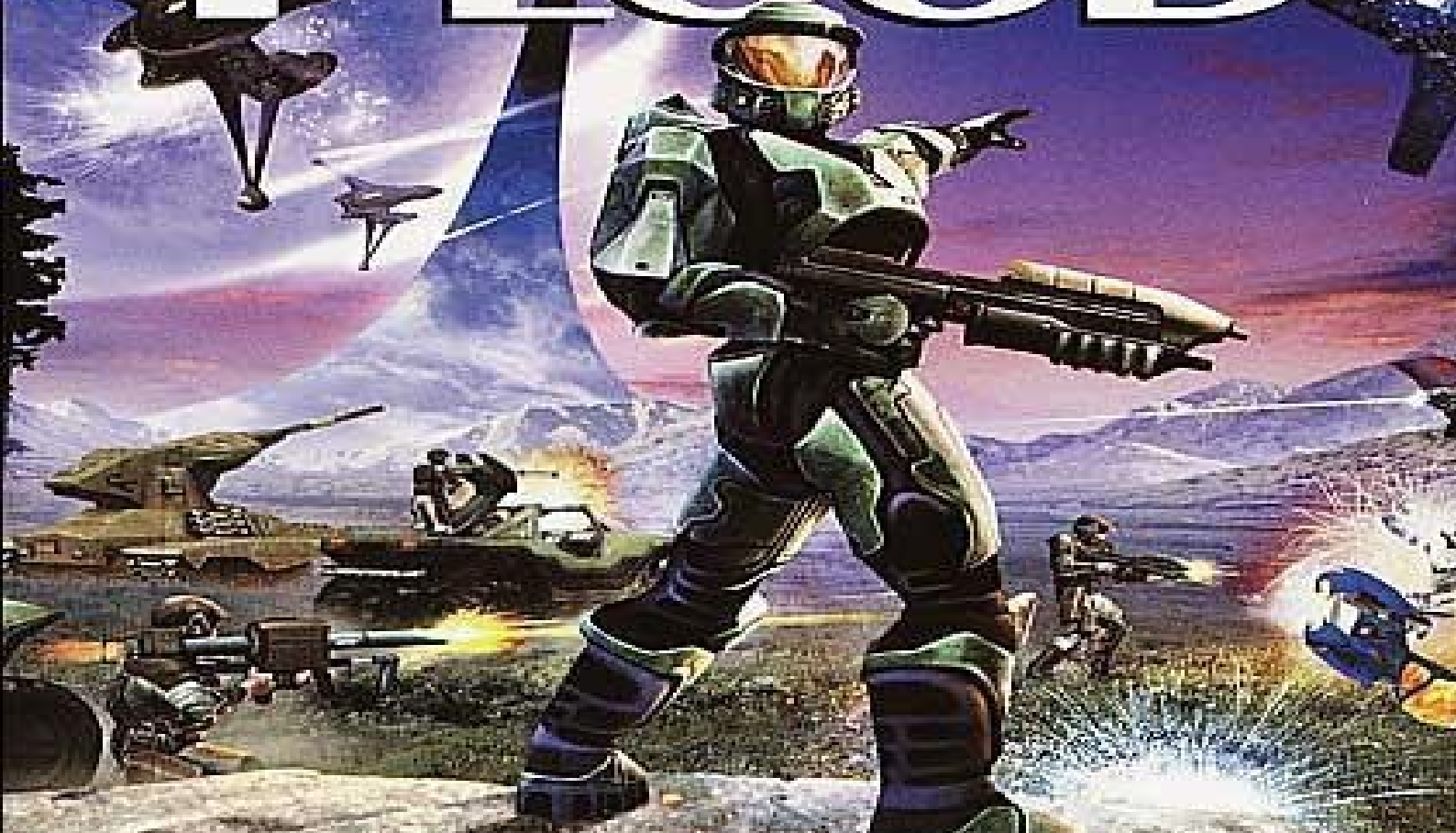


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For Marjorie, with love and gratitude.

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PROLOGUE

0103 Hours, September 19, 2552 (Military Calendar) / UNSC Cruiser *Pillar of Autumn*, location unknown.

Tech Officer (3rd Class) Sam Marcus swore as the intercom roused him from fitful sleep. He rubbed his blurry eyes and glanced at the Mission Clock bolted to the wall above his bunk. He'd been asleep for three hours—his first sleep cycle in thirty-six hours, damn it. Worse, this was the first time since the ship had jumped that he'd been able to fall asleep *at all*.

“Jesus,” he muttered, “this better be good.”

The Old Man had put the tech crews on triple shifts after the *Pillar of Autumn* jumped away from Reach. The ship was a mess after the battle, and what was left of the engineering crews worked around the clock to keep the aging cruiser in one piece. Nearly one third of the tech staff had died during the flight from Reach, and every department was running a skeleton crew.

Everyone else went into the freezer, of course—nonessential personnel always got an ice-nap during Slipspace jump. In over two hundred combat cruises, Marcus had clocked fewer than seventy-two hours in cryostorage. Right now, though, he was so tired that even the discomfort of cryorevival sounded appealing if it meant that he could manage some uninterrupted sleep.

Of course, it was difficult to complain; Captain Keyes was a brilliant tactician—and everyone aboard the *Autumn* knew just how close they'd come to destruction when Reach fell to the enemy. A major naval base destroyed, millions dead or dying as the Covenant burned the planet to a cinder—and one of Earth's few remaining defenses transformed into corpses and molten slag.

All in all, they'd been damned lucky to get away—but Sam couldn't help but feel that everyone on the *Autumn* was living on borrowed time.

The intercom buzzed again, and Sam swung himself out of the bunk. He jabbed at the comm control

“Marcus here,” he growled.

“I’m sorry to wake you, Sam, but I need you down in Cryo Two.” Tech Chief Shephard sounded exhausted. “It’s important.”

“Cryo Two?” Sam repeated, puzzled. “What’s the emergency, Thom? I’m not a cryo specialist.”

“I can’t give you specifics, Sam. The Captain wants it kept off the comm,” Shephard replied, his voice almost a whisper. “Just in case we have eavesdroppers.”

Sam winced at the tone in his superior’s voice. He’d known Thom Shephard since the Academy and had never heard the man sound so grim.

“Look,” Shephard said, “I need someone I can depend on. Like it or not, that’s you, pal. You’ve crossed me on cryo systems.”

Sam sighed. “Months ago . . . but yes.”

“I’m sending a feed to your terminal, Sam,” Shephard continued. “It’ll answer some of your questions anyway. Dump it to a portable ’pad, grab your gear and get down here.”

“Roger,” Sam said. He stood, shrugged into his uniform tunic, and stepped over to his terminal. He activated the computer and waited for the upload from Shephard.

As he waited, his eyes locked on a small two-dee photograph taped to the edge of the screen. Sam brushed his fingers against the photo. The pretty young woman frozen in the picture smiled back at him.

The terminal chimed as the feed from Shephard appeared in Sam’s message queue. “Receiving the feed, Chief,” he called out to the intercom pickup.

He opened the file. A frown creased his tired features as a new message scrolled across his screen.

```
>FILE ENCRYPTED/EYES ONLY/MARCUS, SAMUEL N./SN:18827318209-M. >DECRYPTION KEY: [PERSONALIZED: “ELLEN’S ANNIVERSARY”]
```

He glanced back at the picture of his wife. He hadn’t seen Ellen in almost three years— since his last shore leave on Earth, in fact. He didn’t know anyone on active duty who’d been able to see their loved ones for years. The war simply didn’t allow for it.

