and waited for the fire to consume me.



SECTION-3

February 8<sup>th</sup> 2567

CODENAME: HYDRABAD

They've surprised us all. Who would have thought—a human statue on their home world. Cole always said he would have the last laugh. Now he'll be watching them 24/7.

He... I was trying out my artistic side.



NAME: MYSTY WINTER



# BIOGRAPHIES:

## **MaxReallflugel:**

Max or Dave as he's really known by is a writer in the making. He's currently writing an original Science-Fiction novel with publishing in mind. And his previous military experience has undoubtedly played a part in creating such vivid and atmospheric stories. When he's not writing, Max can be found scouring his fridge for food.

## **EspenGenin:**

Completely self-tought and an obvious Halo fan, Espen is truly boud for greatness. Any game studio out there that values a talented concept artist would be wise to hire the man from Norway. Otherwise he might be found working for the competition.

## **AJW34307:**

Like most on here, AJ is one talented writer, with a plethora of imagination and an eagerness to put it on paper to boot. The future holds lots of shiny sparkly things for AJ. He's also a keen Dr Who fan, with material previously written on the timelord himself as well as previous fictional shorts from Mass Effect, Star Wars and Percy Jackson.

## **Air Force Hero:**

AFH is a seventeen-year old who likes to dive into both concept and 3D art. He's a regular in the Gallery forum on B.net and has an extensive range of work on the Deviant web site. He hopes to be a full on official artist in the near future with a degree in 3D motion design and will, of course, be applying for a job at Bungie.

## **Deception Cobra:**

Tyler is a sixteen-year old who lives in America and has been a serious fanfiction writer for over a year. Some of his early work included Halo-inspired shorts on Edgar Allen Poe poems. Then Halo 3 ODST came out and he penned his first serious story, High Charity. But despite aspirations of becoming a renowned writer, Tyler is actually aiming for Presidency.

**Skulblaka:**

Billy is from Ireland and started off his artistic ventures by drawing cows and tractors. Later in his life he decided to start drawing the Covenant, and though he uses traditional methods, Billy never fails to convey images that are thought provoking and deeply set within the universe of Halo, especially the humanity of it all. Besides all of that, Billy aims high, very high, indeed. He would love to fly a Eurofighter Typhoon in the Royal Air Force.

**Mr Evil 37:**

Elliott is only seventeen but has a solid belief in his talents and has aspirations to match. He's been writing for five years, which includes a horde of original stories so any future venture into the realm of publishing will be well practiced.

**Just Another Fan:**

Unlike most of our other contributors, writers and artists, Just Another Fan is more than just a player of Halo games and a fan of the universe, he's a Bungie forum ninja, so no swearing. His artistic talent is clearly evident in every nanometer of his work.

**Random No337:**

Though Random didn't write or draw anything in Revolutions, he did put in a tremendous amount of work as the resident Editor, spellchecker and doer of all things difficult that no one else particularly wants to deal with. Without Random, Revolutions would not have become a reality.

**Arthur Wellesley:**

What's this? A stranger? Arthur Wellesley does not usually hang around on B.net. In fact, he spends a lot of his time on HBO where he writes, writes and writes. His inclusion in Revolutions is the edited version of his Feet First into Hell piece. Though he narrowly missed out on winning the competition, he clearly has what it takes to put out excellent written material time and again.

**Foman:**

Yes, that's right. It is, indeed, the one and the same. Foman provided a bit of a guiding hand during the birth of Revolutions and will be penning his own material for a special edition after the New Year, so there is no need to panic if you are desperately trying to track his stuff down. It's coming.

**Wolverfrog:**

Wolver has been hellishly busy for quite a while now, and narrowly missed out on the chance to inject his own bit of fiction. But while his stories stayed away, this time, his imagination and invaluable assistance did not.

**Sergeant Murph:**

Like Wolver, Murph also missed out a chance of worldwide gloating, but applied himself as a man of thought and future planning. Expect to see stuff from the pair of them in the next few months.

**Colonel Sanders:**

The Colonel is one talented individual, not primarily because of his artistic talent but because of the way he presents everything in it. He has a knack of taking images that are otherwise ordinary and uninteresting, and turning them into something very special, indeed.

**Mike120593:**

Besides being a first rate poet, Mike also spends his time B.net. But beyond that, details on Mike's true nature and purpose quickly plummet into large ball of enigma, wrapped up in the papers of mystery and surrounded by a puzzling fog. He's out there somewhere.

**Keep checking out The Secrets Within group on B.net for forthcoming projects, more specifically Foman's much-anticipated dive into fiction.**