

Arc 1 – God Out of the Machine

1.01

“- March 10, 2525 .-“

“- Catherine Elizabeth Halsey .-“

They came for her in the night.

She wished she could say she had been prepared for it. She always believed herself to be someone who always considered every possibility, even if just as an intellectual exercise. It was even true. But for all that, she'd never seriously entertained the idea that her Spartans, who'd so consistently exceeded all assessment criteria and *her* expectations, would ever outright *defy* all of them.

And so she woke up in the middle of the night to station-wide alarms and confused COMs, that she had to blearily and anxiously tap manually because *Jerrod was gone from her laptop!*

Someone had been inside her quarters! Her ultra-secure ONI quarters. Which she'd installed her own security protocols in. While she was *sleeping*. And she wouldn't even have known if not for that!

“-repeat! Station security has been compromised by escaped experimental subjects! Requesting immediate assistance!”

“Call it what it is!” Franklin Mendez barked over the panicked ONI staffer. “To the UNSC Atlas! CODE S.O.S. I repeat, code S.O.S! This is Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez! I am authorising full military boarding operation against Science Station Endurance! The Spartans have gone roGHHH!”

The yowl of pain intersped with the far too distinct crackle of electricity was the last thing she heard before the comms all went dead.

Then she was alone with her daughter, her laptop, her red backup lights and the eerie silence for the next four hours, before someone finally deigned to come and unlock her room.

Kelly.

She stood tall. She did not speak. She wore one of the suits ONI had prepared for the Spartans in anticipation of Operation TALON. And for all that she still had a few of the mannerisms giving her away in spite of her covered face, Kelly may as well have been a titanium wall instead of a human. That's how completely Catherine's entreaties, questions and demands for answers broke against her.

Kelly gave her food rations and left, sealing her in her quarters again.

“- .-“

Kelly did not return until the next day, well after Catherine had concluded that her Spartans had full control of the Endurance, up to and including blocking all outbound communications.

That time, Kelly watched Catherine eat, feed and change Miranda. Then Kelly escorted her to the medical wing at gunpoint, where she was subjected to every bio-medical test the human scientific and medical community had come up with. And likely a few they hadn't, considering that she only awoke again the next day, back in her room.

“-.-“

She came to with a start, gasping in fear from a nightmare of being scanned and probed and dissected by an alien machine. Then froze in terror when she saw a large shadow looming over Miranda's crib.

She almost screamed. Perversely, the only reason she *didn't* was because she did not recognise him. He was a Spartan, clad in slacks and a medical robe and he had nothing concealing his identity, but she did *not* recognise him! It was enough to make all screams stick in her throat. He was taller than any of them. Stockier. An eight-foot monolith of a man with frame broader and grander than any of the others. Larger than life. Grimmer than death. It was everything she'd imagined the embodiment of war would be.

The man turned around and suddenly she felt like she was only now experiencing the meaning of shock.

It was John!

But how? He was taller than Samuel!

And he did not spare her even the merest glance as he walked out on her, IV pole in tow.

Doctor Catherine Halsey sat, stuck from shock and fear and her heart in her throat for who knows how many frantic heartbeats, after the door closed to her room-turned-prison. Then she jumped to her feet and rushed to Miranda's crib, suddenly terrified that she'd-

She was safe. She was *there*. She hadn't been stolen her like she'd-

The relief was like a bucket of ice dumped all over her skin. Fear for her daughter's life was a thousand times worse than separation anxiety, no matter how irrational both feelings happened to be. And they were not irrational now and here. She felt like she was in purgatory. And why did she so easily invoke such archaic religious metaphors? There were so many more relevant considerations hitting closer to home.

In a bit to both reassure and distract herself, she reached down to pick up her daughter. She was safe and sound. Whole. No evidence or harm. Or tests. Or anything else.

Only to freeze when she finally noticed what was between the folds of her blanket. The dog tags. John's. And a note. 'To the only one innocent.'

Three sharp knocks sounded on the door before Catherine had much chance to contemplate further.

Linda this time. She had the same armor and equipment. Along with a System 99 Anti-Matériel Sniper Rifle. She motioned with it at her. Signalled her to follow.

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey carefully set her daughter back down and did as directed.

Linda turned her back on her and led the way.

Catherine did not taunt her for what would be considered a reckless act in any other soldier. She wished she could have used it as a hint that she was not considered an actual enemy. But she could do neither. The reality was much simpler. And galling. She was an enemy, but she was no threat. And they both knew it.

Even so, Catherine did not ask questions. She knew that if *Kelly* didn't answer any, there was no way Linda would. Besides, she knew where they were going. Or at least who they were going to. Who was responsible for all this. In charge of this. Who was and would always be in charge of anything the Spartans did. She'd known the moment she met him.

A short walk down the hall, and an even shorter wait on the turbolift, took them to the central hub of the station.

Catherine still tried to discreetly contact Jerrod or Deja or Kalmiya, even though she did not expect to succeed. And she didn't. She tried to subvocalize AI-independent security failsafes as well. None of those worked either. She didn't know if it was because the station security had been undermined, or if her equipment had been while she was out. Or both. Or neither and something else was at work. There was suddenly so much she didn't *know*. It was maddening!

Even more maddening was to walk past the mess hall and see it filled to the brim not with Spartans but marines and ODSTs. UNSC marines and orbital drop shock troopers! They were all disarmed, bandaged and beaten black and blue. Some of them even had limbs in casts. And barely any of them dared look up from their trays. In fact, only one of them had enough nerve to hold his head high.

The only reason Catherine recognised him was because she had reviewed his file, when she found out ONI had arranged for certain 'elite' troops to come test her Spartans' augmentations. Second Lieutenant Antonio Silva. The leader of the 105th Shock Troops Division. Stationed on the UNSC Atlas Epoch-class heavy carrier that had only arrived in-system three days ago.

He was the only one who seemed to bear meeting the gaze of the impromptu warden of the science-turned-prison station. Even talking to him. Or at him. Sullenly. With gritted teeth. Increasingly so the more her Spartan continued to answer the much older and seasoned man with grim silence.

Frederick. Catherine would have recognised him even without his helmet off. It only made her inability to recognise John all the more disturbing. She had seen him after the changes and he looked *nothing* like he did now. But that didn't help because it only sparked more questions. Chief among them being *what had happened to him?*

As she was ushered onwards and they left the mess hall behind, Catherine's thoughts wandered to the augmentations she had ruled out due to their high failure rates and unacceptable likelihood of side-effects. None of them involved physical changes as extreme as what she'd seen of John during the brief moment earlier. But it was not *impossible* that cross-chemical conflicts or synergies could arise that would manifest such a thing. And there were so many possibilities, more so if ONI had conducted anything without her permission.

It was just about what she would expect from them, especially the usual suspects. They wouldn't balk at ruining her Magnum Opus with such little things like slow death by necrosis. Or fatal blood clotting. Or the extreme likelihood of the subject turning antisocial and *psychotic*.

Despite herself, Catherine flashed back to John looking down on her baby daughter and then walking out on her as if she wasn't even there. The memory suddenly seemed much more sinister than the event itself had been.

She couldn't imagine how it might have happened. Or when. The level of personal supervision she placed on the augmentation procedures was virtually religious. And yet there was no other explanation.

What had ONI done to her Spartans?

What were they doing with her work?!

John was already in the classroom when Catherine was shown in. He was in a chair behind the holotable that Deja normally used in her lessons. A mountain of food was on the table next to him and a fresh IV hung off the pole to his other side. And before him, pages turning as quickly as allowed by the annotations he was making to its pages, was an open journal.

A very familiar journal.

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey felt all blood drain from her face.

Linda either made or helped her sit. She wasn't sure. She couldn't remember later, if she were asked to recount it. She remembered only slightly better how it rankled to be made to sit as if she were an errant schoolgirl called before the teacher's desk.

What did settle crystal clear in her memory was how lost for words she remained at the sight of John. If there even was anything in common left with the John she knew before. The impossible rate at which he devoured the food was only the least incongruous thing about him.

