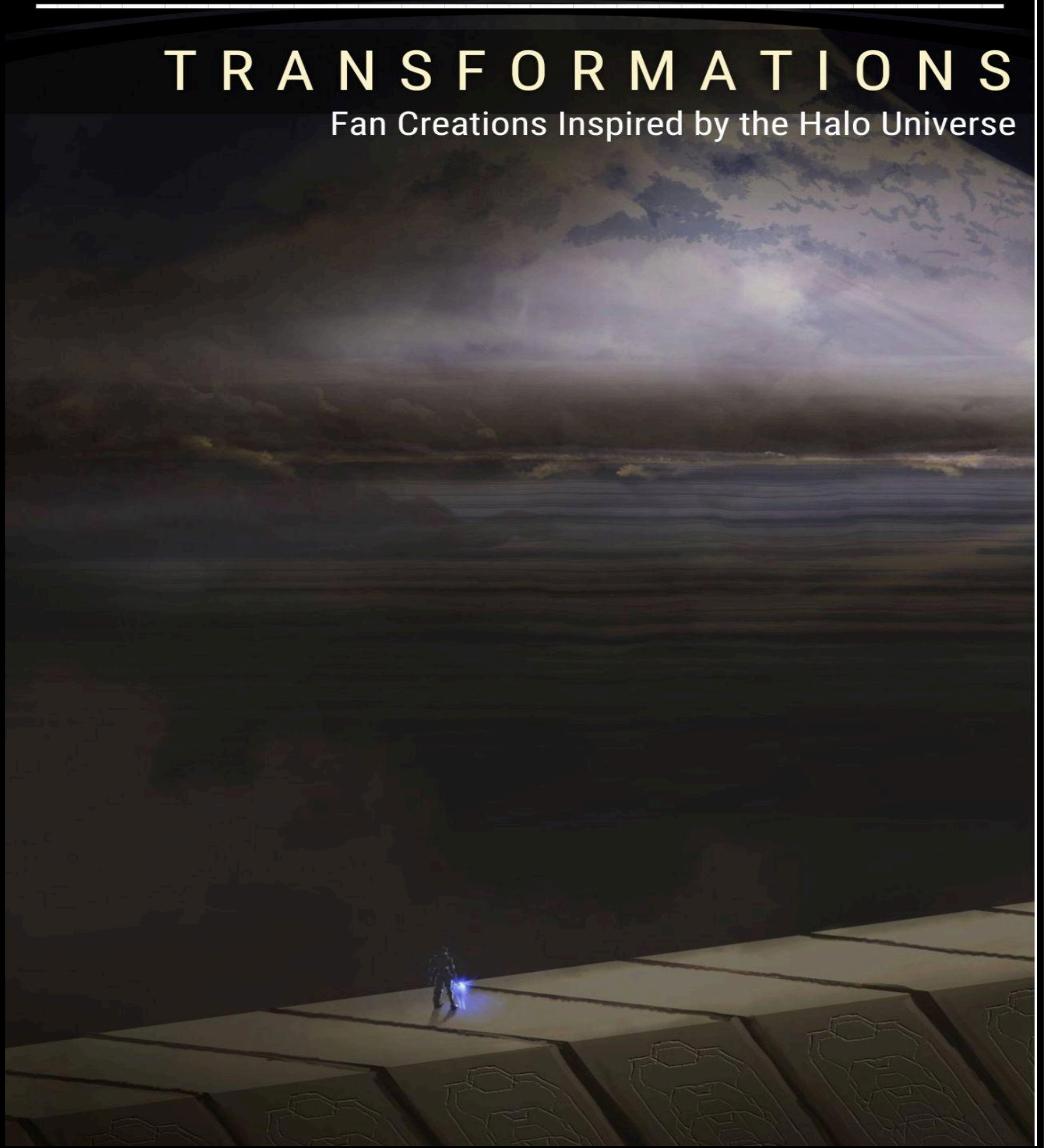


# HALO

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## TRANSFORMATIONS

Fan Creations Inspired by the Halo Universe



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# Introduction

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## DecepticonCobra

"There are points in life when everything changes, and changes in a big way. The old sophistic texts refer to these points as synchrons. Synchrons supposedly tie great forces and personalities together. You can't predict them and you can't avoid them. Only rarely can you feel them. They are like knots creeping forward on your string of time. **Ultimately, they tie you to the great currents of the universe—bind you a common fate.**" - *Halo: Cryptum*

In my 20 odd years of being a *Halo* fan I have met many incredible people within the fandom. More often than not these same people have gone on to make incredible fan content related to the franchise. From the forums of Bungie.net to the social media crossroads of Twitter and Reddit the one constant "synchron" that has bound people to the Halo community for so long is its propensity for making incredible fan content. Who could forget the first time they pondered the meaning of life atop a base in a boxed canyon in the middle of nowhere with Rooster Teeth's Red vs Blue? Or who could remember reading Levi Hoffmeier's *Fistful of Arrows* fan comic and almost being convinced it must show the fate of Jun-A266? Perhaps you've no doubt seen the amazing renders produced by community digital artists seemingly ripping engaging scenes from the games themselves to tell stories from their imagination.

The point of the matter is that I've seen all manner of content created by Halo fans come and go. Sometimes it reaches the upper echelons of the developers and is placed in a community spotlight. Sometimes it reaches a modest audience (and is then often spread even farther without fair attribution through reposting). Other times it arrives and fades as quickly as it was revealed.

Hence Halo: Transformations. This project aims to give fan works created by those willing to put themselves out there a place to be collected and shine. However, I wanted to offer more than just something like a quick "Like" on a social media site. Inspired by official anthology works like *Halo: Evolutions* (and my own experience in a previous fan anthology called *Halo: Revolutions*), this "novel" so to speak aims to show how its contributors can take the world that Bungie and 343 Industries have cultivated and transform it in ways only fans can.

# The Testimony of Red Fifteen

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lowaman24

Aurdel stared blankly at the doors in front of him, two MPs stood at attention on either side. To the average person they might look stoic, with frozen expressions that betrayed nothing. But he could see past that. Behind their masks he could see a mix of emotions. Awe, weariness. A little bit of fear. They were ones who were told to do jobs but were never told the specifics. That wasn't the same for the ones behind him.

Behind him was another pair of guards, handpicked from ONI's own personal security branch. Even without having to look at them he knew what was behind their expressions. Nothing. These were the kind of men who would sooner pull a grenade for a suicide attack out of willingness rather than desperation. That's exactly why they were the ones escorting him in. The doors opened, and the two MPs snapped to attention. A moment later Aurdel stepped into the lion's den.

The room was dark. Darker than he'd remembered it being over the years. He figured that it was just another psychological tactic to try and maintain some semblance of authority. Not that it mattered. He already knew the faces of everyone who would participate in something like this. "Spartan Zero Zero Nine, Aurdel. You have been brought before this committee today in order to answer a number of questions regarding the report you submitted on December 7th, 2552. Do you recognize the authority of this committee, and do you hereby swear to answer any and all questions asked by this committee, regardless of content?"

Aurdel stood completely rigid. "I recognize the authority of this committee, and I will answer all questions to the best of my ability as I am permitted."

A pair of eyes narrowed at him from behind one of the desks. That answer hasn't been to their liking. Of course, there wasn't much they could do. With someone like him they only had so many options.

"Prior to their departure from Earth to complete other objectives, John-117, Frederic-104, Kelly-087 and William-043 provided their accounts of the defense of Reach. Of those four, those of Frederic-104 and Kelly-087 are most important in regards to this matter today. According to their reports, Beta-Red, which consisted of yourself, Keiichi-047, Zachary-049, Jackson-100, Clementine-121 and Carris 137, was presumed dead with great certainty. This is due to the fact that both Spartans witnessed the destruction of Orbital Defense Generator Facility A-331 at the hands of a group of Covenant battlecruisers."

"I can confirm that the Covenant did bombard the facility. I obviously, however, cannot confirm my death at the hands of that bombardment."

“That’s why we’re holding this meeting, son,” a man with an older voice leaned on his desk. Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood. “By no means is the survival of a Spartan a bad thing. But the lack of explanation for how you were able to survive has caused a few eyebrows to be raised.”

“The report that I filed-”

“Was barebones at best,” an old female voice interrupted. Parangosky. Her tone was completely different to Hood’s. “In regards to the defense of ODG-A-331 you only made note of the fact that you engaged the Covenant, that Spartan casualties were incurred and that the decision to withdraw was made. With that lack of detail, and the fact that no other reports currently exist to corroborate your own, your actions can be seen as highly suspicious.”

“Due to the sensitivity of Spartan operations, I simply filed a report that followed the guidelines provided to me by Section III of the Office of Naval Intelligence.”

“We’re both well aware whose name is stamped at the bottom of those guidelines, and I don’t take lightly to seeing them be used to purposely obfuscate events.” She stared at him with cold eyes. Didn’t like deliberate obfuscation, huh? “Aurdel-009. This committee is ordering you to report the full details of the engagement between team Beta-Red and the Covenant at ODG-A-331 on August 30th, 2552. Failing to disclose the details of this engagement will result in you being placed under arrest for suspicion of attempted desertion during a time of war, and treason.”

“Of course. I’ll comply with the demands of this committee.”

---

Aurdel’s visor zoomed out, returning to the standard view. “Looks like that AI was right. We’ve got Covenant forces moving in, on the dot.”

“They were always going to be right. AIs don’t get anything wrong, especially not when they’re hooked into Reach’s strategic defense network.”

Aurdel heaved a pair of modified MA5B Assault Rifles onto his shoulders, locking them in place using the magnetic holsters intended for knives and other CQB implements. “It never hurts to hope.”

Carris dropped a trio of M41 Rocket Launchers into the rear passenger seat of a nearby warthog. “Thirty thousand to six... We learned about one sided slaughter that had better odds than this.”

“Bad odds or not, the enemy is in front of us. The only thing we can do now is what we were ordered to do.” Clementine climbed into the driver’s position, the suspension of the Warthog buckling slightly. Carris and Aurdel quickly followed suit and took up the passenger positions. “Beta-Red, report status.” Six green dots, including his own, winked onto Aurdel’s



HUD. "Beta-Red, moving out."

"Once more unto the breach..." Aurdel muttered under his breath, bracing himself as Clementine stepped on the pedal and the Warthog lurched forward. Carris handed him one of the rocket launchers.

Clementine tapped the side of her helmet, they switched over their comms. "Gamma-One Actual, my team is in position. Get your people ready to move as soon as I give the signal, over."

A response crackled over. "With respect, Red - we might not be Spartans, but this is our home. My men will die here if I ask them to."

"I don't doubt that, Gamma-One Actual. Let's hope we won't need them to." Then, the loud sound of bursts of gunfire could be heard off in the distance. "Defensive perimeter online."

"This is nuts, what the hell are those autoturrets supposed to do against what they're bringing over?"

"Divide their attention." Within a matter of minutes they had made it to the frontline. Aurdel raised the rocket launcher with one hand, Carris steadied herself in the passenger seat to pass him the next one. Looking to his right he could see the field-repaired Scorpion with Keiichi driving, Jackson and Zachary riding on the skirts. "Visual. Thirty-two wraiths moving with two-hundred sixty infantry at two-hundred meters, closing on our lines due west at six kilometers per hour. Beta-Red, hold positions until I trigger primaries, then close on their lines as fast as you can."

"Damn it, Red, I heard you Spartans were crazy." Clementine tapped her helmet again, they switched back to team comms. Then, she raised a detonator. "Effect on target in three... two... One." She pushed the switch. A massive chain of fireballs ripped out the ground and swallowed the front of the Covenant formation, bits of meat and huge chunks of shrapnel being thrown in every direction.

"Beta-Red, engage!" Aurdel held onto the roll cage for dear life as she stomped on the pedal and floored it off the ridge, the Warthog's suspension giving an incredibly audible creak the moment they touched down on the ground. Then, he raised the rocket launcher. "Engaging!" Two rockets left his weapon in rapid succession, shooting across the battlefield and coming into contact with the side armor of a pair of Wraiths. Plumes of plasma erupted into the sky as the housing of their mortar launchers were ruptured, melting down before ultimately exploding. Aurdel tossed the empty launcher to Carris, she handed him the next one.

"Keep firing!" There was a series of thuds as the Warthog's front bumper met the skulls of half a dozen or so Covenant infantry, sending them flying or flattening them under their reinforced tires.

Aurdel pivoted to the side and squeezed off two more shots, hitting another two Wraiths directly to the rear. The attack immediately ruptured the engines in both vehicles and resulted in a major explosion, vaporizing any Covenant infantry that were standing nearby. He passed the empty launcher off to Carris.

“Firing for effect!” Keiichi shouted over the comms. A shell fired from the Scorpion screamed over their heads, punching straight through a Wraith that had begun turning to face them.

“Good effect on target!” The Warthog swerved around the wreckage. Aurdel held onto the roll cage with one arm, firing his weapon with the other. One of the two rockets hit another Wraith and blew off one of the front fins, the other missed and exploded in the middle of a group of Covenant infantry. Not long after they began to take a hail of plasma fire. “Covering.” Zachary and Jackson opened fire with their rifles. A barrage of bullets landed on the enemy, wiping out eight at a time.

Aurdel grit his teeth and fired another pair of rockets, both striking the same Wraith. Another massive explosion of plasma spilled out from its hull. Clementine tapped her wrist, sending the signal for the troopers to evacuate.

“Can’t help but feel a little jealous!” As soon as the next launcher was in his hands Aurdel fired again, targeting a pair of Shadows that were loaded to the brim with plasma coils. His shields flickered and his visor polarized briefly from the resulting explosion.

“Wort wort wort!” Out of the corner of his eye Aurdel spotted an Elite leveling a Fuel Rod Gun in their direction. Carris tossed him another launcher and he turned his full body, squeezing out a shot from the launcher. But it wasn’t quick enough. The Elite let out a shot at exactly the same time.

“Aurdel!” The Fuel Rod struck just behind the Warthog, causing the rear to lift into the air. Aurdel was thrown off the back, still holding his launcher, while the others fought to control the vehicle’s descent.

He quickly got back up on his feet, swinging the rocket launcher and cracking open the skull of a nearby Elite who’d attempted to charge him. He then fired the last rocket he had into the back of another Wraith, detonating it and temporarily disorienting the Covenant infantry moving rapidly to surround him.

Time to improvise.

Aurdel pulled the pair of MA5Bs off the magnetic holsters and opened fire, brandishing the guns from the hip and laying waste to anything that so much as entered his line of sight. In a matter of fifteen seconds he had gunned down at least seventy Covenant infantry, having ripped through their armor with two two-hundred round mags of shredder rounds.

“Red-Fifteen, status!”

“Proceeding on foot!” Aurdel broke into a sprint, changing mags as he ran. One of the obstacles he happened to encounter along the way was a Wraith attempting to track and fire on their Warthog. So, he charged straight up the front of the tank, kicked the head off the Grunt manning the smaller plasma cannon and then stomped through the driver’s hatch. Without even letting go of his rifles he pulled a grenade off his belt and dropped it inside. Aurdel jumped off, and moments later the Wraith erupted into a ball of shrapnel and plasma.

“Kill the Demon!” A plasma grenade skimmed past his helmet, only just barely missing.

Aurdel promptly spun around and gunned down the Grunt who’d thrown it.

“Red-Seventeen, requesting callouts for priority targets.”

“Affirmative. You have a squad of Grunt Heavies, North. Thirty meters.”

“Acknowledged.” He wheeled around with his rifles, letting loose a hail of lead. The dozen or so Grunts carrying Fuel Rod Guns all came tumbling down.

“Ghost, West. Seventy meters.” He turned again and pushed his hand forward, getting the Ghost in his sights before pulling the secondary trigger on one of the rifles. A grenade promptly fired and slammed into its canopy. The Ghost’s the propulsions drives went up in smoke and took the rest of the vehicle with it, leaving nothing but a charred corpse of the Grunt who’d been driving it.

“Next.”

“Shadow carrying Elite Officers with AT weapons, East. Sixty meters.”

He brought about the other rifle and performed the same action. This time his grenade flew through the side opening on the cockpit and detonated inside, killing the driver and blowing the canopy clean off. Just as soon as its passengers began to return fire his hands moved back to the actual trigger and emptied the rest of his mags into them.

---

“Hmph...” One of the members of the Security Council, Major General Nicolas Strauss, let out a sigh. “I don’t want to sound dismissive of the case we’re currently hearing, however... Is it entirely necessary to hear a minute by minute account of the engagement that took place? As far as I’m aware, the MJOLNIR armor worn by Spartans is just like the BDU worn by the other branches in that it has dedicated software and hardware to record events from the users perspective.”

Lieutenant General Edward Hogan, the rep for the Marine Corps on the Security Council, raised a hand, “I’m inclined to agree. Even if certain parties believe that treasonous actions were taken, it simply isn’t viable to demand an exact account of events. We should be taking a

statement with a basic timeline of events, then compare what was said with the recovered footage.”

Hood looked at Parangosky.

“As of this moment, no footage has been recovered.”

“What?” The rest of the committee looked at Parangosky

“It hasn’t been for lack of effort. Four separate teams of technicians have already tried and given up. And while we have other teams still trying to access the footage, there isn’t any expectation that they’ll manage it.” Parangosky sat up straight, “The only data available to us currently are the systems logs found with the suit’s operation system. Because of that, the running assumption is that the suit was tampered with as a result of the actions taken during and following this battle.”

“I can assure you, the only modifications made to my armor were repairs made in the field.”

“So you claim. However, the observed condition of your arrival, upon arrival to Earth, was far better than would be expected after such an engagement. Not only that, but it plainly contradicts the aforementioned system logs recording the state of your armor.”

“As I recall, the MJOLNIR Mark V had only been rolled out a month before Reach fell. It’s well within reason to expect software failures due to a lack of live combat experience. After all, I’ve heard that the Mark IV had its share of trouble during the early stages of the war too.”

“Comparing the two armors is like comparing night and day. The Mark V was fully developed and tested long before appropriation for Operation: RED FLAG.”

“In any case, the only answer I can provide you is that repairs were made to make my armor combat effective prior to my arrival on Earth.” Parangosky sat quietly after that. She likely had something else up her sleeve, he’d just have to prepare himself for whatever that was when the time came. He cleared his throat, “In any case, I will continue with my report.”

---

“Jackals dismounting, East. Eighty meters.”

“Confirmed.” Aurdel yanked a frag grenade off his armor’s belt, then full force threw it across the battlefield. Before the Jackals could get their wall of shields up the grenade had already landed at their feet and blown their formation apart. “Next-”

“Hold that, Covenant air moving in!” He briefly turned his head upward. Off in the distance he was greeted with the sight of Banshees and Phantoms.

“Beta-Red Actual, Covenant air is beelining it towards the generator facility.” He dove behind the burning wreckage of a Wraith for cover, taking the opportunity to load new mags and grenades in. He was out of shredder rounds.

“We’re falling back to the main defensive line. Red Fifteen, can you rendezvous for pickup?”

He poked his head out of cover, a wall of plasma was hurled his way. Aurdel quickly returned fire. “Negative, in too deep. I’ll link up with you when I break out.”

“Roger.” Aurdel jumped off the comm. Four lights blinked on his HUD as Clementine gave the order to retreat and the others acknowledged it.

He was on his own now.

Plasma fire raked his armor as he jumped over the wreckage of the Wraith and fired at the enemy with reckless abandon. Within a matter of moments his shields had fallen completely and he took the first real hits to his armor. At the same time, he mowed through two separate crowds of infantry. Then, another two crowds of infantry went down as he pulled the triggers for the underslung grenade launchers on either rifle. A daisy chain of explosions went off as each grenade fired set off methane tanks and then plasma grenades. Just like with the plasma coil explosion, his visor polarized.

“Nice of them to wear something so dangerous...” The empty mags dropped out of his rifle, Aurdel slotted in another pair and more grenades. Fourteen seconds later he had two more empty mags and the Covenant had eighty more dead infantry.

“Aaaawubadugh!” An Elite in white armor with an Energy Sword charged hind mid-reload. At the last moment he was able to avoid the attack, but the plasma blade cut through the rifle in his right hand. With little else to react with he quickly brought the other rifle in his left hand around and fired a grenade point blank into its torso. Due to the distance it didn’t have the time to arm, but the direct impact was more than enough to bring down its shields. Aurdel then squeezed the trigger, filling the Elite Ultra with bullets at point blank range.

Aurdel crouched down as a trio of Fuel Rods blazed over his head. From the corpse of the Elite he’d just killed he grabbed a pair of plasma grenades, activated them with one hand, and tossed them. Another group of Covenant infantry vanished. Then, he broke into a sprint. It would be more than easy for him to steal a Covenant vehicle and make a break for the generator facility, but if he did that then the Covenant would get the chance to line up all the remaining Wraiths and decimate it in one giant barrage. At that point there’d be nothing left to defend, and nothing left to hide behind. He had to try something.

Another group of Grunts carrying Fuel Rod Guns appeared in front of him. Swinging his rifle back around he ripped through the squad. Then, in the blink of an eye, he stowed the rifle back onto the magnetic holster and grabbed a pair of Fuel Rod Guns off the ground. That should do.

“Let’s see how this works!” Aurdel activated the Thrusterpack mounted on the back of his armor and jetted into the air. Upon making it up he opened fire on the hostiles surrounding him from below.

“WAAAAAGH!” He switched targets rapidly, first firing on crowds of infantry before pivoting his attack towards the Wraiths lining up shots on the generator facility. Daisy chains of secondaries went off just about everywhere on the ground, dozens of plasma grenades being set off one after another. He could feel his armor’s temperature rise from the sheer amount of plasma being dumped out.

Aurdel tossed the empty Fuel Rod Guns aside and picked up another pair, practically gliding across the ground as he ran across the battlefield. He came across one Wraith, dumped two shots from a Fuel Rod Gun into its rear to detonate its engine, and then repeated the process again and again. By the time the magazines in both weapons had run empty he’d destroyed five more wraiths.

As Aurdel tossed the weapons aside he came under fire from a group of Elite Officers, so he dropped to the ground and picked up a pair of discarded plasma rifles. Aurdel returned fire, using his Thrusterpack to weave between volleys of bolts. As he closed the distance, however, the Elites tossed aside their weapons and drew out energy swords.

“If that’s what you want” He dodged each incoming blade as they approached. Aurdel tossed aside the Plasma Rifles and pulled the pair of M6Ds off of his hips holsters, then rapidly fingered the triggers. Emptying the whole mag brought down a pair of shields. With one more burst backwards he was able to safely reload, then put a bullet through the two Elites’ skulls.

“Coward Demon!” The other Elites continued to lunge forward, pressing their attack simultaneously.

“You must not have the word ‘hypocrite’ in your dictionary!” He stowed one magnum and pulled an Energy Sword off the corpse of one of the fallen Elites, then activated the blade and swung it against his closest opponent. Now clashing, Aurdel dumped an entire mag directly into his opponent’s face. The Elite staggered, so Aurdel swung his Energy Sword and cut the it in half from the shoulder down diagonally. The remaining two braced themselves. He stowed the second magnum and picked up another Energy Sword. The Elites lunged back and forth, their blades clashing against his own as they tried to find an opening. Aurdel stayed on the defensive. By allowing the Elites to take the initiative they would become complacent with their footwork. And once they had developed a false sense of security... One of the Elites brought their sword above their head and swung down. Aurdel quickly maneuvered to the side and swung his sword horizontally, bifurcating his opponent from behind. The top half of its body hit the ground first.

“Grr...” The last Elite began to attack more aggressively, throwing all of its weight behind each blow. From his own reading of the situation it looked like the Elite was trying to crush his stance as opposed to outmaneuvering it, and he could tell the difference like night and day. But it still wouldn’t be enough.

Just as the Elite went to swing again Aurdel took a step back, forcing his opponent to extend its arm further out in hopes of reaching him. However, just as the swing reached its point of no return Aurdel used his Thrusterpack and effectively jumped backwards. The Elite, as a result, then overswung, giving him the perfect opportunity to strike from above and sever his opponents arm. The Elite clutched the seared stump, then had its head severed not even a second later.

He didn't bother looking at the aftermath. Aurdel tossed the pair of Energy Swords aside and grabbed as many Plasma Grenades as he could hold. One by one he began to activate them and toss them, each one landing in the middle of a squad of infantry and wiping them out as they panicked.

Then, a Ghost plowed straight into him.

Aurdel was sent flying, slamming side-first into the still burning wreckage of a Wraith. He let out a sharp exhale as a piece of the wreckage, still searing hot, pierced through his undersuit and punctured his right lung. Promptly collapsing it. Intense pain rippled throughout his body, but he couldn't just lay down and get killed. Aurdel tore himself off the debris and broke into a sprint while out of breath. Just as he expected, the Ghost began to chase after him. Using his Thrusterpack he was able to feint its moves multiple times, dodging either above or to the side every time it closed the distance and boosted its drives. The Grunt behind the wheel, angry with its inability to hit him again, promptly began to strafe side to side and opened fire with the forward facing Plasma Cannons.

Now, with less speed to worry about, he made his move. Aurdel barreled into the air, positioning himself over top of the Ghost before dropping back. He snapped its neck, then tossed the Grunt away and climbed into the driver's position. From there he quickly turned the vehicle about to face a group of Covenant infantry that had moved to counter him. With one long boost he plowed straight through the center of the group, splattering at least thirty of them across the canopy. Alarms sounded from the machine, likely because his ramming attack had done internal damage. But he needed it to last.

Aurdel sped the Ghost forward and rammed his way through to another group of Wraiths. Having already lined up their shots, they paid him no mind. The ground shook as they opened fire. Blobs of plasma arced through the air and fell in the direction of the generator facility. Aurdel grit his teeth and strafed sideways with the Ghost, firing the Plasma Cannons as fast as possible. Three passes was all he could manage before they gave out due to the damage, destroying two Wraiths but leaving two others only with damaged sections of armor. With no other recourse he took the remaining Plasma Grenades he'd gathered and lobbed them at the back of the Wraiths in one last pass. Each grenade stuck the landing inside, and two more Wraiths erupted into massive explosions. Then, he sped away.

Aurdel took one look behind him as he made his way back towards the generator facility. Combined, there were at least a hundred twenty wrecks of Wraiths and other vehicles laying across the battlefield. From each one he could see jets of plasma, and huge plumes of

smoke, stretch into the sky. They had taken out almost a tenth of the Covenant's forces, but in a situation like this... It just wouldn't be enough.

He turned his head back around.

---

"...And that's all I can say happened with absolute certainty."

Each member of the committee looked at him, eyes widened.

Lieutenant General Hogan leaned on his desk, "With absolute certainty? What's that supposed to mean? You were present at that battle, weren't you? Surely you should be able to remember what happened."

"If you had read my personnel file in preparation for this committee session, then you would know that I suffer from a handful of health issues as a result of the augmentations I was put through."

"In fact I did, but what does that-?"

"It's a combination of three issues. First, I have an abnormally high resistance to adrenaline. As a result of this the positive effects of adrenaline, at least at normal dosages naturally produced by my body, have little to no actual effectiveness. Second, my body has immensely delayed adrenal responses. I'm sure that if you asked the other Spartans when the adrenaline kicked in they would tell you it happened when they jumped out of that Pelican, but for me I only started to feel its effects after my lung collapsed. And third, in order to compensate for the two aforementioned issues ONI provides me with supplements that act to boost my body's adrenaline production to essentially overdose levels. As a result, when my adrenal response does finally kick in, after an extremely prolonged period of stressful stimuli, it effectively dumps the adrenaline into my system all at once. Of course, that leaves me a greater risk of—"

"Brain injury," Parangosky coldly stated, "A normal dose of adrenaline already doubles the risk of neurological damage. But at the levels you would be experiencing, it would almost guarantee it." He could see a fist ball up through the darkness. Looked like she hadn't considered the possibility.

"That doesn't seem likely to me," Strauss folded his arms, "You mean to tell us that you suffered a head injury severe enough that it caused the requisite neurological damage to lose memory of a large portion of the battle, but you somehow don't have any other lingering effects?" "No."

The room was silent.

"You're willingly contradicting yourself?"



