

The riveting new sequel in the New York Times bestselling Kilo-Five trilogy,
based on the popular gaming franchise

HALO



THE THURSDAY WAR

KAREN TRAVISS

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

HALO®

THE THURSDAY WAR

KAREN TRANISS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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For Sam,
who always talks good Texan common sense when I need it

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PROLOGUE

OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE, BRAVO-6, SYDNEY, EARTH: MARCH 2553

This job is about trouble.

Seeing trouble coming, neutralizing trouble ... and causing trouble for others before they cause for you.

On a day when there's no trouble, something's wrong. There's *always* trouble. You simply haven't noticed it yet, so you have to seek it out before it comes looking for you. But today's a normal day and I don't have to hunt. Captain Serin Osman has just reported in from Venezia. She's calling off the mission for the time being and breaking orbit to return to Sangheili, because we have *trouble*.

And where's my damn coffee?

Osman's lost contact with her Sangheili language expert, Phillips. One minute he's spying happily under the noses of his Sangheili hosts, and the next there's an explosion. Now we're scrambling to find out what's happened. The Arbiter's no fool. He invited Phillips to visit. He has a reason, and he's sane, he *has* to be suspicious of us. Yes, perhaps it's all part of genuinely wanting to build bridges with Earth, but I can't afford to assume the best. My job is about planning for the *worst*, and making sure that it happens—to Earth's enemies, anyway. My job isn't about *okay*.

The whole point of this mission, the whole *raison d'être* of the Kilo-Five mission, is to make things as *un-okay* for the Sangheili as we can, to keep them feuding and fighting while we re-arm and neutralize them once and for all. But we have an operative stranded there with an AI, a civilian academic, not an experienced ONI agent like Osman. So she has to extract him. I'd do the same if I were her. Venezia can wait, after all: it's been a terrorist haven since before the Covenant War, and it's not going anywhere. Besides, Mike Spenser is there. A safe pair of hands, our Mike. In this job you handpick your people. You need the best. You need the most loyal. You need the most ruthless.

And ruthlessness and loyalty in a single human being is a rare combination to find.

So ... where's my coffee? Don't make me beg, Dorsey. I hit the intercom. "Flag, are you still alive out there?"

"On its way, ma'am." Lieutenant Dorsey knows my routine. He's never normally this late with my morning mocha. "Sorry. I got stuck on a call."

"I'm not getting any younger, Flag."

He's a good boy. I couldn't wish for a better flag lieutenant. So the coffee is on its way. Let's take a deep breath and assess the situation.

On the plus side, we've managed to arm and foster a Sangheili insurrection, and we have both a live Sangheili prisoner and four Huragok, three of which have unique knowledge from the days of the Forerunners. With their assistance, we're extracting a treasure trove of Forerunner technology from what's left of Onyx. We've also arrested Dr. Catherine God-Almighty Halsey, who's now making herself useful by incorporating that technology into *Infinity*. Oh, I waited a long, *long* time to get her, but it was worth every minute. She will now do my bidding.

I'd call that a very productive three months' work. Wouldn't you? Excellent value for the taxpayer.

On the down side, though, Phillips is potentially in real danger, and by that token so are we. He's not been trained to resist interrogation. The AI fragment he's carrying won't be much use to the Sangheili if he's caught, but the last thing I need is for ONI's destabilization policy to become public.

knowledge.

~~And there's another fly paddling around in the ointment. There's no lid on Venezia now that the Covenant's collapsed. The rebels can come and go as they please—not just human rebels, alien malcontents too—and the black market's flooded with hardware and vessels. Everyone's dusting off their old grudges. We shall be busy.~~

But on balance ... things could be worse. Osman's doing well: she's proving good in the field although I hope she doesn't get a taste for it. She's my anointed, my heir, my successor. The office of CINCONI will be hers before long, and she has to fill this chair. I have to admit there's a delicious irony in having a failed Spartan head up the agency.

And Kilo-Five is shaping up, too. There's a lot to be said for a mixed bag of oddballs. A few ODSs, a Spartan, a civilian linguist—and BB. God, I miss Black-Box, but he's where he needs to be right now. It's a strange squad. The best ones always are.

Ruthless and loyal, as I said. I *like* ruthless and loyal.

The door opens and Dorsey trots in, balancing a steaming cup and a small plate. "Here you go, ma'am," he says. "And ... *ginger nuts*. That was the cookie you wanted, yes?"

He makes it sound like a strange perversion. He's not been in Sydney long enough to understand *biscuits*. It's hard to find ginger nuts these days. "Indeed it was," I tell him. "Perfect for dunking. I insist you try some."

"Okay, ma'am. Thank you."

There. I've metamorphosed fully from Torquemada to a grandmother foisting cookies on the youngsters. It's not just to maintain morale. This is my conscience intervening. The older I get, the more I find myself imposing affection and generosity on those around me, as if that can atone for a lot of I've done and *not* done.

I dunk the cookie in the mocha, hold it in the hot liquid for exactly four seconds, and then remove it. *This* is perfection. Ginger nuts are baked so hard that in a few seconds they absorb just enough coffee to soften the outer layer, but not enough to make them soggy. They yield to the bite, then the interior snaps and gives up its sweet, spicy pungency. A lesser cookie would dissolve and sink to the bottom of the cup in surrender.

Have a cookie. Forget that junior officers call me *organized crime in uniform*.

I regret a great deal. I don't regret much of the dirty work I've done, but I think I do regret the SPARTAN-II program. I regret it not only because it was built on something utterly wrong, but also—mainly—because the likes of Catherine Halsey can only do what they do if the likes of me let them do it knowingly or otherwise.

I should have kept a closer eye on her. I knew what she was like.

I know what *everybody's* like. That's my job.

I can remember far too much, so many things that I wish I could unsee and unhear. Life's perversities. Most people in their nineties worry about losing their memory, not about being tormented by its lack of clarity in the small hours each sleepless night. But such is power. You get it, then you do things with it, and then you have to live with it.

I won't apologize for saving my world from terrorists and aliens. I don't owe God any explanation when the time comes. Halsey's an atheist, so she can look forward to it all being over, really *over*, one day. But I'm ... agnostic.

And the closer to death I get, the more I'd prefer God to exist. I have some questions for him. I'm great with questions.

If he made us in his image, why didn't he make us nicer, kinder, gentler? Or did he make us like this just to see how vile an organism we could become? What kind of god would make *us*?

Dorsey sticks his head around the door. "Are the ginger nuts okay, ma'am?" he asks.

“Glorious,” I say. “*Infinity* had better have a supply of these.”