Her mind travelled back to that last, long discussion she had with him. He'd been convinced they were going to enter a new, more severe stage of training (How did he know?). Part of her had wanted to tell all of them, show them the exact protocols they had to endure for the augmentation phase. Part of her had wanted to offer them a choice. Would any of them have refused?

There really was no choice, though, was there? Not for humanity's sake. Every day the insurgency grew bolder. Millions had died in defense of the outer colonies since they started this. Deja updated and ran her revision of Carver's model weekly... the results kept growing worse.

The Spartans had to be forged.

Looking at John now, as he loomed over everything even though he was in slacks and a hospital robe and sitting down five feet away with an IV stuck to his arm...

She wasn't sure what he'd been forged into anymore.

He'd told her not to worry, when she talked to him just weeks before. That he and his team were ready for anything.

It was looking like he and his team might have been the *only* ones who were ready for anything. No one else seemed to have been ready for this. Not even her!

The sight of John using a red pen to scribble on *her* journal, as if he were a teacher marking a student paper, she expected even less.

For the first time ever, Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey looked upon one of her Spartans and felt angry.

So when, much later, John set down the pen and finally looked up from her journal and at her, his face judgmental and older than it had any right to be, Catherine Elizabeth Halsey failed to contain herself.

"It took you long enough," she said sharply.

John shut the journal, stood, tossed something over the table and walked out on her for the second time.

Just like that. He dismissed her. Between a moment and the next, he dismissed her. Like the day before, he dismissed her. She had never been dismissed so completely in her entire life.

The gall of it was matched only by the self-disgust over having flinched at the action. But dismissed she was and flinch she did when the small, flat object flew towards her and came to a rattling halt just shy of the table's edge.

She looked at it. She recognised it. It was a 21st century quarter. Their quarter. Their coin.

The coin that was responsible for everything.

Catherine stared at it until Kelly nudged her with her rifle, prompting her to take it and herself back out of the classroom and all the way to her room as directed by her creation-turned-jailer.

She didn't fall asleep until late in the night, after turning the ancient coin between her fingers for hours.

“-.-“

The fourth day, after receiving her breakfast and baby care supplies through the automated delivery chute instead of in person, nothing seemed to happen until noon. It was enough to pull her from her ‘where did it go wrong’ spiral into wondering why the Spartans were even on the station anymore.

Or were they? Everything was so quiet. Even Miranda fussed a lot less than usual, as if she felt the chill mood that had taken over the place. Or maybe she was just more at ease now that even the subliminal white noise normally caused by wireless COMs was gone.

Around noon, it turned out the Spartans very much still were on the Endurance because one finally came to open her sealed door.

Kelly again. Escorting Franklin Mendez at gunpoint.

“Doctor,” the Chief acknowledged, voice scratchy, before turning around at Kelly’s signal to walk ahead of them both down the hall. The Chief was ungroomed, tired, angry, bloodshot-eyed and dressed in rumpled grey prison clothes.

Catherine Halsey recognised a throat screamed raw when she heard it. The bruises around his neck were only slightly less obvious an explanation for it than the twitches occasionally rocking his frame. Obvious symptoms of very recent and extended strikes with electrical batons.

“Torture, Kelly?” Halsey said, unable to suppress a flash of indignation. “I know I taught you all better than that!”

As a matter of fact, she hadn’t. But infuriatingly, her attempt at provocation only got more of the previous in response. Which is to say, nothing.

She couldn’t dwell on even that, however, because their trip led them to the hidden observation deck overlooking the rec room. Just in time to see a commotion come to a sudden halt. Marines along one side of the chamber. Her Spartans along the other. And the four Helljumpers that ONI had brought to test them, hovering between the other groups around the sparring mat. All except for one. The one laid out unconscious in the middle of it all, at the feet of a 14-year-old just a third of his bulk.

Kurt. He was standing over the downed ODST. Trembling in what was either shock or rage or grief or all of them as Frederick held him back by the wrist.

ODSTs. Marines. Spartans. All in one place!

What were they *thinking*?

And why were the Spartans even *here* anymore? They could have gone rogue the first day and yet here they still were, on the fourth!

Kelly activated the intercom just in time to hear a second ODST give a verbal assessment of his downed fellow.

“No obvious permanent damage,” the man said quietly, looking between his commanding officer and Kurt with all the disbelief of someone who’d just seen a 14-year-old fresh out of surgery smack a large veteran elite around like a bale of wheat. “But I don’t think I’d say that if he’d gone for the head.”

Doctor Catherine Halsey pursed her lips and looked away. Situational assessment was more important than listening to people state the obvious. Always her least favourite activity. Then she noticed James at the far end of the room, speed-reading through her journal with Sam and Maria and suddenly felt faint.

Mendez moved her to a seat before she collapsed. He'd expected it. He must have been here before they came for her.

"Alright," said Second Lieutenant Antonio Silva while pushing away from the wall nearest the door. "I have no idea what point is being made here but I'd say it's been made perfectly. If there's nothing else, I'd like to take my men get back to our ship now."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible for the foreseeable future," Fred said, letting Kurt go.

Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey tried and failed not to experience a soul-deep stab of resentment. Random marines were apparently worth conversing with even as she wasn't.

"And here I thought I'd just get another 'negative.'" Silva grunted, rubbing at his bandaged collarbone as he scowled at Frederick. "For all the good it does, which is jack shit! You're not helping either our situation, kid!"

"Negative."

The chief Helljumper pinched his nosebridge.

Halsey couldn't blame him. Negative to what? That he wasn't helping anyone? Perhaps Frederick was even replying a negative to the idea they were trying to make a point at all, but Fred making a joke like that was preposterous. Levity was one of the first thing their training had beaten out of them.

"Negative what?!" Silva, it seemed, had the same train of thought she did.

And now she was thinking the same as a jarhead. What was the galaxy coming to?

How had her Spartans managed to coerce this level of docility in the ever proud and belligerent Helljumpers? They were not trained for anything even approaching the sort of social engineering needed to achieve this, let alone on defeated enemy fighters. When did they even find the *time*?

What was she *missing*?

"Freaks of nature," muttered the only ODST not visibly injured.

Halsey almost gave in to the impulse to palm her face. The only reason she didn't was because she didn't want to miss anything. Especially her Spartans' reactions. All of whom were looking at the man before he even finished speaking. As did half of everyone else. As if he were an idiot of the first degree. Which he was.

"Cartman," the first Helljumper growled. "I swear to God--"

"Let him say what he wants," Silva said flatly, looking at Fred challengingly. "We're all on *enforced leave* here."

"Yeah, *let* him say that again," Solomon cut in, marching forth from the corner to get in his face. "I for one want to know *exactly* what the rest of humanity thinks about us."

"You sure you can handle it, little boy?" Eric Cartman sneered down at him. "Don't think we didn't notice how *none* of you went up against any of us real soldiers. I won't be talked down to by brats that've never done anything but hide behind big brother and sister's skirts!"

"Cartman--"

"No! Fuck you, Marsh! I sure as hell didn't come up here from God Damn Jotunheimen and spent months frozen to the balls in the aborted asshole of space, fought my way through half of that bastard's cunt fuckers and jumped out of fucking orbit on a regular basis, just to teach lessons in humanity to some ONI nutjob's

hell-spawned freaks! ONI ain't got no humanity and there's even less of it in whatever these poor excuse for foot soldiers are supposed to be! I'll say whatever the fuck I want! And through my honesty they'll know who I am! Same as they made sure *we* know who they are in the bruised, broken and crippled bodies they left behind."

"I bet that rankles, doesn't it?" Solomon spat. "Boo hoo, I'm the only one who didn't get taken down a peg by a little kid' is that what this is?"

"Weak burn, brat! Try it with someone whose job isn't to stomp on innies until they spend their lives imagining the cruelty their brothers endured at our hands and our boot heels and the edge of our knives!"

"Go to hell, you bastard! You wanna have a go!?"

"What's this I hear? Little baby gonna throw a tantrum 'cuz he can't browbeat a real man?"