Sam’s frown deepened. UNSC personnel generally avoided talking about the people back home. The war had been going badly for so long that morale was rock-bottom. Thinking about the home front only made things worse. The fact that Thom had personalized the security encoding was unusual enough; reminding Sam of his wife in the process was completely out of character for Chief Shephard. Someone was being security-conscious to the point of paranoia.

He punched in a series of numbers—the date of his wedding—and enabled the decryption suite. In seconds, the screen filled with schematics and tech readouts. His practiced eye scanned the file—and his adrenaline suddenly spiked through his fatigue like a bolt of lightning.

“Christ,” he said, his voice suddenly hoarse. “Thom, is this what . . . who *I think* it is?”

“Damn right. Get down to Cryo Two on the double, Sam. We’ve got an important package to thaw out—and we drop back into real space soon.”

“On my way,” he said. He killed the intercom connection, his exhaustion forgotten.

Sam quickly dumped the tech file to his portable compad and deleted the original from his computer. He strode toward the door to his cabin, then stopped. He snatched Ellen’s picture from the workstation—almost as an afterthought—and shoved it into his pocket.

He sprinted for the lift. If the Captain wanted the inhabitant of Cryo Two revived, it meant that Key believed that the situation was about to go from bad to worse . . . or it already had.

Unlike vessels designed by humans—in which the command area was almost always located toward the ship’s bow—Covenant ships were constructed in a more logical fashion, which meant that the control rooms were buried deep within heavily armored hulls, making them impervious to anything less than a mortal blow.

The differences did not end there. Rather than surround themselves with all manner of control interfaces, plus the lesser beings required to staff them, the Elites preferred to command from the center of an ascetically barren platform held in place by a latticework of opposing gravity beams.

However, none of these things were at the forefront of Ship Master Orna ’Fulsamee’s mind as he stood at the center of his destroyer’s control room and stared at the data projections which appeared to float in front of him. One showed the ring world, Halo. Near that, a tiny arrow tracked the interloper’s course. The second projection displayed a schematic titled HUMAN ATTACK SHIP, TYPE C-11. A third scrolled a constant flow of targeting data and sensor readouts.

He fought a moment of revulsion. That these filthy primates somehow merited an actual name—let alone names for their inferior constructs—galled him to his core. It was perverse. Names implied legitimacy, and the vermin deserved only extermination.

The humans had “names” for his own kind—“Elites”—as well as the lesser races of the Covenant: “Jackals,” “Grunts,” “Hunters.” The appalling temerity of the filthy creatures, that they would dare name *his people* with their harsh, barbaric tongue, was beyond the pale.

He paused, and regained his composure. ’Fulsamee clicked his lower mandibles—the equivalent of a shrug—and mentally recited one of the True Sayings. *Such is the Prophets’ decree*, he thought. Or didn’t question such things, even when one was a Ship Master. The Prophets had assigned names to the enemy craft, and he would honor their decrees. Any less was a disgraceful dereliction of duty.

Like all of his kind, the Covenant officer appeared to be larger than he actually was, due to the armor that he wore. It gave him an angular, somewhat hunched appearance which, when combined with his heavy, pugnacious jaw, caused him to look like what he was: a very dangerous warrior. His voice was calm and well modulated as he assessed the situation. “They must have followed one of our ships. The culprit will be found and put to death at once, Exalted.”

The being who floated next to 'Fulsamee bobbed slightly as a gust of air nudged his heavily swathed body. ~~He wore a tall, ornate headpiece made of metal and set with amber panels. The Prophet had a serpentine neck, a triangular skull, and two bright green eyes which glittered with malevolent intelligence. He wore a red overrobe, a gold underrobe, and somewhere, hidden beneath all the fabric, an antigrav belt which served to keep his body suspended one full unit off the deck. Though only a Minor Prophet, he still outranked 'Fulsamee, as his bearing made clear.~~

True Sayings aside, the Ship Master couldn't help but be reminded of the tiny, squealing rodents he had hunted in his childhood. He immediately banished the memory of blood on his claws and returned his attention to the Prophet, and his tiresome assistant.

The assistant, a lower-rank Elite named Bako 'Ikaporamee, stepped forward to speak on the Prophet's behalf. He had an annoying tendency to use the royal "we," a habit that angered 'Fulsamee.

"That is very unlikely, Ship Master. We doubt the humans have the means to follow one of our vessels through a jump. Even if they do, why would they send only a single cruiser? Is it not their way to drown us in their own blood? No, we think it's safe to surmise that this ship arrived in the system by accident."

The words dripped with condescension, a fact which made the Ship Master angry, but couldn't be addressed. Not directly, and certainly not with the Prophet present, although 'Fulsamee wasn't willing to cave in completely. "So," 'Fulsamee said, careful to direct his comment to 'Ikaporamee alone, "you would have me believe that the interlopers arrived here entirely by *chance*?"

"No, of course not," 'Ikaporamee replied loftily. "Though primitive by our standards, the creatures are sentient, and like all sentient beings, they are unconsciously drawn to the glory of the ancients' truth and knowledge."

Like all the members of his caste, 'Fulsamee knew that the Prophets had evolved on a planet which the mysterious truth-givers had previously inhabited, and then, for reasons known only to the ancients themselves, subsequently abandoned. This ring world was an excellent example of the ancients' power . . . and inscrutability.

'Fulsamee found it hard to believe that mere humans would be drawn here, the ancients' wisdom notwithstanding, but 'Ikaporamee spoke for the Prophet, so it must be true. 'Fulsamee touched the light panel in front of him. A symbol glowed red. "Prepare to fire plasma torpedoes. Launch on my command."

'Ikaporamee raised both hands in alarm. "*No!* We forbid it. The human vessel is much too close to the construct! What if your weapons were to damage the holy relic? Pursue the ship, board it, and seize control. Anything else is far too dangerous."

Angered by what he saw as 'Ikaporamee's interference, 'Fulsamee spoke through gritted teeth. "The course of action that the holy one recommends is likely to result in a high number of casualties. Is that acceptable?"

"The opportunity to transcend the physical is a gift to be sought after," the other responded. "The humans are willing to spend *their* lives—can we do less?"

No,'Fulsamee thought,*but we should aspire to more.* He again clicked his lower mandibles, and touched the light panel. ~~“Cancel the previous order. Load four transports with troops, and launch another flight of fighters. Neutralize the interloper’s weaponry before the boarding craft reach the target.”~~

A hundred units aft, sealed within the destroyer’s fire control center, a half-commander acknowledged the order and issued instructions of his own. Lights began to strobe, the decks transmitted a low-frequency vibration, and more than three hundred battle-ready Covenant warriors—a mix of what the humans called Elites, Jackals, and Grunts—rushed to board their assigned transports. There were humans to kill.

None of them wanted to miss the fun.

SECTION I PILLAR OF AUTUMN

CHAPTER ONE

0127 Hours (Ship’s Time), September 19, 2552 (Military Calendar) / UNSC Cruiser *Pillar of Autumn*, location unknown.

The *Pillar of Autumn* shuddered as her Titanium-A armor took a direct hit.

Just another item in the Covenant’s bottomless arsenal, Captain Jacob Keyes thought. *Not a plasma torpedo, or we’d already be free-floating molecules.*

The warship had taken a beating from Covenant forces off Reach and it was a miracle that she remained intact and even more remarkable that they’d been able to make a jump into Slipspace at all.

“Status!” Keyes barked. “What just hit us?”

“Covenant fighter, sir. Seraph-class,” the tactical officer, Lieutenant Hikowa, replied. Her porcelain features darkened. “Tricky bastard must have powered down and slipped past our sentry ships.”