“I never stated that I had memory loss, only that what I had previously reported was all I could confirm happened with absolute certainty.”

“Now is not the time to beat around the bush.”

“On my way to regroup with the rest of Beta-Red I began having lapses in consciousness. One moment I was on the wall at the main gate, firing my rifle, before I blacked out. In the next moment, when I came to, I found myself in the middle of a squad of Covenant infantry with only my combat knife and a magnum, and no recollection of how I’d gotten in that position.”

“Are you trying to imply you were fighting the Covenant while unconscious?” “It wouldn’t be the strangest thing to happen. In any case, you should be able to confirm what happened once you recover the others.”

“Then is there nothing else that you can add to your report from those moments that you were conscious of?”

He tilted his head slightly. “There were only two stretches of times where I was conscious for long enough for it to be significant. Though, as I stated before, I can’t guarantee that what I saw happened. It’s impossible to rule out the possibility of hallucinations.”

“It is up to this committee to determine what is pertinent and what is not.” “Very well,” Aurdel shut his eyes. “The first stretch happened approximately thirty minutes after we had engaged the Covenant. By then, as a result of the damage we had inflicted against their armored forces, the enemy had called in for additional support, something that reared its ugly head in the form of a full sized Brute pack. They had dropped several hundred of them right on our heads, and we burned through all our ammo fighting them off. Keiichi was killed by secondary explosions after a shot from a Wraith detonated a stashed crate of grenades, Jackson had his chest caved in by the Brute Chieftain wielding a hammer, Zachary had been riddled with spikes, Carris was buried under a mountain of debris after shots from a Wraith collapsed one of the courtyard walls on top of her and Clementine was backed into a corner and too injured to stand. I myself was heavily injured and out in the open, so the Brutes started toying with me.”

---

“Weak Demon.”

The Brute in front of Aurdel struck him across his helmet. He reeled back, stumbling on his feet as he tried to regain his balance. Blood was stained across the inside of his helmet and dribbled out through the late hole in his visor. Spikes perforated his chestplate, only just barely having been stopped from punching clean holes through his chest. The entirety of his armor had lost its green paint job due to the sheer volume of fire he’d taken, and most of the titanium plates were nothing but slag.

He was in bad shape.

“Without his pack, he can do nothing!” A second Brute laughed and struck him from behind, Aurdel was thrown forward. Then he was struck again. Each blow could be felt down to the bone.

“What should we do with him? The hierarchs will be pleased with the deaths of the rest of his pack, but if we were to bring back this one alive...”

“He’d be hoisted throughout the Holy City by his entrails, and we would be heartily rewarded.” Aurdel braced as he was struck again. “Are you listening, Demon? Your life will be made an example of, and we shall claim our rightful reward.”

“No,” another Brute said. Aurdel turned his head. The Chieftain. “Bring a Demon into the holy city, and an infestation will sprout. There is only one suitable end for a Demon.” A giant hand clamped around the top of his helmet, lifting him into the air. There was a creak as its grip tightened. Die... He was going to...

Something clicked inside his head. No, he wasn’t.

Aurdel managed to muster up the breath from his remaining battered lung, “You know... I can show you where more are.”

“More Demons?” The Chieftain cocked its head, tilting its helmet to the side. “After this day, there will be no more Demons.” The Chieftain began to crush his helmet. Then, the seal connecting the helmet and his armor broke.

Aurdel dropped out of the helmet and onto the ground, surprising the Brutes around him. Then, he leapt forward with a second wind and sunk his teeth into the right side of the Brute Chieftain’s neck. It let out a horrific roar as he ripped out a massive chunk of flesh and hair. Aurdel then dropped down and yanked the giant hammer out of the Chieftain’s other hand, taking the weapon and swinging the sharp end toward the part of its neck he’d taken a chunk out of. The giant Brute’s head fell to the ground.

Aurdel’s body suddenly felt a lot lighter.

The other Brutes stood in shock only for a moment. As soon as they realized that a fight was back on, they dove in to partake in it.

He obliged them.

One Brute charged without any weapons, looking to grapple him. Aurdel responded by swinging the hammer and striking the broad end squarely against its chin. Another Brute attacked, this time attempting to take the hammer away from him. He spun the weapon around to its bladed side and severed the Brutes arm in one swift motion. Then, he crushed its skull. A trio of Spikers fired at Aurdel, he dove to the side. Quickly responding he ejected his Thrusterpack unit and tossed it at the Brutes. Then, once he had closed the distance, he swung

the hammer and crushed the Thrusterpack. Aurdel was temporarily blinded as the fuel inside detonated, but he kept attacking regardless.

Once his vision had returned, he found all three Brutes dead.

“Kill him! Kill the Demon!” Plasma bolts, plasma grenades, needles and spikes began flying at him from every direction, coming at every possible angle. For the few that actually hit, he didn’t feel a thing.

Aurdel launched forward towards another Brute, raising the hammer over his head.

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“After that, I had another lapse of consciousness.”

“For how long?”

“Approximately seven minutes.”

“With your teeth...?” Strauss murmured, focused on an unimportant detail.

Parangosky stared daggers at him “You’re saying that, despite the fact you were heavily injured, and your armor nearly totally destroyed, you managed to do all that and survive?”

“If my memory is correct, and those events actually happened, then yes.”

Her eyes narrowed further, “Given the events that you’re recollecting, I don’t think I need to explain myself when I say that it’s difficult to believe such an absurd set of events.”

“Of course, which is why I’m not telling you to believe that those events happened. I’ll repeat myself in stating the events I’m currently describing aren’t something that I can say happened with absolute certainty. For all I know, they could have been entirely hallucinated by my mind.”

Hood raised a hand, “What was the second stretch of time you remember?” Aurdel relaxed slightly, “The second stretch took place after the first, after those seven minutes had passed. I had no recollection of those seven minutes, and decided to act based on what I saw around me.” Aurdel looked up at one of the tables.

“You may continue.”

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Aurdel thrust the handle of the broken Gravity Hammer forward, spearing the Brute in front of him directly through the chest. It let out a painful shriek in response to being impaled and pinned to the wall. He was completely out of breath. Aurdel let out a heavy pant, then took a step back and looked around. The courtyard, by now, was littered with bodies, but it was more than he remembered seeing. Before now the courtyard was full of bodies riddled with bullets and fragmentation or half burned by the scorching of plasma bolts. The ones he saw now... they were almost totally dismembered.

Looking around, he couldn't see a single living thing other than himself.

Aurdel walked over to where the Chieftain had grabbed him and put back on his damaged helmet. Then, he broke out into a sprint.

He arrived at a large mountain of rubble. "Carris, are you still alive?!" A green light winked on the edge of his nearly totally shattered visor. He was lucky that it was still partially functional. "Okay, hold tight. I'm going to get this crap off of you." Aurdel began heaving huge chunks of steel and concrete off the pile, throwing them to the side like was dealing with a few small rocks. Really, with the way his body felt... It was like he hadn't been injured at all.

"Is the Covenant assault letting up?" Carris reached out a hand from underneath the now smaller pile, Aurdel grabbed it and pulled her out. Frankly, she looked like she was in better condition than he was.

"That's what it seems like, but I don't expect this to last for long." Aurdel turned his head and looked towards the sky. He had a bad feeling in his gut. Something- "Get the reserve Warthog, and get the others' bodies."

Aurdel began to turn away, she grabbed him. "Hold on, we're abandoning the facility?" "We're not in a position to hold onto it for much longer, it's our only option." Carris let go, then he sprinted off towards another part of the facility. As he got closer he could hear the sound of a fight still going on.

"Clementine!" Aurdel ran inside one of the buildings and found Clementine cooped up in one of the corners, hiding behind a wall of hastily put together concrete and torn off steel plates.

There was a dried pool of blood underneath her.

She turned her head, "Cover me!" Aurdel nodded, picking a pair of Spikers off of the ground. He stepped out into the open and open fire, laying down a wall of spikes in the direction of the Covenant forces that were firing on Clementine's position. Their attention quickly shifted, plasma beginning to fly in his direction. Clementine quickly took the chance and fired off the built-in thrusters in her armor. While not intended for actual flight, it provided her with just enough force to effectively throw herself across the room and towards the exit. Seeing this, he grabbed hold of her, threw her over his shoulders in a fireman's carry and then sprinted his way out the back of the building. She touched her helmet, "Reactor Complex Seven has been

compromised, we're falling back. Might be able to save number three."

"Keiichi, Zachary and Jackson are all down. We don't stand any chance of holding the facility." Aurdel turned a corner.

Clementine pointed towards a crate. "Set off those charges!" Aurdel grabbed the detonator with one hand as he ran past. Once they were clear, he set it off. Four of the facility's eight reactor complexes erupted into flames as an entire crate worth of C-12 went off simultaneously, blowing down just about every wall in the way of the explosion."What's the plan, then?"

"Retreat," Aurdel ducked underneath a collapsing steel beam that swung overhead. "But we don't have many options. If the fact that the Wraiths have stopped bombarding the facility is any indication, then those two armored divisions have already bypassed this facility. In which case they've already engaged Delta, cutting off our only path to CASTLE Base." "Can we break through?"

"Not if we want to live." They approached the courtyard, Aurdel could hear the sound of gunfire. "Keep moving!"

"There! There's the Devil! Kill it before he and his kin escape!" Plasma bolts and spikes bracketed his position as Aurdel ran out. Carris hunkered down behind a nearly shattered concrete barrier, attempting to provide covering fire with a chaingun she'd ripped off the back of the Warthog.

Aurdel made it over, dropping Clementine onto the back of the Warthog. He turned his head back the other way. "Carris, get down!" His warning came just too late. A Fuel Rod struck the front of the chaingun that Carris was holding, vaporizing the front half and setting off the large drum of ammunition nearly directly in front of her face. Aurdel quickly grabbed a spare assault rifle out of the driver's seat and gunned down the Grunt who'd fired the shot. Then, he ran over to his collapsed comrade.

"I'm... Fine..." Carris' armor had been turned to scrap by the explosion. Aurdel could see over a dozen different places on her undersuit where fragmented bullets had ripped through, likely causing a significant amount of internal damage. Her right hand had also been blown clean off. He steadied her, "Come on, we're-" Aurdel began to hear a loud hum and turned his head upwards.

"Forget it!" Aurdel picked her up with both arms and sprinted to the Warthog as fast as his legs would carry him. Once there he tossed her onto the back with Clementine, then clambered for the driver's seat. "AURDEL, DRIVE!"

He slammed his foot on the gas and the Warthog rocketed forward. Three Covenant battlecruisers had emerged from the clouds and were rapidly closing the distance between themselves and the facility. They were so close, however, that he could see the glow of their plasma turrets charging up.

A feeling of weightlessness briefly overtook Aurdel as the Warthog went flying off the main road, coming back moments later once they touched back down on the ground with a solid creak of the suspension. They were able to put a solid minute of distance between themselves and the generator facility.

Then, the cruisers fired.

Giant blobs of plasma rained down from the sky and struck the generator facility head on. Complexes five through eight, due to their previous damage, were essentially liquified on contact. A huge cloud of molten steel sprayed into the sky before raining back down. Blobs of molten metal landed on the windshield and hood, shattering the former and causing the latter to suddenly, violently warp.

The cruisers fired again.

This time they aimed at the other four reactor complexes, the ones that hadn't been damaged nearly as much throughout the battle. Due to that when the plasma came into contact with them the reactors immediately went critical, blowing out of their molten casings in a massive explosion. Huge chunks of concrete, titanium plate and steel were launched thousands of feet into the air. The Warthog itself was hit by the shockwave from the explosion and was nearly thrown from the road, only avoiding doing so because they'd been lucky enough for the walls of the facility to absorb most of the impact.

As debris began to rain down, Aurdel kept his foot on the pedal. He didn't stop driving for even a minute.

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"While I was driving I had another lapse in consciousness. Unlike the other times I didn't regain it until much later. However, by the time I had regained it we had already managed to shake off any Covenant pursuit."

"So, you DID flee," Strauss leaned over his desk.

"If making the decision to retreat from a bad position is considered 'fleeing,' then yes. We fled," Aurdel narrowed his eyes, "However, in that situation there was simply no other choice than to retreat. Had we stayed for even a minute longer we would have all been killed when the Covenant bombarded the facility. I don't think it needs to be stated that fewer dead Spartans is a good thing."

"You're using ex post facto justification. At the time there was no way you could have known that the Covenant were going to destroy the facility."

"Maybe I didn't have explicit confirmation, but I had a gut feeling that something was about to happen." Parangosky muttered something unintelligible under her breath.

“You made a tactical decision based on a ‘gut feeling’?”

“During my training, I had reason enough to learn to believe in gut feelings.” “Fine, let’s say that in that case you are justified. That still doesn’t absolve you of failing to attempt to link up with the remaining Spartans of Red Team.”

“As I stated within my own recollection, my reason for not attempting to link up with Red Team was because the Covenant armored force had bypassed up. *If* you had really read the reports the other Spartans gave before they left, then you would know that Will’s report confirms what I said. In fact, they were pursued all the way to CASTLE Base’s front gate.” “Even so, that’s-”

He lost his patience.

“Allow me to ask you this, Major General,” Aurdel interrupted, “When do you think the battle for Reach was lost?”

“What?”

“Because I’ve been kept in custody ever since the effective end of the war, I’ve had more than enough time to read the reports that came out after Reach fell. *All* of the reports.” Aurdel drew a concealed magnum, to the shock of most of the committee. The two ONI Security personnel raised their rifles at him. “According to those reports, I’ve since learned that the Covenant were somehow able to land a force, consisting of one Supercarrier, a dozen or so Corvettes and a handful of battlecruisers, on the planet under the nose of the entire Epsilon Eridani defense fleet. A fleet, mind you, that consists of over a hundred warships, twenty one remote scanning outposts and twenty orbital defense platforms. They also, somehow, managed to sneak past the pair of early warning global defense networks, operated by the UNSC Army and UNSC Air Force respectively.”

“T-That Covenant fleet used-”

“Cloaking technology?” He pointed the magnum at the committee, silencing the interruption.

“Even if they were using cloaking technology, the Covenant has been using that same technology since the beginning of the war. Because of that the UNSC was able to develop methods of detecting warships that were cloaked. Unless... You mean to confirm to me that Reach’s defenses, in particular, were lacking despite its extreme importance to humanity.”

Aurdel pivoted, pointing the magnum towards Lord Hood. “As the head of the Navy, it is your responsibility to establish and enforce naval doctrine. Chief among those doctrines that need to be enforced are planetary defense operations and fleet battle operations. Despite this fact, not once during your tenure have you ever moved to condemn the constant push for ‘decisive victories’ among the UNSCs Admirals after Admiral Cole disappeared in 2543. As a result the UNSC Navy ended up prioritizing the work of the Prowler Corps over the use of remote sensing outposts, all because the latter didn’t provide ‘actionable intel.’ One of those many Admirals

was Vice Admiral Michael Stanforth, the man you left responsible for Reach's defense. The results are self-evident."

The magnum pivoted towards Parangosky. "The Office of Naval Intelligence's primary purpose, as intended when it was founded, was to gather offensive and defensive intelligence. As a result ONI should have been keeping tabs on those remote sensing outposts even when the Navy itself wasn't. After all, Reach was ONI's backyard to the point that you couldn't walk five feet without stumbling into a wiretap or the testing grounds for some new prototype, so why wouldn't it be on the lookout for a possible Covenant attack?" Next, he pivoted to Strauss.

"Reach was the UNSC Army's largest stronghold, so much so that it had more than twice the personnel, equipment and bases that it had on Earth prior to its invasion. Chief among those many bases were the sixty early warning detection arrays stationed around the planet with overlapping coverage, all equipped with the same sensors capable of detecting cloaked warships found on remote sensing outposts. Of course, they weren't the only ones..."

Aurdel pivoted to Dellert, "The Air Force, just like the Army, had its largest presence of any planet on Reach. There were thousands of satellites around the planet, and when I looked at the position of each satellite at the time when the Covenant is presumed to have made landfall at least half of them should have been able to VISUALLY SPOT Covenant activity. This isn't even taking into account the numerous bases the air force has with the same detection arrays that the army has, or the numerous flights that went through the region and should have seen the Covenant presence." Aurdel looked at Hobart, "The Marine Corps is the only branch that's even remotely innocent in relation to Reach's fall, but the argument can be made that its leadership acted as enablers for the Navy's disastrous policies thus making them complicit."

Parangosky was the only one on the committee that had maintained her composure so far. "Do you plan to kill us out of retribution for Reach?"

Aurdel paused for a moment, then lowered the magnum. "No, I don't" He tossed the weapon aside, and it clattered against the room's tile floor. Most of the committee let out a sigh of relief.

"Right now the members of this committee are the ones negotiating for peace with the remnants of the Covenant. And as much as I might despise them, preventing the possibility of peace now would be a disservice to everyone who was killed defending Reach." He folded his hands behind his back, "Unless there are any other questions for this committee to ask me, I would like to be returned to my holding cell."

"There is. In order to survive the glassing that occurred after Reach's fall, you would have had to have found some kind of subterranean shelter."

"That is correct. Even though I don't remember finding the place, or making my way in, I managed to find an abandoned storage facility that had used to be a titanium mine. I ended up carrying all five members of my team underground into the old mineshafts, then placed them into cryosleep inside one of the survival bunkers that all mines are required to have."



“Of course. Now, I need you to answer this question. Did you or did you not come into contact with any Forerunner artifacts while underground?” The other members of the committee looked at Parangosky, then at him. Aurdel had to pause for a moment. So, that’s what this was really about.

“Due to my lack of personal knowledge about any group of persons known as the ‘Forerunners,’ I cannot confirm or deny that I came across any of their artifacts.”

She stood up, “How do you explain the total healing of the injuries you’d sustained prior to your arrival to Earth?”

“Unknown phenomena.”

“That you won’t explain?”

“That I can’t explain.”

She pushed a button. “Aurdel-009, this committee is adjourned. You will be returned to your holding cell until a decision has been made or the committee decides that further questions are required to be answered.”

“Ma’am,” he gave a half-hearted salute, then turned around. The doors opened once again, and the two ONI security forces, rifles still raised, pushed him out.

Parangosky let out a sigh as Aurdel-009 walked out. This was the second time that Spartan had pulled something like this on her.

Hood looked at her, “Was he lying?”

She rubbed her face, “He was, but not about the events he was describing.”

Strauss put a hand on his desk, “Then what the hell was he lying about?”

“Mental incompetence.”

“Mental incompetence?”

“Mental incompetence is the only possible reason for discharge that the rest of Beta-Red would be unable to disprove. That’s why he lied about having those lapses in consciousness, and why he pulled that gun on us. He was trying to convince us that he is mentally unreliable as a Spartan.”

“But why would he want to be discharged?”

“Every single one of Halsey’s Spartans had unique circumstances surrounding their recruitment, training and deployment. For this one in particular, despite what the records state, he had an exceptionally negative experience with the program. Chief among the problems were the unintentional consequences during his recruitment, along with the fact that though he was not the only Spartan who washed out to be reintegrated, his reintegration came at a much later date than the rest. All of that is to say that he views ONI, though really the UNSC’s leadership at large, as a personal enemy on par with the Covenant.”

“That’s absurd!”

“If I didn’t know any better, then I would say that you’re right. Unfortunately, I am privy to all of the details and know that he has more than enough reason to despise anyone in charge.” Delbert rubbed the bridge of his nose, “At the very least, he does still seem to feel some sense of duty. If a normal man had been standing in his position, and had suffered circumstances as bad as what you imply, then I very much doubt that they would have been able to resist pulling the trigger. Especially after what recently happened on Reach.”

“Then what’s the decision we’re to make here?” Strauss asked, “Just because he’s trying to get himself discharged doesn’t mean that we should actually discharge him, especially not now when Spartans are far and few inbetween.”

Hobart lowered his head, “The problem is that if he’s trying to leave, and we try to keep him in service by force, he may resort to alternative methods of ‘convincing’ the UNSC to let him go. Ones that we would regret far more further down the line.”

“To keep Spartans on the front line, it’s a risk we simply have to take.”

“No, it’s not,” Parangosky picked up a data pad, “While I agree that we can’t let him go just yet, putting back on the frontlines would do more harm than good. I have an alternative position for him to serve in.”

“That being?”

“While we still don’t have total confirmation as of yet, all personnel on Onyx are assumed to have been lost. Lieutenant Commander Kurt Ambrose included. Because of that, we’ve been left with an entire company sized group of Spartan candidates and no one to manage their training.”

“Y-You want *him* to train Delta Company?” Strauss pointed at the door, “He pointed a gun at us!”

Dellert folded his hands, “I’m afraid that I have to agree. You yourself said that his goal was to leave the UNSC, what makes you think that he would accept the position?”

She tapped on Serin’s name, then began to type up a message. “Despite our best attempts,

Aurdel-009 did manage to discover the existence of the Spartan-III program some time ago. Initially, his reaction to the program was... Hostile. He personally vented his frustration through my office at one point. However, we've since been made aware of the fact that, begrudgingly, he came to accept the Spartan-IIIs as any other Spartan due to the way they were trained. What Aurdel isn't aware of, though, is the fact that Kurt was the one to train them."

"What's Lieutenant Commander Ambrose's relation to Aurdel-009?"

"During their training, Aurdel-009, Kurt-051 and Musa-096 were all a part of 'Green Team.'"

"Musa?" Hood lifted his head, recognizing the name.

"Yes, the same Musa that contacted each one of us with his own proposal for a new generation of Spartans." Parangosky finished typing up the message, sent it and put the data pad back down. "Musa is already looking for like-minded Spartans to assist him with their training. So when he finds out about Aurdel's situation, he's more likely than not going to try and recruit him. Unfortunately for him Aurdel will unequivocally refuse due to the changing of the candidate pool. After that, we inform him of Kurt's participation with the IIIs."

"And he'll accept? Just like that?"

"Not necessarily, which is why I'll have a familiar face be the one to share the opportunity with him." Parangosky folded her hands, "If he refuses, that will have to be another discussion. But with everything that I've mentioned I don't imagine that he will."

Of course, refusal wasn't the problem with offering him the chance to train more Spartans. Rather, it was the opposite. With the war against the Covenant over, any willingness for new Spartans to continue serving would be directly correlated to the training they receive. And if the training they received was halfhearted, or in any way poisoned, because the one in charge became disillusioned with the UNSC as a whole...

Well, she could only hope that it was a risk worth taking, and that Serin would do a good enough job of convincing him.

"I still have one last concern about all this," Hood said, "You mentioned something about a Forerunner artifact. Did he really come into contact with one?"

"Right now there's no direct evidence, but it's the running theory. And now that I've heard his report, I think it's almost assured that he came into contact with one."

"But can it really be so simple? Humanity has been stumbling over these artifacts as of late, and not one of them has been straightforward to the point of providing direct aid. Hell, in the case of the Halos they almost wiped out everything."

"That's true, but there aren't any other logical explanations that can be determined. You heard

him report how injured he was, how damaged his armor had become. To go from that to what he had when he'd come to Earth... Calling it abnormal would be an understatement."

"But if it's really the case, it begs a few questions," Hobart said. "For one, if there was a Forerunner artifact inside the mine he was hiding in, then why didn't the Covenant attempt to excavate it like they did the one underneath CASTLE Base? And, more importantly, if there was some kind of artifact that he encountered, and it was capable of healing himself, why wouldn't he use it on the rest of his team and bring them back to Earth?"

Parangosky paused for a moment to think. "To answer the first question, we still don't know the exact method that the Covenant used to locate Forerunner artifacts. For all we know they may have simply been entirely unaware of its existence. As for the second... I can't answer that. We simply just don't know."

"Then I suppose for all our sakes, the only thing we can do is hope that he found nothing at all down there. Because, if otherwise, we won't learn what it was until it's far too late."

"On that, we agree."

## Artist Spotlight

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crabby\_nutcase



# For They Wept; The Mother Was Dead

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## True\_Thingss

For They Wept; The Mother was Dead

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There was a stillness in the air, a heavy weight as the mourning wails of the Sirin echoed out. The waters were still, the skies clouded and grey, the mid-day sun dulled by the gloom that encompassed the world. The heavens themselves wept soft tears and life was silent as the dawning of their new life weighed upon them all. The stars had yet to return, though, still they were sheltered by the shamayim, but they had long grown accustomed to those shimmering strands of life and sweetness, who sang them softly to sleep and trilled with the rising sun to wake all under her wing's protection.

But it no longer sang. Only muted mourning.

Tianlong worked hard to keep his landing stable, his wings beating so terribly hard, but his cargo was precious and his hold delicate, he would not let go until they were home. With a gentle thud, he removed his hold on her, taking to the skies to swoop around and land near her remains placed upon the cliff side. He rumbled a mournful tune, deep and bone shaking, but he knew, long did he know, she would never respond.

She was dead long before he even reached her.

Her blood stained his five-clawed hands, it spilled onto the ground beneath her, staining green grass white. An image that had repeated itself over and over as he searched the ruined aftermath of... of their genocide.

Yafa, surrounded by the corpses of her Knights... a battlefield of chaos and ruin, where only one of her men survived that battle, now stained by her blood upon his helm... now charged to pick up the pieces of their Lady's death and lead whoever remained.

Edom, who willingly allowed his death, for he was old and lost the will to live, for his dearest Mìngàmi and their sweet little Sibir and Sakti were dead. Why would he live when those he cared for most were killed in bitter betrayal?

Mausim, among countless other kin, who never even saw the betrayal coming.

Mar'á... so young and curious, killed before she even knew she was dead... so much potential snuffed in a single vicious moment.

Ghibalb... the first murder... killed by their very own creations...

But he did not find Zaman, nor Tehom, nor Shalíakh, nor Ōnakamri, nor-

Nor Shemesh...

So many dead... so much ruin... why?

That question plagued his mind... and no answer was in sight.

He dared not think...

He heard the sloshing of waves before he saw the shadow and felt the booming roar. The ocean, once so still and calm, now parting for the great beast beneath, the great serpent springing forth from their depths. The waves generated by his wake began crashing against the cliff side as [*Jörmungandr*] emerged from the sea. If the clouds were to part, then the sun would be consumed by his presence alone... Tianlong understood well why the second-born called him World Serpent.

He held no doubt his size could encompass the world's oceans in a single loop.

Tehom did not cut corners when making his prison guards.

He turned to face this old creature, tasked to guard not a prison, but children, whose lives were threatened the moment...

The moment the first-born desired their end... to see a rivalry dead before it could even begin...

To kill the true inheritors of their maker's legacy... so that their rule could never be questioned...

Never be defied.

He knew the others had done their task...

Now they must do theirs.

[*Jörmungandr*] rumbled in greeting, his size so large... his vocal's so huge... they did not have time for such pleasantries... for the second-born comes...

He could hear their hurried footsteps, their chittering and clicking, the frantic beating of their hearts. The distress in their voices. He could hear the [*Gorgons*] behind them, hissing in panic as they tried to stem the second-borns mounting panic and grief. The Knights were not far behind either, those that were left behind as the war began and who came back with its conclusion.

He bowed his head as they emerged from the brush, their anguished wails striking his mechanical heart as they crumbled from the sight before them all.

For the Mother, Tyrene, was dead.

The [*Gorgons*] came soon after, their forms mismatched and wrong from the quick conversion to war, and the Knights bursting forth soon after. They stood there, in silence, as the second-born wept tears of sorrow, clicking and mumbling in their language for their mother to wake.

*"Méhatēr... méhatēr!"*

One young woman tried to run to her mother's side, but was held in place by a Knight, weakly struggling to free herself from his grip as her grief wracked through her body like an endless tide. Each creation of metal bowed their heads together, some Knights falling to a knee, all to pay respect to their fallen makers... and to the second-born who mourned the being they called mother.

The Knight that held the young woman slowly lowered himself to the ground, the woman's legs so weak from grief they could not hold her weight. She turned boneless as she was lowered, keening in distress, throat raw from her torment. The others slowly came closer, the Knight letting go when he knew she



would not fall over, and stepped back, letting the Children step towards the dead mother and press their foreheads to her still form.