"I'll show he browbeating-!"

"Solomon," Fred. "Stand down."

"Fuck no, let him make my day!" Cartman sneered. "I'm always up to shed blood for a good sob story, and you freaks are overdue a pint or five. You're not nearly afraid enough. Let's have at it! Then when you close your eyes at night and you're tortured by your subconscious for whatever fucked up shit you get up to, it'll be with thoughts of me you're tortured with!"

"Call me a freak one more time-!"

"He's not wrong, though, is he?"

Just like that, a single one of her Spartans derailed everything without putting even a modicum of effort. Not even what it would take to look up from his own hand. "We *are* freaks. Just not of nature." Kurt clenched his fist. "There's nothing natural about us."

"Bullshit!" Solomon lashed out. "You're gonna let what he said get to you?"

"Like you are?" Kurt said, lifting his eyes to his. "Look at us. ONI said we were humanity's only hope. That they'd make us into the most disciplined of soldiers and saviours. 'You have been called upon to serve. You will be trained - and you will become the best we can make of you. You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies.' That's what they told us. For everyone else's peace we would become living weapons of war! But the first time something challenges that system of beliefs, we're ready to kill the first person that offends us. Punch and stomp our way through a pile of corpses, if only we can find something to make everything that was done to us feel justified. How very much like children throwing a tantrum when exposed to the real wide world!"

"That's not..." Solomon trailed off.

"Speak for yourself!" Daisy yelled from the back before squeezing through Ralph and Oscar. "Maybe you have no trouble punching your problems until they go away, but me? Fuck that! The first chance I get, I'm out!" A shudder seemed to wrack her frame, but she wouldn't stop what she had to say. "I'm going home."

"And where is home?" Kurt turned to her, ignoring the way her voice had hitched at the end. "Do you even remember what it's called?"

"What kind of question is that! It's-" she cut off, unable to find the words. The panic that stole her features made Halsey's fists clench on her knees, but she reminded herself of the stakes.

Carver's findings. The Insurrection. Haven.

The Spartans *must* be forged.

“You can’t even remember the name, can you?”

“Kurt-“

“No!” for the third time that day, one of her Spartans turned on another. If this was the aggressive alpha dominance that ONI ‘experts’ spent the past 8 years vainly trying to bring about, Halsey wished she’d never seen it at all. “No, Fred! Isn’t this what you wanted? That’s why you guys showed us Halsey’s journal, right? Well there you have it! She can’t even remem-“

“It’s on Sargasso!”

Daisy’s outburst finally stopped the downward spiral, for a moment.

But only a moment. “...But you can’t even recall the name of your hometown, can you?” Kurt said.

“I...I...”

“Was it even a town? Or a village? Do you know?”

Daisy’s frozen face was all the answer he needed.

“Behold the great sons and daughters of ONI!” Kurt swept his arm wide, laughing derisively. Bitterly. “The once-in-ten generation geniuses turned into 14-year-old brainwashed kids that don’t know shit! The good doctor really knew what she was doing, didn’t she? And why wouldn’t she? Parenthood is the closest thing anyone gets to being God! You get to create a lifeform that then grows how you want, learns what you want, believes what you want and does what you want! Unless you’re so incompetent or treacherous that they rebel, but even then they’re defined directly relative to how they feel about you! Remember the underwater mission Chief Mendez sent us on at Emerald Cove? When he sabotaged half our air tanks? And we ended up stealing his?”

The marines and ODSs shifted uncomfortably, Silva narrowed his eyes intently, and Halsey wanted to go in there and yell. This was classified, need to know information! What was Kurt thinking by-

“And after, we ditched him and camped on that island and what did we do? A week of nothing but light bonfires, bake clams, and surf. Fun. Rest. Relaxation. The *exact opposite* of everything he’d put us through! We already were ONI’s perfect little sons and daughters and we didn’t even know it! The fake sons and fake daughters of a fake mother and fake father! Ha! Hahahahaha!”

There was nothing but awkward quiet on the part of everyone else as Kurt laughed himself hoarse at everything. Derisively. Hysterically.

“Ahahaha! Ah... Oh... You know what the worst part is?” Kurt finally said, when hysteria hollowly tapered off into self-ridicule. “All of this is on *us*, because they’re *terrible* at it. Being a teacher, a professor, a propagandist, compared to real parenthood they’re just pansy-ass imitations. You only become those things if you want to be a parent but can’t, or *failed* at it already. And Mendez and Halsey, they didn’t even try. They kidnapped us, brainwashed us, *tortured us for eight years*, and what do we do? We start thinking of them as mom and dad! Even though they electrocuted us and broke us and mindbent us and stomped all over us until we didn’t even know our own name.” His voice caught on the last bit. “...I don’t even remember my last name.”

“Trevelyan.”

Kurt jerked in place. As did everyone else.

Halsey herself was no better. Because that was, she now realised, the first word she'd heard John speak since the surgeries. And she hadn't even realised he was in the room! Belatedly, she looked up at the reflective ceiling to see him rise from where he'd sat next to a pile of food against the wall beneath Halsey's own feet. He really was the tallest person now. Even more so than Samuel, who faithfully followed in John's footsteps, pushing along the IV pole that hadn't left John's side since the augmentations.

What had ONI done to her Spartans?!

As if to pile up on the insults, the universe decided that Silva once more thought along the same lines as her. Was as taken aback as she was. "So you do talk."

But John ignored him. No, he acted as if the man didn't even exist. As if everyone besides his fellow Spartans didn't even exist. Her Spartans, the first of whom he walked up to and placed a hand atop his head as if he were a priest giving benediction. "Kurt Trevelyan. Of the City of Mira, planet Circumstance."

Kurt's breath hitched, his eyes misted, but he suddenly stood straight and taller than he ever had.

Halsey's mouth fell open.

Then John turned to Samuel, put his hand on *his* crown and said. "Samuel Roscoe. Gladsheim. Harvest."

Catherine Halsey watched in shock.

"Solomon Boesis. Sextantio, Aleria; Naomi Sentzke. Alstad, Sansar."

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey watched in shock as the one who should have been her greatest success seemingly undid all last eight years of her work.

"Daisy Wade. Taranto, Sargasso; Oscar Connolly. New Texas, New Houston; Joseph Appleton. Turin, Capella."

Catherine Elizabeth Halsey watched in shock as the one who should have been her greatest success seemingly undid all last eight years of her work with just a handful of words.

Then, after seeing it happen to every last Spartan including the crippled washouts that should long since have been pronounced dead, she was escorted back to her rooms. She spent the rest of the day watching her mind run in circles around the memory of it all.

The memory of UNSC marines looking disturbed as if they'd just watched John form a cult.

The memory of her scarred and shaken Spartans standing tall and looking up at John as if they'd just found God.

1.02

“-. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey .-“

Hypocrisy. Noun. The practice of professing beliefs, feelings, or virtues that one does not hold or possess. Falseness. An act or instance of such falseness. Dissimulation of one's real character or belief. A false assumption of piety or virtue. A feigning to be better than one is. The action or character of a hypocrite.

She'd never dreamed that someone would have the audacity to claim that the finest case study for that term was Halsey herself. But here it was.

The flash-fabricated facsimile of her journal taunted her.

All of the entries were the same and yet added over. Below or aside her words were others written in John's small, precise hand.

The horror of insurrectionist sympathies in her favorite Spartan was only overshadowed by the shock at how verbose he was turning out to be in passing judgment.

Judgment.

The universe's judgment was her creation's words in red all over her sketches.

[August 8, 2510] Can't concentrate today. Haven't been able to for weeks. New ideas, recent insurgent reports, the ubiquitous eye of ONI watching me... how can I NOT be distracted? Setting up the new lab has consumed the last few months. I have doubts. I keep wondering whether this is the best course. How did I become involved in this? Carver's report on the Colonies surely led me here, that scarcely begins to tell the story (Will clarify my thoughts on this further when I get a chance to breathe!).