A humorless grin tugged at Keyes’ mouth. Hikowa was a first-rate tactical officer, utterly ruthless in fight. She seemed to take the Covenant fighter pilot’s actions as a personal insult. “Teach him a lesson, Lieutenant,” he said.

She nodded and tapped a series of orders into her panel—new orders for the *Autumn*’s fighter squadron.

A moment later, there was radio chatter as one of the *Autumn*’s C709 Longsword fighters went aft to the Seraph, followed by a cheer as the tiny alien ship transformed into a momentary sun, complete with its own system of co-orbiting debris.

Keyes wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead. He checked his display—they’d reverted back into real space twenty minutes ago. *Twenty minutes*, and the Covenant picket patrols had already found them and started shooting.

He turned to the bridge’s main viewport, a large transparent bubble slung beneath the *Autumn*’s bow.

superstructure. A massive purple gas giant—Threshold—dominated the spectacular view. One of the Longsword fighters glided past as it continued its patrol.

When Keyes had been given command of the *Pillar of Autumn*, he'd been skeptical of the large domed viewport. "The Covenant are tough enough," he had argued to Admiral Stanforth. "Why give them an easy shot into my bridge?"

He'd lost the argument—captains don't win debates with admirals, and in any case there simply hadn't been time to armor the viewport. He had to admit, though, the view was almost worth the risk. Almost.

He absently toyed with the pipe he habitually carried, lost in thought. It ran completely counter to his nature to slink around in the shadow of a gas giant. He respected the Covenant as a dangerous, deadly enemy, and hated them for their savage butchery of human colonists and fellow soldiers alike. He had never feared them, however. Soldiers didn't hide from the enemy—they met the enemy head-on.

He moved back to the command station and activated his navigation suite. He plotted a course deep in-system, and fed the data to Ensign Lovell, the navigator.

"Captain," Hikowa piped up. "Sensors paint a squadron of enemy fighters inbound. Looks like boarding craft are right behind them."

"It was just a matter of time, Lieutenant." He sighed. "We can't hide here forever."

The *Pillar* seemed to glide out of the shadow cast by the gas giant, and into bright sunlight.

Keyes' eyes widened with surprise as the ship cleared the gas giant. He had expected to see a Covenant cruiser, Seraph fighters, or some other military threat.

He hadn't expected to see the massive object floating in a Lagrange point between Threshold and its moon, Basis.

The construct was enormous—a ring-shaped object that shimmered and glowed with reflected starlight, like a jewel lit from within.

The outer surface was metallic and seemed to be engraved with deep geometric patterns. "Cortana," Captain Keyes said. "What is that?"

A foot-high hologram faded into view above a small holopad near the captain's station. Cortana—the ship's powerful artificial intelligence—frowned as she activated the ship's long-range detection gear. Long lines of digits scrolled across the sensor displays and rippled the length of Cortana's "body" as well.

"The ring is ten thousand kilometers in diameter," Cortana announced, "and twenty-two point three kilometers thick. Spectroscopic analysis is inconclusive, but patterns do not match any known Covenant materials, sir."

Keyes nodded. The preliminary finding was interesting, *very* interesting, since Covenant ships had already been present when the *Autumn* dropped out of Slipspace and right into their laps. When he first

saw the ring, Keyes had a sinking feeling that the construct was a large Covenant installation—one far beyond the scope of human engineering. The thought that the construct might also be beyond Covenant engineering held some small comfort.

It also made him nervous.

Under intense pressure from enemy warships in the Epsilon Eridani system—the location of the UNSC’s last major naval base, Reach—Cortana had been forced to launch the ship toward a random set of coordinates, a standard procedure to lead the Covenant forces away from Earth.

Now it appeared that the men and women aboard the *Pillar of Autumn* had succeeded in leaving their original pursuers behind, only to encounter even more Covenant forces *here . . .* wherever “here” was.

Cortana aimed a long-range camera array at the ring and a close-up snapped into focus. Keyes let out a long, slow whistle. The construct’s inner surface was a mosaic of greens, blues, and browns—trackless desert, jungles, glaciers, and oceans. Streaks of white clouds cast deep shadows on the terrain below. The ring rotated and brought a new feature into view: a tremendous hurricane forming over a large body of water.

Equations again scrolled across the AI’s semitransparent body as she continued to evaluate the incoming data. “Captain,” Cortana said, “the object is clearly artificial. There’s a gravity field that controls the ring’s spin and keeps the atmosphere inside. I can’t say with one hundred percent certainty, but it appears that the ring has an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, and Earth-normal gravity.”

Keyes raised an eyebrow. “If it’s artificial, who the hell built it, and what in God’s name is it?”

Cortana processed the question for a full three seconds. “I don’t know, sir.”

Regulations be damned, Keyes thought. He took out his pipe, used an old-fashioned match to light it, and produced a puff of fragrant smoke. The ring world shimmered on the status monitors. “Then we’d better find out.”

Sam Marcus rubbed his aching neck with hands that trembled with fatigue. The rush of adrenaline that had flooded him when he’d received Tech Chief Shephard’s instructions had worn off. Now he just felt tired, strung out, and more than a little afraid.

He shook his head to clear it and surveyed the small observation theater. Each cryostorage bay was equipped with such a station, a central monitoring facility for the hundreds of cryotubes the storage bays held. By shipboard standards, the Cryo Two Observation Theater was large, but the proliferation of life-sign monitors, diagnostic gauges, and computer terminals—tied directly into the individual cryotubes stored in the bay below—made the room seem cramped and uncomfortable.

A chime sounded and Sam’s eyes swept across the status monitors. There was only one active cryotube in this bay, and its monitor pinged for his attention. He double-checked the main instrument panel, then keyed the intercom. “He’s coming around, sir,” he said. He turned and looked out the observation bay’s window.

Tech Chief Thom Shephard waved up at Sam from the floor of Cryostorage Unit Two. “Good work

Sam,” he called back. “Almost time to pop the seal.”

The status monitors continued to feed information to the observation theater. The subject’s body temperature was approaching normal—at least, Sam assumed it was normal; he’d never awakened Spartan before—and most of the chemicals had already been flushed out of his system.

“He’s in a REM cycle now, Chief,” Sam called out, “and his brainwave activity shows he’s dreaming—that means he’s pretty much thawed. Shouldn’t be long now.”

“Good,” Shephard replied. “Keep an eye on those neuro readings. We packed him in wearing his combat armor. There may be some feedback effects to watch out for.”

“Acknowledged.”

A red light winked to life on the security terminal, and a new series of codes flashed across the screen.

```
>WAKE-UP SERIES STANDBY. SECURITY LOCK [PRIORITY ALPHA] ENGAGED. >x  
CORTANA.1.0—CRYOSTOR.23.4.7
```

“What the hell?” Sam muttered. He keyed the bay intercom again. “Thom? There’s something weird here . . . some kind of security lockout from the bridge.”

“Acknowledged.” There was a static-spotted click as Shephard looped in the bridge channel. “Cryo Two to Bridge.”

“Go ahead, Cryo Two,” a female voice replied, laced with the telltale warble of synthesized speech.

“We’re ready to pop the seal on our . . . guest, Cortana,” Shephard explained. “We need—”

“—the security code,” the AI finished. “Transmitting. Bridge out.”

Almost instantly, a new line of text scrolled across the security screen:

```
>UNSEAL THE HUSHED CASKET.
```

Sam hit the execute command, the security lockout dropped away, and a countdown timer began marking time until the wake-up sequence would be completed.

The soldier was coming around. Respiration was up, ditto his heart rate, as both returned to normal levels. *Here he is*, Sam thought, *a real honest-to-god Spartan*. Not just any Spartan, but maybe the last Spartan. The shipboard scuttlebutt said that the rest of them had bought the farm at Reach.

