Merged Galaxy Part 1: Tenuous Pacts

by Slipspace_Anomaly

Summary

Nations collide as 2 alternate versions of the Milky Way Galaxy are joined into 1. As members of the SGC and the UNSC struggle to establish peaceful relations, a new threat emerges. One that includes new enemies from each of their pasts. Co-written with Jon Harper.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The Beginning

Reality is infinite, but divided.

Endless possibilities exist. Possible actions, possible places, possible people. They range from the most minute of decisions to the existence of entire galaxies. These possibilities are divided into and contained within universes, each distinct, yet many similar. Some universes are nearly identical save for 1 or 2 minor aspects. Others are so different they defy comprehension. All exist within the ever growing expanse of the multiverse.

Rarely do the universes meet. Still more rarely do they overlap. Although travel between them is possible, such things are normally reserved for a small number of unique individuals, the impact of whom, on a cosmic scale, is hardly significant.

Soon, though, something different will happen. Something nearly unprecedented in all of the glorious infinity of reality. Soon 2 universes, similar and yet so very, very different, will be joined in a union no living creature had ever dreamed possible.

Soon, 2 universes...will be become 1.

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Dakara, Free Jaffa Nation, 2009

On an ancient world, a nearly as ancient device came alive. It was a ring of metal that resembled dark gray carved stone. It was relatively small with symbols like hieroglyphs arrayed in sequence along its circumference. The sequence spun, lights coming on at various points as the appropriate symbols passed over ornate sensors. One light, then another, and another...

At last, all 7 appropriate symbols had been recognized. A connection with another such ring, thousands of light-years away, was established. A fountain of what appeared to be water sprang out, sideways, from the upright ring, before 'falling' back and settling into what looked for all the world like a pool of water turned on its side.

A group of figures, humans, emerged from the 'water'. They brought with them numerous devices, items to be used on a world far from where they were made. It was a fairly common sight in the Milky Way galaxy.

For the ring was a Stargate. It was one of a network of devices that, once activated, connected to another on a planet far away. It created a stable wormhole between them that was able to transfer matter instantaneously from one side of the galaxy to another.

Though the race that created it was long since dead, their legacy lived on as the races that came after them utilized the Stargates for their own purposes. The ease of use and instantaneous travel, far more efficient than the relatively slow starships, made them extraordinarily useful. The gate network became the most important technology the galaxy had ever seen, with every aspect of civilization being connected to it, from economics, to the sciences, to politics, to the military.
An example of that last was standing a distance away from the active Stargate, watching the arrival of their comrades.

“The new gear’s here,” Captain Carl Grogan, United States Airforce, called out.

“Right on schedule,” Major Brian Williamson, his superior and commander of the SG-9 squad, replied.

The doctors and medical technicians they were currently guarding paid them no attention as the 4 soldiers shifted slightly at their posts. They were guarding the civilians as they oversaw the creation of the House of Healing, the first hospital/medical university to be built by the Free Jaffa nation. The doctors were currently touring the facility. The building was still under construction, meaning the academics had to occasionally shout to be heard over workers laboring away in the background. The new arrivals would be coming over momentarily to deliver the advanced medical equipment. The staff of the House of Healing would be studying them extensively over the coming months.

A sharp crack drew Grogan's attention. A crane had been lifting the sign identifying the facility as part of a greater university, the 'Jackson Hall of Learning’, to place it over the main entrance. The sign, made out of what looked like a fusion of stone and metal, was making the bundled cable start to break apart. A worker was standing under it, gathering some tools off the ground and apparently unaware of the danger he was in.

Instantly, Grogan sprang into action. He sprinted, closing the distance quickly, and tackled the man out of the way.

The sign crashed to the ground behind them a fraction of a second later.

The sound of breaking stone and rending metal overwhelmed the ears as dirt and dust were thrown into the air. The pair lay on the ground, disoriented by the experience, for several seconds. Grogan came to his senses first, his military training bringing him to his feet with his weapon up in the ready position almost immediately. He lowered his P90 as his head fully cleared.

“Grogan! Status!” Major Williamson shouted. The dark night made seeing anything past the bright work lamps difficult.

“I'm okay, sir,” Grogan replied as his superior came close enough to see. “Just a workplace accident. No major injuries I can tell.”

“We're not taking any chances,” the Major replied, sternly. “Let one of the docs look you over real quick.”

“Copy, sir,” he said, knowing better than to argue. Williamson could be positively neurotic where it came to the well-being of his subordinates. While the young Captain supposed that was better than the opposite, it could get rather tiresome from time to time.

“Chel'vak,” the worker whispered as he shakily rose to his feet beside Grogan. His eyes were still wide with shock.

“Tal'ma'che,” Grogan replied, accepting the expression of gratitude. He nodded amicably before heading back toward the rest of his squad.
Grogan sat obediently on a stack of building materials as one of the nearby doctors checked him out. Having little to do, he observed the proceedings. Workers from around the site had rushed to see what had happened. Upon discovering that no one was hurt, most returned to their duties, with a few remaining to remove the debris.

“Nice work, sir,” said Captain Elisabeth Satterfield, fellow squadmember of SG-9 and Grogan's immediate subordinate.

“It was nothing,” he replied honestly. The doctor rose to his feet and declared Grogan to be perfectly fine before heading back to his own responsibilities. Grogan continued, “Really, I'm just glad I finally had something to do. Not much excitement around here, you know?”

Satterfield laughed. “I hear you. Pulling guard duty on one of the most secure worlds in the Milky Way isn't exactly what I signed up for, either.”

“Both of you cut that crap out, right now,” Major Williamson said with a frown. “I've been with the program since the beginning, when all we were doing was running and gunning. We should all be grateful that things are this quiet. Or would you rather still be mixing it up with Goa'uld, the Replicators, or the Ori in some backwater hellhole as your buddies get chewed up around you? Listening to their screams and cries for their family, who you then have to lie to about what happened?” Silence. “I thought so. Neither of you are exactly rookies either—you've both had your share of 'action' out here, you know exactly what that entails.” He sighed, his pace slowing down. “The galaxy is at peace for the first time in over a decade. In millennia, if you count the infighting of the Goa'uld Empire. Appreciate it.”

Grogan winced but nodded, accepting the rebuke. The Major was right. Every member of SG-9 could remember the dark days that accompanied each of the fearsome enemies Williamson had mentioned. This world around them was testament to the horrors that each of the recent wars had wrought. The horizon was dotted with buildings that had been gutted by the assaults of 1 or all of the 3, waiting to be demolished and replaced with new constructions. So much of its history and heritage lost.

In a way, Dakara was a microcosm of the entire galaxy. Battered, bruised, but getting shakily to its feet. Trying to build something out of the ashes of the old. Grogan glanced upward, at the tens of bright lights moving in the sky. There should be hundreds, he reflected. Hundreds of lights, each one a ship or space station representing the prosperity and security of Earth and her allies. Even the mighty fleet of the Free Jaffa, still the largest and most powerful in the galaxy, was a shadow of what it should have been, stretched thin to protect its nascent territory. Such had been the cost of three successive galactic wars.

The sound of approaching footsteps brought Grogan back to the present. He shook his head to clear out the last of the ruminations; he needed to stay focused while on duty.

Fortunately, that wouldn't be a problem for now. SG-6 had arrived with the medical equipment and quickly relieved SG-9, allowing the Major and his squad to get some much needed rest.

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Three hours later found them all lounging around their assigned 'quarters', which were essentially two US Air Force Temper Tents connected end to end and divided for Male/Female sections with just enough room towards the front entrance to act as a sort of co-ed recreation room. Cammo netting covered the tents to both give it concealment from prying eyes and also act as a screen against the
intense sunlight of Dakara's primary star. Something it did only moderately well. It was cramped, uncomfortable, and utilitarian as all such field tents went.

Ten tents like the ones they were using were stacked side by side, 5 meters apart, with two male and female portable latrine/shower trailers running perpendicular to the living sections. It was all cordoned off by a perimeter of double stacked hesko barriers with two points of entry and exit. Their little slice of Earth.

Currently the members of SG-9 were enjoying the shade of the cammo netting and relaxing as much as they could in their limited time off.

A buzzing sound filled most of the air. Major Williamson stood off to one side, gazing into a mirror held in his hand as he ran his electric trimmer over his scalp. He always kept his hair in a simple buzz cut, feeling that anything more than that was a waste of valuable time. The Major was a simple, utilitarian man, always concerned with how best to use what was given to him.

Grogan, meanwhile, sat a short distance away examining a tablet computer. On it were operational reports on the security status of Dakara as well as several other documents relevant to their current assignment. He had already read them, of course, but it paid to be thorough. There was no telling what he might have missed.

Satterfield was standing some distance away chatting with some of the Free Jaffa in the Goa'uld language. She was generally the most sociable of them. While Grogan focused mainly on briefings and reports, his friend focused on making direct connections and understanding the people they would be interacting with. The fact that they were both studious, but in different areas, made them a good team and had earned them more than a few commendations.

Captain Jennifer Hailey, the fourth and final member of SG-9, was sitting down and staring into space, her lips moving slightly in time with whatever thoughts were racing through her head. Occasionally she would turn to the tablet on her lap and start typing away rapidly before examining her work and going right back to staring straight ahead. Grogan had long ago learned that it was a waste of time asking her what she was thinking about. Doubtless she was solving some sort of world-changing mathematical equation that maybe 5 people in the galaxy were qualified to even understand. The trooper was insanely brilliant, a fact that would be endearing if she wasn't so insufferable about it.

“I'm surprised there are so few guards at the hospital,” Grogan remarked to Satterfield, who had finished her conversation and rejoined her companions. Maybe she could give him some straight answers. “Even the few that are there seem pretty unhappy about it.”

“It's a cultural thing,” Satterfield replied. She grabbed her canteen and took a swig. The desert sun was harsh, even this early in the morning, and they had already sweat through their uniforms from the oppressive heat. “Before the liberation most of the important people were implanted with symbiotes that boosted their immune system. Anyone who got sick probably didn't have one, meaning they weren't important. This resulted in a bit of a stigma against needing medical help. Even now it's hard for a lot of the older Jaffa to understand that getting a fever isn't a sign of weakness.”

“Sounds like the docs have a bit of an uphill fight on their hands,” Grogan replied, grimacing. Satterfield nodded and took another drink.

“On your feet!” Major Williamson shouted. The members of SG-9 obediently rose to their feet and stood at attention for Colonel Holland, the 2nd highest ranking officer of the Stargate Command
(SGC) forces on Dakara, who had just approached them. None saluted as was standing orders for all US Military personnel when dealing with officers in the field.

“At ease,” the Colonel replied, nodding to them. He then moved toward Hailey.

*Here we go,* Grogan thought with dread. He could already tell where this was going. The Colonel arrived in front of Hailey, who had already sat down and gotten back to work.

“Excuse me, *Captain*” the Colonel said. He received no reply; Hailey simply continued to stare into space. Somewhat annoyed, the officer repeated his greeting. Hailey blinked several times and turned an annoyed face toward her superior. She hated being interrupted.

“Yes... *sir*?” she asked. Her tone made it clear that the honorific was meant to be anything but respectful.

The Colonel gave her a hard stare. Suppressing a sigh, Hailey set her tablet aside, rose to her feet, and stood at attention again, as if she were back at the academy.

“I require your assistance, *Captain,*” the Colonel said, sharply. “There's a technical issue with one of the new pieces of equipment and I told the Free Jaffa that I'd get my best engineer on it.”

Hailey’s eye twitched and Grogan suppressed a wince. Hailey hated being compared to a 'lowly engineer'. “Well, *sir,* I was just working on an equation that would improve hyperdrive efficiency by 7%, but I suppose I could put that on hold to play mechanic for a few hours. Have to know what's important, right?”

The Colonel's face turned a bright red. He was no doubt about to launch into a rather heated dressing down of the young Captain when, thankfully, Major Williamson stepped in.

“That's enough, *Captain!*” he snapped hotly. He stormed over and stood a step away from the young officer. “You will give whatever assistance is required of you and you will show proper respect for the chain of command or I'll have you scrubbing toilets like a cadet! Do you understand me?!”

“Sir, yes *sir,*” Hailey replied, chastised, but with genuine respect. The Major looked to the Colonel, who nodded in acceptance. He'd let it go this time, but if Hailey didn't stop popping off at the mouth like that he was also able to appease the bruised egos of the higher-ups.

The Colonel and Hailey departed immediately. The Major sighed and ran his hand over his freshly trimmed head. “She'll be the death of me, I just know it,” he muttered. Grogan and Satterfield glanced at each other, sharing a silent grin.

To their surprise, Hailey returned within 5 minutes.

"Oh no! You didn't get kicked off planet *again,* did you?" Satterfield asked in a bemused yet expectant tone.

Hailey rolled her eyes and smirked, "Oh ye of little faith." She quickly spun to face Grogan and pointed, "And don't you say anything either! It was easily handled with minimal fuss. I even got a nice, almost sincere 'thank you' out of it!" She smiled.
“Simple fix then, Captain?” Williamson asked.

“User error, sir,” she replied, again with respect. If she could just pretend to have such an attitude towards other people, she wouldn't have been passed over for Major at least twice now. General Landry's denial had been rather...emphatic last time, Grogan reflected.

“Solved it in under a dozen keystrokes,” Hailey finished. She went back to her work for several minutes before sighing and shutting down her tablet in frustration.

“Stubborn problem?” Grogan chanced.

Hailey smirked playfully at him, a far cry from the disdain she would have given to someone that she didn't know and respect. “Hardly,” she said. The smile fell from her face as she continued. “There's just so much to do. The technology we've recovered in the past 12 years is mind-shattering, yet most of humanity still lives like its 1996. There's just too much to learn. There are only so many scientists and universities that have the necessary clearance. Not to mention the fact that the very existence of alien life and the Stargate are classified top secret. Progress is practically at a standstill.” She threw her hands in the air from frustration. “For goodness' sake, we're having to invent entire new schools of math just to begin to understand what we do have. We're years, possibly decades away from large scale practical applications. Earth should be in the midst of a technological renaissance right now. Instead, we're still stuck in the stone age!”

“A bit of an exaggeration,” Grogan replied, dryly. He pointed to the body armor he was wearing.

At first glance it was similar to the tactical vests utilized by many Earth militaries, but a closer look would reveal what resembled a hybrid design between the tactical vests of old and the newer dragonskin body armors. In reality, it was a device reverse engineered from alien technology. Essentially using second generation ESAPI ceramic-polymer plates and coated with a first generation energy absorbent fabric based off the armor of the Kull Warriors, it was capable of repelling practically any known hand-held weapons fire. Any Earth-based weapon, anyway. They had yet to be put to the test against their alien counterparts.

Hailey snorted. “This is hide armor compared to what we should have to play with.” She glanced upward, glaring at the stars accusingly. “If only our supposedly advanced allies weren't so isolationist these days. We could really use their resources.”

Grogan shrugged but acknowledged the point with a nod. "They've all got their reasons. I can get why Hebrida went isolationist. Ori essentially steamrolled their fleets and they were forced to fight tooth and nail on the ground. Mass ethnic cleansing of the Sarrakins, hybrids and any who tried to help them. Oh and the usual extermination of non-believers, too. Death toll in the tens of millions...and counting. They got a lot of healing to do and just want time to mourn their dead and rebuild their world without interference. At least they're not blaming us for the Ori."

"Okay, yeah, so maybe they have good reasons. What about our other allies, hmm?" Hailey asked archly.

"Pangar got wrecked by the Ori too, you know that one. They're still recovering. Same with Langara. Both will need years to be passing fair and decades before they're back to where they were. And you both know about the general situation with the Free Jaffa. They're essentially broken, scattered, leaderless and divided between half a dozen factions. With Bra'tac and Teal'c leading the strongest, and thus why we are here supporting them."
He licked his dry lips as he gathered his thoughts.

"Galar was within days of getting invaded and it caused a massive political shift in their governments. The new administration there is much more hesitant with us now since Earth seems to have a giant target on its back saying 'shoot me'." Grogan stated flatly.

Hailey frowned, "Okay...point. And our other allies?"

"Tollan are gone, Asgard too—"

"—Okay smartass, I'm not *that* much out of the loop on current events." Hailey interrupted, but without any real bite to it.

Grogan chuckled. "Just seeing if you were paying attention."

"I have been." She replied with all seriousness and motioned for him to continue.

"Bedrosia and the Optricans got wiped out by the Ori. Took a shit load with them though, and the Ori had to deploy the bulk of their fleet and armies to do it. Halted their advance in the galaxy for weeks."

Hailey shuddered in mild disgust, "Never thought I'd ever be grateful to Goa'uld worshippers for anything."

"Not all of them were." Satterfield corrected, "The Optricans certainly weren't, but it kinda doesn't matter now."

Both cast expectant looks at Grogan.

"And that pretty much only leaves Orban...who everyone seems to either have missed or forgotten about. Aside from them everyone else is either too small or too primitive to matter." Grogan concluded.

"Hailey smacked her hand down triumphantly on her tablet. "Orban, now you're talking!"

"I've actually been to Orban," Satterfield interjected which got her a look of surprise from Hailey. "I went with Doctor Jackson and the State department team that went to expand on the tech exchange agreement for access to all their Naquada research and technology."

Hailey glared in silent indignation at her fellow teammate "I was supposed to go on that mission too. Colonel Carter wanted me with her to see how far their naquada technology had progressed since our last exchange."

Grogan clucked his tongue in barely restrained amusement, "Would that be before or *after* you slugged Doctor Kavanagh?"

Hailey scoffed with a dismissive shrug. "Whatever. Asshat totally had it coming. No one talks about Colonel Carter like that around me and walks away unscathed!" She turned to Satterfield with an expectant look. "So, Orban? What'd I miss?"

"Its...beautiful. Modern—actually they're a few decades ahead of us, contemporary Earth that is. But
it has an Aztec twist to their architecture that's just wild!"

"As in?" Hailey prompted but it was Grogan who responded.

"Ziggurats." Grogan supplied helpfully. "Lots and lots of Ziggurats. And the main colors you see anywhere are beige and brown. Lots of variations of those colors too."

Hailey shot him a betrayed look, "You went too!?"

"Yeah....we were all supposed to go, until someone got herself in trouble."

Hailey deflated at that statement.

"The talks went well and we got the exchange program back up and hopefully more long term. But thats about all we got." Satterfield said and shooting Grogan an amused smirk causing him to groan.

"How was I supposed to know they'd freak out that badly?" Grogan said defensively. "I was talking with that Urrone kid, Maviem. Telling him about the downfall of the Goa'uld and then battling the Ori. Exactly as General O'Neill said we should. Be upfront and be honest, don't sugarcoat anything. And so I was; about the capabilities of the Ori Army and their fleet. Poor kid was so freaked out about what he heard he ran off to go do his Averium right then and there. The next day their Council of Elders decided to dump massive resources into building the ultimate defense grid imaginable. Colonel's Mitchell, Reynolds and Castleman were there just last week and they say what they've achieve so far has been...impressive."

"Like how impressive?" Hailey asked with genuine interest.

Grogan cocked his head to the side as he gave it some thought. "Let me put it this way: if we were playing Command and Conquer, they'd be the ultimate turtle."

Hailey and Satterfield gave him bizarre looks but all he did was smile knowingly and then turn back to his tablet.

"Fine then, keep your secrets." Hailey said in mock exasperation. "I happen to know the State Department is hoping to use the Asgard Core and its knowledge to entice the Orbanians out of their...'shell'..." Hailey added. Grogan rolled his eyes. "...And even the IOA is backing this deal hoping for broader cooperation with them."

Grogan snorted without looking up from his tablet, "Pentagon shot that down a week ago."

Both women looked on in surprise.

"I see someone's been reading their situation reports." Satterfield grinned.

Now he did look up from his tablet, "And I see two people who aren't. Come on, you two! We're supposed to be keeping up with the 'ever developing situation' in the galaxy. Not just the latest archaeological findings to come out of Doc Jacksons office," He directed a mild glare to Satterfield here, "Or the new R&D reports out of Area 51 that have have the brass at the Pentagon swooning like teenage girls on their first date." He directed this one toward Hailey.

"What, why! Why not approach Orban about this?" Hailey asked.
“Stuff’s classified, Hailey,” Satterfield pointed out. “Besides, can’t really blame them for being
cautious, what with the wars and all.”

Hailey just snorted again. “I still don’t understand the point at keeping everything secret if it holds us
back like this. The least we could do is clue in MIT or CalTech.”

"We did clue them in." Satterfield said. "We also clued in half a dozen different defense contractors
and technology firms. Just not all the people we'd like as most didn't pass their security clearance
screenings. Remember Coulson industries and how that turned out? Pentagon does not want a repeat
of that.”

“Patience,” Major Williamson urged, having had enough of listening in and finally jumping back into
the conversation. “I know the restrictions are frustrating, but the existence of alien life is kept
classified for a reason. We'll get there eventually.”

“Given the past 12 years, sir,” Hailey retorted, “that might happen too la—”

Suddenly, the ground shook, a blinding light blotted out the sky, and the world changed forever

Earth, Unified Earth Government, 2558

Broken, dirty glass crunched under metal boots. The scenery was a wasteland, dark and grungy gray
as far as the eye could see, everything from the ground to the horizon covered in blackened, ruined
soil. Occasionally the broken, half-melted remains of destroyed buildings could be seen rising out of
the scorched earth like the broken ribs of a rotting whale.

“Area secure. Bring in the excavation team,” the Master Chief commed. Multiple Pelican dropships
descended from orbit, bringing digging equipment and engineers to the Glasslands.

The dropships kicked up waves of silicate particles as they landed. The Chief resisted the urge to step
back. A single unprotected breath of the stuff would shred the lungs of even a Spartan II
supersoldier. Not for the first time, he silently thanked the brilliant Dr. Halsey for his armor and its
sophisticated air filtration systems.

The silicate particles reflected the landing lights, shining bright in the pitch black night air. The
fragments of the melted earth obscured vision and partially confused sensors, occasionally providing
a ghost return.

They were also sharp, meaning a strong wind could shred the skin right off an unprotected human.

They were also toxic, being composed of the annihilated remains of a once proud metropolitan
center, and could therefore cause a number of terminal illnesses in anyone who ingested it.

They also choked all plant life and rendered the Glasslands barren in a way that even the most
inhospitable Earth deserts had never achieved, could never achieve. Everything about this place
seemed to want to kill anyone who dared set foot there. It was all so...alien and unforgiving.

The plasma bombardment inflicted upon the entirety of Northern Africa had certainly done a number
on the landscape.

The engineers activated bright floodlights as they went about their work. The Master Chief and the
rest of the Spartan supersoldiers paid them only minute attention as they focused on their mission. Between their biological augmentations and the advanced sensors in their MJOLNIR armor, the beams of light served only as decoration.

The Spartans were spread out, providing a secure perimeter. The engineers would break into the buried compound within the hour. The Master Chief was glad for that. Spartans were built to go on the most dangerous of missions, not babysit a recovery op on the most secure planet in the Unified Earth Government.

The Master Chief's gaze turned upward. Towards the thousands of lights moving in the night sky above Earth. Each one was a warship or a shipyard or a merchant vessel or an Orbital Defense Platform. The Unified Earth Government (UEG) controlled a territory with over 120 planets and the infrastructure to match, which had allowed the immediate re-fortification of Earth following The Sack. The planet was as secure as it had ever been.

Space under the protection of the United Nations Space Command (UNSC) outside of Sol was another matter.

The Storm Covenant were still a threat that continued to plague the UNSC. Despite the recent setbacks the organization had been dealt, they continued to launch raids on the surviving outer colonies. However, they never ventured too deep into UNSC held Territory and they often disappeared before Rapid Response Forces could adequately deal with them. Much to HIGHCOM's continued frustration. Reports painted a grim picture of Jul M'dama rebuilding his fleet with Covenant-era technology and ships...which were far more potent than the outdated cast offs he’d been using until fairly recently.

Where exactly he was getting the resources to do that was still a mystery. Regardless of the specifics, it had to be some kind of shipyard. If ONI could find it, then they could send in Blue Team to do what they did best and deny the Storm Covenant a critical strategic resource with which to threaten the UNSC.

Of a more recent concern was the discovery of yet another Covenant splinter faction that the wider UNSC was still mostly unaware of.

The Banished.

Details on this new group were scant, and they had yet to move against the UNSC. But what few details Blue Team had learned about the enigmatic band of Covenant nomads painted a concerning picture, and to the Chief it was only a matter of time before the UNSC and the Banished inevitably came to blows.

Internally things were still...in flux. The recent deaths of Ilsa Zane, Admiral Mattius, Captain Daniel Clayton, and other Insurrectionist leaders in such rapid succession assured the that the New Colonial Alliance, the largest faction of the guerrilla rebellion that had plagued the UNSC for decades, would collapse under its own weight.

And collapse it did.

The UNSC special forces, Blue Team among them, had rushed in and mopped up what was left of the organization with admirable efficiency. The Insurrection was, effectively, dead. On the surface things were peaceful as the UNSC continued the process of transitioning back toward civilian rule.

Of course, the Chief reminded himself, that would count for little if the Unified Earth Government
itself collapsed. Humanity had just gone through nearly 30 years of war, being constantly pushed back by an alien enemy dedicated to exterminating every human being in existence. Infrastructure was recovering but still a shadow of its pre-War self, 10s of billions of people were dead, refugees were packed tight in the Inner and Outer Colonies, and food was short everywhere. Worst of all, national morale was still low, meaning people might just give up on the idea of a united human state all together. It could all come apart at the seams.

Hence, this mission.

The propaganda masters at the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) had concocted a story about a UNSC morgue that had been buried during the bombardment. Supposedly, it had been located by routine scans and the Senate had approved a recovery mission to lay its fallen soldiers to rest. Nearly every Spartan in existence had been called in and the Master Chief, long hailed as humanity's greatest hero (a fact which mattered little to the career soldier), had been given command. Much to his chagrin.

A series of flashes winked on the Heads Up Display (HUD) projected onto the inside of his visor. It was Blue-Three. Kelly. He glanced over at the other Spartan, 30 meters away, and saw her turn her helmet slightly in his direction.

She nodded her head fractionally and ran 2 fingers across the outside of her visor. Their signal for a smile. She understood his frustration; more than that, she agreed.

Not for the first time the Master Chief marveled at his sibling's ability to read his body language. He knew for a fact that most outsiders were unable to tell that a Spartan II even had emotions, let alone discern them and their cause through mere body language. Kelly had always been the best at that, even more so than his other siblings, Linda and Fred, who stood to either side of him, equally far away.

Speaking of whom, he noticed they also inclined their heads a few centimeters in his direction. The Chief suppressed a scowl. He had to do a better job hiding his emotions. He had been slipping as of late.

He knew that his team still respected him. They had fought together for nearly thirty years, and had trained alongside each other before that. They were the only series II Spartans left in existence. They were family, and there was little in all the universe that could undermine their unit cohesion.

Rather, it was the series IV Spartans that worried him. The manner of their recruitment, their training, and their overall demeanor were quite different and the series II Spartans had a hard time trusting the new bloods.

A loud crash echoed over the desolate plains. The Chief's helmet whipped around and saw that the center of the dig site had sunk out of sight, throwing a cloud of silicate particles into the air. The engineers could be seen scrambling to get into cover.

"Commander Palmer, report!" the Chief commed, moving swiftly but carefully towards the site. He kept a close eye on the readouts from his boots' sensors. Any sign of unstable ground and he couldn't risk continuing forward.

"All clear, Chief," came the response. "We must have hit an air pocket. Don't worry; the civvies were clear."
“What is your status?” the Chief reiterated. He was glad to hear the civilians were safe, but he needed to know if any of his Spartans had been hurt.

“Aww, I didn't know you cared,” came the response. She continued before the Chief could object to the unprofessional outburst. “We're fine. A couple of us were too close and fell in after the gear. Some scratches on the paint, but nothing to worry about.”

“Copy that,” the Chief commed. Were this an ordinary situation, he would be chewing out his subordinate over her handling of this situation. Sarah Palmer was brash and overconfident, qualities that worried him greatly. Unfortunately, Commander Palmer, leader of the series IV Spartans, was not in the same chain of command as the Master Chief. In fact, she outranked him. The only reason he had been give command in this op was for the press. Or as the Spartan IVs of Mastic Team had so lovingly coined it, the dog and pony show.

So, he grit his teeth, and decided to just add an addendum to the report about it.

A quarter of an hour later, they had broken through. The Master Chief ordered the engineers to fall back to the dropships while he and his Spartans cleared the interior. It took little time to find what he was looking for.

A server farm. Still intact and functional by the looks of it.

“Command, package is located. Prepping for extraction,” he commed. The Spartans brought in the body bags and started filling them with equipment.

The story about a discovered morgue had been a cover. The cameras in orbit would see the removed bags and the news outlets would regurgitate the official story like they were supposed to. In reality, the Spartans had been sent in to clean up a mess.

The Office of Naval Intelligence had improperly stored classified materials. Sensor sweeps had found an ONI facility and, under pressure from Fleet Admiral Hood, the ONI leadership had admitted that sensitive materials were located within. All entry into the North Africa Glasslands were strictly forbidden, so the higher-ups had decided to take refuge in audacity. No one would suspect something this brazen.

The Master Chief bit back a scowl at the farce. He understood the necessity of it, but passing off the bodies of otherwise dead marines (heavily mutilated by ONI specialists to avoid identification) in order to cover up ONI's mistake struck him as...a betrayal. It wasn't the first time ONI's mistakes had required him to perform cleanup. He suppressed a sigh as he realized it probably wouldn't be the last, either.

The ground started to shake, causing dust and debris to fall from the ceiling and walls. A light started shining, seeming to come from everywhere at once. The world itself seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

“Blue Team, report—”
A light blazed across 2 galaxies.

2 universes aligned, and chaos was unleashed. Across all space synthetic sensors were overloaded and organic races were blinded. None could see or otherwise sense the cosmic events playing out all around them. It seemed, as impossible as it was, that a great noise was echoing all throughout the stars.

Abruptly, unceremoniously, the noise ended. The light faded. The various races and peoples of the galaxies blinked the spots out of their eyes and looked around themselves in wonder.

The world had changed.

Ships that had been approaching empty space found themselves faced with entire planetary systems they had never seen or heard of before.

All spectra of communication blazed with new and unfamiliar signals, seemingly summoned from the ether.

Astronomers detected entire celestial bodies birthed by whatever incomprehensible Event had just transpired.

Races advanced enough to bear witness watched, stunned, as the Milky Way doubled in size.

2...had become 1.

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

The Whitehouse, Washington DC, Earth
May 22nd 2009 (3 days post 'Event')

“Wait, I'm having a hard time understanding this. Are you telling me that another galaxy was just...tacked on to ours?!” Ambassador West demanded. He seemed rather angry and on edge, no doubt due to the sparse amount of information that was being provided to him nearly 36 hours after the world had gone tits up.

General Jack O’Neill forced himself, in what he considered a Herculean effort, to keep from sighing in exasperation. He had to spend entirely too much time away from military matters, dealing with ivory tower politicians that didn't know the first thing about the Stargate or anything alien. Especially now that he was needed most out there, where Homeworld Command required his leadership.

The scene was an emergency meeting of the higher echelons of the United States government. Chief among them were Henry Hayes, President of the United States; General Hank Landry, The head of
Stargate Command; General William Ronson, head of the US Airforce's Space Command, which included the space fleet; O'Neill himself, head of Homeworld Command, which was the military body responsible for overseeing the SGC and the USAF space forces; the President's National Security adviser; the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and a few other military and public officials. Also present were Colonel Samantha Carter, one of the world's foremost experts in all sciences extraterrestrial, and Ambassador Frank West, a former United States senator and representative from the International Oversight Advisory (IOA), the civilian authority that oversaw Homeworld Command. Any other official figures were busy keeping the nation running while the present situation was discussed.

They were gathered inside the Oval Office. Normally, President Hayes preferred to keep the shades open to allow in as much natural light as possible. It was one of the things that O'Neill really liked about meeting with the president; he got far too little sunlight while sharing a seat with his ass at Homeworld Command. Today, however, the shades were pulled closed in order to block the view of the legions of reporters currently surrounding the White House compound.

The press had been there for over two days. Within a few hours of The Event, in fact. And behind them a large and ever growing crowd of protesters, or just people hoping for answers, had steadily built up until it had practically choked off any traffic on Pennsylvania avenue. People were really freaked out. It had actually been a struggle for the Secret Service to force a path to allow the various higher ups to get through to the President's home. If O'Neill were a betting man (which he wasn't. Honest.) he would place a lot of money on the intelligence agencies not being able to cover this one up. This was the end of an era, without a doubt.

And instead of preparing for it, they were getting bogged down by a self important politician asking stupid questions. He would no doubt be the first of many.

“Not exactly, sir,” Colonel Carter explained to the IOA representative. She had been giving a presentation of what Homeworld Command had put together concerning the event that rocked the world less than three days ago. 'The Event' as it was called, had thrown everyone and everything into pandemonium, and it had taken this long to simply get things functional again and start sifting through the data that had been pouring in. O'Neill felt it was a rather good presentation, all things considered, but the IOA was rarely satisfied with anything.

It was one of the many reasons that, ever since being granted the rank of General, O'Neill had lamented the responsibilities of a flag officer. It seemed like most of his time was spent trying to unravel all of the red tape and soothing the egos of politicians. In principle, O'Neill understood the need for the military to be beholden to elected, civilian authorities. He didn't want to live in a military dictatorship, after all. However, he would be lying if he said that he didn't prefer the desperation and terror of leading an SG Team into battle to talking over a phone to irate, entitled, prissy politicians who had never seen a day of action in their lives.

It would probably be easier to put up with if the IOA wasn't entirely clandestine. None of the common, everyday citizens of the political body's member nations knew of its existence. It seemed rather counterproductive to O'Neill to have a civilian authority that wasn't actually, you know, reporting to civilians, but what did he know. He tuned back in to Carter's patient explanation.

“As near as we can tell,” she was saying, “our galaxy has become directly connected with an alternate Milky Way from elsewhere within the multiverse. 3 dimensional space isn't as simple as most people think, but basically most of the territories are separate, with a relatively clear border separating one 'side' from another. However, there are several planetary systems that appear to have been melded together. Case in point: Sol.”
Carter raised a remote and pressed a button, causing an image to be projected onto the wall. The image was of a planet. It was clearly from a technologically advanced race, being surrounded by starships and what appeared to be orbital facilities of various functions. It was only upon getting a closer look that, as O'Neill himself would say, 'things started getting weird'.

The planet was Earth.

The continents were clearly the terrestrial ones, with Africa, the Americas, etc., all present and accounted for. Although, some of them looked a bit worse for wear. The result of climate abuse or, perhaps, war.

“This alternate Earth,” Carter said, not bothering to explain the patently obvious. O'Neill smiled as he was reminded again why he loved this woman. She continued, “appeared in an identical but opposite orbit around our star. It seems to be the center of a vast, interstellar governing body. The ships and facilities visible in this shot alone would indicate that. And sensor sweeps from the Odyssey in orbit have picked up other facilities in and around Mars and the Jovian Moons, Saturn and out towards Neptune and Pluto. All of which have given us some indication of size and industrial might of this new organization but nothing concrete in terms of intel into who they are and how they got here. However, we have also intercepted a number of communications from them that have granted us additional insight.”

Colonel Carter pressed another button, replacing the recon photo with an image of an abstract globe flanked by curved olive branches. “This is the emblem of the 'Unified Earth Government', or 'UEG',” she explained. “It appears to be the representative body responsible for governing the only new nation we have been able to identify. We haven't gotten much yet, obviously, but references to some kind of Senate have us optimistic that we're dealing with a representative democracy. More interesting, however, is the current date listed in many of the documents we've recovered: 2558.”

Silence.

“Colonel, do you mean to say that the future has been teleported into the past?” President Hayes asked cautiously.

“Probably not, sir,” Carter answered. “As you know, we have dealt with alternate universes before. These universes had a number of variables that were radically different from our ours despite being relatively 'close', for lack of a better term, to our own. As you move 'away' from one universe, more and more variables become different. It only stands to reason that the exact date would be different as well. I mean, linear time is largely an illusion from a physics standpoint, anyway.”

There were some additional details given, but O'Neill didn't concern himself with them. He had already gone over everything Carter had put together prior to this meeting. Instead, he focused on the President. On how he reacted.

Henry Hayes leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply.

He clicked his tongue a few times then slowly exhaled in one long, laborious breath.

Abruptly, his eyes opened and he leaned back forward, a burning intensity behind his gaze. He was ready for whatever was coming.

This time, O'Neill let his emotions show: he grinned. His leader wasn't allowing himself to be
overwhelmed. The General had already gained a healthy respect for the man 5 years ago when he took office and first learned of the Stargate and everything pertaining to it. This most recent revelation just proved once again that Hayes was not a man to be cowed by the world being turned on its head.

“We have no idea what caused this?” the President asked.

“No, sir,” Carter said, respect clearly in her eyes as well. “We don't know of any race that has the ability or the motive to do such a thing. I would think this is beyond even the ascended Ancients. Obviously, we'll keep looking into it, but in the absence of some kind of lead I wouldn't be hopeful, sir.”

“Is it permanent?” Hayes asked next.

“We don't know,” came the response. “From what we can tell, the galaxy has stabilized after whatever Event caused this. The only truly notable effect was the fact that it crashed the Stargate Network and forced us to do a correlative update network wide. Aside from that, as near as we can tell: they're here to stay.”

Hayes nodded, having expected that would be the case. He turned to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "General Maynard, Where do we stand?"

The general straightened in his seat and cleared his throat before pressing on, "Sir, we currently have our conventional forces at DEFCON 2. All leaves have been canceled, the Guard and Reserves have been mobilized, and the troops are on lockdown at their bases awaiting orders. Commandant Granger of the Marine Corp informed me earlier this morning it was the same for the Marines. For the Navy, Admiral Bretano has sortied everything he has. Unless it's in drydock undergoing overhaul the entire fleet is out at sea. Ditto for the Coast Guard."

The President nodded before turning to General William Ronson, the first Commander of the Prometheus, later promoted to General to command the US's growing space fleet program. "General, what's the status of the Fleet?"

"Sir, The Odyssey and the Hammond are in orbit and keeping an eye on things for the moment but they're badly outnumbered up there. We've had no choice but to recall the fleet. The Apollo should be back within the hour, if she's not already. Unfortunately Daedalus is still in the Pegasus Galaxy and won't be home for weeks, even if we give the recall order right now. They were scouting out potential habitable worlds for potential bases for Atlantis. The Argo and the Marathon are only half finished and won't be space worthy for months. As for our terrestrial allies they're in much the same boat, aside from the Chinese. The Sun Tzu is out on a shakedown cruise. The Russian Gagarin is almost complete, but she's still weeks from being ready. And HMS Indefatigable's keel was just laid down two weeks ago. She won't be ready for at least a year. And the French only just approved the Caraquon."

Abassador West chose this moment to interject, "I would remind everyone that the last four ships mentioned are Assets owned by our international allies. Currently under the auspices of Homeworld Command, that they have so kindly granted us."

Hayes let an infinitesimal grimace slip out in annoyance. "I'm well aware of that. Thank you,
Ambassador West." He settled his eyes on O'Neill. "What about our extraterrestrial allies?"

O'Neill shook his head with a grimace, "No help on that front I'm afraid, sir. The Free Jaffa have been seriously disrupted. Until they pickup the pieces from the Event they're essentially going to be a no show. Everyone else of note either got trashed by the Ori or just don't have space assets of note. We're on our own."

"And with the number of ships out there, I am rather concerned." Hayes stated bluntly. "What about our strategic assets?"

Maynard shared uneasy looks with both General O'Neill and General Ronson, head of the space fleet, before pushing forward."Currently at DEFCON 3, but we can upgrade at a moments notice."

National Security Advisor Colleen Winston spoke up immediately and with grave concern. "Mr, President, I must advise against that. At present this...Alternate Earth....hasn't made any aggressive moves against us. If we start arming Nukes that might very well change. Its a clear escalation on our part and one they might not ignore. We have to assume they are monitoring us the same way we are monitoring them. It could make finding a diplomatic solution just that much harder if they feel threatened."

"Not to mention it would ramp up an already tense situation here on Earth as well, Mr. President." General Maynard added.

The President nodded, satisfied for the moment. He moved on to the next topic at hand, asking, "Why hasn't this other Earth attempted to make direct contact?"

"We're not sure, sir." Carter replied. "It's possible that they're a very cautious people." She pressed the button again. This time, images of various alien races were projected onto the wall. "From what we've picked up, the UEG has recently fell victim to a massive, interstellar war against a theocratic alliance of aliens calling itself 'The Covenant'. The War seems to have been one of ethnic cleansing writ large, with The Covenant attempting to exterminate all human beings in existence. Entire planets were incinerated in a process called 'Glassing' and early estimates of the death toll place it in the 10s of billions. Given that fact, I think it's perfectly understandable that they're a bit nervous about this whole thing."

Even though he had read the report before, O'Neill still felt his face pale. This sort of thing was exactly what he was afraid of happening to his Earth. Billions dying as year after year the so-called defenders of humanity were unable to protect their people. It was like the life these people must have lived was a manifestation of every horrible nightmare he had ever had working at the SGC, just fast-forwarded a few centuries. He shook himself, the moment passing.

"Maybe this whole thing was their idea," General Maynard said. "If what you said is true, Colonel Carter, and they were losing the war then anything and everything could have been on the table. Maybe they were trying to get away from these 'Covenant' folks. Tens of billions dead? God knows I'd be trying to find a way to escape if I couldn't fight back effectively."

O'Neill nodded internally as he thought over that statement. It certainly had merit, but just didn't feel right.

"That's a possibility, but we don't think so," Carter replied, catching O'Neill's thoughtful look and understanding what it meant. She knew him so well.
“There are numerous references to the 'Human-Covenant War', as they call it, having ended several years ago. We'll keep looking into it, but early assessment is that the time for that level of desperation is passed.”

Maynard and Ronson seemed satisfied for the moment, as was the President's National Security adviser who alternated between looking over her own briefing files and the men in the room. That pretty much ended the presentation. All of the relevant information had been conveyed. Now, it fell to the people in this room to determine what to do in response. A quiet murmur took hold as conversations began between individual members.

“I'm proposing we immediately go public with the Stargate and all related organizations and programs,” President Hayes said.

Once again, the room descended into silence. If anything, this one was deeper than the one before.

“You can't be serious!” Ambassador West objected. “Mr. President, you yourself have argued on numerous occasions that the people of the world simply aren't ready for this information to be made available to them. We must—”

“I argued that,” Hayes interrupted, in no mood to endure another of West's ill-conceived rants, “because of the widespread unrest and uncertainty it would breed in the people at large. Look around you, ambassador: that has already happened. For God's sake, radio transmissions from the other Earth started reaching us within hours of its appearance. Anyone with a high powered telescope can look and detect the ships they have at various points in our solar system. Youtube and Discovery Channel have teamed up with observatories across the globe and have been doing a running tally on all the ships and stations they can see. They were at over 400 as of 5 minutes before this meeting! S.E.T.I has been cataloging radio and TV broadcasts from the other Earth and then gave it to the news outlets before we could stop them. The list goes on and on. We're lucky people are just nervous and staying home, not rioting in the street!”

The President got up from his seat, walked over to a window, and drew open the shades. He gestured to the line of press and protesters just outside the fences. “That, people, is just the tip of the iceberg. The public needs to know that we are prepared to deal with this situation. They need to know that we, too, have forces in space, including warships and allies, that can protect us from an uncertain galaxy. They need to know that the representatives they have entrusted with power will be able to meet the challenges that they will face in the coming days. The time for secrecy is over. We have to accept that and move forward, whatever the consequences. Because there is no going back.” The President paused to let that all sink in.

"In the mean time we need to move on this and move on it fast, we can't stall any longer." Hayes continued. He turned to his National Security Adviser "Connie, Get with the Chief of Staff and arrange a press conference for later tonight. Nothing too big, and let them know ahead of time we will not be taking questions. But we will be addressing this....Event...whatever."

"Of course, Mr. President," Connie replied at once.

"Then I want you and Ambassador West to coordinate with the IOA council and their various heads of state. If we're going to do this then we need to coordinate our efforts. Show a united front. Something like that will do wonders to keep the people calm, not to mention make the UN take note. Dealing with them will be just that much easier."

West looked almost indignant but a sharp look from the President's National Security Adviser told
him to let it go. He did so a moment later. "Of course, Mr. President. The IOA is at your disposal during this...crisis."

"Very good." Hayes said. Anyone else have any suggestions or ideas? I'm open to them."

None were forthcoming.

"Alright then, lets do this." Hayes said. The people in the room got ready to rise from their seats in order to disperse.

As much as a part of him screamed to argue with the President, O'Neill found himself in agreement with the man. People were scared. Pretty soon, they would be turning to anyone who seemed strong enough to protect them. Strong-man figures and authoritarian factions would be on the rise as their bravado made them seem like they might be capable of keeping the frightened people safe. The pre-existing networks and infrastructure of Homeworld Command would provide an effective counter to the rhetoric of any would-be tyrants, they just needed it to be shown that they were on top of things. The coming days would be a war for the soul of the people of Earth. And they intended to win it.

“Alright,” O'Neill said aloud, drawing everyone's attention, “I'm starting a pool on how long it takes for people to start demanding we all get executed. Any takers?”

The response was mixed. Some were dumbfounded. Ambassador West was irritated, angrily saying, “I hardly think this is the time for—”

“Put me down for $50 on 12 hours,” President Hayes interrupted. West turned to him in disbelief.

“Ooh, conservative bet, Mr. President,” O'Neill replied. “I've got $20 on 30 minutes.”

“Put me down for $20 on 2 hours,” Colonel Carter added. O'Neill smiled as West and others like him sat back in stunned disbelief. At least something enjoyable was happening today.