(ADMIRAL MARGARET ORLEND A PARANGOSKY, COMMANDER IN CHIEF, OFFICE OF NAVAL
INTELLIGENCE, UNS

CHAPTER ONE

**ARBITER, I HAVE LOST HIM. THE BRUTES ARE REBELLING AND ONTOM IS IN
CHAOS.**

(CADAN 'ILMIR, PILOT AND BODYGUARD TO PROFESSOR EVAN PHILLIPS, GUEST OF THE ARBITER)

TEMPLE OF THE ABIDING TRUTH, ONTOM, SANGHELIOS: MARCH 2553

Evan Phillips could manage only one thought: Sangheili breath stank.

It was like waking up face to face with an old dog who'd sneaked onto the bed, and it wasn't just the terrifying mouthful of fangs. Avu Med 'Telcam, religious zealot and ONI-sponsored insurgent, was kneeling right over him, staring into his eyes. Phillips could hear a tuning fork singing deep inside his head but the yells and roars around him were muffled, a world away. He struggled for breath in a fog of brick dust, smoke, and something that smelled horribly like ammonia. How could he smell all that if he couldn't breathe?

Oh, God. A bomb. I was walking into the temple, and ...

He was walking into the temple with 'Telcam, and 'Telcam had asked him a really awkward question about a Sangheili he wasn't supposed to know.

Jul 'Mdama. Oh ... shit.

And then there'd been an explosion. But Phillips's biggest problem right then was getting his breath, followed by checking that he had all his limbs and wasn't bleeding to death light-years from home on a planet where they wouldn't take kindly to ONI spies.

Because that's what I am now. Aren't I?

He kept trying to suck in air. His lungs felt disconnected from his brain, beyond his control, then they relented and a huge, convulsive wheeze shook him. He started coughing so hard that he almost vomited.

"I thought you were dead," 'Telcam said. He sounded irritated, as if he thought Phillips had been shamming. "Can you speak? Are you injured?"

Phillips's eyes watered painfully. "Am I bleeding?"

"Not much." 'Telcam stood up and started roaring orders, although Phillips couldn't see who he was yelling at. "Is anyone injured? Answer me! Did anyone see what happened?"

Voices called back from the gloom. "A wall has collapsed, Field Master. We're still trying to find all our brothers."

"Be quick about it." 'Telcam drew his pistol and stalked toward the outer gates. "And secure the perimeter until we find out who did this."

Who would attack the temple? It was a sensitive target, sure to cause outrage. Perhaps the Arbiter had worked out where his opposition was coming from and had launched a preemptive strike. *And I walked into the middle of it. Should have stuck with Cadan, shouldn't I? I bet he's panicking now trying to find me in case the Arbiter shoots him for losing me.* Phillips eased himself up and tried to stand. Razor-edged rubble cut into his palms. He could hear mayhem outside in the plaza, filtered by the thick walls around the temple grounds, and the thud of Sangheili feet echoing in the passages behind him. Now that the smoke and dust were settling, he could work out exactly where he was: about twenty meters inside the temple compound, right in the ancient doorway of the Forerunner building.

Nobody seemed to be taking any notice of him. He got to his feet, tested his balance—not great, but at least he could still hear—and tottered toward the gates.

At least this had killed the conversation about Jul. Phillips hoped ‘Telcam would forget he’d even asked the question, but he doubted it.

Damn, I could have died. Really died. This is getting a bit too real.

His legs were shaking. Now that he stopped to think about it, he realized he could have been killed any number of times in the past few months, but it hadn’t felt quite this immediate before. How did Mal and Vaz handle it? Now he understood something at a gut level, something he didn’t have words for, and suddenly the world looked different. Then he remembered.

Oh God. BB. Where the hell is he?

The AI would usually have been chatting to him in that arch, slightly bitchy way that was somehow incredibly comforting. BB knew all and saw all. He probably spoke Sangheili even better than Phillips. But now he was uncharacteristically silent.

“BB?” Phillips whispered. He peered down at the coin-sized radio with its pinprick camera lens, unable to see any indicator lights. Military comms equipment was designed to withstand all kinds of shocks, and ONI was certain to have the very best kit that money could buy. “BB, are you okay? You can come out now.”

But the radio remained lifeless. Phillips took it off his jacket to examine it, and it was only when he held it right up to his eye that he saw the chunks of metal embedded in it like lead shot. It took him a few moments to think that through. The realization made his stomach knot again.

Shrapnel. That would have gone into my chest. Holy shit. So that kind of luck really happens.

He tried to focus on the luck, that a potentially fatal injury had been deflected by that little device, but it didn’t keep him going long. All kinds of fears and worries were now flooding back. Cadan, the pilot the Arbiter had assigned to take him on a tour of Ontom’s ancient sites, would have heard the explosion and come running to find his charge. And did Osman realize what had happened? Phillips had been transmitting right up to the moment of the blast, so she must have known his last position. But how was he going to contact her now without a radio and without BB to guide him? Damn, he would have to find Cadan and get him to contact UNSC. Searching the temple for Forerunner clues to the locations of the other Halo rings would have to wait.

It could take me years to wheedle my way back in here. We might not have years.

He made his way through the rubble in the courtyard. Walls that had stood for millennia, built by the Forerunners themselves, had collapsed in places, giving him jagged, chaotic glimpses of the huge plaza outside. It was pandemonium. Troops were stalking around, barking orders at Sangheili who were milling about, inspecting piles of what Phillips thought was more rubble until he realized there was no masonry close enough to fall in heaps. The plaza was an open space like a parade ground.

The piles were bodies.

He stumbled out of the gates, as if the notional line between holy ground and the public space would shield him. A crater about seven or eight meters wide had gouged a scar in the elegant geometric paving. That was where the device had detonated: not in the temple grounds, but out in the plaza. Purple Sangheili blood lay in glossy pools or trickled into gutters. Phillips tried not to focus on the dead and injured. Mal and Vaz might have been used to seeing body parts, but this was all new and sickening for him. He didn’t recognize some things. He made himself look away before he did.

It was sobering that even on an alien world, in a city of towering creatures with four jaws, the carnage that followed a bombing looked pretty much like any shattered street on Earth in the aftermath of a terror attack. And people were just as scared and shocked and grief-stricken.

People. Yes. They’re people to me. Sorry, Vaz. I can’t see them any other way now.

‘Telcam stood absolutely still, fists clenched at his sides in an oddly human way. He was seething.

Phillips edged up beside him.

“So...” Nobody seemed interested in a lone human now. An hour ago, he’d been a sensation, an unlikely little pink creature who could rapidly unlock the *arum* puzzle that left most Sangheili perplexed. “Who did it? This isn’t about the temple, is it?”