I need a place to record my personal thoughts and the most sensitive research notes as I undertake this project which I've simultaneously desired, been inspired by, and dreaded. Reach is the sum of all those things, so it seems fitting that this journal begins here. Am I being sentimental? Yes. Pragmatic? Absolutely.

And so I begin... to learn whether humanity can be saved from itself, and the role I will play in its uncertain destiny.'

[Externalisation of responsibility for own anxiety. Emotionally-driven rationalisation. God complex.]

[December 4, 2510] It started three years ago when I met the acclaimed Dr. Carver at one of those academic social mixers where everyone is charming and trying to impress project benefactors. Even as a doe-eyed doctoral candidate, I detested these affairs. So when I heard Carver describing "the matrix mechanics of the socio- and politico-economic vectors of human expansion," I couldn't resist correcting him. (His ideas were genius, his algorithm implementation obsolete). I outlined a corrective matrix calculation revising the dimensional parameters in my head (he used 7 when he needed 16). Carver – who had been coasting on the lecture circuit after his initial publication – didn't appreciate the truth, especially from a young upstart.

The vice admiral (then a captain), however, took note.

If I had known that Carver would commit suicide three years later, I may have been more charitable in my presentation (Carver blamed himself for the very carnage he had predicted – a lesson for all scientists resides therein).

Three weeks after that party my grant proposal for artificial intelligence control for N-dimensional matrices was greenlit by the UNSC... contingent on the successful testing of a model of their choosing.

Naturally, it was Carver's.

I knew that his flawed model would produce flawed results. I ran my correct 16-dimensional variant as control in addition to his 7-dimensional version. Carver's model predicted a breakdown of social order in the Outer Colonies within twenty years unless strict governmental control was established, reinforced by an immediate and permanent military presence. The resultant vector was correct, but

not the magnitude. I ran more than fourteen hundred simulations, varying every parameter, and in the best-case scenario the Outer Colonies would rebel... and rebel soon.

With FTL-capable transports, ANY colony could convert such vehicles into weapons of mass destruction.

Minimum effect was thirty years of war and five billion dead. The maximum effect was unbounded. Interminable war. Another Dark Age for humanity.

I took my results to the vice admiral.

But the UNSC already knew. They had come to a similar conclusion (a slightly gratifying tidbit given that it had taken them three years of intensive research). Then why make me do the same calculations?

The Office of Naval Intelligence had apparently had their eye on me for years and knew the only way to convince me to join them was to get ME to convince me.

It worked. I joined.

How many lives must be spent to save all of humanity? Is any price too high to pay? This may be our only solution. Now, back to work.

[Personal variation of predictive model is assumptive rather than experimental. 'Breakdown of social order' a buzzword used to give negative connotations to the natural shift of the overton window towards liberty and independence when ruled by a bloated, ineffectual and abusive regime. 'Strict governmental control' a euphemism for centralised authoritarianism. 'Immediate and permanent military presence' a sanitised term for *tyranny*. WMD deployment assumed without any foundation. Entirely groundless in absence of UEG/UNSC striking first using precisely these measures! Acting on Carver's model grants anti-governmental forces legitimacy. Self-fulfilling prophecy.

[Supposed enemy factions entirely hypothetical. *Imaginary boogeyman*. Outer colonists assumed to mirror Kosovics and Friedens despite the *opposite* nature of economic, social and political vectors extant now. Similarity less than 10% to Interplanetary War. Similarity 92% to the American War of Independence.]

[Side Note: Colonial emancipation – independence – treated as an inherently evil prospect. Inherent superiority of decentralized governance entirely disregarded. Cognitive dissonance? Rather widespread. Hypocrisy even more widespread: ONI itself uses a decentralized organisational model to stay effective and competitive.]

[February 15, 2511] While I agree with the original direction of project ORION (even then they recognised the need for non-traditional forces to remove the budding dissident leadership in the Outer Colonies without massive carnage) their methodology was... unsettling (Amateurs led by uninformed career military).

[Ego exceeds investment in the scientific objectivity principle. Young doctoral graduate condescendingly assumes she possesses superior grasp of logistics and strategy than the very people who predicted, preempted and integrated her doctoral thesis into their long-term analytics years before its conception.]

Generation-II genetic election criteria are astronomically improbable. Statistically, over thirty-nine billion DNA records are required.

[Personal preferences described impersonally as if inherent requirements rather than self-chosen preferences for OWN project (official 'advisory' role clearly a mere formality). God complex self-reinforcing.]

ORION candidates were volunteers from various UNSC special forces: men and women who were undoubtedly qualified for any military assignment. But they were much too old to undergo genetic augmentation. Inserted gene sequences led to subliminal target changes, while the immunosuppressants failed in most subjects, causing rampant, irreversible genetic fragmentation and degenerative conditions. Refinement: The largest DNA database is currently the CAA's Outer Colony vaccination program. Colonists tend to avoid registering births and deaths, and even paying taxes... but they eagerly milk the free school vaccination program, which regularly catalogues DNA traces from the disposed injectors.

Deconvolution techniques can now reconstitute the entire base-pair sequence from such a trace, and I intend to recalibrate my selection criteria to look for markers that will expedite the sifting process.

[Natural overton shift towards decentralised governance and defence of private property continues to be demonised. Despite own actions suggesting similar if not more extreme conduct in similar circumstances. Confirmation bias self-reinforcing. Hypocrisy. Self-Delusion: Outer Colony vaccination program only biggest because inner colonies run *independent* programs. Combined Inner Colony databases dwarfs CAA Outer Colony vaccination program by several orders of magnitude. Explanation for obvious bias? Brain drain considered more palatable when inflicted on the 'enemy'?)

Many ORION candidates exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder or repressed insurgent sympathies. Some in the latter category refused to participate post-augmentation and were incarcerated. Sympathies of this sort are likely dormant in most Outer Colony citizens.

[Blatant confirmation bias. Draconian secrecy policies mean ORION subjects were never informed of their intended role pre-augmentation. Reluctance to invade, kill, conquer and impose martial law upon their own countrymen, friends and family entirely natural. Justified. Legitimate.]

On some level we all identify with these colonists (the CMA relentlessly churns out propaganda about the "noble" pioneers). More pointedly, these are the very people we are fighting to protect from a nascent civil war.

[Painting the enemy as morally reprehensible or psychologically compromised. Painting their civilian dependents as gullible sheep. Standard propaganda for any warmonger. Present situation unique only in that the writer actually believes the propaganda (Confirmation Bias!). Imposing tyranny 'for the people's own good' also standard procedure... for fascist and communist state structures! (i.e. the Koslovics and Friedens that the UNSC was created to defeat!)]

Refinements: Total indoctrination is required. NOT the brainwashing, however, suggested by several of my counterparts in the intelligence community. This requires persuasion and acclimation – a lifelong training commensurate with the import of the Generation-II ORION mission. Our most efficient agents will be those who thoroughly understand and embrace their orders. To forge a new breed of ORION soldiers into unrivalled human weapons, we must maintain absolute control over them. Summary: Criteria involving genetic flexibility, a statistically improbable set of DNA markers, and a decade of indoctrination and training leads me to one conclusion: the ideal candidates are children.

My logic is sound, but ethical and moral ramifications linger. So much to reflect on... I need time to think.

[God complex intensifies. Confirmation bias intensifies. Superiority of method wrongly conflated with superiority of morality. AND presumed to guarantee practicality. Pretends indoctrination and brainwashing are not the same in practice. Ethical and moral ramifications treated as if extant in a vacuum. Completely disregards the possibility of *practical* ramifications beyond those in favour of the project already cited. Not

nearly *enough* to reflect on. Consequences of removing the once-in-10-generation best and brightest from mankind's social structure and gene pool entirely disregarded. Short-sightedness. Self-delusion. Treason.]

[February 23, 2511] My god, they detonated a nuclear device at Haven!

Preliminary radiological analysis indicates the bomb was spiked to disperse toxic materials high into the colony's atmosphere. Millions dead. Millions more projected to die from the fallout. Countless birth defects for generations to come. The Freedom and Liberation Party has claimed responsibility, demanding the CMA withdraw from the Eridanus sector.