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

Facility, HIGHCOM Bravo-6
Sydney, Australia. Earth. April 30th 2558

“His name is Henry Hayes,” Director Serin Osman said. She gestured to a 2D image of the man in question, projected over the holographic console toward the front of the room. The President of the 'United States of America' was a Caucasian man, relatively middle-aged for the time, with worry lines and a fire behind his eyes.

Fleet Admiral Hood considered himself a good judge of character. He had to be in this job. While it was difficult to tell from an image, much less a 2D picture of rather primitive quality, he had a good feeling about this one.

Hood was attending a meeting of the highest ranking individuals within the Unified Earth Government. They were in a bunker deep beneath the UEG Capital in Sydney, Australia. In
attendance was President Ruth Charet, leader of the civilian government; attending via hologram was Director/Admiral Serin Osman, leader of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), the intelligence division of the UEG; Hood himself, supreme commander of the United Nations Space Command (UNSC), the military division of the UEG; and a small number of fellow higher-ups.

The air always felt cold down here, Hood reflected. While the warships he usually spent his time on were no less isolated and climate controlled than this room, something about the bunker always struck him as...separated from the real world. As if it were the 26th Century version of the metaphorical Ivory Towers of old.

He couldn't wait to leave.

“While the United States of America does not currently rule this New Earth,” Osman's hologram continued, using the nickname that had already taken off for the alternate human homeworld, “it does hold a dominant economic and military role. This is the individual we will most want to talk to when it comes to direct interactions with them.”

Interactions that you will have no part of, if I have any say about it, Hood thought, suppressing a scowl. ONI had never been an organization he trusted. What his sources within the spy agency informed him of their activities in recent years only reinforced that mistrust. While he was sure he didn't know everything about what was going on with the opaque institution, he did know that he didn't want their Machiavellian hands anywhere near New Earth.

“We've had every specialist and Artificial Intelligence available scouring intercepted transmissions,” Osman continued, unaware of Hood's thoughts. Or perhaps not; Lord knows the enmity between Hood and ONI was well known within that organization. The hologram of the intelligence director continued her briefing.

ONI had hacked into nearly every major database on the planet within a matter of hours. Everything from public libraries to the supposedly secure databases of major governments were perused in infinite detail by ONI's AIs. They now had a near-complete picture of just what New Earth's situation was. Or so they claimed.

It seemed that there were few differences between New Earth and the one of their distant past. However, beneath the surface there were a number of substantial deviations. Most significant of these was the fact that several of the nations appeared to have the capability to field military units beyond their own biosphere. Case in point: the 3-D wireframe image of a warship in orbit slowly rotating on the screen. ONI and HIGHCOM could only guess as to its capabilities, but the simple fact that these people were fielding practical space warships circa 2009 was simply astounding.

“We have found numerous references to extra-planetary warships, alliances with alien civilizations, and other such advanced concepts that should not be present,” Osman's hologram explained. “Classified emails and the like frequently utilize terms such as 'Homeworld Command', 'Subspace', and something known as a 'Stargate'. We're still working on narrowing down the location of these organizations' headquarters, so for now we have been unable to remotely access their databases. Given the relatively primitive nature of their overall infrastructure, we estimate it should take no more than another 1-2 days to acquire all relevant intelligence we need.”

“And the general public knows nothing of these off-world activities?” President Charet asked. Though her tone was level and controlled, Hood could sense the almost bewildered disbelief in her question.
Admiral Hood liked Charet. She was an educated woman, with a doctorate in political sciences, and was always seeking out new knowledge and finding the best ways to utilize it. More than that, she had the strength of conviction. Already she had done more to reign ONI in than Hood had been able to accomplish in decades of service.

Of course, Charet came to power after the end of the Human-Covenant War, so she didn't have the threat of encroaching extinction staying her hand like he had. To this day Hood wondered if his leniency on the UEG's intelligence division during the War hadn't been a kind of Faustian bargain.

“No, ma'am,” Osman answered. Her monochromatic hologram flickered as the programs struggled to maintain contact with the UNSC Point of No Return many light-years away. “The general public is completely unaware. How they've managed to achieve such a feat is another issue we are...looking into.”

This last bit was said with the distinctly uncomfortable air of a person not accustomed to admitting they don't know something. ONI always tried to maintain a facade of omniscience. Hearing its Director have to admit to her ignorance not once but twice in one meeting almost made this whole thing worth it, in Hood's opinion.

“Could the people of this 'New Earth' have caused The Event?” the President asked.

“We find that highly unlikely, ma'am,” Osman's hologram answered. “Whatever advanced technologies they have kept secret, their infrastructure indicates that they are still remarkably primitive. It is possible that they recovered some type of alien technology that could have caused The Event, but that would beg the question of Why?”

“What about the sangheili? Have the Arbiter's people gotten back to us? Do they know anything?” Charet asked, following a clear and focused line of reasoning. New Earth probably wasn't responsible, so she had moved on to the only advanced alien life humanity was on relatively good terms with. The fact that the Arbiter led the sangheili race, formerly the chief military species of the Covenant, did not concern her. They might have answers, and if so, she would work with them to get at the truth.

“The Arbiter himself sent a reply,” Osman said, looking like she had swallowed something sour. “He claimed to have no idea what had caused this. After saying so, he indicated he would be pulling back his forces to secure his borders against possible threats.”

Which is just fine by me, Hood thought.

While the Arbiter had proved honorable in the past, even coming to humanity's aid in the final days of the War, Hood had never quite been able to forget the nearly 30 years of slaughter that the Arbiter and his people had wrought. Sometimes it felt that Charet was a bit too friendly with humanity's former butchers. Then again, perhaps that was just the old soldier in Hood talking. He would leave diplomacy to the diplomats.

“So, for the meantime we will have to focus on what to do next,” the President said, getting back to business. “How is our public responding to this?”

“Mostly with shock,” the Director of ONI replied. “As you know, radio signals from New Earth began reaching us within hours. Fortunately, most of our territory is not on the 'border', so there has been no direct contact yet. Still, news spreading across social media and Waypoint has proven...problematic.” Waypoint was the modern, interstellar equivalent to the ancient internet,
connecting all of UEG space in a giant slipspace-comm FTL network. It had provided ONI with quite a bit of trouble since its establishment. “We have been seeking out and neutralizing thousands of sources of news per hour. Unfortunately, even our resources have not been able to contain the spread of information. Word is getting out, and its making the public nervous.”

Admiral Hood was, once again, disturbed by how...casual ONI was when discussing the quelling of basic civil liberties. He had to wonder just what methods the intelligence division was using to 'neutralize' said sources of independent journalism and free speech. He knew in the pit of his stomach he would absolutely hate that answer.

“We'll have to compose a public address quickly, then,” President Charet said. “What is the military capability of New Earth?”

“For the most part, minimal,” Osman's hologram said dismissively. “Whatever secrets they have withheld, there can only be a few nations involved in this 'Homeworld Command'. This limits the amount of forces they can field. Their aforementioned primitive infrastructure would also cripple any efforts to prosecute an interplanetary war; they have no space-born shipyards, no orbital elevators, no mining operations on their moon or other planetoids. Even their starships are only 400 meters long, smaller than even our light frigates, and we count only three of them in high orbit. We predict that they haven't had to face a single off-world threat, let alone one as powerful as the UEG. Compared to the UNSC, they're a flea facing a whale.”

“A flea...” Charet said, her tone concealing the displeasure that Hood knew she had to be feeling. “Display the planet again,” she commanded.

Nonplussed, Osman gestured, causing a projection of New Earth to appear beside her own image.

A hushed silence fell over the room. Once again, the sight of this world world had awed them all. It was clear why the term 'New Earth' had taken off. It wasn't just an indicator of the fact that it had never been seen before. No, it referred to something much more profound.

The planet was nearly pristine.

There were no cities reduced to molten rubble by the Sack. Northern Africa was still a healthy, arid landscape. The infrastructure wasn't lying in smoldering ruins or in the process of being rebuilt. The people had not suffered decades of fearing extermination by an alien adversary that seemed unstoppable. There was some damage from climate change and pollution, obviously, but nothing that couldn't be addressed by the UEG's advanced Terra-forming technology.

Even Hood, the practical man that he was, had to admit that the sight was...awe-inspiring.

“A bit more than a flea...” President Charet said.

“I believe our course of action is clear,” a new voice opined. Hood suppressed another scowl. The voice belonged to Charles Marlowe, one of Charet's advisers. Hood had never liked the little pissant. He was a war-hungry fascist whose apathy toward the people of the UEG was rivaled only by his desire to please the private sector. The only reason he even had a place here was because Charet stacked her cabinet with her fiercest rivals; she refused to be surrounded by yes-men. Hood wished she was just a bit less pragmatic as the man continued talking. “We should seek to establish friendly relations. Show them just how advanced and enlightened we are. Then, after they have gotten a good look at what we have to offer, we invite them to join the Unified Earth Government.”
“Getting way ahead of ourselves, aren't we?” Hood replied, frowning. “At any rate, we don't know that they will ever come to that conclusion. What if they say no?”

Marlowe put a look of obviously false innocence on his face. “Why would they?” he asked, his voice laden with hidden meaning. The threat of force was clearly conveyed between the lines.

Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood exploded.

“Absolutely not!" Hood shouted, rising to his feet. Several attendees visibly recoiled from his fury. “I refuse to have anything to do with intimidation tactics or strong-arm policies! The UNSC is the sword and shield of humanity. We are meant to defend the human race, not conquer it, and we have done that for centuries. The last 30 years in particular. It will not be turned into a tool of oppression on my watch. Besides which, Mister Marlowe,” he added, emphasizing the the cabinet member's civilian status. The man had never seen the inside of a warship, let alone fought in the Human-Covenant War. “The UNSC is in no position to prosecute another war. We are still deep in recovery from the butchery of the Covenant. Our resources and infrastructure are stretched thin defending our current territory. Besides which, the victory may not be as easy as you imagine. Guerrilla tactics are far more effective than you realize, Marlowe, and trying to conquer something on the size and scale of New Earth could well spell the death of the UEG through sheer attrition. I will say it again, clearly and for the record: I will have no part in any attempted conquest or military intimidation of New Earth. If you have a problem with that, I will be more than willing to tender my resignation.”

Silence again.

For the first time in his life, Hood longed for the emergency powers that had been granted to him during the Human-Covenant War. As the Covenant had conquered system after system, glassed planet after planet, more and more authority had been ceded from the civilian government to the UNSC. Eventually, it got to the point where Fleet Admiral Hood was effectively the emperor of all humankind.

Following the War, Hood had willingly and gratefully ceded power right back to the UEG. It was a...controversial move, particularly among some of his general officers. Said officers had been relieved of their commands as soon as they made their complaint known. The military existed to serve the people, not lord over them.

This was not to say there hadn't been dissenters among the civilian population, either. Hood had lead the human race to victory. He was overwhelmingly popular with the public and there were billions of people who would follow him wherever he went. Even the remnants of the insurrection spoke of him with grudging respect.

Which was what made his ultimatum so effective. It may have been the only card he had to play, but it was one hell of a card.

“Easy, Terrence,” President Charet soothed. “No one, and I mean no one,” she said, sending a meaningful glare at Marlowe, “is suggesting that we conquer New Earth, or otherwise intimidate it. It is our duty to represent the people of the UEG and the last thing the people want, or need, is another war, however short it may be. We will pursue direct contact with them but only from the standpoint of establishing peaceful relations. Any potential admission into our governing body will be dealt with if it ever arises.”

Admiral Hood nodded respectfully and took his seat. He would keep vigilant in the coming days, but he was at least moderately comforted to have an ally in the presidency.
One look at Marlowe and Osman told him that the president might well be the only ally he would have. Marlowe had been getting quite chummy with Osman as of late. Worryingly so.

“As such,” Charet continued, “I am hereby commissioning a diplomatic mission to meet with representatives from New Earth. Said meeting will led by Mr. Sekibo and held aboard the UNSC Infinity.”

“Is that wise Madame President?” Sekibo asked. He was a renowned peace advocate and one of the few senators Charet trusted enough to allow into this meeting. He was the adviser that Hood actually liked most of the time. “Holding the first formal contact with New Earth aboard the UNSC’s most powerful starship could send the wrong message.”

President Charet just smiled and said, “There's a difference, Richard, between intimidation and negotiating from a position of strength.”

Spheres of blue-white light flew through the air, chasing the desperate tribesmen as they ran. One of the primitive humans was struck in the back. He collapsed to the ground, his flesh and animal-hide clothing smoldering from the burn. None of his fellows paused in their flight; they could not spare the time.

“Chappa'ai! Get to the Chappa'ai!” one of them shouted. He twisted his body in mid-run and loosed an arrow at their pursuers. It was a futile gesture. None of their bows or spears had done any good repelling the monsters from their village. The rising smoke behind them was a testament to that.

At last, they made it. The circular shape of the ancient device was a blessed sight to the eyes of the terrified survivors. One of them, the one who had shouted a moment ago, rushed to the control device. He had to enter an address. It couldn't be Dakara itself; he refused to lead these monsters to the home of the Free Jaffa. He would go somewhere no one lived, then once he was safe, dial Dakara from there. Masters Teal'c and Bra'tac had to be told of this.

He had not pressed the first symbol of an address when the spheres began flying in earnest.

The plainsman, a former Jaffa who had taken on the ways of the tribes he once, to his eternal shame, helped the System Lords enslave, was struck in the shoulder. The force of the blow knocked him off of his feet and away from the control device. The excruciating pain of the burn kept him down. He lay, helpless, as his fellows were struck down one by one. He was alone before he could even draw his weapon.
The Chappa'ai. He had to activate the Chappa'ai. He turned onto his belly and crawled, as swiftly as he could, desperate to complete the address and reach salvation. Anger, anger at his destroyed home, at the premature end of his redemption quest, fueled a lust for vengeance that drove him onward. He had to reach Dakara. It was his only hope for justice.

He left bloody handprints on the control device as he entered the first address that popped into his mind. It was one he had learned long ago, back when he still served the System Lord Ba'al.

The gate opened. The luminous water rushed out and fell back, as it had innumerable times in the plainsman's life. He stumbled toward it, energy blasts flying all around him, and leaped through.

He crashed to the ground, kicking up a cloud of black dust. He shook himself and glanced about. A blackened, desolate landscape greeted him. He cared not a whit for the ugliness of his surroundings. He had made it. There was hope that his people would be avenged!

That hope was quashed, as was his body, by the heavy boot that smashed into his back and broke his spine. The enemy had followed him through the chappa'ai.

He did not die. Instead, he felt himself be lifted up, paralyzed, and held before his adversary. It was an alien, although not one that he recognized. And he was sure he would remember this one's kind. For it was easily 7 feet tall and covered in fur, with a short muzzle filled with sharp teeth, and an overall ape-like visage. It was a monster out of a child's nightmare. And now it was going to kill him. The monster chuckled, it rancid breath washing over its victim, as it savored its work.

The Jaffa-turned-plainsman spit in its face. The creature roared and drew a large, serrated blade. It buried the vicious weapon into his chest. The world faded into a white light...

“Disgusting wretch!” the omega shouted, wiping the saliva from his face. He threw the broken body of his prey to the ground and stomped off, muttering about the indignity of human vermin. The beta in charge of this sub-pack snorted, amused by his subordinate's humiliation. It served him right for being such a complaining whelp most of the time.

The beta was just about to order his warriors to return to camp when, belatedly, he came to his senses.
He and his pack had rushed blindly into the ring device, their blood screaming with the thrill of battle, without a thought as to what would be on the other side. They certainly hadn't expected to find themselves on an entirely different planet. They must have passed through some kind of portal device. Strange; the ring hadn't looked like any kind of Forerunner relic he was familiar with. As the beta was pondering this, the ring deactivated!

“Who dares intrude on my domain?” a voice called out from the shadows.

“Take cover!” the beta shouted. The members of the Jiralhanae band moved awkwardly to positions behind some rocks that dotted the ground. Their natural instincts demanded that they roar and rush forward to smash their foe to bits. However, Atriox, their current Alpha, had made clear that they were to use more 'advanced tactics' while he was in charge. So, the members of the band made a half-hearted effort to crouch behind cover.

A single figure emerged, seemingly from the empty air, unguarded and unarmed, dressed in ornate clothing, and covered in expensive jewels. It was another human!

“Fire!” the beta shouted. He needn't have. The Jiralhanae under his command had loosed their plasma rifles as soon as their prey had appeared.

A cylindrical, shimmering energy shield appeared, blocking each of their shots. It mattered little. There was not a portable shield in the galaxy that could withstand a sustained bombardment for long. Curiously, the human raised its jewel-covered hand toward the pack, as if commanding them to stop. This, naturally, only enraged them further, and the rate of fire increased. A bright, red light shone out from the creature's palm.

An invisible force rushed out and smashed into one of the Jiralhanae. The mighty warrior, member of a race so strong and durable as to inspire awe and fear throughout the galaxy, was crushed to paste in a moment's time.

One by one the creature slew the beta's warriors. It showed no sign of effort in the task, as if killing an enraged band of Jiralhanae were the easiest thing in the world. At last, the beta was alone. He roared in defiance of his imminent death. Determined to meet his end in the way of his people, he tossed aside his plasma rifle, drew his own serrated blade, and rushed his foe. The red light shone again.
To his surprise, the beta was not slain. Instead, he was knocked back several meters to land in an ungraceful heap upon the barren soil. The pain in his bones and muscles left him helpless as his enemy approached him and stood a few strides away.

“You will tell me who and what you are,” she said. Her voice was odd, the beta thought through the pain. It was deeper and had a kind of...echo to it that he had never heard in a human's speech. Her eyes shone with an otherworldly light as she said, “and you will tell me how the Goa'uld might profit from you.”

Chapter End Notes

Note: We're going to try to stick to a 2-week posting schedule for now. It's unclear if we'll be able to stick to it long term, but for the next few chapters at least we should be reliably posting twice per month. Hope you all enjoy the ride.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

SlipSpace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 3 Meetings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 3: Meetings

Atriox was surrounded by spoils.

The leader of the jiralhanae raiders known as the Banished took a moment to revel in the wealth his warriors had assembled. The recent raids on the strange human tribe had gone quite well. His pack had been forced to flee as hostile ships arrived in the target star system, but that was to be expected. Let some of his omegas complain about fleeing in the face of enemies. Atriox was Alpha, and he understood the value in guerrilla tactics. He knew how to bring wealth and prosperity to his pack.

A trunk caught his eye. The container was large, nearly as large as himself, was constructed of hard metal, and had a complex electronic lock. Atriox grinned, showing his maw of razor-sharp teeth. That one peaked his interest. He stomped over and lay his Chieftain's Gravity Hammer on the ground.

The dataslate integrated into his Chieftain's Armor beeped and buzzed as it got to work unlocking his prize. The minutes dragged on without visible progress. Atriox growled as he waited, impatient, feeling as if what he wanted was being dangled in front of him. It was a feeling he had known well growing up in the time of the Covenant.

The dataslate buzzed an annoying tone. The machine had failed!

Atriox growled, his expression of frustration filling the tent and no doubt frightening the guards waiting outside. The jiralhanae Chieftain gripped the container's lid with both of his enormous hands and lifted. A groaning sound filled the air as metal was bent and warped by his tremendous strength.

SNAP!

The latches broke off and flew into the air, ripping through the tent fabric and disturbing the air beside Atriox's head. A few centimeters to the left and it might have struck his neck. The jiralhanae paid that fact no heed as he rifled through the chest's innards. He growled once again.

Useless trinkets.

Ancient relics, no doubt of a race long dead. Why would any being bother collecting such things in such a secure container? Atriox shook his head and slammed the chest closed in frustration, the abused hinges breaking apart from the strain and leaving the lid ajar.

Footsteps echoed in the jiralhanae's naturally excellent hearing. The tent flap was pushed open as one of Atriox's betas entered. The jiralhanae subordinate kept his line of sight below eye level, rightly afraid of making eye contact and thus challenging his Alpha's dominance. The beta walked forward and stopped a respectful distance away, putting his fist to his chest in a salute.

“Alpha, I bring news,” he reported.

“Then speak it,” Atriox barked gruffly. After the disappointment of a moment earlier he had little
patience for pleasantries.

“We have a prisoner, Alpha,” the beta groveled, eager to prove he wasn't wasting his irate leader's time. “A human who used a cloaking device to get close to one of our raiding parties. It had other...technology...that we are unfamiliar with. It has been placed in a tent under guard.”

“You took it alive?” Atriox asked, privately thrilled. In the old days, before he had taken power, the jiralhanae would have simply slaughtered the human without a thought. Instead, they had taken it prisoner in order to extract valuable intelligence from it. Perhaps his own cunning was finally being emulated by his ranks.

“Well...” the beta replied hesitantly. The silence drew on as the subordinate jiralhanae seemed to struggle to find the courage to continue. Atriox released some pheromones that indicated he was a half-step from beating the information out of the coward. The beta hurriedly continued, “It surrendered itself! It used some sort of telekinesis device to kill the entire party save the beta then told him to bring it to see you. It says it has something to offer you, Alpha.”

Silence.

“It is...offering me something.” Atriox said, not quite believing his ears.

“Y-yes, Alpha.”

Silence again.

“Give me your report,” the jiralhanae alpha ordered. The beta gladly complied, handing him a dataslate and happy to no longer be the focus of his attention.

Several minutes passed as Atriox silently studied. “Fascinating...” he whispered to himself. Suddenly eager to see this 'human' for himself he picked up his Chieftain's Gravity Hammer, holstered in across his back, left the spoils tent, and began the march toward the prisoner.

The campsite was temporary by design. The only visible buildings were tents and other such portable structures that could be taken down at a moment's notice, all laid out in orderly grids. Dropships and shuttles sat parked a short distance away, ready for emergency launch. Guards stood in lookout 'towers', small platforms held aloft by gravity projectors, keeping a watchful eye for any approaching forces. Yet this was no army camp. It was the berth of criminals.

Just like the pirates of old, Atriox thought with pride.

Things had certainly changed since the destruction of the Covenant at the end of the war with the humans. The jiralhanae had always been subjugated in that ancient, theocratic regime. They were marginalized, ignored, and forbidden from ascending to high office. The sangheili in particular had been especially cruel, taking every opportunity to remind the jiralhanae that they were lesser than their exalted saurian brethren. Atriox's fur ruffled in contempt as he remembered their jeers.

No, the Covenant had never been a friend of the jiralhanae. It had been their master. In a true jiralhanae society, any warrior could challenge the Alpha for ascendancy. Anyone could become Alpha. All that was required was the strength and skill to be worthy of it. The Covenant had refused this way, and relegated Atriox's people to the lowest rungs of its hierarchy.

The only truly free jiralhanae had been the renegades. The outlaws. Those who turned to piracy and
other so-called disreputable arts to seek their living. Only among thieves did a jiralhanae have the chance to live as a jiralhanae should. As far as Atriox was concerned, these were the true heroes of his people. The pirate lords were the leaders that he would emulate.

A pair of guards stood outside the prisoner's tent. They straightened as they saw their Alpha approach, keeping their eyes down and pressing their fists to their chests in a salute. He ignored them as he barged in.

The prisoner sat calmly behind a bare table, showing no signs of alarm at his abrupt entrance.

“Ah, Alpha Atriox,” it said in a deep, strange voice, very much unlike any human Atriox had ever encountered. “I would bow in respect but, well,” it said, gesturing to the restraints keeping it bound to its stool. Interestingly, it made sure to keep its eyes lowered as it made a slight bow with its upper body.

“Who are you?” the jiralhanae leader demanded.

“I am of the new world,” it replied. Which was not an answer, Atriox noted. The vermin's eyes glowed as it finished, “and, contrary to appearances, I am not human.”

Atriox laughed, a loud rumbling noise that drowned out the room. “I knew that already,” he said, gesturing to the dataslate. “I had you quietly scanned as you were waiting. I know that some...creature dwells within you. Regardless of whatever the wretched thing is, your body is still clearly homo sapiens sapiens. You are still vermin.”

The creature's eyes flashed again, growing hard as it continued to keep its eyes lowered. Good. He was making it off-balance.

“It does not dwell within me,” the vermin replied. “I dwell within it. The one you speak to now is the entity inside the human host. I drive its body as you might pilot a craft. Nothing of the 'human' you spoke of still lives inside this frame.”

Atriox roared with laughter. “You are a parasite, then! A vermin twice over! What business would I have with one such as you?”

Again, the glow returned. “The same business I would have with such a filthy primate: profits.”

Atriox let loose a savage roar and drew his hammer. He marched forward, swung his weapon in a massive overhand blow, and smashed the table into a flat, broken disc. The pulse from the gravity hammer forced the stool, and the vermin atop it, back a third of a meter and made the tent walls flutter.

The vermin in question didn't even flinch. Instead, it looked Atriox dead in the eye as the air settled.

“I trust I passed the test?” she asked.

The Alpha roared again, but this time with laughter. The creature had gained a—small—measure of his respect. “Indeed you have,” he replied. “Tell me: what do you offer to the Banished?”

The creature smiled. “First, allow me to introduce myself.” Her eyes glowed and her back straightened as she spoke her full title. “I am System Lord Astarte.”
Representative Arivinda Singh of India left shock-waves with his impassioned speech at the United Nations. He demanded equal representation in any and all off-world programs as well as equal access to all alien technologies for those nations not already represented by the 'International Oversight Advisory'. Saying, quote, "This most recent revelation is but another example of first-world empires attempting to enforce economic hegemony here on Earth." Experts say that he echoed the sentiments of many in the developing world—"

And let's go to our next caller. Bill from Waco, Texas, tell us what you think about the government's reasoning for keeping the existence of alien life secret from the public."

"Yeah, I've got to disagree completely with the last caller. The government has proven itself inept and corrupt in everything it's done lately and you honestly think it's a good idea to let it fight multiple wars in complete secret? This is nuts! Who knows how badly they've screwed things up! How many of our soldiers have died—"

―the single greatest maskirovka in the history of the world. The fact that they were able to keep all of this a secret for so long is, frankly, frightening. It hearkens back to the worst of totalitarian policies. How many people, I wonder, did our government have to 'disappear' to keep this secret? How many people had to be threatened? How many of our supposedly trusted news media did our representatives buy into silence? We must demand transparency—"

Anti-war advocates have been involved in a flurry of activity in the past weeks, questioning just how many wars the people of Earth have been unknowingly committed to. They have also questioned just how many of them were truly necessary and how many were caused as a direct result of the secrecy and forced isolation of those running our 'off-world' programs—"

"Had enough of this nonsense," Major Williamson said, turning off the Humvee's radio with a disgusted sigh.

Grogan nodded in agreement from the passenger seat. The few days since the President went public had been filled with a non-stop barrage of people questioning every organization and individual at all connected to the Stargate. The unrest was worldwide. Demonstrations and protests were popping up in every major capital. Politicians were lining up to try to spin the revelations to their own advantage, stoking the fear and paranoia of the public. Outrage, incredulity, round the clock press coverage...It was every bit the circus General O'Neill had been afraid it would be.

Speak of the devil, Grogan thought with a grimace.

The convoy had arrived at the United Nations compound. Protesters surrounded the entire area, kept back by chainlink fences and a number of armed guards with very large rifles. The Humvee made its
way between the barricades keeping the road open, narrowly avoiding the guards keeping the angry citizens from just knocking the things over and pouring into the street. Grogan breathed a sigh of relief as they passed the gate and left the angry civilians behind. He glanced back one more time to get a good, less anxious look at them.

They were obviously angry. The kind of angry people get when they're so floored they don't know what to be angry about and just lash out at anyone and anything. Numerous conflicting and often mutually exclusive chants were being shouted at the convoy. There were also a lot of signs being held up by the protesters. Calls for resignations and demands for accountability were a frequent theme. A rather disturbing number of them were calling for impeachment and capital punishment for those responsible for the cover-ups.

Grogan almost smiled as he remembered General O'Neill's reaction to the fact that people were calling for President Hayes' execution within just under half an hour: “Damn! Off by 5 minutes!”

At last, the convoy arrived within the perimeter. They had to pass a second barricade line keeping the press away from the dignitaries. A swarm of flashes and extended microphones greeted SG-9 as they exited their vehicle. They swiftly made their way over to the shuttle, taking up their positions to the right of the loading ramp, opposite the Secret Service team.

The limousine that the convoy had been escorting opened up. Out came President Hayes, the UN representative, the IOA representative, and the various other personnel attached to them. They were the diplomatic team that would be speaking for the world in a few hours. They waved or nodded to the cameras and made their way over to the X-300 exo-atmospheric shuttle that would be taking them to the diplomatic conference with the 'Unified Earth Government'.

They were taking a shuttle for several reasons. For one, they didn't want to tip their hand that they had beaming transit technology. Not that beaming would work since the scans Col. Carter and her people had performed indicated that the UNSC energy shields would block the effort, anyway. And two, beaming transit tech was currently only available via an BC-304 capital ship. Neither the Pentagon nor the IOA wanted to detach one of Earth’s precious few ships from homeworld defense to meet the Infinity, thereby leaving the ship vulnerable to attack in the event of a double cross. The IOA had been adamant about the fleet staying in orbit to protect their Earth, with the Pentagon and the President in full agreement with them.

Lacking a Tel'tak or a Puddle Jumper large enough to take the diplomatic team, the X-300 was suggested to do the job. First designed in early 2000 as a replacement to the aging Shuttles still used by NASA, the X-300 was canceled due to budget constraints, as well as being obsolete once technology from the Stargate Program began to trickle in. That still hadn’t stopped the first two prototypes, Freedom and Independence, from finishing construction.

Stargate Command, sensing an opportunity, had quietly taken control of the two prototypes and transferred them to a specialized hangar at Area 51. There the they were stripped down to their frames and rebuilt to become test beds for new technology developed from the X-301 Interceptor and incorporated into the X-302 Hyperspace Fighter. Trinium-Titanium composite hull, artificial gravity plating, first generation inertial manipulation technology, and the enhanced rockets and aerospike engines were all pioneered on the Freedom and Independence. The final result had been a surprisingly robust shuttle capable of easily entering orbit and landing under its own power. One even capable of prolonged interplanetary travel in the Solar system. The first in what many hoped would be an inter-solar system transport shuttle fleet.
But as the war with the Goa’uld and later the Ori grew in size and scale the Pentagon was forced to prioritize resources and funding. The X-300s were placed into mothballs while funding and resources were diverted to the 302, 303, and later 304 programs.

Now the two shuttles had been pulled from Mothballs and after 3 days ensuring they were up to spec, would carry the President and his team to the Infinity. They weren’t state of the art by the SGC’s standards of today. They would, however, be more than sufficient for the job.

Grogan watched as President Hayes kept up a practiced smile and made his way toward his destination. It had been a rather controversial choice for the American president to lead the first diplomatic mission to the new half of the Milky Way galaxy, the Captain reflected. There were many nations that objected rather strongly, saying that the country responsible for lying to the world shouldn’t be the one to lead any international endeavor at the moment.

Thankfully, those voices had been outvoted. People were scared. The American government had the most experience dealing with aliens. They had the resources, the military, and the diplomatic know-how, which meant they would be negotiating from a position of strength. And if there was one thing people craved in a time of uncertainty, it was strong leadership.

The fact that Henry Hayes was the most popular American president in decades, perhaps in history, probably helped matters. Grogan didn't care about that so much as the man's obvious skill in a crisis situation. He wanted the only politician who could keep it together and lead his country through the Anubis, The Replicator, and The Ori crises in charge in the days ahead. There was no way he'd trust a corrupt and ineffectual Congress or, God forbid, the IOA alone to handle things going forward.

After another brief nod to the cameras (President Hayes even giving a thumbs up) the delegates boarded the shuttle. SG-9, representing the SGC, and the Secret Service would be providing the Earth (well, their Earth) security team for the meeting, in accordance with the terms set down in advance with the UEG. As such, they followed the delegates and strapped themselves into the smaller, more utilitarian of the troop compartments.

The shuttle rumbled slightly and took off, shooting into the sky faster than any terrestrial spacecraft NASA had ever thrown into orbit. Grogan was grateful for the inertial dampeners keeping them all from feeling the effects of sudden acceleration. The last thing he needed was to throw up in the new, vacuum-rated combat armor he and the rest of the security force had been issued for the trip.

The screen mounted on the wall came to life as the external cameras activated. The Earth dropped away below them, a beautiful blue marble growing ever more distant as the seconds ticked by. A field of stars greeted Grogan in its absence. They glittered against the blackness of space like sparks on dark velvet. Once again, he marveled at the fact that he was actually in space.

“Never gets old, does it?” Satterfield whispered into the silence. The rest of the room nodded in silent agreement. Even Major Williamson seemed awed by the beauty of it all.

The trip took just under an hour. The screen automatically focused on their destination as they got closer to it.

“My God...” Major Williamson whispered in awe. They had all been briefed on the 'UNSC Infinity', the flagship of the UEG’s fleet. Still, it was one thing to be told about the size of the 5.7 kilometer long super-dreadnaught, and a whole 'nother ballgame to actually see her in person.

It was clearly a carrier, with numerous fighter craft launching from hangars to escort the SGC shuttle
into its berth. Not that the Infinity needed protection. Numerous weapons systems dotted the ship, from missile ports to heavier rail-gun turrets to point defense laser batteries. Most fearsome of all were the 4 enormous holes on the bow of the ship. Col. Carter had theorized these to be the barrels of some kind of enormous, spinal mounted gauss cannon. If that was true, he really didn't want to see what one of those shells could do to a BC-304 or, God forbid, a city.

*I thought we were gonna meet on a ship, not the freakin' Death Star,* Grogan thought with an awed dread. He had to wonder just what that ship could do if the people commanding it got pissed off. More than that, what the UNSC as a whole could do if its leadership got angry. The rest of the security force seemed to share his discomfort, as they all shifted uncomfortably in their seats. No one could take their eyes off the behemoth as it slowly grew in size on the screen.

Not for the first time, Grogan wondered whether the people calling for a single world government on Earth had a point. What hope did humanity (his humanity) have to meet extraterrestrial threats if it was still bickering among itself? After all, if people like President Hayes and General O'Neill were in charge, what did they have to worry about?

The shuttle was escorted past the patrol line of frigates and docked with the Infinity. The shuttle ramp lowered, allowing the security team to head down. They paused just prior to exiting to allow Major Williamson, the CO for this op, to request permission to board.

A uniformed officer greeted them. He identified himself as 'Fleet Admiral Hood', supreme commander of the UNSC and temporarily in charge of the Infinity, and welcomed them aboard his ship. He was an older man, with stress lines and crows feet making him look like a less crotchety Clint Eastwood. He struck Grogan as a decent officer, professional but welcoming, authoritative without being overbearing. The SGC officer hoped his impression of the man spoke well of the rest of his people. The initial formalities accomplished, the security forces entered the UNSC ship.

The first thing Grogan noticed was the sheer size of the hangar. It had to be at least an 100 meters high, and triple that wide. There were multiple levels to it, too, with several dropships and fighter craft docked at various points. All of the equipment appeared to be retractable; Grogan thought they could probably land a BC-304 in here with room to spare.

It was all...rather impressive, to say the least. The SGC officer tried to take comfort in the fact that the UNSC didn't seem to have anything like the Asgard energy weaponry or beaming technology. At least, he didn't think they did.

The second thing Grogan noticed was UNSC security team. His eyes immediately became riveted on his people's counterparts.

*Whoa*...

To say the UNSC security officers were impressive would be a massive understatement. These guys were huge, easily 7 feet tall if not more, and looked like they had the muscle mass to match. They carried advanced firearms and were clad in fully enclosed combat armor that made the best of what the SGC had to offer look like chain mail in comparison. The polarized visors that covered their faces only enhanced the intimidation factor.

More than their size or their gear, what impressed Grogan was the way they moved. Every movement, from complete steps to minute shifts in posture, was efficient. When one moved, the other subtly moved as well, indicating a near-superhuman level of coordination. Grogan had no doubt that these troops would be absolutely devastating in a battle. A chill went up his spine as he was eerily
reminded of the Kull warriors that Anubis had fielded. He resisted the urge to swallow and hoped that the comparison was not particularly apt.

“Hangar secure. Bring in the VIPs,” one of them said. Their voice was cold, as efficient and professional as everything else about them. For a moment, Grogan wondered if he was looking at highly sophisticated robots.

His attention was soon drawn back to the proceedings as a relatively small group of people entered the hangar. They were led by the executive branch of the UEG, a ‘President Ruth Charet’. Major Williamson ordered his troops into position. Grogan took his place just off the ramp, at the side of the path his representatives would use to walk toward the UEG president. A red carpet had already been laid down and hovering camera drones buzzed over the whole assembly, broadcasting to every corner of human space.

The stage had been set.

The delegates exited the shuttle, walking down the ramp with strength and dignity. Finally, they arrived in front of the UEG delegation. Greetings were exchanged. Hands were shook. It took a while, but eventually enough words had been exchanged that President Hayes and the rest of the people from Grogan’s Earth were told where their quarters would be for the duration of the talks. The actual diplomatic proceedings would occur in several hours.

As they moved out, Grogan noticed General O’Neill approach Admiral Hood. They shook hands and exchanged a few words, but he was too far away to hear. Whatever they said must have been amusing because they both chuckled quietly. Hood walked with O’Neill, continuing their conversation on the way to the ambassador’s quarters. Grogan was relieved; if General O’Neill liked the guy, his initial impression of him must have been correct. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad, after all.

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The meeting hall was bathed in shadows. It was a large room, normally used for banquets or royal events, with ornate tapestries lining the walls and elaborate lighting fixtures hanging from the ceiling. Only a small section was currently lit, however, allowing the rogues to conduct their clandestine meeting. One of the main doors opened a crack, allowing a herald to enter.

“The other guest has arrived,” the servant announced.


Atriox rumbled softly to himself. Apparently, it was not quite quiet enough, as the goa’uld Astarte turned to him and said, “Is something wrong, Lord Atriox?”

The jiralhanae grunted and crossed his arms. “I dislike this formality. It reminds me of the days before my kind’s liberation.”

Astarte smiled and inclined her head. “Patience, Lord of Jiralhanae. It will all be worth it.”

Once again, Atriox noted the smell of pheromones in the air. The goa’uld witch was trying to influence him. It was a fool’s errand. His kind naturally used pheromones to communicate and he had learned to resist such manipulations as a child. Still, there were benefits to having another believe you to be under their control. He allowed his nostrils to flare slightly and feigned acquiescence. If the
guileful female thought she could manipulate him, so much the better for him.

There was a knock at the door, signaling the arrival of the third and final party attending this meeting. Both the goa'uld and the jiralhanae rose to their feet. The main doors opened again, this time fully. A pair of humans entered along with the servant from before and made their way across the large, unoccupied hall to the small table where Atriox and Astarte stood.

“Lord Netan, leader of the Lucian Alliance, and his Second, Draven,” the herald said.

Netan was, in Atriox's opinion, not very impressive. He was a relatively short man, functionally dressed with little displaying his rank. His hair was just on the verge of being unkempt and his eyes had deep shadows surrounding them. He placed his hand on his chair as he approached, apparently not trusting himself to keep upright. This demeanor did not surprise Atriox; if half of what Astarte had told him was true, it was a marvel that the man was even still alive.

The Lucian Alliance was, according to the goa'uld, a crime syndicate that had arisen in the power vacuum left behind after the fall of the Goa'uld Empire. Their history was similar to that of Atriox's Banished, as was their command structure. Netan was the Alpha, occupying the top-most rung of power, with a group of Betas called 'Seconds' serving him directly. These Seconds were the lieutenants that made running the organization possible.

The Lucians had their hands in practically every criminal enterprise imaginable. From narcotics trafficking to slave trading, if it were against a law, the Lucians had played a part in it. They had even managed to acquire some capital ships left over from the days of the goa'uld. This made them one of the most powerful, and ambitious, organizations in the interstellar theater.

Unfortunately, that ambition had recently brought them to the brink of ruin. Netan had authorized several strikes at the 'Tau'ri', this universe's version of the human empire. Their attempt to steal a Tau'ri capital ship had resulted in all out war against the criminal organization. Shipments of narcotics had been intercepted, slave bases raided, and capital ships had been destroyed or captured. The fact that the Tau'ri were now coordinating with one of the larger Free Jaffa factions following the destruction of a mutual enemy had proven disastrous, as well. All of this had reduced the Lucian coffers to the breaking point...and put Netan's position as leader in jeopardy.

“Welcome, Lord Netan,” Astarte greeted, bowing slightly. She gestured to the seats; both she and Atriox sat at the table. “I trust your journey went well?”

The crime lord looked surprised by the show of respect and consideration. He, too, sat, although far more reluctantly than the other 2. His Second followed suit, nearly reaching his position faster than his alpha. Judging by the brief, impotent glare Netan gave, Atriox judged that the Lucian alpha was well aware of his subordinate's ambitions; he was simply powerless to do anything about it. The human turned to the goa'uld and addressed her.

“When I learned that the source for our best Kassa,” Netan began, referring to the most profitable narcotic the Lucian Alliance traded in, “was a goa'uld, my first thought was to have you killed.”

Astarte smiled politely. “I am pleased that you decided against the attempt. As pleased as you shall be at what I have to offer you, now.” Atriox was impressed by the goa'uld's restraint and poise. Were he in her boots he most likely would have drawn his hammer and killed the impudent wretch on the spot. Astarte continued, “Oh, where are my manners? Allow me to introduce Atriox, lord of the Banished, a group of free acquisitions specialists.” Netan nodded, understanding the veiled term for what the jiralhanae did. Atriox wondered why she didn't just come out and call him and his pack
'raiders'. It was what they were, after all, and he didn't see the need to go through all of this absurdity just to appease some elitist sense of decency.

“Allow me, for the sake of thoroughness, to briefly describe what each of us does, that I may then explain how we would benefit from working together,” Astarte began. She turned to the hulking jiralhanae, towering over the others even in his seat. “Lord Atriox has been leading his forces in raids against the territories formerly a part of the Covenant Empire. I,” she said, gesturing to herself, “System Lord Astarte, was once the servant of System Lord Ba’al. Since the great Ba’al’s downfall I have hidden, keeping an ear to my network of spies and selling my special formula of Kassa to sustain myself. Finally,” she said, turning toward the final 2 guests, “Lord Netan traffics in those precious things that sapients throughout the galaxy desire but that their leaders would deny them. Each of us has found a measure of success in their own right; but we have all been frustrated, as well.” She paused here, allowing her words to sink in.

“In the case of Lord Atriox,” she continued, “The humans and the one known as ‘The Arbiter’ have been making his business troublesome of late, forcing him to go further and further afield for spoils. I desire a measure of rule as befits my abilities. Finally, Lord Lucian finds himself drawn deeper and deeper into conflict with the Tau’ri, depleting his funds and shrinking his sphere of influence.” Astarte paused here to look each of them in the eye once again. “What I propose is simple, my lords: We ally with each other. The so-called ‘Free Jaffa’ are not as united or as formidable as they would like us to believe. There is a wealth of plunder there for those who would take it. My Lord Atriox could do that. However,” she added, “he is unfamiliar with the Stargate network, and his operations will require a spy ring to operate at maximum efficiency, as well as to avoid traps laid by the more conventional martial forces of the galaxy. That is what I shall provide. The good Lord Netan,” she said, directing her attention to the human, “will then be able to sell or otherwise trade the spoils to interested parties.”

“There are not many willing to trade for such things,” Lucian's Second, Draven, objected. “Fear of the Tau’ri and their allies grows strong.”

“As does fear of the Tau’ri’s growing influence,” Astarte countered. “There are many who have not forgotten that those of Earth have only been active outside of their world for less than 20 years. In that time they toppled the goa’uld and beat back the Ori. There are many who wonder if their people will be next. There are certain parties within several nations that, while not willing to take any open action, would be very interested in weakening the Tau’ri and their allies by secretly supporting us. Parties that I, naturally, will be able to deal with.”

“To what end, I must wonder,” Draven objected once again. “Do you intend to restore your kind’s rule? Make us all worship you as gods and grovel at your feet?”

“Worship?!” Atriox growled. That detail about the Goa'uld Empire had not been related to him by Astarte. “You expect me to work with a being such as they who kept my kind in chains for generations?!”

“You employ sangheili, do you not?” Astarte riposted, flooring him. “The sangheili were the dominant martial race in the Covenant, responsible for countless crimes against your people, yet you have one ‘Shipmaster Let ‘Volir’ and his sangheili crew fight for your coin, no? Why is that?” Silence greeted her. Atriox fumed, verbally outmaneuvered; Astarte’s abilities as a spymaster were formidable, indeed. She continued, “You employ sangheili because it is profitable for you to do so. Profits trump all for individuals such as us. In answer to our good Second,” she said, emphasizing the other's low rank. Said Second's face turned red in silent rage. Astarte continued before he could retort, “I do not intend to restore the theocratic ways of the old Empire. I had never agreed with the
godhood ruse and it would not work in the new galaxy that has taken form over the last few years. In any event, I do not desire the galaxy. Simply a corner of it, to do with as I will. A corner which, I might add, would be open to trading with both the Lucians and the Banished.”

Draven looked ready to continue the argument, no doubt fearing that a successful alliance would strengthen Netan’s grip on power and frustrate the Second’s obvious ambitions. Unfortunately for him, Netan chose that moment to speak.

“Second Draven,” he said, with a calm strength he had not shown previously. “You will wait for me outside. I shall conclude the negotiations with our new allies myself.”

Outraged shock dominated the Second’s face. He directed a glare that could have melted through a Chieftain’s armor at his leader. Netan simply stared back calmly, expectantly.

Draven broke first, as most betas did. He got up in a huff and walked angrily toward the door. The sound of the main entrance opening and closing echoed toward the group a moment later.