‘Telcam scanned the scene with a slow sweep of his head, taking in the neatly trimmed shrubs and trees that lined the plaza. Phillips thought he’d spotted something suspicious. But he curled his lip back, parting that cloverleaf set of jaws and baring his fangs in anger.

“What do you *not* see, scholar?” he asked.

Phillips wasn’t back to his best yet. He tapped his radio again, hoping BB was just keeping his head down and gathering information. It took a while to check the scene and not pay too much attention to the grisly detail. A pair of Sangheili trotted past carrying something on a sheet of fabric, a makeshift stretcher. Phillips looked away.

“Sorry. What am I missing?”

“Where are the Brutes?” ‘Telcam demanded. “There were Brutes working out here. They were tending the gardens. Where did they go?”

Phillips’s first thought was that they’d been killed or taken away wounded. He was about to suggest that when ‘Telcam caught his arm and hauled him into the plaza to inspect the scene for himself. Phillips had no choice now. He found himself looking down at a body, a male in his middle years minus legs and part of his head. The smell—sweet, metallic, but also tinged with ammonia and sulfur—struck him more than the glistening shreds of flesh. Somehow he managed to switch off. He hadn’t realized he could do that. When he looked up, ‘Telcam had stalked away and was moving from casualty to casualty, grabbing troops by their shoulders and questioning them.

“Where are the Brutes?” he demanded. “Have you found any Brutes? Where did they go?”

He was right, though: the Jiralhanae had vanished. Not many had stayed with the Sangheili once the Covenant fell, but their absence was suddenly conspicuous. Phillips struggled with the idea that they might have turned on their former superiors.

‘Telcam came striding back, jaws working angrily. “Not *one*,” he snarled. “Not one has remained.”

“You think this is an uprising?”

“Most of the Brutes turned on us in the Great Schism.”

“Yes, but lots of them just took ships and went home, too.”

“You seem to have missed the point, *Philliss*.” Yes, he really did make it sound like *Phyllis*, just like Vaz Beloi had said. Those extra jaws made explosive consonants hard going. “There is no affection between our species.”

“Perhaps they just ran for it,” Phillips said. No, he didn’t believe that. A Brute had tried to take out Naomi and lost—not that he could share that with ‘Telcam. “We’ll find them quaking in a cell somewhere.”

“I knew we should never have tolerated them. This is the worst possible timing.”

Ah, so that was his problem: not that they’d dared to kill Sangheili, something that he was preparing to do himself, but that they’d messed up his tidy insurrection.

“Yes, but how do you—”

Phillips never got to the end of the sentence. A bolt of energy hit the paving twenty meters from him, splattering him with painfully sharp grit, then another and another, bright as lightning.

He dived instinctively and hit the ground, not that it would have saved him, and another alien sensation overtook him: real fear, the absolute fear that he would die any second. His body ignored his conscious mind completely. It saved itself. He couldn’t move. All he could do was listen to the crack and sizzle of energy rounds zipping past his ears. That was how close it felt. He could smell it, too, like paint burning on a hot radiator.

“Brutes!” someone yelled. “It’s *Brutes!* Filthy traitors! *Kill them!*”

Boots thudded near his head. “Outrage!” one Sangheili kept shouting. “Ingrates! To think we gave you food and shelter!”

Phillips tried to turn his head, looking for somewhere to take cover. Three Sangheili were still trading shots with somebody up on the walls. Was it a Brute? He couldn’t tell. He couldn’t raise his head far enough to see. He just wanted the shooting to stop. He was sure he’d crap himself if he had to lie here in the open a moment longer. He was going to die alone without even BB for company. That wasn’t how it was supposed to end.

Get a grip. It’s seconds. Vaz told me so. You think it’s going on forever, but it’s only a few seconds.

There was more zip and crack as the shooting continued. Then it stopped and the echo around the walls seemed to go on forever before being swallowed up in roars and murmurs. Phillips didn’t know whether to raise his head or stay down, but someone made the decision for him and hauled him upright by his collar.

“Telcam stared down at him, nostrils flaring, looking distinctly unimpressed. “Those shots were nowhere near you.”

Phillips had had enough for one day. He’d been bombed and shot at. He’d seen people killed. And he was on his own a long way from home. The novelty of playing spy games was over. It was a lonely way to end up dead.

“I’m going to go and find Cadan,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. More heavily armed militia were streaming into the plaza, arriving in all kinds of mismatched vehicles that parted the crowd. The mood had now changed from shock to anger, something Phillips was certain he could smell. “My pilot. He went to a tavern. He’ll be looking for me. I need to call in to tell everyone I’m okay.”

“Telcam still had a tight grip on his collar. “And then what? Go back to the Arbiter’s keep?”

“That’s the idea.”

“That would be an unwise choice of sanctuary, and you’re well aware why.”

The closest that Phillips had ever been to a riot was a rowdy night in Sydney when the Aussies had won some rugby trophy and the bars had started overcrowding, then overflowing into the streets. There’d been arrests, scuffles, deafening noise, and a few moments when he was sure he was going to get his head kicked in while simply trying to hail a taxi. He’d felt just as confused and alien as he did now. Just like that night, the hundreds—maybe thousands—of Sangheili were a wall of muscle and hostility, not particularly aimed at him but still volatile and potentially lethal.

Then something distracted them. Phillips saw every head turn simultaneously before he heard the shouts of *Jir’a’ul, Jir’a’ul*—Brute, a play on the Brutes’ own name for themselves and the Sangheili word for a lump of wood, *a’ul*. It was an ugly term of abuse. He could guess what was coming when the loud, communal hiss like escaping steam swept through the crowd. He’d never heard that before and wasn’t even sure what it was, but the meaning was instantly clear, the kind of knowledge he’d never have gleaned in a lifetime’s research in the safe comfort of his office at Wheatley University.

The crowd parted. Now Phillips could see a Brute struggling in the grip of two Sangheili troops snarling and spitting, and the crowd closed again like a wave. The Brute’s snarls were drowned by Sangheili roars. Phillips couldn’t see what was happening, just the ripples of movement. It was a lynching mob. But Sangheili didn’t use ropes. They were carnivores, and they fell on the Brute like a pack of dogs. Phillips let his imagination fill in the gaps. It was time to run.

“I’ve got to go,” Phillips said. He could remember where the tavern was. He had to get out. *Jesu BB, why pick now to break down?* “My radio’s not working. I’ll contact you later.”

It was hard to see what was happening because he was a lot shorter than the average male Sangheili. He was a child lost in a dark forest, staring at legs and weapon belts. Then the firing started again. B

it was coming from the walls: he risked looking around and now he could see a lot more Brutes with rifles. His belief in invincible Elite superiority was waning fast. Bolts of energy sizzled through the air before an explosion sent debris flying. The blast was much farther away on the north side of the plaza but still deafening, still powerful enough for Phillips to feel it in his chest and ears.