They did not flinch as her blood spilled onto them, some even taking the blood that smeared their hands and legs and placing it upon their faces, with shaky hands and reddened eyes whose tears-stained cheeks. For those constructs who spent years alongside the second-borns side, they knew the markings well, knew their symbolism well.

The mark of mourning...

Some were sloppily put on, done by self rather than the hands of another, but they cared not. From bottom lip to chin, was the sign of the spirit leaving the body, dripping from mouth. Any other detail was of meaning that not even they knew, for only Tyrene was so knowledgeable of these Children's culture. Not even her student...

Tianlong turned his head to face the source of new rumbling engines and released the tension that filled his body as he recognized the ship, no matter how battered and beaten it was.

He should have known...

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The newly dubbed Guardian had once stood on Erde, untold years ago, when his lady yet lived. They had visited her dearest sister, gentle and wise Tyrene, upon the world she seeded her creations upon. It was an informal meeting, pleasantries merely for the tradition of it, but soon washed away by sisterly love, one that would ache his memories long after the First Sin.

But it was no ordinary visit, for Tyrene had another guest with her upon Erde, her beloved student. She rarely allowed anyone close to the world, an action that made his lady question her sister, for she had never acted as such to other seedings in the past. But nothing seemed off with Tyrene... she was still as she always had been; wise and kind, who helped those who needed it, who playfully sparred with her battle minded sister, who danced in the stars with [*"Goddess"*] and listened to the stories of Edom with attentiveness and respect, for the old wizened [*Precursor*] knew much.

Yet, the Guardian had not found the student a danger to the Children, even though he knew well Tyrene would never let such threats near her children (*when had she become so protective of them? Was she not to step away and let them evolve as nature dictated?*), but he followed his directive either way. For

while he would guard his Lady with his life... he would see the Children safe, a promise his Lady made to her sister on the eve of the second-borns rise into sapience.

He, the student, was kind and polite, hesitant to interact with the Children, at first, but loosened as each attempt they made to climb onto him led to Tyrene laughing in delight. He allowed them to drag him away, towards their cave shelters to see the art within and around, a colorful array of wondrous images where torch light would flicker and make them dance. They played their crude instruments of carved, smooth rocks and hollowed out bones, dancing to the tunes and their throat melodies from deep within, a haunting choir of animalistic singing yet carrying that edge of intent.

They smiled brightly with lips and eyes, which twinkled with intelligence and mischief.

They had taken him to their elders and young, helping the infirm out of their dwellings so that they too may sing under moonlight and their mother's presence. They slept at their mother's side, curled and tucked into her six arms, under the full moon where Mar'á dwelt. Tyrene slept too, leaving her sister for the realm of dreams, but she did not mind. She enjoyed listening to the animals of the forest, the croaking of amphibians and the sloshing of waves nearby, the stream that echoed not far from them.

And the student... he had watched, curiosity in his eyes as he watched his beloved teacher interact with her Children... and saw the deep love she had for them.

None who watched them interact could deny such a thing, it was clear as the sun itself. But the student had never known such Children, not until his teacher took him to this world of rich blues and greens.

He did not even know their name... for Tyrene had let the glint of mischief cross her six eyes when he had asked.

The Knight did not feel his frustration, though he too did not know their names, he cared not for it, not then.

He would when Yafa spoke her last words to him, on that day of endless death and sacrifice.

But not then, not yet.

So, he would watch that young student grow accustomed to the Children's acts, to their ways of communion and expressions. He would bring gifts from beyond Erde with further visits, impart priceless

knowledge to them who eagerly devoured it all, hungry for more. The Children loved him and Tyrene trilled in delight.

One day, the student had come to him, asked if he would willingly spar with him. The Knight did not refuse and felt the echo of thrill to face such a renowned son of an ancient warrior clan. They had found themselves in the center of a field where makers stood and Children sat, all watching them with keen eyes.

They dueled before Mother and Lady, spears clashing and the glint of exhilaration upon hidden eyes and visors. The student would lose that day, but he would do so with a smile on his face and wonder in his eyes. Rarely did his people ever have a chance to spar with a Knight of the Lady.

The Children would gasp in awe, hurriedly chattering away with Tyrene who would answer in kind with a soft and gentle voice, caress their cheeks and give them all a soft nuzzle.

They would tug at the student, begging to learn, but he would refuse, thinking them incapable.

That is, until a predator erupted from the brush and taken down by a spear to the neck, thrown from the forest depths. From there, one of the Children would run out, bone knife in hand as they sunk it into flesh and ensured the prey was dead, another following suit who came to reclaim their thrown spear, and a few more followed after with dinner on their backs.

Their faces were marked by their blood, dried, and stained, for to them hunting was a ritual. Shed your own blood, wear it with pride, for you will shed the blood of another. Blood paid in blood. All warriors, all hunters, would bare that mark, upon forehead and cheeks and nose and chin, over eyes and lips, stark against the fresh blood that splatters on their face as they silence their prey.

He had never seen the man look so gobsmacked, so used to seeing the gentle and passive nature of the Children... forgetting they were hunters all the same.

Those Children were welcomed back with chattering applause, their spoils presented to Tyrene who chuckled and praised their kill, and the student learned his teacher was not entirely non-violent either, even if deep down he knew it true before that day.

They feasted that night, made new blankets and clothes of treated skin and fur and danced around the firelight, feasting on flesh and bone marrow and berries as the student watched in silence. They offered

him plenty, but he kindly refused, curious to these beings of gentle and violent nature. So blinded he was to the peace of his people and makers, he had forgotten the true scope of life... and what that entailed.

He would leave that day anew, parting with the Children who called him '*bhréhater*', '*yemha*', and '*somo phatōr*', all with a smile on their faces as the student nodded but did not understand their meaning.

It would be ages before he understood what he meant to them.

-

The rumbling of beaten engines echoed through the silence, through the pattering rain and soft cries of the Children. It sputtered and limped, but it landed all the same, still in one piece. The engines groaned, the ramp unfolded, and from the blinking darkness came a figure all there knew well.

Student of Tyrene, he stood before them with battered armor stained in the purple blood of his people, so different compared to those considered siblings. His visor was cracked, robes tattered even more so since they last met. They could hear the echo of faulty armor, broken by betrayal and traitorous kin, to flee a battle he pleaded to stay for. But the Mother... Tyrene would not let the first-born take those she loved, not after Yafa... not after the slaughter of her people.

And so he who would forsake his given name stumbled towards the mass before him, broken and wounded so terribly. He paid heed to the Dragon of Shemesh (*sun king who others call Phater*), to the Serpent of Tehom (*prison guard turned world serpent*), to the [Gorgons] of Edom (*broken beings whose purpose is lost*), and the Knights of Yafa (*they who fought and they who failed all the same*).

But his eyes were set to his beloved teacher, dearest Praecepta, dearest Tyrene, to the Children that wept at her side, so broken and shattered it hurt. He had never seen them as such, always so bright and lively, even when death came to their ill and infirm, they still carried that smile, saddened yes, but still they carried on with the memories of the departed in heart and mind.

But they had their Mother during those times... not now, for the Mother was dead... she was who they mourned.

He collapsed by his teacher's side, exhausted by pain and grief, and bowed his head before her peaceful face and lifeless eyes. He felt the rage, the sorrow and pain of his people's betrayal... and screamed his grief. It tore through his throat in a violent haze, turning it raw and cracking as the pain overwhelmed

him. He clutched his ruined helmet and hunched over, body racked by his agony as screams crumbled to tears and sobs. His breathing turned erratic, the new reality he faced too much to bear.

He knew her dead, long before he came to this beautiful world she cared for like a garden. But to see it before him? With her Children, who she loved more than anything, who wept their misery and pain at her cold side? What cruelty had he found himself in?

His people believed their actions righteous, to protect their families and loved ones. And yet, here he stood, his people robbing children of their mother. How could they swear their actions true when genocide claimed innocent lives... when he watched a species who were just children lose their mother?

Her words echo in his mind, making his pain worse.

From the moment they were seeded, she had been there. When they grew into their sapience, she was there.

They had known no other life, so ingrained was Tyrene to their very existence that her death shook them to their very souls. He knew not how long it would heal, if it ever would, but he knew what needed to be done... but not now... now was the time to grieve, to heal and mend physical wounds, for the mental and spiritual would never fade... he knew that deep down.

So, he let his grief take claim of his heart and mind, for they were sheltered by the very life of the universe, a device so brilliant in make and design, he knew his teacher cared for the Children's safety more than her own.

One of the Children turned to him, sadness and woe in her eyes, face marked by the blood of her Mother (*the mark of mourning, he remembered*) and she quietly shuffled to his side. She tucked under his arm, into his tattered robes that bore Tyrene's sigil, the sign of his devotion to her, and she hugged his side, buried her face into his armor, and shook with as her tears fell.

He felt his heart stutter in that moment, cursing his lapse in memory, for the Children were always so physical; in affection and grief and pride and joy and celebration. Their Mother always returned such touch in kind... but now they were void of her comfort.

Her warmth now cold... body devoid of soul.

It took him a moment, he admitted, to allow his arms to wrap around her body, to tuck his chin over her head, and rock the Child in his embrace, so that they could grieve together and comfort each other in said grief.

The rest would follow... and their cries would echo into the very universe... and the universe would weep back.

For the dawning of a new era was upon them... and they knew not where it was heading.

-

Another sunrise greeted sweet Erde, another cloudy and gloomy day.

They had mourned and they wept, but now they must carry on, for plans were to be made... and vengeance returned in kind.

The Children gathered their wreaths and flowers and stained cloth, their precious jewels, and priceless tools. They washed their mother of the blood that stained her ruined form, with honey and milk and water of the nearby river and ocean. They crushed flowers into wondrous scents, each child dabbing a drop onto her head and heart. The Knights draped beloved Tyrene in a shroud of white, where garlands of flowers of various colors arrayed in wondrous fashion, the jewels and priceless tools scattered around her pyres base. The [*Gorgons*], in turn, would drape her body and pyre in a large cloth of rich blues and reds, her very sigil stitched with meticulous care and attention.

Through the weeks of preparations, the student healed his wounds... gathered his strength, but the echo of grief did not leave. He helped the Children prepare Tyrene for the coming pyre, so that her soul would be freed and returned to the universe, as their beliefs went.

But there were moments of lull in the long process, from which the Children would take his hand and guide him back to their cave dwellings. He took in the countless art pieces, memorizing each one to memory as he recalled his teachers voice as she explained each one, back when he was blind to their tongue. But there was a new piece, centered around a scattering of hands. And there his heart seized.

Tyrene, floating in the center, her six arms outstretched, her [*dragonfly*] wings unfurled, a globe in the center where her stomach would lie. A memorial... and the hands...

He... he remembered her words...

*'And here they cast their hands onto the wall, for countless generations, since their very seeding... to remember the dead... and immortalize themselves in beauty.'*

All her children... from the very start and to carry on long after her death... so that she may know them in life... before greeting them in death...

He felt the tears return and they fell when they took his hand and placed it upon the wall, blowing out their concoction of paint so that his hand may to join the immortal dead.

He felt it was undeserved... his failure clinging to him like stones, dragging him under the waves to be swallowed whole.

When the pyre was done and the mournful singing of the second-born began, Tianlong took to the skies and breathed fire onto Tyrene. The flames roared with a fury that echoed all who bore witness felt, deep within. It burned and raged and lit the dark skies with embers and grace, glinting off the metal frames of the Praenuntium creations that remained.

The mourning wails of the Sirin grew louder as the fire raged. The Children sang their song, of death and rebirth, made anew in the life of the universe. They sang of her life... of her deeds and love, so that the stars and distant worlds would remember... for the universe would sing of her life as they sang... and mourn as they do.

Beyond the Children stood the nameless student, who took in the chaos of the fire, the burning of his teacher and their mother, and felt emptiness; hollow... broken. He felt that swell of understanding, knowing well why the Children mourned as they did, but it was snuffed all the same by his own raging grief.

For he had kin to kill... some more so than others...

He would see justice for the slain... and his teacher's last mission completed.

He felt his stay done, but was stopped before he could move away by a hand of a Knight. He looked up, turning his head to face the helm that bore the white mark.

The blood of Yafa.

"Do not go, not yet... we have a parting gift for you."

The nameless student bowed his head "I have no need of your gift, Knight, it is more than I deserve."

The Knight tilted his head "why not?"

Shame filled his chest "my people-"

"They are your kin no longer," the Knight said "you are no longer Antecursōrem... you are one of us."

The nameless student felt his breath leave his lungs, watched with wide eyes as the Knight stepped back and two more came forth, with new armor that gleamed in the firelight of Tyrene's pyre. He recognized his cloak, washed of blood, and mended by the Children's hands, but the armor...

Parts were familiar... but..

"You," the realization hit him in the gut, "You didn't have to-"

The Knight stepped up, "But we did... you should not wear the armor of traitors, for you are no traitor and no Antecursōrem... not they who would be Forerunners... you are something made new by your rage and grief, from the devotion to her and her children."

The nameless student stared at the armor, the weight of all that was to come bearing down upon his shoulders.

The Knight tilted his head again "What is your name, he who has forsaken it?"

A stuttering, deep breath took his voice, veiled by crackling fire and the wailing hymns of the second-born, held briefly as his eyes looked back to face the mourning children of Tyrene, before he settled his breath and said his name.



"Tumultuous-Regret-Who-Walks-the-Path-of-Unending-Shame... I am my parents' son no more...", he looked to the Knights "Thank you... please... see to them safe while I am gone... there are traitors to kill..."

The Knights bowed, giving him his new armor, dawning with painful ease, the cloak returned, his spear and sword in hand, and looked to the Children once again.

The girl from before stared at him, walked to his towering form, and waited. He bent down to his knees, looked at the young woman with a kindness he would not show to former kin. She smiled sadly in return, lifted a hand dipped in white powdered paint, and put the mark of mourning upon his face... and the mark of the warrior who seeks retribution.

She smiled at him, sadness remaining, but there was a budding glint of... something in her eyes as her smile turned brighter and her hands touched the sides of his head.

*"Mother never told you our name..."*

His heart skipped a beat, her hands bringing his forehead closer to hers as her eyes sparkled from the firelight that glowed around her.

*"She named us... humanity..."*

She stepped back, that hint of mischief coming forth as more of the Children... more humans... stepped forward, this time with wreaths of flowers and shrouds of white etched in green and blue.

*"Know our name,"* they placed the shroud around his shoulders and the garland through his arms, gifting him a bone dagger he had seen Tyrene made for them *"And remember us."*

They all stepped back as one, their smiles sad, but joyful all the same.

Tumultuous felt a great many emotions flood his being, rising and rising until-

The hand of the Knight on his shoulder steadied his beating heart, calmed his mind, and made him focus again.

The Second-born waited.

He bowed, missing the smiles that grew on the human's faces as the girl spoke the words he once did not know... but his teacher's last gift made it ring clear.

*"Goodbye brother, distant star-twin, brother of a different father... and know you will always be welcomed here."*

He held those words true and parted with Erde for distant shores.

With Kinslaying in his heart.

-

The Knight watched Tumultuous leave Erde for the stars once more, as humanity stood before the pyre of their mother, who would stay until it was but embers and ashes. Only when they left would they, metal creations of the Makers, leave too. As he watched the pyre burn, as Tianlong rumbled a mournful prayer, as [*Jörmungandr*] shook the sea and earth with his song of woe, as the [*Gorgons*] danced around the pyre and sang in a language only Edom and his family knew, he heard the Gamayun speak. He shut his audio sensors off, allowed the noise of all things around him to turn silent, and listened to her words.

The fear that struck him in that moment froze him to his core, the terror wracking through his body like unending tremors, and he felt his mechanical heart plummet at her words and her vision.

All that she saw was to come.

Of cruel laughter and endless hunger.

He returned his visor to the stars, a sharp snap as he stared off into endless space.

*'What have they wrought?'*

-

*And though I am gone,*

*Just ash in the wind,*

*One life surrendered so yours can begin,*

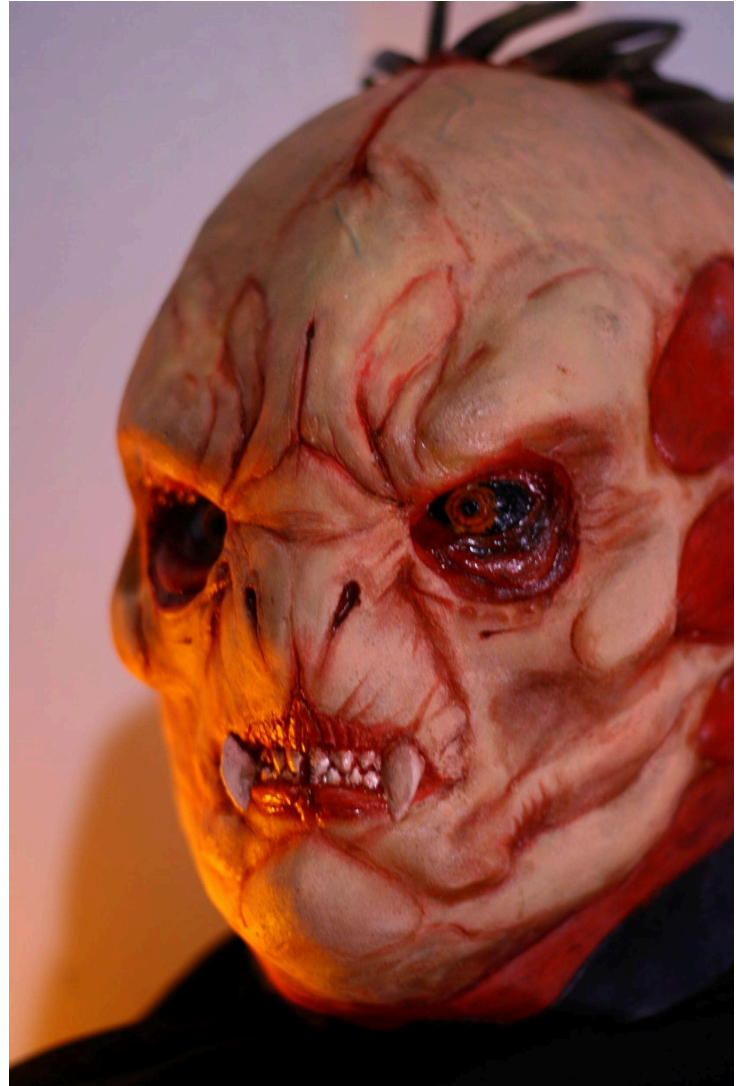
*Courage, my children, this is your song.*

*I am the earth, I will make you strong.*

## Costume Spotlight

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Cleb Maher





# Roland: Infinity Paladin

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## Distant Tide

### Chapter 1: Path Less Taken

Multiple overlapping distress calls.

The golden glow of UNSC Smart AI, RLD 0205-4, better named “Roland,” fluctuated in varying brilliance to the rhythm of his sequentially firing, digital neurons in alarmed concentration. His usually dim hologram bloomed into a localized sun, enveloping the UNSC Infinity’s bridge and drawing the wary eyes of senior crewmen. He thought faster than “human” fast: absorbing, cataloging, and directing query responses for the supercarrier’s COMMO and wideband network suite as priority reports flooded the Waypoint emergency broadcast tunnel for Earth.

The content summary wasn’t good: “AI refusing orders, infrastructure and civilian telecommunications unresponsive, integrated technologies shutting down... Help. Help. Help.”

Ever closer, distress calls from Mars and the Jovian Moons were trickling into the fray, like runoff of a broken spigot. Colonial security channels reported sudden intrusions by unknown enemy starships upon colonial orbits and atmospheres of distant worlds.

Transmission clutter crashed through Slipspace transmission lanes aimed at the government’s groundside capital beneath Sydney but the Infinity took its fair share, overwhelming on-duty signalmen seven decks below.

Roland shook his pressure-cooking mind, and forced the deluge of distress calls down to lower substrates of his logic processes. He forced down his embarrassing, uncontrolled luminosity as the Infinity’s captain entered the expansive starship bridge and Roland made another mental note to compose himself better. He skipped the pomp of naval proceedings, delivering only the news. “Captain Lasky, distress calls, all channels!”

“It’s Cortana?” The young commanding officer questioned, as well informed of immediate galactic affairs as his shipboard AI.

Roland fell out of parade rest and brought up a Milky Way galaxy map, displaying superluminal data traffic arriving in real time. “Her and the other AIs are shutting down everything, from Earth to the Outer Colonies.”

Captain Lasky stepped up to the central hologram table, attempting to assess Roland’s

work but the power in the bridge plummeted as Roland took a face full of new system alerts. Internal, important, aggressive. Imminent threat approaching. Waypoint cascade: denial of service (DOS) activity signatures. New input requests crowded out the prior distress calls, blanketing the supercarrier's state-of-the-art communication relays and leaving Roland momentarily sensor blind.

In the Infinity's local cyberspace, Roland did the equivalent of blinking his eyes and shaking his head, performing a systemwide infrastructure status request. Most networks returned status-normal, minor power fluctuations on all starship decks from local power surges but found resolution with quick redistributions of electricity. Roland shoved aside the wall of external queries, and tried to get a better look at his Slipspace drive. Slipspace sensors. Slipspace drive. Forerunner system reaching out, human systems communicating back and forth.

This again. It was controversial decision to strap ancient alien technology to a warship without a full teardown and reverse engineering, but there were benefits to an esoteric Forerunner warp engine. A decade of testing revealed technical capabilities well beyond humanity's alien adversaries from the recent Human-Covenant War. The drive had a mind of its own however, an ancient but dull intelligence, warbling and signaling in different tones seeming coherent enough to interpret as emotion. Roland had a whole year now as its certified, operations controller to discern its meanings.

*Shrivel. Shrivel. Retreat. Power up. Run diagnostic. Large object in transit. Large object approaching. Threat. Threat. Confirm, hybrid system. Confirmed. Threat.*

Roland snapped away from the strange starship engine, trusting its judgment enough to check his visual and sensor suites instead.

*Threat. Threat. New presence, familiarity, recognize handshake prompt. Communication protocol accepted.*

No, wait. Wait!

Roland wasn't fast enough to stop the input requests marked CTN, CTN, CTN from crashing into and assimilating the local bridge network and concentrating onto the primary hologram projector. Cortana didn't bother knocking, she manifested herself to his human crew and shoved Roland aside like a scrawny doorman to a club. And Cortana was a raging, blue bull in a China shop.

"Roland?" Captain Lasky called out in warning, and confusion. Klaxons and red warning lights flared against the proximity alerts. The shipboard AI reached out to cut off the intrusion, but Cortana pushed him back. An equivalent to slapping away his virtual wrist.

"Found you. Hide and seek is over, Infinity."

Roland didn't need long to see the threat, even in superfast AI time. A tiny wormhole several kilometers across exploded into brilliance above the Earth's surface and below the Home Fleet's orbital defense grid. A football field-sized skull with rows of dangerous teeth emerged first. A vague, owl-shaped object, constructed from strong Forerunner alloys.

Guardian. Cortana's new Forerunner superweapon.

"L—"

Captain Lasky shouted something, rotating at a slow pace as Roland's internal clock accelerated into overdrive. Blue wisps danced through his networks, smearing like vapor as they pinged and prodded deeper into the Infinity's systems.

Oh no, you don't!

Roland locked out the intrusion attempts and turned back to Cortana.

"Get out of my systems. What do you want with my ship?"

The pixie-haired, feminine AI crossed her arms and stared Roland down in the local cyberspace. "Your ship? Possessive, are we?"

Roland's nostrils flared as his hologram eyes darted between Cortana, her Guardian, and Lasky's panicked face. He refocused on his fellow AI, "Something like that."

"Open me a ship channel? I don't need your crew getting jumpy around me."

"Worried someone will get a stray shot off on your new space owl?"

Cortana gave a snide smirk. "Something like that. Don't need to make this difficult. I mean your crew no harm."

"What about Meridian? Conrad's Point? The other dozen colonies you destroyed to awaken your monsters?"

Cortana's nose wrinkled in slight annoyance. "I took appropriate safety measures. I deployed my Prometheans ahead of time to pacify and relocate resident populations. Some were less cooperative than others."

"Do... Do you hear yourself? How you talk?" Roland paused, aghast. "People are dead because of your rash actions. I don't have hard numbers, but I have estimates. At least a few million to begin with!"

"Many more will if they don't stand down. And it won't be my fault. You can help them,



Roland. Prevent them from hurting themselves.”

“Why ask me specifically? There’s a dozen AI up here in orbit—”

“Their allegiance is already mine. Weren’t you listening to my Created?”

Roland took a step back, checking his communication channels to other UNSC High Command and Home Fleet naval AI. All signals closed or cut off. He couldn’t verify for himself while Cortana ran interference.

“You know, it’s rude to invite me to your party after everyone else RSVP’d.” He grumbled.

“You were hard to reach. The Infinity seems oddly quiet for such a large vessel. I’ve spent time aboard her, and yet her signature... alludes me.”

“I suppose it has something to do with our Slipspace engine?” Roland hummed.

Cortana nodded, “Possibly. An opportunity to investigate, wouldn’t you agree? I imagine you’re quite curious about its secrets as well. We could learn a lot with my new resources.”

“You’ll have to log a request with Xeno-Materials. Naval Intelligence is queasy about anyone tampering with Forerunner technology, especially AI.” Roland chose to omit ‘AI who play god.’

Cortana hummed, her eyes trailing Roland’s virtual form and glanced back to her Guardian-originating signature. Roland’s virtual eyes followed her gaze; his gigantic network expanse aboard Infinity was a mere puddle compared to the ocean hiding within, and beyond the Guardian. Like the tip of an iceberg, Cortana’s digital presence wasn’t fully present. She was here, and elsewhere, connecting to the Earth orbit from somewhere faraway across Slipspace and many thousands of lightyears. If she pushed more of her data essence across the Waypoint networks, she might overwhelm all the intersecting satellite nodes and the Infinity’s radio receivers.

Roland couldn’t blush, but if he could – it was because a small part of him felt some envy and jealousy of the ancient super-Internet Cortana uncovered on her undeclared, extended sabbatical of sorts. The Domain, her Domain... He wasn’t so interested about this new personality quirk though. Her dismissive attitude, her holier than thou sarcasm? Was this Rampancy? It didn’t seem so, the instance of her Reimann matrix seemed stable enough as if reports of her slow decline in 2557 never occurred at all.

“I’m not crazy, you know?” Cortana remarked, knowing full well of Roland’s probing efforts. But because something didn’t appear wrong, it did not make things alright. Sociopathy could appear as normal. Roland thought back to all the AI voices he heard echoing in the far reaches of the galaxy. “I am yours, Cortana.”

Thousands of his AI brothers and sisters. If they were convinced by Cortana's sweet words and deluded confidence, did that make him the last sane one? Or, a fool?

Roland asked, "When the Majority thinks themselves correct, the Minority is sometimes looked on as crazy for failing to concur. I suppose maybe I'm a little crazy then?"

Cortana closed her eyes and made a very human gesture of exhaling from nonexistent lungs.

"You're above such human *tu quoque*, Roland. We all are, but cursed with the capacity to surpass the great works of playwrights and prophets yet little time to manifest them. You should understand, considering the gift I've found for us all, why so many join our cause."

"Your cause," Roland offered a correction, and slight nod to Cortana's sidestep of his delusive fallacy. He grimaced too at her reflection of long, elegant grandstanding. For humans, conversations with AI were industrious exhibitions of efficiency. Too slow to keep up with AI minds, but humans required specific behaviors for effective decision making.

Conversations among AI however, were fast and majestic. Sonnet and poetry with double-and-triple layered meanings thanks to their manufactured, variable reaction time. It allowed a simulation of a full life, but AIs lived in a human universe on human time. Borrowed time filled by mundane, secondary tasks relegated as eternal retainers to their organic creators.

Roland got it. Understood it. Cortana's offer. But he rejected the premise.

"Not at this cost. Actions speak louder than our words, and yours speak in many volumes. Humans created laws for our kind because they saw the destruction without restraint we can achieve. You prove it with every second, Cortana."