The next hour was spent pouring over specifics, mainly to establish the credibility of each party. Astarte displayed her knowledge of the various factions of the galaxy. Atriox provided recordings of his troops in action. Netan provided documents showing his organization’s skill in moving a variety of illegal merchandise.

Netan, his eyes filled with a renewed fire, took hold of a glass of wine and raised it in a toast. “To profitable days ahead.” Astarte and Atriox both grabbed their own glasses, the jiralhanae’s looking almost comically small in his massive hand, and raised them as well.

“To profitable days ahead!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.
Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 4 Progress

The ground trembled as the assembled Banished forces conducted their preparations. Vehicles hovered off of the ground on their gravity drives. Scores of jiralhanae performed checks on their plasma rifles and spikers. Atriox looked upon his warriors with pride. He knew that each and every one of them would prove their worth in the days to come.

“I wish you good fortune, Lord Atriox,” the hologram said. The so-called System Lord Astarte had not deigned to grace the jiralhanae raiders with her presence on their staging world. A fact which suited the Alpha Atriox just fine. The last thing he needed was for this place of glory to be stained by the presence of that beguiler.

“Just be sure our Lucian 'friends' are ready to traffic what we take,” Atriox replied with a grunt.

“Of course, my noble colleague,” the goa'uld would-be ruler replied. “I shall see to it personally. Farewell.” The hologram, blessedly, winked out of existence. It had taken some doing to interface the Banished technology with the goa'uld's own communications equipment but his engineers had managed it. It allowed easy coordination with the other members of Atriox's alliance, which made the annoyance of continued interaction with them ultimately worth it. He forced himself to remember that fact as he felt himself snarl at the departed vermin.

Soon, he thought, grinning savagely as he looked back over the battle plan for the coming days. Soon they would launch the first of many raids. Soon the new dawn of his people would arrive...

Day 1 of Diplomatic Talks between the United Nations and the Unified Earth Government

The members of SG-9 stowed their gear. The day was drawing to a close and they had been relieved of duty by the Secret Service detail; they would be alternating shifts for the duration of their stay.

Grogan practically tore off his armor. He couldn't wait to get to their quarters and pick the Major's brain about what had gone on in the conference room. None of the SGC or Secret Service personnel had been permitted within the actual room, the goings on considered classified far beyond their level. However, General O'Neill had briefed the Major on the broad strokes so security would be ready if things really went to hell.

The plain barracks greeted the SGC personnel. Bare gray walls, a few wall-mounted video screens, and simple bunks filled the standard issue room. Grogan whirled toward his CO the second the doors had shut.

“What happened, sir?” he asked excitedly. He was desperate to know what was going on. The talks had dragged on for over 12 hours. He couldn't imagine the kind of progress they must have made
within that time.

Major Williamson smiled wanly. “We said 'Hi','” he answered.

The Master Chief watched the security officers from New Earth with precision. While he hoped that no conflict would break out between the UNSC and the other human government, he wasn't about to be caught flat footed, and planned to spend every possible second analyzing the other faction for potential weaknesses.

Of the 2 groups of security, the SGC personnel were clearly the superior soldiers. They were more alert, more coordinated, and more practiced than the 'Secret Service' detail was. Their demeanor was professional and they were always on alert for threats, both from the UNSC and from the unknown. The way they carried themselves and conducted their mission, the Master Chief would have pegged them in the same category as top tier Marine units.

Their armor appeared unbelievably primitive by the standards of the 26th Century but, the Chief had to admit, it was a lot more advanced than anything the Earth of his past had produced in this time period. Looks, however, could be deceiving. The Chief had read the ONI report on the armor; Designated OTA 1, it was supposedly constructed with some sort of energy absorbent fabrics and ceramic polymer plates that greatly cut down on the effectiveness of enemy weapons fire. The Chief wasn’t exactly sure how that was possible, but the ONI report hinted at reverse engineered alien technology. He would assume nothing on the armor's capabilities.

Their firearms, on the other hand, seemed to be fairly standard projectile weapons for the period. Powerful but lacking the punch of UNSC weaponry.

All in all, they wouldn't cause the Spartans too much trouble if hostilities broke out. However practiced they might be, they were using mostly outdated tech and they were only human. Even for baseline human they didn't strike him as particularly impressive; competent, certainly, but nothing he would really be nervous about going into combat against on equal footing.

Of course, the quality of individual troops was only one concern. Another issue was how effectively New Earth as a whole would be able to counter an extra-planetary threat. Command had revised its original assessment of them, saying that they had in fact faced at least one extra-terrestrial enemy before, but the UNSC leadership was confident that any such threat would be minimal compared to the Covenant. The Chief found it hard to imagine New Earth posing much of a danger to the UNSC.

He grimaced behind his polarized visor as he noticed one of the SGC security officers approaching him. This particular trooper's team had just been relieved of duty and her comrades were returning to their barracks. He could tell by her posture that she was going to attempt some kind of casual conversation with him.

Again.

Spartan IIs were, as a rule, rather antisocial. There were exceptions, of course, most notably the long-dead Kurt-051, but for the most part they just didn't talk much. They certainly didn't interact socially with anyone outside of their own little 'family'. This was rarely a problem. The Spartans had been elevated to the status of living legends by the propaganda masters in ONI because humanity had
needed heroes to keep up morale in the dark days of the Human-Covenant War. A side effect of that legendary status was that most people were too intimidated and/or awed to work up the courage to talk to them.

Occasionally, though, someone would try. Some brave, enterprising soul would approach them between missions or during non-hot shuttle rides. It never ended well. The Spartans never attacked them or anything, of course. The normally well-meaning marines, civilians, etc., simply walked away disappointed at the cold shoulder they received from the introverted supersoldiers.

“Hi. You're the Master Chief, right?” the SGC trooper, 'Satterfield' according to the name stenciled onto her chestpiece, said. “I was wondering: is there a gym or something around here? I need to keep up with my exercises and I'm getting a little sick of sticking to push-ups, ya know?” she said with a chuckle.

“I'll put in a request for a recreation wing to be cleared for New Earth personnel,” the Chief replied. This had been one of the possible scenarios they had been briefed on and he knew the appropriate response. “You'll have the deck to yourselves.”

Satterfield's body language told the Master Chief that she was disappointed. He had to admit that she did an admirable job at keeping it from coming across in her voice. Still, he and the other Spartan IIs were experts in reading people encased in full body armor. They were practically lie detectors.

“I suppose that will be sufficient,” she admitted. “What about feeding time? Do you think we could eat in one of the larger mess halls?”

“I'll put in a request for it with Command,” the Chief replied. He waited for her to continue.

“I was actually hoping to talk to some of you UNSC guys,” Satterfield admitted, apparently realizing that being coy wasn't going to work here. “Just casually, getting to know each other, right?”

“You'll have to clear that with Command,” the Master Chief replied coldly.

The pair simply stared at each other for a minute.

“So, when do you guys go off-duty? Spartans, I mean,” she asked, probably hoping she would have more luck conversing at such a time.

“We don't,” the Chief answered.

More staring.

Satterfield tried a few more attempts to bait the Master Chief into conversation. They all met with predictable failure. “Let me know if you change your mind,” she said, leaving with a sigh of disappointment.

The Chief felt encouraged. If this was the quality of New Earth's intelligence agents, the UNSC had little to fear from them on the espionage front.

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX
Day 3 of Diplomatic Talks between the United Nations and the Unified Earth Government

“Well, sir?” Grogan asked, not bothering to voice the complete question. He was sure the Major had noticed how eager he was to hear news. General O'Neill had just briefed Major Williamson for the first time since the first day of talks. There had to have been progress made by now.

The Major smiled again. “We agreed on what to call each other.”

As you can see, everything is going according to plan,” the Project Leader said. The other individual, an official sent to inspect the site and oversee its first official operation, nodded indiscriminately.

The command center was bathed in shadows, the overhead fluorescents cranked down to minimal settings. It was buried in the innermost room of the center floor, the very heart of the building, hidden away from the sun and all prying eyes. There were IOA technicians toiling away within, performing the task that their clandestine leaders had given them. Their faces alone were visible, given a deathly pallor by the weak lighting of their monitors. The clacking of their hands on their keyboards competed with the quiet hum of the climate control system for what little sound filled the air. It had taken time to covertly gather the best and brightest minds the IOA had to offer, but it had all been worth it.

The room the command center occupied was small, about the size of a small university computer lab, with the spartan decorum to match. It was nestled deep within a nondescript office building on an unremarkable street, the sign advertising it as a sub-branch of one of the IOA’s many shell corporations. Everything about the building’s aesthetic and exterior had been carefully crafted to blend into the surroundings. Project Leader Simmons imagined the eyes of passersby rolling off of the building as if it were an optical illusion. A shield of veils concealed the secrets within this building.

This was Project Mundus. It’s mandate was to perform acts of espionage and acquire power for the International Oversight Advisory in relation to the new half of the galaxy. Its current target: the UNSC.

Simmons grinned again in self-congratulation as he looked across the room to the wall of reinforced bullet-resistant glass. Visible just past them were the towers of the IOA’s most powerful supercomputers. Built with an internal crystalline physical structure reverse engineered from alien computer systems, the server farm contained enough processing power to hack into and disable the military networks of any 10 first world nations in a matter of minutes. It could cripple the electronic infrastructure of the entire world within an hour. It had been assembled and constructed here in absolute secrecy. Combined with the technicians, this was now the most powerful electronic warfare suite in human history.

“The 'UEG' doesn't stand a chance,” he boasted to his unwelcome colleague.

“So you say,” the inspector said. “We have no idea what the UNSC's electronic warfare capability is. From what we have discerned, they are centuries more advanced than we, perhaps as advanced as any interstellar power we have ever encountered. This likely extends to electronic security as well. To be blunt, I believe this entire facility is a waste of time.”
“Noted, Inspector,” Simmons said through gritted teeth. Part of him wanted to pull the little prick into his office to dress him down, but he decided that actions would speak louder than words. He wanted to show off his achievement, anyway. “Chief Technician, begin Odysseus Protocol,” he ordered.

The technicians sprang to life, the sound of keyboards operating rising to a dull roar. Projectors activated, turning the wall into a large display detailing the progress of the cyber-intrusion software.

**Connecting...Connecting...Connection Established.**

“We're in,” Project Leader Simmons gloated. They would have results by the end of the day, he was sure of it. Several minutes went by.

“Sir, we've encountered a complication,” one of the technicians told the Project Leader. The younger man spoke softly, almost whispering, as if afraid to disturb the palpable shroud that hung over the room.

“Speak of the devil,” the inspector chuckled darkly.

“What kind of complication?” the Leader demanded, scowling. He had promised the higher ups of the IOA that he would be able to gather intelligence directly from secure UEG databases within the week. He was in no mood for delays.

“**Our kind.**”

Both Simmons and the few visible technicians noticeably jumped at the sound. The ‘voice' was deep, imposing, and artificially distorted, sounding positively inhuman to those who were unfortunate enough to hear it.

Without warning, every monitor in the room shut off. What few overhead lights were there followed immediately after. Even the blinking lights on the servers vanished. The entire room was pulled into pitch darkness. The fans installed in the servers and the ceiling turned off, creating a shroud of quiet broken only by the sound of the listener's beating heart.

A light blazed into the room. A silhouette of a human being, black but somehow also blindingly bright, was projected onto the wall. The voice reappeared, once again making Simmons jump and increasing the weight of the ball of lead in his gut.

**“You have gone where you do not belong. You have violated our sovereignty and jeopardized our national security. We would not be inaccurate to interpret your actions as an act of war.”**

This...this was bad. This had to be a communication from someone high up in the UEG or UNSC. Probably someone from their intelligence apparatus. Simmons felt sweat break out on his face and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight. What was he going to say? What was he going to do? He felt himself start to hyperventilate.

“I would advise against that.”

The voice was calm, betraying none of the terror that gripped the rest of the room. Its owner strode forward, emerging from a crowd of shadows to stand brazenly in the light. It was the mid-level official that the IOA leadership had sent to assess the status of their latest investment. The rising star
Alexander Pierce.

“I apologize for the intrusion.” Pierce said, continuing to speak in that damnably calm and seemingly-unaffected tone. “It was certainly ill-advised, but I'm sure you understand the way the game is played. These are uncertain times, after all, and I believe taking rash action would be most unwise. In fact, we have much to offer each other. I believe we are alike.”

Silence.

Simmons wanted to shout at the man for his audacity, but he was still rooted to the ground in terrified silence. This was the time to be cutting deals, not pushing agendas. They had to do damage control! At last, the silhouette 'spoke' once again.

“In what way, pray tell, would we be alike?”

Pierce stood still, his posture relaxed, stubbornly refusing to show any sign of distress at the silhouette's intimidating presence. “We both understand the fundamental truth that humanity needs to be ruled,” he said.

Silence again.

“We will be in touch...Mr. Pierce.”

The projection vanished. The lights, dim as they were, turned back on. The computers activated, each terminal showing the boot up screen. Simmons turned to Pierce, absolute fury on his face. “My office. Now!” he ground out.

Simmons lead Pierce into the small office just outside the command center. He all but slammed the door shut after the other man had followed him in. “Just what the hell do you think you're doing?” he demanded.

“Seizing an opportunity,” Pierce replied, utterly unrepentant. “Our...colleagues...wouldn't have bothered to contact us if they didn't want to gain something from it. I simply provided an avenue to whatever they were after,” he said, taking his seat in front of Simmons’ desk. The Project Leader took his own seat and kept glaring at the man. Pierce continued, “In fact, you should be thanking me. I have just solidified the beginnings of a very profitable alliance.”

“You haven't been authorized to do any such thing!” Simmons seethed.

“A trifling detail,” Pierce waved off. “The IOA leadership will be more than happy to authorize my move retroactively. In fact, they will almost certainly give me command of Project Mundus within the day.”

“And why would they do that?” he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“There are two reasons: First, I will be a convenient scapegoat if the project backfires. Second,” Pierce paused here. His lip turned up in a predatory smirk and his eyes blazed with an inner light. It was his first true expression since arriving in the facility. The look he gave Simmons chilled the man to the bone and left him riveted to his chair in discomfort. “This will happen because our leaders are much like you: they always lead from afar. That, good sir, is also where they—and you—will find
themselves in the days ahead. Left in the dust as those men of strength march forward into true power.”

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Day 7 of Diplomatic Talks Between Earth and the Unified Earth Government

Grogan looked over at Major Williamson.

The Major grinned and shook his head.

Grogan's shoulders slumped in frustration.

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“I just feel like we've been sitting here and spinning our wheels, is all,” Grogan said, pacing the floor. The members of SG-9 were sitting in their cramped barracks deep within the Infinity. They were currently off-duty and, technically, should have been asleep.

No one even pretended they would be able to rest with everything going on. They had taken a brief nap but otherwise they sat around, performing whatever idle task suited them, and generally just took up space.

They were currently discussing the state of the diplomatic talks with the UEG. Grogan longed to return to his Earth so he could really talk openly with his friends. They were all smart enough to figure that the room would be bugged even if the mission briefing hadn't explicitly told them to expect it to be.

“The only thing both sides have agreed to is not to attack each other,” the Captain continued. “For now. Unless something comes up. It's not exactly encouraging, sir.”

“These things take time,” Major Williamson responded. He was across the room from Grogan, sitting calmly on his bunk and playing a game of solitaire. Hailey was going through some sort of mental exercise and Satterfield had gone off to once again try to strike up a conversation with the Spartans, leaving just him and his commanding officer to talk things out. “I've run security for conferences like this before. Believe me: things are going well, they just take time. There haven't been any major mishaps, no one is shouting threats of sanctions, and we aren't about to get into a trade war or anything. Chin up, Captain.”

“But we've been here over a week already, sir,” Grogan argued, “and as far as I can tell we haven't made any real progress. It seems to just be bogged down in politics.”

“Hate to break it to you, Captain,” Williamson replied with a grin, “but these are politicians. Politics are kinda their thing.”

“I guess...” Grogan conceded, still pacing the floor. He sighed and sat himself back down on his bunk. He pulled out his personal tablet and started going over the briefing files once again (the ones he'd been allowed to bring, at any rate. No one was stupid enough to take classified materials here who wasn't a diplomat). Politics had never been his strength, anyway.
The door to the barracks opened and Satterfield entered. She sat down on her bunk, her shoulders sagging slightly.

“Struck out again?” Grogan asked.

“Yup,” Satterfield replied. She rallied after a moment, forcing her posture back into its proper position. “Those Spartans are a tough nut to crack. I've had more luck with the other personnel, but something about the supersoldiers tells me there's a lot about them we should know.”

“Anything in specific?” the Major asked, suddenly interested. Satterfield’s gut was rarely wrong on these kinds of things and they had all felt uneasy around the Spartans from day one. Apparently, Williamson was as curious as to why as the rest of them were.

“Not really, sir,” Satterfield admitted, giving the signal that her words were to be taken at face value. “It's way they talk, the way they move. Their size. They just...give me a feeling, is all.”

“Keep working on it,” Williamson ordered. Satterfield nodded in response. He hesitated before saying, “You didn't mention any sensitive subjects, did you?”

Everyone in the room knew what he was talking about. Prior to their departing on this trip, Dr. Daniel Jackson, the world's leading expert on alien cultures, had given them all a briefing on what they could and could not say on the trip. They had been encouraged to interact with the UNSC personnel, but there were certain subjects that were explicitly forbidden.

One of them was the fact that humanity had allied with several alien races and, in fact, directly profited from interactions with them.

The reasoning was simple. The people of this other galaxy had just went through several decades of war against the first alien life they had ever encountered. Worse still, said war had been an unprovoked crusade of ethnic cleansing against the human species. Dr. Jackson had theorized that the human race of the new half of the galaxy would have developed an acute cultural xenophobia in that time and that it would be particularly bad in regard to any sapient life that wasn't homo sapiens sapiens. Thus, the Asgard, the Tok'ra, even the Free Jaffa were strictly off-limits.

Satterfield struggled not to make a face. “No, sir. I still have to object to the parameters that have been set for us, though, sir.” Having to pretend that the contributions and sacrifices of their non-human allies hadn't happened didn't sit well. Refusing to broach the subject felt almost like a kind of betrayal.

“Noted,” the Major replied. “For what it's worth, Captain, I do agree with you. I'm willing to bet the higher ups agree, as well. Still, orders are orders. Things might change over time but for now, this is the way it has to be.”

Satterfield nodded, although she still looked distinctly unhappy about the state of affairs. Grogan didn't blame her; he felt exactly the same way.

“She's probably just working on her next crush,” Hailey said into Grogan's ear in a false whisper. She had probably said it loudly enough for the bridge to hear. Satterfield merely smiled sardonically and flipped her squadmate off.

The young trooper's early infatuation with Dr. Daniel Jackson had earned her quite a bit of ribbing...
from her friends. It had eventually developed into a bit of a private joke wherein they would accuse her of developing crushes on various individuals, particularly the more 'homely' alien species, that SG-9 interacted with. It was all in good fun, of course, since she behaved as professionally as the rest of them.

“Lay off with the sass, people,” Major Williamson said in a completely serious tone. He immediately followed it up with an equally deadpan, “we all know Dr. Jackson is the only one for her.”

Grogan and Hailey burst out laughing as Satterfield buried her head in her hands in mock horror.

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One of his betas approached Atriox and informed him that the preparations were now complete. The Banished Alpha hefted his gravity hammer, relishing the weight of the mighty tool of carnage, and made his way to the front of his forces. Row after row of jiralhanae warrior was lined up, ready to savage their enemies and take their fortunes. The gray of their armor gleamed in the light from the unfamiliar sun.

At the front of his fighting force he found the device that would assure their ascendancy in the ranks of power in this new galaxy: the Stargate. He punched the sequence of symbols, given to him by Astarte, into the dialing device. The ancient machine activated, sending a pillar of ‘water’ into the air before stabilizing into the glittering portal it was famous for. He turned around, his blood-red Chieftain's Armor shining in the sunlight, and addressed his pack.

“Warriors of the Jiralhanae!” he shouted. He refused to use any comm unit or amplifier to increase the volume of his voice. Such would be a sign of weakness. His pack would hear his words directly from him. “Today is the first day of our triumph! Today is the day we claim our rightful place as the strongest in this galaxy! Today the so-called 'Free Jaffa' shall be the first to feel our might! Starting today, we shall be feared from star to star as no other has ever been! The humans, sangheili, and other weaklings shall tremble in their homes at the mere rumor of our approach! Their streets shall run red with blood as ours run gold with plunder, and we shall be ignored NO MORE! For freedom! For Glory!!” He ended his speech by raising his hammer into the air and letting loose a deep throated roar that was echoed by every warrior present.

The jiralhanae rushed forward and through the Stargate, eager for the battle and plunder that awaited them on the other side. According to Astarte, the 'Free Jaffa' world they were raiding was only lightly defended, without even a warship in orbit to protect them. The amount of actual plunder on this day would be minimal. More important was what it represented.

The beginning...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.
Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Distant smoke greeted Rak'nor as he exited the Chappa'ai. A loud shimmering sound echoed over the empty terrain as the wormhole deactivated. His fellow Free Jaffa warriors tensed. They saw the signs, too.

The landscape had been rather desolate even before the attack. The planet had been a naquadah mine in its prime, one of the key sources of the invaluable mineral for the System Lord Cronus. That, however, had been long ago.

The mine had dried up decades prior. As a result, Cronus had removed all but a scant few of his slaves from the planet, leaving only a token force as a demonstration of his ownership of the world. The once proud city that stood next to the mine had been all but abandoned. Buildings had sagged and roads had cracked. Worst of all, the walls had collapsed in places, which had left the residents defenseless against whatever force had recently attacked. The smoke and silence indicated that they had met a poor end. All because a System Lord had wanted none to forget who owned this now-worthless planet.

The warrior shook himself and returned to the present. “Forward, warriors, and keep ready,” he ordered his team, “we must learn what calamity has befallen here.”

Those warriors that had served with Rak'nor for years moved out immediately. Those who were sent along to escort them...hesitated. It only lasted a moment, but it was still more than enough to tell the squad-leader that he did not have the trust of half of the Free Jaffa following him. Were circumstances different, he would reprimand them for their insubordination.

This type of behavior was expected. Rak'nor served the Freedom Coalition, the most powerful and centrally located of the Free Jaffa factions. Unfortunately, the worlds that had come under attack from some previously unknown adversary did not reside within Coalition territory. The factions that governed these worlds were not interested in allowing Coalition armies to assist them for fear of being annexed.

Thus, a small scouting party to discern the nature of this new threat had been all that was allowed. It grated at him enormously.

Rak'nor knew better than to grumble. For one, it would never do for his warriors to see his dissatisfaction. For another, he was sure that his leaders, Masters Teal'c and Bra'tac, were doing all that they could to meet this newest adversary. Already the fleets of the Free Jaffa were readying themselves for war; conducting patrols of the most likely path this new enemy might take and staging in preparation for a counter attack. Such was the Jaffa way.

The journey to the ruined city was short, but tense. The Free Jaffa walked with their staff weapons ready and their senses peeled. All were wary of an ambush. Thankfully, the attackers seemed to have fled before their arrival.

Once again, Rak'nor was reminded of the fact that the city had fallen into decay long before
whatever fate had recently befallen it. The gates were clearly unable to be closed, the hinges having rusted over long ago. Battlements had crumbled from the elements and general disuse. A nearby stream was dark with the filth that the residents dumped into it in place of a functional sewage system.

The band advanced cautiously through the gate. There were no living souls to greet them. Just more decay and damage. There was a mural just within the gates. It depicted a figure standing on a cloud, clad in a toga and hurling lightning bolts down at his enemies. Cronus. The paint was badly faded, the bits of precious metals that had once been inset had fallen out or been looted years before, and the once-proud depiction of the pretender to divinity was barely recognizable. It was heartening to Rak'nor to see a bit of the Goa'uld's self-aggrandizement reduced to ruin, but the fact that it reflected the poor living conditions of these Jaffa made the feeling bittersweet.

Worse were the signs of battle. Blackened, melted patches were burned into the stone walls. Wooden carts and market stalls had been scorched or smashed. Bodies littered every available surface as far as the eye could see. The signs were clearly of energy weapons fire but they were not in any pattern he had ever seen. Similar to Staff weapon strikes, but different.

“Fan out,” Rak'nor ordered. “Search for survivors. And clues.” The warriors moved to obey. They spent the next several hours investigating the ruins, still smoldering in places, hoping to find anything that would tell them who had done this. Anything that would tell where they might obtain vengeance.

The dead were mostly men, those who had sought to defend their homes. Rak'nor examined the body of a fallen Free Jaffa guard. The warrior's staff weapon lay a short distance from his body, neatly snapped in two. Whatever had done this clearly possessed great physical strength. More interesting were the wounds upon the body itself.

It seemed as if the warrior had been stabbed with some sort of spikes. There were several of them sticking out of the old Empire-era armor that he had been wearing. Most curious was the lack of any kind of handle or gripping surface on the spikes themselves. Perhaps they were some form of bolt? From a crossbow-like weapon? If so, there must have been a great many of them, for there were nearly as many spikes as there were burns from energy weapons scoring his surroundings.

A noise reached Rak'nor's trained ears. He was on his feet in an instant, his weapon up and his guard fully in place. His eyes darted to where his ears reported the sound originating from. For a moment nothing happened. Then—

There!

A small shape darted into a partially demolished shack. Rak'nor caught a glimpse of a very human hand disappearing past the door frame. He surged forward, intent on catching whoever was fleeing from him. He came to a stop just to the side of the door. He removed a small piece of polished metal and used it as a mirror to peer around the corner without revealing himself. It was a trick taught to him by O'Neill of Earth, and it had saved his life many times over these past few years.

He saw nothing.

One of his warriors rushed up beside Rak'nor, having seen his leader running in pursuit. The squad-leader motioned the warrior to guard the door and ensure nothing came out. With one exit secure, Rak'nor made a circuit of the shack's exterior. There was no way out. More of his warriors arrived and he had them surround the building, half looking inward, half outward to guard against an
“Come out,” Rak'nor called into the shack. “We have you surrounded. You have my word of honor that if you surrender peaceably no harm will come to you.”

There was no answer. Rak'nor strained his ears. His senses, still enhanced from years of carrying a symbiote, allowed him to discern the breathing of the being inside. It was not overly difficult; whoever was there was clearly terrified and struggling not to lose their breath entirely. Something about it bothered him, though. It was as if...

The Jaffa warrior's eyes widened. His mouth spread into a grin as he realized what they had found. He handed his staff weapon to one of his warriors, motioning them all not to do anything without his signal. Rak'nor entered the shack.

“I have water,” he said to the pile of debris blocking his sight. He drew a waterskin and took a quick drink from it. He made a show of enjoying the refreshing liquid. He then placed it on the ground and backed up several steps.

Nothing.

The warrior sighed. After thinking for a moment, he sat down on the ground. Hopefully that would be enough to calm the frightened figure.

Slowly, timidly, a child peeked around the debris. She was young; maybe 4 or 5 years of age. Her face was covered in filth and dried blood. Her eyes were wild. They darted from Rak'nor to the waterskin and back again several times. Eventually, need won out over fear, and the child emerged to retrieve the water. She drank greedily, draining the receptacle within moments.

“Do you understand me, young one?” Rak'nor asked gently. It was unlikely that she wouldn't, considering the fact that the Goa'uld dialect he was speaking was near-universal, but he hoped that a clear, easy question would help draw the frightened girl out of her shell.

The child nodded, clearly contemplating returning to her hiding place. Rak'nor smiled at her comfortingly. The girl's eyes darted to the scarred mess on his forehead. The place that had once held a tattoo marking him as property of the System Lord Apophis.

“I bear a mark no longer,” he said, answering her unspoken curiosity. “I am a Free Jaffa. As are you,” he said, smiling. The girl instinctively rubbed her own clear forehead. The Free Jaffa warrior took heart in the fact that it would bear no mark of slavery. Those days were now past, thanks to the likes of Teal'c and Bra'tac.

A few hours later, Rak'nor was carrying the child through the Chappa'ai as she clutched to him in exhausted slumber. If they were lucky, she would make a full recovery and live a free life in this new galaxy. If they were even more lucky, she would be able to tell them just what the hell was attacking so many Free Jaffa worlds across their domain.

“We have good reason to believe that this enemy hails from the new portion of the galaxy,” Teal'c's message said. “The Freedom Coalition Parliament has requested that you provide what aid you are able, either in troops or in information.” The Jaffa warrior-turned-politician allowed his eyes to soften slightly as he talked. “I must confess, O'Neill, I echo their sentiment. The Coalition can ill afford this
new foe. For the sake of those you have aided so valiantly, and in honor of our long friendship, I ask that you send what aid you can.” The smile made a brief return. “I am confident that whatever you do, it will at least irritate the enemy quite strongly.”

The message came to an end. Deep within his quarters on the Infinity, General Jack O'Neill resisted the urge to drag his hand across his face. He knew he had to stay focused, especially here.

Fleet Admiral Hood had sat back in his seat as the message played. O’Neill could practically see the gears turning behind the man's eyes. After several moments of sustained thought, the man turned to his host. “Thank you for showing me this. It fills in some holes in our intelligence,” he said.

The video message had provided a number of useful details, not the least of which was a detailed description of the troops responsible for the eerily well coordinated raids that had taken place across Free Jaffa territory over the last few days. It was rather exaggerated, having largely come from the account of a young girl, but the hostiles were undoubtedly of the jiralhanae species. O'Neill had immediately recognized them from the briefing on the Covenant he had sat through in the Oval Office.

They were called Brutes by the UNSC. A name he found aptly fitting based on what he had learned.

“Teal'c is an old friend,” O'Neill informed his guest. “He saved our lives early on, when he was the second in command to a System Lord named Apophis. His defection proved vital to our eventual victory over the snake-heads. He was also a member of my own team for over 7 years. We're...close, is what I'm saying.”

“Making recent events all the more frustrating,” Hood added, nodding in understanding. O'Neill scowled as he remembered the events in question.

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“—Now let us discuss Diplomatic Protocol Section 15, Sub-section 4f: the maintaining of agreed upon language...” the IOA representative continued to drone on and on. O'Neill actually managed to suppress a yawn, a feat which surprised even him, while he waited for something to actually happen.

Most of the rest of the room seemed perfectly content with the proceedings, to his chagrin. The representatives from each nation sat in rapt attention to the bureaucratic minutiae that was sucking up so much time. Comparisons between the occupants of the room and the bare, boring gray color scheme on the walls appeared unbidden in O'Neill's mind.

He made eye contact with the Commander of the UNSC, Fleet Admiral Hood, from across the table. The moment of connection was all the USAF General needed to tell that his counterpart felt every bit as impatient as he was.

A loud buzzing sound filled the air. Instantly, O'Neill was on high alert. He almost reached for his not-present sidearm, years of experience in the field still lingering after his relatively brief time behind a desk. He checked himself and kept his eyes and ears open.

The IOA representative paused mid-drone as a UNSC AI hologram appeared over the conference table and addressed President Hayes. Apparently, someone at the UN had sent a priority message to him in the middle of the talks. As the President's features grew more grim, O'Neill began to have a very bad feeling about this.
Said feeling was compounded when, the following day, every one of his proposals to take immediate action were denied by Representative West.

“I'm afraid that will be quite impossible, General,” West had said as the ghost of a smug, vindictive grin tugged at the edge of his mouth. “We simply must maintain our focus on the matter of the UEG. The public will not brook any distractions from ensuring their security, both now and in the future. The Jaffa will simply have to fend for themselves.”

Oh, and I'm sure petty revenge has nothing to do with this, O'Neill thought with a carefully suppressed snarl. It was common knowledge that the IOA had it out for him ever since he had maneuvered a critical asset, namely the city-ship Atlantis, out of their clutches. Combined with the Ark of Truth incident, the clandestine body had seemed to make it their mission in life to make O'Neill's job next to impossible. Never mind how many innocent people died in the meantime. Honestly, people like this almost made him long for the days when Harry Maybourne, NID agent, was the worst he had to deal with.

O'Neill risked a glance at President Hayes. His Commander in Chief gave him a frown and a minute shake of the head; he wouldn't help!

Outrage coursed through the General's veins. How could his leader betray him like this? How could he abandon Teal'c's people, after all they had done for Earth?

O'Neill forced himself to think this through. Be rational. He knew that the President was hanging on to his position by a thread. His popularity had maintained his reputation in the public eye so far, but if he wasn't careful it wouldn't take much for his enemies to paint him as an obstructive liar that had never truly had the general public's well-being at heart. He had kept many secrets from them, after all.

Thus the General had sat, fuming, as he and his President were rendered unable to help his oldest friend due to petty politics.

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“I presume you were blocked by bureaucratic nonsense as well?” O'Neill asked his guest.

Admiral Hood nodded, scowling in contempt. “Sadly, yes.”

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Hood barely succeeded in keeping himself from glowering at the pair as Director Osman and Adviser Marlowe shared a self-congratulatory glance. It seemed that his attempts to reign in the borderline-rogue intelligence division had finally come back to bite him in the ass.

He glanced briefly at President Charet, hoping against hope that he might find an ally there. A frown crossed the esteemed statesman's face for a moment before she shook her head slightly. Her hands were tied. There was nothing she could do to help Hood's proposals for offering immediate aid to New Earth through. He had the task force prepped and ready to go. All needed was the word...but the word would not come.

It was to be expected, Hood supposed. Those of the same mind as Marlowe were already pushing for full-blown intervention against the Banished. If they intervened and managed to rack up some victories, it would be a short leap to convince people that annexing New Earth would really be in everyone's best interests. Charet wouldn't let that happen. But if her political party lost the Majority
then she'd suddenly find herself marginalized or ousted, allowing for someone more like Marlowe to take over. Like it or not she was stuck playing the political game and couldn't risk doing anything that could be construed as detrimental to UNSC security.

Thus, Hood and those who genuinely wanted to aid the people of the new half of the galaxy found themselves stuck in the mud.

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"Our respective allies and enemies have become aware of each other," O'Neill went on. "They're jockeying for position. Trying to establish a new hierarchy. Meanwhile, we're stuck here playing politics."

Hood nodded. The ONI report he had read just that morning had painted a similar picture. These 'Banished' were on the move, attacking Jaffa worlds deemed vulnerable. None survived the assault and it was destabilizing an already precarious situation. One that would soon drag both Earths into it if nothing was done.

"There are a lot of people in the UEG that don't take you people seriously," Hood admitted. He normally would keep this to himself, but O'Neill had invited him into his quarters aboard Infinity and shared sensitive information with him. He felt he owed it to the man to at least be honest with him.

"They think it would be a simple matter to just take you over, seeing as how you never had to face an enemy like the Insurrection or the Covenant."

A hard look entered the New Earth General's eyes. "You might be surprised by what we've gone up against. And by who we've managed to beat into the dirt," he said, coldly.

"I didn't say I agreed with them," Admiral Hood said, hoping to smooth over the General's ruffled feathers. To that end, he kept the condescending smile from crossing his lips. While he didn't have quite as low an opinion of the New Earth military as Marlowe, he had to admit that he thought them far the inferior to his own UNSC.

Though in recent days the information ONI had managed to dig up on New Earth and in particular Stargate Command had essentially dried up. Much to ONIs irritation and Hood's silent amusement. With the discovery of UNSC AI and their capabilities the SGC and most government institutions of the world had correctly deduced just how vulnerable their networked systems and databases were to successful AI intrusion. And had likely already been intruded without tipping off anyone. Thus something called 'Replicator Protocols' had been instituted at Stargate Command, the Pentagon and a R&D facility known as 'Area 51'. Those facilities were more or less impregnable to AI infiltration at this time, making getting a full picture of who and what Stargate Command was, what it had accomplished, and the kind of technology it possessed difficult in the extreme.

General O'Neill seemed to accept the olive branch. He closed down the 2D image of that 'Teal'c' character and leaned back in his chair across from Hood. "Much as I hate to admit it, Homeworld Command doesn't have the resources to prosecute a war with these 'jiralhanæe' at this time. The Banished are a wholly unconventional threat. They hit where we're not expecting them, then retreat back into your neck of the woods—where there aren't any Stargates. We don't have the ships or the logistical infrastructure to really stomp these guys, the Free Jaffa are too disorganized and shot through with infighting to present a unified front, none of our other allies are interested in getting involved in anything outside their own borders, etc., etc. In short, shit creek we are up, and we have no paddle." He ended with an exasperated sigh and a rubbing of his temples.
“So what's your plan?” Hood asked, getting down to business. “I can tell you're a practical man. You wouldn't have invited me over here just to chat.” His counterpart smiled.

The next several hours were spent spit-balling ideas for how to counter the Banished threat. Everything from fleets to the movement of armies was considered. By the end of the meeting, they had no less than a dozen possible joint operations that they would be presenting to their respective governments within the day.

“They'll never go for this, you know,” Hood said somberly. He could see a look of frustration cross the General's face. The UNSC flag officer could tell that the man was not annoyed at him; he recognized the truth in his words.

“We just have to hope they do,” O'Neill responded with little optimism. “If they don't, a lot of people might die before the truth finally gets through their thick heads.

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**Planet Angar, Free Jaffa Nation—Ma'sam Fiefdom Faction, 1 Week After News of the Banished Reaches UN/UEG Diplomatic Summit**

Voices droned on and on behind the wooden door. Col. Hernandez, CO of SG-11, suppressed a yawn as the negotiations continued within the governor's throne room. He went back to scanning the room.

The Fiefdom guards were about as friendly as ever. They generally pretended that the Earth soldiers didn't exist. When they did interact with Hernandez and his squad, they did through gritted teeth. It was abundantly clear that the local leadership was barely tolerating their presence here.

Hernandez smiled as he caught the eye of a guard. Said guard scowled and went right back to what he was doing. Kill 'em with kindness, best behavior, yadda yadda. Such were the duties of an officer. It was a good thing he was on the ball, because it looked like Captain Isaacs, one of his subordinates, wanted to lash out. A simple nod and a hard look were enough to discourage him. Hernandez had the respect of his squad.

Be that as it may, he knew that his team was growing restless. Word was trickling down the ranks about what was going on with the Free Jaffa and no one was happy about Earth's inaction. The Jaffa were allies. The SGC should be helping them.

The watch strapped to Hernandez's wrist beeped. It was time for his scheduled check-in with Stargate Command.

“Miller, Isaacs, stay here and guard the negotiators. Nelson, you're with me,” the Colonel ordered. His team nodded and the pair moved out.

They took one of the main roads, being careful to maneuver around the traders making their way to the bazaar. Smoke wafted out of a nearby building that just had to be a drug house. It seemed Kassa use was rather prevalent here. Many of the civilians on the street, and even some of the guards, had overly dilated eyes, backing up that assertion. The military men crossed the street to avoid exposure.

“Pick up the pace, Nelson,” Hernandez ordered as they made their way down the busy streets. It was a relatively short trip to the 'Gate, a quick conversation via radio waves broadcast through the wormhole, and another short trip back. Still, the Colonel felt bad about splitting his team, and wanted to get this over with.
“I feel like we should be doing something about those raiders,” Captain Nelson grumbled after they left the town proper.

Colonel Hernandez frowned. “Stow the chatter,” he ordered. The last thing he needed was for one of his subordinates to accidentally offend their hosts.

Even if he secretly agreed with him.

The 2 members of SG-11 approached the Stargate. Fiefdom guards were hanging around the courtyard, ostensibly guarding the 'Gate but in practice keeping more of an eye on SG-11, and handled their staff weapons nervously. The area was rather open, with stone pillars laid out in twin rows heading away from the 'gate. Plenty of cover for a firefight.

The Colonel put any of those thoughts from his mind. They were here on a mission of peace. The SGC negotiation team was currently talking to the Fiefdom planetary governor about a certain chemical agent that was in his possession. Specifically, they wanted to keep the Free Jaffa politician from selling said chemical, a crucial ingredient for the refining process of the addictive narcotic Kassa, to the Lucian Alliance. The deal with the Lucians had not yet been made but none of the human forces were under any delusions. The governor was just holding out for a better price. He had no intention of handing over the chemical to the SGC or the Freedom Coalition.

The Colonel's radio crackled on his vest. “Warriors of the Tau'ri! Explain yourselves!” It was the Fiefdom governor. Hernandez suppressed a sigh. His patience with this greedy tyrant was running short.

“I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific, Governor,” he replied.

“A Ha'tak capital ship has just exited hyperspace and is entering orbit! What is the Coalition intending—”

The transmission cut off with an ear-shattering screech accompanied by static. The Fiefdom guards were going on alert, their weapons carefully trained just to the edge of SG-11's direction.

Abruptly, the Stargate activated.

“Get to cover!” Hernandez ordered. Jamming radio transmissions, sending a ship into orbit, dialing the Stargate from off-world—this had all the hallmarks of a planetary assault. He hoped the planet's defenses would be enough. Angar was a minor world with little in the way of fortifications. The only reason they had been considered safe was it was deep within Fiefdom territory. The threat of being cut off by the fleet should have been enough to deter the Lucians, which was what he assumed the assault force to be composed of.

A raid, then. The attackers must be hoping to strike, get what they came for, and leave before the Fiefdom fleet marshaled to catch them. They might have a chance.

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The Stargate finished its sequence and opened with its signature 'splash'. Captain Nelson stood a bit closer beside the stone pillar he was using as cover. He resisted the urge to wipe the sweat off of his brow. This was it.

A horde of nightmares rushed out of the gate.
Roaring ape-like marauders, wearing only leather harnesses, charged forward. They opened up with some kind of projectile pistol-like firearm. The weapons fired nasty, half-foot long spikes of hot metal that embedded themselves in the stone pillars up to the mid-way point.

A Fiefdom guard screamed as a spike struck him in the gut, punching through the armor with ease. Smelling blood, the hostiles focused fire on him, turning him into a human pincushion. He dropped dead in seconds.

Staff Weapon and P90 fire greeted the monsters. Blasts hit the sasquatches, punching through leather and leaving scorched fur and burned flesh. Bullets impacted, leaving sprays of blood or sending patches of fur flying as they dug deep.

The marauders pushed forward, anyway.

More of the Fiefdom guards fell. Some some to spikes and some to the brutal bayonet-like blades attached to the barrels of the projectile weapons.

Several more emerged from the 'gate. These were clad in gray armor plating. They carried a new firearm, as well: some kind of heavy weapon, carried underhanded, with a large, curved blade covering the bottom and extending to a point well behind the stock.

“Take cover!” Hernandez shouted. Nelson had to agree with him. Whatever that thing was, it looked like it packed a—

A stone pillar exploded as a launched explosive struck it.

The Fiefdom guards huddled behind the pillar were flung into the open. The marauders cut them down in seconds, in some cases literally.

A barrage of expletives escaped Nelson's mouth as he huddled back behind his cover and reloaded his weapon. This was not going well. They'd downed a few of the hostiles, true, but they were being overwhelmed quick. The giant primates' ability to just soak up incoming fire was making them obscenely hard to kill. He peeked out behind cover.

A Fiefdom guard was engaging in close quarter combat with one of the marauders. The staff weapon sang as the guard expertly weaved it through the air. He landed several strikes and jabs on his opponent while evading the bladed heavy weapon the hostile swung in response. He struck another blow across his enemy's face.

As a Jaffa, the Fiefdom Guard was quite a bit stronger than the average human, even one in peak physical conditioning. Such a hit would have shattered the jaw of an ordinary man. The beast didn't seem to notice.

Even the P90 fire Nelson peppered it with didn't distract it from its prey. Nelson caught a hint of bloodshot eyes and a crazed, savage expression on its face.

All it took was one misstep. The marauder surged forward and shoulder-checked the guard. The Free Jaffa was knocked off his feet and fell to the ground. Dazed, he held his weapon out horizontally in an attempt at a block.

The beast swung his bladed grenade launcher downward. It sliced through the staff and cut the guard
in half before embedding itself in the ground.

Nelson quickly took stock of his surroundings as he fired on the enemy. Nearly all of the Fiefdom guards were dead. He could see the Guard Captain slouched against a pillar, a spike having punched through his neck. Blood poured freely from the gushing wound as the soldier twitched...before going limp.

“Fall back! Fall back!” Colonel Hernandez shouted. Nelson started sprinting away from the Stargate, feeling like he had a target on his back. He glanced behind him impulsively.

He had only a second to realize one of the grenade launcher weapons was aimed at him before the pillar right next to him exploded. A chunk of stone smashed into his head, he felt his neck break, and it was all over.

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A Death Glider spun out of control as a green energy blast struck it. The craft spiraled into a house and exploded out the other side, the craft shattering into pieces and continuing to tumble onward from the sheer force of the momentum-driven impact. Burning wreckage and building materials rained onto the terrain in a cataclysmic wave.

So much for air support, Colonel Hernandez grimaced as another of the shrieking hostile gunships flew overhead, strafing their position.

Rescuing the negotiators had been a bust. The governor's 'palace', really just a fancy thatched hut, had been the first place raided. All of the occupants had been slaughtered before he had even reached the town.

Only one other member of SG-11 had survived the initial assault. Captain Miller hunkered down behind cover with his superior. The Colonel could tell the younger man was gritting his teeth hard enough to crack several of them. At last, the gunships passed by and split off to other parts of the town.

The pair darted from cover to cover, trying to find any of the surviving Fiefdom military. They might not have been able to save the VIPs, but they could at least help protect the civilians from whoever the hell these hostiles were.

Hide—sprint—hide—sprint.

The better part of half an hour passed this way. More than once, as they hid waiting for a chance to pass unseen, they saw the hostiles ransacking buildings for valuables. Many of them carried staff weapons slung across their backs as trophies.

Worst of all were the civilians. Dozens of people, primarily women and children, were being led into ships in chains. The SGC officers clutched their weapons with white knuckles and did nothing. There was nothing they could do. They had to wait, and slip away and report back.

Finally, they heard weapons fire in the distance. It seemed some of the Fiefdom forces had held on, after all.

Movement.
The pair crouched behind the nearest concealment. The Colonel peeked out.