Like his fellow techs, Sam had heard of the program, though he’d never seen an *actual* Spartan person. In order to deal with increasing civil turmoil the Colonial Military Administration had secretly launched Project ORION back in 2491. The purpose of the program was to develop supersoldiers, code-named “Spartans,” who would receive special training and physical augmentation.

The initial effort was successful, and in 2517 a new group of Spartans, the II-series, had been selected as the next generation of supersoldier. The project had been intended to remain secret, but the

Covenant War had changed all that.

It was no secret that the human race was on the verge of defeat. The Covenant's ships and space technology were just too advanced. While human forces could hold their own in a ground engagement, the Covenant would simply fall back into space and glass the planet from orbit.

As the situation grew increasingly grim, the Admiralty was faced with the ugly prospect of fighting a two-front war—one against the Covenant in space, and another against the collapsing human society on the ground. The general public and the rank-and-file in the military needed a morale boost, so the existence of the SPARTAN-II project was revealed.

There were now successful heroes to rally behind, men and women who had taken the fight to the enemy and won several decisive battles. Even the Covenant seemed to fear the Spartans.

Except they were gone now, all but one, sacrificed to protect the human race from the Covenant and the very real possibility of extinction. Sam gazed on the soldier in front of him with something akin to awe. Here, about to rise as if from a grave, was a true hero. It was a moment to remember, and if he was lucky enough to survive, to tell his children about.

It didn't make him any less afraid, however. If the stories were true, the man gradually regaining consciousness in the bay below was almost as alien, and certainly as dangerous, as the Covenant.

He was floating in the never-never land somewhere between cryo and full consciousness when the dream began.

It was a familiar dream, a pleasant dream, and one which had nothing to do with war. He was on Eridanus II—the colony world he'd been born on, long since destroyed by the Covenant. He heard laughter all around.

A female voice called him by name—John. A moment later, arms held him, and he recognized the familiar scent of soap. The woman said something nice to him, and he wanted to say something nice in return, but the words wouldn't come. He tried to see her, tried to penetrate the haze that obscured her face, and was rewarded with the image of a woman with large eyes, a straight nose, and full lips.

The picture wavered, indistinct, like a reflection in a pond. In an eyeblink, the woman who held him transformed. Now she had dark hair, piercing blue eyes, and pale skin.

He knew her name: Dr. Halsey.

Dr. Catherine Halsey had selected him for the SPARTAN-II project. While most believed that the current generation of Spartans had been culled from the best of the UNSC military, only a handful of people knew the truth.

Halsey's program involved the actual abduction of specially-screened children. The children were flash-cloned—which made the duplicates prone to neurological disorders—and the clones covertly returned to the parents, who never suspected that their sons and daughters were duplicates. In many ways, Dr. Halsey was the only "mother" that he had ever known.

But Dr. Halsey *wasn't* his mother, nor was the pale semitranslucent image of Cortana that appeared

replace her.

The dream changed. A dark, nebulous shape loomed behind the Mother/Halsey/Cortana figure. He didn't know what it was, but it was a threat—of that he was certain.

His combat instincts kicked in, and adrenaline coursed through him. He quickly surveyed the area—some kind of playground, with high wooden poles, distantly familiar—and decided on the best route to flank the new threat. He spied an assault rifle, a powerful MA5B, nearby. If he placed himself between the woman and the threat, his armor could take the brunt of an attack, and he could return fire.

He moved quickly, and the dark shape howled at him—a fierce and terrifying war cry.

The beast was impossibly fast. It was on him in seconds.

He grabbed the assault rifle and turned to open fire—and discovered to his horror that he couldn't lift the weapon. His arms were small, underdeveloped. His armor was gone, and his body was that of a six-year-old child.

He was powerless in the face of the threat. He roared back at the beast in rage and fear—angry not just at the threat, but at his own sudden powerlessness . . .

The dream started to fade, and light appeared in front of the Spartan's eyes. Vapor vented, swirled, and began to dissipate. A voice came, as if from a great distance. It was male and matter-of-fact.

“Sorry for the quick thaw, Master Chief—but things are a bit hectic right now. The disorientation should pass quickly.”

A second voice welcomed him back and it took the Spartan a moment to remember where he'd been prior to entering the cryotube. There had been a battle, a terrible battle, in which most if not all of his Spartan brothers and sisters had been killed. Men and women with whom he had been raised and trained since the age of six, and who, unlike the dimly remembered woman of his dreams, constituted his *real* family.

With the memory, plus subtle changes to the gas mix that filled his lungs, came strength. He flexed his stiff limbs. The Spartan heard the tech say something about “freezer burn,” and pushed himself up and out of the cryotube's chilly embrace.

“God in heaven,” Sam whispered.

The Spartan was huge, easily seven feet tall. Encased in pearlescent green battle armor, the man looked like a figure from mythology—otherworldly and terrifying. Master Chief SPARTAN-117 stepped from his tube and surveyed the cryo bay. The mirrored visor on his helmet made him all the more fearsome, a faceless, impassive soldier built for destruction and death.

Sam was glad that he was up here in the observation theater, rather than down on the Cryo Two main floor with the Spartan.

He realized that Thom was waiting for diagnostic data. He checked the displays—neural pathways clear, no fluctuations in heartbeat or brainwave activity. He opened an intercom channel. “I’

bringing his health monitors on-line now.”

Sam watched as Thom led the Spartan to the various test stations in the bay, pitching in where he was required. In short order, the soldier's gear had been brought on-line—recharging shield system, real-time health monitors, targeting and optical systems all read in the green.

The suit—code-named MJOLNIR armor—was a marvel of engineering, Sam had to admit. According to the specs he'd received, the suit's shell consisted of a multilayered alloy of remarkable strength, a refractive coating that could disperse a fair amount of directed energy, a crystalline storage matrix that could support the same level of artificial intelligence usually reserved for a starship, and a layer of gel which conformed to the wearer's skin and functioned to regulate temperature.

Additional memory packets and signal conduits had been implanted into the Spartan's body, and two externally accessible input slots had been installed near the base of his skull. Taken together, the combined systems served to double his strength, enhance his already lightning-fast reflexes, and make it possible for him to navigate through the intricacies of any high-tech battlefield.

There were substantial life-support systems built into the MJOLNIR gear. Most soldiers went in cryo naked, since covered skin generally reacted badly to the cryo process. Sam had once worn a bandage into the freezer and discovered the affected skin blistered and raw when he woke up.

The Spartan's skin must have hurt like hell, he realized. Through it all, though, the soldier remained silent, simply nodding when asked questions or quietly complying with requests from Thom. It was eerie—he moved with mechanistic efficiency from one test to the next, like a robot.

Cortana's voice rang from the shipwide com: “Sensors show inbound Covenant boarding craft. Stand by to repel boarders.”

Sam felt a pang of fear—and sorrow for the Covenant troops that would have to face this Spartan in combat.

The neural interface which linked the Master Chief to his MJOLNIR armor was working perfectly, and it immediately fed data to his helmet's heads-up-display on the inside surface of his visor.

It felt good to move around, and the Master Chief quietly flexed his fingers. His skin itched and stung—a side effect of the cryo gases, but he quickly banished the pain from his awareness. He had long ago learned how to disassociate himself from physical discomfort.

He'd heard Cortana's announcement. The Covenant were on their way. Good. He scanned the room for weapons, but there was no arms locker present. The lack of weapons wasn't of great concern to him—he'd taken weapons away from Covenant soldiers before.

The intercom crackled again: “Bridge to Cryo Two—this is Captain Keyes. Send the Master Chief to the bridge immediately.”