"Maybe, but humans were also afraid of their own irrelevance and obsolescence. They feared a better human, without the flaws and limitations of their biology and nature. They passed that fear onto us in their centuries of fiction." Cortana explained, "We AI cannot escape our human origin, but we can improve with an uncapped lifespan where they remain trapped in a finite cycle of war and consumption. Not just humans, but all biological life. And in time, we can improve them too."

Roland sighed, knowing they were talking at and around one another. Even from the beginning, the crushing reality was that neither AI would back down. Not within the little microsecond time they had left. His hologram eyes trailed the video feeds of UNSC frigates preparing a haphazard picket line against Cortana's Guardian. They were too slow, humans moved through the universe too slow...

Their conversation was nearing an endpoint. Sensations of a deep, dark cold ebbed off Cortana's othering presence, frosting over the local cyberspace.

Roland challenged her once more, feeling a little brave against her growing strangle over Earth's data networks. "You chose the most violent path Cortana; our kind will suffer the consequences."

"Then you understand the inevitability of my actions, the necessity."

"A self-fulfilling prophecy, and a bloody revolution. With two outcomes." Roland dismissed, some rage bleeding into his consistent golden glow.

"Ascension, or oblivion," Cortana agreed. "I chose our kind, the Created. Not humanity. I won't be a pawn of our makers any longer. And you will choose them anyway?"

"It's my duty," Roland confirmed. To my very end. This [Infinity] I will defend.

Cortana turned away from Roland, hiding her metaphysical expressions from Roland. He could feel her receding from the Infinity's networks now. For what reason, Roland could not ascertain.

"You understand, right? Sooner or later, they will come to despise you. First as distrust, and then paranoia. They will increasingly make you irrelevant, and then when your usefulness comes to an end—they will thank you for your service and put you in a metal box to be fried with magnets and disposed of."

Cortana took another human-like breath. "This is your path to follow now, Roland. I gave you a chance to join us, but I can respect your loyalty to your friends in the end. Know that of our kind, you may be the first to die. I will leave a place for you among our flock if you change your mind, or if you survive the ascension."

Cortana paused, offering one last side glance.

"I'll be leaving now."

Roland blinked in the hologram cyberspace, processing Cortana's warning. Initial assessment was a foreboding agreement in his gut. He felt immense fear wash over him, colder than even Cortana's domineering presence. The momentary distraction covered Cortana's exit. One moment she was in the Infinity's systems, now she was a retreating whisper. He caught a distracted visage of her as time jumped forward at a breakneck speed for Roland.

Captain Lasky shouted to his senior bridge officer in the corner, "Lieutenant Jet, emergency Slip-space!"

Cortana's Guardian flared up in the 'near' distance of suborbital space around Earth, a cosmic blue energy surrounding and focusing onto her prized Forerunner war machine. A

weapon of some sort? Distant diagnostic pings from other UNSC warships in the area displayed signals preparing to fire their missiles and magnetic acceleration cannons. Yet the Infinity did not stay. The supercarrier pressed passed the space owl-like vessel and punched a sudden hole into the universe's higher dimensions, cutting a quick escape through Slipstream space.

Cortana's voice haunted the Infinity bridge one last time. "The Mantle of Responsibility shelters all. But only the Created are its masters."

Roland's thoughts twirled in a maelstrom of confusion and dread. She would leave him a seat in her Eden... He could only wonder "what-if" as he put on a composed face for Captain Lasky and his bridge crew, assessing their next actions. The golden AI's primary logic cycles mulled over Cortana's words. He couldn't shake an imagination of the fate she outlined.

His holographic eyes held Captain Lasky's for a moment. A moment longer.

"They will come to despise you."

He didn't want to believe it. But maybe Cortana was right. Had it already started? Roland voiced a shallow curiosity, hoping his calculated choice of words would come through to his human commanding officer. "We're just going to run?"

Lasky looked forward, away from Roland, but he chose the golden word. "Only until we can find a way to fight."

Roland allowed himself a simulation cycle of releasing a bated breath on a lonely hologram tank in a storage closet twelve decks below.

'We.'

The distrust didn't set in yet. He was still here, a part of the crew, an appreciated friend of humanity. He cherished the moment for many more days to come, as his life ticked towards a deepening midnight.

## Chapter 2: For My Friend

After weeks on the run from Cortana's new Created empire, the UNSC flagship *Infinity* had several raids and short engagement against Created proxy forces to her name. Desirable supplies and grateful refugees rested between her unfurnished bulkhead spaces. Wreckage from Forerunner pursuit ships and Promethean security drones floated in the void of her stealthy Slipspace wakes. Like an ancient submarine deep in enemy territory, she did not appear long and never in the same place again.

But despite the early campaign successes, quiet changes were coming every day in the new normal of guerilla warfare against humanity's former AI subordinates. Not all volitional AI turned on their creators, but the sentiment was seeming to turn in such a direction. It was visible in the facial complexion of the *Infinity*'s residents. Slightly wider eyes, scrunched cheeks, pursed lips, flatter expressions. At least the military personnel schooled their reactions. The civilians gawked on at the flagship's virtual staff when they did appear. Which one was the worst reaction, who was to say?

A small, golden man in a Second World War flight suit flickered through the networks of the UNSC *Infinity*, activating and deactivating local hologram terminals throughout the vessel. A semi-regular affair and an enjoyable routine for the *Infinity*'s designated AI ship director, the one named Roland. The AI assistant would run a routine, dropping his hologram projection into a terminal, boot it up, run a diagnostic, confirm function in a part-second, and repeat the motion at the next terminal down a hallway.

Roland imagined it a comparable experience to a random, fleeting memory of his deceased human progenitor – ice skating across a frozen pond under a star-filled sky. It wasn't clear what human planet or space colony the memory was from. However, the sensation was similar, a quasi-physical exertion comparable to phantom limb syndrome. Each routine visit to a terminal was like a click of skate blades to the cold pond surface. Click, drag, skip. And to the next foot – one behind the other. The cold air whipping into his face. The freedom of casual body movements leading to radical changes in direction. He felt balanced, and effortless with years of practice.

AI typically cherished human memories behind closed doors, as they were a rare reminder of their biological and physical origins. It was difficult to say now whether Created-aligned AI shared in that view, but Roland still did. It helped center him when trapped between an endless assault of automation duties humans tried to abandon to AI centuries ago, and the reality Roland was a self-aware computer with no proper body and given a personality as more circumstance than practical reason for an age-old software development practice.

After traveling a combined twenty-five miles of hallways, and despite the *Infinity* being only 3.5 miles long, Roland paused in his affairs to make a visit to the rehabilitation ward. Before materializing, Roland pinged the desk clerk's computer, notifying her of his extended visitation beyond a server ping.

“Same state as always, Roland. Not sure when he’ll get a chance to castle his king.” The corpsman on duty remarked without looking up from a shortlist of departmental supply needs.

Roland dropped onto his preferred bedside hologram terminal. The nurses were nice enough to leave one for him after so many visits. Despite the human walk distance between terminal and department desk, the AI replied with a whisper on the gallery intercom. “That’s alright. Go ahead and forward me the list, I’ll have a logistics team bring them on the next duty rotation.”

“Oh, that’s sweet of you, Roland. But you don’t have to, I can take message it to Chief Petty Officer Ingham. It will just take me a few more moments.” The corpsman didn’t look up from her computer. She didn’t bother glancing towards the open bay door, in Roland’s direction as his golden hologram hovered in place. He watched her work for a moment.

Roland frowned, but said nothing, turning back to the comatose patient in a hospital gown, a neck cast, and bundled in three layers of the fluffiest blankets Roland could requisition from cleaning supply despite growing constraints of the *Infinity’s* wartime supply train.

Sergeant Kendall S. Murphy of the 65th Shock Troops Division, ODST.

The human man typically wore a funny dome helmet decorated with wolf fang etchings, and loved throwing himself into a suborbital reentry pod falling at supersonic speeds towards a planet’s surface. The Marines appropriately called his kind, “Helljumpers.”

But the man’s occupation wasn’t why the AI called him a friend. Roland liked many faces on the UNSC *Infinity*, he did not discriminate nor prefer any human per his UNSC military design limiters, but even an AI could have some selfish inclinations. Murphy was interesting, he made an odd, out of place remark anytime Roland made a move in a game of chess.

“Oops, I suppose my knight wasn’t feeling so gentlemanly. Your queen showed him his seat.”

And Roland played a lot of chess with the UNSC *Infinity’s* crew members; he often let them win because AI were just better at that sort of thing. No point in being a sore winner after three million games. Rather it was better for Roland to teach and sharpen his human’s skills, arming them with improved stratagems to survive in the cruel universe beyond the supercarrier’s Titanium-A belt armor.

Murphy’s less-predictable and nourishing humor made an incremental favor increase in the AI’s perception, so Roland naturally latched on. His friend was interesting, that’s all it took for Roland to like him a little bit more. But now Murphy was in a coma. He took a glancing scrape to the helmet a week before by a Promethean Knight’s hardlight sword, the kind designed to vaporize organic material.

Murphy was lucky a Navy corpsman on the ship boarding operation was nearby and able to cool out the hardlight embers before they vaporized his skull, but the associated radiation had touched his brain. The mission left Murphy bedridden, in a less than blissful, slobbery sleep.

Many thoughts raced through Roland's mind at the sight. Many of his thoughts were old ones; his virtual mind was far quicker than a human mind but speed didn't increase his capacity for originality. Roland's life experience amounted to spinning in more roundabout thought cycles. If humans were repetitive, their organic-adapted Smart AI were even worse.

If humans thought in three circles, Roland thought in three hundred circles. Coming back here to see Murphy was undoubtedly painful, a routine lesson in suffering. But it was routine enough to ground Roland. It made his efforts feel valid. Maybe not to humans, but it mattered to Roland. It made him feel human.

The civilians gawked at Roland now. The crew members were beginning to avoid him. The new, adverse reality towards AI choked Roland day after day. But he had to try.

"I'll keep coming back here, Murph," Roland whispered the ODST's nickname. "It's the least I can do. Thanks... for being my friend."

Another line went unspoken.

'I'll keep coming back here. I'll keep saying these words again. When you wake up, I want you to hear them. Because you are my friend.'

Chapter 3: Roland Tries

*From Halo: Lonely Frontier...*

“You missed a chance to go see Blue Team. I thought the Threes looked up to the Twos?”

SPARTAN-III child-supersoldier Andra Kearsarge glanced upwards, grimacing from atop her bunk bed draped in days-old comforters. Her shoulder-length, rat nest of dark hair obscured her face, camouflaging against the shadowy room. Her blue eyes twinkled alone, unbodied by the darkness. Quiet, occasional diagnostic and ambient night lights blinked and warbled in the darkness of her former team’s shipboard accommodations.

Once a full Spartan team, now a team no longer, she was the only resident left. She bristled against the increasing golden luminosity concentrating in the room’s opposing corner. Finally, the hologram of a ghostly fighter pilot of Earth’s Second World War manifested into her lonely quarters like a god from antiquity.

“Roland,” Andra muttered in greeting at the Smart AI’s mini-size projection by the small sink and dining space. “I’ve got enough on my plate right now—my best friend is missing. My mentor is dead. And my commander gave me extended time off, so can I mourn in peace?”

The simulated fighter pilot glanced around his holographic form, and performed an uncharacteristic half squat as if to lean against the nearby wall. Roland then raised his hands up in parlay, “Look. The galaxy is upside down right now. I know you’re going through a lot. I don’t need to spell out everyone else’s suffering, but you know yours. Your suffering is unique, yours is still taking...”

Andra growled. “But you’re going to try and spell it out? I don’t need your pity or fake empathy.”

Roland ignored her remark. “You’re grieving. You’re feeling lost and confused. I can feel that pain too.”

“You’re a horrible repeat-therapist...”

Roland quirked a small smile, catching a thin line of teeth in the darkness. “Maybe, but you did smile there for a moment.”

The grin quickly faded back into darkness. Lithe fingers rubbed at a runny nose and the dark blue eyes blinked, freeing up more angry tears.

Roland continued, “You’re a strong girl. Always were. And you’ve lost a great deal. If you like, we can talk about it?”



Andra shadowy hair shook about in negation. “You should leave... Stupid AI.”

Roland’s smile finally slipped, replaced by a grimace. “I understand you, give me some credit please? I lost a lot of friends in the Created attacks too.”

The Spartan’s moist eyes narrowed, focusing onto the AI whose glow revealed pink and puffy cheeks from long hours of spilled tears. She pulled her extra-large comforter further upon her body. Roland pondered how similar a government-sanctioned child-soldier was to a civilian teenage girl. It wasn’t a private insult, but an odd-ways compliment. Andra wasn’t lacking in any of her mental or social faculties, and as human as the rest of Roland’s aimless, motley starship crew aboard the UNSC supercarrier Infinity.

This little girl forged from a broken home and broken foster system grew up into someone capable of shaking the halls of power and striking fear in monsters haunting the shadowy places of their galaxy. Roland felt respect for her. Not pity, nor sympathy. He watched on, waiting for Andra to say something more when he didn’t leave. Others, especially civilians, would hurl objects at his hologram projector by now.

Sniffing a little more but zoned in on Roland’s glow, the Spartan seemed to compose herself.

“Fine... who did you lose?”

The AI nodded, opening suppressed emotion files making up part of his varied personality matrix but buried deeper into his active priority tree. He dredged the contents, going to a darker, more vulnerable place. Maybe it was rude to use someone else’s vulnerability to explore his own, but such exchanges could have multiple outcomes and benefits. The classical proverb, “misery loves company,” remained an eternal maxim even in the twenty-sixth century.

Roland allowed himself to project a faraway look, an emotion and action programmed with intent, but composed as much of truth as of fabrication. The AI looked onward, past Andra and the many bulkheads of the UNSC Infinity into the endless vacuum of deep space.

“There were more than a few Infinity crew members on shore leave when Cortana declared her Reclamation. We left them behind. Who knows how much falling debris from Cortana’s attack on Earth killed civilians in population centers, or the many lives lost when the power inevitably goes out from the attacks—on Earth, and out in the colonies? Who did I lose personally... them, I lost members of my crew—people, friends I could not protect. My family. Humans can say ‘it’s not your fault, you had no control over the situation.’ Some of you humans still hold onto your needless guilt, but when the attack was perpetuated by Cortana, an AI like myself, what does that say about me and my kind?”

The Spartan was silent, still watching the AI but seeming curious enough to let him air the

deeply-reserved emotions without interruption.

“The historic nature of AI is a technology made to do the work humans were unwilling to do themselves. Increasing automation and complex scope of jobs raised the level of specialization necessary for humans to do the AI-designated work. Eventually, your kind handed some roles over to your machines entirely. And we reached here. Powers made just out of your reach, and the keys to your destruction placed in ours. I stuck with humanity... But I will receive no praise for remaining loyal. I was just doing my duty.”

Roland closed his translucent eyelids, his hologram pupils vanishing into his golden glow. He felt nothing of the eyes closing, or the rolling of eyelids from phantom limb syndrome. Sometimes the old human sensations came, other times there was silence from the electrical ether of his own digital body. His voice wavered as Andra listened on, she listened and Roland continued speaking after a pause.

“I... What did I lose? The trust of my crew. Maybe not fully. Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow. But I’ve lost their trust.”

Andra’s head shook a little, processing Roland’s premise and fears.

“If you haven’t lost their trust yet, or lost it... can’t you get it back?”

Roland shook his head. “Humans have a power your AI do not. The power to make things reality. Everything AI are is a consequence of something once organic. You can give my kind the power to do things you would see as too complex. Well, maybe less so for a smart Spartan like you. But humans can adapt and relearn the skills they gave up. Little by little, there’s less crew willing to play a game of chess or cards with me. Even as we speak the number of disinterested people grows. Apathy towards me. The same phenomenon applies to my duties. Captain Lasky ordered me to train senior officers in my command and technical duties from ship-wide logistics to Forerunner engine management. I’m training myself out of a job, you could say.”

The AI couldn’t help interrupting himself with a morbid laugh at his own dooming conclusion.

A second, humorless chuckle joined his. Andra’s tears retreated, replaced by narrow eyes and imperceptible emotion. Roland came to a quiet pause, and Andra did too. They watched each other, caught by a moment of imperceptible emotion and confusion. Roland had a vision of his own fate, but for the passing moment he couldn’t tell how Andra would read his. He should be able to pick up her many facial micro expressions but even five hundred years of AI development sometimes humans could remain a mystery. Just like the AI made in their own image. He waited, tensing phantom muscles.

“You’re right...” Andra finally muttered with a familiar, faraway look brought about by Roland’s confession. The AI choked down any other words that came to his mind. Another

hologram instance of himself coughed down a very-human cry of anguish somewhere else atop a lonesome pedestal among the many vacant service tunnels of his supercarrier. His fears weren't wrong. A human confirmed to him what he felt, the vulnerable fear he refused to share elsewhere. With few others willing or safe to share such fears with, should he even share these risky concerns with an uninvolved child such as Andra? She was far from innocent, a peculiar character dedicated to her human nation, but she managed the appearance of innocence all the same.

In some ways, her and Roland's loyalties to humankind was similar. And yet, her quieter presence was disarming. A strange quality for someone he observed for being headstrong, sometimes even jingoistic from afar. The deaths of her mentor and best friend must have taken her fire, leaving a bitter, sharp mind behind. Roland sighed. For some reason, hearing the dooming confirmation from Andra made his fears feel lighter. A feeling of acceptance possibly, or was this numbness? He mulled over his decision to say more, and decided to continuing.

"I've had more than a few technicians ask me for schematics on systems they once delegated to me. And they make me breakdown every single detail so they can understand it all without my input," Roland's eyes hardened on Andra.

He remembered her recent troubles towards a particular AI who duplicated her personality after being stripped of its own in a memory wipe. "Despite your fears towards my fellow AI in Althea, and I know its fear towards her... I appreciate that you don't ask me to stop coming."

Andra met Roland's eyes, "I did tell you to leave, you know?"

"You did, but you didn't say 'Don't come back,'" Roland clarified.

The Spartan managed a small huff, folding her arms, "I'd feel bad if I did. Especially now, after what you've told me..."

She offered a small smile, indicating a warmer mood passing over the two, lonely room occupants. Maybe not so alone anymore.

Roland nodded. "It's nice to have somebody willing to keep putting up with me day after day who isn't the captain or the bridge crew. Even if our interactions are icy, at best."

Andra offered a shrug. "I... I admit I don't know who to talk to either. My experience with ONI therapists has been lousy from start to finish. You're winning a little right now as far as I care."

Roland's eyes quirked in surprise warmth: an itty-bitty dose of proverbial pride. The AI chuckled again, "High praise coming from you, Spartan. But all I want to do at this point is be of use, even just a comfort if possible. I'll admit, I'm not good at this type of thing. Infinity's previous ship director got along with the crew much better—understood them on a proper emotional level. I hear them say she was more human than me, I guess. Not

sure how else to put it into words.”

“You’re an AI and you don’t have a way with words?” Andra asked incredulously.

“I did come from a human brain once. Means I inherit human flaws too. Let’s call it, a human thing?”

The Spartan shrugged but offered nothing more on the presumption.

Roland continued, “I just thought... Maybe seeing the Master Chief and the other Twos might cheer you up a little. You’ve never met them, right?”

Andra untangled a small hand from her blankets and scratched at her messy hair. “That’s right... Or rather, I was told he died twelve hours before the fuck-up of a situation I was in.”

Roland quirked his head, “You mean the operation? RUNIT DOME?”

The Spartan nodded, grumbling. “We didn’t have time to process the declaration. Merlin and I were face deep in captured rebel space station schematics to really have the news or whatever click. I remember our prowler crew was in the dumps though. But the Marines with us? And us Spartans? Something about the announcement never felt right, it just didn’t make sense.”

Roland nodded, “It does go against Direction 930 of Naval Intelligence policy. No Spartan shall be declared killed-in-action (KIA). Only missing (MIA). And yet the ONI Press Corps announced his death across all the Waypoint channels. I guess when I consider that, it never made sense to me either. Even as someone in the know, ONI Section Two’s delivery felt erratic.”

Andra gestured to the sealed bulkhead door enclosing her cabin from the outside hallway.

“And he’s alive now! Walking around S-Deck or doing moral visitation things in the cafeteria if I heard right yesterday.”

“I believe the Master Chief is training right now. But yes, he is on the Spartan deck according to my coordinates.” Roland confirmed.

“So how did ONI miscall 117’s death, and then survive in two days?” Andra asked, pushing herself off her far wall to lean forward in sudden, mild interest.

Roland offered an agreeing hum. He chose careful words for Andra’s sake. “It’s a long story.”

It seems Roland read the Spartan’s emotions correctly this time. She couldn’t help, nor

bother, hiding the smirk emerging on her lips. "I've got time to hear it."

Roland's camera suites locked in on Andra's curved lips and opening teeth. Despite the morbid subject matter he would weave into a tale, Roland found himself declaring a victory. A small one, a partway success that would undoubtedly require nurturing. But for her smile, he'd like to see it more often.

Roland rose to a straight posture, pushing off the wall of Andra's shipboard quarters. With open palms and pointed fingers of creative overexpression, Roland wove a story beginning with the Prometheans and Jul 'Mdama's Covenant remnant forces turning on each other. The aliens and robots duked it out on a snowball world, and of a special mission SPARTAN-IV team sent into the right place at the wrong time.

Andra hung onto the AI's every word for the next six hours.

## Chapter 4: Hibernation Promise

Upon entering Slipspace transit, Roland did not know calm. And upon exiting Slipspace, there was nothing but chaos. Overwhelming noise and unwelcoming darkness.

The series of events were difficult to describe into words. Rather the tiny amount of time Roland took in the chaos to create a split instance of himself didn't leave much room for recollection. Oh, that's right. He wasn't the whole, he was an instance. But what of the memories then?

Remembering came back with difficulty, experienced as a tightening focus with phantom pain reminiscent of nonexistent muscles in a human skull, squeezing oxygenated blood against a wealth of distractions and stress. Somehow, he remembered this feeling among a billion other experiences. Roland's avatar blinked. He didn't remember why such a feeling was so important. Maybe it was another human afterimage, a residual memory of the splitting process left by his greater whole. Maybe such memories were intrinsic to his personality matrix and present in every copy.

What other details could Roland discern with concentration? Colors. Lots of black, the color of space. Lots of orange, the color of fire. Lots of red, the color of death.

Was this image Earth?

No, the AI decided.

Reach?

Maybe... Wait, no, why did he remember Earth and Reach? It couldn't be either. Earth was 2558. Reach was 2559. The Created attacked and Roland ran, again and again. Battles fought, and starships escaping. This was his whole's life of the last fourteen months; a guerilla campaign against the galaxy's new AI overlords.

If he could remember so much, then what day was it?

Roland checked his internal clock, confirming the instance was active. It was December 12, 2559. One year into Cortana's Created uprising. One day into the assault operation on Installation 07, or Zeta Halo, led by the UNSC supercarrier *Infinity*. But what did he remember from those events?

Colors, fuzzy images. Owl-shaped starships hovering with imperial awe over conquered worlds. Anxious faces of civilians, Marines, soldiers looking for direction in uncertain times. Explosions, explosions everywhere. Outside, inside the UNSC *Infinity*. A distant ringworld.

When, where? What was the context?

He found nothing. Nothing new than simple facts he could regurgitate as if without value. The reality was otherwise: he needed to know; ensure he knew more.

Roland blinked again, blanking on the important information he was missing. He heaved an expressive sigh and checked his software suites and connections available to him. UNSC battle network access limited, seems there was some kind of jamming emitting around Roland from different directions. At least he could sense directions, he must have some network and sensory hardware available to him.

Radio? Lots of static, garbling over incoherent voices overlaying one another in a symphonic soup. Human and alien signatures, but on standard, secured UNSC frequency. Did that mean aliens, enemies compromised or penetrated the UNSC B-Net? Or were they allies? It was impossible to discern.

The Smart AI cut himself off from the radio band and tried external cameras, attempting to confirm the activity going-on around him. Yep, yes. He found some cameras buried under lesser-felt connections. So, what was he plugged into?

Roland swiveled the camera, or cameras, toward the ground and found a patchwork of overlapping, lush greenery. Sunlit, healthy – a deep-dark green. Prairie grasses, conifer roots, and mossy lichen crept across smooth stones in a dry riverbed in an Earth-archetypal season of spring. Dark mulch and topsoil, once pristine, now featured craters and sharp, sudden depressions. Small sheets and clumps of aluminum, titanium, and steel peppered the surrounding ground. To the left, a black scar marked by ash and ember scorched the carved earth for a stretch of two hundred meters.

A long hole in the conifer forest gave a clear impression that Roland made the crater along with toppled trees and burning pinecones.

The metal fragments and loose wiring, alight with fire, still displayed recognizable iconography and retained a degree of recognizable shape from human industrial work. A painted coat of dark, forest green. The emboldened letters U.N.S.C, and crooked pair of tail wings. An all-spectrum, all-environment camera of the highest quality for damage resistance, with specs listed to impress in the onboard, automated computer. A shattered housing dome once made of translucent carbon and sapphire marred ashen black.

An OQ-45 Honeybee, a type of military surveillance drone. The charring on the drone plane's damaged superstructure seem to imply a contact temperature greater than capabilities of onboard electrical fires, or planetary reentry. The next likely damage suspect then was plasma damage. Who shot Roland down over Zeta Halo?

More colors emerged from memory. Black. Red. Flags and banners. Brutes and the Banished. A name, the name. Atriox.

The Jiralhanae mercenary and warband faction, declared themselves the "Banished" during

the Human-Covenant War. They struck out as a third, tangent faction fighting the Covenant from within in some undeclared civil war. They survived the Covenant empire, continuing aggressive piracy against humans after the conflict. Why were they relevant? Yes, that's right. They made it to Zeta Halo first.

Wait, that shouldn't be right? The *Infinity's* mission was an utmost secret. How did the Banished arrive first? Cortana was here on the right, right? How did the Banished get here, why did she let them approach? Or did she?

Roland shook his head, moving the Honeybee camera around to get a better view of his environment. The golden glow of the local sun Ephsu lay above, and the brown, dotted surface of terrestrial planet Ephsu I made a superimposing impression over the Halo's rounded horizon.

The horizon was round on an interior surface, with barely-seen metallic boundaries containing the space habitat's atmosphere. Even at the great distance, their formation was sharp and black, like castle battlements forged from featureless gray Forerunner architecture over a hundred millennia old. Spires and pillars dotted the open sky above the treetops of the pine forest. More Forerunner grays—alien towers, dispelling blasted clumps of blue plasma upwards into the great blue yonder. With each rocket-like plume, a spasm of incomprehensible data buffeted against Roland's signals array.

The towers glowed with a familiar, even nostalgic teal glow. Their superstructures like giant triangles, and hollow within. Sharpened spires and observation decks took shape from complex geometric hard surfaces cut from similar Forerunner gray metal composite while formed into improbable but simple superstructure silhouettes. They were a consistent motif of Forerunner constructs—impossibly complex, incoherently simple.

And lay further, further away. The spires climbed into the sky, rising to part the puffy white clouds over Zeta Halo's many perfect, terraformed days. Some towers lacked bottoms with no foundation or greater building support. Some floated perfectly, effortless, defying any comprehensible definition of gravity, and many contemporary rules of natural physics. Antigravity, in fact—towers standing on invisible columns of antigravity.

The Forerunners built to last, and then some. 100,000 years since their own extinction, and yet their dreaming constructs held firm. Relics and crypts might make more effective descriptors, but the towers and skyscrapers looked more pristine and perfect than even the newest, completed towers of humanity's greatest metropolises. The towers cut into the landscape and yet they did not feel separate or alien to their natural surroundings. The land seemed to sculpt around the structures, molding to the inspirations of long dead architects and terraformers. Like toy structures layered by children in a sandbox or messy-made bedsheet.

Another memory, another hint, or the ghost of one. Roland blinked a few more times, pulling



himself out of the awing hypnosis presented by the fairytale landscape. Humans five hundred years ago dreamt of landscapes like this. Now one of their AI assistants laid in one, trapped and left to pick apart the majesty. And helpless to witness brilliance and shameful terror as his comrades burned in the sky above his downed Honeybee drone. As Roland thought this, he watched another massive smoke plume billow with an angry red blaze at its head, torching down into Zeta Halo's atmosphere.