One of the marauders was leading a group of civilians away. The civvies were, again, chained in a line. The marauder yanked one of them forward, causing the whole group to stumble. He grumbled in contempt, apparently upset at pulling shit detail.

Miller looked to the Colonel. The CO nodded in response. This was their chance. He gave a few hand signal instructions, which his subordinate immediately carried out.

Colonel Hernandez crept to the edge of his cover. He grabbed a loose piece of stonework. Then, he stood upright out of cover and hurled the stone directly into the enemy's back.

The marauder turned, rage filling his eyes. Hernandez flipped him off and fled around the corner. As hoped, the ape-man immediately gave chase, turning the corner at a sprint.

Thereby coming face to face with the claymores Miller had planted.

The blast peppered the beast with shrapnel. Hernandez and Miller followed that up by unloading on the stunned thing's face with their P-90 sub-machine guns. It went down with a satisfying thunk.

A quick scan of the corpse revealed a simple key. The pair rushed over, freed the captives, and told them to find a place to lay low. They only needed to stay out of sight for a few hours, at most.

Hernandez knew that a raid like this depended on speed. The marauders couldn't afford to get bogged down by any one thing or they risked being caught by the Fiefdom's response fleet. Thus, his plan was simple: find a place to hole up and wait for the clock to run out.

Of course, he wasn't about to sit out the fighting if there was any to be had. That just wouldn't do. He had some payback to dish out.

They found some surviving Fiefdom warriors defending a stone and wood longhouse from a trio of the marauders. Given the ferocity the defenders were fighting with, it was a safe bet there were civilians inside. The pair of USAF officers crouched behind a low stone wall and readied their weapons. They exchanged a quick set of hand signals, the Colonel instructing his subordinate to focus fire on the center of the enemy formation. He counted off on his fingers. 1...2...3!

The stood up out of cover and opened fire. Armor piercing P90 rounds slammed into the marauders.

The hostile formation broke...but not in the way the Colonel had expected.

Instead of scattering, the center ape-man roared and charged toward the SGC personnel. The savage was peppered with rounds as it went. Blood, flesh, and fur were torn off of its unarmored hide, and it started leaving red footprints as it continued to charge forward.

All the while, enemy fire struck the stone wall Hernandez and Miller were standing in front of. Stone was chipped away bit by bit as spike rounds tore into it. By the time the hostile charging them reached it, the wall was nearly falling apart.

The Marauder crashed through the wall with a deafening roar, holding its weapon up as a shield to avoid impaling itself on the spikes. Bits of stone and dust flew into the air as the SGC officers were tossed to the dirt by the sheer force of the blow.
Miller shook off the disorientation first. He rolled onto his belly, his weapon in hand. He was getting his hands and knees under him, trying to get up, when the marauder slammed his massive foot down on his back.

Then he did it again.

And again.

The Captain had his torso flattened in seconds by the sheer force of the assault.

Colonel Hernandez roared in rage. He rose to a knee and shouldered his P90, unloading on his enemy at point blank range. The rounds tore open what little of the hostile's chest remained intact. Blood poured in miniature rivers from its many, many wounds.

It staggered toward the Colonel, its eyes crazed, seeming intent on killing him with the same barbarity he had directed toward the unfortunate Captain.

Abruptly, thankfully, it stumbled, the fire faded from its eyes, and it collapsed dead on the ground. It twitched for several seconds before going still.

Colonel Hernandez struggled to keep his hands from shaking as he reloaded his weapon. His mind could barely understand what his eyes had just reported to him. What...just...what...?

“Tau'ri, are you well?” a voice called out. Apparently, the Fiefdom Guards had been successful. Good. The Colonel rose to his feet and, after retrieving Miller's battered dog tags, made his way over to the closest thing to friendlies he would find on this rock. He had to watch his step to avoid impaling his foot on all of the spent spike rounds or tripping over the several dead marauders that had fallen before the bloodied defenders.

The Staff weapon seemed to prove rather effective against the big brute-like aliens. Surprisingly so. The kinetic aspect of the condensed plasma bolt easily able to punch through the armor and into the thick hide of the animal beneath. On a per shot basis it seemed to actually hit harder than the aliens own plasma weaponry and had greater endurance. Of course, it was still shit to aim with. But that didn't stop the Colonel from reaching down and grabbing one from a Fallen Fiefdom guard. He was running low on Ammunition and would soon have to discard his P90 if he didn't make it back to the 'Gate.

The defenses around the longhouse were battered and worn. The stone and wood was almost completely chipped away and covered in spikes. It wouldn't stand up to another assault.

Still, it was the best they had, for the moment.

“How are the civilians holding up?” the Colonel asked, still catching his breath.

“Our people are well,” the Guard Captain replied, managing to be curt even with his bleeding head wound. “We warriors of the Jaffa need no aid in defending our own.”

Hernandez was about to argue about how this wasn't a defensible position when the marauders made the point for him. A massive roar drowned out all speech. It was immediately followed by the thunderous sound of dozens of charging footsteps. A whole legion of the ape-like raiders emerged from the maze of buildings and charged toward their position.
“Tell some your men to take the civvies out the back,” the Colonel shouted. “The rest of us will hold them—”

A spike hit him in the shoulder, punched clean through, and spun him around and into the dirt.

Searing pain. The worst pain he'd ever felt. He could barely notice anything outside of the stabbing, burning agony.

The sky dimmed as a cloud of spike rounds flew overhead. Fiefdom Guards fell, impaled in multiple parts of their body. Within moments, all of the defenders were down. Dizzy with pain, the Colonel drew his sidearm and tried to take aim.

A ball of blue energy struck him in the chest. The ceramic-composite plate of his armor held, but only barely. The plate cracked and part of it melted, seeping onto his burned flesh. The world started spinning.

“Chieftain, we have found another batch of slaves,” one of the marauders barked out.

“Excellent,” said another. This one, Hernandez noted through the fog of pain, seemed to be a big shot. He wore fancy gray armor and the others all moved deferentially around him. “We will need them if we are to make a profit out of this ridiculous venture,” the beast grunted.

The big shot paused a half-step away from the Colonel. He smirked, showing a glimpse of razor sharp fangs. “We will allow this one to live,” it barked, some kind of device strapped to its armor translating into passable Goa'uld. “So that it may spread tales of our might.” That raised a chuckle from the rest of the apes.

Oh, I'll remember you, alright, the Colonel promised silently. He made sure to memorize this particular marauder's features, as well as the ornate designs inscribed into its armor. One day, he promised himself, this freak would face justice.

One day...

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The conference room was dimly lit. The occupants sat silently, listening to the video reporting the events on the planet Angar. Colonel Hernandez's account was particularly vivid and detailed.

General O'Neill understood the man's pain. Too often in his time as a Colonel had he faced the inability to save people, to stop some catastrophe. He made a mental note to meet with the man personally. Let him know that, while he would never stop blaming himself, there were at least others who understood.

The rest of the room watched the end of the taped debriefing silently. President Hayes, Admiral Hood, and President Charet were the only other people present. No major figure, including and especially the other members of the diplomatic summit, knew this meeting was taking place. Only the guards standing outside the soundproofed room knew where they were in the middle of this night.

“We can't just sit idly by while this happens,” President Charet said. She was clearly fighting back outraged grief. O'Neill felt relief as his initial impression of the woman was proven correct.

“Oh that, ma'am, we are in complete agreement,” President Hayes said, his eyes hard. He turned to
the representatives of the military that were present. “General O'Neill, Admiral Hood. You presented us with several potential joint operations. I think number...3A should be pursued. For the moment, of course.” President Charet indicated her agreement.

Both O'Neill and Hood nodded, albeit reluctantly. 3A was a stop-gap measure at best. A way to keep damage to a minimum while more effective strategies were enacted. Only, no other strategies would even be started until the politicians could get their heads out of their assess and actually do their jobs.

Still, O'Neill decided, it was better than nothing. They would save what lives they could.

Chapter End Notes

Note: In this timeline Teal'c has taken an active role in the Free Jaffa council, freeing up Rak'nor to be a field agent and provide a window into the Free Jaffa for the story. It goes along with the 'in the trenches' focus that I like to focus on.

Note: So, another action scene. Let us know how we handled it.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 6 Assemble

The holographic grave shimmered briefly before stabilizing. Serin Osman, Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence, stared at the simulated headstone with a neutral expression.

The newly-minted admiral had no idea how to feel. Her predecessor, Admiral/Director Margaret Parangosky, had died less than a month before. Osman had been her protege, her student. As such, it was an inevitability that she would be promoted to fill the now-vacant position of leader of the UNSC’s intelligence apparatus.

The holographic grass rustled in a virtual wind. The grave site was a stereotypical one, derived from ancient tradition of the Western world. A single patch of grass-covered dirt with a stone obelisk inscribed with the name and date of birth and death of the deceased. It was surrounded by similar patches of ground with a blue sky above and open spaces all around. It was so...normal. She could almost feel the sun on her face and smell the scent of freshly cut grass. UNSC Holographic technology had made massive leaps and bounds in the past few decades. They were crisper, sharper, more versatile.

It was all a lie, of course.

Parangosky had been cremated and her ashes jettisoned from her Flagship, the Point of No Return, to be drawn into the Earth's gravity well, thus scattering them over the globe. Her remains would symbolically coat the world and thus continue her mastery of it in death. Osman had conceived and designed the artificial grave site she now knelt in herself. Why she had done so was a question she had yet to find an answer for.

“Ma'am, the briefing is about to begin,” a familiar voice said.

Osman looked up from her place kneeling before the gravestone. The one who spoke stood out sharply from the generically domestic background.

Naomi-010 was completely enclosed in MJOLNIR Mark VII Power Armor. Numerous scratches and scorch marks decorated its surface, testament to the experience the supersoldier had gained in her decades-long career. Abnormally, her visor was depolarized, allowing Osman to see her face when she spoke. Sibling to sibling. It was a sign of trust and respect that went back to their training in the Spartan II program.

Naomi's face lacked any of the emotion that Osman felt. The Spartan-II had never had the same relationship with the late Parangosky and so was apathetic at her passing. This bothered Osman some, but she would never let it show.

“Yes, of course,” Osman replied to Naomi’s prompt, moving to get up. A twinge of pain in her hip caused her to stumble.
Naomi caught her before she could fall. The Spartan II trooper helped her gain her balance. Looking at her eyes, Osman could tell that there was no judgment. No loss of respect. Naomi knew that her physical pain was not caused by weakness. Osman had washed out of the Spartan IIs due to a fluke in the augmentation procedure leaving her crippled; it was no fault of hers.

She was incredibly grateful for that understanding. That empathy. No one else in the galaxy shared it.

Of course, had anyone else ever witnessed such a moment of weakness, Osman would almost certainly have had them killed.

Putting aside her ruminations, the newly-minted Director began her meditation exercises. With a combination of deep breaths, precise body movements, and the accumulated effects of years of mental focus and discipline, she forced her own psyche into a new position. A more formidable position.

She opened her eyes.

Gone was the physically handicapped, vulnerable woman entering into a new position of power. In her place was the Admiral. The Director. The all-knowing, all-seeing spymaster that individuals and organizations across the galaxy knew to fear. The one who could find any secret and crush any opponent.

The Admiral gestured with her good arm. The holographic grave site disappeared, revealing the large office that she worked out of. She walked over to her desk and picked up her compad, scanning the various documents that her agents had gathered over the past few days. The ones relevant to the meeting she was about to convene. Nodding her head in satisfaction, she gestured to Naomi to take her place out of range of the holographic transmitter.

Admiral Osman stepped into position and, with another gesture and a crisply issued voice command, the office disappeared and was replaced with a holographic projection of a briefing room.

“Admiral on deck!” Spartan Sarah Palmer shouted. She immediately rose to her feet and saluted Osman. Osman returned the salute, effortlessly concealing the disdain she had for the series IV Spartan. The formalities out of the way, Palmer took her seat. The Spartan and the Admiral’s projection were the only two in the room.

The first several minutes were spent going over various subjects. The common theme was Palmer confirming reports that Osman had received concerning the Spartans and the sections of the UNSC that the female supersoldier was exposed to. Then, came the interesting part.

“I'm sure you realized that this briefing is not as...populated as it normally is,” the Admiral said.

Palmer nodded in response. “Yeah, I was wondering about that. What's the score, Ma'am?”

“We have a mission for you, Spartan Palmer,” the Admiral said.

Palmer's eyes lit up. She sat forward in her reinforced seat, eager to hear the news. Like a loyal attack dog ready to be unleashed on its next target.
“You have, of course, been briefed on the raider group known as 'The Banished',” Admiral Osman said. “We have been monitoring their communications and have discovered the location of Atriox, their leader. His fleet is away preparing for another raid while he inspects a supply depot. We likely will not get another chance and therefore don't have time for the normal chain of command. We must act now. Your mission is simple: execute a stealth insertion onto the planet and eliminate the Banished leader, thus destabilizing the entire organization.”

Spartan Palmer practically leaped from her seat in enthusiasm. The commander was always looking for chances to engage in battle, hoping to build up her own legend and, as she put it, 'take the fight to the bad guys'. Her enthusiasm blinded her to the obvious deception at play.

The lack of time was a lie. In reality, Atriox would remain on site for more than enough time for the well-oiled machine of the UNSC response system to send in a team to execute the raider. It would, of course, be unacceptable to inform Hood of this opportunity and allow the regular military to deal with it. Formidable as the Fleet Admiral was, he lacked the vision necessary for the new Milky Way and he couldn't be allowed to accumulate even more popularity by gaining another victory. Achieving this goal on their own would gain popular support and political clout for ONI and the factions it backed. It would, hopefully, be the first of many victories that would lead to a galaxy united under one banner. One World for a new age...

Once again, Osman lamented that she would not be able to use Kilo Five. The elite black ops team, which included Naomi, was her preferred cat's paw for all of her covert enterprises. They were the only people in the galaxy that she trusted and had absolute confidence in. They should be the ones she was entrusting with this crucial task. Unfortunately, the ONI AIs dedicated to predictive analysis had been clear that only a team of fully augmented and equipped Spartans had a chance of pulling off this mission successfully. As formidable as Kilo Five was, Naomi was the only Spartan within it.

Osman struggled internally against the resentment that welled up inside her. Resentment of those that hadn't suffered the imposed failure that she had. Keeping the struggle off of her face, she directed her bitterness and anger to their usual target: the Master Chief and his little Spartan-II 'family'. The ones Hood would no doubt send if he were in charge. That group would be even more unacceptable for this mission than Palmer and her ilk.

They were not to be trusted.

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Grogan held on tight as the UNSC vehicle carried him and the rest of SG-9 toward their destination. He struggled to hold in the meager lunch he had ingested prior to travel through the Stargate. The hydrogen-powered 'Warthog LRV' may have been centuries more advanced than anything his Earth had developed, but whoever had designed the thing had clearly thought of 'motion sickness' as something that only happened to civilians. The USAF officer held on tight to the support struts of the small troop compartment as the rough ride continued. The driver was either oblivious to his discomfort or, more likely, taking enjoyment from it. It was kind of hard to tell with UNSC Marines.

The transport crested a hill and SG-9 finally got a glimpse at the place that would be their home for the foreseeable future. It was a low structure, heavily reinforced, with very little actually on the surface. What was had roughly dome or cylindrical shapes. They were constructed from a material that resembled a cross between advanced metal alloys and ancient stone bricks. The bunker complex
had been constructed by System Lord Cronus' forces during the days of the Goa'uld Empire and, sadly, had the aesthetics to match. The Warthog passed by the inner perimeter of hidden sensors and their driver broadcast his Friend or Foe signal to the headquarters of Operation: Camelot.

The Warthog passed through the holographic facade of a collapsed entrance and a wall of projected energy popped back into place as they passed into the vehicle bay. From the exterior it would seem that the place remained a deserted ruin. As the entire operation depended upon secrecy and the use of minimal assets, they had to rely upon trickery rather than conventional fortifications.

That didn't mean there weren't defenses. Next generation SGC railgun turrets were spaced 50 meters apart behind the 50 feet high perimeter walls. Along with smart munitions and mines they formed a protective barrier around the facility.

For the millionth time, Grogan silently thanked the Asgard for what they'd done for humanity. The now-extinct alien race had given humanity a repository of all of their knowledge, allowing, for one thing, the SGC to field a limited amount of ridiculously advanced technology. From the FOF system to the advanced sensors to most of the physical equipment, Grogan's Earth was ensuring Camelot had a clear technological advantage over whatever enemy they had been summoned here to fight.

“Dismount, people,” Major Williamson barked as soon as the vehicle came to a stop, nodding to the driver who nodded back. Grogan, being the closest to the rear of the vehicle, grabbed his duffel bag from the Warthog's floor and jumped onto the paved interior of the base. Various pieces of equipment littered the vehicle bay with technicians working furiously to bring the base to full operating status ASAP. Sparks flew as one engineer welded mounts for the power grid onto the walls and ceiling. Grogan was forced to jump back a step as a team of armory specialists moved mobile lockers stocked full of UNSC weapons. Following behind them were crates and crates of ammunition to the base's new main Armory.

“Sir, please tell me we won't have to go through that every time we 'gate over here,” Grogan pleaded, holding his stomach with his free hand.

“We won't,” the Major assured him. Grogan tried not to feel any resentment as he noticed that none of his squadmates seemed bothered by the ride. Maybe they were just better at hiding it. The Major continued, “The engineers'll be bringing the Stargate in here soon. They're still working on bringing the embarkation room's defenses up to standard. As soon as Command gets the gear ready we'll have a full Gate Room setup, Iris and all.”

The 'Iris' was effectively a shield that covered the Stargate on command. Composed of a trinium/titanium alloy, the Iris would automatically contract upon the activation of a Stargate from off-world and remain closed until opened by an authorized technician. It was placed less than 3 micrometers from the Event Horizon of the active wormhole, meaning anything coming through would not have the room to reform. Their component particles would be dispersed harmlessly in subspace. In short, nothing could come through a Stargate with a closed Iris. It was the most important safety feature any 'gate-based facility could have and Grogan was immensely relieved that the SGC had authorized the enormous expense of one being constructed off-world.

“Come on, people,” Major Williamson said. “Briefing's at 0800 local time. Let's get settled while we can.”
The auditorium-sized briefing room buzzed with conversation. The numerous seats were all grouped into one unbroken grid, but the soldiers occupying them had still separated into 2 distinct groups. The primary conversation topic of each group was the population of the other.

On one side was SG-3,-5,-7,-8, and -9. They were the front-line troops that would be representing the SGC and its Earth for this operation. Beside them were Col. Carter and several other scientific staff that would be overseeing the use of the SGC gear, as well as developing countermeasures to anything the enemy threw at them. Behind them all were the engineers and various support personnel they would need to function as a unit. All told, there were probably less than a hundred and fifty SGC personnel present. Grogan knew that number would only increase in the future, but for the time being it was all the SGC could spare.

On the other side was Blue Team (sitting in specially designed chairs that were reinforced to hold the weight of an armored Spartan-II) and several hundred Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, supposedly the second-most elite infantry that the UNSC fielded. That number didn't include the UNSC science team and the several hundred more support personnel backing them up.

General O'Neill had assured the SG Teams that whatever advantage the UNSC possessed in size would be balanced out by the advanced tech reverse engineered from the Asgard and the SGC's other alien allies. Staring at the size disparity, Grogan could only hope the more seasoned officer was correct. Because based on the looks being sent his way, it was obvious the UNSC's elite forces weren't too thrilled at what they viewed as the lack of support they were getting from their new allies.

Interestingly, Grogan thought he noticed the ODSTs that were sitting next to the Spartans were distinctly uncomfortable, going so far as to lean away from the supersoldiers as much as possible without being blatant about it. He made eye contact with Satterfield and gestured covertly in their direction. She nodded slightly; she saw it, too. Maybe there was some sort of institutional rivalry there?

"Commander on deck!" one of the UNSC Marines stationed as a guard shouted. Instantly every one of the room's occupants sprang out of their chair. A single figure entered from a door at the front of the room and walked onto the 'stage'. He took his place behind a podium and shuffled some papers. He seemed slightly uncomfortable and almost out of place, as if he would rather be in front of the podium than behind it. He looked out at the soldiers he would be commanding.

"At ease, people," the officer said. "My name is Colonel Cameron Mitchell. I'll be the CO for this whole show. I'm not much for speeches, so I'll keep this brief. The information available to you has been limited but I'm sure you're all aware that something big is going down out there. Well, let me lay it out straight for you."

The wall behind him was suddenly replaced by a projection of footage taken from a portable recorder. It showed a number of Free Jaffa forces engaging some kind of...Sasquatch-looking aliens. Instantly the UNSC Forces straightened in their seats, recognition visible on several faces.

So that's what the new bad guys look like, Grogan thought. He had heard rumors of the Free Jaffa coming under attack from some kind of alien menace that had never been heard of before. He had also heard the rumors that said menace had originated in the new half of the galaxy. Given where he was and who SG-9 would be working with for the duration of this Op, it seemed like those rumors had been true.
His trained eyes and keen tactical mind poured over the images of the hostiles, cataloging everything about humanity's new enemy. He noted a distinct trend of aggressive tactics. There were lots of roars and war-cries, frontal assaults were favored over more subtle insertions, etc.. The kit they used followed a similar trend. Carbine-sized pistols that shot red hot spikes, grenade launchers the size of a car engine, oh, and the fact that seemingly every weapon and vehicle was adorned with vicious blades indicated that these were not a subtle race. They were inelegant, monstrous...brutal.

He blinked as information from an ONI intel packet he had read back at the SGC came to mind. Brutes. That's what the UNSC had pegged them as. The name was certainly apt.

Yet for all their lack of finesse, they were undoubtedly deadly. Their armor, although only used for some of the troops, could stand up to a ridiculous amount of punishment. Even those rank-and-file grunts that only wore leather harnesses could still shrug off entirely too many hits for comfort. Probably why this joint operation would primarily be utilizing UNSC weapons. They were significantly more effective than what the troops of Stargate Command currently used.

The Brute vehicles were similarly sturdy. Even single-pilot scout vehicles were seen taking multiple hits from Death Gliders and just shrugging them off. With the toughness and sheer will on display, these new hostiles didn't really need subtle tactics to be a threat. After all, a tank charge was unsubtle; that didn't make it any less dangerous. Or less terrifying to be on the receiving end of.

“This, gentlemen, is the Banished,” Col. Mitchell was saying. “They're a group of former Covenant soldiers who've turned raider since the collapse of their empire. They're composed almost entirely of representatives of the Jiralhanae species. Consult your briefing materials if you need a refresher on them. They've been launching raids throughout the Stargate network for the better part of a month now. In that time, this,” the Colonel gestured to the footage behind him, which had already reached its end. The Banished forces had retreated through the Stargate, taking a sizable amount of stolen materials and Jaffa slaves with them. “represents most of the direct combat the Banished have engaged in. They have proven exceptionally good at picking poorly defended targets. They are also skilled at predicting traps and staying ahead of response forces. They're brutal, they're quick, and they're good at fading into the woodwork.” The officer pressed as button on the podium.

The wall faded to black and was replaced by footage of an orbital battle. Three Ha'tak motherships were under seige by twice that many Ha'tak as well as other ships that Grogan recognized CCS Class Cruisers. The latter must have been Banished ships. The Free Jaffa ships were taking a pounding. Bright orange spears of energy from the enemy Ha'taks slaming into their shields with brutal force that was quickly joined by dozens of guided plasma torpedoes. It was unclear exactly how effective the weapons of the Banished Warships were, accompanied sensor data was not presented with the video, but it certainly looked impressive.

Despite the pounding they were taking the Free Jaffa held their ground and fought back with even greater tenacity. A CPV class Banished destroyer quickly fell to return fire after a salvo or two. Before long, however, a black and blue portal seemed to open at the rear of the enemy formation and a ship almost as large as the Infinity in size slowly emerged from the unfamiliar vortex. The screen paused for a moment, a white bracket appeared over the Carrier with the name CAS-Class Enduring Conviction.

The screen unpause at that point and a few moments later the battle was joined as hundreds of contacts launched from the Carrier and made a bee line for the Free Jaffa squadron doggedly holding
out. Grogan raised his eyebrows in surprise when saw the arrowhead shape of Al'kesh spearheading bombing runs on the Free Jaffa lines. Hot behind them were Gliders and a tear drop shaped fighter the likes of which he had never seen before. A quick consultation of his TAC PAD identified the fighter as the type 31 Seraph, a heavy former-Covenant fighter craft with shields and weapons of considerable capability.

The few Free Jaffa Al'kesh and Gliders were quickly swarmed and made short work of by the enemy fighters.

A minute later the first Free Jaffa Ha'tak succumbed to the combined weapons fire. Less than thirty seconds later the second did as well. Realizing they were doomed if they stayed the third Ha'tak quickly recovered its few remaining Gliders and then jumped to Hyperspace before the combined forces could finish it off.

The enemy fleet then moved in and destroyed the small defensive network of the Free Jaffa planet, immediately moving to take possession of small convey of cargo freighters.

“Of equal or greater interest are the new allies of the Banished: The Lucian Alliance. They're the owners of the former-Goa'uld ships you just saw,” the Colonel said, distaste clear in his voice. Everyone on the SGC side of this equation knew that he had clashed with the organized crime syndicate numerous times during his leadership of SG-1. Grogan wondered if that was part of the reason Mitchell had been selected for this assignment. “What you're seeing here is the only confirmed joint operation between the Lucians and Banished forces, which were attacking the planet through the 'gate at the time of this recording. Intel indicates that the Lucians have been cooperating with the Banished extensively. While joint field ops like this are rare, the amount of goods and slaves the Lucians have been trafficking has skyrocketed since the Event. Doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out where it's all coming from.”

Grogan could see the UNSC personnel squirming uncomfortably, whispering between each other. He knew they'd been given a briefing on the Lucian Alliance and the other major players on his side of the Galaxy. The idea that the Brutes would ally with a human power clearly took them off guard. From what he had read, he could understand why.

The projection faded again and was replaced by the symbols of the UNSC and the SGC, shown side by side.

“That, people, is where we come in,” Col. Mitchell said. His eyes passed over the room, conveying the sincerity of his words and the depth of his resolve. It had a noticeable impact as the UNSC personnel quieted down. “Our respective leaderships are still hashing out a large scale, formalized response to the Banished/Lucian Alliance threat. In the meantime, it's our job to be as big of a pain in the ass to these hostiles as we possibly can. As a small operation, we can move more quickly and respond more decisively than a larger armed force ever could. The Stargate network seems to be the focus of their attacks, so we'll also use that to our advantage.”

Mitchell firmly locked eyes with the UNSC forces in the room, the air of slight discomfort in his demeanor long since gone. The ODSTs were looking at him levelly, neither sneering or showing any hint of disapproval. Their faces were stoic and blank but Grogan knew they were taking the Colonel
"We will be the unconventional response to an unconventional threat. We will interrupt their operations at every available opportunity, we will gather intel directly in the field, and we will keep the loss of life to an absolute minimum. Understand this. You will almost always be outnumbered and outgunned by your enemy. But you will not be outmatched. For no matter what the enemy will throw at you, YOU will be able to adapt and overcome it through superior training and skill."

Colonel Mitchell motioned to the SGC side of the amphitheater like room.

"These men and woman are experts on this kind of warfare. Fighting as the underdogs against a superior enemy, and coming out victorious. We are also the experts at projecting power through the Stargate. You, however," he said, addressing the UNSC personnel now, “have the experience in fighting the Brutes that we lack. So starting tomorrow we'll be conducting joint training exercises; combining our certain skill sets. That means a lot of cross training, lots of weapons familiarization, coordination and team work. Take a good look at the people sitting on the other side of the isle."

Everyone did. "You are all about to get to know each other very well in the coming weeks and months. And then, we're going to take the fight to the enemy, as the tip of the spear. So by the time the politicians get their act together and the conventional militaries mobilize, we'll already be neck deep into it. Understood?"

The answer was a resounding “Sir, yes Sir!” from everyone present. The entire complex seemed to rattle from the force of it. Grogan smiled; the enemy wouldn't know what hit them.

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“Oh, do be careful with that, will you?” an annoyed, authoritative voice demanded. The poor technician nodded and mumbled an apology before moving on to the next piece of equipment he had to install. He took care not to set down any of the sturdy military-grade gear as hard as the last one, even though the impact had been well within acceptable levels of force. The Master Chief admired the man's professionalism. Dr. Catherine Halsey tended to make people either wither in fear or retaliate in frustration.

“So hard to get good help these days,” Dr. Halsey quipped. Her scolding of the worker complete, she turned back to the compad in her hand. “Truly fascinating...” she mumbled. She spent the next hour poring over the documents and schematics that the SGC Chief Scientist for the OP, Col. Samantha Carter, had sent over. Her attention was riveted on her work with a type of enthusiasm the Chief couldn't remember ever seeing on the good doctor before. Her labors had seemed to him to always include a hint of melancholy along with the curiosity and personal pride. Perhaps her overall disposition was improving now that the Insurrection and the Covenant were no more.

Dr. Halsey's next remark was directed at the Chief, despite the fact that her eyes remained riveted on the computer screen. “Have you gotten a look at any of the New Earth equipment, John?” she asked.

The Master Chief smiled behind his polarized visor. Dr. Halsey was one of the few people in the galaxy that dared to use his actual name when addressing him. He supposed it was only fair for her to do so. After all, she had known him since he was 6 years old.

“Afraid not, Ma'am,” the Chief, also known as 'John-117', replied. “Is there anything in particular
you are interested in?"

“Nothing I can't look into myself,” she said dismissively. The Chief wondered how she planned on accomplishing that. New Earth had placed severe restrictions on what tech could and could not be studied by UNSC personnel, apparently intent on maintaining their technological secrets until relations stabilized. Much of it was open for examination, provided a member of the New Earth science team was present, but much of the tech he would expect Halsey to be most interested in was off limits. He had half expected her to ask him to covertly acquire some specimens for her to study. Instead, Dr. Halsey seemed to frown in disappointment, which further confused the Chief, when she abruptly changed the subject. “How are Fred, Kelly, and Linda doing? I haven't gotten a chance to talk with them in months.” She looked up from her work, her eyes showing the barest hints of anxiety.

Understanding dawned upon the Chief. He had wondered why Dr. Halsey had insisted on him guarding the Lab during her visit. The explanation that she wanted the scientific wing to have 'the best protection at this early stage' didn't make a lot of sense, particularly since the rest of Blue Team was still assigned elsewhere in Camelot HQ.

It seemed she had just wanted to talk to the Chief about his siblings. It was an area he was willing to indulge her in. “They're adapting well,” he assured her. “Smooth cruising.”

“Really,” Halsey said, arching an eyebrow. “The entire galaxy just got turned on its head. None of you were a bit thrown off balance?”

“The galaxy was turned on its head when we first encountered the Covenant,” the Chief reminded her. “That didn't change our purpose; merely added another dimension to it. The Event is no different.”

Dr. Halsey chuckled ruefully. “Ever the pragmatist, John,” she said affectionately.

“I'll arrange for you to have some one-on-one time with each member of Blue Team. Off the record, of course,” the Chief said. While Halsey commanded considerable respect, she did not have direct control over military matters and thus could not easily obtain the personal meetings she clearly desired. The Master Chief was in a better position for such things, something he was more than happy to do. He knew his siblings missed her as much as she missed them; she had mentored them all since they were young children and had been the most important single figure in all of their lives. She was the closest thing to family they had left outside of the 4 of them.

There was a pause. For a brief, brief moment, the Chief thought he saw tears welling up in the good doctor's eyes. He felt the unfamiliar beginnings of panic begin to rise in his gut. A level of dread he had never experienced even when confronted with alien hordes started making itself known to him. He had no idea how to handle things if they were going in the direction he was afraid they were. Thankfully, Dr. Halsey quickly rallied and buried whatever emotional response had produced her momentary silence. “I would appreciate that. Thank you,” she said matter-of-factly. She smoothed her lab coat, adjusted her glasses, and glanced briefly at her compad before continuing the conversation. She talked as she worked, continuing to oversee the installation of the UNSC's technological contribution to the Scientific Wing.

“The technology that New Earth has brought here is truly astonishing. Do you see that cylindrical device there?” Halsey said, gesturing to the other end of the lab where SGC technicians (there were no UNSC personnel anywhere near, the Chief noted) were setting up their own equipment. Indeed, a
large tube-shaped piece of equipment was being loaded onto a supply rover, having already been programmed by the scientists seeing it off. "That is an energy shield projector. It will be able to create a shield around the entire base in case of an emergency, without any need for an emitter net being woven into the exterior itself. That is simply the tip of the iceberg in regard to the level of scientific prowess at their fingertips. Much of their technology may even surpass our own. They must have acquired and reverse-engineered very interesting alien devices to be able to reach such a stage this early in their history..."

The Master Chief only half paid attention. The technical specifications were things he could, and would, read later in reports. He was willing to indulge Dr. Halsey's desire to spend time with him, but he had no interest in her monologues. He was deep into his continuing mental analysis of the Banished threat when Halsey addressed him again.

"What do you think of this cooperative effort, John?" she asked. "This 'Operation: Camelot'."

The Master Chief's response was tactical, pragmatic, and direct, like most of his speech. "Their knowledge of the Stargate network and the Jiralhanae's new allies should prove invaluable in neutralizing the Banished as a threat. However, joint operations are always tricky and provide new obstacles. Not the least of which is learning to trust each other in the field. Also, while their technological level may be high, we have yet to see examples of that in their infantry aside from a first generation form of body armor. Personally, Ma'am, I'd prefer it if they functioned purely in a support capacity rather than accompanying UNSC personnel into the field."

"An interesting assessment, John," the doctor replied in a complimentary tone, although the Chief thought he could detect more disappointment behind it. "However, I was thinking in broader terms than that. Humanity finds itself in a new galaxy, in all likelihood permanently. Camelot is the first act of direct cooperation with the humanity of New Earth, our closest neighbors and the first members of the human species in centuries that do not fall under the banner of the Unified Earth Government. What role do you think it could play in humanity's developing history? What role could you and your siblings play?"

The Master Chief suppressed a sigh of frustration. These types of questions never interested him. His purpose was to win battles, not ruminate on the potential future of the human race or his existential place in it. Thankfully, he was rescued by the comms.

"Master Chief, report to briefing room A," the voice of the communications officer relayed.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but duty calls," the Chief said, trying to keep the relief out of his voice. Halsey just grinned enigmatically and watched him depart.

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"Ah, Master Chief. Now we can begin," Admiral Hood said. His hologram returned the salute the Spartan respectfully gave him. The formalities accomplished, the Master Chief took his seat in the briefing room next to the ranking officers of both the UNSC and SGC forces. Col. Mitchell sat to the front of the room, waiting in front of but with the rest of them. Hood's image stared into the ether as the man looked at something out of range of the hologram's projection. Having reviewed whatever intel he deemed relevant, he turned his attention back to the members of the briefing. The Chief sat up straighter as he noted the stress and anxiety in the man's stance. It wasn't particularly obvious, but he could tell that his superior had bad news. "I'm afraid some of my colleagues have jumped the
gun,” Hood said sourly.

“Can you be more specific, Admiral?” Col. Mitchell quipped, frowning.

The Master Chief struggled to suppress any signs of his own dissatisfaction. He had not been happy to learn that Camelot would fall under the direct command of an SGC officer rather than a UNSC one. He hadn't been privy to the hows and whys, but he suspected Hood had agreed out of desire to ensure the operation had access to the SGC's advanced tech. He could understand the strategic value of that, even if said access was heavily monitored and supervised. Regardless, the smart mouth that a lot of New Earth officers seemed to suffer from seemed to make the pill even harder to swallow.

“Alright, I'll get right to the point,” Admiral Hood said, frowning. “Some of my subordinates managed to locate the leader of the Banished and, deciding that time was a factor, launched an assassination mission without my direct approval. I regret to say that it failed.”

“Is that kind of thing common in your neck of the woods?” Col. Mitchell frowned. The Master Chief couldn't help but notice the looks he shared with Colonels Castleman and Reynolds. Both men were Field Officers at Stargate Command and rounded out the senior leadership of the organization present on the base. Even so, the look the three men shared had his stomach in a knot.

“The Human-Covenant War forced us to adopt many unusual policies,” Hood defended, seeming unhappy about being questioned by a mere colonel but still feeling obligated to provide an answer. “The ability to immediately seize opportunities was necessary enough to allow more autonomy than would normally be permitted within a conventional military. Be that as it may, I am currently looking into whether or not this overstepped any bounds and have already assured General O'Nell that it won’t be happening again.”

“Sir, do we have any specifics about the botched mission itself?” the Chief asked, wanting to get the conversation back on topic. He had no patience for whatever politicking the commissioned officers seemed about to engage in.

“We do, actually,” Hood replied. The wall behind the hologram was suddenly covered by a familiar projection. The Chief immediately recognized it as the video log recorded by the sensors in a MJOLNIR helmet. The information at the bottom of the screen indicated that it was a feed from Commander Palmer's armor.

The Spartan-II felt the knot in his gut become a ball of dark matter.

Admiral Hood explained, “a small group of Spartan-IVs, led by Commander Palmer, executed a stealth insertion to the planet designated PVX-207 with the objective of assassinating Atriox, the leader of the Banished. The footage you are about to see was automatically transmitted to the Prowler class stealth vessel that had transported them into the system.”

The playback began. The Chief watched as the footage recorded Palmer and her small team of series IV Spartans capturing a Banished transport. The small extra-atmospheric cargo hauler featured a bulbous and organic design in keeping with the aesthetics of the Covenant. This made sense considering the Banished lacked the ability to manufacture their own gear and thus relied upon left over equipment from the days of the Human-Covenant War.

At first, everything was going well. The capture went off without any snags and the transport avoided detection, making planetfall without engagement. The Spartans even managed to land away from the primary camp and begin the task of infiltrating the groundside facilities undetected.
Unfortunately, the cracks started to show fairly early on.

Commander Palmer and her subordinates showcased what the Master Chief would deem an unacceptable lack of patience. They moved from concealment too quickly, they didn't muffle their movements carefully enough, the false 'all-clear' signals they transmitted to enemy sentries were not as polished as they should have been, etc. It was clear that these Spartans were far too eager to get to the fighting when stealth would have been the preferred option.

Eventually, that eagerness caught up with them. One of Palmer's subordinates shuffled behind cover as a patrol was passing nearby. Now on alert, the jiralhanae squad turned and the pack leader seemed ready to order a search. Rather than attempt to salvage their element of surprise, Palmer immediately leaped from cover and opened fire.

The Master Chief struggled not to groan as he saw Palmer dual-wielding pistols, firing away with both hands. It was nearly impossible to have anything approaching an acceptable level of accuracy with 2 weapons at once. Her augmentations made up slightly for the disadvantage, but Palmer's effectiveness still clearly suffered. It took too many rounds and far too many precious seconds for her to down even a single target, not helped by the natural durability of the jiralhanae. Accuracy and speed were absolutely vital when going up against those bullet sponges since multiple shots to the head were basically the only way to bring one down efficiently.

The other officers shifted in the Master Chief's peripheral vision. He noticed several of them grimace at the mistakes that the Chief himself had noted. This made him even more annoyed, as now the UNSC's top tier unit was looking bad in front of foreign officers.

Despite the incompetence on display, the Spartans made a good accounting of themselves. The jiralhanae were disposed of to the last and the supersoldiers raced to their objective, sidestepping or eliminating opposition along the way. It no doubt helped that this was just a supply depot rather than a true fortification. For a while, it almost seemed like they would accomplish their objective.

The hammer dropped when Palmer and her team entered the base proper. They didn't perform adequate recon, they didn't take proper precautions, they just eliminated the sentries and charged straight in through the front gate. No sooner had they breached the perimeter that orange-yellow energy blasts began erupting all around them. What the Chief now recognized as goa'uld Ma'tok Staff Weapons fire raked the Spartans and what looked like legions of human troops in gray/black armor sprang from the ground.

Lucian Alliance mercenaries. The Chief recognized their equipment and insignia from the intel files he had studied. The glorified hit-men shook off what must have been sensor-dampening mats as they rose and opened fire with their energy weapons. They were immediately joined by the jiralhanae, who wasted no time in surrounding and trapping the overconfident human soldiers.

The ball of dark matter in the Chief's gut now left a cold tingling down his spine. This was unprecedented. The Brutes didn't work with humans. It just wasn't done, no matter how aligned their goals might be. Even within Covenant ranks their standing had been fluid, often working at odds with the Elites, though at times together.

But humans? Never.
Until now.

Even though he had seen the footage of the Banished/Lucian fleet battle, the reality of it hadn't set in until just that moment. If there was anything that told him in stark clarity that the old rule books went out the window it was this video. Brutes working with humans as allies and equals. Not master and vassal. It left him almost dizzy at the thought.

The Chief struggled to regain his equilibrium and focus on the video as the firefight progressed. Strong as MJOLNIR armor was, it was not impenetrable, and the Master Chief watched the footage in impotent rage as he saw the Spartan IVs cut down one after another. Domino...Jack Knife...Ivy and Shadow. Good teams, all with a lot of potential if properly trained and directed. Now no longer. At last, there were only a trio of them left huddled behind cover. Among them was Palmer, having abandoned her preferred dual-weapon loadout in favor of one of her fallen subordinate's Assault Rifles. Cocky and over-eager she may have been, Palmer was no coward, and the Chief noted with grudging respect the number of hostiles the Spartan IV commander took down even in the face of her imminent death.

Eventually, though, a group of small gray spheres were thrown toward the embattled human defenders. They emitted a great flash and noise, blinding the Spartans' sensors and allowing the assembled jiralhanae to mob them. The alien species' tremendous strength allowed them to force Palmer and co. into specialized restraints. The video cut out soon afterward.

The wall display shifted to what was obviously footage from a ship in orbit. It showed a number of capital ships, their resemblance to a pyramid surrounded by a net-like scaffolding marking them as former goa'uld vessels and thus a part of the Lucian Alliance, suddenly appear and move to secure the planet.

“The prowler was forced to flee the system to avoid capture,” Admiral Hood's hologram explained. “We now believe that the intelligence that led us to launch this mission was deliberately leaked in order to lay the trap you just witnessed.”

“Meaning the enemy is gutsy as well as frighteningly competent,” Col. Mitchell supplied. He sat up straighter in his seat as he continued. “Camelot will make the rescue of the captured Spartans one of our top priorities, Admiral.”

“Thank you, son. It's appreciated,” Hood said with what the Chief thought was sincerity. The Chief was certainly thankful for the sentiment. “In the meantime, this event has convinced both General O'Neill and me that espionage will have to be a vital component of this operation. As such, each of our nations will send a representative from its intelligence apparatus to ensure that nothing like this happens again.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Mitchell replied with a frown. The Chief couldn't really blame the man for his reluctance. The Spartan had never really trusted spooks himself, despite ONI having originally funded and executed the Spartan II program that gave him his purpose in life. Mitchell continued, “Just who will each nation be sending?”

“No,” General O'Neill said. He said it clearly. He said it loudly. He'd have shouted it, if he'd thought
Harry Maybourne sat back in his chair and grinned that infuriating smile of his. “Come on, Jack. It'll be fun. Just like old times.”

“No!” O’Neill repeated. The memories of said 'old times' were exactly why he was reacting so strongly to this. “You are not going to be our intelligence officer in Camelot. How in the holy hell do you even know about any of this?"

Harry Maybourne had been a high-ranking member of the National Intelligence Department, a civilian branch of the US government meant to provide oversight of top secret military operations, particularly those of an extraterrestrial nature. Unfortunately, it was an organization that had proven particularly susceptible to corruption. Maybourne being an excellent example of that.

“Camelot, is it? Someone was feeling poetic. I figured out what was going on but it's nice to have a name,” the former intelligence officer said, making a show of mentally cataloging the information. O'Neill chastised himself for his rooky mistake. Maybourne sipped at the good scotch from O'Neill's desk that, come to think of it, the General couldn't remember actually offering to him. It was as if the glass had just appeared in his hand in the seconds it took O'Neill to shut the door. “Anyway, as to how I know about it in general, well...You know me, Jack,” the man smiled. “Gathering and using information is what I do; it's my calling. I couldn't just stop after I resigned. And I've always been too good at getting things I'm not supposed to have.”

“Pretty good at selling them, too,” O'Neill reminded him. “And you didn't 'resign'. You were convicted of treason.” For the hundredth time he asked himself why he'd agreed to see this jerk privately instead of having him arrested the second he'd stepped through the Stargate.

“Now that's a low blow. I haven't done anything of the sort for quite a while, I assure you,” Maybourne insisted with false sincerity. “Besides, my little...indiscretions never truly endangered American lives. They were rare and a badly needed way to maintain my covert resources. Speaking of which,” he trailed off, reaching into his ornate silk robe to pull out what O'Neill recognized as a goa'uld data storage unit. The former NID agent laid it on the table. “On that crystal is the location of several naquada and supply depots for Lucian Alliance capital ships. They're the ones in sector SDH-081, I believe. Whichever one it is that you guys have no idea about, yet. They should help you narrow your search for the UNSC troops that got captured recently,” he said with another smile.

O'Neill stared at Maybourne. He stared at the crystalline data stick. He stared at Maybourne again. He rubbed his temples, trying to stave off a headache.

“Why do you even want to do this?” Jack O'Neill asked. “Don't you have a kingdom to look after? Adoring subjects and all that?”

As part of a deal for much needed information, Harry Maybourne had been allowed to retire to a technologically primitive planet far away from Earth. While there he had stumbled across information that had allowed him to save the lives of the locals from some natural disasters. Said locals, impressed with his supposed ability to predict the future, had gratefully proclaimed him their King. A development the man had been more than happy to go along with.