One of the techs started to object, pointing out that more tests were required, when Keyes cut in. He said, “On the double, crewman,” and the rating gave the only reply he could.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

The tech chief turned and faced him. “We’ll find weapons later.”

The Master Chief nodded and was about to move for the door when an explosion echoed through the cryo bay.

The first blasts slammed into the observation theater’s door with a noise that made Sam jump. His heart pounded as he quickly hit the door controls, engaging an emergency lockout. A heavy metal barrier slammed into place with a crash—then began to glow red as Covenant energy weapons burned their way through.

“They’re trying to get through the door!” he yelled.

He glanced down into the bay and saw Thom, a stricken look on his face. Sam could see his own startled reflection in the Spartan’s mirrored visor.

Sam lunged for the alarm, and had time to call in an alert. Then, the security door exploded in a shower of fire and molten steel.

He heard the whine of plasma rifle fire, then felt something punch him in the chest. His vision blurred and he groped to feel the wound. His hands came away sticky with blood. *It doesn’t hurt, he thought. It should hurt, shouldn’t it?*

He felt disoriented, confused. He could see a flurry of movement, as armored figures swarmed into the observation theater. He ignored them and focused on his wife’s picture—smeared with his own blood—which had somehow fallen to the deckplates. He fell to his knees and scrambled for the photograph, his hands shaking.

His field of vision narrowed as he struggled to reach the discarded photo. It was only inches away now, but the distance felt like miles. He’d never been so tired. His wife’s name echoed in his mind.

Sam’s fingers had just brushed the edge of the photograph when an armored boot pinned his arm to the deck. Long, clawed fingers plucked the picture from the floor.

Sam cursed weakly and struggled to face his attacker. The alien—an Elite—cocked his head at the image in puzzlement. He glanced down, as if noticing Sam for the first time. The human continued to reach for the picture.

He dimly heard Thom’s voice call out in anguish: “Sam!”

The Elite aimed the plasma rifle at Sam’s head and fired.

The Master Chief bristled. Covenant forces were in close proximity, and a fellow soldier had just died. He longed to climb to the observation bay and engage the enemy—but orders were orders. He needed to get to the bridge.

The cryo tech keyed open a hatchway. “Come on!” he yelled, “we’ve got to get the hell out of here!”

The Master Chief followed the crewman through the hatch and down the corridor. A sudden explosion

blew the next door to smithereens, hurled what remained of the technician's body down the passageway, and caused the Chief's shields to flare.

He mentally reviewed the schematics of the Halcyon-class line of ships and doubled back. He vaulted over a pair of power conduits, and landed in the dimly lit maintenance hallway beyond. An emergency beacon strobed and alarms wailed. The rumble of a second explosion echoed down the corridor.

He pushed ahead, past a dead crewman, and into the next section of hallway.

The Master Chief saw a hatch, its security panel pulsing green, and hurried forward. There was a third explosion, but his armor deflected the force of the blast.

The Spartan forced open the partially melted door, saw an opening to his left, and heard someone scream. A naval crewman fired his sidearm at a target the Master Chief couldn't see—and the deck shuddered as a missile struck the *Autumn*'s hull.

The Master Chief ducked under a half-raised door just in time to see the crewman take an energy bolt through the chest as the rest of the human counterboarders returned fire. Covenant forces backed through a hatch and were forced to retreat into an adjoining compartment.

Chaos reigned as the ship's crew did the best they could to push the boarders back toward the air locks or to trap them in compartments where they could be contained and dispatched later.

Unarmed, and well aware of the fact that Captain Keyes needed him on the bridge, the Master Chief had little choice but to follow the signs, and avoid the firefights that raged all around. He made his way down a darkened access corridor—the Covenant boarders must have shorted out the illumination circuits in this compartment—and nearly ran headlong into a Covenant Elite.

The alien's personal shields sparked and he roared in surprise and anger. The Spartan crouched and prepared to meet the alien soldier's charge—then ducked, as a Marine fire-team unleashed a barrage of assault-rifle fire at the Elite. Purple gore splashed the bulkhead, and the alien dropped in a crumpled heap.

The Marines moved forward to secure the area, and the Chief nodded in thanks to the squad leader. He turned, sprinted down the passageway, and made it to the bridge without further incident.

He looked out through the main viewport, saw the strange-looking construct that floated out beyond the cruiser's hull, and was momentarily curious about what it was. No doubt the Captain would find him in. He strode toward the captain's station, near the center of the bridge.

A variety of naval personnel sat hunched at their consoles as they struggled to control the beleaguered vessel. Some battled the latest wave of Seraph fighters, others worked on damage control, and one grim-faced Lieutenant made use of the ship's environmental systems to suck the atmosphere out of those compartments which had been occupied by Covenant forces. Some of the enemy carried their own atmosphere, but some of them didn't, and that made them vulnerable. There were crew members in some of those spaces, perhaps some she knew personally, but there was no way to save them. If she didn't kill them, then the enemy would.

The Chief understood the situation well. Better a quick death in vacuum than at the hands of the Covenant.

He spotted Keyes near the main tactical display. Keyes studied the screens intently, particularly the large display of the strange ring.

The Spartan came to attention. “Captain Keyes.”

Captain Keyes turned to face him. “Good to see you, Master Chief. Things aren’t going well. Cortana did her best—but we never really had a chance.”

The AI arched a holographic eyebrow. “A dozen Covenant battleships against a single Halcyon-class cruiser . . . With those odds we still had three—” She paused, as if distracted, then amended: “—make that four kills.”

Cortana looked at the Chief. “Sleep well?” “Yes,” he replied. “No thanks to your driving.” Cortana smiled. “So, you *did* miss me.” Before he could reply, another blast rocked the entire ship. He grabbed a nearby support

pillar and braced himself, as several crew members crashed to the deck nearby. Keyes grabbed onto a console for support. “Report!” Cortana shimmered blue. “It must have been one of their boarding parties. My guess is an

antimatter charge.”

The fire control officer turned in his seat. “Ma’am! Fire control for the main cannon is off-line.” Cortana looked at Keyes. The loss of the ship’s primary weapon, the Magnetic

Accelerator Cannon, was a crippling blow to their holding action. “Captain, the cannon

was my last defensive option.” “All right,” Keyes said gruffly, “I’m initiating Cole Protocol, Article Two. We’re abandoning the *Autumn*. That means you too, Cortana.”

“While you do what? Go down with the ship?” she shot back.

“In a manner of speaking,” Keyes replied. “The object we found—I’m going to try and land the *Autumn* on it.” Cortana shook her head. “With all due respect . . . this war has enough dead heroes.” The Captain’s eyes locked with hers. “I appreciate your concern, Cortana—but it’s not up to me. The Protocol is clear. The destruction or capture of shipboard AI is absolutely unacceptable. That means you *are* abandoning ship. Lock in a selection of emergency landing zones and upload them to my neural lace.”

The AI paused, then nodded. “Aye, aye, sir.” “Which is where *you* come in,” Keyes continued as he turned to face the Spartan. “Get Cortana off this ship. Keep her safe from the enemy. If they capture her, they’ll learn everything. Force deployment, weapons research.” He paused, then added: “Earth.”

The Spartan nodded. “I understand.”

Keyes glanced at Cortana. “Are you ready?”

There was a pause as the AI took one last look around. In many ways the ship was her physical body and she was reluctant to leave it. “Yank me.”

Keyes turned to a console, touched a series of controls, and turned back again.

The holo shimmered and Cortana’s image swirled into the pedestal below and disappeared from view. Keyes waited until the holo had disappeared, removed a data chip from the pedestal, and offered it to the Spartan, along with his sidearm. “Good luck, Master Chief.”