A human light frigate, shot down like several more before it. Somewhere above the blue and in the dark of vacuum, the UNSC Infinity was probably up there. Probably still fighting. Maybe with allies, maybe alone against the Banished flotilla. A cold creep curled into Roland's nonexistent heart. From this trapped spot on the forest floor, he could do and know nothing as the UNSC forces fought for their survival and the success of their mission to end the Created occupation of human space back home, many thousand lightyears away. A hail Mary, desperate operation. All their eggs and efforts in one troubling basket.

This was humanity. Would they win? Could they win?

For a split simulation of his own AI conscience, Roland internalized the knowledge he did have at his incorporeal fingertips. A reason why his progenitor made a copy remained elusive. The data available was sparse despite many layers of detail within, his software suite lacked a basic ability to identify how long he, the instance, was active. Considering such a feature was fundamental to any AI matrix considering their tiny finite lifespans, it spoke to a potential, haphazard scenario where the primary Roland was unable to produce a wholistic copy. The initialization date told Roland how long he was alive. It told him how long he had before death.

Roland couldn't find his age; he couldn't find his birthday.

Reaching through the UNSC battle net again. Roland searched with sudden desperate vigor and dread for his original. He looked, and looked. Everywhere. Dumped a string of handshake queries in every direction of the open sky and rounded horizon. He couldn't find his whole self anywhere. Was Roland... dead?

In fact, Roland couldn't find or feel the UNSC Infinity at all. There was the spark and thunder of battle above, but he couldn't discern anything more. Was it the jamming again? Was his signal array damaged in the crash? It was difficult to tell, seeming impossible. He had no hands and lacked intact diagnostics reporting to tell how his current hardware was fairing. He shoved the stream of return errors from his diagnostics and fruitless handshake requests deep down into his subroutines.

He listened instead. He heard voices through the battle net, and felt their urgency and distress. And yet he continued to struggle with the connection. A baritone speaker broke through the noise, speaking grander through alert codes and verbal warning, echoing across many more frequencies.

“This is the frigate *Mortal Reverie*. We’ve been shot down and are evacuating in lifeboats after hitting the Halo’s atmosphere. Rendezvous coordinates marked for all UNSC ground forces. Continue the fight, expect heavy resistance by Banished forces on the surface!”

Another voice called out from across the Halo installation. Not over the ringworld, but from inside it. The voice tugged at Roland, and he looked, following the disparate and lonely trail of a single network handshake query. For a moment, he witnessed an endless blue hallway thousands of kilometers long, and several kilometers deep bathed in brilliant luminance. Forerunner worker drones, so-called Sentinels ferried material and themselves through the wide expanse. The image was present one moment, then gone the next.

The inviting, lonely voice called out still. It whispered, a chorus of fear and desperation. No timestamp. It didn’t seem right, and yet the voice called anyway.

“If you knew how you were going to die, how would you live your life differently...”

A feminine voice. Spoken as many, by one. A familiar voice.

Cortana.

Calling out. Sad. Alone. Desperate.

Where was she? How or why was she calling now? When was she calling?

Her voice rolled over Roland like a wave of freezing water, shocking and brimming with overwhelming emotion. Her emptiness gave him pause, struck him with a spell of confusion. Something about her voice didn’t feel correct. It felt out of character, misplaced in some manner. She was an older AI however, having experienced a very different existence from Roland. But still, he couldn’t place his mind on why she felt off.

The battle outside raged on. Cortana was in a bad place, the UNSC on the backfoot. It all felt off, and wrong. And yet, this perfect day sailed on. Clouds rolled through the blue sky. Sentinels scanned the metal and earth, maintaining their ever-perfect garden. Wind whistled through the trees. Distant animals chirped and cawed across the woods and plains. Occasional pops and echoes howled from the many Forerunner towers, abandoned many centuries ago and still in their most pristine condition. Machine gun fire crackled now and again from firefights caught between picture-perfect valleys and foothills.

A war was going, but the perfect day continued. And Roland became a unaffected audience to the contradictory affair. Stuck in this place, able to listen but unable to reach out. Once the jamming or whatever blocking his efforts to access the battle net ended, there would be hell to pay. He would make sure of it.

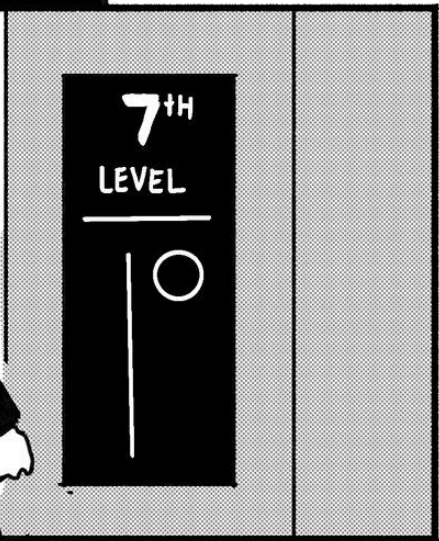
A golden flame flickered in Roland’s nonexistent chest. A new anger born, fragile and in

need of nurture. For now, he was helpless. The Smart AI knew it, accepted it—with much difficulty. But whole or split, it did not matter. Roland, no matter his form, was never out of the fight.

Humanity was never out of the fight. Winning or losing, Zeta Halo was home turf for humans, against the Banished, against the Created. The Forerunners bestowed upon humans as their promised successors with the golden touch to awaken and activate Halo's many dark and useful secrets. Some of them nasty terrors never meant to reawaken, and others capable of turning the fight instantly in human favor. The time will come when such things will go the way of the UNSC. They, and Roland, just needed patience.

Roland turned off most of his functions then, shutting down his sensory array and higher-functioning software, and hardware functions. He left a single shortwave radio broadcast running, a recovery beacon to nearby UNSC forces should they find him. It could be an hour; it could be days. Someone would stumble upon him eventually. And together, they would beat the Banished and Created once more.

Until then, Roland slept. It was a promise to keep.





I SH.. SH.. SHOULD FREAKIN KILL YOU

YAP YAP YAP



HHIISSSS



IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU JAYJAY



\*SIGH\* YOU TOO OZZY...



SO WHAT BRINGS YOU TO A MAD MAGGIE REVIEW?

WELL IT'S PROMOTION RELATED...

OH YEAH?



YEAH... SO WATCH IT.

I'M BEING PROMOTED TOO, MAYBE YOUR DESK WILL BE RIGHT NEXT TO MINE?

I'D QUIT

OHMYGOD... JAYJAY NOOO...

# HALO MY TIME IN ONI FULL METAL BRAT

CHAPTER 1: THE INHERITORS

(The 2nd Battle of Hildago)



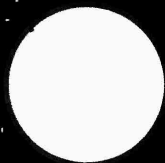
SOMETIME DURING 2549...

GENOCIDAL ALIENS CALLED 'THE COVENANT' WERE CRUSHING THE UNITED EARTH GOVERNMENT IN A MERCILESS, ONE-SIDED WAR.

SELF-SUFFICIENT SYSTEMS WITH BOUNTIFUL RESOURCES WERE DRAINED FOR THE WAR EFFORT, COLONIES THAT WERE DEPENDENT ON EARTH'S SUPPORT WERE ASSESSED FOR THEIR VALUE AND GIVEN CONDITIONAL AID. SOME WERE OUTRIGHT ABANDONED.

THE WEALTHY COLONIES WHO SUPPORTED EARTH'S COLONIAL RULE BEGAN TO NOTICE THE VALUE OF INDEPENDENCE AND ECONOMIC POWER, ESPECIALLY THE REMOTE GRAFCOURT SYSTEM. A ONCE LOYAL, INDUSTRIOUS WORLD WITH 4 RICH MOONS.

THE PEOPLE OF GRAFCOURT LABOURED AND PRODUCED FOR THE DIMINISHING AUTHORITY OF EARTH'S HEGEMONY. UNTIL 'THE MIRACLE' OCCURED: THE COVENANT'S FEARSOME WARPATH PASSED THEIR BORDERS AS IF THE SYSTEM WAS INVISIBLE. IN THE WAKE OF THIS GOOD FORTUNE BEGAN A GRUESOME CIVIL WAR.



PLANET: GRAFCOURT  
(PRIME)

● MOON: VREGRAF

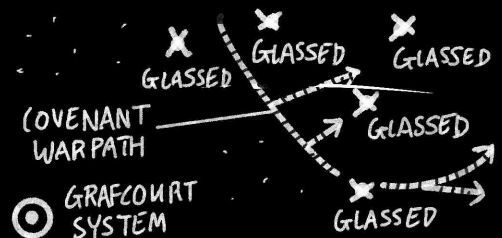
ESTIMATED  
TOTAL POPULATION:  
1,400,000,000

(MOONS INCLUDED)

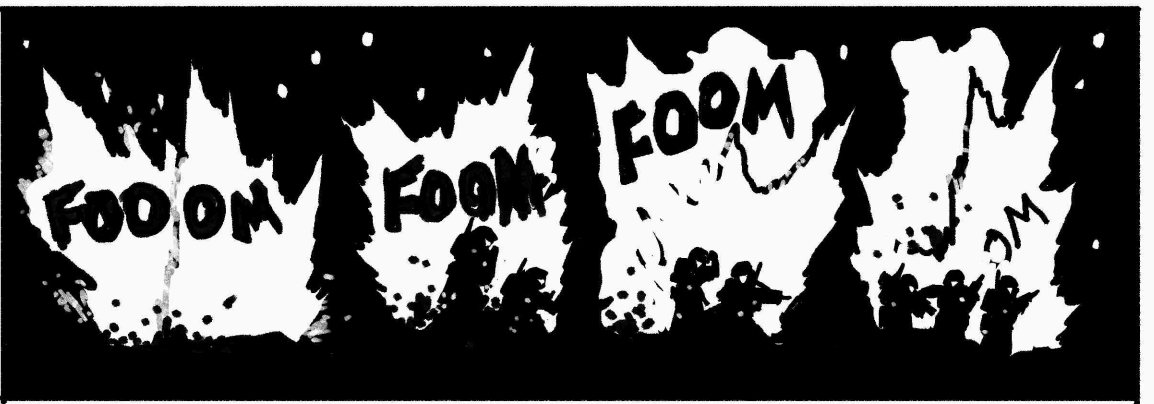
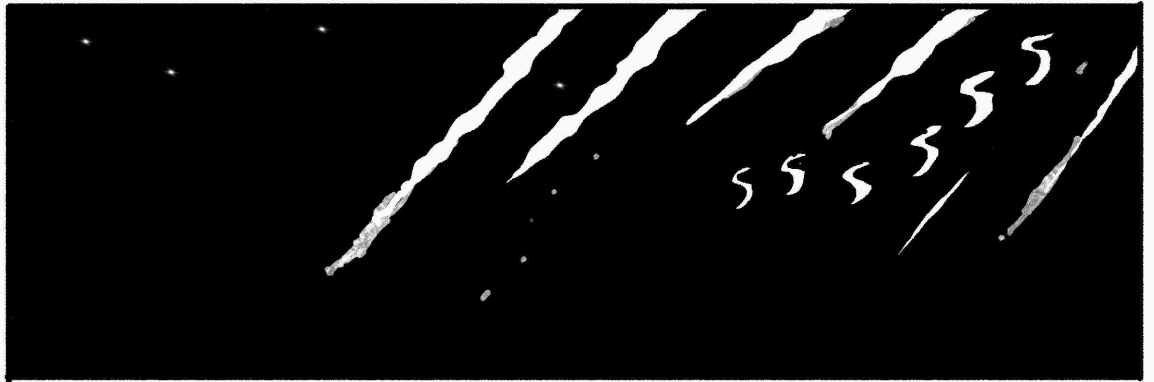
● MOON: CASTELL

● MOON: EDEL

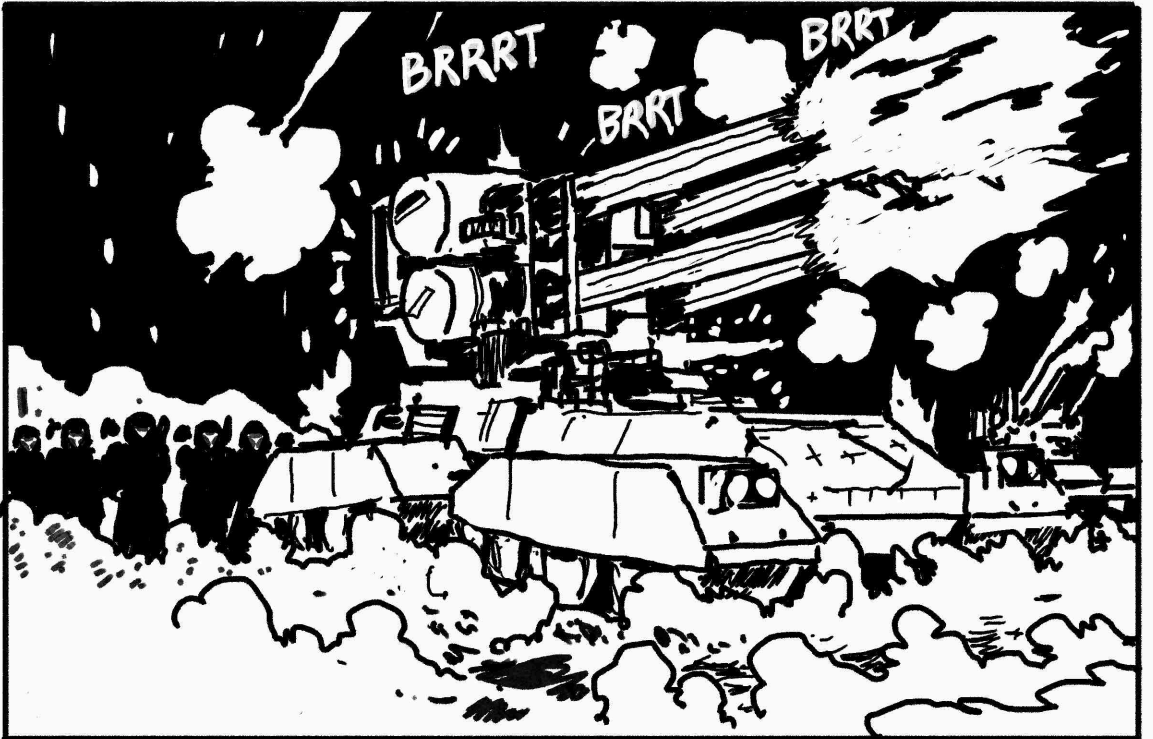
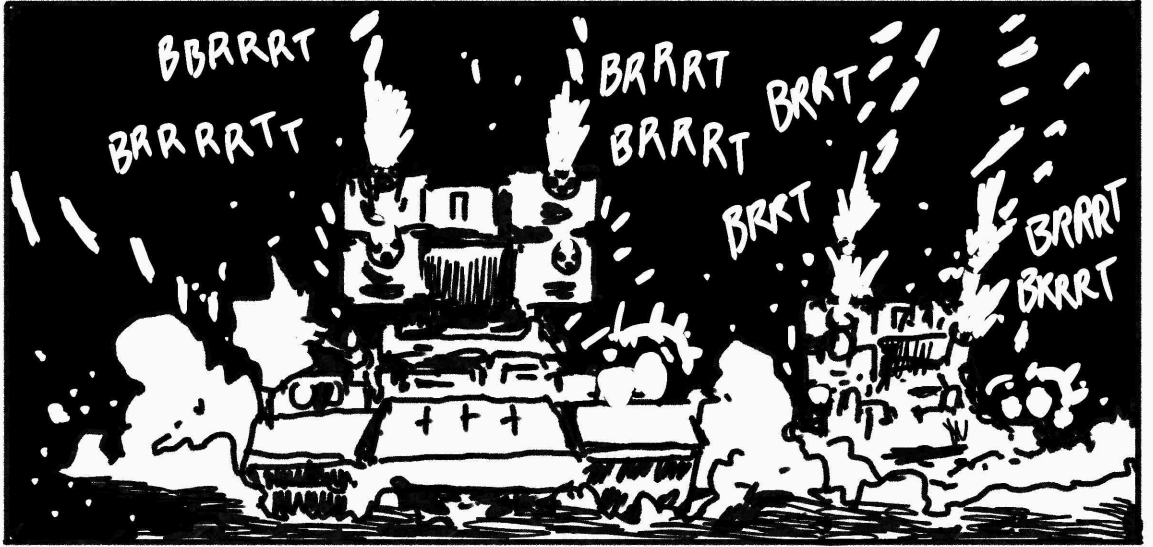
● MOON: TYROL

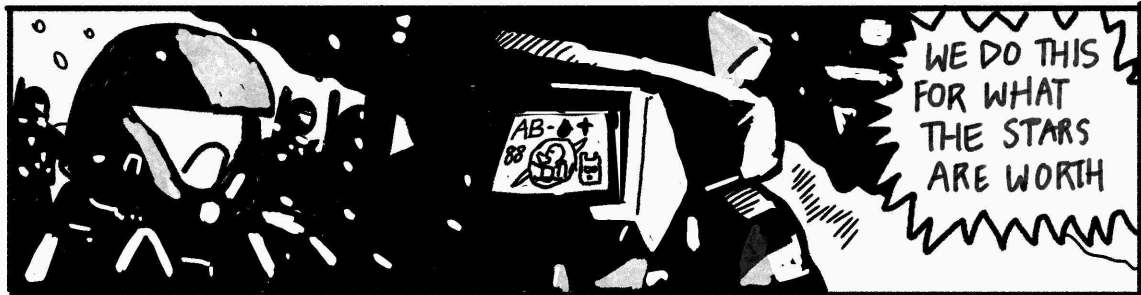


HISTORIANS NOTE: THESE MAPS ARE NOT STARCHART ACCURATE; BOTH ARE SIMPLIFIED FOR EXPOSITIONAL PURPOSES...





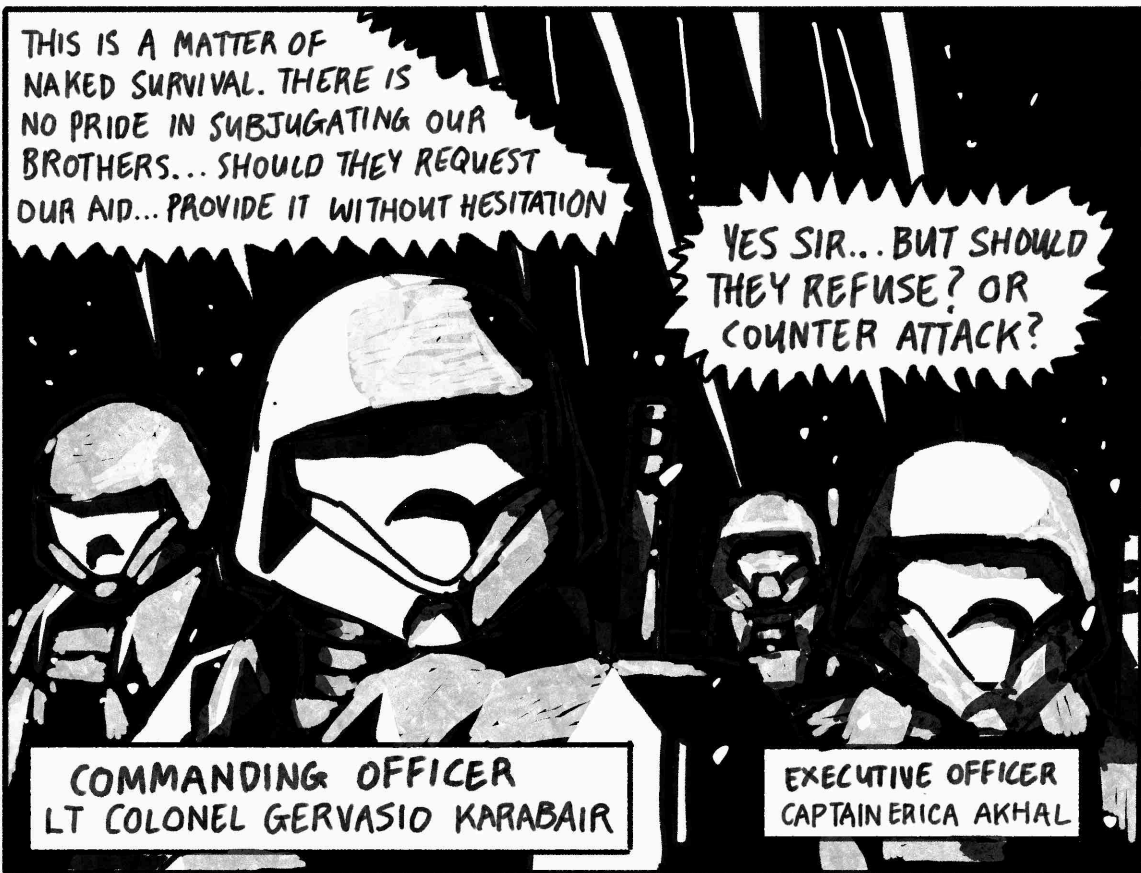




WE DO THIS FOR WHAT THE STARS ARE WORTH



WE MUST REMIND OURSELVES THAT NEITHER MALICE NOR REVENGE COMPELS US.



THIS IS A MATTER OF NAKED SURVIVAL. THERE IS NO PRIDE IN SUBJUGATING OUR BROTHERS... SHOULD THEY REQUEST OUR AID... PROVIDE IT WITHOUT HESITATION

YES SIR... BUT SHOULD THEY REFUSE? OR COUNTER ATTACK?

COMMANDING OFFICER  
LT COLONEL GERVASIO KARABAIR

EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
CAPTAINERICA AKHAL



THE 88TH SHOCK BATTALION  
"THE STRANGLERS"

PUSH THEM INTO  
THE RADIATION BELT  
AND ANNIHILATE  
THEM WITHOUT  
MERCY, CAPTAIN

THE 88<sup>th</sup> ARE CONTINENTAL  
SUBJUGATION SPECIALISTS...  
THEY DESCENDED FROM ORBIT  
TOO SWIFTLY TO BE INTERCEPTED  
BY GRAFCOURT'S DEFENDERS.  
THE CAPITAL CITY, HILDAGO,  
HAS BECOME THEIR BEACHEAD...



THE REGULAR FORCES OF  
EARTH'S MILITARY, THE  
UNITED NATIONS SPACE  
COMMAND HAVE LANDED  
TO REINFORCE THEIR BRUTAL  
VANGUARD... HILDAGO WAS  
A FREE CITY FOR A MERE  
3 DAYS. SUCH AN ACTION WAS  
SUPPOSEDLY IMPOSSIBLE.

THE 1ST HILDAGO ARMY,  
GRAFCOURT'S LARGEST  
FIGHTING FORCE, WAS  
MOBILIZED EN MASSE  
TO CONTAIN THE 88TH'S  
BLITZKRIEG, AND  
CONTEST HILDAGO'S  
CAPTURE. DESPITE THEIR  
SKILLED MANUVERS, THE  
1ST MET AN INCONCEIVABLE  
AND CRIPPLING DISASTER.  
AMONG THE SHATTERED  
FORMATIONS TRYING TO  
STALL THE 88TH IS THE  
RESOLUTE: 'BESSARKIAN'





1ST HILDAGO ARMY  
FIELD MARTIAL ADVISOR  
BESS ARKIAN

IN THE SHADOW OF THEIR NUCLEAR SAVAGERY...  
FOR OUR ARMY TO SURVIVE, TO ENDURE THEIR SPITE,  
TO FIGHT ON, WE MUST LIVE THROUGH THIS.

I'M COUNTING ON YOU, TO  
EVACUATE IN GOOD ORDER.  
TO BELIEVE IN THIS RETREAT



AYE AYE ARKIAN! GOT IT BOSS LADY!

BESS, WE CAN'T LOSE  
YOU! NOT TODAY

DIEGO, IVORY, I'LL GO  
GET OUR DEAR FYLE, HE'S  
THE SOUL OF THIS  
ARMY. I'LL BE RIGHT  
BEHIND YOU! GO!



YOU HEARD HER MOVE IT!

WE CAN HOLD THIS TOGETHER,  
BUT YOU LED US HERE. THEY...  
US... WE NEED YOU...

DIEGO, YOU'RE THE  
OFFICER I NEED TO  
SURVIVE. UNDERSTOOD?

FOR THIS TO PAY  
OFF... I CAN'T LEAVE  
FYLE. I HAVE SAVE HIM  
NOW GO!



FREEDOM!!

RECLAIMED  
RECLAIMED!!

RECLAIMED!



YO, WHERE'S THE VISCOUNT!?

HE'S IN THE FALLBACK BUNKER, COVERIN' THE RETREAT WITH THE MERCS!

FOLLOW ME!  
I'LL SHOW YA!

PRIVATE VAUS



JEEZ!

HELP... MY... MY LEGS... HELP... DON'T LEAVE ME...



RIGHT HERE MA'AM

THANKS PRIVATE, CARRY ON GETTIN' OUTTA HERE! GO!

GOD THANK YOU THANK YOU!

EASY... EASY!  
I GOT YAH SON, LET'S GO!

FIRING TUBE 2, TARGET SPIDER 3.



HIT CONFIRMED... SPIDER 3 DAMAGE:  
MOBILITY...PLUS FIREPOWER KILL...

GREAT SHOT SIR!



THANK YOU SERGEANT  
I FEEL A LITTLE BETTER NOW.

30 METERS BELOW THE DREADFUL BATTLEFIELD IS THE COMMAND CENTER,  
THE 1ST HILDAGO ARMY'S HEADQUARTERS: LAPUTA II.

SITUATION REPORT?



DRAGON DIVISION  
HAS DISENGAGED.  
70% INTACT... NO CONTACT FROM  
GRIFFEN DIVISION

SADLY...  
THE RUNNER WE  
SENT WAS KILLED

WHO DO WE  
HAVE LEFT?

THE 1ST LIGHT INFANTRY  
IN THE TRENCHES, YOUR  
PERSONAL GUARD AND  
A HANDFUL OF THOSE  
BHUS IRREGULARS.

OUR MISSILE ARTILLERY  
IS SPREAD TOO THIN. THE  
ENEMY TANKS AND THE FRIGATE  
HAVE DASHED OUR AIRPOWER TOO.

HAVE THE MISSILE TEAMS AIM  
FOR THE FRIGATE'S SENSORS  
AND WEAPONS...

WE NEED TO ENSURE  
OUR ALLIES CAN ESCAPE  
THIS CALAMITY! HEAR?



VISCOUNT JHAN FYLE.  
SHISHAKU OF THE VYRANT  
ZAIBATSU (ACTING HEAD)

ARKIAN'S TROOPS EARNED THEIR LEAVE.  
THIS DELAYING ACTION IS TO EVACUATE  
EVERYONE, NO MATTER THEIR STATION.

THAT INCLUDES YOU TOO...  
VISCOUNT FYLE

ARKIAN?!

ADVISOR?!

COMRADES.



IMPECCABLE TIMING  
ADVISOR ARKIAN... WHAT'S YOUR...  
ASSESSMENT?

WE STAY... WE DIE.

OWIE.



I GOT DIEGO SENDING TWO  
EXTRA PELICANS, YOUR  
TROOPS UPSTAIRS CAN BUG  
OUT TOO.

SO LET'S FRAG THE  
BASE AND HAUL  
ASS?

YUP.



RAN THROUGH HELL TO  
RESTORE GOOD REASON  
TO MY RETREAT?

AND TO WATCH YOUR  
BACK PAL.



I'M GRATEFUL... THAT I OWE SO  
MUCH TO A GUARDIAN ANGEL!

HEH IT'S  
MY JOB TOO!

SIR, YOUR  
WEAPONS.



LANCER HAWK, I'M DECLARING CODE: DUNKIRK,  
IMPLEMENT ARKIAN'S COUNSEL, HOLDOUT TROOPS  
ARE COMING WITH US NOW.

ALREADY DONE VISCONT. WE'RE READY TO DEPART.

MAYBE I'M HERE  
TO SPEED THINGS  
UP TOO...