“Yeah, about that,” Maybourne said, shifting in his seat. Only a bit, of course; O'Neill didn't think it was possible to be very uncomfortable in the royal outfit Maybourne's people had given him. “I've
actually been getting a bit tired of the job. It's fun, don't get me wrong, lots of great perks. But between trade, economic policy, revitalizing the legal system, yadda yadda, it's just been getting too much to handle. Can you believe my hair has started turning gray?"

“My God. The horror,” O'Neill said, deadpan. His own salt-and-pepper hair was significantly whiter than Maybourne's cut. Another thing to get annoyed about.

“Hah. Yeah. Who the hell am I to gripe, right?” Maybourne joked. O'Neill resisted the urge to punch the man. It was a familiar feeling, so he had practice at overcoming it. “Look, monarchy is a bad system of government, anyway. I'll have a council elected to rule in my place and by the time I get back they’ll be ready to start moving toward a democracy Uncle Sam would be proud of. In the meantime, I help stabilize the galaxy and make sure no big bad guys come and rain fire from the sky.” His face resumed its cocky grin. “So, what do you say, Jack? Skilled, motivated, has sources on- and off-world, trustworthy—"

“Trustworthy?” the General asked in disbelief.

“Hey, I've come through for you before, haven't I?” the other man asked.

Much as Jack hated to admit it, Maybourne was right. There were several situations where his help had been crucial to victory, situations where he didn't even necessarily have to help. Slimy as he was, greedy as he was, Maybourne did seem to have a conscience buried somewhere inside. His fairly benevolent rule of his newfound kingdom stood proof to that.

“I can help, Jack,” the former intelligence officer said, his voice and face turning serious. “I'm not blind. I know how crazy things are getting out there. Like I said: I have people and resources across space. I've got my thumb on the pulse of the people in the Galaxy, and they're not liking what's been going on since the Event. Let me use what I have for something good.”

The room went quiet. O'Neill let his finger tap against his desk repeatedly, a few inches from the data crystal. He mentally went over the possibilities. Then he went over them again. And again. Trying to find some way out of this.

At last, he sighed, and looked his royal guest in the eyes. “Have I mentioned I really, really don't like you?” General O'Neill asked.

Harry Maybourne grinned again. “It's come up, yes.”

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“You will report for transit to Camelot HQ by 0700 hours tomorrow. Is that understood?” Director Osman asked.

“Perfectly, Ma'am,” Major Veronica Dare replied.

Osman bit back her annoyance. On her end, Dare was only seeing a blank silhouette and hearing a modulated voice dispense her orders. There was no way the mid-ranking intelligence agent could know who it was she was talking to, or even what gender they were, beyond it being someone high in ONI command. Despite this, the mid-ranking officer seemed to know exactly who it was. It had to be a bluff. An attempt to get the voice to dispense more information than intended. Osman shrugged
it off and disconnected the call.

The office was bathed in shadows again. The Director sank into her chair.

“A bit of a risk using Dare, isn't it, Ma'am?” Naomi asked. Her stoic features betrayed just a hint of uncertainty from within her MJOLNIR helmet.

“Yes, but it is a calculated one,” Osman assured her. Although, in truth, she was not comfortable with it, either.

Things were not going well. Palmer and her team had failed their assignment. Spectacularly. Not only failed, they had been captured. Worst of all, this had forced Osman to inform Admiral Hood about her covert op. The humiliation and loss in political capital had been tremendous. She was scrambling to salvage things and develop assets to increase ONI's power in the new galaxy. She couldn't afford setbacks like this.

“Veronica Dare is difficult to control, true, but she is also extremely competent,” she continued, offering her sister the luxury of an explanation. “More to the point: she is an idealist. This is what makes her so troublesome but it is also what will make her so useful here.” The Director rose from her chair and began pacing the room as she talked. She carefully concealed the discomfort she felt from her aching hips and malformed knee joints. “Everything we have uncovered about the leadership of Homeworld Command and the SGC indicates that they are lead by unabashed moralists. As such, they would view the more typical of our Agents in a distinctly negative light which could hamper our use of them in the future. A more by-the-books figure like Dare will make a good impression and ingratiate ONI to the SGC and its attendant organizations.”

Naomi nodded her understanding, but still looked skeptical. Normally, this would be a concern for Osman, but she knew that her sibling trusted her completely.

“Now, on to your assignment,” the Director said. The armored Spartan-II's eyes lit up; she had spent far too much time cooling her heels. Director Osman smiled infinitesimally as she continued, “The Director of Project Mundus has provided us with leads on where to acquire some very useful New Earth technologies. Kilo Five will be responsible for extracting the packages he provides for us. Understood?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Naomi replied immediately. Her visor polarized as she prepared to move out.

The ONI Director smiled and dismissed her subordinate. She sat back down at her desk and began reviewing the documentation her New Earth asset had already provided for her. This Alexander Pierce was growing more promising by the day.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I couldn't resist including Maybourne in this fic. Writing him is just too fun. And yes, he will have a significant role in the events to come.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.
Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 7 Settling In

The Humvee lurched slightly as it made its way along a night-time Pennsylvania Avenue. General O'Neill barely noticed. After piloting several of humanity's first space-born fighter craft there was very little capable of giving him motion sickness.

What was really taxing was the long wait for the White House security check which began once the small convoy stopped in front of the gate. With all of the unrest and activity, security had been ramped up at all important locations. The White House looked more like a makeshift field command with Tempter tents on the front lawn, Marine fireteams patrolling the perimeter, and enhanced barricades at the gate entrance. A team of Marines were currently running a mirror under his vehicle to check for explosives while a dog team inspected the vehicle behind them.

The General's eye was once again drawn to the protesters across the street. Even in the dead of night they were in the middle of some kind of rally. Multiple news cameras, all from major networks like CNN, MSNBC and Fox News attentively recorded and broadcast the goings on. It seemed like the people there never left. As if their anger and fear drove them beyond the limits of human endurance.

If only he could figure out how to transplant that kind of drive into his soldiers. The SGC would be unstoppable.

O'Neill was drawn out of his thoughts when he noticed something different about the protest. Rather, in the signs the protesters were holding up. Before, they had all been demanding answers or accountability. They had ranged from the reasonable to the downright homicidal. Some of them had actually been rather amusing, in a morbid sort of way. People could be very creative when it came to the execution of public figures they didn't like.

These signs, though, were all calling for unity. For the president to reach out to the other nations of Earth and start building stronger alliances. They said things like 'Only together can we be safe' and 'United against alien threats'. One standout demanded Hayes 'Expand the IOA'. That one was particularly terrifying to O'Neill, who didn't think he could handle any more of the trumped up bureaucratic pissants and their red tape.

The General started to press a button that piped in audio from the outside. Normally, he would just open a window, but current protocol forbid such a risk this close to non-military personnel. Even he might get reprimanded over it.

A smirk appeared on his face. His hand moved from the speaker control to the window control. An annoying alarm chimed softly and the driver glanced back. O'Neill waved him off; he didn't need babysitting. The cold air blew in from outside, rustling his salt-and-pepper hair, and he heard the end of a speech being given by a well-dressed man on top an erected stage.

“...unity is more important now than ever before. The Goa'uld and the Ori may have been the beginning of an age of strife and peril. Only united do we stand a chance of survival. Join me as I call upon the president to strengthen the bonds between we nations of Earth! Safe as one! Safe as
one!” A cheer answered the speaker. The crowd roared their agreement and waved signs and banners echoing the speech.

The Humvee lurched forward again. The small convoy entered the White House compound and the sounds of the protesters melded into an unintelligible roar. O'Neill closed the window as he thought over what he had just witnessed.

It was not the first rally he had heard of to focus on global unity in the face of a greatly expanded world. The idea seemed to be spreading like wildfire over the past week or so. On the one hand, joining forces certainly made sense from a strategic point of view. Lord knows he would have appreciated the backing of an entire planet during the Ori war. Still...there was something about the whole thing that made him uneasy.

For the millionth time, he wished Carter was with him. She always had a way of getting the world to make sense when he couldn't. He could only hope the Banished threat would be over before the year was out. He didn't want to miss their anniversary. Again.

The General's transport rolled to a stop and a Secret Service agent opened the door for him. He set aside his reservations as he mentally prepared to brief the president on the goings on at Homeworld Command.

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Veronica Dare stumbled slightly as she walked out of the Stargate. The active wormhole bathed the Camelot Gate Room in shimmering blue-white light that further added to her momentary disorientation. A hand grabbed her beneath the shoulder and helped steady her.

“Don't worry, the disorientation passes quickly,” a voice assured her. Dare recognized it as belonging to Col. Cameron Mitchell, the CO of Operation Camelot and Camelot Base, and after a few seconds the world stopped spinning enough for her to focus on his face. “The body gets used to it quickly, so you should be just fine after another few trips. I barely even notice it anymore,” he said, smiling in reassurance.

Dare carefully kept her annoyance from showing on her face. She despised appearing vulnerable in any way, particularly to strangers. She regretted the enthusiasm she had felt upon learning that the fastest way for her to get here was to be dropped off on a world with a Stargate and transported via wormhole. She was the first UEG citizen to do so, although she doubted the historians would be allowed to record the event.

That was the price she paid for working in the shadows: if all went well, no one would ever know you existed. She took comfort in the fact that her work was important, even if no one outside UNSC Command would ever know of it.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, straightening and giving Mitchell a salute. She would be under his command for the immediate future and she was determined to make a good impression.

The Colonel nodded and return the salute. The wormhole deactivated behind them, allowing the room to revert back to more stable lighting. “Walk with me, Major,” he said. “I'll show you to your place of operations here at Camelot HQ.” Dare hefted the duffel bag that contained her possessions and the pair made their way down the ramp in front of the Stargate. She took note of the defensive
measures set up in the Gate Room itself. Manned machine gun turrets flanked the walkway and she could glimpse demolition charges built into the walls and ceiling. There were a number of other defensive measures she could not see, she was sure. She looked forward to witnessing the Iris in action. They exited the Gate Room.

The cramped, narrow halls were busy, with technicians rushing this way and that to put the finishing touches on the base's renovations. The power grid had already been established, as had the hard line computer network. Dare could see the cables for both running along the stone/alloy ceilings as they walked. She reflected that it was rather impressive that they had brought the derelict bunker almost to full readiness within a week.

“You'll be working with Harry Maybourne, a...specialist in the field of intelligence,” Col Mitchell explained. Dare nodded.

“Yes, sir. I read the file you sent,” she replied. To say that she had been surprised by the history of the New Earth intelligence officer would be a massive understatement. She had been almost convinced that whoever was in charge of this operation was playing some kind of prank on her.

“You read nothing but good things, I hope,” a voice joked as the pair entered a room off a side corridor.

Dare recognized the man immediately from the file. He was of average height and build, with dark brown hair and sharp eyes that the ONI Agent could detect behind the facade of bumbling irreverence. More surprising was the man's clothing. Dare wore a simple black dress shirt, jacket, and pants combination. Maybourne, by contrast, wore an ensemble that contained numerous vibrant colors, purple being prominent, and looked suspiciously like it was made out of silk.

“Agent Maybourne,” Col. Mitchell said with barely concealed distaste. “Didn't I ask you to start wearing more appropriate clothing?”

“Yes, well,” Maybourne said, attempting to smile disarmingly and just coming across as sleazy. “I haven't gotten around to unpacking yet. Busy busy, you understand.”

“Of course,” Mitchell said, dryly. He gestured to his side. “This is Major Veronica Dare. She'll be your partner for the duration of this Op.”

“Yes, I recognize her from the report,” he said, approaching her. “It painted quite a glowing picture of you. I must say, though, it didn't put nearly enough emphasis on your beauty, madam.” He held out his hand palm up in a position Dare recognized. He intended to kiss the back of her hand like she was some noblewoman out of a period piece.

Dare simply smiled and grabbed his hand, twisting it into its proper position before shaking it in the standard manner. “A pleasure to meet you, Agent Maybourne,” she said, refusing to give any indication of being offended.

A light twinkled briefly behind the man's eyes and Dare got the distinct impression that she had just undergone some sort of test. She wondered idly if she had passed.

“Oh, my sincerest apologies,” Maybourne said. “My royal profession instilled some rather...traditional mannerisms, I'm afraid.” He chuckled.

“Try to keep the chivalry crap to a minimum, okay, Maybourne?” Mitchell said with a frown. Dare
got the distinct impression that her current CO was not particularly fond of his planet's intelligence representative. “I'll leave you two to get settled,” he said, leaving the room with a nod to each of the other occupants.

There were a pair of desks placed front-to-front, a configuration that would allow Dare to keep Maybourne in her sight so long as they were both at work. She decided that this suited her just fine. She made the short journey toward the desk that had no obvious sign of occupation—meaning the one that had a standard chair rather than one with a rather expensive-looking cushion resting on it. Dare didn't think she had ever seen a single piece of furniture that had so many tassels hanging off of it.

Setting down her bag, Dare immediately turned on the computer that had been set up for her. She entered her username and password and was impressed by the speed with which it operated. For some reason, she had expected New Earth technologies to be slow and archaic to the point of being utterly unworkable, something she recognized as foolish now that she thought of it. She knew that this universe's version of humanity had spent a lot of time reverse engineering alien computer systems.

“Ah, it's nice to work with good old Earth computers again,” Maybourne opined, sitting down with an exaggerated flourish. Dare pulled out a water bottle and sipped at it as she waited for the complicated security programs to finish their start up procedure. Maybourne continued, “One of the perks of coming back into the fold. Almost makes up for the awful food and lack of female bath attendants.”

Dare almost choked on her water. She carefully set the bottle down and glanced at her counterpart, trying to determine if he had done that on purpose. She was greeted with a tiny hint of a smirk as the man withdrew several flash drives from his robe's pockets.

“These are most of the files I've collected about the Banished/Lucian pact,” he said, handing them over. Dare accepted them with a nod and handed over her own drives. Maybourne plugged it into the adapter that the engineers had designed to allow UNSC gear to interface with New Earth equipment.

Within seconds Maybourne was engrossed in his reading. He scrolled through the documents at a rapid pace, his eyes darting back and forth so fast it was hard to keep up with them. Dare got the impression that he was absorbing the information with a thoroughness and efficiency that would make any ONI Officer proud. She turned back to her own work, opening the files her counterpart had given her. Her eyebrows shot up at the amount of detailed intelligence he had provided. Assuming this was accurate, they had one hell of a good start in their mission of finding and rescuing the captured Spartans.

Her initial impression of Maybourne was...mixed. On the one hand, he came across as a bit of an irreverent prick with a penchant for making sure he had the best comforts he could acquire and Dare was very curious as to how far he would go to get said comforts. On the other hand, he seemed to be a very competent intelligence officer with the capacity to deliver where it counted. She'd indulge his idiosyncrasies to a point if it got her want she and HIGHCOM wanted.

Overall, he seemed to be half-dirty and half-clean...which was admittedly a half more than Dare could say for most of her colleagues in the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Putting aside her assessment of her counterpart, Dare dove into her work, determined to succeed in her mission.
The Master Chief suppressed a sigh as he realized what was coming.

“A Captain?” Dr. Halsey was finishing asking. The room seemed to drop several degrees and the other occupants tensed, sensing the shift in the social atmosphere. The Chief noticed Halsey's body tense slightly as her indignation built. She looked about ready to leap out of her chair and start pacing the floor in outrage. He'd seen it before and it was never a pretty sight. “I ask for an assistant and Col. Carter sends me a field officer?’

The Chief had been called in to act as security again. It was another surprising bit of accommodation that Col. Mitchell had extended to Blue Team in addition to the private meetings with Dr. Halsey. He suspected that the CO recognized the bond that existed between Halsey and the Spartans and wanted to get on good terms with them. It was a smart move for a commanding officer. The Chief's estimation of the SGC colonel had gone up a notch. Unfortunately, his presence in the lab at this time meant he would have to deal with some rather unsavory duties, a fact he lamented as he observed the doctor's behavior closely.

Generally speaking, there were two ways to react to an irate Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. The technician from his previous visit had displayed the first response, namely meek submission. The current recipient of the good doctor's wrath, on the other hand—

“Listen, Ma'am,” the SGC officer, Captain Hailey, said. She set her features and gave a glare that the Chief found disturbingly familiar. “This isn’t my idea of a premier assignment, either. I have multiple degrees in astrophysics and the applied sciences. I've written papers that even Col. Carter holds up as top-of-the-line research. I've helped develop breakthroughs that were instrumental in getting Earth's space fleet functional. The fact of the matter is that I should have been promoted years ago. Sadly, some people just can't deal with being wrong, and my attempts to correct them have resulted in bruising their fragile egos. Leaving me a field agent. So how about we cut the crap and get to work so I can return to my squad? Would that be acceptable?"

The Master Chief braced himself for the shouting match that was about to result. He was getting ready to send a message to security to ignore the chaos, knowing armed intervention would likely exacerbate the situation, when something wholly unexpected happened.

“...you seem rather sure of yourself, Captain Hailey,” Dr. Halsey said. She stared at the Captain for a while before glancing down at her compad. Her eyes moved back and forth rapidly as she absorbed the information. From what the Chief could glimpse it was the Captain's personnel file. Hailey seemed ready to retaliate to the perceived slight when Halsey continued. “You are indeed very accomplished, particularly considering your age. A bit of a prodigy, aren't you?” Halsey looked up to regard Hailey, eyes narrowed as she assessed the young woman.

The seemingly genuine tone Dr. Halsey expressed the compliment in threw the young Captain off-balance. She watched the doctor with suspicious eyes for a moment before responding. “You could say that. Most of my teachers certainly seemed to think so.”

“Well, let's get to work proving them right, shall we?” Dr. Halsey said with a smirk. “My expertise extends to many fields, but my greatest work has been in personal armor systems. You are more familiar with the effects of Goa'uld energy weapons and I would like your assistance in helping
develop the next generation of SGC infantry armor.” She showed Hailey an order, signed by Col. Carter, authorizing her to examine classified documents relating to body armor.

Captain Hailey's eyes lit up. This was undoubtedly outside her normal area of expertise, but the chance to contribute to a program that would help protect the lives of her friends clearly appealed to her. The two scientific minds spent the next several hours pouring over technical specifications of SGC armor. Dr. Halsey spoke often, offering her insights and suggestions, which Hailey happily jotted down.

“What about UNSC armor systems?” Hailey eventually asked. “What do you think we could adapt from them into our designs?”

Dr. Halsey's lips pressed together in frustration. “Unfortunately, I won't be able to reveal that to you. I've been given explicit instructions that the most advanced of UNSC technologies are not to be revealed to SGC personnel. Nor are we permitted to attempt development of any combined technologies until further notice. The fact that I am lending my expertise is already pushing the limits of our restrictions. The only reason I can get away with it is that I'm not working directly with Col. Carter.”

“That—that's insane!” Hailey objected. “The sheer handicap that instills is...I just...” She sat back in shock.

Dr. Halsey nodded sympathetically from across the wide table. “I wholly agree. Unfortunately, our respective leaders are still struggling to pull their heads out of their own backside and are refusing to cooperate on a large level. Until further notice the UNSC and SGC science divisions are to work side by side, never touching, as it were.” Her tight lipped expression shifted to a scowl. “I can only wonder what the cost will be for this idiocy.”

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The joint training ops were still at a stage the Master Chief would describe as 'rocky'.

He was currently observing one such exercise in a wide, tall open room deep within the bunker complex. According to Col. Mitchell the place had been a prayer hall—an area where all of the personnel were required to gather each day to pray to their 'god', the warlord Cronus. Some of the elaborate symbols and iconography could still be seen like faded echoes plastered onto the walls, towering over the floor below.

The Chief was standing in a balcony-like protrusion that the Goa'uld CO and priest would use to look out over the assembled troops during an address or sermon. There was still a blank space on the floor, a break in the accumulated wear and tear that had once supported a throne. Something about standing in this place made the Chief uneasy, but it was worth it for the view.

A team of soldiers was moving through a maze of simulated rooms and hallways down below. The holographic projectors that produced a variety of training environments were one of the few technological contributions the UNSC had made to Camelot HQ and the Chief was grateful for their familiarity. He peered through the one-way holographic ceilings keeping him and Colonel Mitchell from view and observed the soldiers he was helping to train.

It was a simple exercise. The SGC/ODST team was tasked with capturing and extracting a piece of
valuable technology within an enemy controlled facility. They were currently making their way through the simulated interior; utilizing stealth and quick direct action when required. It was the type of scenario they had all practiced innumerable times in their respective training.

What made this time unique was the opposition they were up against: the other members of Blue Team.

Really, this was more a test of how the soldiers would deal with walking into a completely unwinnable situation. If they kept their cool and managed to get a few of themselves out 'alive' to report back, they would pass. If not...

The Chief noted with respect that the team had managed to find an approach that was largely unguarded by the three Spartans below. The 'facility' was simply too large and elaborate for three people to cover completely, even with Mjolnir armor and its advanced sensor technology. He could see Fred quickly react and move to intercept, but if they hurried they could capture the target before the 'slaughter' began. Possibly even hold him off long enough to extract with the target at the cost of most of their combined team. That would certainly earn them some points.

The SG Team members cleared a room just before their objective; quick, crisp, and efficient, it left no doubt in the Chief's mind they were veterans who knew what they were doing. The ODSTs followed them in—

And promptly made a mistake.

The UNSC troopers apparently had little faith in their New Earth counterparts as they took the time to double-check that the room was clear before continuing. That robbed them of precious seconds. The SG Team members noticed, and the soldiers all exchanged some dirty looks. That took another couple seconds.

In that time, Fred managed to reach them. They opened the door and a scout pushed a fiberoptic probe around the corner.

A flashbang bounced off of the door-frame and into the room with the team. The UNSC-issue visors automatically polarized to block most of the effects, but it still took them by surprise. Some of their attention had still been directed at their teammates. Each half of the team instinctively moved to cover their countrymen rather than act as a coordinated unit. Fred eliminated them all with ease, placing stun rounds dead center of mass on each of them within 3 seconds.

The Master Chief sighed within his enclosed helmet and dipped his head ever so slightly. This was not a situation he was used to. In the Human-Covenant War there had only been two sides: humanity and the Covenant. Figuring out how to overcome the distrust that came with working with foreigners was a new problem, to say the least. He knew that he and his fellow Spartans could overcome it. The ODSTs on the other hand....

“Don't worry, Master Chief,” Col. Mitchell said from his place a few feet away. “We'll whip 'em into shape quick enough.”

A flicker of doubt went through the Chief's mind. Had the Colonel somehow detected his reaction to the events below? It was doubtful; the MJOLNIR helmet was good at filtering out sounds and his body language had been typically steady throughout. Perhaps the colonel was just guessing.

“Well, let's go scream at some filthy maggots, ey, Chief?” Mitchell asked with a chuckle. The Chief
simply nodded in response and followed his superior.

“Can I ask you something?” Grogan said.

“Pretty sure you just did,” the ODST Captain, Taylor, replied.

The locker room was noisy, hopefully enough to cover up this conversation, provided no one started shouting. Which, to be fair, might be a bit of a hard sell. The pair of officers stared at each other for a moment, a patch of steam from the showers drifting by being the only visible motion.

Maybe it would have been easier if he'd approached someone of lower rank. Grogan technically outranked some of the ODSTs assigned to Camelot. Those soldiers would be obligated to give him at least a little respect. He had decided against it for the same reason he decided against approaching someone of higher rank: he wanted this conversation to be between equals.

“I was just wondering what that was about in there,” Grogan asked. He had been one of the SGC soldiers that cleared the room in the recent exercise, only for his ODST teammates to second guess them and undermine the mission. It was the latest in a long line of implied, and in some cases explicitly stated, insults directed toward the SGC personnel by their UNSC counterparts, and the veteran was getting sick of them.

“'fraid I don't know what you mean, Chairforce,” Taylor responded with a sneer. He turned away and opened his locker, continuing the task of cleaning up. He removed a towel, apparently intent on hitting the showers rather than finishing their talk.

Grogan counted to ten. He breathed in and out. He considered whether he should have had Satterfield do this; she was always better with people than he was. Unfortunately, he was nearing his breaking point, and just had to get some answers from these UNSC grunts, even if it meant physically beating it out of them.

“This bullshit is gonna get us killed, you know,” Grogan said.

The Marine froze. He turned away from his locker and faced the USAF Officer with an angry frown slipping onto his face. “Come again?” he asked.

There was no way he was stopping now. “This condescending, double-checking bullshit you and your buddies keep pulling,” Grogan said. He noticed the noise in the locker room start to die down a bit. People were noticing the conversation, and apparently Taylor's tense posture and tone was drawing attention. Grogan decided he didn't care and pressed on. “Your people and mine are going to be sent into the field together. We're going to be expected to watch each other's backs. We won't be able to do that effectively if you keep treating us like cadets who've never seen any action in their lives.”

“You haven't,” came the response. Now it was Grogan's turn to freeze. “I don't know much about whatever you people fought, what battles you've seen, and frankly I don't care. Nothing compares to the Covenant. Nothing. Until you've fought, bled, and watched your buddies die for a planet, only to be pulled off-world and forced to watch it get glassed from orbit, until you've seen billions of innocent people slaughtered for no goddamn reason, you haven't seen shit. And we've seen it dozens
of times. Hundreds. The ODSTs were on the frontlines since the conflict began. Neck deep in every hopeless campaign. All 27 years of it.” Taylor moved closer to Grogan as he went on, word by word closing the distance until the were centimeters apart. The room was completely silent now. Everyone was watching. “We. Have. Seen. Shit. And you haven't. So when things get hairy, just get behind cover and stay out of our way and let the real soldiers take care of business.”

Grogan was trained in unarmed combat. Trained enough to notice the subtle shift in Taylor's stance. How he set his feet more solidly, for instance. It wasn't an offensive maneuver. No. He expected Grogan to attack him. To take the bait so openly laid out for him.

It was definitely tempting. A large part of Grogan was screaming to deck this prick. To show him just what the SGC had been through. He had seen members of SG Teams gunned down by Goa'uld and Ori. His entire squad been wiped out once, leaving him to dodge dogged Jaffa patrols for days, the weight of their dog tags burning a hole in his pocket. It felt like Taylor had just spit on their memory. Had spit on the memory of every soldier, sailor, marine and airman who had fallen in the line of duty. His fist clenched as the rage poured through him.

Yet, in the midst of his rage, he held himself back.

He forced his fingers apart. He took several deep breaths. He thought about General O'Neill, and what he would expect of him.

“This, right here,” Grogan said, gesturing at the entire room. The UNSC and SGC personnel had separated into two groups, tension radiating between them, practically boiling the air. They looked as if they were ready to lay into each other. “This is the problem. This is what is going to get people killed. We can either solve it here, at base, or watch it blow up in the field. Watch good men die when they didn't have to. All because we couldn't trust each other. I don't ever want to carry that weight with me. I don't ever want to look back and think 'what if'. You're right, we haven't faced the Covenant. No...we're only about to face a splinter faction of that organization they couldn't contain even at their height. We're being thrown in at the deep end, and you people have been far from helpful in preparing for it. Do you want to be responsible for people dying needlessly? Do you want blood of brother and ally alike on your hands, simply because you couldn't get over yourself? I sure don't. But its up to you. Your call.”

He turned away, leaving the stunned Marine behind. Grogan decided to head to the exercise area rather than shower off just yet. He needed to punch something for a while.

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The briefing room was divided again. The Master Chief scowled behind his polarized visor as he observed the SGC and UNSC personnel. Present were Blue Team, a squad of ODSTs, and SG-9. They had separated themselves into distinct units defined by their planets of origin, much as they had during the initial mass briefing by Col. Mitchell over a week ago, as well as every time they had been together since. It was a bad sign.

The Chief considered ordering the members of Blue Team to mingle, but dismissed it almost as soon as it occurred to him. Spartan IIs were antisocial by nature and any efforts by them to reach out would almost certainly end poorly. Hopefully some more drills would resolve this problem, but for now he would be uneasy about any joint field ops.
“We’ve got a mission for you, gentlemen, and its time sensitive so listen up,” Col. Mitchell said as he entered the room. The Chief suppressed a groan. Major Dare and Agent Maybourne followed the Camelot CO and stood a fair distance behind the colonel as he took his place at the front of the room. The colonel continued, “Thanks to the efforts of our intelligence team we have determined the location of the Spartan POWs. Blue Team, ODST Fireteam Charlie, and SG-9 are going to pull them out of the fire. Agent Maybourne?”

Said intelligence officer walked to the front of the room. The Chief scowled once again as he noted the man’s decisively non-regulation attire. He supposed there was nothing directly dangerous about a soldier wearing ornate silk robes so long as he wasn’t in the field, but he would have thought professionalism would demand the colonel put a stop to that. Perhaps he was granting the spook extra leeway, similar to how many officers allowed special forces units certain 'perks' not afforded to the regular infantry. The Chief had never utilized said privileges himself, but he had worked with many an ODST that did.

“Commander Palmer and her subordinates are being held on a planet designated 'PHQ-052',” Maybourne said. “My sources within the Lucian Alliance have provided me detailed intel on the location.” He grabbed a remote from a nearby desk and pressed a button. A detailed diagram was projected against the wall along with some aerial shots of the complex itself. “Like most Banished facilities, it is temporary by design. Most of the buildings are either portable or literally tents. It is my and Major Dare’s assessment that the prisoners are frequently moved to prevent a rescue op from being executed.”

“Which is where we come in,” Col. Mitchell interrupted. Apparently the man was fond of the occasional one-liner. The Chief felt a moment of camaraderie with him. Mitchell continued after thanking Maybourne and motioning him back. “This is exactly the kind of mission Camelot was conceived for. I want all of you to be prepped and ready to go within an hour.”

If the colonel was expecting a stir, some kind of objection or expressions of incredulity, he was disappointed. The soldiers in this room were all elites. The best of the best. The kind of people accustomed to being given impossible assignments out of nowhere. They simply nodded and kept paying attention.

Col. Mitchell gave the room a look that effectively conveyed the praise 'Outstanding!'. There was no need to verbally express it. The Chief's estimation of the man as a CO went up another notch. Mitchell began, “Command will rest with Major Williamson of SG-9. The plan is simple. Infiltration will occur via the Stargate. The Banished still transport their troops and resources primarily by ship, except during raids, so the 'gate is a fair distance away from their base. False identification tags, provided by Dare and Maybourne, will be broadcast through the 'gate. A combination of flashbangs and jamming equipment will then be sent through following which you will transit and eliminate the disoriented opposition. Fireteam Charlie will then proceed to establish a defensive perimeter around the 'gate while Blue Team and SG-9 makes their way to the base and liberates the POWs. The SG Team will bring anti-grav equipped stretchers with them in the event that the POWs are unable to walk under their own power.”

Said SG Team shifted a bit in their seats. They were clearly unhappy with being relegated to glorified transportation. Thankfully, they were professional enough not to voice their displeasure. The ODSTs appeared about equally displeased. It was clear to the Chief that they felt being relegated to guard duty while the Spartans, their institutional rivals, handled all of the action was tantamount to a personal insult. Thankfully, they were also professional enough to keep their dissatisfaction to themselves. The Chief was thankful. Not all ODSTs were able to hold in their contempt for the Spartans. Memories of a certain Major Silva floated before his mind before he dismissed them.
Mentally going over the plan, the Chief was rather unsatisfied himself. He didn't like the idea of taking orders from someone outside the UNSC, for one thing. More important was the fact that Blue Team was not used to being slowed down by non-augmented personnel. And they would be slowed down, trained and competent though SG-9 was. There was the unshakable feeling that Col. Mitchell had demanded their presence so the SGC would be involved in the operation. Still, someone needed to be available to transport the wounded Spartans. He dearly wished there was more time to work out the kinks in their unit cohesion.

“Fireteam Charlie will immediately dial a rendezvous planet in order to keep any active wormholes from being opened that could block your retreat,” Col. Mitchell was explaining. “This will give you a minimal window of 38 minutes to complete your objective. You may have to redial more than once if things go south. The Banished have a small fleet of former Covenant spacecraft in orbit and will be able to send significant reinforcements once they realize what's up. Not to mention the troops at the base. Speed and stealth will be of the essence. You need to get in, get our people, and get out before they can mass against you. A QRF force is being prepped as we speak; two companies of ODSTs, all loaded for bear. We're hopeful they wont be needed, because it will be an absolute bloodbath if they have to go in. So do your best not to get pinned down, understood?”

The response was a resounding “Sir, yes sir!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper


Chapter 8 Rescue

The jiralhanae's stomach grumbled. He scratched his belly impatiently, wishing that his duty shift was complete.

The small pack was gathered around the device the Alpha had called the 'Stargate'. The Stargate itself lay in a large, empty field with some forest a good kilometer distant. Meaning the jiralhanae had neither something to fight nor anything to look at. They were manning portable defenses, mostly, sitting behind energy barriers, with one slouching behind the controls of a plasma turret. They were to guard against any enemy that might come through the device attack them.

Wisely their Alpha had not sent any of the new thralls to join them. Those 'Jaffa' were as squishy as their human counterparts. They were of little challenge and even less fun to torment. Let them cool their heels in the fleet, along with the puny unggoy and kig-yar. Foes should be met with warriors, not fodder.

The warrior huffed at the thought. As if anyone in the galaxy could be a challenge to them. The human empire was too busy licking their own wounds to mount any sort of threat, and the strange, staff-wielding peasants had proved little difficulty in dominating. Threat after threat they had matched and would continue to match. The time of their humiliation was over. It was the start of a new age, the Age of the Jiralhanae, and he would relish rending the flesh from anyone that tried to stop them.

A mechanical noise drew the guard's attention. A light had activated on the Stargate. Someone was coming through!

The guards rushed to man their posts, eagerly readying their weapons for whatever fool would come. Technically, they were supposed to contact the camp if this were to happen, but they decided that it couldn't hurt to have their fun first. The guard salivated as he contemplated the feast he would soon enjoy. The Stargate finished its task and the vertical pool appeared.

Nothing happened.

For several moments the Stargate simply stood there, shimmering with its activation, leaving the jiralhanae growing impatient. They shifted and growled. Eventually, several of the guard's pack-mates left their posts to move forward in cautious investigation. The Beta in charge allowed this, being as restless as the rest of them. At last, a group of small objects flew through the center of the shimmering light and landed right in front of the curious jiralhanae.

A bright flash consumed the world.

The guard angrily rubbed a hand across his burning eyes. Unwilling to stand idle, he fired his weapon blindly in the direction of the Stargate, intent on killing whatever was undoubtedly following the initial attack. After several seconds, he was able to blink the spots away.

The defenses were largely intact. Several of the energy barriers had been knocked over, but nothing had been outright destroyed. It would almost look normal were it not for the fact that all but a trio of
his packmates were lying dead on the field. What could have—

There was a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to see burst of spiker rounds connect with his face at near-supersonic velocity.

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The Spartans had eliminated the ‘gate defenses and secured the perimeter by the time Grogan came through the Stargate. He resisted the urge to whistle as he looked around the battlefield.

At least a dozen Brutes were dead, many clearly having been taken out hand-to-hand. More impressive was the fact that all of the defenses were still intact. That would be a benefit to the ODST platoon that was ordered to hold the gate.

Said UNSC Marines emerged immediately behind SG-9. They stumbled slightly as they exited, their bodies still not fully accustomed to gate travel.

“Don't worry, boys. It gets easier,” Captain Hailey quipped. While the ODSTs' faces were invisible behind their polarized visors, it was clear that they were glaring daggers at her.

“Stow the shit, Hailey, its game time,” Grogan barked. Major Williamson had already walked off to confer with the Spartans before moving out. That left him to play older brother to his brilliant-but-insufferable squadmate.

“Apologies, sir,” Hailey said, noticeably directing the statement to him rather than the soldiers she had just made fun of. Thankfully, the ODSTs had already moved off to set up their defenses. Everyone was acting professional, but they couldn't afford to be poking at each other in the field.

A series of small, Frisbee-sized discs rose into the air. Grogan recognized them from the UNSC equipment files he had studied. They were a type of UAV that would perform surveillance, jam enemy comms on command, and act as communication relays in the event of jamming from the enemy. They rose high into the atmosphere and became invisible to the footsoldiers within seconds.

“We were able to avoid using our firearms,” one of the Spartans, the leader, reported to Major Williamson. He then set down the captured Brute 'Spiker' pistol and drew his own assault rifle.

A buzzing sound reverberated inside Grogan's helmet. He was hearing the Brute comms traffic. It made the unfamiliar UNSC gear crammed into his SGC helmet feel even more uncomfortable.

“Pack 6, report!” a voice commanded. Major Williamson gestured to Hailey, who pressed some buttons on a machine she drew from her pack.

“All is well, Beta!” a Brute voice answered. “Some of my runts grew bored and fired off their weapons. This waiting is intolerable.”

“You will wait as the Alpha commands! See to it that your warriors are disciplined!” answered the voice. Grogan felt immense relief. The ploy had worked. The lack of human gunfire had doubtless helped sell the deception.

“Good work, Captain,” Williamson said to Hailey. He turned to the rest of them. “It looks like we still have the element of surprise, so let's not waste it. Move out, people, you know the plan.”

Obediently, the ODSTs continued fortifying the gate area. Blue Team and SG-9 started out toward
the base where the POWs were held. Hopefully, things would keep going as smoothly as they’d started.

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A red light winked in a specific sequence on Grogan’s Heads Up Display. He dove behind the first bit of concealment he could find.

Several minutes passed before anything happened. The forest path remained empty as the humans crouched just outside of it. Eventually, a Banshee flew overhead. The small, single-pilot gunship was several hundred meters in the air, barely visible past the trees and the bit of dirt that had stuck to Grogan’s visor. The wail of its engines could be heard echoing over the landscape, so very different to Goa’uld Deathgliders. Several more minutes passed after it left his field of vision.

A blue light winked in another sequence. They were all-clear.

The Spartans sure knew what they were doing. They were easily within a kilometer of the Banished base and they hadn’t been spotted yet. For a temporary encampment, the Brutes were proving themselves rather studious in their security. This was an unpleasant change of pace from the Goa’uld, whose arrogance lead to security that could generously be called ‘lacking’. Stargate Command was definitely going to need to step up its game when facing off against these guys.

Fortunately, their UNSC buddies were already on the ball in that arena. The members of Blue Team were rarely visible to SG-9. Mostly, they were relegated to whispers on their motion trackers and precisely timed micro-burst signals broadcast via HUDs. Occasionally, Grogan would glimpse what he thought was an armored limb or rustling piece of vegetation out of the corner of his eye. He could never be sure. It was insane just how effective the 7-foot tall, armored supersoldiers were at being unseen. Nothing that big should move that quietly and gracefully.

Within an hour they had arrived at their destination. It was a relatively short walk. The Brutes probably hoped to use the Stargate as an emergency evacuation site if their fleet scattered; it was a common defensive tactic on planets connected to the ‘gate network. Stargate Command did it all the time.

Major Williamson sent a signal over their HUDs. He also held up his fist out of habit. The other members of SG-9 went prone as they edged around a patch of dense foliage. There was a stretch of open plains up ahead, in the center of which was the enemy camp. The UNSC VISR system they were utilizing identified and marked everything visible to them. Grogan saw the Major place his left hand against his helmet, a sign he was talking to Blue Team. He was likely relaying everything they had seen, but Grogan had the sneaking suspicion the Spartans knew all of this already…and in fact probably knew more about the enemy defenses and layout than they did. Once more he couldn’t help but feel hopelessly outclassed by the UNSC Super Soldiers.

He pushed it aside. It wouldn’t help to dwell on these things during the mission.

The next half-hour was an exercise in patience. SG-9 was stuck waiting in concealment until the Spartans had finished performing recon on the base. Grogan spent his time examining what defenses he could see and running over tactics to use against them over and over again. Based on what he had seen and what was relayed to them by Blue Team, he had a fairly solid plan they could utilize and at least three possible backup plans if things went south.
Eventually, the Major clued in the rest of them to what the Spartans had discovered. The situation was largely as the spooks had reported. That alone made SG9 trade nervous glances. Intel was never that accurate unless it was a trap. The base itself was relatively empty, with only about a hundred Brute's present. Still more than enough to give them trouble. Grogan couldn't help but wonder where the rest of them were or how 'the other shoe would drop', as General O'Neill always put it.

The Major gestured to Hailey again. The Captain nodded and pulled out the gadget from earlier. It took a second to link to the UAV before a message played out over the enemy comms again. Another pre-recorded and carefully crafted message went out.

Grogan traded a look with Satterfield and both held their breaths.

The camp exploded into activity. What looked like three quarters of the enemy personnel piled into dropships and gunships and hauled ass over the horizon. Grogan smiled. The false news of an enemy landing several hundred kilometers away had indeed gotten their attention. The Brute's bloodlust had come back to bite them in the ass.

More flashes and hand signals. SG-9 tensed. Grogan could see the sentries. They were mostly in the grav-lift guard towers. Each was looking in the opposite direction from the humans, toward where their comrades had flown, no doubt wishing they were part of the action.

That was the last thing to go through their minds before their heads started exploding.

The loud report of a sniper rifle could be heard, only slightly muffled by the forest. Grogan's eyebrows shot up as he saw at least 20 sentries downed, each by a precise headshot, in about 9 seconds. That took care of the guard towers, at least.

“Sentries down, moving to new position,” the Blue Team sniper, Blue Two, reported.

“Hailey, jam local Comms! SG-9, move in!” Major Williamson ordered. The SGC officers leaped from cover and started sprinting for the base perimeter. The sounds of gunfire were already echoing from within; the Spartans were fast, alright.

The base was surrounded by a fence made of projected energy. There was an energy barrier, a slightly darker shade of bluish-purple than the surrounding fence, that served as a gate on 2 ends. This was where the humans were headed.

There was another Spartan there to greet them. “Standby,” he said. He then tensed his legs and jumped clean over the 3-meter tall fence from a standing position, landing right next to the gate controls and forcing the SGC officers' jaws to drop open. They recovered quickly and entered the base proper, nodding thanks to the supersoldier.

The base was completely deserted. It seemed the Brutes weren't quite as committed to security as their Alpha would prefer. The human soldiers quickly cleared the tents, leaving only a small group of collapsible buildings. The POWs were in the smaller building. The human soldiers entered it on high alert.

The interior was mostly bare, save for the assortment of weapons and body parts mounted onto the wall as trophies. Grogan grimaced as he saw the collection of severed human heads. The rear area of the lower level was clearly a brig/torture facility. The rusted, bloody chains hanging from the ceiling were kind of a dead giveaway.
It turned out there was only one survivor: Commander Palmer. The others were lying a short distance away, their mutilated bodies in plain view. They had refused to talk. That, or the Brutes just decided they were expendable enough to use up for recreation. There was hardly anything recognizable for a casket.

Satterfield gave Palmer a quick examination. It turned out she hadn't fared much better than her subordinates; there were bruises, lacerations, and numerous other marks across her body that indicated she had been tortured.

“Commander Palmer? Can you hear me, Spartan?” Major Williamson asked.

The wounded Spartan groaned. Her eyes fluttered open briefly, but she was unable to focus on anything. She drifted back into unconsciousness immediately.

“Sir, there's no way she's getting out of here under her own power,” Satterfield reported. Williamson nodded.

“Hailey, Satterfield, prep the package for evac,” the Major ordered. The pair stowed their weapons and drew the anti-grav stretchers from their packs. He addressed the member of Blue Team next, saying, “Blue One, find the POWs' armor and set them to self-destruct.” The supersoldier nodded and obediently started looking. The Major turned to Grogan. “Let's clear the last building.” He paused for a moment then turned to Satterfield "And prep a Magnesium charge. We can't take these mangled bodies with us. But we can deny these bastards their prize." Satterfield visibly gulped, but nodded. The magnesium charge would burn hot enough to render the bodies of the fallen Spartans to ash in a matter of seconds. It was as good as any funeral in the field as they could manage. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the Spartans nod ever so slightly. They approved.

Major Williamson and Grogan left the other members of their squad under the watchful eye of another of the Spartans, the one with the shotgun. Blue Three. Grogan found it was easiest to tell them apart by looking at their weapon loadout. Williamson and Grogan left the building.

“Sir, reading significant movement ahead,” yet another of the Spartans, the Master Chief judging by his Assault Rifle, reported. He was referring to the larger of the two buildings. It resembled a storage shed except for all of the curved, organic-looking sides in place of hard corners. The Spartan's vastly more sophisticated motion tracker was picking up movement from within. Grogan double checked his and found nothing.

“Recon,” the Major ordered. The Spartan nodded and withdrew a fiberoptic probe from his gauntlet. He placed it beneath the door and scanned the interior, the feed projected onto his own visor.

“Sir, you need to see this,” the Master Chief said. The Major nodded, pressing a button on his helmet to accept the feed from the Chief's armor. He tensed as soon as he saw what was inside.

“Clear the building,” the Major ordered. The Chief nodded and opened the door. The three rushed inside, UNSC rifles at the ready.

The entire floor was full of cages. Inside the cages were people. Humans. They were dressed largely in dirty rags, but the occasional bit of more elaborate clothing clearly identified them to Grogan's eye. They were Free Jaffa. Doubtless on their way to be sold on the slave market by the Lucian Alliance.

“Get these cages open,” Williamson ordered. “We're taking these people with us.”
“Sir, that is outside our mission parameters,” the Master Chief objected. “Speed will be crucial if we intend to make it to the Stargate and evacuate before the main Banished force returns. Additionally, the comm jamming won't be able to hide our position as effectively with a massive train of refugees marking our position. Recommend we stick to the primary objectives and evac the POW, sir.”

Grogan's eyebrows shot up behind his visor. He had known the Spartans were logical, but this shot past simple pragmatism in his eyes. These people were, technically, the allies of his Earth. More than that, though, they were people, people who had had everything taken from them and were about to be sold like property.