How could they commit such an atrocity? And against those who were supposedly their allies? They are INSANE! They must be stopped. I have to stop this.

[Confirmation Bias! Entirely disregards obvious similarities between the Freedom and Liberation Party and all controlled opposition of the past: Koslovic Flaggers. Frieden Rousers. Bolshevik Commissars. Antifaschistische Aktion. Every single political, military, intelligence, police and judicial sellout in the history of mankind.

Entirely disregards similarity to all past false flags.

Entirely disregards match with the gradual rise in the magnitude needed for incidents to incite public outrage sufficient for pursuit of war: Assassination of Sarajevo, Nazi Financial Reform, the Bombing of Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 attacks, the total collapse of the Geneva convention during the Earth Global Wars, the deployment of military-grade explosives against interplanetary diplomats during the Interplanetary War.

Summary: Alarming evidence of suggestibility! *Entirely emotional response with no rational follow-up*. No attempt at independent verification. No attempt at independent verification even after official story paints an identical picture *months* later. Complete failure to account for propaganda. Confirmation bias ever present. Note: Check Haven conspiracy sites for mentions of ONI agents dancing and celebrating a job well done on any rooftops nearby.]

[September 15, 2517] Astonishing! Every candidate has exceeded the selection criteria... and my expectations: superior strength and speed coupled with dazzling intellects and remarkable cognitive absorption rates. In another time, each could have been the next Alexander, Cleopatra, Hannibal or Genghis Khan.

One girl (Number 058) engineered her own intelligence network at school to spy on the teachers!

Number 117 had an unprecedented string of forty-five victories over two weeks in a brutal version of King of the Hill. Walked away with a chipped tooth. Over a dozen broken arms, collarbones and fingers among his opponents.

Number 095, oddly enough, was never located. Some have suggested limited precognition – but I'll believe in "trolls under the bridge" before I subscribe to such pseudoscientific nonsense.

Addendum: Retrieval team Gamma reports that Number 087 eluded capture for six hour! She dodged and sprinted away faster than anyone anticipated. Fortunately, the girl came forwards... believing it all to be an elaborate game for her upcoming birthday!

This serves as a reminder of the candidates' special natures, and how one mistake could jeopardise the entire program. If insurgent-sympathetic media discovered our project, they would discredit us with the very populations whose sympathies we are trying to retain.

We've implemented new retrieval protocols.

No more mistakes.

[Treason, treason, **TREASON!** *Irreparable* damage to mankind's potential acknowledged and dismissed in the same breath as rejoicing over successfully inflicting it! The greatest leaders, visionaries and savants of latest generation were removed from society. Removed from the future. Removed from the gene pool. *Incalculable* damage to mankind's prospects well into the far future. Best case scenario, the socio-political, economic and technological stagnation of humanity will continue for at least 5 generations. Worst-case scenario, widespread societal degeneration. Interminable war. Another Dark Age for humanity!

Exceptionalism unaccounted for in Carver's model! Three thousand simulations recalculated with just ONE extra dimension to account for individual impact on mass action. New picture directly contrasts ONI projections: a gradual, multi-lateral, over 64% peaceful proliferation of independence, decentralized forms of governance, and privacy for all Outer Colonies. Federal organisation likely within 30 to 50 years. May eventually prompt the Inner Colonies and Earth itself to follow suit due to higher need for self-sufficiency. Side Effect? Unavoidable political reform for the UEG and all its state mechanisms.

Side Note: Letting events follow their natural course would, of course, lead to the inability for ONI to maintain and extend the oily tentacles and feelers of its draconian surveillance and oppression apparatus. Socio-political reform might do what all UEG and UNSC attempts to enforce some form of oversight have not. One needn't wonder whether or not ONI has already run these same calculations and is taking steps to prevent its own end: death by irrelevance.]

“-.-“

Sitting there in the briefing room, trying to make no noise and draw attention to herself, Doctor Catherine Halsey tried to reign in her emotion. Emotion was the death of reason. Unfortunately, emotion was also the catalyst for the *freeing* of reason depending on who you asked. The freeing of reason from the yoke of conviction and *expectations*. She definitely didn't seem to lack in terms of expectations. Even now, when everything went completely *against* her expectations.

There were other notes all over the later entries of course. Even in the most recent one of March 9, 2525. John had some pretty choice things to say about what she considered an 'acceptable' rate of failure. He also included some particularly snide barbs about project TENDRIL. Not just on moral grounds but practical ones, as with all the rest. Chiefly how there would be no shortage of volunteers if they just did it openly. Possibly enabling a research sample magnitudes greater than what their 'quiet arrangements' were likely to produce.

None of it would be nearly so galling if he didn't have a point.

A point now known far and wide after her journal was scanned and uploaded straight to SATCOM along with every other shred of damning intelligence on Endurance station, blowing ONI's conspiracy wide open.

“Doctor, when he told me the Spartans were exceeding all expectations, I didn't think you meant this,” said the holographic seeming of Vice Admiral Hieronymus “Harold” Michael Stanforth. Completely humourlessly. “Let's take it from the top, shall we?”

Normally, reports would be given in chronological order. But since she was now considered an unreliable source and Mendez had been in lockup for the duration, Captain Aimilios of the late UNSC Atlas took precedence. He had much less to say on the matter than anyone there, as his involvement was little more than as second-hand observer before he became a victim like everyone else.

But his report worked very well to frame the others. In particular, the report by the most senior operative on the ground, so to speak. Which, as serendipity had it, was Second Lieutenant Antonio Silva of the 105th Orbital Drop Shock Troop Division.

The man's verbal account, when his turn came, proved illuminating.

"Their physical abilities exceed peak human parameters by several good factors. Just three of them were able to neutralize the entire security implement of the station including my men and I. While working solo."

The full picture was only more so.

"We couldn't use numerical superiority in these rooms and corridors. Also, concussives and blanks shot out of an SRS99D-S2 AM Sniper hurt like a motherfucker."

Unfortunately, the report also proved to be as coarse as it was incriminating.

"Their fists hurt like an even worse motherfucker even without those suits of theirs, begging your pardon, sir."

Extremely incriminating. Those were the suits designed for Operation TALON that would never now take place. They could deflect small-caliber rounds and were equipped with refrigeration/heating units, encryption and communications gear, and thermal and motion detectors. That they were entirely unnecessary in the end for her Spartans to take on entire divisions of marines and ODSTs singlehandedly was no consolation. At all.

After subduing everyone on Endurance, her Spartans had deliberately lingered for days on the station in total COM blackout. At first it seemed they were waiting for John to wake, since he was the last to do so. But the immediacy with which they secured and set about collecting every last washout and cryo-frozen failure put paid to that assumption quickly. Especially when they started using Halsey's subverted Ais, and their home field advantage alongside deception and manipulation, to have the majority of the Reach fleet redirected here.

Then the Spartans goaded the Atlas command structure into deploying 80% of its marine and ODST complement for full-scale, multi-pronged boarding action. Conveniently leaving the ship dramatically vulnerable to counter-boarding action, which they promptly carried out. In less than an hour! While preventing any alerts from escaping the ship, just like they did on the station beforehand.

Between the total COM jamming and the sheer size of the station that needed to be seized, it was five hours of goose chases, anti-compromised-AI cyberwarfare, and explosives or blow torches applied to every other door before the Atlas complement smelled a rat.

But her Spartans had been long gone by then. Including the washouts. And the cryogenically frozen corpses of the ones whose augmentations failed.

And the UNSC Atlas cruiser itself.

To make matters worse, Atlas was also the ship where the eight most intact failures had been moved before the graduates even woke up. Without anyone's knowledge (even hers, and she'd be having *words* with all relevant parties about that!). But her Spartans had recovered them too. There had been some excitement involving an ONI black ops cell attempting to sneak off the ship with four of them, using a Black Cat subprowler that had been kept off the books. But Linda had apparently arrived at the scene in the nick of time and stopped that too.