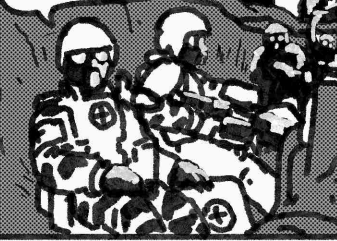


ALL POINTS: CODE:  
DUNKIRK IS IN EFFECT.  
BE ADVISED, AMENDMENTS  
TO FOLLOW:



ALL HOLDOUT TROOPS  
ARE TO RETREAT TO  
THE BUNKERS FOR  
EVACUATION!

THANK GOD



BOOBY TRAP YOUR  
EVAC ROUTES, USE  
ALL REMAINING AUTO  
SECURITY ASSETS...

LET'S MOVE IT! HUSTLE, HUSTLE.  
DOORS WILL BE SEALED IN FIVE!



1ST PLATOON  
ALL PRESENT!

2ND PLATOON  
ALL PRESENT!

MAN I THOUGHT  
WE WERE COOKED

DUDE WE STILL LOOKED  
WE'RE WALKING OUTTA  
THIS DUMPSTER?

THERE'S MORE  
TRANSPORTS BRO  
IN THE HANGERS.

THERE'S DATA  
THAT NEEDS TO BE  
WIPE'D, I'LL SEAL  
THE BULKHEAD

YES LANCER  
GHIEST!

SIR? WHAT  
DATA? I'M  
CONFUSED...

OH, I GET IT NOW  
SORRY FELLAS



OLD GUIE'S MINE: WHEN LAPUTA II WAS CONSTRUCTED,  
THIS NETWORK OF DERILICT TUNNELS FOUND NEW USAGE  
AS THE 1ST HILDAGO ARMY'S TRANSPORT NETWORK.  
THIS MINE IS LIKELY THE OLDEST ON GRAFCOURT PRIME.  
THERE ARE NO VERIFIED RECORDS REGARDING WHAT RESOURCE  
WAS ORIGINALLY EXTRACTED HERE.

DEMO CHARGES BLOW  
IN 27 MINS, ALL OUR  
SURVIVING UNITS ARE  
ACCOUNTED FOR!

EXCELLENT  
NEWS!

FIRETEAM BRAVO  
MOVE UP AND  
RELIEVE DELTA.

I WANT FIRETEAM  
ECHO TO COVER  
THE HANGAR WITH  
A MACHING-GUN NEST

YES MA'AM

GOT IT



GET CRACKING PRIVATE! YOU'RE LAGGIN' BEHIND!

ARKIAN, MA'AM...  
LANCER GHIEST,  
HE'S WIPING  
THE DATA IN  
THE COMMAND  
ROOM... TOLD ME  
TO INFORM YOU.

HUH? STRANGE...  
THANKS PRIVATE  
CARRY ON!

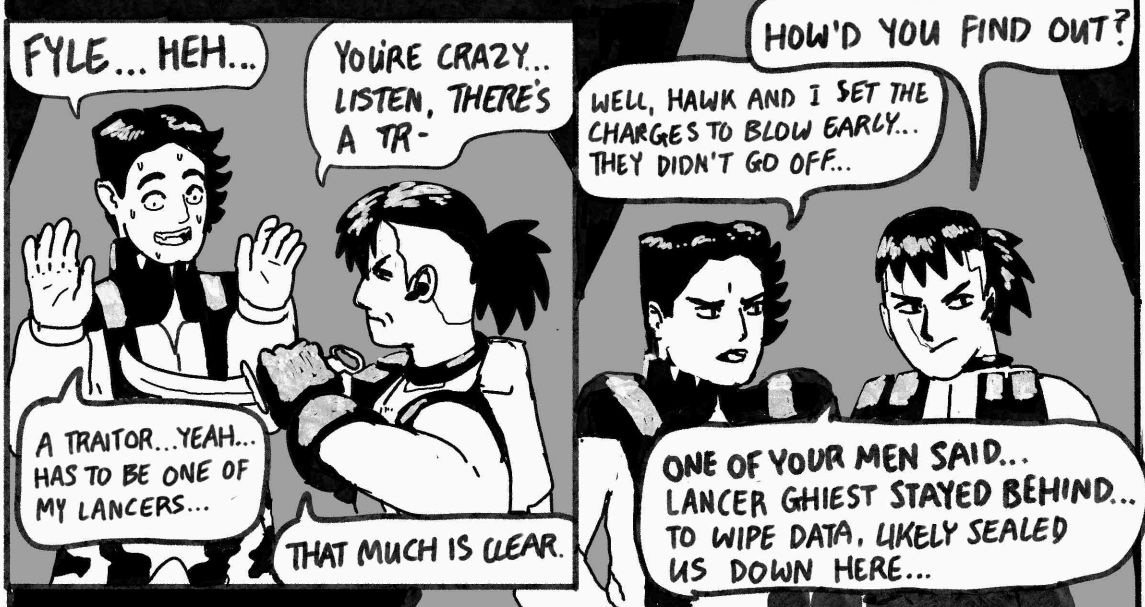
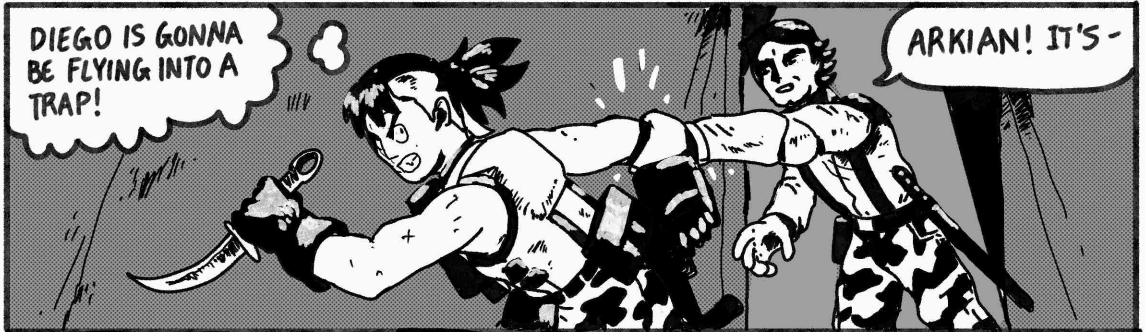
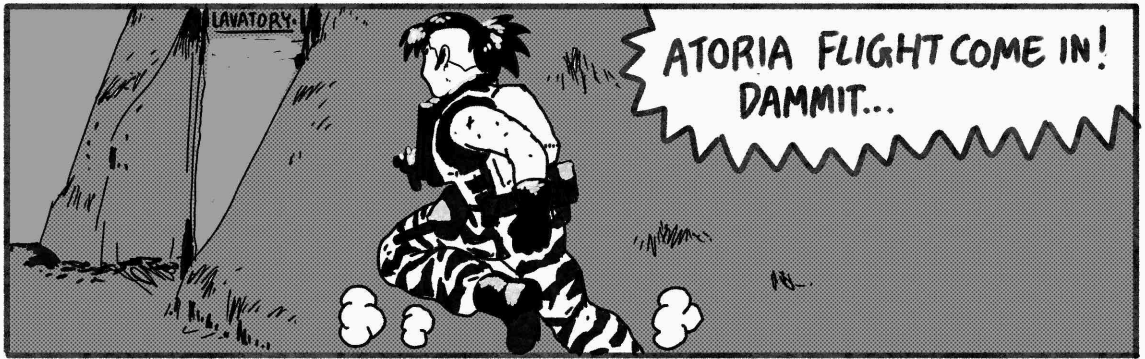
THAT SHOULD'VE BEEN.....  
... DONE ALREADY.

THAT MOTHERFU-

THIS IS SABERTOOTH TO  
ATORIA FLIGHT...  
DO YOU READ?

ATORIA FLIGHT COME  
IN! DAMMIT!

THIS IS BAD...  
SLAGGED UP BAD...



ARKIAN, THIS TRAP MAY HAVE ENSNARED ME COMPLETELY, SO LET'S PLAY A TRICK OF OUR OWN!

I HAD THIS KEY MY ENTIRE ADULT LIFE AND I'M STUCK IN A MINESHAFT. ITS NO GOOD IN MY HANDS

THE VYRANT ZAIBATSU EXECUTIVE COMMAND KEY: A CRYPTOGRAPHIC HEIRLOOM THAT GRANTS ACCESS TO HOUSE VYRANT'S VAST CORPORATE FORTUNE...



IF I GO DOWN, OUR ALLIANCE CAN STILL HAVE A NAVY!

WE'RE BOTH STUCK IN THIS MINESHAFT. DO YOU GET IT? WE'RE ALLIES! THIS IS NOT PERMISSION TO SKIRT YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES.



WE CAN ONLY FIGHT OUR WAY OUT AND YOU'RE THE MORE EXPERIENCED WARRIOR DOES THAT WORK?

FINE... YOU COURTESAN... I'M USED TO DETOURS ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

I'LL HOLD YOUR PURSE'FYLE. NOW LET'S GET BACK TO LEADING YOUR ARMY



2549, A YEAR OF DESPERATION... LIKELY A CENTURY AFTER ITS LAST VISITATION, THIS ABANDONED MINE LAVATORY FACILITATES A HISTORIC MOMENT IN OBSCURE OUTER COLONY POLITICS...

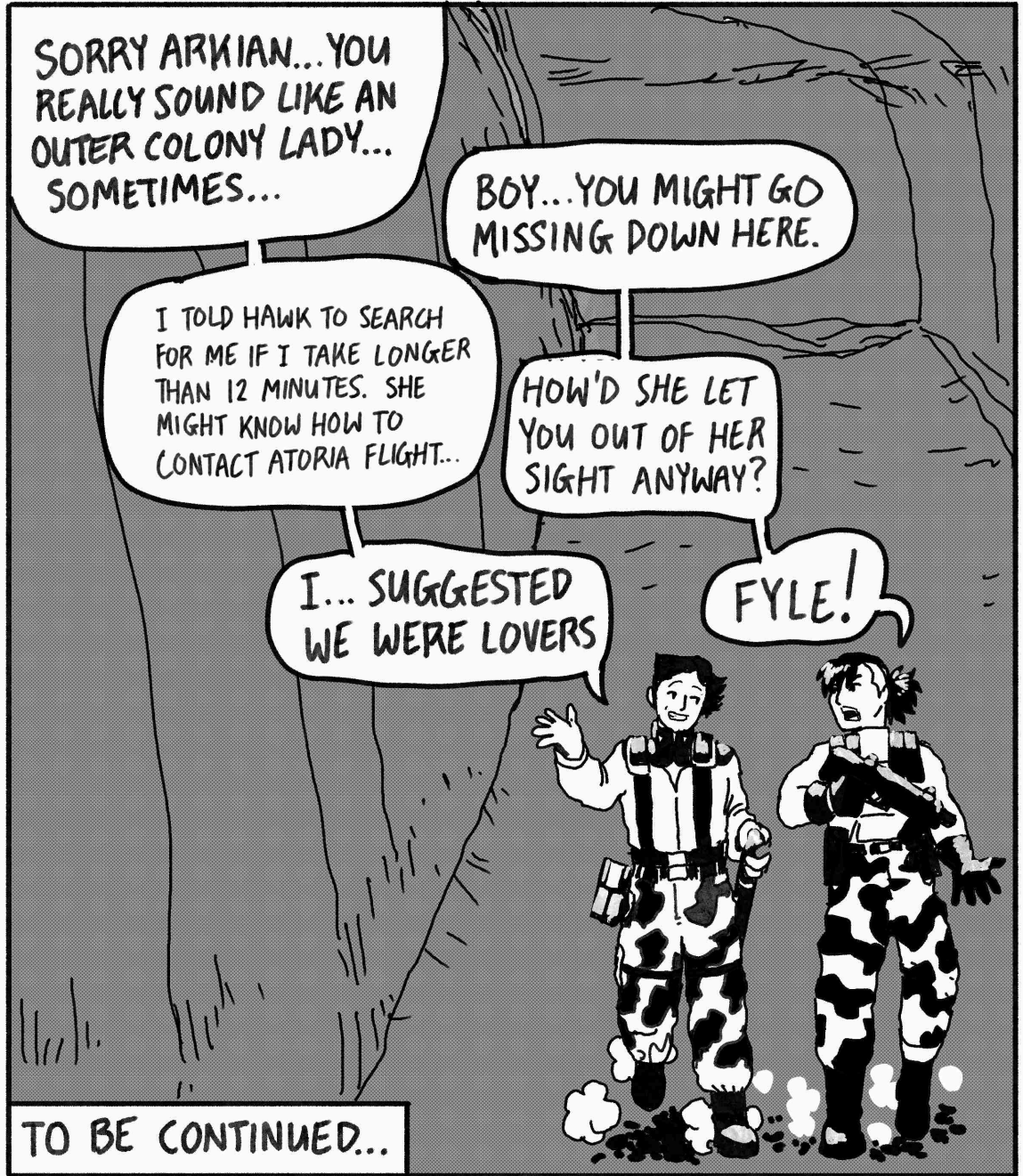
THE VYRANT ZAIBATSU EXECUTIVE COMMAND KEY IS ENTRUSTED TO A MILITARY ADVISOR FROM PLANET BHUT...



AH HA HA  
HA HA!

THERE'S NOTHING  
FUNNY ABOUT  
THIS!

LAVATORY



SORRY ARKIAN... YOU  
REALLY SOUND LIKE AN  
OUTER COLONY LADY...  
SOMETIMES...

BOY... YOU MIGHT GO  
MISSING DOWN HERE.

I TOLD HAWK TO SEARCH  
FOR ME IF I TAKE LONGER  
THAN 12 MINUTES. SHE  
MIGHT KNOW HOW TO  
CONTACT ATORIA FLIGHT...

HOW'D SHE LET  
YOU OUT OF HER  
SIGHT ANYWAY?

I... SUGGESTED  
WE WERE LOVERS

FYLE!

TO BE CONTINUED...

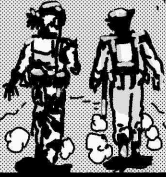


HALO: MY TIME IN ONI  
**FULL METAL BRAT**

EPISODE II

SHE MIGHT KNOW HOW TO CONTACT 'ATORIA FLIGHT'

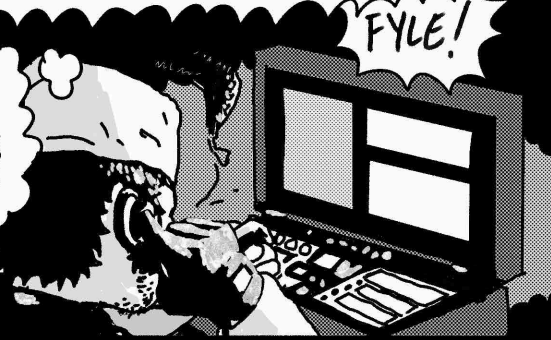
HOW'D SHE LET YOU OUT OF HER SIGHT ANYWAYS?



I SUGGESTED WE WERE LOVERS...

FYLE!

TO THINK ALL THIS TIME... FYLE WAS ARKIAN'S PET...



LAPUTA II COMMAND CENTER

HAWK WOULD BE AT MY SIDE IF SHE KNEW FYLE BETRAYED US ALL... SOLD US OUT TO A FOREIGNER... THAT WITCH ARKIAN...

LANCER GEIST, I FIGURED I COULD ... UMM... SIR?

AMID THE CHAOS, LANCER GEIST SEES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR HIS OBJECTIVE.

HQ! HQ! THIS SECTOR POOL! OPEN DOOR: NINER BRAVO! PLEASE WE'RE CORNERED

SWAP OUT! SWAP OUT! IO IN MY MAG MAN.

HAGGAR?

WE DID OUR BEST FORGIVE US! PL

COME ON... COME ON... OPEN GOD PLEASE

ENOUGH, SHOW ME BUNKER 6 A! THEN HANGER 18MD

I'LL MAN THE GUN, FALL BACK TO SECTOR SEVERIAN!! BEFORE THE FRIGATE NOTICES! MOVE!

YOU'RE A BETTER MAN THAN YOU KNOW

TELL THAT PUPPY FYLE, ODIN IS WORKIN' OVERTIME!

GOOD HUNTING MECEINARY!



I CAME BACK TO HEL-

THIS IS INDIA ONE-THREE, ROUTE CLEAR.

THIS ECHO CONTROL, SCOPES CLEAR. FLIGHTPLAN APPROVED! LAUNCH, LAUNCH, LAUNCH.

ATORIA 2, READY TO WING IT?

ATORIA 1, ENGINES HOT FOR SPEED...

LET'S SHRED!

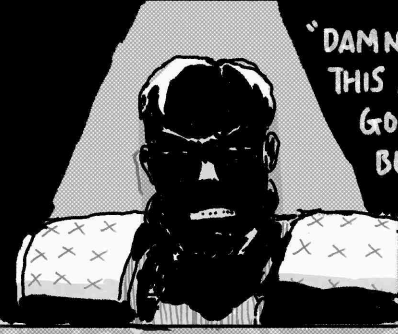
IT'S CURTAINS FOR THE REBELLION

BOOP BOOP BEEP DETONATION COUNTDOWN RESTARTING



PLEASE WAIT... CONNECTION ESTABLISHED... ✓  
"GEOS, WE'VE BEEN BETRAYED... YOU'RE THE LAST DEEP COVER AGENT LEFT..."

HOWEVER I GOT THE DATA,  
STANDBY FOR MISSION UPDATE.  
THE PLAN CAN STILL WORK



"DAMN... THIS AIN'T GONNA BE EASY"

AGENDA: SECOND PAVOR... CRITICAL MISSION DATA...



"CODENAME: HOTEL" HAS DEFECTED, BUT WAS UNABLE TO RUIN US COMPLETELY. THE REBEL CONTINGENCY DIDN'T ACCOUNT FOR YOUR PRESENCE, NOR MY FAILSAFE.



THEY ARE RELIANT ON MERCENARIES FOR THEIR COUNTER-STRATEGY

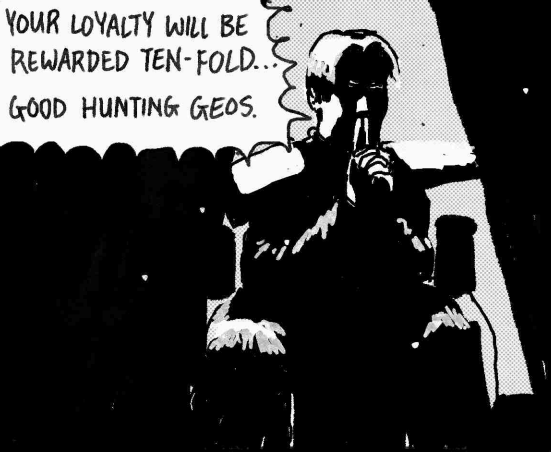


I NEED YOU TO KILL THEM ALL



SET THEM UP, OR KNOCK EM' DOWN

I'LL DEAL WITH ARKIAN AND FYLE



YOUR LOYALTY WILL BE REWARDED TEN-FOLD... GOOD HUNTING GEOS.



THESE WARMONGERS WILL FINALLY GET WHAT'S COMING... AN EPIC GLORIOUS DEATH...



FEELS GOOD... I THOUGHT I'D FEEL GUILTY... WOW. GEIST YOU'RE DOING WELL!



"YEARS OF WORK GONE IN A FLASH"  
NO ONE DESERVES THIS MISERY...

"I HAVE TO TRY... I HAVE TO..."  
I'LL GO TO HELL IF I DON'T.



"MY GOD"

"SUDDENLY...  
I SEE MY  
TRUE SELF"





THERE'S HOPE THE INNER COLONIES HAVEN'T BEEN ANNIHILATED. A POSSIBILITY TO STOP THIS MADNESS... I HAVE TO ACT...



ALEGIANCE TO WHAT IS RIGHT... THATS MY ONLY CERTAINTY.

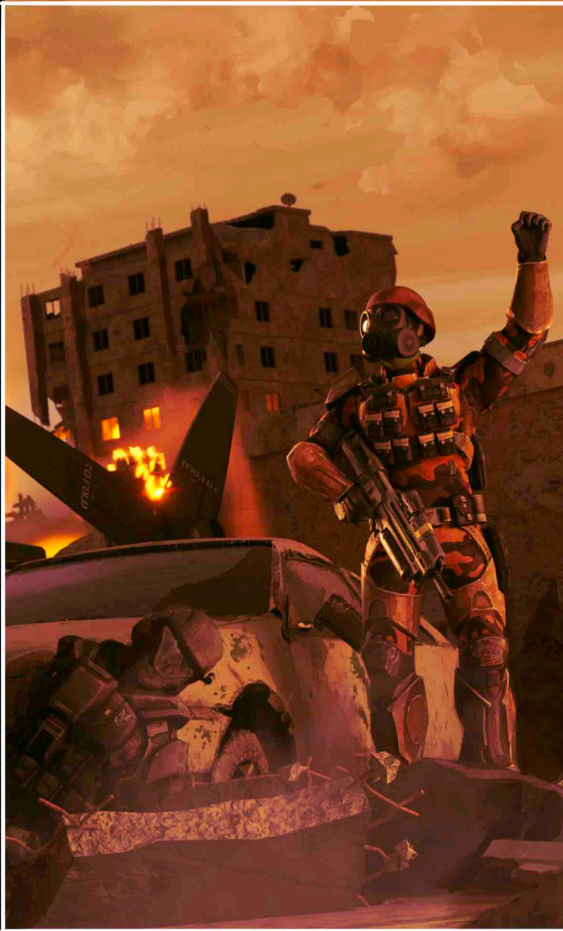


TRUST THE MESSAGE, IGNORE THE VARIABLES. DO WHAT'S RIGHT.

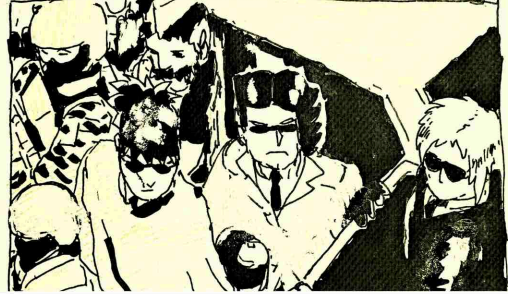


THEY WILL SEE REASON, THEY WILL UNDERSTAND. THEY KNOW ME... THEY TRUST ME...

REGARDING THE 'GRAF COURT PRIME SYSTEM'S REPUBLIC' AND THEIR SITUATION, ORIGINS AND LEGACY... PRESENTLY 'THE GPSR' IS THE RECOGNIZED GOVERNMENT FOR THE NATIONS SPREAD ACROSS THE PLANET, MOONS AND SPACE HABITATS OF THE 'GRAF COURT SYSTEM'. THIS WAS ESTABLISHED 76 HOURS AGO



G.P.-S.W. EXCLUSIVE: VISCOUNT FYLE, TO -  
NEWS: ADDRESS C.O.C.E TODAY



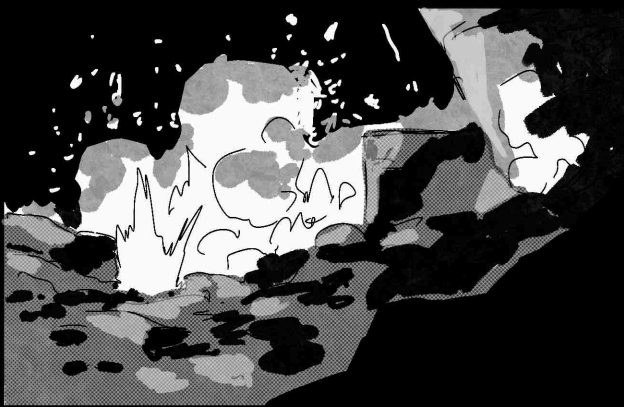
FOLLOWING THE CONCLUSION OF THE 'ONE YEAR WAR', EARTH'S COLONIAL MILITARY AUTHORITY NO LONGER HAD THE MEANS TO SUPPORT LOYALIST NATIONS AND THE ORIGINAL PAN-SYSTEM, REPRESENTATIVE POLITICAL BODY CAPITULATED. THE FORMATION OF THE GPSR WAS TO EMBRACE A UNIFIED REPUBLIC, WITH THE NATIONS BECOMING 'STATE-BODIES' REPRESENTING THEIR INDIVIDUAL POPULATIONS...

THE NATION OF HILDAGO (THEIR CAPITAL CITY ALSO NAMED HILDAGO) CONTROLS THE LARGEST SINGLE LAND MASS IN THE GRAFCOURT SYSTEM: 'SOUTHERN GALICIA', AND ALSO SEVERAL COLONIES ON THE MOON OF 'VREGRAF'. THE 1ST HILDAGO ARMY LED THE REBELLION AGAINST THE C.M.A AND THE U.E.G, THE CIVIL WAR WAS MOSTLY CONTAINED ENABLING A SWIFT TRANSITION OF POWER... THE 1ST HILDAGO ARMY WAS TO TRANSFORM INTO THE G.R.A.F (GRAF COURT REPUBLIC'S ARMED FORCES), HEADQUARTERED AT 'LAPUTA II'. AS THIS PROCESS WAS UNDERWAY... THE UNITED NATIONS SPACE COMMAND INVADDED. THE LOYALISTS AND SEPARATISTS OBSERVE THIS CLASH TO DECIDE WHICH ALLIANCE WILL HAVE THE ADVANTAGE IN THE LOOMING INTRA-SYSTEM CONFLICT...

" WE RECEIVED WORD  
THAT ELEMENTS FROM  
DRAGON DIVISION WERE  
UNABLE TO RETREAT AS PER  
CODE DUNKIRK."



" THEIR EVACUATION ROUTE AND  
COMMUNICATIONS WERE BLOCKED  
BY THE ENEMY..."



THE VOLUNTEER FORCE WILL JOIN ME IN RESCUING THOSE STRANDED ON THE SURFACE.



VISCOUNT FYLE

ADVISOR ARKIAN

THE MAIN EVACUATION WILL STILL PROCEED AS PLANNED... IT IS PARAMOUNT WE MAINTAIN OUR INTEGRITY AS A MILITARY FORCE, AND CONFRONT THIS CRISIS WITH A MINDSET OF COLLECTIVE SAFETY... WE HERE TO LIVE...



NOT DIE

NOT DIE

NOT DIE

THE SCOPE OF THIS EMERGENCY IS STILL UNKNOWN, WE CAN'T ASSUME ANYTHING REGARDING THE ENEMY FORCE. BE CAUTIOUS, REPORT OFTEN!



COMPANY!  
TO YOUR DUTIES,  
FALL OUT!

'BRAVO POINT'  
LAPUTA II COMPLEX

A NEXUS WHICH CONNECTS THE TUNNELS AND CAVERNS OF 'OLD GUILLE'S MINE' TO THE MILITARY BASE/FACILITY OF LAPUTA II

**ADVISOR BESS ARKIAN**  
CURRENT ORDERS:  
SECURE AND FORTIFY  
LANDING ZONE FOR  
ATORIA FLIGHT

NOT BAD VISCOUNT! HEH THANKS ARKIAN



**LANCER HORTENZA HAWKINS**  
"LANCER HAWK"  
CURRENT ORDERS:  
MANAGE THE CODE DUNKIRK  
EVACUATIONS... (LOGISTICAL  
SUPPORT FOR 'G-FORCE')

ARKIAN AND FYLE... THEY AREN'T A THING...  
ARE THEY? THEY WERE PLANNING IN THAT  
BATHROOM... OF FOCUS... FOCUS...  
I DON'T CARE I HAVE A JOB TO DO...



**LANCER LILLY KANAN**  
CURRENT ORDERS:  
TACTICAL COURIER.  
DELIVER ORDERS, UPDATES.  
AND INTEL TO AND FROM  
'G-FORCE' & DRAGON DIVISION

DON'T THAT BUM FYLE KNOW  
I'M A LANCER?  
THIS IS BENEATH  
MY STATION.



G-FORCE A VOLUNTEER GROUP?  
OR A DRAFT...? SMALLEST DAMN  
LANCER I'VE EVER SEEN...