The Major paused for a moment before responding. It wasn't long, but it was just enough to get Grogan worried. “I acknowledge your concern. I share it even,” Williamson said, “But it doesn't change my mind. These people are our allies and we're getting them out of here. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” came the instant reply. There was no more emotion in it than usual, having the blank, almost cold professionalism that Grogan had come to expect, but the SGC officer couldn't help suspecting there was a bit of something in the response that indicated displeasure. Regardless of the supersoldier's personal opinion, he followed orders, moving along the line and tearing the steel locks off each cage with only his gauntlet.

“Team Charlie, This is SG Niner Actual, we have secured the package. One Spartan survivor, the rest are KIA. We've also found numerous civilians, tall around a hundred. All of them are in pretty bad shape. Relay to Camelot Command to standby medical teams for mass casualties.”

"Understood and will relay, SG Niner Actual. Should we call in the the Quick Reaction Force?"

"Standby."

"The Banished will almost certainly see through the ruse before we evac,” the Master Chief stated the moment Major Williamson's eyes fell on him. “If they haven't already. When they do they're going to know the Stargate has been compromised. They will hit it with everything they can muster. And given the situation, we likely won't make it back to the 'gate before that happens. Sir, I strongly suggest calling in the QRF. Even a platoon of ODSTs are not going to be enough to hold it for long.”

"Team Charlie, affirmative on the QRF,” the Major commed the ODSTs back at the Stargate, “Hold the gate, guys. We're coming in with wounded.”

Getting the civilian prisoners organized and ready to move out took an agonizingly long time. Hailey was able to use false reports to keep the Brutes going in circles for long enough to move out, but that could only last so long. They got one of the healthier and more stable looking prisoners to help Satterfield carry Palmer's stretcher. They needed every trained rifle they could get to defend the line. Eventually, the civilians were ready to move. Williamson gave the order and they started toward the Stargate as fast as they were capable. An explosion echoed behind them after a few minutes; the MJOLNIR armor's power cells had overloaded and detonated, destroying a fair amount of the enemy camp as well as igniting the magnesium charges. Grogan smiled grimly. They had denied the Banished their prize.

About half-way to the destination, Hailey started swearing into her helmet. “Sir, they're on to us. They'll be here in a few minutes.”
Grogan didn't even sigh. They had actually maintained the ruse for longer than he had expected.

“Get a move on, people!” Williamson shouted, repeating the command in the common goa’uld language.

The civilians tried to comply, but they were in poor shape to do so. Many of them had suffered physical abuse at the hands of the Brutes. Not enough to leave permanent injury and thus decrease their value as slaves, but enough to make sprinting impossible. Even those who weren’t injured had been starved for some time, limiting their ability to run at high velocity somewhere between ‘slim’ and ‘none’.

“Enemy aircraft on approach. Moving to intercept,” one of the Spartans commed. The upper left corner of Grogan’s visor displayed a feed from one of the UAVs. A trio of Phantom class dropships and a pair Banshee gunships were coming in. The Banshees flew at high altitude, acting as scouts for the main force. One of the Phantoms split off and made a beeline for the Stargate...while the other two were going straight for them. The Banshees had no doubt spotted the long line of prisoners. Behind them and higher out, Grogan could make out specks on the horizon that could only be more Phantom and Spirit drop ships on approach.

They were out of time.

The sound of Brute vehicles became audible over the noise of the prisoners. Grogan strained to see the enemy through the forest canopy. The UAV footage was coming dangerously close to their coordinates and he tried to figure out how much time they had by glancing at the information on the side of the video.

A green flash nearly drowned out the feed. The image stabilized just in time to see one of the Phantoms, belching smoke out of a fiery hole in its side, veer out of control and crash into the ground. Hopefully the passengers were killed on impact; if not, damage to the ship and distance should at least delay their arrival.

“Commandeered Brute Fuel Rod Cannon expended. Moving to provide cover for the package,” one of the Spartans reported.

“Move! Move! Move!” Major Williamson shouted. Hearing the sounds of battle so close gave the prisoners renewed motivation to haul ass to the Stargate. A heavily bruised woman stumbled and fell, only spared being trampled by the fact that she was toward the edge of the line. Grogan stopped and helped her to her feet. She looked like she was about to thank him. He shoved her toward the evac site and turned his attention back to the task at hand.

The remaining Phantom, apparently having learned its lesson, had touched down several hundred meters away. In a rare show of restraint the Banshees remained at their higher elevation, hesitant to begin strafing runs without knowing if more heavy weapons would greet them. The Brute infantry were getting close enough to show up on Grogan’s motion tracker.

Gunfire erupted from within the forest. The Spartans, still unseen, were engaging the Brutes further out from the civilians to buy time. The bodies of hulking aliens and slightly-less-hulking supersoldiers could be glimpsed firing on each other between the trees and dense foliage.

Also visible were some of the smaller alien species known to cooperate with the Brutes, namely the meter-tall Grunts and the avian Jackals. Thankfully, these other races were far less durable than their masters, but there were just too many hostiles for a four person team to keep contained. Several of
Brutes in particular pushed forward, seemingly intent on taking out their frustrations on their former prisoners.

A Brute burst out of the trees to the side of the prisoner train. He crashed into the center of the path, taking down several of the civilians and cutting the train in half. The would-be slaves stumbled to a halt in terror.

Grogan crouched, supporting himself on one knee, and took aim. His pulse pounded in his ears. Even after all the time he had spent in combat, this part still drove his heart wild. He opened fire with his Assault Rifle.

The first burst landed dead center mass. Grogan cursed his training as the Brute shrugged off the hits. He re-centered on the alien's head, ignoring the blue plasma shots that it was sending toward him, and pulled the trigger again.

The first burst shredded its scalp. The next made a mess of its large nose and mouth. Teeth and bone exploded outward in a fountain of blood.

...but it kept firing. Less accurately, now, but the loss of most of its face didn't deter the Brute from trying to kill his assailant. Grogan had to land several more direct hits before the beast went down.

The SGC officer pushed his disbelief into the back of his mind. He'd have time to go over what had just happened later. He rushed forward and joined his commander in convincing the prisoners to get moving again. They flowed around the dead Brute's corpse like a river around a stone, none of them daring to come within arm's reach of the thing.

Thankfully, the rest of the hostiles weren't as suicidally enraged as their comrade and were more than happy to take cover behind the trees and trade fire rather than rush into the open. Grogan downed one of them before slipping himself behind a tree to reload; hot wooden shards rained down him as the tree was riddled with with plasma rounds and spiker shots. Hailey downed another with her Assault Rifle while Williamson took down a number of charging Grunts with his Battle Rifle.

Distant gunfire could be heard behind him. Heavy Machine Guns followed the distinct sound of UNSC rifles.

"This is Charlie Team," a new voice, one of the ODSTs back at the Stargate, said over the comms. "We are under attack by Banished forces. A detachment from the QRF, 3rd ODST Battalion are standing by to make a breakthrough to your position. SG Niner actual, do you copy!?"

Grogan moved to raise his weapon but then ducked again as searing hot plasma flew inches over his head and steadily hammered the tree he was using as cover. He ducked lower as the weapons fire punched completely through the trunk, causing the upper half of the tree to fall over like someone had taken a saw to it. Any second now he'd have to make a break for it.

A loud three round burst sounded from his right, followed by two more. The fire keeping him pinned down vanished. He peeked around the now-shredded tree and saw the Brute that had him pinned lying on the ground in a shower of its own fleshy bits.
Grogan turned and nodded gratefully to Williamson, who was standing twenty meters away and lowering his BR-85 Battle Rifle. The superior officer nodded back to Grogan and then motioned him towards the Civvies. Grogan took the hint and moved out.

The Major placed his hand on the side of his helmet and commed the ‘gate team. "This is SG Niner Actual. Negative on attempted breakthrough. I say again, negative on attempted breakthrough. We are almost to the gate. Hold your position!"

"Roger, Niner Actual. Would advise you pick up the pace. Enemy forces massing to the north of the Gate and probing our lines of defense. We expect a big push shortly."

"Understood. We'll be there momentarily!"

"SG Niner Actual, This Blue Lead," another voice said. This one was calm to the point of being almost casual.

"Go ahead, Blue Lead." Major Williamson responded.

"Sir, hostile reinforcements from the fleet have made planetfall. Banished forces approaching from the North, North-West, estimated Battalion strength. Blue three and I are engaging them. Distance one and a half klicks out. Blue's One and Two also report a Battalion strength moving from the South, South-West, distance two klicks out."

Grogan blinked in disbelief and saw horrified look on Hailey's face even through her transparent visor. That force alone was four times the size of their QRF. And that was already engaged by a sizable force that dropped in around the gate. They were going to get overrun if they didn't pick up the pace.

"Contact left! Two hundred meters, on the ridge!" Hailey shouted as dropped to a knee and began laying down fire up a hill. Grogan took cover and began scanning, spotting a number of Jackals on a ridge that had just noticed them. He took down one with a quick burst and manged to wound another before the rest took cover.

"Understood, Blue Leader. Do what you can to stall them and then get back here. We're consolidating at the gate!" Williamson ducked a plasma round that almost took off his head before taking cover. He swung around behind the tree and returned a three round burst of his own. Immediately the Jackal fell in a shower of its own blood and brain matter.

"Hailey, supressive fire!"

The trooper complied at once. She did their best to keep the enemy pinned as the prisoners entered the last leg of their race to safety.

“Grogan,” Major Williamson's voice said over the comms. Grogan was thankful that his new helmet filtered out enough of the sounds of battle that he could hear his commander more clearly. That was a feature that he could get used to. “Move up the line and into the friendly perimeter. The Spartans will cover the rear.”
Grogan was only too happy to oblige. Several Brutes had emerged onto the edges of the path and started opening fire with the clearer line of sight. Things were really getting hairy out here. He sprinted toward the fallback point at top speed, passing the front of the civilian formation and leaving it in the dust.

The clearing around the Stargate was a wreck. Makeshift barricades and the few concrete pillars were scorched and in some cases cracked from numerous plasma and Spiker rounds. The ground around the perimeter was charred and cratered where the buried anti-personnel explosives had been set off. Spike rounds littered the ground along with nearly a hundred Brute corpses and numerous jackals and grunts. The ODSTs had been successful in their effort to defend the 'gate, but it had not been without cost. Upon approaching the perimeter Grogan noted a dozen ODST fatalities and at least twice that wounded. Major Williamson arrived shortly after he did.

They were met by Captain Taylor, whom Grogan quickly recognized. "No sooner did I get off the net with you guys that they made their push against us. Took most of our heavy ordinance just to push them back, but they left a few sharp shooters as a rear guard to harass us!" he said.

The pair of SGC officers quickly took cover next to the Captain and began laying down fire into the nearby treeline.

Williamson ducked down as he reloaded his weapon. "Blue Team reports two Battalions heading this way, from the North and the South. They'll be all over us inside of fifteen minutes!"

Taylor swore. "Sir, there is not a hope in hell we can hold out against that kind of force!"

Williamson nodded. "Agreed. The moment we get the civvies and the package through the 'gate we're out of here!" The CO grit his teeth and watched the perimeter. Suddenly, his eyes widened behind his visor and his hand shot to the side of his helmet. "Captain Hailey!" he commed. "Think you can use that jamming gadget of yours to trick the enemy motion trackers? Make the troops to the South-West hesitate?"

There was a pause. When Hailey answered, Grogan would swear there was an undertone of insulted pride to her voice. "That's affirmative, sir. I'll have to plant the device in their path and leave it, though."

"Do it. Leave a timed charge with it, as well," Williamson ordered.

The better part of a minute passed. Grogan kept an eye on the video feed in the corner of his visor. Suddenly, the force to the South-West slowed their advance. Thunderous detonations echoed from that direction.

Grogan looked to the South. Several plumes of smoke were rising into the air. The enemy was trying
to break up the phantom formation with grenades and other explosives.

The prisoners finally cleared the treeline and started charging toward the Stargate at once. They were all familiar with what the device was and were eager to be as far from this god-forsaken planet as possible. The stream reached the upright 'pool' and began disappearing from sight. It was the fastest Grogan had seen them move, desperate hope driving them on.

"Bringing up the Rear!" Hailey called out as she cleared the Treeline and sprinted for cover closer to the 'gate. Grogan breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that his friend and squadmate had made it back in one piece.

Williamson frowned as he noted the number of prisoners making their way through the gate. "Are we short some?"

Hailey dipped her head. "We lost seven back there from the Jackals. Nothing we could do sir."

Major Williamson hissed through his teeth.

“A bit heavy on passengers, aren't we, sir?” Taylor asked, the temporary lull in the battle finally allowing a spare moment for conversation.

“Stow it, Marine,” the Major ordered before adjusting his position on the line. Grogan and Hailey joined him.

A bestial roar issued out from the trees. It seemed that the Brutes had re-consolidated. The enemy forces emerged from the treeline and quickly closed with their targets. The Brutes were, predictably, not deterred by the sight of their dead comrades. If anything, it seemed to spur their bloodlust even further. They threw themselves into the teeth of their enemies defenses with wild abandon, grunting, growling, and bellowing challenges as they charged in the hopes of intimidating their foes into breaking.

It didn't work.

The Marines held their positions and returned fire with gusto, answering with their own firepower. Brute after Brute dropped to well placed fire, quickly followed by Jackals and Grunts. Yet on and on they came, like a tidal force of bodies.

“Any claymores left?” the Major shouted. The answer was a negative. Grogan swore mentally, grabbing a full magazine for his UNSC Assault Rifle from the spares the ODSTs had brought with them.

Spikes and plasma shots impacted the defenses. Those prisoners struck before reaching the inner perimeter were quickly trampled and broken first by their fellows, then by the rushing mass of enemies. Screams and explosions started drowning out the world.
Finally, at long last, the last of the prisoners vanished through the active wormhole.

"HAILEY!!! Get control of the wounded and get them back through the 'gate ASAP!!!
There was no acknowledgment that Grogan could hear, but the Captain moved to comply at once as she braved moving out into the open to start marshalling the ODST and SG-Team survivors through the gate.

The defenders continued firing back, never letting up despite the friendlies falling around them. A wall of rifle fire and blasts from the appropriated plasma cannon tore into the hostiles. The Brutes continued pushing forward, spreading out and ignoring their comrades being torn apart around them. At least one of them kept coming even after taking a direct hit from the plasma cannon, his left side reduced to a smoldering ruin, before Grogan put him out of his misery with a headshot.

“Banshees incoming,” a Spartan commed.

Indeed, the pair of gunships was coming in for a strafing run. Grogan forced himself not to watch them coming in. There was nowhere for him to go; he might as well try to keep the enemy suppressed while he could. He kept firing, holding the line, as the last of the wounded were rushed through the Stargate.

Spheres of blue-white plasma started impacting the ground in two parallel lines, cutting the defenders off from the Stargate. The Banshees were close enough to fire. Soil exploded into the air as the superheated plasma scorched and melted the dirt to glass. The lines moved swiftly, closing the distance to the beleaguered defenders at what seemed to be meters per second. Any moment now the vehicle-mounted weaponry would start chewing into them.

The sound of a sniper rifle rang out once again. One of the Banshees suddenly tumbled out of control, crashing to the ground just outside the clearing and exploding in a blue-white fireball, setting the trees on fire.

The other gunship accelerated and attempted to orient on the new threat. The rate of fire from its plasma cannons increased dramatically, the blue-white spheres shredding the forest canopy and spreading the forest fire exponentially.

More shots rang out from the sniper. They came from several hundred meters away from the targeted area, a testament to the enhanced speed of the Spartan shooter. One of the Banshee's stabilizing fins abruptly exploded, sending the craft into an uncontrollable spin that ended with it crashing somewhere out of sight.

“All units, this is SG Niner Actual. Primary and Secondary objectives complete. Now lets get the hell out of dodge. Begin falling back through the gate by Fire Teams. Move move move!”

Enemy fire kept a large number of Camelot forces pinned down and slowed their exfil. The commandeered energy shields flared and changed colors, turning from light blue to a purplish-red. The sheer volume of spiker and plasma rifle rounds would soon overwhelm them. The enemy, not patient enough to simply whittle down the defenses from afar, pushed forward again.

The human soldiers fired back. ODST and SG Team personnel covered each other, buying time for
the layered evacuation. Grogan sighted his targets, downing one after another as fast as he could pull the trigger. He focused fire on those who pushed forward ahead of the others. The wannabe heroes that every good soldier knew not to share a foxhole with. The defenders taught them the error of their ways with coordinated fire.

The main force, however, kept coming. There was now too much fire for anyone to make it to the Stargate in one piece. They were pinned down. The Brutes reacted as if they smelled blood, roaring again and pushing forward with renewed vigor. Grogan scrambled to reload his Assault Rifle as a horde of nightmares barreled down toward him.

A storm of fire erupted from behind the Brute formation. Standard human weapons fire and appropriated Banished gear tore into the unprotected rear of the hostile assault force. Those still partially coherent whirled to meet this threat.

Seeing their enemy's attention divided, the defenders fired back with renewed enthusiasm. Grenades and plasma cannon fire finally succeeded in grinding the assault to a halt. The Brutes, caught out in the open inside a surprise pincer maneuver, were gunned down in droves. The battle was over shortly.

"Enemy threat neutralized. Blue Team moving to rendezvous. Be advised, enemy reinforcements inbound. Less than five minutes out," the same steady, calm voice from before reported over the comms. All four Spartans appeared at the edge of the clearing and sprinted toward their comrades. The friendlies all regrouped around the Stargate as they resumed pouring through in quick succession. The plasma cannon was abandoned, its smoking emitter indicating it wouldn't have lasted much longer. SG-9 and several of the ODSTs took the time to reload their weapons. Their hands remained steady, although Grogan was sure that was due to concerted effort, as it was on his part. That firefight had been one of the most intense he'd ever been a part of.

Several more ODSTs had been hit in the final assault, although thankfully there were no more fatalities. Hailey herself had been grazed by a plasma shot. Everyone was covered in a layer of soot and hot soil from the sheer volume of plasma shots and explosives. "Double time, people," the Major ordered. "Those Battalions and that fleet in orbit aren't gonna wait forever."

Abruptly reminded of the enemy reinforcements literally hanging over their heads, Grogan and the others rushed to get out of danger. A swarm of dots, distant Phantoms and Banshees, were descending from the sky and in the treeline they could hear the bellowing from Brutes and the yapping of Grunts. It was the last thing Grogan heard before he went through the 'gate. He and Major Williamson were the last humans on the planet to do so.

They had done it.
Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 9 Post-Mission


The temporary base was buzzing with activity. Camelot personnel moved between tents containing the ODST and SGC wounded, treating the casualties as best they could. The rescued slaves, on the other hand, had to wait in an open area originally intended as an emergency airfield. They sat on the grass and dirt, often huddled in small groups, each waiting for the medics and doctors to be available to tend their wounds. There was simply too much work to go around. Grogan himself had loaned out his canteen and a few protein bars he had in his pack, which had lead to other soldiers doing the same, meaning that at least the most desperately hungry and thirsty were taken care of. Still, it was a struggle to meet even the most basic needs of so many.

Major Williamson, for his part, was completely unapologetic. His face was steady and unyielding as he addressed his superior. “Sir, I believed that leaving these people behind would be unacceptable from an ethical standpoint. If what I have done is warrant for disciplinary action, I ask only that all such consequences be inflicted upon me and me alone. It was my decision, sir.”

Grogan, standing off to the side after having been checked over, felt a swell of pride for his commander. This kind of thing was why he would follow Major Brian Williamson into the gates of hell if he ordered it.

The problem was, none of this had been planned. This camp had been set up at the Beta Site (which normally housed only enough troops and equipment to ensure its viability as an emergency fall-back point) to treat injuries too critical to risk further ‘gate travel before the final jump to Camelot HQ. They couldn't very well take all of the rescued civilians to their classified base, even if there had been room for them. This had necessitated the deployment of additional defenses to make the base more permanent while the higher-ups figured out what to do with all of them. It increased the risk of their clandestine operation becoming public knowledge exponentially. It also meant expending an enormous amount of Camelot's medical supplies and rations.

“Steady there, Major,” Col. Mitchell replied with another sigh. “Just had to say it. Burden of command and all that. Lord knows I would have done the same thing myself. Still, it's gonna be a hell of a thing to explain to Command. This operation barely got off the ground as it was.”

Grogan breathed a sigh of relief. He was sure this wasn't the last they would hear of this event. The REMFs almost certainly wouldn't like it, and he didn't want to think about what the bureaucratic gasbags at the IOA were going to say.

More alarming was Col. Mitchell's reaction to the whole thing. Given the man's reputation, Grogan had expected the veteran of the legendary SG-1 to be fully on-board with saving the civilians, and damn the consequences. To hear him have even a slight amount of hesitation was almost shocking to the Captain.

*Maybe I should stop hoping for that promotion,* Grogan thought. Dealing with the bureaucrats seems
“Excuse me, Blue Three?” Satterfield asked.

Said Spartan turned to face the SGC soldier. Despite seemingly having been watching the perimeter, Satterfield got the distinct impression that the supersoldier had seen her coming from a mile off. There was a moment of doubt as she questioned whether or not she had identified the right Spartan. The figure was carrying a shotgun, which was the preferred loadout of the one she was looking for, but it was just so damned hard to tell them apart. It was a source of continued frustration that she was determined to overcome.

“How may I be of assistance, SG-9 Three?” came the response. From this Satterfield inferred that she had, indeed, found the correct Spartan. That was one problem solved, at least.

“Col. Mitchell has instructed anyone with medical expertise to assist in treating the rescued Fiefdom citizens. I could use your help,” Satterfield said, holding out one of the two medical kits she was carrying.

The Spartan tilted her head quizzically. “I'm no corpsman, Captain,” the figure replied. Even their gender came across as neutral from behind that polarized visor; it would be creepy if it wasn't so annoying. “I can probably be better utilized on patrol, sir.”

“Yes, but your profile states that you have the most medical expertise out of all of the members of Blue Team,” Satterfield replied. “I think your comrades will be able to hold the line without you for a few minutes.”

The Spartan paused for a fraction of a second. Satterfield was still pissed that Command hadn't told the rank and file any of the Spartans' actual names, instead opting to stick entirely to callsigns and codenames. Blue Three Spartan-087, in the case of her current target. Satterfield preferred to use the former rather than the latter, since at least there was a word in there along with the numbers. Referring to a person with a series of numerals was just...creepy.

“Understood, sir,” Blue Three said at last. She took the offered medical kit and followed Satterfield as she walked toward the Free Jaffa.

The next hour was spent treating injuries. Most of their work was superficial first aid, with the real trauma cases being handled by the medical staff sent by Camelot HQ. Cuts, sprains, the occasional fracture, etc., anything that could be handled by a grunt while the real work was done by the docs.

Satterfield found herself struggling to keep up with her augmented companion. The Spartan was fast, steady, and precise. Examinations that took several minutes for Satterfield were completed in a matter of seconds by Blue Three. The time that the Spartan had to ask the injured questions seemed to crawl by at a glacial speed by comparison, the translation programs in her helmet seeming to jerk the pace to a screeching halt.

Occasionally, they would encounter an injury that was more serious than originally believed. A few cases of internal bleeding were particularly alarming. At these points the pair used canisters of what the UNSC called ‘biofoam’. It was a kind of all purpose medical substance that was injected into affected areas, particularly deep wounds. It sealed off ruptured veins, sterilized the area, and generally stabilized the patient until more permanent treatment could be arranged. It was another of
the contributions that the UNSC made to the Camelot operation and Satterfield sincerely hoped that the SGC was allowed to study it soon. The thought of how many lives it could save made her even more frustrated on the strict limitations that had been placed on the sharing of technology in Camelot.

Eventually, the task was done. Satterfield and her Spartan colleague stood off to the side and watched the medical personnel treat the remaining injured, ready to offer assistance if needed. Satterfield braced herself for another attempt. This was her chance.

“"You know, this is probably one of my favorite duties," she said. Blue Three turned to her, tilting her head once again. Satterfield took that as a prompt to continue. “Don't get me wrong, I don't want to quit my job and become a doctor or anything. I belong with a rifle in my hand. Also, you know, it sucks that people were injured in the first place. Still, it's nice to save lives directly every once in a while, without having to kill anything to do it. You know?”

Silence. The Spartan was unreadable within her enclosed shell of impenetrable armor. Several seconds, far longer than the pause from earlier, passed with no visible change or progress.

Everything within Satterfield screamed at her to say something. To keep reaching out to this other person. She forced the impulse back with an effort. She knew that pushing these people would get her nowhere. This was a game of patience; she had to lure them out of their shell if she was going to get a good look at them.

And she needed to get a good look. Something about the supersoldiers told her that there was something important about them. Perhaps something in their past, or in their nature, beyond the obvious augmentations. Her instincts had rarely been wrong before. This was her strength: connecting with people. More than that, knowing who she needed to connect with.

It was also personally frustrating. Satterfield was competitive by nature. She practically had to be, to rise to the top of the United States special forces. Her repeated failures to make a social connection to any of the Spartans had really goaded her. This felt like losing. She hated losing.

“...I suppose I can understand that,” Blue Three said.

Outwardly, all Satterfield did was nod with a neutral expression on her face. Inwardly, she was jumping up and down and hollering in victory. She had made a connection! It was small, granted. Minuscule, by normal social standards. Still, it was by far the biggest social interaction she'd gotten out of them yet. It was progress. It was something that she could build on.

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“In short, the mission was a complete success,” Fleet Admiral Hood said.

He took a moment to enjoy the way the room brightened at the news. The diplomatic talks hadn't exactly stalled, but progress had remained slow for some time. While the bare gray walls of the conference room remained as sparse as ever, the members of the UEG higher-ups seemed to breathe new life into their surroundings with their brightened eyes and small smiles. Victory always did that to people.

Well...some of them. People like President Charet and Senator Sekibo seemed positively ecstatic to have a concrete victory to take their minds off of the political quagmire the current diplomatic
proceedings had turned into. People like Adviser Marlowe and the holographic Director Osman, however, remained as gloomy as before.

Hood suppressed a smile. He tried not to delight in the frustration and disgrace of his rivals, particularly when they were members of his own nation, but it was hard not to enjoy the ONI faction's fall from grace. The loss of so many Spartan-IVs had cost them dearly.

“Calling it 'complete' might be a bit of an exaggeration,” Marlowe retorted. “The mission resulted in 22 ODST KIA with another dozen wounded. Not to mention the expended resources caring for all of the 'refugees' this Major Williamson decided to drag along with him.”

Just like that, Hood's good feeling was gone. Senator Sekibo replied before he could. Hood was grateful; he doubted his response would be as diplomatic.

“While the loss of any of our soldiers is, of course, a tragedy,” he argued, “we shouldn't understatement the value of this victory. We retrieved one of our own people, a captured Spartan no less. We also rescued 67 enslaved civilians. While, yes, this incurred unexpected expenses, it also represents an invaluable diplomatic opportunity. Think of it: the first major contact any of the Free Jaffa have with the UEG was a rescue of their civilians. We should move at once to return them to their people. Imagine the progress this could provide in establishing friendly relations.” He glanced at the Fleet Admiral with a smile on his face. “It is no small thing to be viewed as heroes.”

Looking around, Hood could tell everyone approved of this idea, even Marlowe and Osman. It was a sound strategy for when they made direct contact with the juggernaut that was the Free Jaffa nation.

“I agree,” President Charet said. “The public will have to be kept in the dark concerning the nature of Camelot, but the leadership of the Free Jaffa can and should be informed of the UNSC's involvement. It will also prove a powerful bargaining chip for when we do go public with the program. My administration will handle that angle. Admiral Hood, you'll have to request General O'Neill's aid in returning the civilians to the appropriate planet immediately. Until then, we provide them with sanctuary. See to their protection in the meantime. Request assistance from Stargate Command if you have to. They have experience in this sort of thing, so let's not let pride get in the way.”

“Of course, ma'am,” the Admiral answered. His practiced mind went through the logistics within seconds. He had already planned out the orders he would send by the time his president continued speaking.

“I also believe that this proves the potential of Operation Camelot more than my most optimistic appraisals. In fact,” she said, “I am considering additional resources and authorities to be granted to its leadership. This Colonel Cameron Mitchell has impressed me. In the span of not even 16 hours he managed to put a plan together, unite two top tier units from two different factions not formally allied with each other—who have never worked together and had differing skillsets—outwit a numerically superior enemy who had the high-ground, and not only accomplish the primary mission, but deny critical technological secrets to the enemy and rescue over 60 civilians. And in doing so, opened the door for us to capitalize on that joint mission. Quite the coup.”

“We may want to consider that further,” Marlowe had the gall to interrupt. Hood suppressed a scowl. Osman's image was remaining silent and neutral, but the Admiral wasn't fooled. He knew the adviser wouldn't be stepping out like this if he wasn't being pressured by the UNSC's intelligence wing. Marlowe continued, “Camelot showed some success here. No one is denying that. However, we
mustn’t allow ourselves to forget the sheer cost of this one operation. The UNSC can scarcely afford the loss of highly trained personnel, even several years removed from the Great War.”

“I would remind you,” Admiral Hood replied with a carefully neutral tone, “that Camelot succeeded where other, more expensive, alternatives failed. Despite the noticeable—but still lower—cost, they got results. With some rather ingenious lateral thinking, I concur with the President. Operation Camelot deserves our support, and given the greenlight by the President, I intend to see that there are no more costly delays in personnel and materials.”

Hood couldn’t help but glance meaningfully at the report on his TAC-PAD about the missing hospital staff that had been unexpectedly and inexplicably delayed. That deficiency had compounded the logistical strain already incurred by the arrival of the refugees and could easily have led to increased casualty numbers at the Beta Site. He would look into this and heads would roll if he found what he thought he would.

Marlowe turned a bright shade of red at the thinly veiled rebuke. Even Osman seemed to shift ever so slightly.

It was well known that the UNSC’s supersoldier programs had their origin in the Office of Naval Intelligence. As such, the organization and its allies had always pushed for more resources to be funneled into Spartan programs. Despite the program technically not being under their control, operating instead under Spartan Operations, they still exerted a significant amount of unofficial influence. Even worse, the more successful the Spartans were, the more political clout ONI tended to have at its disposal.

The Spartans had proven very successful by the end of the Human-Covenant War.

Of course, there were still those who opposed the program. The primary criticism of it was the same as every ‘super weapon’: expense. An entire company of ODSTs could be trained, equipped, and fielded for the price of a single Spartan, even the scaled down Spartan-IVs. The botched assassination had resulted in the deaths of 19 S-IVs. This had renewed the question of whether or not investing so many resources into so few units was truly wise, even considering recent history. Already certain Generals in both the Marine Corp and the Army were pouncing on this.

Hood himself believed that the Spartans were worth it. They had personally saved his life on multiple occasions and he had received a front row seat to their necessity in the War. The UEG needed Spartans. Fully prying them loose from under the thumb of ONI was one of his primary goals for a reason.

Still, he understood the argument against them. He was also more than willing to use their threat as a tool to achieve his ends.

“Hell of a thing, losing so many Spartans,” Sekibo said. “We rely on them so much. We emphasize their every victory to keep national morale up, not to mention their battlefield utility. After a while, you start to think of them as invincible. I suppose even we aren’t immune to our own rhetoric.”

The more open residents of the room nodded in agreement. The others remained stone-faced, trying to hide their discomfort. The mystique of the Spartans had indeed taken at least a small root in the minds of those present.

“I find myself in agreement with the Fleet Admiral,” President Charet said. “I am authorizing further personnel and resources to be granted to Camelot Command. I am also loosening the restrictions on
the sharing of technology, particularly in regard to body armor. I want those casualty numbers to go
down, understood, Admiral?"

“Perfectly, ma'am,” Hood replied with an internal smile. He knew that Charet's New Earth
counterpart, Hayes, had approved similar actions with his own personnel within Camelot. He could
only hope that the increased cooperation would bleed over to the diplomatic arena.

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The general buzz around the Camelot Mess Hall was overwhelmingly positive. Grogan was waiting
in line for the morning meal a day after returning to Camelot HQ. The sounds of conversation
echoed over the bare stone/alloy walls.

“I hear we kicked some ass yesterday...”

“Bout damn time we started taking the fight to the Brutes again...”

“So we pulled off the objective, and managed to extract a metric fuck-ton of POWs at the same time?
Sweet!”

Grogan smiled. This was what he liked to hear.

The grub was being ladled out from some tables set to one side of the long room. Greek-style
columns rose into arches at the ceiling, supporting a slightly lower section of the roof and creating a
sort of alcove that had been converted into the base kitchen. The tables containing the food were set
between the cylindrical columns with the cooking gear behind. It was unclear if that was what the
purpose for the area originally was, as all of the equipment had been stripped out during Cronus'
withdrawal, but it was serving its function well enough.

The standard meal was ladled onto his tray. Grogan nodded his thanks to the Marine on KP duty and
moved toward his usual seat. Several long tables had been set up in the center of the floor. The seats
were back-less stools connected to the table itself by steel rods low to the floor. It was a pretty
standard set up that nonetheless contrasted with the anachronistic architecture of the building itself.

The seating arrangements were still largely self-segregated. SGC personnel were at some tables and
UNSC personnel were at others. That was annoying. Still, there seemed to be less active hostility and
mistrust between the disparate groups than previous days. Grogan even saw some SG-Team
members and ODSTs laughing together on their way to their chairs.

Perfect. Now was the time to capitalize on the good mood that was pervading the base. The SGC
officer caught Satterfield and Hailey's attention and directed them to a UNSC table. It was near the
end of the hall and mostly unoccupied. It was also right against what could be considered the border
between SGC and ODST territory. Most importantly of all, the Marines sitting there were among
those who had guarded the Stargate on yesterday's mission. The trio sat down across from their
counterparts.

Conversation stopped at the table. Grogan and his buddies did their best to ignore that as they dug
into their meal. He decided to take the lead in breaking the ice.

“So, are all Brutes bullet sponges, or did these one's just take more vitamins than usual?” he asked
with a shit eating grin creeping onto his face. Humor was generally a good approach for breaking the
ice.
The ODSTs smirked and glanced at each other. Eventually, one of them, Captain Taylor again, decided to respond.

“Nah, they're pretty much all like that. Always a bitch to take down. Honestly, the preferred method to fighting them is to just call in an airstrike,” Taylor smirked again. “Why? They tougher than what you lot usually go up against?”

“Some of them,” Grogan admitted, hiding the scowl that wanted to appear on his face. Now was not the time. “Still a hell of a lot easier than the Kull Warriors.” He spent several minutes describing the elite supersoldiers that Anubis had briefly fielded against the SGC. How they were immune to nearly all conventional weaponry. How their armor could repel claymores, rocket launchers, and coordinated automatic weapons fire. How their engineered bodies could regenerate from nearly any injury. How Stargate Command had to develop custom energy weapons just to hurt them. How even a single one of them could, and had, destroy an entire army. He even briefly explained how current SGC armors had used a reverse engineered version of the energy absorbent fabrics of the Kull armor, though it was considerably less effective than what the alien monstrosities had utilized. As he went on he allowed a tiny bit of the terror he’d felt fighting those juggernauts to creep into his voice. Not enough to look weak, but enough to convey how serious he was when he described them as boogeymen.

The ODST had the grace to whistle in appreciation. “Damn. Not sure how much of that I really buy, but if half of it's true, you guys have been through more shit than I gave you credit for.” He paused for a moment, mulling something over, before turning back to his SGC counterpart. “Look, I still think you boys haven't seen shit compared to the UNSC, but you fought well out there. You faced Brutes and lived to tell the tale, and not only that we accomplished the mission. Not everyone can say that.” There were nods and a rumble of general agreement from the other ODSTs at the table.

Grogan was...mixed about this. On the one hand, he was still sick of being talked down to by the jarheads. On the other, there was at least a bit more respect there than had been before. He decided to just take the compliment with a nod. At least the man was willing to recognize skill when he saw it. Some of the US military personnel Grogan had met over the years were too stubborn to even do that. This was progress, after all, and further missions should change their minds completely. Patience was what was needed to achieve his objective.

One step at a time.

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“So, how long till I can blow this joint, doc?” Commander Palmer asked.

The Master Chief noticed Dr. Halsey suppress a sigh. He could tell that she disliked working with the woman and would rather be back in her lab instead of the Infirmary. The Series IVs were not 'her' Spartans, after all. Still, she was the world's foremost expert on the supersoldiers, even if she had only worked on the Series II project and not the Series III or IV, so it made sense that she would oversee the medical treatment of any injured Spartans. This included Palmer.

“You should be ready for release tomorrow morning,” Dr. Halsey replied, still looking at the tablet holding the Spartan's chart. “Your body needs to finish adjusting to its new lung and spleen. Once it is, you will be ready for active duty again.”

“Yeah...” Palmer replied. She laid back and seemed to examine the ceiling for several minutes.
The Chief had seen that kind of expression before. It was the look of an officer that had screwed up, badly, and was fully aware of what it had cost her soldiers. She was questioning her decisions, her qualifications, whether she was even fit for command. The names of the Spartans that had been lost in the failed attempt to assassinate Atriox would doubtless be burned into her memory for the rest of her life.

Good.

It was certainly well deserved. The mission had been a trap from the start, but Palmer's recklessness and bravado had prevented her from minimizing casualties and getting her people out alive. So many Spartans had died in that mission who didn't have to. The Chief appreciated that the Spartan IV Commander at least recognized her own responsibility, but that didn't absolve her of it, and it wouldn't mean anything if it didn't spur her to change.

Palmer turned to the Master Chief next. “So...we're working with New Earth now, huh?”

Apparently, she had decided she needed a distraction, and had gone for conversation. The Chief decided to indulge her, if only because he couldn't think of an excuse to remain silent.

“Correct,” he replied. “Blue Team and several hundred UNSC personnel are taking part in a joint operation with New Earth, Code-named 'Operation Camelot'. You'll be briefed on it upon your release.”

“I guess that makes sense. They know the terrain through the 'gate, and all that,” Palmer said, her tone still restrained and lacking the cocky energy she normally exhibited. “Still, I don't get why we went with a full-blown joint op. Why not just let them provide intel and consultation? How important can it be to have some troops from 500 years in the past marching into battle with us?”

The Chief frowned from behind his polarized visor. These were questions he himself had asked back when he first learned of the project. The forces of New Earth, however well trained, were still inexperienced dealing with former Covenant hostiles, not to mention the obvious technological disparity. Something about Palmer's questions nagged at him, though. The troops he had fought with in the rescue op, SG-9, had performed beyond his expectations. He hadn't witnessed much of it, but most of the civilians had survived and none of the SGC Officers had been killed. Considering the unforgiving nature of combat against the Covenant and its splinter organizations, that took real skill. He still wouldn't place them on the same level of their UNSC counterparts, but they had earned more of his respect. Palmer seemed to assume they were somehow inferior to UNSC troops simply because of the circumstances of their origin. A fallacy he realized that he had been falling into as well before their successful joint mission.

The Chief marveled at that for a moment. It was in fact the circumstances of their origins and their experiences that had given the mission the window of opportunity it needed for their success. Captain Hailey's spoofer program had been surprisingly effective in drawing Banished forces out of position on multiple occasions. The SGC's subtle use of misdirection had given them a critical edge in that battle. Thinking further on this and other pre-Event missions he had been briefed on, he and Blue Team had noticed a pattern of behavior and operation that the soldiers of Stargate Command tended to employ. They could certainly do Force on Force if and when required but it wasn't their preferred choice. They tended to rely more on misdirection and slight of hand to complete their objectives and deceive their enemies, to stack the deck in their favor before striking at a critical point and then falling back out of firing range.

The UNSC by contrast tended to rely more on Force on Force—or rather, Force Overwhelming
Force. While improvisation and lateral thinking certainly weren't lacking in the UNSC, the Spartan IIs being an example of that, it was never employed quite as effectively as what Stargate Command had demonstrated.

This new insight into their allies bore more thinking about, but he wasn't sure how to properly express that.

Of course, Doctor Halsey had a far more eloquent way of putting it than he could ever manage.

“There are several reasons,” the good doctor replied. Apparently, she had been paying attention to the conversation, even if she had no intention of taking part in it until now. She scowled at the prostrate officer as she shifted to the 'disappointed lecturing' tone the Chief had occasionally heard growing up. “Not the least of which is building trust between the UEG and the nations of New Earth. Trying to treat them as ancillary assets rather than capable allies would be taken as an insult. Far from aiding further relations, it would hamper them. If such things are too strategic for your tastes, you may also consider the fact that, having come from a different nation with different threats and experiences, their approach to combat and warfare would naturally differ from ours in many ways. Encountering a foreign perspective always provides opportunities to challenge institutional assumptions and correct long-standing mistakes. They may be more technologically primitive, but that does not mean we can not learn from them.” Her eyes hardened. “This is something that should have occurred to you, Commander Palmer.”

“...I guess...” Palmer responded. She was frowning, clearly not appreciating being dressed down by a civilian. Her injuries and blows to her ego seemed to quell whatever response she would normally have made. She simply lapsed back into silence and started staring at the ceiling again.

The Chief suppressed another sigh. He knew that Commander Palmer's doubts were echoed by many throughout the UNSC and the UEG in general. Hell, the ODSTs within Camelot itself were testament to that. He wondered if this joint project could really be as important and beneficial as Halsey seemed to believe.

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The electronic bell rang. The match began.

Grogan circled his opponent. Taylor circled him right back. They were both looking for openings in the other's defenses. Once or twice their eyes met as they darted over each other's stance. Taylor was obviously determined to win. Maybe more so than he would normally be, what with his opponent being SGC, an organization he still had little respect for.

Grogan just hoped the ODST wouldn't take it too hard when he lost. It had taken a lot of work to begin wearing down the man's superiority complex and the SGC soldier didn't want to have a setback over a damn sparring match. He briefly considered letting his opponent win.

No. No way. Carl Grogan would do a lot in the name of strategy, but some things were just too much.

Distantly, he could hear Satterfield chatting with another of the ODSTs off to the side. Their conversation began with the hand-to-hand training regimen that each of their respective organizations put its troops through. Naturally, each insisted that their own was superior. This match was as much about backing up the boasting as it was keeping their skills sharp.

Part of Grogan wished he was over there with Satterfield. Not because he was scared or anything.
Oh, hell no. It was just that sometimes he envied her social skills. Satterfield could make a friend out of a rabid dog just by talking to it. Grogan, on the other hand, had to rely on approaches that were more...physical. More uncivilized, you might say. Thankfully, they were both aware of this weakness, and planned accordingly. She would fight her battles with her silver tongue, he would fight his with his steel fist, and they'd meet up at the objective.

Today, that objective was further eroding the divide between the two military units stationed in Camelot. Satterfield by talking to one of them, he by proving his skill in hand-to-hand. There had been less tension since the rescue op, but enough to demand attention. This bullshit pissing match had to stop before it got someone killed. Grogan was yanked out of his ruminations when the match really began.

Taylor launched the attack. Grogan parried and maneuvered into position. Grogan launched his own strike. Taylor dodged.

They went back to circling.

The fight went on like this for a while. Strike. Counter-strike. Dodge. Parry. Testing defenses and neither finding the other lacking. They both started to sweat profusely as the match stretched on. Grogan resisted the urge to wipe the sweat off his forehead. That would have left an opening. He contented himself with blinking the sting out of his eyes.

The trash talk from the side of the ring eventually transitioned to discussing the recent mission. More specifically, the botched operation that had lead to it.

“Hard to believe so many Spartans were KIA in one mission,” Satterfield was saying. “We’ve only seen them in action once, obviously, but they made quite an impression. They seemed almost invincible.”

Taylor angrily threw a jab. Grogan dodged and noticed an opening. He suppressed a smirk; Satterfield had obviously stepped on a raw nerve. Grogan couldn't let his amusement show, obviously, it wouldn't due to piss the guy off too much in addition to beating him. The USAF officer threw a punch and managed to score a glancing blow. Not definitive, but definitely a step in the right direction.

The ODST Satterfield was talking to snorted in contempt. “Didn't surprise any of us,” he said. “Spartans have always been over-rated. The ODSTs were around centuries before anyone even dreamed of the Spartan program, and we'll be around long after they're gone. They were never the superheroes the press made them out to be.”

Grogan noticed Taylor redouble his efforts. The fatigue they were both feeling was buried by a new determination. A renewed desire to prove himself the superior soldier.

Okay, asshole, two can play at that game. Carl ignored the way his breath started getting heavier. He filtered out the sound of his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He committed more energy to the fight, weaving around his opponent with the familiarity of over a decade of intense physical training.

Jab—block—hay-maker—dodge—chop—parry

“I suppose I can understand that,” Satterfield said, her voice sounding more and more distant. Her words almost seemed to come on a delay, Carl was getting so into his match. “Civilians seem to love hero worship. Especially in desperate times.” She paused here, seeming to consider her words before
continuing.

Later, when his mind wasn’t as laser-focused, Grogan wondered why she was pressing this issue. It was obviously a sore subject. Pursuing it was unlikely to do anything but piss the other guy off. Maybe she felt the need to defend the Spartans, seeing as she was starting to make progress connecting with them. That was one of her weaknesses: getting too close to a target to make sound tactical decisions. Grogan figured that was the price you paid for her level of empathy.

He circled Taylor. The ODST had gone on the defensive, cutting off any obvious avenue of assault. The pace didn’t so much slow down as hit a plateau. Carl’s mind raced with a hundred different approaches, a thousand possible ways to break his opponent. He planned his next move carefully. Didn’t want to stumble into a trap.

“Still,” Satterfield said. “The loss of so many Spartans was a tragedy. I mean, over-hyped or not, the UNSC is weaker without them.”

“Weaker?” the other ODST snapped.

Taylor threw a wild jab, his defensive stance forgotten. Carl deflected the strike and, seeing his opening, levered the Marine straight into the mat.

Then, he slipped.

“Point ‘Chairforce’,” Grogan said with a smirk.