At least that's what the Vice Admiral had seen fit to tell them. And the only reason he even knew all that was because the bruised and beaten ONI agents were among the occupants of the many escape pods left behind, floating in the vacuum of space and still being retrieved.

Catherine Halsey had been entirely oblivious and useless through all of it. Not least because her own door had been welded shut, so she couldn't even try to hack her way out. Not that she put more than a token effort in that. She knew it would fail. They were her Spartans after all. They'd never leave such a vulnerability at their backs. She'd made sure of it.

Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey listened, silent and grim-faced, and yet pride still burned beneath her outrage and dismay.

She feared this would happen to her. Something about the parent-offspring relationship debilitated her otherwise objective reasoning, evoked emotions... far more than anticipated.

"This is a fine pickle we find ourselves in, people," Stanforth finally said after Silva finished giving his report.

She stayed silent. Mendez also stayed silent.

"Sir," Silva said. "Permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"They're good kids."

Catherine Halsey gaped. So did Mendez. And the less said about the face of Captain Aimilios of the late UNSC Atlas, the better.

Even Stanforth couldn't contain his astonishment. That was not something that *anyone* expected the proud Helljumper officer to say. "Lieutenant," the Vice Admiral slowly uttered. "They're rogues."

"Yes, sir."

"They went against and compromised the security of the UNSC."

"Yes, sir."

"They stole his ship."

"Yes, sir."

"They cut a bloody swath through all your men."

"And we're all still alive," Silva said, head high. "Sir."

That gave pause to everyone. Actually, the look of the Vice Admiral's face suggested he hadn't been told that tiny tidbit yet. ONI up to its old tricks already? Stanforth being Stanforth, of course, he was far too self-assured to worry about how it might look to check the reports right then and there, for all to see. "Well I'll be," the Vice Admiral murmured after reading the relevant sections. Nothing on his face even hinted that he'd be having some words of his own with the usual suspects. Later. "So even your man made it? Langston, was it?"

Langston. The large ODST that Kurt had almost killed, not knowing his own strength.

"He'll be out of combat for a month or five but yes, Sir. He'll make it."

"Fascinating." Stanforth closed the window and treated everyone to inscrutable look. "Gentlemen, I'll be frank. This is not looking well for us. We just had our own tactics and protocols turned against us. The ones that did it are the result of the most expensive UNSC project to date. And we're not just looking at unstable augmentees, but extremely capable, intelligent and tactically gifted individuals. Who now have what may well be the most sensitive need-to-know information in our history. Topping everything off is their escape.

It was a helluva piece of astrogation they pulled off. People noticed. Not to mention the morale hit it's given to the entire fleet by having a bloody *Epoch*-class heavy carrier stolen right from right under our noses. And now you're telling me that we basically handed all of this on a silver platter to a bunch of 14-year-olds?"

No 'ladies' and gentlemen. Or even gentlemen and lady. The Vice Admiral was already tacitly denouncing her. Or was it just intended as a rebuke for this utter clusterfuck? Or both? Whichever it was, it worked. Catherine kept her mouth shut.

Mendez also said nothing. He was on the same thin ice as she was. Not that he was that talkative at this point. He seemed to take his utter failure to see signs of this impending rebellion as a personal insult. He'd barely said anything even to her since the short report of that morning, when he showed up at her door with news that her Spartans had finally vacated the station. And taken the UNSC Atlas with them.

"I need solutions, people!" Stanforth barked when no one had anything to say. "I need solutions and I need them before these loose cannons make their way to Earth and really set the fox loose amongst the chickens! It's bad enough that the whole of Reach already knows about the Spartan program. We can't contain this anymore, but we damn well better stay ahead of the mess."

"They're not going to Earth."

She almost surprised herself by speaking, but the conclusion she had slowly been thinking her way towards all afternoon was finally in sight. FLEETCOM assumed her Spartans were on their way to Earth based on their slipspace vector. Their trajectory. Obvious.

Her Spartans never did anything obvious

"And how," Stanforth asked lowly. "Can you be sure of that, Doctor?"

"Because..." Because Spartans never did anything obvious unless as a smokescreen to pursue a side goal or five. She accessed the reports and incoming readings from all the scout ships in the fleet and... yes! "They never left."

Bringing up the orbital map, she zoomed in on one of the spots that the fleet redirection had conveniently opened a gap in. She knew it! "Spectrographic readings show Čerenkov radiation consistent with slipspace exit at this location." She looked up from the hologram to the Vice Admiral, certain of her conclusions. "They're not going to Earth because they never meant to go there. They just used a vector that make it look like it. And if you're not convinced, consider one last question: why did they wait so long to make their break?"

She swept a finger across the hologram from the position of Endurance at the time of escape to the exit point.

"The answer is this." She interposed the line atop the terrestrial map of Reach. "They're still here. On the planet below."

Stanforth stared at the line. And the sites located under it, planet-side.

Then he tried to raise CASTLE base and got no reply.

"To all UNSC assets in range: we have a situation!"

Catherine got herself assigned as field advisor by the skin of her teeth. Mostly by pushing the argument that John's inexplicable changes were something she had nothing to do with (which was true), and claiming she'd be unable to help track down her Spartans without being there in person (which wasn't).

The Vice Admiral probably humoured her only because her failure already reflected badly on him, and he'd take any chance to dull the consequences. Or perhaps he just wanted to spare himself her nagging. Rapid mobilization wasn't easy after all. There were logistics and tactical and intelligence factors to consider. As well as potential loose ends that couldn't be tied up in the usual way ONI would have preferred.

Namely the entirety of the crew and 800-strong marine implement lately of the UNSC Atlas. Granted, all but one ODST squad and marine platoon had been left unfit for active duty. But that still left 54 people. Including one Second Lieutenant Antonio Silva who was proving to be far less timid in front of ONI's reputation that anyone liked.

Also a lot less of a jarhead than she expected. The look he'd given Stanforth spoke volumes, when the Vice Admiral deployed him and his leftover complement to the single planetary objective *not* in vicinity to CASTLE base. Or even on the same continent.

Halsey did feel a shred of sympathy for him. SWORD base was still just a glorified geological research outpost still in construction. ONI probably had some suspicions or expectations from the site, considering the lofty name, but she hadn't heard anything concrete on that score. More importantly, it was neck-deep in the Badd Catha Ice Shelf just below the Arctic Circle. Far from the most pleasant place to be.

But Silva's extended contact with rogue elements, and the outright sympathy he expressed regarding them, made him a liability. They needed to put him somewhere out of the way. And if it was someplace where he'd have little to do besides freezing his extremities off, well, that's just one of many things marines were trained for, wasn't it?

A literal army had been deployed in and around CASTLE base by the time she made it groundside. That wasn't alarming. What was alarming was that the base wasn't actually compromised, strictly speaking. Or, at least, not anymore. Her pelican even deposited her right in the courtyard.

No, the problem was that her Spartans – or rather just three of them – had blitzed their way through the base at some point earlier in the day. Frederick, Kelly and Linda. They sabotaged communications and took down everyone who got in the way of their mission to make the lockdown permanent. Then they disappeared into the mountain.

What CASTLE folk weren't in the infirmary had spent the time since feverishly trying to repair or replace damaged equipment. They hadn't gotten comms back online – they were surprised to see reinforcements because of that – but they did have spares for some of the more delicate equipment. Including the prospecting scanners and topography radars on the base. It was the only reason they'd managed to pick up the exotic energy readings that had slowly been rising in concentration in the ground and atmosphere ever since.

Acting on a hunch, Halsey matched what little scan data could be salvaged against standard slipspace waveform recordings. It was a 23% match. A low percentage, but statistically relevant. Especially when the rest of the readings were different from anything she'd seen before. And almost everything she'd theorised before.

Looks like she had one extra reason to make CASTLE base her new home, until further notice. Assuming she kept her job that is. Which depended on her ability to catch up to her Spartans. So, back to work.

To her frustration, however, she didn't pick up any sort of trail. Mendez did, though only through sheer luck helped by the sheer concentration of manpower they'd brought along. Especially the ground scouting

parties. One of them stumbled upon what looked like an artificial cavern freshly dug. The edges were still warm. A mining laser must have been involved.