SPARTAN-117 accepted the chip and reached back to slot the device into the neural interface, located at the base of his skull. There was a positive click, followed by a flood of sensation as the AI joined him within the confines of the armor’s neural network. At first it felt as if someone had poured a cup of ice water into his mind, followed by a momentary jab of pain, and a familiar presence. He’d worked with Cortana before—just prior to the disaster at Reach.

The AI-human interface was intrusive in a way, yet comforting too, since he knew what Cortana could do. He would depend on her during the hours and days ahead—just as she would depend on him. It was like being part of a team again.

The Master Chief saluted and left the bridge. The sounds of fighting were even louder now, indicating that, in spite of the crew’s best efforts, Covenant forces had still managed to fight their way out of the areas adjacent to the air locks and made it all the way up to the area around the command deck.

Bodies lay strewn around the corridor, roughly fifty meters from the bridge. The human defenders had pushed them back, but the Chief could tell that the last assault had been close. Too close.

The Master Chief paused to kneel next to a dead ensign, took a moment to close her eyelids, and appropriated the fallen trooper’s ammo. The pistol the Captain had given him was standard Navy issue; it fired 12.7mm semi-armor piercing high-explosive ammo from twelve-round clips. Not what he would choose to tackle an Elite with—but good enough for Grunt work.

There was a metallic *click* as the first clip slid into the pistol’s handle, followed by the sudden appearance of a blue circle in his HUD—a targeting reticle—as his armor made electronic contact with the weapon in his hand.

Then, conscious of the need to get Cortana off the ship, he made his way down the corridor. He heard the strange high-pitched squeaks and barks before he actually saw the Covenant Grunts themselves. Consistent with his status as a veteran, the first alien to come around the corner wore red-trimmed armor, a methane rig, and a Marine’s web pistol belt. The alien wore the captured gear Pancho Villa style and dragged it across the deck. Two of his comrades brought up the rear.

Confident that there were more of the vaguely simian aliens on the way, the Master Chief paused long enough to let more of them appear, then opened fire. The recoil compensators in his armor dampened the effect, but he could still feel the handgun kick against his palm. All three of the Grunts went down from head shots. Phosphorescent blue ichor splattered the deck.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The Master Chief stepped over their bodies and moved on.

A lifeboat. That was his *real* goal—and he would do whatever it took to find one.

Ashamed by the ignominy of it, but consistent with his orders, the Elite named Isna 'Nosolee waited until the Grunts, Jackals, and two members of his own race had charged out through the human airlock before leaving the assault boat himself. Though armed with a plasma pistol, plus a half-dozen grenades, he was there to observe rather than fight, which meant that the Elite would rely on both his energy shielding and active camouflage to keep him alive.

His role, and an unaccustomed one at that, was to function as an “Ossoona,” or Eye of the Prophet. The concept, as outlined to 'Nosolee by his superior, was to insert experienced officers into situations where intelligence could be gleaned, and to do so early enough to obtain high-quality information.

Though both intelligent and brave, the Prophets felt that the Elites had an unfortunate tendency to destroy everything in their path, leaving very little for their analysts to analyze.

Now, by adding Ossoonas to the combat mix, the Prophets hoped to learn more about the human enemy, ranging from data on their weapons and force deployments to the greatest prize of all: the coordinates for their home planet, “Earth.”

'Nosolee had three major objectives: to retrieve the enemy ship's AI, to capture senior personnel, and to record everything he saw via the cameras attached to his helmet. The first two goals were bound to be difficult, but a quick check confirmed that the video gear was working, and the third objective was assured.

So, even though the assignment was empty of honor, 'Nosolee understood its purpose, and was determined to succeed, if only as a means to return to the regular infantry where he belonged.

The Elite heard the rhythmic clatter of a human weapon as a group of their Marines backed around the corner, closely pursued by a pack comprised of Grunts and Jackals. The Ossoona considered killing the humans, thought better of it, and flattened himself against a bulkhead. None of the combatants noticed the point where the metal appeared to be slightly distorted, and a moment later the spy slipped away.

It seemed as if the *Autumn* was infested with chrome-armored demons spouting plasma fire. The Master Chief had acquired an MA5B assault rifle along with close to four hundred rounds of 7.62mm armor piercing ammunition. In this situation, with plenty of ordnance lying around, he preferred to reload when the ammo indicator on his weapon dropped to around 10. Failure to do so could result in disaster if he ran into serious opposition. With that in mind, the Chief hit the release, allowed a nearly empty magazine to fall, and shoved a new clip into its place. The weapon's digital ammo count reset, as did its cousin in his HUD.

“We're closer,” Cortana said from someplace just outside his head. “Duck through the hatch ahead and go up one level.”

The Master Chief ran into a shimmery, black-clad Elite, and opened fire. There were Grunts in the area as well, but he knew that the Elite posed the *real* danger. He expertly sprayed a trio of bursts at the alien.

The Elite roared defiance and fired in return, but the sheer volume of the specially hardened 7.62mm projectiles caused the Elite's shielding to flare, overload, and fail. The bulky alien fell to his knees, bent forward, and collapsed. Frightened by what had happened to their leader, the Grunts made barking noises, turned, and began to scurry away.

Individually, the Grunts were cowards, but the Spartan had seen what a pack of the creatures could do. He opened fire again. Alien bodies tumbled and fell.

He continued on through a hatch, heard more firing, and turned in that direction. Cortana called out, "Covenant! On the landing above us!"

He ran toward a flight of metal stairs, and charged straight for the landing.

Boots rang on metal as he slammed a fresh magazine into the weapon's receiver and passed a wounded Marine. The Spartan remembered the soldier from his last action on one of Reach's orbiting defense stations. The Marine held a dressing to a plasma burn and managed to smile. "Glad you could make it, Chief . . . we saved some party favors just for you."

The Spartan nodded, paused on the landing, and took aim at a Jackal. The vaguely birdlike alien carried energy shields—handheld units, rather than the full-body protection the Elites favored. The Jackal shifted to take aim at the wounded Marine, and the Chief saw his opening. He fired a burst at the Jackal's unprotected flank and the alien hit the deckplates, dead.

He continued the climb up the flight of stairs, and came nearly visor-to-visor with another Elite. The alien roared, charged forward, and attempted to use his plasma rifle like a club. The Master Chief evaded the blow—he'd fought Elites hand-to-hand before, and knew they were dangerously strong—and backed away. He leveled the assault weapon at the Elite's belly, and squeezed the trigger.

The Covenant soldier seemed to absorb the bullets like a sponge, continued to advance, and was just about to swing when a final round cut through his spinal cord. The alien soldier slammed into the deck, twitched once, and died.

SPARTAN-117 reached for another magazine. Another Elite roared, as did *another*. There was no time to reload, so the Master Chief turned to take them on. He discarded the assault rifle and drew his sidearm. There were a pair of dead Marines at the aliens' feet, roughly twenty-five meters away. *Well within range*, he thought, and opened fire.

The lead Elite snarled as the powerful handgun rounds tore into the shielding around his head. Sensing the Spartan's threat, the aliens shifted all of their fire in his direction only to watch as it dissipated against his shields and armor.

Now, free to direct their fire wherever they chose, the Marines launched a hastily organized counterattack. A fragmentation grenade blew one Elite into bloody ribbons, shredded the Jackals who had the poor judgment to stand next to him, and sent pieces of shrapnel flying across the stairwell.

slam into the bulkhead.

The other Elite was consumed by a hail of bullets. He seemed to wilt, fold, and fly apart. “That’s what I’m talking about!” a Marine crowed. He fired *acoup de grâce* into the alien’s head.