“Oh, shit—”

“There is your answer, scholar.” ‘Telcam yanked him back toward the temple so hard that his arm hurt. “You’ll be safe here.”

“Cadan will come looking for me.”

“It’s too late. It must begin now.”

Phillips struggled to match ‘Telcam’s huge stride. Somewhere at his back, all hell had broken loose. He didn’t know if it was a pitched battle or just the crowd erupting in fury, but his legs had made the decision to keep moving away from the noise as fast as they could.

“What does? What’s got to begin?”

‘Telcam shoved him through the gate into the temple grounds. “What do you *think*? We have to bring the revolt forward, to strike before the Brutes force us to fight on another front.” ‘Telcam slipped into English. He was fluent, trained as an interpreter for the fleet, and it was hard to tell whether he thought that Phillips didn’t understand him or if he’d switched languages for some other reason. “*Cowards*. Utter cowards. Why do they plant bombs? This is a filthy, sly habit they have learned from you humans. *Terrorism*. That is the word, yes?”

That was the whole point of being here: Phillips had known the unspoken deal with ONI from the start. He wasn’t here to study the Sangheili or build bridges with them. ONI’s mission was to crush them before they regained their military strength, and he was the one man who could talk to them and gain their trust because he was so *harmless*. He felt like a complete bastard. But then he thought of billions of dead humans, and Sydney in flames, and talked himself back into knowing which side he had to be on.

Terrorism. That’s the word, ‘Telcam. We’re all doing it, one way or another. It’s just semantics. I’m good at that.

“It works, though,” Phillips said, catching his breath. He could still hear the rioting but the walls muffled the sounds, creating an illusion of safety. “Efficient. Cheap. You can keep it up for years. You could learn a lot from us monkeys.”

Phillips was only saying what was factually true, and playing the game of planting a suggestion that ‘Telcam might follow to the benefit of Earth, but the monk rounded on him as if it was blasphemy.

“No!” For a moment Phillips thought he was going to shake him like a badly behaved child. “That’s *not* war! There is a line between catching the enemy off guard and being too cowardly to show yourself. *I will not cross it*. It defiles us. We fight for faith, *Philliss*, we fight to restore what we were to come close to knowing the gods’ intent for us again—not to make them shun us in disgust.”

Phillips had never really got used to rules of engagement. He wasn’t going to debate about them now. ‘Telcam strode back into the temple lobby, pushing Phillips ahead of him. Monk-warriors and former Sangheili soldiers who’d found themselves purposeless in what was to them a sudden catastrophic peace were already sweeping up the blast damage and fortifying the temple again.

How could he get word back to Osman that he was okay? He had nothing with him except a broken radio—not even a change of underwear. He was sitting in the middle of an unfolding civil war, clueless and alone. He might be back on board *Port Stanley* in a few days, or still hiding in tunnels months from now.

Or he might have been counting down the days to his death.

Suddenly he realized he felt more real, more alive, more *relevant* than he ever had in his life. The thrill of it ambushed him. It wasn’t fun, but the adrenaline had ebbed and the paralyzing fear had been

replaced with an extreme focus. He *liked* this new feeling. It was sharp, bright, and intense. Everything—~~sound, color, smell, every sensation in his body~~—was vivid and minutely detailed.

Maybe this was what kept his UNSC buddies going. He understood them a lot better now. If he played his cards right, he might live to swap this tale with them over a beer.

‘Telcam walked up to a table that had just been set upright again and slammed his fist down on it to get attention. Everyone stopped and listened.

“Brothers,” he boomed. “This is the work of the Brutes. An irrelevance. An annoyance. Are we a fit to fight?”

“We are, Field Master.”

“Are we set on our path? Does anyone wish to step back from the war to come?”

‘Telcam was a monk who still believed in the Forerunners as gods, even if the San’Shyuum had been discredited as false prophets. But he also had a pragmatic political streak. Phillips had started to think of him as medieval Pope material, a Borgia of a creature, both ruthless commander and devoted bishop. The Sangheili was playing a bit of both now. He looked from face to face as if he was searching out the waverers before devouring them. Nobody twitched.

“Are we ready to launch our assault?”

“Close, Field Master. Very close.”

‘Telcam hit the table again. Dust jumped. So did Phillips.

“Then that is close enough. Ignore the Brutes. Kill any that get in the way, but focus on the main objective.” He turned his head slowly from side to side to take in the whole room, suddenly seeming more like a swaying cobra. “The assault on Vadam must begin *now*.”

UNSC INTELLIGENCE SAFE HOUSE, NEW TYNE, VENEZIA: MARCH 2553

Me and my big mouth.

As soon as Vaz Beloi said the name *Naomi*, he knew he’d regret it. But he couldn’t stop himself. He just wasn’t expecting to scroll through mug shots of Venezia’s resident undesirables and see his father’s face looking out from the rogues’ gallery.

Staffan Sentzke. Terror suspect. Colonial insurgent. Ready to take a pop at Earth any chance he gets.

Sentzke was the one conspiracy theorist in a million who was actually *right*. His long-lost daughter really was alive and the child the police had brought back to him was an impostor, just like he claimed. He didn’t know she was a Spartan, though. And Naomi didn’t know he hadn’t been killed when Sansar was glassed by the Covenant. Vaz sat staring at the datapad, wondering where the hell he’d start explaining this escalating disaster to her—or anybody else, for that matter. He’d thought ONI had finally done the decent thing by letting the Spartans know about the families they’d been snatched from as kids and brainwashed to forget, but now it didn’t look decent at all. It looked agonizingly messy. There’d be no happy endings and no healing reunions, not for any of them.

Maybe she’s better off never knowing where she came from.

But it was too late for that. Naomi knew, and now he and the two men peering over his shoulder knew a lot more. Vaz craned his neck to look up at Mal Geffen for a reaction. Mal wasn’t just his friend. He was his sergeant, too, and—Vaz had to admit it—a lot calmer when it came to these kinds of situations. He didn’t get angry. Vaz did.

Mal just let out a long breath, hands still braced on the back of the sofa as he leaned over Vaz. The basement was a scruffy jumble of old furniture and high-tech comms equipment, with the dead

musty, muffled silence of a soundproofed room. It swallowed every breath and creak.

“Well, bugger me,” Mal said quietly. “Small world, eh?”