Sure enough, upon exploring it the scout eventually discovered the laser left behind.

But he also found something else.

A rushed Pelican ride into the mountains and an even more rushed bout of spelunking later, her frustration was a thing of the past. The only thing left was wonder.

What they found was almost impossible. Improbable. Something humankind had given up on happening after so many centuries of exploring space without finding anything in it besides its own kind.

A close encounter of the second kind.

At first it looked like granite rock. But then they found what had flummoxed the scout – passages that allowed access along the wall. The wall had a long stretch of glyphs trailing along it that twisted into a spiral mosaic and vanished into ever-smaller curls. Glyphs that were part of the wall's material. They looked as though composed of glittering mica inclusions in the granite matrix. The glyphs themselves were a series of squares, triangles, bars, and dots that blurred out of focus when she looked at them directly.

If not for the movement she spotted at the far, far end of the gargantuan megacavern, she may well have been lost in looking at them for the next several hours.

Frederick. Alone. Reaching out to touch what could only have been an artificial *wall*.

When his hand touched the wall, a transformation occurred. The glyphs began to emit a soft red glow just like heated metal. The glow spread outward from the point of contact all the way to the entry point they'd only just come through. Then the colors in the centre began warming to orange and then to yellow-gold. A single white glyph, a triangle, became visible in the centre of the spiral. She only saw it thanks to the zoom function in her contacts. Which also told her that, despite the emission of light, the glyphs did not radiate heat. Fred touched the glyph, then, with his bare fingertip

All the glyphs along the entire wall glowed white with brilliant illumination. And after a moment, the wall in front of him rumbled and transformed into a corridor leading into what could no longer be anything but an alien structure of some sort.

Latchkey. A word that could only ever describe monumental achievements of mankind on the level of the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine and the conical bullet. She felt like she was seeing the term lived up to a thousand times over.

“Fuck me with a rusty rebar,” Chief Mendez breathed ahead of her, where he'd taken command of the marine platoon but had stopped to stare as dumbstruck as everyone else there.

Standard MO... was there even standard MO for something like this? Ideally they would turn back, relay the information to a higher authority and wait for more orders. But this was not a standard situation, and the last thing the UNSC (and she) wanted was a rogue faction getting control of this. Even if it was her Spartans.

Especially if it was them. Discoveries like this, like the weapons of war she had sought to build...

The UNSC *must* have total control over them.

“Alright people,” Mendez said, forcing some manner of professionalism back into himself. Barely. “Steady and quietly now. But don't waste time either. We've got a lot of distance to catch up on. We'll let number 104 tank any traps. But we *will* be the ones to come out with the goods intact, am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

When they finally reached it, the corridor was twenty meters in height, leading inward at a straight line that gently sloped deeper into the ground. Golden light shined from the ceiling. The floor was paved with asymmetric blue tiles patterned in a way comparable to waves lapping on a shore. The utterly smooth walls were inlaid with centred four-meter tall gold glyphs made of similar shapes of triangles, squares, bars, and circles.

When the glyphs began to softly glow, several of the men felt so inexplicably attracted that they reached out to touch them, but Mendez smacked them over the head and barked orders to stay away after Halsey sent an alert over comms. Her radiation counter briefly pulsed, supporting her hesitation.

Further down the corridor, the ceiling stopped shining golden light and faded to total black. Pinpoint lights emerged imitating stars, which twinkled realistically. In addition, silver-gray orbs that represented moons pockmarked with craters spun in wide orbits across the ceiling. Along the walls, tall green bamboo-like stalks appeared. The only thing Dr. Halsey could think of calling them was semisolid holograms with no visible emitters. But she wouldn't be surprised if they were something completely different in actuality. They could be hard light decor for all she knew.

Who knew what this place was? What alien civilization had built it all?

Throughout the length of the corridor, the holography underwent three transformations to depict different scenes, each sharing the golden glyphs along the walls. After the initial scene, it changed to depict an arid moonscape with deep craters and sterile light. It then transformed into a volcanic world with active streams of lava flowing along the walls. The realism of this scene was enhanced with realistic distortion of the air, which wavered as it would in the presence of extreme heat.

Beautiful.

Finally, the corridor emptied onto a landing overlooking an approximately circular room with a diameter of what had to be around three kilometers,

The landing was on one of twelve tiered levels that had no railings and encircled the room. The floor, approximately one hundred meters beneath the landing, was made of innumerable blue tiles that appeared to shift around into patterns that seemed bizarrely familiar. Unlike the floor in the corridor, though, these tiles formed squares, circles, bars, and triangles. And the ceiling was a dome with a holographic golden sun, a dozen moons, a blue sky, and cottony clouds that morphed into spheres, pyramids, bars, cubes and other geometric shapes.

And then there was the center of it all. A flickering pedestal. A pedestal made of the same gold material as the symbols in the corridor. Above it floated a crystal, which spun and pulsed a bright sapphire-blue glow. It was the final piece of evidence that this all was of non-human make and grandiose and *real*.

A fist-sized alien artefact with a thousand facets tapered at both ends that glowed with a blue light.

“Freeze!” Mendez yelled.

Frederick froze mid-reach, hand just shy of the alien artefact.

“Turn around! Slowly! Hands open and to his sides.”

The Spartan slowly turned and beheld them all.

But to her shame, she barely had eyes for him. The alien artefact had captured all of her attention. It was floating upright and the area around appeared spatially distorted.

“End of the line, soldier!” the Chief barked at his late trainee. “Step away from the pedestal and no one else needs to get hurt.” An empty threat. They weren’t about to risk shooting an obvious alien artefact. Who knew what wonders could be decoded from its depths? And for that matter, who knew how it would react to impacts? “I gave you an order, Spartan!” Mendez snapped again, trying to reassert some semblance of authority over his erstwhile troops. “Do as I said or we’ll open fire!”

Frederick stood, fearless, and said a single word in response. “Kelly.”

Impact from above, a black blur at the edge of her vision, gasps and grunts of pain all around her, and half of the marine platoon was flying or falling away before Catherine Halsey even had time enough to turn her head.

When the abruptness caught up with her she gasped, stumbled away and fell on her back when struck by an abrupt wave of disorientation. It was the only thing that saved her from the misfires that erupted in the squad before all gunshots fell silent. She struggled to her feet and tried to keep track of her surroundings, but all she got for her trouble was a sense of vertigo as if she were walking on the ceiling instead of the floor. She tried to step away from the melee, but abruptly found herself shifted around until she was back where she started.

An effect of the artefact? Did the apparent spatial distortion reach closer than she could see?

The thud of the last body falling to the floor reminded her that there were more urgent things to worry about. Unfortunately, she was too late. All the marines were downed and Kelly was just finishing restraining a cursing, snarling Franklin Mendez with his own ziplines. When she was done with that, she dragged him over to her by the collar and pulled her off the floor as well, by the elbow.

Kelly stepped with both of them within the artefact’s area of effect, then, and Dr. Halsey had to close her eyes and swallow against the sudden urge to retch.

Paradoxically, though, Kelly turned around and started dragging them in the opposite direction of the pedestal.

Which made it all the more bizarre when all three of them were suddenly at the very base of the pedestal next to Frederick and the crystal-

Wait what?

She blinked and looked around in surprise.

It was gone! Where had it-?

Vertigo, weightlessness and gold.

Between one blink and the next, she fell to her knees at Linda’s feet on the roof of CASTLE base, just in front of the aft entrance to the pelican she’d come down on. And because the shock of *teleportation* apparently wasn’t enough on its own, she soon after became the first human to see a slipspace jump performed while still within the atmosphere of a world.

Sat on the cold, concrete roof of Reach CASTLE station, Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey watched history being made and pondered matters of aliens, war and treason.

“-.-“

“Code Bloody Arrow!”

Bloody Arrow. A UNSC emergency code signifying the complete rout and decisive defeat of friendly forces

“I repeat: Code Bloody Arrow!”