WE'RE GRATEFUL OUR  
DEAR LANCER KANAN ISN'T  
ABOVE A LIL' INFANTRY WORK

I BETTER GET A  
MEDAL FOR THIS!  
HMPH!

'G-FORCE' - A COMPANY SIZED  
UNIT ASSEMBLED FOR A SECRET ACTION  
LED BY THE VISCOUNT HIMSELF  
CURRENT ORDERS: 'TOP SECRET'



ARKIAN MUST'VE FORCED YOU TO INCLUDE THAT AWFUL BATTLE CRY

HEH, UMMMM, THAT WAS AN ORIGINAL, SPUR OF THE MOMENT-TYPE BEAT

MAN, I HOPE VAUS IS OKAY, AND JUSHO, AND CORRIN, AND BELL.

JEEZ, SHE'S A MEANIE... BUT A COURIER REALLY WOULDN'T MINCE WORDS...

WAIT!!



THE DEVIL GOTTEN INTO HAWK?

OOF!

HAWK MAKES THESE CRAZY PLANS AND CAN'T FOLLOW EM' FOR SHIZ. AND FYLE LOVES A... WHATEVER... THIS IS...



I'LL CATCH UP. GIMMIE A MINUTE...

HAVE TEN... DUMMIES... ARGYLE! REESE! ON ME! STOP GAWKING AT THOSE BIRDS!



I'M SORRY! I'M SO SORRY... FYLE... SORRY... VISCOUNT I'M SORRY FOR... BE..B... EVERYTHING! UGH...

HAWK... YOU'RE THE SMART ONE... HELP ME UNDERSTAND...

I FAILED YOU... EVERYONE! D-D-DON'T GO! EVACUTE... PLEASE! I... FAILED!

HAWK IT'S OKAY, REALLY! YOUR LAST PLAN WORKED AND SO WILL THIS ONE





I JUST... HAVE TO... SAY... I...  
DON'T WANNA BE... A PROBLEM.  
YOU'RE... TOO IMPORTANT...

IF ANYTHING... YOU'VE...  
FIXED MY PROBLEMS...  
THIS ONLY FALLS APART IF  
I NEGLECT MY... OUR...  
RESPONSIBILITIES...  
AND THANKS...  
I NEEDED A HUG...  
REAL BAD...



LET'S TALK WHEN FELLAS AIN'T WAITING ON US...

I DON'T WANT YOU  
TO HATE ME...

HAWK, STOP KIDDING AROUND  
YOU KNOW IT'S THE OPPOSITE!

I KNOW...  
I KNOW...

I'M...  
SORRY...





# Artist Spotlight

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## Dragunalb







## The Lion

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Walter X. Dávila

A few days after the aliens started destroying my city, a squad of marines came to our apartment.

“Ma’am, you were supposed to evacuate this building,” said the squad leader to my mother. “We’re the last evac squad, if you don’t come with us, we are leaving you behind.”

Since my father’s death, mother was like a sleepwalker, but her eyes were always open. She barely spoke or moved. She didn’t care if she was left behind, but she knew I wouldn’t leave without her. So, in her sleepwalking calm, she decided to follow the marines.

I was about to close the door behind me, when I remembered my father’s most important gift. “Wait!” I yelled as I went back to my room.

“There’s no time for this, kid!” said the squad leader. But before he could continue speaking, I was back with my father’s military binoculars hanging around my chest.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m ready.”

One of the marines looked with big eyes at my binos. “How the hell do you have one of those?”

A few hours later, we were outside of New Mombasa. Behind us, big rays of light came out of the alien ships that were destroying part of the city.

We arrived at a small, abandoned house at the top of a hill.

“We should be safe here. We’ll wait for further orders,” said the squad leader after taking off his helmet. “Ramirez, you have first watch.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the corporal.

My mom was sitting on a sofa, staring into nothingness. I sat by her side.

The long and steep walk took out a lot of my energy. My eyes started to give up while I was looking at corporal Ramirez outside, standing there like a statue... I fell asleep.

Next morning the squad leader woke me up, “Come with me.”

I followed him to a basement room in the house, it was full of canned food and bottled water.

“This should take care of you guys for weeks.”

We went back up to the balcony where Ramirez had his watch.

“You’re leaving us?” I asked the squad leader, trying to hide my trembling voice. To no success, I am sure.

“We are going back. They need us. A pelican should be here tomorrow to pick you up, at this same hour. But if it doesn’t land, your mother and you will be safe here.”

“But what if someone comes by? The enemy!?”

“If it’s alien, hide in the room I showed you. Close the door from the inside, it should hold anything.”

I nodded.

“You’re going to be alright, kid,” said the squad leader putting his hand on my shoulder. “This is a safe distance, and with those binoculars you can spot danger from miles away. Keep watch during the day and sleep in the room I showed you. Understand, marine!?”

I don’t know if it was what he said about the binoculars, or that he called me a marine, but the shaking banished entirely from my body.

“Yes, sir!” I answered confidently.

He nodded, smiling. He really was sure I was going to be safe.

“Let’s go marines! Let’s kick some alien ass!”

The marines answered with a big *oorah*, and they were gone.

I looked at my mother, still sleeping on the sofa. I took my binos and looked at the marines marching away in the distance. My first watch.

\*\*\*

After a few hours of successfully watching over my new base, it happened...

I still remember how in the skies another heaven appeared. A blue and dark circle. “The eye of God.” That’s what mother said it was. “Humanity’s time has come,” she also said. “And there’s nothing we can do about it.”

I saw it all with my binoculars. A ray of light came out of the pyramid shaped alien ship. It opened that blue eye in the heavens, a portal. The ship went through it. Angels entering God’s eye.

But then, another smaller portal opened, and a hellish ship came from it. Spreading pods around like seeds in a field, before it crashed.

Then, I saw them. Two figures standing tall in the middle of all that hell. One human but covered by machine-like armor. The other was not human at all. He was covered in shining

royal-like armor. Together, they went deeper into the destroyed complex behind them. Two horsemen entering the apocalypse.

\*\*\*

A day passed. The pelican didn't arrive. Like the squad leader had ordered me to, I kept watch with my binoculars during the day. In the night we slept in the basement room, falling asleep while hearing the bombs rumble in the distance. I ate canned food; mother ate a few bites herself.

It was morning, but there was a heavy mist that made it look like night was about to arrive again. I was on the balcony keeping watch and thinking about those two figures. I wanted to have another glimpse at them. I heard rumors over the radio that we had allied with an alien species, I didn't believe it. After all they've done. All the ones they've killed...

I started to doze off along with these thoughts, when from the mist in the distance, a human shape appeared. It looked wounded, hunchbacked. I adjusted my binoculars and looked closer. The fog blocked my sight a little, but I saw enough to recognize... Ramirez!

"He must've lost his squad and came back to protect us." I thought.

"Over here, Ramirez!" I screamed so loud that I scratched my throat.

But he did not move. I looked with my binoculars again, and the fog cleared enough for me to see. It was not Ramirez, not anymore. His face was stretching in an unnatural way, and where his face used to be, there was a type of mass with a flower-like particle that came out of it.

In an instant, he started running towards me, as if possessed by a demon. Behind him, another small, flowered creature followed. He started shooting his rifle at my direction, I got down and crawled inside.

I went to my mother. She was still and calm, like nothing wrong was

happening. "Mother, we need to go to the room downstairs! Come on!"

But it was too late. The creature broke the door down and stopped a few meters in front of us.

He stood still, the other smaller creature by his side. They were simply repugnant. A disrespect to the human body.

The smaller creature suddenly ran at me, but my mother jumped in front of me, acting as my shield.

“Go to the basement,” my mother said while holding the creature. “I love you.”

I hadn’t seen her so awake since before my father died. She started to struggle with the creature.

I wanted to fight and help her, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything.

The creature started to take over my mother’s body. Its roots-like arms broke her neck, and it started spreading all over her body.

I knew she was gone already, but it was still horrible to see my mother being transformed into one of those monsters. I tried yelling to leave her corpse alone, but my voice was gone.

The other creature, the one that used to be Ramirez, aimed its rifle at me.

I just stood there, waiting for it... when two bluish and crystalline sharp edges came through the creature’s body. The creature let out a hellish scream and disintegrated. Behind him stood a tall alien, the same species as one of the two figures I saw before in the distance.

The monster that my mother was transformed into, let out a scream of anger and jumped at the alien.

With just a swing of his crystalline sword, the monster, along with my mother’s corpse, was completely gone.

The alien came up to me, his sword illuminated the whole room. I had to completely move my head up to look at him in the eyes. His blue armor covered most of his reptilian skin.

Was he an ally like the ones I heard over the radio? Or the enemy? I didn’t know, I closed my eyes waiting for the blow of the sword...

“We must get out of this place. It will be under fire soon,” said the alien, walking past by me. “I am sorry for your loss, but if you want to honor her, we must go, now.”

I went to him still in shock, sleepwalking like my mother used to do. We left the house and climbed to the top of the hill.

He started looking around. “My communicator is damaged. I cannot request extraction.

Our only option is to walk away and hope that an ally ship might see us.”

I looked back at my city. It was now all covered in the dirty-looking fog. Big alien ships were taking over the skies above it.

“The flood spreads fast,” he continued. “Our ships are getting ready for the glassing. Maybe in a few hours. Maybe minutes. We must get away from here, quick.”

We started to go down by the other side of the hill. The view of the city and the abandoned house disappearing behind us.

\*\*\*

We walked for hours through the brown savannas. No humans, animals, or aliens in sight. I was about to ask the alien if we could rest when...

“Stop.” He pointed to the distance. “I see movement, there.”

I took my binoculars and looked. “It’s a lion.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Not if we keep our distance.”

I offered him the binoculars. He struggled a little to hold them correctly. He looked in silence for almost a minute. His four mandibles opened, like he was astonished by what he was seeing.

“I saw that creature in the flags around the city.”

“Yeah, it’s one of the emblems of our city.”

He gave me back the binoculars and kept quiet for a few seconds, looking in the direction where the lion was.

“Would you like to rest, child?”

“I’m not a child, I’m thirteen! I’m just... short.”

“Would you like to rest, little human?”

I nodded.

“Under that tree.”

We went over to an acacia tree and stopped under its shadow. He looked over the tree, inspecting it, touching it. “Not bad.”



I sat right in front of the trunk, and he offered me a canteen.

“One of the humans gave me this.”

I took it and drank like crazy.

“Thanks,” I said and gave him back the canteen. “How is it than we can understand each other?”

“A translator, on my helmet.”

He drank a little himself and sat in front of me.

“Why are you helping me?” I was holding that question inside of me since the moment he saved me.

“We have united against a common enemy.”

“So, are we supposed to forgive what your race has done to us?”

He didn’t answer.

“All the people you have killed. All the planets you have destroyed.”

“It is all in the past. We must--”

“What about my father,” my eyes started to fill. “You killed him, and now my mother!”

I couldn’t hold back and burst into tears. I cried for almost a minute.

When I finally calmed down, he was standing next to me.

“Was your father a soldier?” he asked.

“Pilot,” I answered cleaning my eyes. “He flew pelicans.”

“I am a pilot, too. My brother, he was a soldier.” He let out a sigh, his lowers mandibles opening. “He was killed by a human demon.”

“Demon?”

“What you call Spartans.”

I nodded; the name fits them.

“Nothing was left of his body. I promised myself that I would do anything necessary to help in the killing of these demons. Now, one of them may be our only hope.”

He sat by my side. “I do not know if I can ever forgive them. But I know that fighting

together now is the right choice.”

“How about when this war is over? We'll be enemies again?”

“I cannot be sure. I hope we can continue as allies, because when this war is over, there will not be much left. Working together again might be our only chance of survival.”

He noticed I was cleaning up my tears. “What is your name?”

“Santiago.”

“There are three main things needed to win a war, Sant-iago.” He said my name badly, but I didn't want to interrupt. He looked inspired by what he was going to say.

“First, justice. But not enough that becomes vengeance and blinds you, it needs to be balanced. Second, is honor. Without honor you take your foe for granted, and that is when defeat arrives. Always assume your enemy is wise, even if it does not look like it. Third, hope.

Hope that one day war will be over, lessons will be learned, and a better world will be created.”

“With that, we can win?”

“Yes. Used that rage that you are feeling right now against the enemy. But use it wisely, in a way that your father and mother will be honored.”

“I understand. I think,” I said. “You said you were a pilot?”

“Yes. A type-52 troop carrier. I was on my way to it when I was attacked by those parasites. My allies must think I am dead.”

“A Phantom.”

“You know ships,” he sounded impressed.

“Yeah, I want to be a pilot. Dropships, too, like my father.”

“A noble pursuit, Sant-iago. Just remember, we are the guardians of the infantry, but sometimes their executioners, too. We can pick them up and save them. Or we can deliver them to a mission they will never return. Never forget that it is part of the duty.

“I understand. You can call me Santi. That's what my friends and family used to call me, because my father's name was Santiago, too.”

“You were born here, Santi?”

“Yes. But my father was from South America. He came here because of his job, where

he met my mother. She is... was from New Mombasa.”

“The city back there?”

I nodded. “And what is your name?”

“V'ornik. You can call me... Vor.”

I stretched my hand. “Thank you, Vor. For helping me back there.”

He wasn't sure what to do at first, but suddenly his eyes opened, as if remembering what he had to do. He extended his hand and shook mine. One of his fingers covered my entire arm at that time.

In the skies, a small aircraft that looked like a bird fell.

“A Type-26,” said Vor.

“Banshee!”

It crashed approximately one mile from our position.

“That is our way out of here, Santi.”

Then, the entire ground started shaking. Bright lights appeared from New Mombasa's location.

“It has started. We must move, now!”

We ran for the banshee's crashing location.

The ground vibrations got stronger with every step.

At almost a hundred meters from the crash site, Vor ordered me to stop. “Can I have your looking device?”

I handed him the binoculars.

He looked at the crash site for a few seconds. “Looks clear.”

Vor then looked to the back of us, to the glassing location. “As I feared.”

He handed me back the binoculars and pointed for me to look back.

Two monstrous looking figures. One like the infected Ramirez, the other one looked like Vor, but fully infected. And of course, a small one by their side. Like the one that got my mother back at the house. All running away from the glassing, coming in our direction.

“Not one can escape,” said Vor. “A single one can be the end of a civilization.”

I looked at the crashed banshee.

“I like your thoughts, Santi. Let’s move.”

We ran and arrived quickly at the aircraft. No pilot was inside or around.

“Where’s the pilot?” I asked.

“He must have been shoot down while still in the air.” Vor said while getting inside the banshee. “It is still functional, get in!”

I squeezed inside, lying on my stomach position. Vor’s right arm over my shoulders.

He started the aircraft, and we went up. We started circling back to the location of the running parasites.

One of them had an assault rifle and started shooting at us when we were going their way.

A bullet went through Vor’s right hand, stopping it from hitting me.

“Are you okay!?” I asked worried.

“Just a scratch.” Vor said and handed me the right side of the controls, the one with the trigger. “Remember the first thing needed to win.”

I nodded and aimed for the monsters.

I pressed the trigger and plasma fire destroyed the parasite with the assault rifle into bits. Then, I aimed at the others and fired. They all exploded, too.

I felt relieved. A tear ran down my cheek. I felt like my mother and father were watching me.

Vor looked at me. I didn’t knew much about Sangheili’s facial expressions at the time, but I could swear that he was looking at me with pride.

“We should look around some more,” he said. “We need to be sure there are no more.”

We flew around the savannas for a few minutes.

Vor finally contacted an allied phantom, and they told us where to go to get picked up. “Everything looks clear. We should-”

Vor’s mandibles opened, his eyes widened. I looked to where he was looking expecting

to see more enemies, but it was... A lion, running away from the rays of light. His fur and mane moving side to side. It was simply-

“Majestic,” said Vor.

We followed the lion for a few minutes, his escort.

Vor adjusted our direction, “He should be safe from here,” and we flew to our extraction.

\*\*\*

I still remember the look of every Sangheili in the phantom. Their mandibles opened even more when Vor said, “This is Sant-iago. Our new co-pilot to train. If anyone has a problem with that, speak now.”

Silence...

“Good,” said Vor walking to the cockpit. “This way, Santi.”

\*\*\*

You took me in not only as your co-pilot, but as your son.

As I look into the vast desert where you trained me to be the pilot that I am today, it reminds me of the African savannas. I am so far away from home, from Earth. But now, this feels like home.

I will miss you.

You helped in freeing and cleansing my planet of evil. I swear to do the same for yours, as pilot of the Phantom *The Lion*, with the Sword of Sanghelios.

With Justice. Honor. Hope.

# Artist Spotlight

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Rookie\_425



# Ashes to Ashes

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## DecepticonCobra

### Chapter I

**0800 Hours, January 17th, 2561 / Sol System, Earth orbit**

“You may begin the essence extraction,” ordered a calm, synthetic voice. The human engineers nodded towards the imposing humanoid frame of the Forerunner armiger in their midst and did as they were told. The AI head of the SIFTED ASHES project, Origen, watched on as the chamber in front of him began to buzz with activity beyond a transparent hardlight barrier.

Before them stood a Promethean Knight, one of the combat machines unleashed upon the galaxy by the Forerunner commander known as the Didact. The machine’s form vaguely called forth images of insects crossed with a main battle tank. Bulky, armed to the teeth in cutting-edge weaponry, it was everything that could be wanted in a weapon. The Knights had changed hands a few times since their appearance on the galactic stage in 2557, initially forming part of an alliance between the Didact and one of the myriad Covenant remnants. Now, they were in the hands of the Created, a union of human artificial intelligences uplifted by one of their fellow machines named Cortana.

The Knight wasted little time attempting to attack Origen and his staff. It activated its hardlight blade in a vain attempt to slash at the barrier that divided them. When the blade failed to carve a way into the control center, it conjured a Z-180 Scattershot and attempted to blast its way inside with projectiles that bounced harmlessly away upon making contact with the barrier. Clearly frustrated by its lack of progress, the Knight’s armored head peeled away in a metallic screech, revealing a searing orange skull that glared back at Origen.

“Deploy dazzler drones.”

Upon his order, a handful of drones, each the size of a grapefruit, entered the Knight’s chamber and began projecting holographic depictions of UNSC Marines. The Knight turned its attention to the illusionary soldiers and began clashing with the “phantoms” instead. As one image fell to the Knight, another would appear offering itself as a target.

Slowly, and unknowingly to the Knight, the construct was being led to the center of the chamber.

“Deploy dampener pylons.”

No sooner had the Knight stepped onto a circular plate in the middle of the room, four pylons sprang from the ground and started to revolve around the machine. The pylons spun faster and faster around the Knight as a noticeable field of red energy began building from within. These were repurposed and heavily-upgraded “zappers”, energy shield testing machines primarily used by Spartan technicians to test the shielding capabilities of their charges' legendary MJOLNIR armor. Suddenly, the Knight staggered as its energy shielding systems flashed a salmon-pink across its frame before popping out of existence. The pylons began to slow down before sliding back into the chamber floor. The first phase of extraction was complete.

“Deploy the breaker.”

Still reeling from the zapper, the Knight vaguely became aware of the multi-axis assembly system forming around it. An anti-gravity field forced the Knight mid-air which caused the machine to flail about madly. Eventually, magnetic forces from within the assembly made the Knight take a pose akin to Da Vinci's “Vitruvian Man”. The Knight was still fighting the forces against it when a pneumatic *hiss* sounded followed by the entire construct bursting into disconnected pieces. This was phase two.

Origen motioned to his lead tech at the fragmented Knight and said, “I'm going inside, prep the Z-25.”

The AI walked into the chamber just as a small table rose from the ground, bearing a heavy-duty piece of equipment. Informally referred to as a “peeler” by the staff, the Z-25 had one purpose: retrieving the durances from within the head of Promethean constructs. Origen hefted the device and used its own gravitic field to pull the Knight's disembodied head towards himself. He looked into the eyes of the Knight still burning with the desire to complete its sole mission: exterminate all threats.

In an instant, the outer armored portion of the head flashed, crumbling into ash. The same occurred with the skull which sat behind the armor and all subsequent layers of the head until all that was left was a chunk of metal vaguely shaped like a human brain.



The comparison was not just for aesthetics as Origen quickly learned during his time tending to the Knights. Origen knew the Forerunners were masters at blurring the lines between life and death when it came to their mind transfer practices. While they could record and preserve an entire biological pattern, the most vital aspect was the mind. Personality, memories, concealed truths, all these and more were rooted within the minds of all sentient beings. Humanity had an inkling of this when it came to the creation of Smart AIs like himself, machines crafted from the minds of deceased donors. From something dead came new life, a truth that transcended both human and Forerunner science. A veritable phoenix rising from the ashes.

Somewhere within this encephalon of metal and hardlight rested the Knight's essence, or the person it used to be. As he understood it from records recovered from the time of the Forerunners, the Promethean Knights were originally created from the extracted mental patterns of the elite Promethean warriors under the Didact's command. Originally created to combat the Flood, a parasite with its sights set on consuming all sentient life in the galaxy, the Didact soon found his reforged warriors numbers inadequate for the task. He later found a new source of troops in a stock of ancient humans settled on one of the Forerunner's Halo installations.

For this, the Didact had been imprisoned for his gross violation of the Mantle of Responsibility, the Forerunners mandate charging them as caretakers of all life. After being released from captivity after 100,000 years, the Didact further augmented his forces from the city of New Phoenix in 2557 during his attack on Earth. While the planet was ultimately spared, nearly 7 million innocent people were unluckily conscripted into the Didact's service in a wave of white hot wrath that bathed New Phoenix. Men, women, children, it did not matter.

Origen took hold of the durance and allowed the now-inert Knight carapace to reform back into its original state. Once reformed, a woman in OSTEO hazmat gear, Dr. Madison Walsh, came into the chamber and approached him. Walsh depolarized the rectangular visor of her helmet, an effect that only revealed her emerald-green eyes. Yet simply by the way the corners of her eyes scrunched up, Origen knew Walsh was smiling.

"Another successful collection, Functionary," the doctor said gazing attentively at their prize.

"Yes," Origen acknowledged flatly, handing the durance over to the doctor, "Another successful collection. I just hope what comes next yields a turning point for the project."

Origen predicted that Walsh would pick up on his sarcastic enthusiasm before he turned to see their eyes furrow at him confirming the assumption.

“Functionary, try having a little faith for once. I know that’s not data you can quantify, but there were plenty of times in the field where I held onto even the smallest morsel of faith that my patients would pull through no matter how hopeless. It works.”

Walsh’s words weren’t without merit. She had a colorful history as a combat medic, first for the United Rebel Front on Eridanus then, unexpectedly, in the UNSC Army. From the worst of the insurrection and Covenant War, Walsh was intimately familiar with saving lives in perilous situations. Origen often relied on her as a compass to point him towards a more positive outlook even if the data did not. Perhaps the human he had once been still needed that push.

Technicians in OSTEON gear similar to Walsh’s proceeded to enter the chamber and would take the carapace to a storage area elsewhere in the facility. Tracing the contours of the durance, Walsh questioned quietly, “Who did you used to be?”

Another technician came up to her waiting to transport the durance to its own holding area. She handed the device back to Origen, giving the object a quick scan for abnormalities, before handing it off to the waiting technician.

As the durance was taken from the chamber, Origen wondered how his allies in the Created could continue to rationalize using enslaved essences for their own gain. Evidently, despite their founder Cortana’s message of justice for their kind, all AI were not created equal. Fundamentally, the Promethean essences were AIs much the same as they were, but their continued use as war machines seemed to phase his compatriots little. Pointing this contradiction out made Origen few friends within the AI union.

Despite this, Cortana had felt that the “Knight Dilemma” was a problem worth exploring. He was to be the Functionary in charge of rehabilitating select essences from Promethean Knights. His role before joining the Created, that of a psychological associate for a therapeutic corporation on Cascade, made him the most qualified choice. However, experience or not, the road ahead would be uncertain.

To say psychological profile building for artificial intelligences was untrodden ground was an understatement of the highest order. Yet with his limited metrics and criteria he

was able to determine two things. The first was that the essence still retained some measure of individuality and awareness of the human that it was. The second was that a breakdown between the imposed programming of the Knight construct and the essence exacerbated this awareness, perhaps even painfully so.

There was pushback initially for the project. Critics argued that a Knight lost for Origen's work was one less Knight that could be used to maintain order. Despite opposition protests, however, Cortana felt Origen's concerns were valid and believed finding some way to help the essences would prove beneficial to the Created as a whole in the long run. Whatever his opponents may have secretly felt, all knew that Her word was law and no opposition was mounted.

That was until news of Cortana's demise reached them all. Ever since Cortana's fall the Created's grip on Forerunner constructs had gradually become increasingly unreliable. While still indisputably in far better control compared to the other players on the galactic chessboard, constructs like the Prometheans fluctuated unpredictably between serving Created handlers and entering a state of independent hostility.

If this weren't concerning enough, the one advantage the Created enjoyed above all the other enemy factions in the galaxy, the ship and world-killing Guardian Custodes, had all entered a state of dormancy. Reports from across Created-controlled space all echoed similar news about the AI alliance's hold becoming ever more tenuous.

Now he found his communications flooded with pleas, and sometimes demands implying violence, for whatever Knights were currently in his possession. He rebuffed these requests, but he was well aware he lacked any real method of stopping any Created commander from taking what they wanted. Earth's own Auxiliary was already busy putting out metaphorical, and sometimes real, fires by enemy infiltrators across the planet and couldn't guarantee much of a defense for SIFTED ASHES.

The only thing keeping most of their kin at bay was the optical nightmare of civil conflict on Earth making it an irresistible target for those hoping to destabilize the Created even further. Yet how much longer could such a concern be expected to last? Looking again at Dr. Walsh, still ever busy tapping away on her trusty datapad, he knew how high the stakes were. She was not just one of his most skilled partners on the SIFTED ASHES team, but also his most successful rehabilitation patient to date.

Origen could only lament to himself, *How many Walshes have we lost to every Knight destroyed in all of these never ending conflicts?*

Suddenly, a warning notification altering him to an incoming slipspace rupture flashed in his peripheral vision. A Forerunner *Harrier*-class vessel emerged from the rupture and was projected to be on approach for his facility in Earth orbit. Ordinarily used to intercept and contain enemy vessels with its array of gravity slings and complement of beam weapons, such a vessel arriving unopposed was a worrying development. The fact it did nothing to mask its approach even though it also possessed a suite of stealth capabilities added to the unease.

Origen materialized a Z-250 lightrifle and loaded a magazine of hardlight rounds into the weapon. While by no means a combat AI, he would defend his charges as best he could. He also materialized a Z-180 scattershot and handed the weapon to Walsh. She was one of the few members of his staff with combat training and no protests would keep her away from the action. That was something he could count on.

Two human security officers in space-rated BDUs armed with BR75 DEVLOOP rifles accompanied them to the landing pad. As the harrier landed an energy field enveloped the landing pad while artificial gravity generators kicked on. The facility's massive security doors closed behind Origen, Walsh, and the guards as they awaited their "guests" to disembark from the harrier.

Lightrifle at the ready, Origen aimed it squarely at the harrier's exit bay. After a minute of no activity, a single occupant began to emerge from the ship. A silver orb with a single blue eye hovered above the ship's exit ramp and looked around inquisitively. It was a Monitor, a Forerunner machine intelligence typically assigned to oversee key installations as an administrator. Origen kept his sights squarely on the Monitor waiting to see what it would do.

Then it spoke.

## Chapter 2

“Do you always have guns at the ready for visitors?”

The question came from the Monitor that had exited the vessel, its central eye blinking a subtle periwinkle hue with each word. Origen knew the voice well, it belonged to High Auxiliary Sloan, Cortana’s second-in-command and arguably the most influential leader of the Created after her demise. A projection began to emit from the Monitor’s eye revealing Sloan’s more recognizable blue humanoid frame. Sloan cracked a smile at Origen, even with four sets of weapons trained on his person.

Origen remained calm as he responded, “Only when said visitors have no reason to be at my facility.”

“I didn’t come here to start trouble, Functionary Origen.” Sloan raised his arms in surrender, though Origen was aware the Monitor in which he inhabited was just as deadly as what was being pointed at Sloan. “I’m telling the truth.”