Mike Spenser, the veteran intelligence agent who’d been posted here, frowned in that hang-on-a-minute kind of way that said he’d put two and two together and had come up with an embarrassing answer. Vaz was never sure how much Spenser had been told about anything. He was military intelligence, but he wasn’t ONI, and ONI was a law unto itself even in the intelligence world. As far as Vaz knew, Spenser hadn’t even been briefed about Kilo-Five’s mission to destabilize the Sangheili state. Just because they were all on the same side didn’t mean they could share information.

I shouldn’t have said Naomi. Jesus, what was I thinking?

“You don’t mean *Naomi Naomi*, do you?” Spenser asked at last. If anything, he sounded bored, and that had to be an act. “*Spartan Naomi? The Valkyrie?*”

Spenser wasn’t the kind of guy to forget a name, and he certainly wouldn’t have forgotten Naomi. She was at least two meters tall, so pale that Vaz still wasn’t sure if she was platinum blond or silver gray. She could take down an Elite or a Brute with her bare hands, and Vaz had seen her do both without breaking a sweat. She was what a human could become if you took the smartest and strongest and pumped them up with gene therapy, ceramic bone implants, and the most intensive military training the UNSC could offer.

Provided you did all that while they were still little kids, of course. That was the heart of the problem as far as Vaz was concerned. It was a recipe for retribution. And he knew that day had come.

“Yes. *Naomi Naomi*. Spartan-Zero-One-Zero.” Vaz stood up and handed the datapad to Mal. There was a certain wisdom to stopping digging when you were in a hole, but that would only make Spenser more curious now. “That’s her real name. Naomi Sentszke. I’ve seen her file.”

Spenser nodded, still pretty relaxed. “Yeah, I wondered when all that crap would come out.” He didn’t elaborate on what he meant by *crap* and Vaz didn’t know how to ask without revealing anything. The dirty details of the Spartan program had certainly come as a shock to the marines. “I can see the resemblance now. That *boiled* look. You think he knows? It would explain his attitude to Earth.”

“He worked out some of it.” Mal narrowed his eyes a fraction. “You know how they recruited for the Spartan program?”

“I didn’t *need* to know. But I do know some operatives declined to take part in the recruitment. I’m being heavy on the euphemism there.”

“What happened to them?”

“What do you think? This is ONI we’re talking about, not an animal shelter. ONI really *does* put healthy dogs down.”

Vaz tried not to dwell on that. Mal missed a beat, but only one.

“So you know they took kids,” he said.

“I do now.”

“Oh.” Mal blinked a couple of times, finally caught out. “We never learn, do we?”

“Ah, come on. You’re ODST. Honest marines. Just stick to low-orbit jumps and shooting things. You’ll sleep better.” Spenser sloshed the dregs of his coffee around his mug, then took the datapad back from Mal. “The question is whether Sentszke knows. Or whether *she* does.”

“She knows who her real family is,” Vaz said. *Do we tell her? Do we not tell her? Do we tell her before we tell Captain Osman? What the hell’s right?* “But this will be news to her.”

Spenser shook his head, slowly and ruefully. “We’re going to miss the Covenant. Nice simple stuff. One jaw, good. Four jaws, bad.”

“Are you going to call this in, Mike?” Mal asked.

“No, because you’re going to do it. Aren’t you?”

Vaz wasn't sure how to take that. There was another awkward silence. He could feel the vibration of traffic from the main road. Beyond these walls, old enemies were picking up where they'd left off before the Covenant had arrived and interrupted the long-running war between humans. Venezia had always been a haven for criminals and assorted outlaws. Now it was open house for any species with an axe to grind with its government, but that suddenly seemed a much more theoretical problem than facing Naomi.

Naomi *had* to be told, one way or another, and Vaz would do it. She'd make a big show of being completely above all the personal loyalty stuff, maybe even want to arrest her dad to prove she put her duty first, just like the way she'd reacted to Halsey. That didn't mean it wouldn't hurt her. Spenser was right: killing hinge-heads had been a blissfully simple kind of war. It had never left Vaz feeling dirty.

"Devereaux here, guys," said a voice in his earpiece. "I need you both back here pronto. Osman's banging out."

Mal's head jerked around. "What's the problem?"

"We've got an incident on Sanghelios. We've lost contact with Phillips."

"Christ, that's all we need. Is this going to be an extraction?"

"Possibly. Now means now, Mal. Move it."

Spenser watched the exchange with mild interest, unable to hear the other side of the conversation. "Is that Oz?"

"Devereaux," Mal said. "Change of plan. We need to get back to the ship."

"Well, I'd better drop you off, then, hadn't I? Spenser Cabs. We never close." Spenser began switching off the various screens and monitors in the shuttered basement. He didn't ask for details. "When are you coming back?"

"I'll tell you when they tell us."

"Never mind. I'll keep the scumbags warm while you're gone."

Spenser had a hell of a lot of security devices to activate before he finally locked the front door behind him. There was no such thing in New Tyne as neighbors who minded their own business. Vaz slid into the backseat of the pickup and tried to look normal for Venezia, which actually seemed easier than fitting in on Earth. Everybody here looked what Mal called *dodgy*, so Vaz felt that the scar across his jaw came in handy. Nobody would work out that he got it trying to tackle a hinge-head. It looked like the outcome of a bar brawl with a knife. He hoped it would deter the curious.

"Do me a favor, Mike." Mal slid into the passenger seat with his carbine half-hidden under his jacket, finger inside the trigger guard. "Hang fire on Sentzke until we get back."

"Wouldn't dream of shooting him without your permission."

"Seriously. This is going to be awkward."

"I'll bet."

Spenser started the engine and headed for the highway. The ancient Warthog eased into the traffic, weaving slowly around trucks until it pulled up at the stoplight in the city center.

Vaz risked looking at the vehicle idling in the next lane. The driver was a Kig-Yar. The assortment of species living side by side on Venezia was the only sign that this wasn't a regular colony, not the kind Vaz had ever seen one of those. By the time he got to a colony world, it was usually smoking ruins or a glassy sheet of vitrified soil. The war with the Covenant had started long before he'd enlisted, and he was an Earth boy.

"Ugly bastards," Mal muttered. The Kig-Yar turned its malevolent heron gaze toward him like he had heard him, but it was just checking the traffic. "You know how long it took me to get the smell off my hands the last time I picked up a dead one?"

"You know how long it took me to build up a working relationship with the ones you shot?"

“Sorry about that.”

“They’ve still got a *mev-ut* out on you two for that. You know what that is, I hope.”

“Yeah, Phillips did explain. A cash bonus for bringing back our skulls and cervical vertebrae. We’re collector’s items.”

Mal must have been more worried about Phillips than Vaz thought. Silence meant he was thinking about a bad situation: swaggering humor meant he was trying *not* to think about it. Phillips was a clever guy with plenty of guts, but he wasn’t trained for these kinds of situations, and Vaz could only imagine what a hinge-head could beat out of him given enough time and a big stick.