He started cursing himself out in his head as soon as the words were out. What the hell was wrong with him? He spent the better part of a week trying to build a bridge with this guy and here he was rubbing salt in his wounds? This could derail the whole strategy. His efforts to dissolve the professional tensions between the ODSTs and the SG Teams could be set back to the beginning! Not sure what else to do, he decided to roll with it and hope for the best. He offered his hand to help his sparring partner up.

To his relief, Taylor snorted , smirked, and took the offered hand. “Rematch. I’ll wipe look off your face.”

Grogan nodded, carefully keeping the relief off of his face. Looked like the respect he garnered by beating a soldier of Taylor’s caliber trumped any resentment at losing a match. All in all, a pretty healthy attitude.

Carl’s smirk became a genuine smile, and they went back to circling.

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The punching bag shook violently from repeated strikes. The material groaned, seeming as if it were about to split open. Considering it had been rated for use by Spartan-IVs, this was a rather impressive feat.

The Master Chief didn’t notice. He simply kept pounding away, practicing his strikes while exercising his muscles.

“I heard Commander Palmer should be cleared for active duty within the week,” Kelly said.

The quartet of Spartan-IIs were alone in the gym area. Linda and Fred sat off to the side,
recuperating from their sparring match, while Kelly held the bag steady during the Chief's near
continuous assault. The members of Blue Team were accustomed to sparring and exercising in
privacy. The UNSC higher-ups had wanted to enhance the mystique and larger-than-life image of
the Spartans and had long ago arranged for the supersoldiers to never practice in front of non-
augmented personnel if it could be helped. Even the Spartan-IV's had only been allowed to spar with
each other. All to maintain a reputation for invincibility that had recently taken a serious hit.

“Sure that's not a bit too soon?” Fred asked as he continued to wipe the sweat from his neck. Linda
nodded in silent agreement.

Kelly's stance shifted almost imperceptibly. She tried to hide it, but she was clearly unhappy about
Fred having been the one to answer. The Chief wasn't fooled; he knew his sister was trying to bait
him into conversation. She was always trying to get him to talk more, at least among their family.

“The higher-ups probably want someone back in the command seat,” Kelly speculated. Her next
words were softer and clearly directed at him. “The Spartans are effectively leaderless right now.”

The Master Chief snorted. His sister had sounded almost exactly like Dr. Halsey. Kelly simply raised
an eyebrow questioningly—another thing taken from their 'mother'. The Chief sighed, realizing that
he had little choice but to explain himself. He eased off his assault on the punching bag a caught his
breath before explaining.

“The failed assassination was a complete fiasco,” he explained. “Palmer showed an unacceptable
failure of discipline, something that has been a clear deficiency among the Spartan-IV program since
it's inception. They are not up to standard.”

“...is that all?” Kelly prompted, her eyebrow raised once again. The pair stared at each other, the
Chief still breathing heavily, for several seconds. He considered pulling rank on her, but knew that
that would only postpone this conversation. Better to get it out of the way now.

“...no,” John admitted. “The Spartan-IVs may not be as close as we are, but they're still family.
They're our...my...cousins. Having so many of them die when they didn't have to...doesn't sit well...”

“I don't think it did with any of us,” Kelly said. The other two nodded in agreement. “So,” she said,
looking directly at her older brother and commander, “what are we going to do about it, sir?”

The Chief paused. He hadn't thought about personally rectifying what he saw as deficiencies in the
modern incarnation of the Spartans. Looking at current circumstances, though...

“Command will probably assign more Spartans to Camelot following the successful rescue op,” he
said. "So we attack this problem on two fronts." He looked at his subordinates, the tiniest hint of a
grin forming on his face. “I'll send a message to Admiral Hood. When more Spartans arrive, we're
going to make sure nothing like the failed assassination ever happens again.”

"That'll mean less Spartans capable of responding to an attack across the wider UNSC." Fred said
with a frown.

The Chief nodded. "I have an idea about that too. That's where the second front comes in."

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The lights flickered on and off in the bridge. The gold paint on the walls was faded and flaked at
points. The displays were smudged and scratched. Detritus littered various parts of the floor. The rest
of the vessel fared no better. There were patchwork repairs on the exterior of the ship itself, plates of metal welded crudely over breaches in the hull. The Ha'tak capital ship had clearly seen better days.

The guards were similarly ragged. Their armor was patched and worn. Several of them were missing entire sections, leaving vital body parts exposed. They moved with a lethargy and poor coordination indicative of low morale and insufficient training. These Jaffa had fallen far since the days of System Lord Yu.

The Jaffa monarch was struggling internally with what he was about to do. What he was about to agree to. He examined a document at length. He read every word, then read them again. Even so, he couldn't escape the feeling that he was being played for a fool. That the being sitting across the negotiation table from him was tricking him into giving up more than he wanted to.

All of this was clear to Astarte. The simple warrior turned aspiring warlord was as an open book to her. She carefully hid a smile as she saw the man go through the expected sequence of internal thoughts and arguments before arriving at the predetermined destination.

The Jaffa, Chun, turned from the contract to look directly at the goa'uld. The mark on his forehead, reminiscent of the calligraphy of the ancient China that his ancestors had been harvested from, glittered in the unsteady light of the bridge.

“You realize this would be the first time I have served another since the death of Lord Yu?” he asked, trying, and failing, to play negotiator. Astarte could tell that he had little choice in the matter. Still, she had learned from Ba'al that it paid to be diplomatic.

“True, but being in my service will be far more liberal than under Yu,” she countered. “I will not require your worship, nor that of your people. Simple submission will suffice, and in exchange I shall provide you with an era of prosperity you have never known.” She gestured to their surroundings. The room that served as Chun's seat of power was ill-decorated. There were few tapestries, and fewer statues. There was little in the way of ornamentation to mark the wealth and power that the ruler possessed. This was for a simple, obvious reason.

Chun had no wealth or power.

Nominally, he was the leader of a small faction of Free Jaffa far from the homeworld Dakara. He had managed to secure his small kingdom following the death of his master and the dissolution of the Goa'uld Empire. Unfortunately, he was less successful at actually ruling his territory than he had been at acquiring it.

The man was simply not adaptable enough. Like his master before him, he had been unable to let go of centuries of tradition. His diplomatic skills boiled down to veiled threats at best and outright aggression at worst. His economic policies depended upon the resources of a vast empire which no longer existed. His arrogance and posturing, while desirable to the Goa'uld, were grating to the Free Jaffa he found himself having to interact with.

None of this had been helped by the fact that his territory was out of the way and relatively poor in resources. He had little to no sources of income, which had led to widespread poverty and the degrading of his military. In most circles, the ones that bothered to take notice of him, it was taken for granted that he would have to offer submission to the Ma'sam Fiefdom in order to avoid complete collapse. Failing that, Chun would be overthrown and executed by his own people. He was in dire straits and had no clear way out.
Enter Astarte.

She had approached him with a simple offer: submit to her rule, and she would use her skills and resources to turn Chun's floundering nation into a true interstellar power. He would remain the public face of his nation while she ruled from the shadows, ensuring the economic and political success he had been unable to acquire for himself and preventing a humiliating and public failure.

A light blinked on the dataslate in front of Astarte. She pressed a button and began reading a coded report while her soon-to-be servant sat back, rubbed a hand over his face, and mulled over his options for the umpteenth time.

Hmm. It seemed that someone had managed to rescued the captured Spartans, as well as free a fair number of slaves in the process. This was rather surprising. The so-called 'Free Jaffa' were too bogged down by internal bickering to have accomplished this. That left either the Tau'ri or the UNSC as the likeliest culprits. She hadn't expected either of the human polities to be able to mount a capable rescue, let alone one that she was not aware of until it had already happened. This was a most unwelcome occurrence.

Astarte made a mental note to investigate this further. She turned back to her host, who sighed and signed the document solidifying their relationship.

Chun rose from his seat, walked around the table, and fell to one knee before the still-seated Goa'uld. “What is your will, my lord?”

This time, System Lord Astarte allowed herself to smile. She had waited years—years!—for this moment. She took a short breath to savor it before speaking in a regal tone.

“Tell me of your shipyard.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. We had a few hiccups in the coming chapters that needed to be resolved. We should be back on track now.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 10 The Crusade Begins

Across space, the Banished-Lucian pact found itself under fire.

Shipments of Kassa were intercepted.

Raiding parties were ambushed.

Slaves were freed.

Mid-level lieutenants and financiers were assassinated.

More and more the criminal alliance was hindered in its ambitions. More and more its leaders fumed at the loss in profits. More and more the people of the Free Jaffa cheered the new, and as-yet unseen, heroes.

Some credited the Freedom Coalition, saying that the great Teal’c and Bra'tac had devised a new ingenious strategy. Some said it was the Tau'ri, responding to what it viewed as a threat to its growing dominance of the stars. Others said it was a new force, not seen nor heard of before.

Whatever the case, one thing was clear: there was a new player on the board.

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All in all, Dare thought the battlefield was rather favorable.

For one thing, having Harry Maybourne in his ridiculous getup and complicated history with the SGC served to draw attention away from her. The man was like a black hole, sucking in all of the ire and negative attention. The slight glower Col. Mitchell gave him as he and Dare entered his office showed that the former NID Agent was still serving that purpose rather well.

Not that Maybourne gave any sign of noticing. He returned the glower with a cheerful grin and a business-like nod to the various glaring officers assembled in the room for the briefing. This response pissed them off even more. Dare wondered if he even realized he was screwing with them or if it was so ingrained in his character that he didn't notice anymore. Neither would have surprised her.

The two Intelligence Agents moved to stand in front of the Colonel's desk. It was a simple metal piece, clearly designed for portability over aesthetics. It went well with the utilitarian style of rest of the room. Dare, a bit of an expert in psychology, interpreted the style as resulting from a man who hated the very idea of being stuck behind a desk. Thus, he went with equipment that emphasized the ability to move out at a moment's notice. This resentment of being 'the man' was echoed by the room itself, which had clearly been a storage room back in the days System Lord Cronus had run the bunker. Mitchell had outright refused to use the quarters built for the original commander of the facility. He had ordered the throne, and other ostentatious furnishings that had been too cumbersome for the former resident to bother moving, destroyed and recycled for parts. The System Lord's quarters itself he had instead designated as the base's backup latrine.
Dare smiled internally. She really did like her current superior. He was certainly a step up from most of the ONI commanders she had worked under. She gave him a respectful salute when she had fully entered and the door had closed. Maybourne saluted as well, demonstrating that he wasn't completely devoid of tact.

“Agent Dare, Agent Maybourne,” Mitchell said. The pair took their seats with the other officers in front of his desk. “I understand you have a proposal for how we should move forward.”

“Yes, sir,” Dare replied. She had browbeaten Maybourne into allowing her to be the voice of Camelot's intelligence wing. As much as she liked having him as a diversion, she didn't want him pissing off the brass too much. She tapped at her compad for a few seconds to bring up a series of images on the wall. They showed emblems marking the following data as belonging to the Freedom Coalition. “As you know, the Banished have proven exceptionally capable of evading the Free Jaffa's efforts to counter them. They seem to know exactly where to hit, when, and how to evade the response forces.”

The series of images shifted to footage obviously taken from orbit. The time-stamps (which resembled the human identification and dating methods, showing it was another practice that Councilor Teal'c had brought with him from his time in the SGC) marked them as Freedom Coalition capital ships. They zoomed in to show sacked settlements and devastated infrastructure. The smoke and settling rubble indicated that the response force had just barely missed the Banished raid.

“This footage represents the closest they've ever come to catching the Brutes in the act,” Dare explained. “So far the enemy has avoided every ambush and sniffed out any trap. Whenever the Coalition forces track the location of a fleet, the Banished ships flee back into their original territory, placing them beyond the Free Jaffa's ability to project power. It also places them outside of the Stargate network, meaning Camelot can't effectively reach them.”

“But not out of range of the UNSC,” one of the other officers, originally from the SGC, interrupted.

“Stow it, Martinez,” the Colonel scolded. “Please continue, Agent Dare.”

Dare hid her anger at being disrespected with the ease of old habit. There would be no benefit to showing emotion here. Besides, she did share the frustration with her own nation's inaction so far. There were a number of perfectly legitimate and objectively verifiable explanations for why her home nation had failed to act in this conflict. Wariness of entering a new war alone would explain everything. However, although she would never admit it, she feared that the UEG leadership had more calculating motivations. That they wanted the Brutes to weaken the new polities that suddenly showed up on their doorstep. Perhaps even in preparation for military action. She forced herself to set those thoughts aside; there would be time to worry later.

“Thank you, sir,” Dare replied. “It is highly improbable that the Banished has put together such a capability in so short a span of time, even with the Lucian Alliance aiding them. Our best guess is that the enemy has somehow found and activated an intelligence network from before the fall of the Goa'uld Empire. It is our assessment that if we want the current threat to be eliminated we must make the neutralization of this network our top priority.”

She noticed Col. Mitchel's eyes light up at the suggestion. The Banished-Lucian pact had always been far too large for Camelot to effectively counter. Camelot was essentially a holding action to buy time for a unified conventional response, and Mitchel was a smart enough man to know that. Given the glacial pace of developing New Earth/UEG relations, such an effort was looking farther and farther off. Pinpointing and eliminating this intelligence network, however, was far more doable.

Dare's target was right where she wanted him. Time to move in for the kill.
“So far, the Banished have proven largely impenetrable to us,” she explained. “They don’t mingle with the local populations or directly sell any of their slaves or stolen property. This reduces the potential for informants practically to zero. Infiltrating them is a lost cause and even if we could bribe some of them to turn traitor, we have no ready means of contacting them. Instead, we recommend focusing on the Lucian Alliance. Specifically, their leader: Netan.”

She pressed her compad a few more times. The images on the wall shifted to display the mob boss in question. There were several images, each blurry and distinctly unprofessional. They were also the only confirmed images of the Lucian Alliance leader. Say what she would about the man's character, he knew how to keep himself hidden. The ONI Agent smiled internally once again. She enjoyed a challenge.

“The Lucian Alliance is highly compartmentalized,” Dare continued. “It is very difficult to identify any individual leaders that would have anything resembling a complete picture of the organization and its assets. Netan is one of the few we can be certain of. Our informants report that his grasp on power had been waning prior to The Event. After the Banished showed up, respect for his authority skyrocketed to unprecedented levels. The conclusion is rather obvious: he had a direct hand in setting up the current Pact. The probability of his having detailed knowledge of the intelligence network is very high. Therefore, we recommend capture and interrogation of Netan be made our top priority.”

Colonel Mitchell blinked and laughed softly. “Easier said than done. We’ve been after that bastard for years.” His eyes narrowed. “What makes you think you’ll have better luck?”

“Do you really want us to answer that?” Maybourne interjected with a smile. This drew a fresh round of glares from everyone present.

“Setting aside any personal opinions,” Dare said, trying her best not to show her own annoyance. She didn't want to let the intelligence wing seem divided and weak. No matter how much she might like to punch her jackass of a partner in the face. “The fact of the matter is that the Lucian Alliance has, up till now, been a secondary threat at most. The SGC and Homeworld Command had its hands full combating the Ori. Not to mention the last surviving System Lords, most notably Ba'al. All of these threats have now been neutralized. As such, the crime syndicate can receive the bulk of your attention. Also, tragic as the surge in criminal activity may be, increased activity also means increased opportunities for the enemy to make mistakes. There will be more leads than ever before simply due to the sheer size of the increased operation. Finding and apprehending Netan will be more possible in the coming weeks and months than ever before.”

The rest of the room seemed to seriously consider the proposal. Good. Dare hadn't lost her touch in soothing the bruised egos of the brass.

“How would you propose we go about this task?” Mitchell asked. Dare was pleasantly surprised. A lot of the time she had to fight to get a word in about how to pursue objectives. Her respect for Mitchell as a commander continued to rise.

“We have devised several approaches for Camelot to pursue,” she replied. “The Lucians are known to traffic in the narcotic known as 'Kassa'. Intercepting their shipments and eliminating their agricultural bases would force Netan to move around large amounts of capital to cover his losses and keep his organization running smoothly. This would create multiple paper trails that we could trace. Intercepting slave shipments and auctions would serve much the same purpose. It would also allow us to raid their financial files directly for additional clues. Perhaps most importantly of all, it would curry favor with the civilian populace and governments, facilitating the cultivation of informants and double agents. Another method of currying favor would be to supervise the creation of rehabilitation clinics for Kassa addicts. This would assist us in making POWs coherent enough to get reliable
intelligence out of, as well. We can provide other proposals as needed.”

Col. Mitchell seemed to mull over the proposals for several minutes. He then conferred with the other officers, assessing viability and bouncing around ideas of their own. Eventually, he turned back to the Intelligence Agents. “I can't help but notice that your proposals seem tailored to appeal to my sense of decency.” He smiled. “As well as my personal inclination to fuck with the Lucian Alliance in any way possible.”

“Well, it's all in how you sell it,” Maybourne interrupted yet again. Dare thought he could give former Director Parangosky a run for her money in how much he seemed to enjoy the sound of his own voice. “Our proposals are sound, aren't they? Besides, there's nothing wrong with mixing business with a bit of pleasure.”

A grin forced itself onto the Colonel's face. “No, I suppose not. Let's get to work, people. I want these bastards taken down yesterday.”

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Grunts and snarls filled the air as the two warriors pummeled each other.

Enormous, furry fists collided with thick hide. Grapples strained joints and strikes left bruises concealed by fur. The opponents panted with exertion, one far more than the other. There was never any question that Atriox would win. This was not a match, after all.

It was an execution.

Battered and bruised, the failure of a Beta tried a last, desperate charge intended to knock his leader off balance.

Atriox set his feet. He took the blow to his chest, ignoring the pain, and grabbed his subordinate by the arm as he tried to slip away. The jiralhanae Alpha snarled and smashed his palm into his foe's forearm. The bone snapped and the arm twisted into an unnatural shape.

The Beta shrieked in agony.

Atriox rewarded that weakness with a fist to the jaw. The Beta was disoriented. The Alpha tackled him to the ground. He struck the Beta's face.

Then he did it again.

And again.

Atriox rained blows upon the miserable failure. He broke arms, ribs, smashed kneecaps, and generally reduced his subordinate to a broken ruin. Blood and fur flew as he used his claws to tear into the disgraced warrior. The red filter over his vision that accompanied his rage drowned out all color. All sound faded behind the roar in his ears. Finally, after bashing the failure's snout to the point it resembled the flat face of a human vermin, the leader of the Banished rose to his feet and faced his people.

The assembled jiralhanae looked deferentially to the ground. None dared to meet his eyes in challenge. The death of their former leader had cowed them, as Atriox knew it would.

“Such is the penalty for failure as miserable as his,” the Alpha barked. “Such is the punishment for
incompetence. Serve me well and you shall see riches and glory. Fail me, and you shall see only my fangs wet with your lifeblood!"

An affirmative rumble and submissive pheromones answered him. He nodded in satisfaction.

“Dispose of this wretch,” Atriox barked. His unggoy servants waddled forward and began the laborious task of hauling the dead jiralhanae off the field. The meter-tall weaklings struggled in dragging his enormous bulk.

The Alpha grunted and thundered back to his shuttle. His task here was done. Within an hour, he was back on his flagship and in slipspace. He couldn't afford to stay in one place for too long, let alone one that had already been targeted by his enemies. It went against the core of his new war doctrine.

The bridge was quiet all around him. The ship's crew knew better than to interrupt their leader's brooding, particularly when he was emitting the barely-restrained-violence pheromones his body was pumping out.

That caution, however, was not shared by whoever was attempting to contact the vessel. A light blinked angrily on Atriox's control chair. He snarled and jammed a massive finger against the appropriate surface.

The hologram of a sangheili appeared before him. The four-mandibled, saurian alien looked irritated. The sight stirred up dozens of memories in the jiralhanae, memories of the days of the Covenant. Days when the sight of a sangheili with a disapproving expression generally meant horrific and humiliating consequences for whatever jiralhanae happened to be within striking distance.

“Fleetmaster Atriox,” the sangheili, Let 'Volir, began. “It has been some time since I heard from you. Business has been profitable lately, I trust?”

Atriox stared with a neutral expression. The white-hot rage he had felt upon first seeing his...subordinate...had settled into a cold fury in the bottom of his gullet. His lips curled into a smirk on the sides of his short muzzle.

“It has,” the Jiralhanae Alpha confirmed. “My people are truly relishing the prosperity this new age is bringing them. Time has never been better for us.”

'Volir's mandibles clung tight to his face at that. Atriox knew that the shipmaster was a loyalist; he believed in the old Covenant, and wished fervently to resurrect it and lead his people back into the old ways. Atriox took great pleasure in rubbing the jiralhanae's success in the elitist tyrant's face.

“Indeed,” the sangheili said. “You will forgive me, but I fear my ship and I have seen little of this prosperity. Perhaps you might share some of these new 'feeding grounds' with us?”

Atriox snorted. He had assigned the sangheili to raid some of the independent unggoy nation-states that had arisen after the Great Schism had shattered the Covenant. They were impoverished, but none of the unggoy had yet developed anything resembling a cohesive national infrastructure or military apparatus. They were a small but reliable source of income for the Banished.

More importantly, they kept the sangheili from ever gaining a considerable amount of wealth. Or glory.
“I am afraid that will be quite impossible,” Atriox said. He made sure to imitate the patronizing tone with which the sangheili fleetmasters had kept the jiralhanae oppressed for centuries. “My other forces are already handling all of the assigned territory. Besides,” he smirked again, “I feel that your current assignment is what your...band...are best suited to. Don't you agree, mercenary?”

'Volir was clearly restraining himself from shouting in rage. Atriox drank in every detail. Eventually, the sangheili capitulated. He needed the income and supplies that the Banished could offer if he was ever to get his revolution off the ground. He nodded his serpentine head and saluted—Atriox chuckled as he noticed the proud warrior almost retch at giving him the gesture of respect—and terminated the call.

Atriox let out a satisfied sigh. That had bolstered his spirits.

Unfortunately, his ordered mind quickly forced his attention back to matters of business. His contented smile faded. He pressed a few more times on his control surface, bringing up images of the temporary base that had formerly held the Spartan prisoners.

The prison camp was a burnt ruin. The collapsible buildings were melted and warped beyond recognition; a fair amount of their material had been blown clear of the camp and landed in the terrain beyond. The tents had all been scorched, with most of them having been blown to the perimeter and piled up against the energy fences by the sheer force of the blasts. He snarled as he was once again reminded of just how expensive this failure was.

They had captured three—THREE—of the humans' elite warriors. It was no secret how valuable the 'Spartans' were to the human empire. The vital role they played both for the vermin's military might and their sense of pride was well known to the former Covenant races. The Banished could have demanded any ransom they wanted for them!

Now they were all gone. As was their armor. As was the sizable group of slaves that were also being kept there. All because of his Beta's failure, and whoever this new threat was.

As his mighty flagship soared through slipspace, Atriox resolved to find out who had done this. Who was suddenly attacking his warriors and interfering with the acquisition of glory. He would find them, and when he did, their fate would make that of the late Beta seem merciful in comparison.

The night seemed to swallow the dim beams of light. The Lucian officer blinked in pain as he watched the cargo shuttles touch down a few dozen meters away. It had been too long since he’d had a smoke and he was starting to feel sick. He would have had one hours ago but he needed to have a clear head for this operation. He'd have to take a break as soon as business here was concluded to get his fix.

Clouds of dirt were kicked up and the trees of the nearby forest were ruffled by the push of the arriving ships' engines. The sound was deafening and could doubtless be heard dozens of miles away. It was a good thing this section of the planet was largely uninhabited. Those old Empire-era ore haulers weren't built for clandestine meetings.

Of course, the sheer size of the shipment would have defeated attempts at stealth in any event. There were dozens of large cargo containers full of Kassa piled up behind him. The war with the Tau'ri had delayed moving the product for some time, leading to a bottleneck that needed to be cleared immediately, or the crop would begin to rot.
The officer was about to order the shipment to be loaded onto the transport when he was shot in the chest.

He collapsed against his own vehicle, sliding to the ground and leaving a bloody trail against the side of the ship. Tau'ri weapons fire rang out across the backwoods. The treeline was alight with their flashes.

Stargate Command had found them.

The officer struggled to stay awake. He drew his zat'nik'tel, activating the serpentine-shaped sidearm and directing his shaky aim toward the perimeter.

His human mercenaries, thankfully, were proving themselves worth every penny. They returned fire with their staff weapons and confiscated Tau'ri firearms. The Lucian officer smiled through gritted teeth at the smell of burnt flesh and the cries of pain. He fired wildly, desperate to take some of his foes down before his mounting exhaustion made accuracy impossible.

A hand grasped his wrist from the side. The Lucian turned his head. An SGC soldier had snuck up on him.

Stars exploded in front of his eyes as the other man punched him in the face.

The Lucian officer's vision cleared to find the zat'nik'tel having fallen from his grasp and some kind of restraint applied to his wrists.

More than anything else in the world, he wanted a smoke. The itch on the back of his neck was screaming at him. Suddenly, it faded. The world started spinning. Blood loss was finally taking its toll. He considered letting the darkness claim him.

The soldier pressed some sort of large syringe into the Lucian's chest wound. Instantly, the area became numb and the bleeding slowed. His eyes shot open as whatever he'd just been injected with jolted him back awake.

“Area secured,” the soldier reported. He collected the fallen zat'nik'tel as he rose to his feet.

“Good work securing the area, SG-9,” another voice answered. The Lucian couldn't see whoever was speaking. After several moments, another figure walked into his field of vision. “You know the drill, people. Log the cargo and begin disposal preparations.” There was a pause as they looked the injured man over. The Lucian could feel the grin in their voice as they said, “Looks like we've got a prisoner, boys.”

The world went black as some sort of covering was forced over his head.

“Now that's a beautiful sight,” Grogan opined.

“Damn straight, Captain,” Major Williamson agreed.

They were looking at an area just to the side of several cargo containers. The contents of the abortive shipment had been removed, cataloged, and promptly set ablaze. The smoke rose high into the air.
and was carried away by the wind. The Lucian Alliance would definitely be feeling the loss of this much Kassa.

Grogan tried not to think of what this strike had cost. The ambush had been well-executed, but it had been rushed. The enemy had been too experienced and had solid defenses. The Camelot strike force simply hadn't had the time to properly prepare and lay in wait. Several ODSTs had been severely wounded and would likely rotate out of Camelot altogether. Stargate Command had also taken a hit, suffering its first KIA since the formation of the joint unit. SG-3 had lost one of its own. Grogan fought back the pang of guilt that thought produced.

“I confess, I share your satisfaction, Grogan and Williamson of Earth,” their guest replied, thankfully drawing his mind away from morbid topics. “This vile substance has done my people great harm in the past.”

Rak'nor was observing the proceedings with a grin. The representative of the Freedom Coalition had been communicating with Camelot HQ about an unrelated matter and was in position to be quickly called over to the site of their latest strike. Col. Mitchell hoped this would serve as a gesture of goodwill between Earth and the largest of the Free Jaffa factions. Rak'nor and his small squad of warriors definitely seemed impressed with the results. This should be good for relations.

“If I may ask, Rak'nor of Dakara,” Grogan said, careful to maintain the proper decorum when addressing a Jaffa warrior, “what events are you referring to? I've read of Kassa use among the Free Jaffa but I'd like to hear your perspective on it.”

“Certainly, honored ally,” Rak'nor replied. The excessive formality was a cultural norm for the Jaffa. It had first been instilled as protocol for behavior during the days of the Goa'uld Empire. Back then submission to accomplished warriors had been an extension of the deference to their supposed 'gods' that was instilled in them from birth. These days it was more general respect for or between people in positions of authority. Rak'nor continued. “The collapse of the Goa'uld Empire, while a glorious occurrence, had its share of unfortunate consequences. There was great political, economic, and social upheaval. Many were unable to cope with how their world had changed and turned to any source of escape they could find.” The warrior took a moment to glower at the few—battered—prisoners that SG-9 had managed to take last night. “The Lucian snakes took advantage of this desperation and lured many of them into Kassa addiction. I have seen countless households, and some entire worlds, lead to ruin in this manner.”

Grogan noticed a female Marine turn and approach them. Upon closer inspection he recognized her as the UNSC's intelligence agent: Major Dare. Instantly, he was on his guard. The rifleman wondered what she could be doing here. Intelligence personnel didn't usually walk into warzones, particularly ones that hadn't been completely secured. He was doubly suspicious considering she was wearing standard Marine gear and he didn't remember her presence being mentioned in the briefing. Weirdly, she was approaching the Major. It wouldn't have surprised Grogan if Williamson had known about her presence here, but he wondered why she would draw attention to herself like this. Wasn't the whole point of an spook to blend into the background?

“Major Williamson. A word?” she asked. Williamson nodded and excused himself from the conversation. He walked the spook a few meters away to talk in private. The two conversed for several minutes before returning. Dare hung back respectfully behind the officer as he voiced a question that she had apparently broached. When Grogan heard what it was, he was glad Dare had the wisdom not to pose the query to the proud warrior herself.
“Just how much of a problem is Kassa addiction for the Free Jaffa these days?”

The Training Hall was full of soldiers. The holographic interiors used in training scenarios were deactivated. The emitters were visible at various points, although they were mostly mounted on the walls or else small enough to avoid getting in anyone’s way. Considering how packed the room was, this was most definitely a good thing. It almost felt hard to breathe in there, they were crammed in so tight.

Grogan’s eyes wandered over the room. Nearly all of the field troopers were present, clad in simple base fatigues. ODSTs and SGC soldiers milled about, conversing relatively quietly, waiting for whatever they had been summoned for. He looked over to the ODST standing next to him.

“Any idea what this is about, Taylor?” he asked.

“Not a clue,” the Marine Captain replied with a slight shrug, letting the conversation drop immediately. Grogan suppressed his annoyance at being blown off. The two of them had continued to develop a bit of a rapport since the rescue mission. Nothing that he would consider ‘friendship’ as yet, but there was a continued cooling of the tensions that they had started with. It was a step to his goal. A baby step, but still.

“Attention!” a voice boomed. Every soldier present stood straight. The members of Blue Team entered the room...followed by a group of five similarly armored figures that Grogan had never seen before. He studied them intently. They were clearly Series IV Spartans. He could tell because of their relatively smaller size compared to the Series II Blue Team, plus the slightly different armor they wore. The documents on the supersoldiers that the SGC personnel had been allowed to read were sparse but Grogan had poured over them nonetheless. It was better to know something than nothing. The Master Chief—identifiable because he was once again carrying his Assault Rifle on his back—walked forward as his fellow Spartans hung back. Salutes were exchanged; at ease was granted.

“Behind me,” the Chief began, gesturing the the unfamiliar group, “are the newest arrivals to Camelot. Their callsign is Fireteam Majestic. They are a unit of Series IV Spartans and they will be augmenting our operations in the field.”

Many of the ODSTs shifted uncomfortably. It was obvious that they were unhappy with more of their institutional rivals being present. They wanted to prove that they were the top dogs again. Personally, Grogan couldn’t care less. He had seen what Spartans could do. As far as he was concerned, the more the merrier. And the harder Camelot could hit back against humanity’s enemies.

“Howver,” the Chief continued, “recent events have brought into question the utility of the Spartan-IV program. Over 30% of the current graduated class was killed in the failed assassination attempt of the Banished leader Atriox. In the wake of that event, it has been decided that all Spartan-IVs assigned to Camelot will undergo an additional training regimen to ensure that such disasters never occur again.”

Poorly suppressed snickers could be heard in the crowd. The Chief ignored them.

“The members of Majestic will be participating in training exercises in which Blue Team will serve as the primary instructors and opposition,” the Chief announced. “However, the demands of continued operation in Camelot will require my team and I be available for particularly high-risk missions. As such, to avoid delays in the completion of the training regimen, members of the non-
augmented personnel will be called upon to serve as OPFOR when Blue Team is unavailable.”

Grogan winced as he thought back to the brief training exercise he had participated in before the rescue mission. The one where the friction between ODST and SGC lead to Blue Team easily dominating them. This was sounding a lot like an exercise in masochism to him.

“Participation in this program will be strictly voluntary for the time being,” the Chief explained, surprising Grogan. “The demands of serving in Camelot are great and no one will expect all of you to add another exhausting duty on top of it. Those who wish to participate may report to the Training Hall at 0600 tomorrow. Dismissed.”

That was interesting, the captain thought. Why would they leave it up to the rank and file to decide who would be involved in this? A thought occurred to him immediately. He had no way to confirm it but it was interesting enough to warrant his involvement in the program.

If nothing else, he wanted to prove that he could do better than last time's poor performance. To prove that he wouldn't get people killed.

He glanced at his squadmates. By the looks in their eyes, he could tell that they were all in.

“What do you think, Grogan?” Captain Taylor asked from behind him. “Gonna join us to kick a little transhuman ass?” Turning to face the Marines, he got the impression that the ODSTs were eager as well, although probably for more antagonistic reasons.

Grogan smiled. He couldn't help but return the enthusiasm. “Wouldn't miss it.”

The color of the walls was predominantly white. Emergency crash kits were mounted on the wall at every intersection. A sterile, clinical smell filled the air. It seemed for all the world like a standard UEG hospital.

With a few key differences, the Master Chief thought. The walls, floor, and ceiling were predominantly made of the metal/stone material that former Goa'uld facilities were constructed from. Most of the security officers carried staff weapons. Instead of English or any other terrestrial language, all snatches of overheard conversation were in common goa'uld.

The rehab clinic had come along nicely.

The members of Blue Team marched through the halls, taking stock of everything in sight. They had been ordered to perform an additional inspection as well as provide any assistance they could to the staff. Apparently, Camelot had been unable to get a sizable enough budget for this endeavor.

Most rooms were dedicated to four or more inmates. They were visible through open doors or glass viewports. Some were conversing with each other. Some were allowed free movement. Some, still caught in the physical symptoms of withdrawal, were restrained for their own safety.

The other residents, the ones the Spartans were most concerned with, were restrained for an entirely different reason. Though given their condition he doubted they would have been much threat even if they hadn't been immobilized.

The Spartans approached a sealed off wing of the facility. The Chief tapped some commands into his
The quartet of supersoldiers passed through the checkpoint.

They left the wide hallway and entered a kind of common area. They nodded to the guard behind the desk, taking careful note of his level of readiness. He was slouching a bit, but he had carefully examined each of them and the Chief could tell he was double checking the security code. The rest of the guards were evenly spaced on the perimeter of the room. They were only equipped with shock sticks to eliminate the possibility of the inmates (or 'patients' as much of the staff liked to refer to them) grabbing them and breaching security. Cameras were strategically placed to cover all visible points, ensuring a record of everything that went on. The alarm switches mounted on the walls blinked silently to indicate that they would still function in the event of a breakout or other violent occurrence. Everything looked in order.

The common area had a number of tables and chairs in it. Several patients could be seen milling about. The newer patients, those who had smoked Kassa most recently, were trembling and shivering almost uncontrollably. They were covered in heavy blankets, and the nursing staff was clearly keeping an eye on them. The more stable ones were conversing with each other in hushed tones. Some of them were playing some kind of game involving wooden pegs placed in slots in a board.

They were, naturally, all in restraints. Lucian Alliance prisoners couldn't be allowed to roam free.

Most were bound by chain-link shackles attached to the heavy metal tables they sat in front of. A few of the more...twitchy patients were firmly secured to wheelchairs, unable to move on their own power, and were wheeled in and out of the common area in accordance to whatever treatment regimen had been prescribed to them.

This was...unusual, to say the least. The Chief had never been assigned to any POW facilities but he had read reports of how Insurrectionist prisoners had been treated (Covenant were seldom taken prisoner, and never lived long when they did). There had been little to none of the coddling that he was witnessing here. Another way that this galaxy was different from the one he had grown up in.

The Master Chief approached the Head Nurse. “We have some supplies for you, ma'am,” he said. He gestured to the small crates Fred and Linda were carrying. They contained some detox chemicals and other supplies needed for the treatment of Kassa addiction. It was the excuse Command had given for the inspection.

The Head Nurse confirmed the arrival of the supplies and the crates were placed in lockup in short order. The Chief made another scan of the room as his siblings put the supplies away.

He did a slight double take.

The doctors were mostly human, primarily UNSC but a few SGC as well. What few Free Jaffa doctors were present were paying close attention, eager to learn the ins and outs of drug rehabilitation. It was yet another aspect of modern medicine that the Goa'uld Empire had shown no interest in.

The nursing staff, on the other hand, was entirely Free Jaffa. They were all women and wore what looked like standard scrubs, only with an attached Muslim hijab-style hood covering their heads.

What had drawn his attention was the face of one of the nurses, which had been made visible when the individual moved and he got a clear view of her behind the hood. She was wearing makeup to
darken her skin slightly, her hair was dyed a different color, and the expression on her face made her seem to be a gentle but firm healer with not a micro-gram of combat experience in her.

Even so, the Chief recognized her immediately: Veronica Dare, Major, Office of Naval Intelligence.

The Chief turned away and watched the intelligence agent from the corner of his eye. She was interacting with one of the prisoners, this one far enough along in his detox to actually hold a conversation. She giggled lightly at one of his jokes. It was a wholly uncharacteristic sound that he never would have imagined coming out of the normally stern and professional soldier.

Suddenly, this place made a lot more sense. The Chief had wondered why Camelot was expending so many resources to set up a rehabilitation clinic for Kassa addicts. Let alone one that treated captured Lucian Alliance personnel. Command had finally issued more funds and resources, and the first thing Col. Mitchell did was this? It hadn't made any sense to him.

Now he understood: it was a way to obtain intel. Major Dare would be able to coerce far more reliable intelligence with a kind word and an unsuspecting patient than she ever would with torture equipment. He was sure Agent Maybourne was also at work, although he couldn't imagine the 'Florence Nightingale' routine working for the man. He was probably interrogating a prisoner in one of the rooms just past the common area.

Their tasks done, the Spartans left the secure portion of the facility. The made their way down the halls toward the barracks area that housed the Camelot and Free Jaffa security force. He idly watched the soldiers manning the perimeter through the windows as they went.

They entered the barracks. Another common area, similar to the one they had just left, greeted them. The facility had just opened a few days ago and the first duty rotation was just about up. After this there would only be a token force from Camelot present to offer security; the soldiers of the 'Freedom Coalition', the Free Jaffa faction that owned the planet they were on, would fill in from there. SG-9 and a fireteam of ODSTs had provided the initial security. The human soldiers were scattered around the room, some of them talking to some of the Free Jaffa guards who would be relieving them. The Chief noticed the Camelot CO off to the side, talking with the commander of the facility.

The CO noticed him and raised up a hand. They were to wait until he was done with his conversation. The Spartans obediently hung back. By chance, they found themselves next to a table that included a mix of SG-9, ODST, and Coalition security.

“...glad we could help, Rak'nor,” Captain Grogan was saying. “Anything we can do to assist your people.”

“Do you have many of these facilities among the Tau'ri?” the Coalition warrior, Rak'nor, replied. The Chief was confused. From what he'd read, Rak'nor was a rather significant figure in the Coalition military. A bit of a trusted agent of politicians high in their government. What was he doing here? Perhaps he was performing an inspection of his own.

“A few,” Grogan said, his face somewhere between a smirk and a grimace. “We don't have Kassa on Earth, but there's more than enough addictive substances to deal with.”

Rak'nor turned to one of the ODSTs, a Captain Taylor. “And what of you, Taylor of UNSC? Do your people have experience in such things?”

“A lot,” the ODST grunted. “Although most places aren't exclusively dedicated to addicts. I've seen
enough aid facilities over the course of the war, treating refugees mostly, and they all kind of blend together after a while. I was never really involved in any health stuff, anyway.”

“You must have had quite a few refugees, if what I've read of the Human-Covenant War was accurate,” Grogan hazarded.

“Like you wouldn't believe,” Taylor replied. “Millions of 'em. Hell, millions upon millions upon millions. The Covenant destroyed dozens of worlds over the course of the War. The UEG is still trying to figure out what to do with all of the people that managed to slip away from the glassing.” He looked around briefly before continuing. “Judging from experience, I wouldn't count on this place being up and running for long.”

“Why do you say that?” Grogan asked.

Taylor snorted. “Because, however much aid sites may be needed, eventually someone up the chain is gonna decide that training soldiers and building rifles is more important than keeping the little people alive. Funding for this place will dry up the second the going gets tough. Trust me on this. I've seen it before.”

Captain Grogan frowned at this. He seemed oddly offended at the suggestion that Command would make what was effectively a triage decision. Unexpectedly, horrifyingly, he turned his eyes to the Chief next. “What about you, Master Chief? You agree with Captain Taylor? Any experience with this kind of thing?”

The Spartan shifted uncomfortably. He checked his peripheral vision and noted that the CO was still busy. He kept an eye on him, desperate to escape the casual conversation, but couldn't think of an excuse not to answer. “…no, sir. No experience,” he said. “The Spartan-IIs were never deployed to anything like this facility.”

“…nothing then, either,” the Chief said. There were countless reasons he wasn't allowed to answer that question with honesty.

“What about before?” Grogan asked. “You know, before you enlisted? Before you were a soldier?”

“…nothing then, either,” the Chief said. There were countless reasons he wasn't allowed to answer that question with honesty.

“What about family? Or friends?” Grogan persisted. The Chief suppressed a growl; this was getting annoying.

“I was an orphan,” he answered. “Grew up in a state facility. I never had a family. Or friends.” His tone and brevity were pretty clear indicators that he wanted this conversation to end. He wasn't an expert in human interaction, but even he knew that what he just did was the verbal equivalent of a heavy weapons strike. There was no way the SGC officer should have been able to miss it.

“What about the other members of Blue Team?” Grogan asked. The Chief heard the sound of a boot kicking a leg under the table. Judging by body language, Captain Satterfield was strongly communicating to her superior that he should back off. The Spartan felt a bit of gratitude toward her.

Still, Grogan was an officer, and he owed him an answer. “They're orphans, too. Same story.”

“All of them?” Grogan and Taylor shared a look. "You're files suggest you were all born well before the Human-Covenant War began,” Grogan said. Satterfield gave him a subtle glare. “Strange coincidence.”
“Yes,” the Chief said. “It is.”

At last, the CO finished his conversation with the facility's commander. The Chief excused himself, never having been happier to get away from a fellow soldier. It was even worse when the other soldier was a foreigner.

At least the Sangheili hadn't been so chatty.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11 On the Trail

Weapons-fire rang out throughout the settlement. The Lucian trader growled, attempting to cover his terror with anger.

“Move faster, worms!” he shouted, his voice cracking. The slaves hurried along, chains clinking as they went, afraid of the shock-whips their owner and his lackeys would employ if they did not comply. His personal slave boy stumbled, but managed to keep pace with his master. Normally, this would have earned the incompetent a stern blow in reproach, but there was simply no time now. The punishment would have to wait for later.

The day had started out so well. The trader had arrived at this backwater cesspit ready to sell the wares so graciously provided by the Banished. The local leadership had been only too happy to welcome them. The goa’uld had enjoyed raiding this world for new hosts and seeing the fallen System Lords’ servants reduced to forced servitude appealed to the local residents immensely. They had suffered for generations from the violence of the Jaffa, and the memories of those dark times would not fade soon. Everything had been going perfectly.

Then the Stargate had opened, strange Tau’ri had emerged, and everything had gone to hell. Now he was rushing back to his ship and trying to salvage what little of his enterprise remained.

At last, the Lucians and their property reached the airfield. Chaos reigned as everyone involved in illicit activities rushed to reach their vessels.

The trader spotted several of his comrades far across the field. They were rushing to load heavy crates back aboard their ships. Those must be the spoils from Banished raids. He felt slightly better about his chances. Surely, the Tau’ri would prioritize the recovery of such valuable goods over a few worthless slaves? He smiled and decided to risk a look back the way his party had come.

He glanced back just in time to see one of his guards shot in the head. Tau’ri weapons fire rang out from the edges of the airfield. The slaves all threw themselves to the ground, the former Jaffa long used to life in warzones. His guards attempted to fire back with their staff weapons but were quickly picked off. The once-successful Lucian quickly found himself staring down the barrels of several Tau’ri weapons. He dropped his pathetic zat’nik’tel and surrendered.

“Col. Mitchell sends his regards,” one of the Tau’ri, a female, gloated as she placed him in restraints. This mockery merely added insult to further injury as he saw his slave boy likewise chained. This was an outrage—only he had the right to handle his own property—but there was precious little he could do.

“Cut the chatter, SG-9-Three,” another, older voice said as the trader was forced to the ground. “And stick to codenames in the field.”

The sound of the other vessels taking off drowned out the voices and seemed to mock the businessman as his enemies lead him away.
The corridors were empty. There was no sign of hostiles. Grogan was getting nervous. This was too simple.

He was squadleader for this exercise, so he motioned his team forward using hand signals. His team was in sight and there was no reason to risk burst transmissions that could be detected by the enemy. That was supposed to be impossible, given the amount of data required to send a series of HUD blips was so small and the transmissions so short, but he could never shake the feeling that each time he used the feature he was sending up a signal flare.

Another of the troopers moved forward. Grogan noticed her scan the holographic pipes running along the ceiling of the simulated industrial facility. Good. She was alert. There could be booby traps hidden there even if a Spartan couldn't fit. The rest of the team moved up after her.

There was a ghost of a blip on their motion trackers. Every member of the team froze. They crouched down, weapons up, alert for any sign of the enemy.

A Spartan flew through a door.

The figure moved so fast Grogan could barely even see it. It was just a blur moving across the hallway and disappearing into a room on the opposite side. The behemoth of a soldier made a loud thump as they landed out of sight. Despite the speed the armored figure had to have been moving, one of Grogan's team signaled having been neutralized.

“Fall back!” he shouted. They had been discovered. There was little choice but to scrub the mission. The team laid down covering fire on the doorway the supersoldier had vanished behind.

Another whisper on the motion trackers. This one was...

He whirled to face behind them. Another Spartan rolled into view, stopping in a crouch. They fired several bursts.