Bloody Arrow. A UNSC emergency code usually following the overrunning of friendly units and positions by hostile forces.

“S-|~ORD A#tu^I,” the Vice Admiral said over the increasingly unreliable frequency. “Co*fi&m!”

Bloody Arrow. Effectively the complete opposite of S.O.S – It meant that one should not, under any circumstances, attempt to land, reinforce, or attempt rescue.

“Confirm Code Bloody Arrow! All reinforcements, turn back!”

Bloody Arrow. It signified to any reinforcements that the cause is lost and they should turn back.

It was enough to jar anyone out of the circles they were running around the memory of a slipspace jump performed by a non-slipspace-capable craft. Even if it was more or less what Catherine Halsey expected would happen when they miraculously got one last report of Spartan sightings and scrambled to send reinforcements.

And yet now, after several hours’ flight and hurry to reach the one objective that had been ruled out as unimportant, they suddenly had to turn back?

The entire pelican lurched as the pilot struggled to keep it stable against the increasingly powerful, unnatural gales. The open rear of the craft showed dust and loose greenery and storm and darkness deeper than even the eternal arctic twilight warranted.

Catherine did her best not to dwell on it. She would *not* be denied her Spartans and her answers. Impossible technology and alien artefacts and bad weather be damned!

“Lieutenant!” Mendez called over the local frequency that still worked somewhat. “We’re inbound to his location, coming in hot. What’s going on down there!?”

“SWORD Base-it’s gone...” What!?! “All personnel has been evacuated, me and my squad are the last ones left! If you plan on landing or whatever else, respectfully, sir, can it! The ice shelf will bury you like it has everything else!”

“Sir!” the pilot spoke immediately after. “I can’t get closer! The cloud cover’s too low. Fog’s too thick! Wind’s way beyond the pale! The Pelican’s a tough girl, but even she’s not rated for this! And I can’t see anything, radar’s glitching like a jackalope on stilts!”

“Bring us lower!” Mendez ordered.

“What?”

“Bring us closer. And *lower*.”

“Bit sir-“

“I gave you an order, marine!”

“... Aye aye, sir.”

The reluctant pilot nevertheless did as ordered and battled the unnatural storm for the next... Catherine didn’t even know. She didn’t count the seconds. Or minutes. She did count the fits and starts of the vessel, and the beats skipped by her heart every time it felt like they’d crash or she’d be thrown out of the craft.

There were far too many such moments.

When they finally broke past the far too thick cloud cover into the dusty fog below, she could barely even tell the difference.

Mendez unbuckled his harness and stumbled over to the front, to look over the pilot's shoulder. After a few moments, though, he became a lot less single-minded than he'd just been. "Sweet baby Jesus on stilts..."

What? What did he see? What was *happening* there? The temptation to unbuckle herself and rise to join him was almost overpowering. But if the pelican lurched just once, she was likely to bang her head against the hull, or worse.

"...Regardless," Mendez said, audibly talking himself into continuing. "We still need to get down there if there's any chance we... Pilot, bring us around." The pelican lurched dangerously. "*Steadily!*"

"I'm trying my best, sir!"

Said best was just barely enough to avoid a total crash, but the craft eventually managed to do its 180 degree turn.

The moment the rear opened, however, the craft almost went out of control just from the wind shear. The frost spread over every surface with alarming speed also, and the less said about fogged over visors and goggled, the better. Even internal heating systems could barely stem the fury of nature, and nature was furious indeed.

SWORD base was a natural disaster on the spot where a man-made structure should have been. The very ground looked like it had split, rolled over and mashed itself into puree. Then levelled out into a welcome mat for the massive ice sheets that had broken off the Babd Catha ice shelf and avalanched their way on top of the remains. Were still splitting and falling. What had once been a dried out glacial lake had been reclaimed by nature.

It looked like a caldera down there, but instead of lava pouring out of the ground, there was ice and snow pouring in from the peaks all around. And because that kind of devastation was seemingly not enough, water billowed from the mega lagoon just to the south.

The only human presence left was the four-man ODST squad boarding the last of the on-site pelicans. Upon seeing them, though, Second Lieutenant Silva waved his men to finish loading the last of their gear – some sensory equipment, it looked like – and jogged towards them.

"Sir. Ma'am," the man said. "I must *insist* that you take back off and evacuate immediately!"

Did he think they didn't want to? They couldn't! There were aliens involved, for crying out loud!

"Listen, son, I'll only say this one last time," Mendez bit out, pulling his supply pack on. "As long as there's even the slightest chance –" which was when a concussive round struck him dead-centre.

The blast was deafening and it sent Catherine reeling back in her seat, dazed and blinded like the arctic wind hadn't managed. But through the shock and whistling in her ears, she also heard the sound of screeching birds and burnt hair for some reason.

"Well that's just perfect!" Silva groaned. "Marsh. Cartman. Get out of here!" he barked over radio while waving his fist at the other pelican three times. "I'll be taking a different ride. These people seem to be in *desperate* need of leadership!"

Catherine Halsey gaped in outrage, but the impulse to say something scathing died in her throat when her eyes fell on the smoking, twitching form of the no longer conscious Chief Petty officer Franklin Mendez.

She stared, dumbstruck. That had *not* been a normal concussive round.

Then she disregarded all semblance of common sense, unbuckled herself from her seat and stumbled past the marines in the hold to the open back of the pelican, even as it lurched drunkenly under her, stability lost along with the ground just below.

“Ma’am, don’t!” Silva barred her way with his arm. “I swear to God, I’ll knock you out if I have to. You are *not* part of my chain of command!”

She grabbed onto a safety handle but she did not reply. Nor did she retreat. She hadn’t the mind for it. Or the heart. There was something else that did. That had them both. Or rather, someone.

John.

He stood up on the crest of the mountainside, lowering a rifle that looked like an antique. Solid and stout, as if he were the only mountain that could not be moved by the storm. And he gazed at her with eyes too judging and face far, far too old.

On any other day, she would have wondered how he’d made that shot. How he’d compensated for the gale and the storm. She would wonder how she was able to see him at all, in that terrible weather and from so far off.

Instead, she could only watch numbly as her Spartan stepped back and disappeared in a vortex of white and golden light. Along with the three human-shaped shadows that had stood at his sides and which she hadn’t noticed until they were all gone.

The next moment, the entire mountain range groaned like a dying giant of myth and split apart.

“Fuck fuckity fuck fuck *fuck!*” Silva swore. “Pilot. Get us the fuck out of here on the double!”

“Yes sir!”

She almost fell out of the pelican from mere inertia, but Silva pre-empted that with a strong hold on her arm. It was tight enough to hurt, but she ignored it. Even as she bruised, she ignored it. As the aircraft flew away from what used to be SWORD base, she ignored it. She ignored it all.

All but the unbelievable sight of the mountains and ice cap behind them breaking apart into so many pieces as a second aurora started to shine from *beneath* them.

‘John. Frederick. Linda. Kelly. What have you *done?*’

The answer to her unasked question came in the form of a massive explosion of air that blasted apart dust, hail and clouds across a distance of a hundred kilometres.

It was almost enough to blow them out of sky, storm and continued breathing into certain death below. The pilot rode it out, though, by the force of his guts and curse streak and the skin of his teeth.

In their wake was left only tumultuous waters, shattered earth, riotous winds, and a massive, absolutely colossal cloud of dirt, smog and ice crystals that rose in the air like the ponderous backdraft of a god machine.

A god ship.

Catherine Halsey had thought she’d seen through everything. And she had. Seen through everything that had been too obvious for everyone else.

But now it seemed she had not seen through what was too obvious to *herself*.

Confirmation bias, was it?

Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey hung off the safety handle at the furthest edge of a Pelican's hold and stared awestruck at what surely had to be the grandest, most magnificent, more monumental sight she'd ever see in her life.

She stared up through dust, wind and smoke as the gargantuan vessel steadily rose through the atmosphere all the way into space. Then it left the planet, people and fleets both on the ground and in orbit, staring shocked and humbled as it opened a portal and disappeared into the slipspace beyond.