But they don’t trust us anyway. You can’t suddenly start trusting an enemy after you’ve been at war for that long. No, it’s not about exposing ONI. It’s what they’ll do to Phillips.

Phillips had a fragment of BB with him, at least, and BB could always think his way out of a tight spot. But the fragment had orders to activate a lethal injection if Phillips found himself with no other way out. Vaz had lost a lot of comrades over the years and had always suspected that one day his last bullet might be best saved for himself, but the thought of having to put a buddy out of his misery was more than he could cope with right then. Maybe BB would find it easier.

“You okay, Vaz?” Spenser asked. “You don’t look too happy.”

“This is Russian elation,” Vaz said. “You should see me when I’m miserable.”

Spenser made a noise in his throat that might have been a laugh. There was a trick to driving a ’ho in a don’t-mind-me kind of way and he seemed to have it. Vaz noted that the old pickup variant had exactly the same degree of denting and neglect that most of the other vehicles here did, no more and no less, so that it simply merged into the cityscape. Spenser was driving briskly, not breakneck fast but not hanging about either, and clearly watching everything around him without looking as if he was staring at anything at all. He simply moved his gaze, casually scanning from side to side and occasionally checking in the mirrors, making it look perfectly normal. Vaz noted the technique. He decided he might need it one day. Spenser had probably been a spook for thirty years, and a guy didn’t get to survive covert operations behind enemy lines for that long without exceptional skills.

Am I ever going to get used to this kind of war?

Spenser had known a time when the only enemy was other humans. Vaz hadn’t. Neither had Mal. Vaz wondered how hard it would be to fire on his own species.

The buildings thinned out from offices and stores to houses, and then melted into open land. Less than thirty minutes after receiving the recall they were grinding through scrubland on a dirt road heading for the RV with Devereaux. The ONI dropship—not just any old Pelican, but a stealth variant—was laid up in a wooded gorge, out of sight of passing ships or vehicles. Stealth didn’t mean invisible to the naked eye. Mal fiddled with his radio and Vaz caught a microburst of signal in his earpiece. Not that Devereaux needed a signal to start the engines: Vaz could already hear the faint whine of drives even before Spenser came to a halt.

Spenser stopped under the cover of trees. He had to live here, after all. “I’ll wait until you’re clear,” he said. “Just in case.”

Mal slapped him on the shoulder and jumped down from the passenger seat without a word. Vaz hadn’t even secured the dropship’s door before Devereaux started to lift. She skimmed along the top of the gorge, putting as much distance between herself and New Tyne as possible before she had to hit the throttle and make the final fast climb out of the atmosphere. Vaz watched tops of trees streak past the cockpit windshield, worryingly close.

Mal stuck his head through the cockpit hatch, squeezing Vaz out of the way. “You got a sitrep, Dev? How bad is it?”

“How bad do you want? Phillips ran into ‘Telcam, and ‘Telcam asked him what he knew about J ‘Mdama.”

“Oh, Christ. So our cover’s blown.”

“No idea. ~~There was an explosion, and the last thing Osman heard over the radio was ‘Telca~~ telling Phillips that it wasn’t them, whatever that means.” Devereaux paused and the dropsh suddenly shot up almost vertically, making Vaz grab for a handrail. He should have buckled in. “The she lost the signal.”

That was what came of playing a double game—a treble game, in fact, smiling at the Arbiter while arming the religious zealots who wanted to overthrow him, as well as kidnapping one of the rebels who happened to get in the way. Well, ONI had certainly succeeded in keeping Sanghelios off balance. That was what Parangosky wanted: to kick the hinge-heads while they were down, to kick them hard that they could never get up and bother Earth again. Vaz didn’t have a problem with that. He was just finding it *tangled*.

The patch of sky framed in the cockpit screen faded from blue to violet to black. They were clear of the planet now. Devereaux turned the shuttle over to the onboard AI with a tap on the console. She didn’t look back over her seat.

“He’ll be okay, Dev,” Mal said.

She sounded a little hoarse. “Yeah.”

Her tone was resigned. Vaz realized he hadn’t picked up something that Mal already had. She was fond of Phillips. It wasn’t until Vaz heard that slight crack in her voice that he realized it was more than a comradely concern for his safety.

“I mean it, Lian.” Mal’s voice dropped to firm, quiet reassurance, the first time Vaz had heard him call Devereaux by her actual name. There was a rock-solid fatherly certainty about him now. “He’ll make it. He can talk his way out of anything in three alien languages. Chin up, kid.”

Devereaux just nodded. Somewhere in the glittering black void, the ONI corvette *Port Stanley* lurked with an impatient captain, a Spartan who was about to get more bad news after a very bad week, and an AI who’d lost part of himself along with Phillips. On the console, the navigation plot showed the ship as a delicate green mesh of light.

“So how was your day?” Devereaux seemed to be making an effort to be her chirpy self again. “Track down any bad guys?”

It was hard to answer. As Kilo-Five’s commanding officer, Osman should have been told first, but then Naomi had the moral right to know before anyone else. On the other hand, Devereaux was ODS, 10th battalion, one of their own, and Vaz didn’t like keeping fellow marines in the dark even for a few hours. He struggled with the news. Mal didn’t step in to help him out.

“We did,” Vaz said at last. “And it’s complicated.”

HANGAR DECK, UNSC *PORT STANLEY*: VENEZIA ORBIT

Pain was a strange sensation when you didn’t have a body.

BB was an entity of pure thought, beyond the reach of aches and injuries, but now he realized what traumatic amputation felt like. He’d been integrated with his fragment while it was stored in Phillips’ radio cam. Then there’d been an explosion. The link had been cut. And it *hurt*.

That was the only way he could describe it. It was the interruption of his thought processes—unpleasant, disorienting, and lingering. He felt something of himself was missing and gone forever.

But I’m used to splitting off fragments and closing contact with them. I’ve got a fragment wandering around Bravo-6 in Sydney, too, and I’m out of touch with that all the time. I could split off a dozen more, no problem. This feels different.

He'd been inserted into Naomi's neural implant just once, plugged into her nervous system in combat, so he knew what stress and adrenaline felt like to a human. Perhaps that was the cause of this. He was identifying too much with flesh and blood. His existence, his body, was input and data, and suddenly pulling the plug was like having a chunk of him ripped away, leaving him in shock.

And thought is all I am. It's my blood. Data is my existence, like breathing. Without it, I'm dead.

It was also worrying to imagine what might have shut down the radio. Just a blast? Surely not. Old kit was far more robust than that. Radios even went on functioning when their owner stepped on a mine.

Well, there's only one way to find out ...