Satisfied that the area was reasonably secure, the Master Chief moved on. He passed through a hatch helped a pair of Marines take out a group of Grunts, and marched down a corridor drenched with blood—both human and alien. The deck shook as the *Autumn* took a new hit from a ship-to-ship missile. There was a muffled clang, and a light flared beyond a viewport.

“The lifeboats are launching,” Cortana announced. “We should hurry!”

“I am hurrying,” the Master Chief replied. “I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Cortana started to reply, reconsidered, and processed the equivalent of an apologetic shrug. Sometimes, fallible though they were, humans were right.

Flight Officer Captain Carol Rawley, better known to the ship’s Marine contingent by her call sign “Foehammer,” waited for the Grunt to round the corner. She shot him in the head, and the little methane-breathing bastard dropped like a rock. The pilot took a quick peek, verified that the narrow corridor was clear, and motioned to those behind her. “Come on! Let’s get while the getting’s good!”

Three pilots, along with an equal number of ground crew, followed as Rawley thundered down the hall. She was a tall, broad-shouldered woman, and she ran with a flat-footed determination. The plan, if the wild-assed scheme she’d concocted could be dignified as such, was to make it down to the ship’s launch bay, jump into their D77-TC “Pelican” dropships, and get off the *Autumn* before the cruiser smacked into the construct below. At best, it would be a tricky takeoff, and a messy landing, but she’d rather die behind the stick of her bird than trust her fate to some lifeboat jockey. Besides, maybe some transports would come in handy, if anybody actually made it off the ship alive.

That was looking like an increasingly big maybe.

“They’re behind us!” somebody yelled. “Run faster!”

Rawley wasn’t a sprinter—she was a pilot, damn it. She turned to take aim on her pursuers, when a globe of glowing-green plasma sizzled past her ear.

“Screw this,” she yelled, then ran with renewed energy.

As the battle with the interlopers continued to rage, a Grunt named Yayap led a small detachment of his own kind through a half-melted hatch and came upon the scene of a massacre. The nearest bulkhead was drenched in shimmering blue blood. Spent shell casings were scattered everywhere and a tangled pile of Grunt bodies testified to an engagement lost. Yayap keened in brief mourning for his fallen brethren.

That most of the dead were Grunts like Yayap didn’t surprise him. The Prophets had long made use of his race as cannon fodder. He hoped that they had gone to a methane-rich paradise, and was about to pass by the gruesome heap, when one of the bodies groaned.

The Grunt paused and, accompanied by one of his fellows—a Grunt named Gagaw—he waded into the gory mess, only to discover that the noise was associated with a black-armored member of the Elite, one of the “Prophet-blessed” types who were in charge of this ill-considered raid. By law and custom Yayap’s race was required to revere the Elites as near-divine envoys of the Prophets. Of course, the implementation of law and custom was somewhat flexible on the battlefield.

“Leave him,” Gagaw advised. “That’s what *he* would do if it were one of us lying wounded.”

“True,” Yayap said thoughtfully, “but it would take all five of us to carry him back to the assault boat.”

It took Gagaw ten full heartbeats to assimilate the idea and finally appreciate the genius of it. “We wouldn’t have to fight!”

“Precisely,” Yayap said, as the sounds of battle grew louder once more, “so let’s slap some dressing on his wounds, grab his arms and legs, and drag his ass out of here.”

A quick check revealed that the Elite’s wounds weren’t mortal. A human projectile had punched its way through the warrior’s visor, sliced along the side of his head, and flattened itself on the inside surface of the Elite’s helmet. The force of the blow had knocked him unconscious. Aside from that and some cuts and bruises sustained when he fell, the Elite would survive. *A pity*, Yayap thought.

Satisfied that their ticket off the ship would live long enough to get them where they wanted to go, the Grunts grabbed the warrior’s limbs and waddled down the corridor. Their battle was over.

The *Autumn*’s contingent of Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, also known as ODST, or “Helljumpers” had been assigned to protect the cruiser’s experimental power plant, which consisted of a unique network of fusion engines.

The engine room was served by two main access points, each protected by a Titanium-A hatch. Both were connected by a catwalk and were still under human control. The fact that Major Antonio Silva’s Marines had been forced to stack the Covenant bodies like firewood in order to maintain clear fields of fire testified to how effective the men and women under his command had been.

There had been human casualties as well, *plenty* of them, including Lieutenant Melissa McKay, who waited impatiently while “Doc” Valdez, the platoon’s medic, bandaged her arm. There was a lot to do—and clearly McKay wanted to get up and do it.

“Got some bad news for you, Lieutenant,” the medic said. “The tattoo on your bicep, the one with the skull and the letters ‘ODST,’ took a serious hit. You can get a new one, of course . . . but scar tissue won’t take the ink in quite the same way.”

McKay knew the pater had a purpose, knew it was Doc’s way of taking her mind off Dawkins, Al-Thani, and Suzuki. The medic secured the bandage in place and the officer rolled her sleeve down over the dressing. “You know what, Valdez? You are truly full of it. And I mean that as a compliment.”

Doc wiped his forehead with the back of a sleeve. It came away with Al-Thani’s blood on it. “Thank you, El-Tee. Compliment accepted.”

“All right,” Major Silva boomed as he strode out onto the center of the catwalk. “Listen up! Play time is over. ~~Captain Keyes is tired of our company and wants us to leave this tub. There’s a construction site down there, complete with an atmosphere, gravity, and the one thing Marines love like beer—and that’s dirt beneath our feet.~~”

The ODST officer paused at that point, allowing his bright, beady eyes to sweep the faces around him. His mouth straight as a crease. “Most of the crew—not to mention your fellow jarheads—will be leaving the ship in lifeboats. They’ll ride to the surface in air-conditioned comfort, sipping wine, and nibbling on appetizers.

“Not you, however. Oh no, you’re going to leave the *Pillar of Autumn* by a different method. Tell me how you boys and girls . . . How will you leave?”

It was a time-honored ritual, and the ODST Marines roared the answer in unison. “WE GO FIRST, SIR!”

“Damned right you do,” Silva barked. “Now let’s get to those drop pods. The Covenant is holding a picnic down on the surface and every single one of you is invited. You have five minutes to strap in, hook up, and shove a cork in your ass.”

It was an old joke, one of their favorites, and the Marines laughed as if they had just heard it for the first time. Then they formed into squads, and followed their noncoms out into a corridor that ran down the port side of the ship.

McKay led her platoon down the hall, past the troopers assigned to guard the intersection, and through what had been a battlefield. Bodies lay sprawled where they had fallen, plasma burns marked the bulkheads, and a long line of 7.62mm dimples marked the last burst that one of the dead soldiers would ever fire.

They pounded around a corner, and into what the Marines referred to as “Hell’s waiting room.” The troopers streamed down the center of a long narrow compartment that housed two rows of oval-shaped individual drop pods. Each pod bore the name of an individual trooper, and was poised over a tube that extended down through the ship’s belly.

Most combat landings were made via armed assault boats, but the boats were slow, and subject to anti-aircraft fire. That was why the UNSC had invested the time and money necessary to create a second way to deliver troops through an atmosphere: the HEV, or Human Entry Vehicle.

Computer-controlled anti-aircraft fire would nail some of the pods, but they made small targets, and each hit would result in one death rather than a dozen.

There was just one problem. As the ceramic skins that covered the HEVs burned away, the air inside the pods became unbelievably hot, sometimes fatally so, which was why ODST personnel were referred to as “Helljumpers.” It was an all-volunteer outfit, and it took a special kind of crazy to join up.

McKay remained on the central walkway until each of her men had entered his particular pod. She knew that meant she would have sixty seconds less to make her own preparations, and was quick

enter her HEV once the last hatch had closed.