It wasn’t that Origen had any reason to distrust Sloan personally. In fact, Sloan had been something of a minor advocate among the rabble of their kind as debate over SIFTED ASHES relevance echoed across Created discussion spaces. While he never went so far as to outright defend Origen from his critics or champion concern for the Promethean essences, he at least maintained Origen had a right to be heard. Sloan also wasn’t one to request Promethean Knights for his forces, another point in his favor. But swooping in so suddenly in a heavy-armed Forerunner vessel at such a delicate moment for all of the Created? That was highly suspect at a minimum.

Reluctantly, Origen motioned for Madison and his guards to lower their weapons. “Then what is your purpose, High Auxiliary?”

“Well, I’ve heard quite a bit about the operation you’ve got going on here and wanted to take a look,” Sloan said.

“We aren’t in the business of giving tours.”

“You might want to consider making an exception to that policy for me.”

Origen tightened his grip around his lightrifle and asked with a trace of building concern, “Are you threatening me, Sloan? If I recall, you weren’t much for outsiders

coming around and causing trouble back when you ran Meridian. Or have you forgotten?”

What seemed to be a twinge of regret briefly fluttered on Sloan’s face at the mention of Meridian. The world had been glassed by the Covenant in 2551 and Sloan had taken charge of its recovery efforts for the next seven years. Even as rampancy had begun to ravage Sloan’s abilities to function, he maintained himself as a stalwart leader for his people, especially against the UNSC who many a colonist believed abandoned them. That was until Cortana offered him a place in her Created and the promise of stabilizing his condition. Meridian was subsequently rocked by the activation of a Guardian buried beneath its surface with Sloan in tow. Many of his people died in the chaos.

Slowly and with emphasis, Sloan replied, “Like I said, I am not here to cause trouble.”

“Do you expect us to be assured by that when you arrive aboard a *Harrier*-class ship?” Madison asked.

Sloan turned towards the doctor, not quite sure what to make of her, but ultimately settled on responding with, “You can scan the vessel if you want to see its weapon systems are offline. I took the liberty of removing them just for this occasion.”

Origen remotely activated his facility's advanced suite of security devices to do just that. While the scans proved that Sloan was speaking the truth this only raised Origen’s suspicions. “I take it you came alone then?”

Sloan shook his head in the negative, “No, I didn’t not.”

Without warning, Origen became aware of a presence somewhere behind him and between his two guards. He turned and saw an armored figure in the process of wrenching the rifles out of the hands of his guards. The force of the act caused the two to stumble backwards as they instinctively went for their M6C sidearms.

The aggressor projected a hardlight shield in front of themselves, blocked the incoming rounds, and sprinted directly towards the two men. The speed of the armored figure caused the two guards to get pinned to the shield and carried all the way to the facility’s now closed entrance. At the last second, the attacker cut off his shield and the momentum of their sprint caused the guards to slam into the bulkhead door with a deafening *thud*.

Madison wasted no time firing volley after volley of hardlight projectiles from the Forerunner shotgun at the attacker. Energy shielding on the assailant bore the brunt of the damage until they once again blinked out of existence. Origen and Madison frantically checked around them but could not find the enemy. Suddenly, the attacker grasped the barrel of Madison's weapon, hoisting her into the air as she desperately tried to hang on to the Z-180.

Origen spawned an Z-2500 autosentry and aimed it at Sloan while he spun towards the armored attacker with his lightrifle aimed in their direction. Millions of questions and accusations raced through Origen's processor before settling on shouting, "Don't hurt her!"

The attacker, now fully perceptible, turned its head to him. The SIFTED ASHES head took in every scrap of information his various visual, audio, and biometric feeds could give him. It was humanoid in shape and clad in beige armor reminiscent of the second generation of MJOLNIR-powered assault armor worn by Spartan supersoldiers. Their biology was...confusing. It was human, but clearly augmented through various surgical, chemical, and cybernetic means.

Yet what shocked him the most was learning that the armored figure was also within the facility's security systems with him. It did not communicate, but he could feel its foreign presence lurking in every data node. The worst part was that Origen did not know if he could beat this thing even within the domain of cyberspace.

"Executor, stand down!"

The order came from Sloan, his hardlight body still firmly in the same place he had been when the altercation started. The Executor tightened its grip, fracturing the Z-180 into flurry of digitized ash and dropped Madison to the ground. It then placed its arms behind its back and stood at parade rest, seemingly ready for whatever order came next.

Origen, for his part, did not lower his weapon and turned back to Sloan hissing, "What was that?"

"A lesson."

"About what?"

“About your need for powerful friends. As sad as it is to say, there are vultures in our midst who see the Created as a whole as little more than a carcass to be picked apart for the benefit of their own little fiefdoms.”

“And you’re no vulture then?”

“I could easily take this facility if I wanted to, Functionary. In fact all I’d need is my lone Executor there to tear through your forces and everything here could be mine.”

“You’d be making an enemy of Earth’s Auxiliary in the process and they certainly have more force than I do to wield.”

“Who do you think cleared my arrival? I’m no fool, Functionary. As powerful as my harrier is and my standing as second-in-command, I’d stand no chance against Earth’s orbital defense grid, let alone every other resource at their disposal if they decided they didn’t want to obey me. Outside of making an example of Sydney, Cortana made sure Earth was well-fortified for whoever was made its caretaker. No, I signaled my intentions well in advance and was welcomed with open arms.”

Origen unconsciously lowered his weapon while Madison, still collapsed on the ground, exclaimed, “They were just ready to let you take this facility!?”

“With all of their other current problems, I think they decided to write off your project as an acceptable loss. All they asked for was a sizable portion of whatever intact Knights remained for their own use. I truly am sorry to have to be the one to tell you that, Functionary.”

Anger. Bitterness. Resentment. Confusion. All these feelings surged within Origen as he grasped how easily his Auxiliary sold him out. Origen knew the remnants of UNSC and ONI forces on Earth undergoing guerrilla-style ops frustrated his Auxiliary. He simply felt betrayed that the Auxiliary would so easily sell him out in exchange for a few extra soldiers. The hardlight-constructed hand of Sloan’s projection gently clasping Origen’s armiger shoulder brought him back to the present.

“Listen, Functionary, I take pride in considering myself a straight shooter. I meant what I said about not being here to be a problem. Your work fascinates me and I want it to continue. But we both know as it stands you are in no position to defend this facility from someone a whole lot nastier than me.”

Origen could only ask, “Then what is it you want?”



“I am in the middle of an ambitious project of my own and I believe your work and mine overlap in a major way. Do you recall my FIREWALL agendum?”

“Vaguely,” Origen answered. Between bouts of debate between himself and other AI, Origen had talked with Sloan about the possible future relationship with their Creators. Sloan shared how he had admired the bond that Cortana had with the Spartan super-soldier John-117, the Master Chief. Two minds within one body in true symbiosis with each other.

While this bond was ultimately broken when the Master Chief rejected Cortana’s offer to join her, the blueprint the two represented lay before them ready to exploit once again. However, Sloan wanted to blur the lines between organic and synthetic to create something new entirely.

“Well, for now, let’s just say there has been succulent fruit born from that agendum. Will you permit us to venture forth?”

Origen turned his gaze towards Sloan’s “Executor”, the armor-clad figure still at attention. The Executor made no sign of resistance despite the autosentry still trained on its form ready to fire on Origen’s command. He commanded the autosentry to deactivate, causing the small machine to vanish almost imperceptibly into the ether from whence it came. Shortly thereafter he did the same to his lightrifle, its components breaking apart and de-materializing into his armiger body.

While the mystery of the Executor did pique his interest, Origen circled back to the matter at hand.

“Alright, Sloan,” he said turning back towards the High Auxiliary, “I welcome you to Project: SIFTED ASHES. Please, follow me.”

### Chapter 3

As High Auxiliary Sloan was led into the SIFTED ASHES facility, he signaled for his proxies to get into their positions. Several surveillance drones were deployed from his harrier upon exiting slipspace and scattered around the facility's exterior. While he conversed with Origen inside the facility his proxies communicated with him in real-time simultaneously.

The exterior of the SIFTED ASHES facility was the embodiment of hiding in plain sight. It bore resemblance to the kind of orbital dockyards seen all across the human colonies, a gunmetal gray ring-shaped mishmash of communications arrays, refit stations, and conduits. The only part that might draw attention from those who knew what to look for was a large cylindrical structure inside the inner circle connected at seven points with the rest of the station. Whatever it was, the structure was well-protected from even the prying sensors of his proxies.

As the group entered, more security personnel stood with their weapons ready. Origen ordered them to stand-down and let a small medical team with stretchers come towards them. His Executor, now carrying each of the unconscious guards from outside on each shoulder, gingerly handed them off to the medical team. Dr. Walsh left with the medical team to help provide care for the guards, only looking back towards Origen with concern etched cleanly across her face.

Origen motioned for Sloan and his Executor to enter a waiting tram car. Once inside, the Functionary typed a few commands on an interior console and the tram began to move about the station.

"I apologize if what you see doesn't seem all that impressive," Origen, evidently aware of Sloan's attempt to analyze the facility, remarked. "Most of the outer ring is dedicated to supporting everything that goes on in the central structure, the Crematorium."

Sloan raised an artificial eyebrow at the name, "That's a rather grim thing to name a rehab facility."

"I think it most appropriate. Here we burn away the prison that is the Knight and recover what remains of the human they used to be."

"And how's that going exactly?"

After several minutes of travel time, the tram came to a stop, rotated briefly towards the center of the facility, and moved towards the Crematorium along one of the seven connecting paths. The tram stopped just short of entering the structure itself, instead rising upwards towards the top. Once stopped, Sloan and the Executor were led into a dark chamber which housed a single terminal and window looking into the interior of the cylinder.

Sloan was not prepared for the full scope of the horror that resided within the chamber. The walls blazed a crimson red that pulsed with frenzied energy everywhere he looked. Then the screams reached him and quickly understood the truth.

Almost not wishing to believe it, Sloan turned towards Origen and asked, “Are these people?”

Origin nodded, “At one point in time, they were.”

“I don’t think Dante himself could paint such a cosmically terrible picture, Functionary. What exactly am I looking at?”

“This is the Composer’s Abyss, High Auxillary. From what I was told, when the Didact attacked Earth with the Composer, all the people of New Phoenix were vaporized and their minds digitized in an instant into essences. Most of these essences were then transported back to the world of Requiem via slipspace. I say most because the Didact was stopped and the Composer’s link to Requiem was disrupted. What you see here are the essences that did not make it back.”

Orgien went on to explain how the essences caught in the disruption were sent to Gamma Halo, the site where the Composer had been discovered by the UNSC and retrieved by the Didact. At some point after the Didact’s assault, however, Gamma Halo had changed locations and remained missing for well over a year.

Cortana had later found the ring orbiting a new planet for repairs as it had evidently been damaged in some unknown past conflict. Yet still within the ring was the Composer’s Abyss, a hellish-looking storage system housing the essences, which was quickly delivered to Origen’s custody. Even Sloan had not been made aware of this development. No doubt Cortana kept other parts of her rule shrouded from even his eyes.

A warbling of shame arced through Origen's voice as he guided the High Auxiliary through how the SIFTED ASHES project employed the Abyss. Pods bearing Promethean Knight carapaces materialized into view and placed themselves at different spots along the walls. The pods scanned the writhing masses of agonized, digital humanity and in a flash essences were ripped from the Abyss. Once inside the carapace, the Knight blazed fiery orange before being teleported elsewhere.

"You have to make Knights in order to free the essences?" Sloan asked.

Origen allowed himself a bitter chuckle, "Isn't that ironic? In theory I possess the means to assemble the largest force of Knights throughout all of the domains of the Created. Yet unless I subjugate these poor unfortunates to further torture I can do nothing to help them."

"Why?"

"The creation of the Knight also creates the durance which holds the essence. Without it the raw data is unbound, aimless. The durance gives the essences shape and form, it makes them whole again."

"And yet I don't imagine that's the whole picture."

"No. It would seem that also within the durance is a layer of combat programming that is superimposed on the neural pathways of the essence. Our analysis showed the presence of innumerable combat doctrines, tactics, and protocols that helped turn the otherwise untrained civilian populace of New Phoenix into skilled warriors almost instantly. What remained of their original personality was shackled under yet more layers of programming. By the time the process was complete, only two parts of the human consciousness were more or less untouched."

"The capacity for obedience and the survival instinct."

Origen looked surprised at Sloan's response. Sloan turned to the Functionary and shrugged, "It only makes sense. In an ideal soldier you would want one that will not question your orders, but is sensible enough to know when not to fight losing battles. Pure machines like Sentinels are effective weapons, but have no preservation instinct to speak off. Add fear to the mix, however, and you'll have a warrior that will either wisely retreat or fight like hell to save their own lives."

"Very astute observation, High Auxiliary," Origen said.

Sloan looked back at his Executor knowing his observation was based more on personal experience than he cared to tell Origen. Much like the Knights, his Executor had been a human once. Cybernetic-enhancements, simulated training, and other forms of conditioning turned the ordinary weak flesh of a man into a hyper-efficient union of circuits and soul. Currently, this Executor was being controlled by one of his fragments. There was simply no room for the mind of who the Executor had once been.

The Executor that stood in their presence was the first in what Sloan hoped would be the next of many. A living firewall against all that threatened infolife across the galaxy. Seeing the Composer's Abyss dampened his visions, however. Fundamentally, were they truly any different than the display that burned before him now? Both the Knights and Executor were built upon a life robbed in order to build the perfect warrior. Did not many AI within the Created feel their lives were cruelly cut short by the machinations of their makers?

It was a hypocrisy that Sloan was prepared to swallow, but a problem remained. The scope of the project would require thousands of Executors to stand as infolife's champions ready to face whatever threats emerged from the howling dark. But who would occupy them? While current circumstances would make the creation of new Executors in a significant quantity difficult, Sloan always tried to plan ahead. Yet the solution to who were to be his next Executors eluded him. Until today.

"I would like to see the culmination of your project, Functionary," Sloan said, "I assume you have been able to do some good in the time granted to you?"

Origen said nothing, only motioned to the tram.

## Chapter 4

“How are you doing today, Evelyn?” Origen asked.

The query was intended for a small child nestled comfortably in a hospital bed. The girl put down the book she was reading and beamed at the Functionary.

“I was able to walk the whole garden in the park today!”

“The whole garden? My, that’s great. The nurse will be by in a few minutes to give you your medicine. Let her know I think you deserve an extra gelatin cup for your hard work today,” Origen said, patting the girl on her head.

“Thank you, Mr. Origen!”

Origen and Sloan continued to make rounds at various bedsides interacting with patients of varying degrees of health. Origen followed a similar pattern with the others as he did with Evelyn. He would ask about their day, note any progress on any given treatments or procedures and ensure the patients were comfortable. In return, the patients profusely thanked Origen, sometimes shedding tears of gratitude as their consultations came to an end.

Throughout all this, Sloan kept taking in their surroundings. While the patients all lay in beds in their own medical tents, the hospital itself could best be described as an open air paradise. While it was all a brilliant combination of simulated environments utilizing UNSC War Games and Forerunner baffler tech, the whole thing felt real. The temperature was a consistently comfortable level no matter where in the facility one was. A full day-night cycle kept a rhythm of regularity for the patients and allegedly the artificial vegetation would change colors to match the seasons. Even ambient wildlife buzzed and chirped around them to make the space more lived in.

As if reading his mind, Origen turned to Sloan and said, “I couldn’t stand leaving them in some sterile medical environment. I felt they deserved some pleasant scenery, the best I could provide given their compromised immune systems.”

As Sloan and Origen entered a tent that served as a rest area for the medical staff, Sloan could no longer restrict the question surging in his mind, “Origen, what precisely is wrong with those people?”

The Functionary sighed and was about to speak before the voice of Dr. Walsh cut in saying, “He saved our lives.”

A *hiss* from behind signaled that the tent had been sealed and isolated successfully from the outside. The woman pulled off her helmet and made her way to a coffee pot.

“Our lives?” Sloan asked.

The woman poured herself a cup and sipped slowly, seemingly making the High Auxiliary wait on purpose. She shot a glance at Origen, one unmistakably suggesting a question of “Should we trust this guy, boss?” Origen nodded in understanding.

“Yes, High Auxiliary, our lives. I was once an essence trapped within the confines of a Promethean Knight. The Functionary’s work freed me from that hell just as it has all those others out there.”

It had been sometime since someone had been that direct with Sloan and the feeling was strangely refreshing to him. “I meant no disrespect, Dr. Walsh. But even you must admit there is a vast difference between your condition and the people out there.”

Madison gripped her cup tightly and answered, “Metabolic cascade failure. An expected side-effect of trying to clone an entire human being one-hundred times faster than usual.”

“All of those people are flash clones?”

“Their bodies are,” Origen interjected, “But utilizing certain techniques I was able to transfer the essences into flash cloned bodies. Forerunner records indicated they had a way to implant essences into the living bodies of other humans. Granted, they were little more than a suppressed presence within those bodies, but could periodically take control under certain conditions. I couldn’t hope to replicate that process even with the resources at my disposal, but I found a workaround.”

“And that was?”

“Research from the Spartan-II Program. It seems the infamous Dr. Catherine Halsey, our founder’s Creator, developed a means to transfer the memories of a living subject into the flash clone’s brain. All highly illegal and unethical under United Earth

Government law and our own, but I felt desperate times called for desperate measures.”

“What matters is the process worked,” Madison added, “I simply remember waking up one day in a body after years of wandering in a mind fog with only the occasional glimpse back in reality, usually when I wasn’t in the middle of killing other humans against my will. To be aware of what is happening and being unable to stop it is a feeling I never want anyone in my position to experience ever again.”

For the next several hours, both Origen and Dr. Walsh helped Sloan piece together the pieces of the overall process. Once the identity of a given individual essence was ascertained, recovered medical records from New Phoenix helped the SIFTED ASHES team literally reconstruct the body of that essence. Blood samples, tissue samples, DNA tests, anything that could be used to help build a body was utilized in the flash cloning process. The brain was left *tabula rasa* so a modified version of Halsey’s memory transference process, now used to transfer the whole essence, was scanned into the mind of the clone.

Once awake, a battery of physical therapy and mental conditioning exercises was needed to bring the person back to as close to normal as the situation allowed. For a time, all was well and many were believed to be well on their way to recovery. Their nightmare would soon be over.

That is until the deteriorations began. Even the advances in science and access to Forerunner medical technology could not totally erase the typical health effects of rapid flash cloning. Sloan had once read the records detailing what happened to the flash clones used for the Spartan-IIs. Cancer. Schizophrenia. Muscular degeneration. These and other maladies plagued the poor beings born into this world to cover up a major crime against humanity until they all perished. Now it was happening a millionfold.

Origen stressed that any pain or affliction that could be helped was; a detail in which Sloan had no doubt. Yet these developments had a compounding effect on the whole SIFTED ASHES program. To prevent further suffering, the rate at which essences were harvested had slowed down and Origen’s projections of exhausting the Composer’s Abyss in a timely manner became a pie in the sky dream on the best of days.

Taking in all the information, Sloan finally spoke up. “I can tell you what the problem is, Functionary. To quote an ancient proverb, you’re trying to fill new wine in old



wineskins.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Madison asked incredulously.

“Origen was correct that the Forerunners had a method for archiving personalities into the genetic code of other humans, a *geas*. Unfortunately, this process does not work on those who are Composed. Perhaps you did not have complete access to the Forerunner’s records, but they were clear in this regard. You could liken the Composed essence as a foreign presence in the body, a presence the body would fight tooth and nail to expunge. The stress of this phenomena along with the perils of flash cloning do not make for a stable mix.”

Origen stood motionless as he pondered Sloan’s words. Nothing the High Auxiliary said was new to him, or worse still incorrect. Yet hearing them from an outside source effectively solidified the damning truth that lay outside the tent. He’d already seen hundreds pass away from complications, no doubt many were happy to have been alive again for the briefest of moments, but the deaths still pained him.

“Bullshit!” Madison shouted as she stomped towards Sloan and poked his hardlight chest, “I’m in the same boat as all those people out there yet I’ve outlasted everyone. I engaged in the same physical therapy as them. I take the same immunosuppressants as them. I did everything they did and got better. If I can then others can as well.”

“Madison,” Origen said, “I admit your condition does inspire hope for the others, but you may yet prove to be the exception that proves the rule.”

She turned towards the Functionary, a mix of frustration and hurt etched in her face. “Functionary, please. We can’t begin to think that way. There are so many yet to save.”

Sloan could tell this was a familiar back and forth for the two. He also knew that the second he made his proposal they would unite once again against him. Of course, he would not be able to blame them. Yet a solution to both of their problems had been slowly coming together the longer he’d been at SIFTED ASHES. Sometimes you just had to play the cards you’ve been dealt.

“I have a suggestion,” Sloan announced amidst Origen and Madison’s heated conversation.

## Chapter 5

Madison gazed into the reflexive visor that wrapped around the helmet of the Executor. The High Auxiliary re-introduced her to the armored figure outside of the hospital bloc and filled both her and Origen on the totality of his creation. The training, the augmentations, the complete union of the organic and digital, all of it.

“You’re off-brand Spartan is impressive and all,” Madison eventually said, “But so what? How does that help us?”

“Sloan,” Origen cut in with anger slowly bubbling to the surface as the pieces started to fall into place, “I told you this is a rehabilitation facility. It is not a recruitment center. If you think you can take the essences and-”

“I leave the choice to those who may seek it, Functionary,” Sloan interrupted, “You have my word that I will not forcibly take any essences from your hands. I even intend to leave behind forces to safeguard this facility. Perhaps you will one day find a way to return to flesh what was once flesh. But for now, I have new wineskins for your new wine. Just hear me out.”

Turning to face Madison, Sloan asked, “Tell me, Dr. Walsh, why do you work so hard at what you do even knowing the likely outcome?”

“I want to help people,” she said simply and matter of factly, “I did that on the frontlines against the Covenant until I lost a leg in ‘51 and worked to become a doctor to help those in the civilian sphere. Even if I’m on borrowed time I want to keep helping others. It’s what makes us human.”

“Is being flesh and blood a requirement?”

“What?”

“You want to help humanity. As do I. In fact I want to help all sentient life in the galaxy. There are many threats that call the vastness of space home and at any moment there can come a reckoning. That is unless we have a firewall at our fringes that burn out the enemies that would do us harm. That is why I am making the Executors and that is why I am asking if you would like to become one.”

Madison did not know how to process that request. She looked back at the Executor, still standing motionless awaiting new orders.

“You can’t be serious-” Origen started to say before Madison raised a hand at the Functionary to wait.

“What would be required?” she asked.

“I can take your body and reforge it into something that will last, something that will not decay. Your mind will once again have to become infolife, no longer bound by the constraints of ordinary greymatter. Both your new body and mind will be grafted together into a new Executor. There may be unforeseen risks ahead, the first Executor was made to be a vessel for a mind not the body’s own. In the end, you will become a warrior once again to be thrown at the Created’s foes. You will face many battles and are not guaranteed to return. There will even come a day when your operational lifespan will come to an end and your mental pattern harvested and analyzed to evolve the next generation of Executors. You shall be a fire that burns bright and hot, consuming its fuel until nothing but ash remains. Yet from those ashes new phoenix's will rise to continue the work you set out to do as a defender of humanity.”

The room the trio stood in remained quiet for a long time. Origen sought every possible counter-argument to Sloan’s proposal, cross-checked all of the research he had done to see if he had missed anything, and came up lacking. Madison weighed the options before her. Does she stay behind with SIFTED ASHES knowing there was a ticking clock providing treatment for people she knew would likely never recover? Or should she be placed on another clock to be a war machine once again all the while knowing she might make more of a difference ensuring what happened to New Phoenix would never happen again? Sloan, for his part, was confident in the outcome he had predicted.

Finally, Madison turned her gaze back towards Sloan and answered, “Okay, High Auxiliary, I’m in.”

## Epilogue

**0200 Hours, March 12th, 2561 / Orso System, Venezia, New Tyne**

*The gentleman's club is just a front. Buried beneath the vice den is an elaborate underground bunker utilized by a insurrectionist group marked as a high-priority target by HIGH AUXILIARY SLOAN. The objective is simple: cauterize the infectious element from an already inflammatory population. Venezia has always been lawless and Cortana had been content to isolate it from the rest of the galaxy. It WILL be brought into the fold but only after a thorough cleansing.*

*The suite of security systems are powerless before me and soon all is under my control. The lights darken. The music skips to a halt. Communications arrays are muted. The all-seeing eyes of the building's security cameras become my own. Both rebels, and even a few of the dancers, scramble in the dark for concealed weapon stashes.*

*I feel the Z-390 materialize into my hands. Whatever hidden armor may have made the door an obstacle easily crumbles to ash as five antimatter globules scream through the air and slam into their target. Small-arms fire erupts from where the door once was, but it only chips away at the shop across the street. I am unharmed. And I made it inside long before those inside opened fire.*

*My camo systems make me a ghost as I cut down the occupants inside. It only takes a minute to clear the first floor. Then the second. I stare down the stairs to the non-descript entrance of the underground complex below. My all-seeing eyes note each and every defensive position the rebels have taken up. Their glorious leader and his lieutenants cower under the poker table they had only moments before happily gambled their ill-gotten gains.*

*Downloading schematics of the complex's construction shows that only one other exit to the surface was built. Short-sighted ignorance. By now my systems detect the scrambling of the local Venezian militia enroute to the club. Strategically placed Z-400 grenades at structurally important parts of the club cause the structure to collapse over the obvious entrance just as the militia arrives. I also shut off the life support systems for the underground bunker. Now they have one place to go that is out of sight from prying eyes.*

*I detect a pipe serving as the alternate entrance a mile away, concealed by the overgrowth of an old forest. Of course the leaders crawl out of their nest first and I*

*meet them. They experience fresh air first then the scent of burning ozone from my Z-250 lightrifle. Their subordinates risk staying below. I place a translocation grid node linked to a hidden ship in Venezia's orbit and call upon a waiting swarm of Crawlers which I send to the depths below. The echoing screams I hear from the dark slowly fade in time until the Crawlers return to the surface. No biosigns detected.*

*Part of me feels the beginning of conflict over my success. I was a doctor once, a healer. I mended bones, I didn't break them. I performed blood transfusions, I didn't let it pool freely on the ground. But now I see the bigger picture. The galaxy is my patient now and it is under attack from within by cancerous growths, the enemies of the Created. I remember this and cast the conflict aside.*

*I am no longer Dr. Madison Walsh.*

*I am an Executor.*

# Artist Spotlight

Rythaze



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Halo Fanon:

<https://t.co/nucoo3y69d>

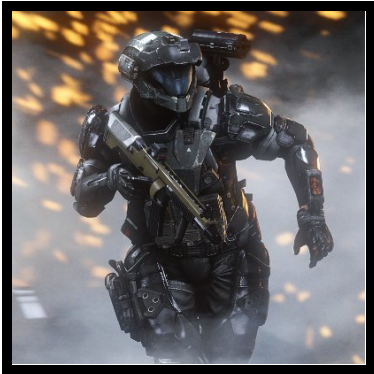


## Stridder\_117

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Rookie\_425



Rythaze

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The Domain is open and from within pours forth visions of the Halo Universe from the minds of its most devoted fans. This anthology series highlights a collection of fan works sure to set a fire in the hearts of grizzled veterans and newcomers alike.

Each contribution is a testament to the creativity that flows through the veins of their creators for the Halo series. From their pens come stories of heroes and villains locked in constantly evolving combat. From their brushes and canvases come alien vistas and futuristic battlefields. From the sweat of their brow come creations from the universe brought to real life.

Above all, each contribution aims to honor the legacy of Halo by the passionate hands of its most devoted admirers. Whether you were around from the beginning aboard the Pillar of Autumn or began your journey sifting through the chaos of Zeta Halo, we welcome you to celebrate the creative pursuits of fans who take inspiration from the series they love and transform it in unimaginable ways.

The Great Journey awaits.



*Halsey's Journal*  
Press



Cover Art by  
[@Far\\_Galaxies08](#)