BB was spread around *Port Stanley's* systems, performing billions of operations a second and monitoring events light-years beyond the ship. Each sensor was his eyes, ears, nose, and fingertips, but he could detect and interpret inputs far beyond a human's senses. He knew more than any individual man ever would. Uncertainty was a new and disturbing experience for him.

Curiosity is wonderful. Ignorance ... isn't.

"*Tart-Cart to Port Stanley*—put the kettle on, BB. ETA four minutes." That was Devereaux, forcing cheerfulness but betrayed by the slight rise in the pitch of her voice. BB knew the dropship's position to ten centimeters and exactly when he'd need to seal the interior bulkheads and activate the hangar doors. He wasn't the only one struggling, then. "Any news?"

"No." BB could hear a conversation going on behind Devereaux, just broken snatches while she was transmitting, and too quiet for human ears to pick up. "Contacting the Arbiter's people requires some diplomacy."

"Oh," Devereaux said.

Mal and Vaz were arguing. BB could detect the changes in frequency that indicated clenched jaw muscles and more rapid breathing. BB caught half a phrase from Vaz, his Russian accent more pronounced, which meant he was angry: —*mi, then I will*. "Okay, then. *Tart-Cart out*."

BB was linked only to the dropship's onboard nav now, talking machine to machine. While he monitored and adjusted its flight path, he speculated on what the rest of that overheard sentence was and what had preceded it.

Mi. Nao ... mi. "Then I will" ... usually preceded by "If you don't."

So if Mal didn't do something regarding Naomi, then Vaz would. Do what? Ask her something, tell her something, give her something? The last crisis before the Venezia mission was unsealing Naomi's personnel file—ghastly stuff, details that would disturb any woman, even one who'd been trained and engineered to cope with traumas that would floor a regular human. It had to be something left over from that. Naomi had asked Vaz to read her file and break the bad news to her, so he was best placed to make the decision on what to tell her and when. Yes, that was what it was all about. BB decided to keep an eye on things and make sure everyone was okay—or as okay as they could be under the circumstances.

It was probably an authority thing. Mal was a staff sergeant; Vaz was a corporal. Vaz also had an inflexible moral streak, the sort that got him into arguments in a political world full of very gray areas.

I wonder if I'll ever regret stopping him from shooting Halsey?

The bulkhead warning lights flashed, the seals engaged, and the aft section of the hangar opened into the vacuum as the dropship maneuvered into position. Voice comms were still disabled. Ah, so they were still arguing. They knew BB heard and saw everything. That was why they'd once resorted to hiding under a cargo crate and communicating in silence. He thought they'd got over that by now and had started to trust him, so this had to be rather more serious.

"Come along, chop chop," BB said. "Osman's waiting to slip. We don't want poor Phillips to have

to sit through the Arbiter's home movies any longer than he has to, do we?"

Tart-Cart powered down. The deck clamps snapped into place on her landing gear and the hangar repressurized as the doors sealed shut. The starboard side hatch opened. BB caught the tail end of the argument before the ODSTs jumped out.

"It's got to be *her* first," Mal said.

"And what if *she* finds out? This is about trust."

"And what if she goes mental about it? Did you consider that?"

"Then let her go *mental*."

"This is what OPs are for."

Devereaux interrupted. "Hey, how about buttoning it?"

The three ODSTs walked away from *Tart-Cart* with their jaws set. BB projected his blue-hologram right in front of them as they jogged up to the metal steps leading to the gantry. He manifested as a box, plain and unadorned, because that was how he thought of himself: not a surrogate human, but a black box, a complex and unknowable machine behind a featureless facade.

"Everything all right?" he asked. *Because it's not all right with me.* He wasn't used to being cut out of the comms loops on missions, and now there were two blank spots in a memory that was built to know and retain everything. "You need a shave."

Mal glanced at Devereaux. "Yeah, Dev, ditch the mustache. Come on, BB. Out of the way."

"I've missed you, too."

Mal seemed anxious to change the subject. Vaz went silent, jaw twitching with unspoken objections. BB drifted ahead of them as they clattered along the passages to the bridge.

"What happened to your fragment?" Mal asked.

"I don't know. I went down at the same time Phillips did."

"You don't sound right, BB."

"It's not a pleasant sensation."

Mal slowed down and looked at him as he might have looked at Vaz. Organics needed to make eye contact. There were times when BB had considered relenting and projecting some kind of basic facial features—eyes and a mouth at least, to make humans more comfortable. But that wasn't who he was, and right now he felt a desperate urge to cling to his own sense of self. The squad had managed to cope with his box facade so far.

"Did it hurt?" Mal asked.

That was perceptive of him. "Yes."

"You're an honorary ODST, then. You've got a scar—you're in. Vaz has got one, Dev's got one, I've got one..."

"Yeah, he was shot in his ass while he was talking through it," Devereaux said. "Come on, we should be worrying about Phillips."

That was exactly what they all seemed to be doing in that mock-aggressive ODST sort of way. Osman was on the bridge with Naomi, leaning back in her seat with her fingers digging into the armrests in anticipation of the jump into slipspace. She hated it. Naomi sat at the nav console in her UNSC fatigues, a monument to stoic indifference. It didn't fool anyone and BB suspected she knew that all too well.

Osman glanced over her shoulder. "Okay, time to burn and turn. BB, spin us up. How did it go, Staff?"

"We'll brief you when you've got five minutes, ma'am," Mal said, settling into his seat for the jump. Vaz shot him a slow I'll-get-you-for-that look. "So what's the plan?"

"Well, by the time we reach Sanghelios, Phillips might have surfaced again. But let's assume he hasn't. It might not be easy to get down to the surface and find him, but I'd rather be there than here."

“We’re up for anything, ma’am.”

“I know. I’ve asked the Admiral to enlist Hood’s help, too.” Osman shut her eyes for a moment. She was probably more about steeling her stomach for the jump than despairing about things going wrong. “We’re giving them enough time to realize he’s in trouble before we tell them we’ve noticed. Not that the Arbiter won’t assume we’ve got our ways and means to stay in touch with him.”

BB was reaching the end of the countdown. He ran a last-minute comms scan to make sure there were no messages waiting before the jump put *Stanley* out of comms contact, and took a sitrep from his fragment in Bravo-6, UNSC’s Sydney headquarters. It was keeping an eye on the other ONI officers and AIs at HQ. Everyone knew by now that Osman was Parangosky’s choice to succeed her when she finally retired as CINCONI, but that didn’t stop rivals jockeying pointlessly for position while her back was turned. BB kept watch.