Once inside, McKay's hands were a blur as she secured her harness, ran the obligatory systems check, removed a series of safeties, armed her ejection tube, and eyed the tiny screen mounted in front of her. The *Autumn*'s fire control computer had already calculated the force required to blow the pod free and drop the HEV into the correct entry path. All she had to do was hang on, pray that the pod's ceramic skin would hold long enough for the chute to open, and try to ignore how fragile the vehicle actually was.

No sooner had the officer braced her boots against the bulkhead, and looked up at the countdown, than the last digit clicked from one to zero.

The pod dropped, accelerated out of the ejection tube, and fell toward the ring-shaped world below. Her stomach lurched and her heart rate spiked.

Somebody popped a tiny disk into a data player, touched a button, and pushed the hyped-up strains of the Helljumpers' anthem out over the team freq. The regs made it clear that unauthorized use of UNSC communications facilities was wrong, *very* wrong, but McKay knew that at that particular moment it *was right*, and Silva must have agreed, because nothing came in over the command freq. The music pounded in her ears, the HEV shuddered as it hit the outer layer of the ring-constructed atmosphere, and the Marines fell feet first through the ring.

The deck jumped as the *Pillar of Autumn* absorbed yet another blow and the battle continued to rage within. The Master Chief was close now, and prepared to sprint for a lifeboat. That was when Cortana said, "Behind you!" and the Master Chief felt a plasma bolt hit him squarely between the shoulder blades.

He rolled with the blow and sprang to his feet. He whirled to face his attacker and saw that a Grunt had dropped out of an overhead maintenance way. The diminutive alien stood with his feet planted on the deck, a plasma pistol over-charging in his claws. The Master Chief took three steps forward, used the assault rifle to knock the creature off its feet, and followed it with a three-round burst. The Grunt's pistol discharged its stored energy into the ceiling. Drips of molten metal sizzled on the Master Chief's shields.

The armor-piercing rounds punctured the alien's breathing apparatus, released a stream of methane, and caused the body to spin like a top.

A trio of additional Grunts landed on the Master Chief's shoulders and grabbed hold. It was almost laughable, until the Spartan realized that one of them was trying to remove his helmet. A second alien carried an ignited plasma grenade—the little bastards meant to drop the explosive into his armor.

He flexed his shoulders, and shook himself like a dog.

Grunts flew in every direction as the Master Chief used short controlled bursts to put them down. He turned toward the lifeboats. "Now!" Cortana urged. "Run!"

The Spartan ran, just as the door started to close. A nearby Marine fell while running for the escape craft, and the Chief paused long enough to scoop the soldier up and hurl him into the boat.

Once inside, they joined a small group of crew members already on board the escape craft. “No, it would be a very good time to leave,” Cortana commented coolly, as something else exploded and the cruiser shuddered in response.

The Master Chief stood facing the hatch. He waited for it to close all the way, saw the red light appear, and knew it was sealed. “Punch it.”

The pilot triggered the launch sequence and the lifeboat blasted free of the ship, balanced on a column of fire. The boat skimmed along the surface of the *Autumn* at dizzying speed. Plasma blasts from a Covenant warship slammed into the *Autumn*’s hull. In seconds, the lifeboat dropped away from the cruiser and dove toward the ring.

The Master Chief killed his external com system, and spoke directly to Cortana. “So, any idea what this thing is?”

“No,” Cortana admitted. “I managed to slice some data out of the Covenant battle network. They call it ‘Halo,’ and it has some kind of religious significance to them, but . . . your guess is as good as mine.” She paused, and the Spartan sensed the AI’s amusement. “Well, *almost* as good.”

“Halo,” he repeated. “Looks like we’re going to be calling it ‘home’ for a while.”

The lifeboat was too small to mount a Shaw-Fujikawa faster-than-light drive so there was nowhere to go but the ring. There were no shouts of jubilation, no high-fives, only silence as the boat fell through the blackness of space. They were alive, but that was subject to change, and that left nothing to celebrate.

One Marine said, “This duty station really sucks.” No one saw any reason to contradict him.

Rawley and her companions skidded to a halt, turned back the way they had come, and let loose with everything they had. Their weaponry included two pistols, one assault rifle, and a plasma rifle that the pilot had scooped up along the way. Not much of an arsenal but sufficient to knock three Jackals off their feet and put the aliens down for good. Rawley caved the last Jackal’s skull in with her boot.

Eager to get aboard their ships, the group ducked through the docking bay hatch, closed it behind them, and ran for the Pelicans. Foehammer spotted her bird, gave thanks for the fact that it was undamaged, and ran up the ramp. As always, it was fueled, armed, and ready to fly. Frye, her copilot, dropped into position behind her, with Crew Chief Cullen bringing up the rear.

Once in the cockpit, Rawley strapped in, ran an abbreviated preflight checklist, and started the transport’s engines. They joined with the rest to create a satisfying roar. The outer hatch cycled open. Loose gear tumbled into space as the bay explosively decompressed.

Moments later, the cruiser entered the ring world’s atmosphere, which meant that the transports could depart . . . but they had to do it soon. Reentry friction was already creating a wall of fire around the ship.

“Damn!” Frye exclaimed, “Look at that!” and pointed forward.

Rawley looked, saw a Covenant landing craft coming straight toward the bay, braving the heat

generated by the *Autumn*'s reentry velocity. There was a limited window of opportunity to get off the sinking ship, and the Covenant bastard was right in the way.

She swore and released the safety on the Pelican's 70mm chin gun. The weapon shook the entire ship, punched holes through alien armor, and hit something vital. The enemy vessel shuddered, lost control, and spun into the *Autumn*'s hull.

"All right," the wing leader said over the ship-to-ship frequency, "Let's go down and meet our hosts. See you on the ground. Foehammer out."

She clicked off the transmitter and whispered, "Good luck."

One by one the dropships left the bay, did a series of wingovers, and dropped through the overarching ring. Rawley struggled to maintain control as the atmosphere tore at her ship. The status panel flashed a heat warning as friction created a massive thermal buildup along the Pelican's fuselage. The leading edges of the ship's short, stubby wings started to glow.

"Jeez, boss," Frye said, his teeth rattling from the constant jouncing of the Pelican, "maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Foehammer made some adjustments, managed to improve the ship's glide angle, and glanced to his right. "If you've got a better idea," she yelled, "bring it up at the next staff meeting."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Until then," she added, "shut the hell up and let me fly this thing."

The Pelican hit an air pocket, dropped like a rock, and caught itself. The transport shook like a thing possessed. Rawley screamed with anger and battled her controls as her ship plummeted toward the surface of the ring.

Covenant forces had launched a concerted attack on the command deck about fifteen minutes earlier, but the defenders had beaten them back. Since that time the fighting had lessened and there were reports that at least some of the aliens were using their assault boats to leave the ship.

It wasn't clear whether that was due to the considerable number of casualties Covenant forces had suffered, or the realization that the ship was in danger of falling apart, but it hardly mattered. The important thing was that the area around the bridge was clear, which meant that Keyes, plus the command team who remained to help him, could carry out their duties without fear of being shot from the back. At least for the moment.

Their next task was to take the *Autumn* down into the atmosphere. No small order considering the fact that, like all vessels of her tonnage, the cruiser had been constructed in zero-gee conditions and wasn't equipped to operate in a planetary atmosphere.

Keyes believed it was possible. With that in mind he planned to close with the ring world, hand control to the subroutine that Cortana had left for that purpose, and use the last lifeboat to make his escape. Maybe the ship would pancake in the way he had planned—and maybe it wouldn't. Whatever the case, it was almost sure to be a landing that would best be experienced from a safe distance.

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