All seemed quiet: everything was under control, even Captain Hogarth and his irritating AI, Harrier. There was also an interesting update from Parangosky on the initial findings from the Forerunner technology discovered in the Dyson sphere. He’d pass that to Osman for leisurely reading later.

“Eight seconds, boys and girls.” BB read the report while he timed the jump. The Huragok were already adapting Forerunner tech for *Infinity*. The nav systems that Halsey had discovered on Onyx could control a ship’s exit from slipspace so accurately that they could predict exactly where and when it would emerge—no more jumping and hoping, then. Perhaps *Stanley* would get that retrofit next. “We’re going to test the drives’ theoretical maximum. Enjoy.”

Osman let go of the armrests and clasped her hands in her lap. BB released the drive inhibitor. The corvette punched instantly into slipspace and the stars in *Stanley*’s forward viewscreen streaked into white lines, then vanished, leaving a truly black and featureless void. Osman sat staring at the absence of a view for a few moments.

“Okay,” she said. “We know where Phillips was, and we’ve got enough positioning data from him to map the immediate area. BB, I want a projection we can start planning with if we have to insert and go looking for him.”

“It’s going to be hard to do that covertly in a city, ma’am,” Vaz said.

“We might not need to do it.” She stood up, but BB noticed her put a carefully casual hand on the back of the seat to steady herself. She took a few minutes to recover from a jump. “So what’s happening on Venezia, Staff?”

Mal’s heart rate jumped, and so did Vaz’s. BB could detect that simply by micro-measuring the visible pulse in their necks. These were men who didn’t even sweat when they jumped from orbit straight onto the battlefield with just a coffin-sized pod between them and hard vacuum. He couldn’t imagine what Venezia could do to rattle that composure.

“Ma’am,” Mal said, “we’ve got a unique problem.”

“That’s an unusual word for you, Staff.”

“It’s an unusual situation.”

“Just tell me they’ve not acquired orbital nukes.”

“I think Spenser would have mentioned that, but we’ve got a complication that ... well, it’s something I think Naomi needs to hear as well.”

Osman didn’t even blink. “Is it something *I* need to hear?”

“Oh yes.”

“Like I’ve said before—we’ve got no secrets in Kilo-Five. We’ve got to trust each other to do the kind of job.”

Mal half-turned to Naomi and hesitated, one of those short human pauses that was an eternity for an AI. BB was used to knowing what was coming next: he thought far faster than a human and his awareness was literally everywhere at once. But he had no idea where this was leading, and it bo

scared and thrilled him. *Information*. It was an AI's addiction.

~~But Vaz got there first. He didn't seem to relish that.~~

"Naomi," he said. "Your father's still alive. He's on Venezia."

BB wasn't expecting that at all. It shocked him, not because her home planet had been glassed long ago, but because he didn't know already. How had he missed that? He knew her real background, the backgrounds of all the Spartan-IIs. Somehow he'd overlooked something. He took five nanoseconds to trawl through all his databases again, every casualty list, every criminal record, every census, and still it came up blank on Sentszke. Now all he could do was observe Naomi and study her reaction.

She was getting better at dealing with bad news. Like the ODSTs, she didn't turn a hair at operational surprises, but personal matters caught her off balance. She'd hold her breath and almost freeze for a second, then gather herself and look impassive again. She was doing that now.

"I don't know if I even remember him," she said at last. "How come he survived? And why is he on Venezia?"

So *this* was what Vaz insisted he'd do if Mal didn't. He was going to tell her about her father. BB could see from the muscles twitching in Vaz's temples that the worst was still to come.

"He's part of the anti-Earth rebellion," Vaz said. "He's on the terrorist watch list, Naomi."

CHAPTER TWO

I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THIS BEFORE, BUT WHAT DO SANGHEILI EAT? DON'T MEAN NUTRITION. WE KNOW THEIR PHYSIOLOGY WELL ENOUGH NOW TO KNOW HOW TO KEEP THEM ALIVE. I MEAN THE CULTURAL ELEMENT IN THIS—WHICH DISHES COMFORT THEM? WHAT REMINDS THEM OF HOME AND CHILDHOOD? DON'T THINK I'M GOING SOFT. I HAVE MY REASONS FOR ASKING.

(DR. IRENA MAGNUSSON, ONI RESEARCH FACILITY TREVELYAN, TO COLLATION SERVICES, OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE)

ADMIRALS' INSPECTION, UNSC *INFINITY*: SOMEWHERE IN THE OORT CLOUD

Parangosky could tell everything about a warship from those first few unplanned, unguarded moments when she deviated from the inspection plan and wandered off on her own.

“Ma’am? The command bridge is *this* way.” The young petty officer came trotting after her as she peeled off down an unlit passage in the opposite direction. “It’s easy to get lost in *Infinity*. She’s nearly six kilometers long, and—”

Parangosky carried on walking and held up her datapad like a security pass. “I know, Richardson. I’ve got the blueprints. I’ll be fine. Worry about Admiral Hood.”

“You’re going to want to take a supply trolley, then, ma’am. The deck transit system’s going to be down for a few hours and it takes forever to walk around. Hang on.”

He had a point. She stopped, leaning on her cane until she heard a small vehicle whir up the passage and stop just behind her. It looked like a narrower version of a golf buggy. Richardson jumped down from the seat and held out his hand to help her climb on, a perfect little gentleman.

“Thank you, Petty Officer,” she said, giving him a wink. “Now go and put a collar and lead on Admiral Hood. We don’t want him getting into mischief, do we?”

Richardson took the hint. She heard his boots fading behind her, listened to make sure he wasn’t warning the engineering crew that she was heading their way, and started the buggy. If she’d read the deck plan correctly, she was heading for the engineering section at the stern, in the opposite direction to the command bridge located amidships. The Huragok would be there and nobody was expecting her. *Least of all Catherine Halsey*. A scientist who didn’t exist on a ship that didn’t exist: Parangosky could keep Halsey declared dead and out of contact with all but *Infinity*’s handpicked crew for as long as she liked.

Infinity had swallowed so much of the UNSC budget that Parangosky had to cooperate with Fleet and accept joint control. No wonder this ship cost so much. She could see it all around her. Every scrap of Forerunner technology that they’d recovered over the years had gone into *Infinity*. The ship should have been ready to deploy by now, but then something akin to a miracle had happened: Onyx had yielded a treasure trove of even more advanced Forerunner technology that the artificial world had held hidden.

It made tolerating Halsey a few years longer worth the pain. No hijack and escape to Onyx—no game-changing refinements for *Infinity*, or the Huragok to install and maintain them. The greatly improved drive speed and accuracy of slipspace navigation were just the first things plucked from the Dyson sphere’s cache. There was no telling what other tactical advantages were still waiting for the Trevelyan crew to unearth.

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