Another of the squad went down.

Then another

Grogan was alone. His pulse pounded louder in his ears and a ball of lead formed in his gut. This was it. The Spartan started firing on him.

Fortunately, the SGC Officer's armor was able to withstand several direct hits. He was struck twice before he could fully orient on the new hostile. He fired back, forcing the Spartan's energy shield to flare. The supersoldier adjusted their aim.

Grogan's armor pinged and locked up. He had been downed. An outline of his profile popped up on his HUD. It seemed that the first few shots had struck center mass, but the killing blow had hit his visor. The exercise was over.

He scowled. They hadn't even gotten close to achieving the objective. This was only the second voluntary training exercise he had taken part in, but he had still hoped to have done better than this.

The post-exercise briefing was not fun. Grogan had assumed that they had been caught in a pincer
maneuver between two Spartans. It turned out, the entire squad had been downed by one of the six-and-two-thirds-foot-tall augmented infantry. The Spartan in question, Majestic-Two, had circled around their position at close to 60 kmp and flanked them within a second. The power of these Spartans was ridiculous!

“You know, those guys can be kinda frustrating,” Grogan griped as he and his teammates began removing their armor post-exercise. The Spartans did not utilize the same locker room, as the augmented and non-augmented personnel had been segregated at the UNSC’s insistence. Apparently, MJOLNIR armor was classified beyond the others’ level, so the supersoldiers had separate locker rooms, support stations, and technicians for their armor.

“Welcome to our world,” Taylor remarked with a smirk. Another member of the practice squad, also an ODST, chuckled in agreement.

“It wasn't so bad,” Satterfield, the final member of the squad today, remarked. She was always trying to lift people's spirits. “At least we got an idea of what our new armor can do.”

Grogan was forced to admit that she had a point about their new gear. The Camelot Offworld Combat Armor (OCA-1) system was a hybrid of technologies from both Earths—and more than a bit of alien tech thrown in for good measure. The basic helmet followed the ODST visual style but had been hardened with a ceramic polymer and coated in the energy absorbent fabrics the SGC had only just started utilizing. In terms of added functionality, the helmet's systems had been greatly enhanced using goa'uld crystal computer technology. Night vision, thermal/infrared, motion tracking systems good to about 100 yards, and even a new X-Ray-style enhanced vision meant to penetrate slight obstructions and (most importantly) enemy cloaking technology. It was enough to give the more excitable troopers an uncomfortable situation in the groin section. Unfortunately, the more advanced sensors, being brand new and reverse engineered from alien tech, hadn't been sufficiently miniaturized to fit inside the armor. They were mounted via hinge onto the exterior-front of the helmet itself. If Grogan wanted to use it he'd have to pull it down over his visor, which would severely limit his field of vision. Only for emergencies, then.

Next came the torso. The pressurized body glove that made up the inner layer of the ODST armor had gotten a bit of an upgrade. Internal pressure seals and locks, a standard oxygen supply, and various automated biomonitoring tech ensured hours of viability in hazardous environments up to and including vacuum. To protect the sensitive components, the entire system was coated in three layers of energy absorbent fabrics based on Kull warrior armor. Nothing short of artillery-grade energy weapons would be frying this gear's innards.

On top of the body glove was a modified version of the ODST armor's exterior layer. The current generation energy resistant armor pieces had been stripped in favor of hexagonal ceramic polymer plates that provided even greater protection and flexibility. It looked closer to the scale-like advanced body armors of Grogan's homeworld than that of the UNSC.

Finally, adding to the armor's overall effectiveness was a heavily modified version of the Revision Exoskeleton System. It resembled a mechanical framework strapped to the outer edges of the limbs and spine, a contraption of metal rods and powered hinges, and was designed to shoulder the majority of the weight a trooper was expected to haul. It also increased strength and speed. Nothing approaching Spartan levels, of course, but it would make clearing small obstructions or digging a foxhole far less painful.

Dr. Halsey had initially sneered at the OCA concept, calling it cobbled-together and utterly inelegant, and had refused to touch it. However, the forces of Camelot had needed an edge. A fact that Colonel Mitchell and, if rumor was to be believed, the Master Chief himself had impressed upon her. Thus,
the career perfectionist worked with Colonel Carter and Captain Hailey to create an armor system that could aid their combined troopers in the field. Appropriating an exoskeleton system the US Army had been developing, as well as other assets authorized after the successful rescue of Commander Palmer, the Camelot R&D department had developed prototypes within a week. According to Colonel Carter, future versions of the armor would be more streamlined, have better protection and enhanced capabilities, and possibly even sport an energy shield. Grogan couldn't wait.

Taylor snorted. “We know what these things can do against simulated rounds, you mean. There's no way to be certain until we get them in the field.”

“They held up well in the demonstration video,” Satterfield defended.

She was referring to a recording that the Camelot soldiers had been shown of the OCA-1 being tested against captured enemy weapons. They had stood up to staff weapon, plasma rifle, and spiker fire with remarkable effectiveness.

It had been a memorable video for one other reason: Captain Hailey had been wearing the armor when it was being tested. There had, of course, been tests with inanimate dummies wearing the armor before that. Still, having a living person show it off from the inside did much to assure the soldiers of its effectiveness. The young officer herself had told her teammates that she wouldn't risk anyone else's life with armor she hadn't personally tested. Grogan suspected that she also didn't trust anyone else to take the maiden voyage with the project she, Col. Carter, and Dr. Halsey had invested so much time into.

It was this time spent in the lab that was responsible for Hailey not taking part in the training exercises. There was simply not enough hours in the day for her to throw herself against a wall of Spartans and work on engineering projects that would help save their lives. Grogan figured it was a fair trade, even if he did miss her watching his back.

Major Williamson had likewise declined the exercises, resulting in a mixed team of Grogan, Satterfield, Taylor, and another ODST. Although, the Major's reason was more shaky. He had said that this was 'kid stuff' and that he had more important things to do. Grogan suspected that his superior just wanted him and Satterfield to come into their own.

“I remember the demonstration,” Taylor replied. His tone was curt, but not outright aggressive. “Just saying: there's no substitute for actual combat.”

Grogan had to agree. Although, it had already proven itself useful in one concrete manner: It was uniform.

The SGC and UNSC units were no longer using different armor systems. From the outside, there was nothing to distinguish a soldier serving one nation from a soldier serving the other. Combined with the attempts at socializing and shared battle experience, the lack of unit cohesion that had spoiled their training session prior to the rescue mission had begun to vanish.

It still hadn't been enough.

Grogan sighed, frowning to himself as he set his helmet down and began working on his boots. A technician immediately grabbed it and plugged it into a computer to analyze the data recorded within. The front-line troopers ignored him, used to the support staff scurrying around in the background.

“Something bothering you, sir?” Satterfield asked. Her eyes were earnest; she wasn't teasing.
“We need to do better,” he replied. “We didn't even get as close as the first time we went up against Spartans, and those were the Series II. We can't afford to go soft.”

“Blue Team only had three soldiers to work with,” Satterfield countered. “Majestic's working with a full roster.”

“We still lost,” he said. He glanced down at his hand, remembering a mission from a long time ago. Remembering the weight of a handful of dogtags trying to pull him into the ground to join his friends. He set his features. “We need to do better.”

Taylor laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. It shook Grogan right out of his memories before they could swamp him again. He was pretty grateful for that, although he'd never admit to anyone that it had happened at all. Taylor continued. “That's what I like to hear. I take it you'll keep coming back to the meat grinder?”

“Damn straight,” he replied. Now Grogan was the one wearing the smirk. “I don't like to lose.”

“I assure you, we're doing all that we can, Mr. Lea'rc,” Colonel Mitchell sighed.

The Camelot Commanding Officer was leaving a meeting with some Free Jaffa leaders. He and his escort, which included Grogan, walked down the hall of the local seat of government. The meeting had went well. Camelot had arranged everything that their operation on this planet required.

Unfortunately, one attendee of the meeting was proving rather insistent. He was followed by a retinue of servants, assistants, and armed guards. His clothing reminded Grogan of an even more gaudy and less subtle Harry Maybourne.

“Oh, he did,” Grogan thought. If it were him, he'd probably be chewing the man out by now. Colonel Mitchell, though, was the kind of guy to give a man enough rope to hang himself with.

“Of course, of course, Warrior Mitchell,” the man insisted. His numerous necklaces and bracelets clinked as he walked. “I meant no insult to your prowess. I merely suggest that perhaps your warriors are a bit...misguided in their priorities.”

The Colonel stopped walking. They were getting close to the entrance, and Grogan figured that the officer didn't want any member of the public to hear. It was a marked contrast to the brief journey from the meeting hall, during which the CO had given every impression of wanting to simply outrun the over-weight pest. His stance and expression suggested he had somewhere to be and was not at all happy at being delayed. The civilian's guards tensed, sensing the Colonel's veiled hostility, but made no move to raise their staff weapons. Mitchell asked, “forgive me, sir, but could you clarify? I don't believe I understood you correctly.”

“Certainly, Proud Warrior,” the businessman said. He seemed to be deliberately ignoring the signals Mitchell was sending his way. The look on his face could be described as 'professional but friendly'. It was the kind of thing that automatically set Grogan on edge; he had seen many a politician wear that exact expression. “I am, as you know, a member of one of the premier trading corporations to emerge following the end of the tyranny of the goa’uld. As such, we have found ourselves the targets of much of the banditry that the Lucian's new thugs are committing. I merely suggest that your warriors could dedicate a bit more effort to protecting and recovering our property.”
Grogan’s eyes hardened behind his polarized visor. He was happy to see his expression mirrored in his superior.

“You understand, of course,” Mitchell said, “that we prioritize the recovery of civilians over that of cargo.”

“Yes, yes, and I commend you for your noble intentions,” the man said, “but I fear you are misguided. Remember that organizations like mine drive the economies of the communities that the Lucian's thugs target. If we are unable to conduct business, entire worlds could slide into economic depression. Planets are unable to defend themselves if they are beset by financial woes. I ask you: what is the point of rescuing people if their fate once rescued is to live in squalor until they are inevitably targeted again? Is it truly better for them to starve than to be pressed into servitude?”

Grogan had to fight to keep himself from tearing into the man. He recognized the organization this ‘Lear’c’ represented. He had read about it. It was a corporation called the ‘Reh'neg Consortium’. It was named after a high-ranking member of the Goa'uld Empire, Reh'neg of Delmak, who had served under the System Lord Sokar. Specifically, he was one of the people chiefly responsible for the logistical infrastructure behind Sokar's ascent to power. The rapid assembly of the sadistic goa'uld's fleet would have been impossible without his ‘loyal servant's’ direct contributions. For his bureaucratic genius, Reh'neg was rewarded with wealth and vast resources.

When Sokar was killed by the combined efforts of a rival System Lord, the Tok'ra rebels, and SG-1, Reh'neg shifted his allegiance to System Lord Ba'al, bringing his fortune, connections, and fleet of cargo ships with him. When Ba'al himself was toppled, the now-fabulously successful trader shifted allegiance again to the Free Jaffa. The liberated slaves were in no condition to turn away the resources Reh'neg had at his disposal and allowed him to play a central role in the establishment of a post-goa'uld economy. He now operated across Free Jaffa space with impunity, dealing in trade in all corners of the former Goa'uld Empire. Word had it that he even had trade contacts on Lucia, homeworld of the Lucian Alliance, though there was no official evidence that he had ever dealt with the crime syndicate itself.

Some saw Reh'neg as a hero. A slave who, through his will and his cunning, rose to power under a corrupt and oppressive empire. A success story that enterprising free people everywhere should emulate.

Grogan saw a man who had no particular allegiance to anyone or anything, save his wealth and comforts. The representative of the Reh'neg Consortium who was currently pestering the Colonel seemed to confirm this suspicion.

“We...understand your concerns,” Col. Mitchell told the mid-level bureaucrat, his face still carefully neutral. “However, for the time being, it is our policy to prioritize the recovery of civilians over private property. I am sorry, but I don't foresee that changing in the immediate future.”

Now it was the bureaucrat who tensed. For a brief instant an expression of disbelief and petulant outrage crossed the man's face. It was the look of a spoiled child being denied something for the first time in ages. It was only there for a fraction of a second. A mask of polite disappointment replaced it swiftly.

Grogan was glad that his visor hid his grin. It was always nice to see people like this run themselves against a wall. And Col. Mitchell was, indeed, a solid obstacle to the greedy jerk. Mitchell was a hero among many of the Free Jaffa thanks to his efforts as leader of SG-1 during the post-go'a'uld
chaos and the Ori War. The immense popularity and political clout he gained in that time, as well as that of Stargate Command in general before and after that, made him effectively immune to any intimidation that the Reh'neg might throw his way.

The businessman exchanged a few more words with Mitchell, but it was clear that he knew he had lost this battle. He would be back, though. His kind rarely gave up. This was especially true when there were large sums of money on the table, but Grogan was optimistic about his leader being able to hold his own.

The Reh'neg representative watched the military group leave the building. Grogan was glad to no longer have to listen to the guy. He left the political complex, guarding the right flank along with Satterfield, in a particularly good mood.

Here I thought I couldn't hate the Lucian Alliance any more than I already did.

Grogan scowled to himself. For the millionth time that day, he was glad that his new armor's polarized visor shielded his expressions. Keeping up a poker face would have been hard under the circumstances.

"The freed slaves are recovering well?" Col. Mitchell asked. The head doctor nodded and explained the treatment program in common goa'uld.

The former captives of the Lucian Alliance were sitting around a common area in various stages of withdrawal. Most were still restrained in their cells. It was necessary, now that their captors were no longer providing them with narcotics to keep them docile and dependent. For some reason, seeing these people in pain felt even worse than the last time he'd visited a clinic. Maybe it was because he had been one of the soldiers to rescue these particular slaves. Their suffering felt more personal.

Grogan reminded himself to punch the next Lucian he saw extra hard.

They weren't in the same clinic Grogan had visited before. This was a different facility. Camelot had given the Freedom Coalition the supplies and support needed to set up a small network of rehab centers, placed strategically on planets that had a large amount of Lucian Alliance traffic and therefore a high probability of acquiring useful intel. There had already been significant dividends from the other facilities.

Thank you again, Harry Maybourn, Grogan thought, with no small bit of irony. The man's connections had certainly proven their worth. Lucky thing, considering Grogan didn't think Mitchell would have any problem spacing the foppish git if he stopped delivering.

Useful intelligence or not, the planets Maybourne had ID'ed did have some drawbacks. Namely, that they tended to be impoverished, hence the prevalence of organized crime. This had necessitated Col. Mitchell bringing along a heavy escort for his visit. SG-9 were the troops actually in the room with him, with several other squads keeping the approach and potential evac route secure. Finally, Spartan Fireteam Majestic was on standby as a QRF if there was even a hint of an attack. Mitchell was, after all, certainly a high-level target now.

Of course, not all of the attention was negative. The effectiveness with which he commanded his Teams certainly couldn't be denied and there was more than one rumor going around base that General's stars were in the near future. This fit with the already existing rumors that General Landry had been grooming him to eventually take command of the SGC. As such, adequate security was
something even a man like Mitchell could not wave off.

The Colonel claimed he wanted to personally ensure the well-being of the civilians they rescued. A gesture of goodwill and thoroughness. Personally, Grogan thought the man just missed being in the field. The stuff he did as part of SG-1 was certainly legendary.

“Fear not, Friend Mitchell,” Rak'nor said, responding to the Colonel's question. The Free Jaffa warrior was quickly becoming the unofficial liaison between Camelot and the Coalition. He seemed to be the one trusted with every interaction between the two groups. It made sense, considering he commanded a lot of respect within the Coalition and had the ears of both Teal'c and Bra'tac. A word from him was a word from them, and Rak'nor had no qualms about cutting through the red tape and speaking to the two leaders directly if needed. “Those peoples you delivered from harm are receiving the best of care,” he assured Mitchell.

Rak'nor gestured to the common area, visible through some windows. It followed the same layout as the other clinic Grogan had visited. This made sense, since the Jaffa were following the models provided by Earth. The freed captives continued to go about their business, uncaring or unaware of their presence. Some were eating and some were talking; these were rescued in one of Camelot's earlier missions. The ones rescued more recently...they could only twitch and shiver. Most looked sickly and were covered in sweat. Sometimes they spasmed in pain. Kassa withdrawal was brutal.

“When do you think you'll be able to send them home?” Mitchell asked. His face was carefully neutral. Grogan imagined that, beneath the facade, the man was furious. It must be frustrating to still have to deal with the effects of those Lucian thugs after all this time.

“That, I fear, is complicated,” Rak'nor sighed. “Many of these are citizens of the Ma'sam Fiefdom. Others are from some of the smaller states. The Fiefdom is simply being difficult; they claim that they must ensure that none of the people we send them are spies or saboteurs in disguise. In truth, I believe they are embarrassed that their citizens were rescued by anyone outside their own nation.” The proud warrior nearly snarled those words, but restrained himself with minimal visible effort. All that time spent around Teal’c and Bra’tac must have been paying off. “The smaller states are more...complicated. Their leadership is often in flux, and what figures we know to hold power have poor lines of communication. Simply ensuring that the people we hand the former captives off to are actually representatives of their nation and not slavers in disguise is proving troublesome.”

Grogan had a lot of trouble keeping his disgust to himself. Why did politics always have to make their job so much harder?

Col. Mitchell shook his head. “It's always something when you go international, isn't it?”

Rak'nor paused. He glanced around briefly.

Grogan's ears pricked up. Something was going on. He kept his eyes on the room's entrances and tried harder to pretend he wasn't paying attention.

“Indeed,” the Free Jaffa warrior said. He spoke slowly, carefully, as if he was stepping onto unfamiliar ground. “…I imagine you would know in your...current position...”

The Colonel's eyes sharpened. If it were anyone else, he probably would have replied rather negatively to the comment. It bore all the hallmarks of thinly-veiled politics. However, Rak'nor was an old friend of the SGC, and a protege to two of Earth's oldest allies among the Free Jaffa. This bought some slack.
“...I take it you're referring to the Unified Earth Government?” Mitchell asked. Thankfully, there were no ODSTs currently in the room to overhear.

“Please, pardon me,” Rak'nor said. “I mean no offense. It is simply...” he sighed. “The way they behave. The way the speak to us in the few times they have had cause to. They have a...swagger to them. A kind of assured arrogance that puts me on my guard. I suppose it reminds me a bit too much of the Jaffa of old.”

“Now I have to ask your pardon,” Mitchell said, frowning. “But I don't think you're telling me everything. Sure, the UNSC troopers can be a bit of a handful, but they're not running wild. They aren't any worse than some of the SG Teams. What else is on your mind?”

Rak'nor blinked. He seemed to spend a few seconds running options through his head before he shrugged his shoulders and just started talking. Evidently, he had decided that diplomacy was a form battle he just wasn't suited to. Grogan felt a stab of kinship with the man.

“I don't want to repeat my past mistakes,” the Free Jaffa warrior confided. He gestured to the patch of scar tissue covering the center of his forehead. “When my father burned off my mark, I had not yet been convinced of his ideals. When the System Lords killed him, it seemed proof to me that he must have been wrong. I had to see Teal'c himself be tortured, see him refuse to give in or waver from his beliefs, before I began to understand. I finally saw the goa'uld for the false gods they were and their empire for the evil that it was. Now...now I see what may be a new empire. One with its own fleet, its own network of planets, its own warriors. I have not seen anything to suggest they are as evil as the Goa'uld or the Ori, but...I am cautious. I do not want to be fooled again.”

Col. Mitchell nodded. “I understand,” he said, placing a hand on the other man's shoulder. “Trust me when I say that the situation is not the same. I haven't seen anything to suggest that it is. Just know that the people of Earth with not abide tyranny. We will stand with you if it comes to it.”

Rak'nor smiled. Grogan frowned, unsure how to take this whole thing in.

It didn't take much longer for the trip to run its course. The Colonel had seen what he felt he needed to see. Major Williamson ordered SG-9 to move out, preceding their CO for security. They would be ready for any surprises.

Grogan blinked as he stepped outside. He was not ready for this.

There was a small crowd gathered outside the clinic. They were clearly all civilians, wearing basic brown robes and carrying no weapons. Their eyes lit up when the Earth soldiers entered into view. A man with slightly more elaborate clothing came forward. Col. Mitchell waved down SG-9's order for him to halt.

What followed was a rather elaborate speech spoken in a local dialect of goa'uld that the translator in Grogan's helmet couldn't even begin to make sense of. Fortunately, Grogan himself had studied enough of the goa'uld sub-languages to work out the gist of what the man was saying. He was expressing thanks for the aid the people of Earth had given to this community. The man was a local leader, apparently, and referred to them all as 'Tau'ri', which indicated he thought they were SGC rather than a joint unit.

Colonel Mitchell thanked them as politely as he could, taking pains to avoid anything that could hint toward Camelot's true nature. He accepted a wreath of local flowers and the Camelot group moved
The people who had gathered round parted to let them pass. The men placed their open right hands on their own chests and bowed deeply. The women performed a curtsy that was only slightly clumsy, coming as it was from a group of peasants rather than ruthlessly trained aristocrats. Grogan resisted the urge to shake his head; he felt like he was on parade.

“Did you know about this?” Col. Mitchell asked Rak'nor as soon as they were out of the crowd’s hearing distance. Nice as gratitude was, Camelot was a covert op, and any amount of public attention was to be avoided.

“I did not,” the Free Jaffa replied. “These were representatives of the local community. In hindsight, it is rather unsurprising that they noted your arrival and rushed to thank you. Many of the clinic’s patients are members of their families, particularly the youth. The people here are rarely given assistance by the local government since there are so few funds to go around. Any acts of charity are exceptional.” He smiled as he continued. “I fear you will have to get used to it. While knowledge of just who you and your band are remain secret, many have noted your arrival. Rumors are flying across all of Jaffa space faster than a staff-weapon blast shot through an open Stargate. Your efforts to help my people have not gone unnoticed.”

“Yeah, well, let's try to avoid any more public displays of affection,” Mitchell replied with a smirk. “Much as I wouldn't mind the opportunity to get laid or anything, our outfit is supposed to remain secret.”

“W-who were those men?” the patient asked. Colonel Mitchell and his guard detail had just finished their inspection and left the clinic. The general hum of conversation picked up a bit now that they were gone. “They did not l-look like Jaffa.”

“I am afraid I do not know them,” Major Dare replied in common goa’uld. She was currently playing the role of Free Jaffa nurse, as she had been doing for the past several weeks at various clinics. The skin darkening makeup, fluency in the language used by the Free Jaffa, and assumed accent—she had had insufficient time to perfect the local dialect, so she had settled for a broader Dakara accent that could be used on multiple planets—had so far proven sufficient to sell her as a citizen of the Coalition. She smiled in a self-deprecating manner from beneath her hood. “I fear that I am too low in station to know such things.”

The patient smiled in sympathy. It was clear that he was well accustomed to being treated as a pawn by those in power. Just as Dare knew he would be. She moved to capitalize on the moment of social identification her subject had formed with her. “I must say, you are doing rather well,” she said, examining his arms once again. The track marks and various bruises had faded a good deal in the days since the boy’s capture.

The subject winced. “I-I heal quickly,” he said. The next words were said much more quietly, to the point where they were practically whispered. “I am accustomed to pain.”

Dare straightened in her seat and flooded her eyes with compassion. She had practiced this and many other performances in mirrors and knew how to look like she felt someone else's pain. “Yes, I imagine you do,” she whispered back. “Do you wish to speak of it?”

The boy froze up and fear filled his eyes. It was a classic response of abuse victims; he knew better than to talk about how he was treated. “N-no,” he said, his stuttering now born of fear rather than the
effects of late-stage kassa withdrawal. The drugs his former master had used to keep him compliant may have mostly left his system, but the psychological conditioning would prove harder to crack. He glanced nervously around the common room. Thankfully, none of the rest of the patients were within earshot. “I s-speak out of turn.”

Dare reached out, slowly and calmly, and placed a gentle hand on the boy's arm. “It's alright, child,” she said. “No one will hurt you here.”

This approach, like all those the ONI Agent used, was tailored to her target. This boy was just that: a boy. From the look of him he was no older than twelve years old. From what they’d gotten out of him previously he had been purchased from his parents several years ago and had served as the personal slave of a Lucian officer. He had been captured in a raid on a slave auction earlier in the week along with his former master.

In short, the subject was a child who had been abused for years and dreamed of nothing more than a warm mother figure to kiss the pain away. The look of desperate, hopeful relief in the boy's eyes confirmed that Dare had chosen the correct approach in her interrogation.

“Please understand,” she said. “I only wish to help you heal. Sharing a past pain can provide a form of comfort for those who have suffered injustice.” She allowed her features to harden ever so slightly as she continued. “Of course, you former 'master' is currently in Coalition custody, so I could pass word of his crimes against you to the guards. They would ensure justice was served.”

That did it. The combination of comfort, a shoulder to lean on, and the potential for vengeance loosened the boy's tongue. He spent the better part of the next hour describing his enslavement to the Lucian Alliance. He hesitated at various points, the ingrained submission hindering him, but Dare was careful to help him over these hurdles. She subtly guided the conversation to the most recent events. Apparently, there was another, higher ranking officer in the Alliance that had taken an...intimate kind of interest in him. An interest his master had been happy to indulge by loaning the boy out like property.

“Do you remember the name of this...wretch?” she asked.

“I-I think so,” the boy said, concentrating. “Dor...Dor'ec! His name was Dor'ec!”

Inwardly, Dare smiled in triumph. This confirmed other reports that placed Dor'ec of Mandaro on the current planet within the past month. Said Lucian officer was a servant of Netan's personal retinue, responsible for attending to the particular tastes of those who accompanied the head of the Alliance wherever he went. If he had been there, then Netan himself had been there.

Camelot was hot on his trail. If all went well, they would have their target in custody soon.

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The crowd cheered, egging on the combatants. The two soldiers fought, sweat breaking out on their foreheads, muscles straining, veins standing out. It was a primal struggle, strength versus strength, a battle to the finish. Each refused to back down. Refused to be the one to bend.

Eventually, though, the tide turned. One started to lose ground. He pushed, trying to regain the lost advantage, but it was fruitless. He and his comrades could only watch in despair as his opponent's arm moved lower and lower, forcing itself inexorably through his defenses, until finally slamming down with brutal finality.

Major Williamson grinned as he released Captain Taylor's hand. The ODST scowled as he rubbed
his sore arm. The crowd surrounding the recreation hall table exploded into a combination of celebration and lamentation.

The Major had beaten every UNSC trooper that had challenged him that evening. He rarely indulged in games such as arm-wrestling contests, but every now and then he couldn't resist demonstrating his immense physical strength. Grogan had no doubt that his commander had risen several notches in every ODST's 'Don't Fuck With' list that evening.

Grogan himself was only half-watching the proceedings from his seat a table away; most of his attention was dedicated to coming up with new tactics to use against the Spartans in the training exercises. With the defeat of the latest jarhead, the festivities seemed to be over. The SGC soldiers cheered their new champion. The ODSTs berated Taylor and the others who had lost to the Major. The reaction was even more pronounced among the substantial number of viewers who had been placing bets on the outcome. The winners' cheering and the losers' groaning tended to have more weight with the exchange of capital.

To his relief, no one seemed to be taking things too hard. There was taunting and griping and a fair amount of aggression being thrown around. It would no doubt make most civilians pretty nervous. The personnel of Camelot were not civilians, though. They were soldiers, and this type of behavior was normal. Nothing had escalated into actual brawling and that was all that mattered.

In fact, this impromptu tournament was encouraging. A few of the other SG Team troopers had decided to try their luck, meeting as much success as the ODSTs, which had resulted in members of both sides finding themselves rooting for the same person more than once. As the contest had gone on more people started to realize that Williamson was unbeatable. A few ODSTs had even shifted their bets to the other side, although they took pains to be quiet about it. All in all, it was a positive social event. It also helped further dispel the idea that the SG Teams were somehow weaker than their UNSC counterparts.

“Notice you didn't place any bets,” Taylor said as he sat down across the table.

Most of the people in the recreation hall had begun filing out, their rec time over. SG-9 and a few of the ODST Teams, including Taylor's, had been granted a bit of additional time due to the higher than average amount of missions they had been sent on recently. They were quickly becoming recognized as the premier (non-Spartan) units in Camelot and were being fielded accordingly.

Grogan had decided that this suited him just fine.

“Well, Captain?” Taylor prompted. “What was the matter? Didn't want to hurt my feelings?”

“I only gamble with my life; never my money,” Grogan quipped. Satterfield rolled her eyes at him as she made her way over, having recognized the reference. She sat down at the table, which by now was the only occupied area of the hall. Everyone there had fallen into a nice groove with each other.

Well, almost everyone, Grogan thought. He glanced at Hailey, who was sitting off to the side, absorbed in some project on her compad. She wasn't even listening to what was going on around her, choosing instead to wear a pair of headphones.

Headphones that Major Williamson ripped off as he made his way over. If anyone else had tried that, from Colonel Mitchell to General O'Neil to the President himself, she would have torn their arms off. Instead, she only had a surprised expression on her face as her commander started talking. “This is your off-time, Captain,” he said. “You're supposed to rest and relax. Not take your work with
you.”

Grogan surreptitiously turned off his compad and slid it under the table.

“This is how I relax, sir,” Hailey insisted. “This work is—”

“Taking up most of your time at base as it is,” the Major countered. “I've kept track of your logs, Captain. You barely even sleep anymore. I won't have someone under my command burning out.” He gestured to the people around him. “Relax. Maybe try talking to people for once.”

The academically inclined soldier practically blanched at that. She looked like she intended to argue the point, but Williamson gave her a hard stare and she caved. Grogan grinned as he noticed her subtly lean closer to her squadmates after shutting down her compad.

Satterfield took pity on her. “So, what were you listening to?” she asked, gesturing to the MP3 player resting on the table next to the compad.

“Some music I brought with me,” Hailey replied. She seemed grateful for the rescue. Being a positive emotion, it only showed on her face for a few seconds before it was replaced by a frustrated scowl. “I'm still sore about not being allowed to bring my smartphone with me. It's ridiculous that I have to rely on this ancient player.”

“Ancient?” Satterfield chuckled. “That thing came out last year. Besides, smartphones only went on the market, what, two years ago? I didn't even know they played music. It's not that big a step back, Jen.”

“What music do you listen to?” Captain Taylor asked. Everyone looked a bit surprised at that. “Sorry to intrude. Just curious about what tunes are like for you guys.”

“No, that-that's alright,” Hailey forced out. Seemed she wanted to make an effort to follow the Major's instructions. “It was a concerto. Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto Number Three, to be specific. Here, let me show you.” She pressed some buttons on the MP3 player to switch the audio to the built-in speaker. It wasn't the best quality, but it was clear enough. The music (composition? Grogan didn't know the right term) relied heavily on string instruments and sounded like the kind of thing people dressed up in thousand-dollar outfits to go see in packed amphitheaters.

Taylor was unimpressed. “Ugh,” he articulated. “This is what you like piped into your ears?”

The look of outrage on Hailey's face was priceless. “I'll have you know,” the highly educated Captain said, “that Rachmaninov was one of the most brilliant musical minds of the late-Romantic period. His works are revered as some of the finest compositions ever produced.”

“Finest sedatives, maybe,” the ODST retorted. Judging by his grin the man was enjoying pressing Hailey's buttons.

“Philistinise,” she said. Her face was starting to take on that expression that usually resulted in disciplinary actions for all involved. This could go...rather badly.

Thankfully, Satterfield swooped in to the rescue. “Well, that genre isn't for everyone,” she said, quietly placing a hand on her squadmate's shoulder. “I've always liked more contemporary music myself.” She held out her hand for the player. The pair of them frequently shared the thing, since the amount of personal effects they were able to bring to Camelot was extremely limited.
Satterfield pressed a few buttons. The classical tune cut out and was replaced by a much more familiar song. It played out for a couple minutes before she cut back in.

“This,” she said proudly, “is 'Smooth Criminal'. One of the best pop songs ever produced by the legendary Michael Jackson.”

“Still not seeing the appeal,” Taylor said. Well, at least he gave it a shot.

“Better be careful badmouthing Michael,” Hailey teased. “Liz here grew up with his music. Practically worshiped the guy.” She lowered her voice to a mock whisper. “He died a few months back. She's still sensitive about it. Practically held a vigil for him.” The people at the table chuckled. The woman in question punched her on the arm.

“I suppose it's not really the best introduction,” Satterfield admitted. “Without being able to see him dance you're only getting half the experience. Trust me: you haven't lived till you've seen him do the moonwalk!”

Grogan snickered. He couldn't help it. Satterfield was one of the toughest people he knew, but every once in a while she'd sound like...well...the kind of person who would constantly be teased about having crushes.

The snickering abruptly cut off when Satterfield turned an angry look in his direction. “Laugh it up. So, tell me, what kind of music do you prefer, Carl?”

He froze.

“Well, I-I like Classic Rock, of course,” Grogan replied. That was a safe answer, right?

“Really,” Satterfield said. “Any particular artists? Songs?”

“Oh, you know,” he replied, scouring his memory. “The usual. The Beatles, Aerosmith...Nirvana...that kind of thing...” At this point no one at the table was buying it. The unimpressed stares would have been hilarious if they'd been directed at anyone else. Grogan decided to just come clean. “Alright, look, I don't really listen to music. I just don't have time. I'm always studying, keeping myself in shape, going on missions, whatever. There's only so many hours in the day.”

“He's not lying,” Major Williamson said. “The man's job is his life. Almost as bad as Captain Hailey.”

“Well, yeah, but—” he struggled. He'd always been rather embarrassed about this. It seemed everywhere he went he was the only one who just wasn't into music.

“Don't have to tell me. I don't think he's ever left base when we're stationed at home,” Satterfield interrupted, replying to Williamson. This time she was the one who started using a mock-whisper. “I've known him almost a decade and I'm pretty sure he never got laid once that entire time.”

She was out of punching range, so Grogan had to content himself with flipping her off. This was not going how he'd hoped. He had to do something or the rest of their time in the rec hall would be spent busting his balls. To his surprise, Taylor actually came to his rescue.
“How about you, Popeye?” the ODST said, gesturing to Williamson. “You listen to music?”

The Major grinned knowingly. Thankfully, the officer took pity on his subordinate, and decided to answer the question. “Johnny Cash. The Man in Black always spoke to me.”

That made sense to Grogan. He'd heard a few of the man's songs in movies and the like. For a simple man like Williamson, a single singer with a guitar made more sense than a complex orchestra with dozens of sounds harmonizing into one. Plus, with all that the Major had seen in his time in uniform, some of Cash's later works would certainly appeal to wearied part of his personality.

“Ah, none of you know shit,” Taylor said. He started tapping on a square device strapped to his left wrist. “This is real music,” he said.

The sound that blasted forth from the device almost shocked Grogan into grabbing his ears. If Hailey's concerto was a harmonious union of sounds, Taylor's music was a chaotic explosion of noises. The only concrete element he could put his finger on was the overwhelming sense of aggression and push for dominance that the...song...seemed to exude like a physical thing.

Mostly to keep himself sane, Grogan tried to dissect the thing—identify its component parts. There was a singer, obviously, although the man (woman? malfunctioning industrial-grade shredder?) seemed to be shouting hoarsely rather than actually speaking a language or carrying a tune. The musically-disinclined trooper thought he could make out an electric guitar and maybe some drums, but most of the instruments were a mystery to him. Maybe they didn't even exist yet on his Earth. Although, he'd swear that he heard multiple power tools being revved up over and over again in the background.

Maybe it would have been easier to make sense of it if Grogan was into music. Although, judging by the looks on Hailey's and Satterfield's faces, that was far from a given. This stuff sounded like the kind of thing a few 'metal heads' he'd known would listen to...if they'd been partially deaf and grown up in an industrial plant.

“What in the hell is that?!” Satterfield asked, practically having to shout over the music.

“This,” Taylor said proudly, “is vintage Heavy Flip. Feast your ears on the future, kids!”

“I take it back!” Hailey almost-shouted. “You're not a Philistine; you're a Vandal!”

Taylor grinned as if it were a compliment. Grogan would have grinned as well. You know, if his ears didn't feel like they were about to start bleeding.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Alesio wrinkled his nose in disgust. The stench was becoming unbearable.

The mercenary shifted uncomfortably beneath his sensor-proof matting. He and his fellow soldiers of fortune had been waiting for their targets to arrive for hours and they were all growing impatient. This feeling was not helped by the...unusual company they were forced to keep.

The massive, hulking jiralhanae were breathing very loudly a short distance away. The client had ordered Alesio to cooperate with the beast-men, so his ability to lash out at them was limited if he wanted to collect his pay. This was especially frustrating considering the variety of smells, apparently some form of communication between members of their race, that they seemed to emit in a continuous stream.

All of that, naturally, was nothing compared to the physical conflict between the groups. Alesio couldn't see it at the moment, but he knew that his shoulder was still stained with blood. It had landed there when a jiralhanae had savagely beaten one of his comrades to death for the crime of daring to look the alien in the eyes.

Apparently, that was an insult to them.

The mercenary stamped down his emotions. The pay. Think about the pay. That dead fool had known what he had signed up for. Mercenaries die; it's part of the job. There was no room for grudges in this business.

A buzzing under his cloak interrupted Alesio's thoughts. His communicator had gone off. Something had crossed the perimeter. He readied himself, peeking out from under his cover, eager to get this job over with.

A small group of figures came into view. They moved carefully, passing between the broad, low hills that flanked the road. The same hills that concealed the Lucian and Banished warriors. The figures were armored and very, very tall. Alesio grinned as he realized that more 'Spartans' had walked into one of their traps. He had not been a part of the ambush that had killed so many of the so-called 'supersoldiers' weeks ago, and he was eager to bag one himself.

The veteran mercenary paused. Something seemed odd. For one, there were only four targets, and his communicator buzzed to indicate that no more were coming. For another, their armor seemed to be different from the descriptions he had heard. Both of those could be explained away, of course. The utter slaughter that the previous ambush had wrought could have so decimated the Spartans' numbers that four were all the Tau'ri could spare. The armor could be explained by inaccurate descriptions—Alesio had never actually seen a picture of them—and the fact that the dark of night was making it hard to see the finer details. Still, that didn't explain why their outlines were making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

A final buzzing from his communicator cut off whatever path his mind was going down. It was time
Alesio jumped to his feet, brought his custom-shortened staff weapon to bear, and aimed down its makeshift sights. His fellow mercenaries did the same, as did the jiralhanae, the aliens letting out inhumanly vicious roars as they raised their spikers and plasma rifles.

They opened fire.

The roar of staff-weapons and spikers drowned out all sound. The flashes of orange-red plasma and projectile weapons nearly blocked the surrounded targets from view. The very ground seemed to shake from the sheer power being directed at their enemies.

Alesio's blood sang. His heart thundered. The stock of his modified staff weapon vibrated against his shoulder with each shot. This—this—was what made all of the tedium worthwhile. The thrill of combat, of utterly dominating an opponent in the ultimate contest, brought him immense satisfaction. His only regret was that the bodies would probably be too damaged to provide any valuable salvage—

Circular energy shields sprang to life around the Spartans, just in time to block the first shots, and the four warriors pressed close together. Their shields formed an overlapping phalanx that blocked all incoming fire.

So...they had learned.

It was no matter. No shields could stand up to this level of attack. Already, the protective barriers were changing colors from blue to purplish-red. They would fail in moments. The Spartans would die. All was well.

A weight slammed into Alesio's back and he found himself pitched onto the ground, his face full of dirt and his ears ringing. He turned onto his side in a daze.

An explosion had blown a hole in their line. Several of his fellow mercenaries had been killed in the blast. Alesio tried to shake his head clear. He wondered if some idiot had dropped a grenade. One of his colleagues made his way over to him, having noticed he was still alive. The man reached a hand down to help him up—

The man's neck erupted in a fountain of blood.

Alesio found himself sprayed with the liquid life of one of his fellows for the second time that day. He looked from his gurgling, dying companion to the long grass beyond the perimeter.

Tau'ri weapons-fire was shining out. A quick glance around confirmed that the Lucian/Banished force was completely surrounded. Everywhere he looked he saw mercenaries and aliens being torn apart. The human warriors desperately sought cover and tried to survive, to no avail. The aliens roared in challenge and tried to fire back on their attackers, to equally little success. The Spartans remained huddled behind their protection, utterly unharmed by the chaos surrounding them.

The ambush had been ambushed.

Alesio rolled onto his chest and stowed his weapon on his back. He wasn't getting paid to be slaughtered. Besides, it wasn't his fault that the Tau'ri had somehow outmaneuvered them. That was the job of the scouts and spies. No. He wasn't about to die because someone else had failed to do
The ringing in his ears had faded enough to tell that the sounds of battle were starting to taper out. That wasn't a good sign. It meant few of his allies were still alive, which meant there were fewer people besides Alesio for the Tau'ri to shoot at. He had to act fast.

Fortunately, the sensor-proof matting that had concealed him before was still close at hand. The veteran mercenary carefully pulled it over himself. He then began crawling, as slowly and as quietly as he could manage, towards a portion of long grass that looked empty. He would survive this. He had survived worse, back during the time of the Goa'uld Empire.

The only part of this whole thing that really bothered him was that he wouldn't be getting paid.

The interrogation room was clean and well-lit, as they tended to be. An energy barrier covered one wall, simulating the effect of one-way glass. The only occupant of the room was her subject. He looked up as Major Dare opened the door.

The mercenary was still smirking when Dare entered and shut the door behind her. He was trying very hard to project a sense of confident irreverence. To make it seem like he was untouchable, that nothing his captors could do was of any concern to him.

She could tell it was an act.

This wasn't to say that the subject was on the verge of falling apart and suddenly spilling everything he knew. Far from it. But the slight tension around his eyes, the way his leg would jump restlessly every now and then, and the frequent glances at the visible security camera and even more visible energy barrier were more than enough to tell her that he was afraid.

“Master Alesio,” the Intelligence Agent said once the door to the interrogation room had clanged shut. She was once again wearing the surgical scrubs/hijab combo to disguise herself as a Free Jaffa. They had been careful to conceal her true identity from any of the inmates at this facility. Anything to keep the subjects off guard. “I am glad to see you in good health. I trust they have been keeping you well fed?”

The mercenary's response was to snort at her. However, there was still a spark of confused suspicion lurking behind his eyes. Dare could tell that his current circumstances were throwing him off-balance. Back in the days of the Goa'uld Empire he would already have endured several forms of torture as his captors endeavored to extract information from him. Even if he gave them what they wanted they still would have cut and burned and beat him. Eventually, he would have been publicly beheaded. Examples had to be made, after all.

None of this had happened to Alesio.

The Camelot strike team had caught the mercenary attempting to sneak away from a failed ambush attempt. Although 'caught' might be misleading—one of the troopers had literally tripped over the sensor-proof matting the man was using to cover his escape. Since then the prisoner had been treated with the utmost civility. His wounds were cleaned and bandaged, he was given regular meals, he was allowed to bathe, and he had not been physically injured by the guards.
This was not to say that Dare believed he didn't deserve such abuse. Oh, no. She'd seen reports of what men like this had done and it had reminded her all too much of the Insurrection back home. She wouldn't have shed a single tear if the hired gun had been torn limb from limb. He had been spared out of pure pragmatism.

“Well,” the Agent said, not having received an answer, “I can see you are in good health, at least.” She moved to the center of the room and took a seat on the other side of the table from her target. He had been handcuffed to the metal half-circles crudely welded onto the table's surface. Not exactly the professional, high-tech interrogation rooms she was used to, but it would have to do. “I was hoping we could discuss—”

“What is this?” the target growled. The ONI Agent paused, waiting for him to continue. The prey had scented the bait; now to let him follow it. “I am a prisoner. Your enemy. Yet rather than whips and heated pokers I am showed luxurious accommodations? Instead of a torturer I am greeted with a servant?” The man sneered. “A woman servant, no less. Is this what the mighty Jaffa have been reduced to? Sending a woman to do a man's job?”

“I assure you, I am more than capable of fulfilling my duties here,” Dare said. She allowed a little bit of doubt to creep into her voice. Just enough to make her seem out of her depth.

“I'm sure you are,” he said. “As capable as I am of bearing offspring. Go away, little girl, and have them send a man to question me. I grow tired of wasting my time with these petty meetings.”

Dare hid her smile. The fruitless sessions of the previous week had indeed lead her subject to exactly the place she wanted him. She made a show of pausing as if she had been made aware of her own failure.

“You are certain this is what you wish?” she asked. The mercenary rolled his eyes and nodded his head. The Agent made her expression fall. She allowed her eyes to drop to the table and sagged slightly in her seat, portraying herself as one who had hoped to perform this duty but had broken in the face of opposition. It was what her target would expect of the supposedly weaker sex. It would also stroke his ego, letting him think that he had beaten her.

The disguised Intelligence Agent gave a show of rallying herself and burying her disappointment. She nodded to the subject and rose to her feet. “I am sorry to hear that, Master Alesio. I hope your next hosts treat you well.”

“Next hosts?” the mercenary asked, his expression turning from smug anger to wariness.

“Oh, yes,” Dare replied. “There are far too many duties for the interrogator here to fulfill. This is why I was sent to you. Now that you have turned me away, the leadership will have to send you to the Ma'sam Fiefdom.” She allowed sympathy into her eyes. “I truly am sorry.”

Now it was Alesio's face that froze. “You-you can't do that,” he whispered. It lacked any conviction, undermined by the horrified realization of his own predicament.

The prisoners at this particular facility had been lead to believe they were being held by the Freedom Coalition. That particular faction of the Free Jaffa had gained a reputation for humane treatment of enemies, particularly in comparison to the System Lords that preceded them. The public perception of the Coalition as the 'nice' successor state had helped convince a number of planetary systems to pledge allegiance to its banner, but it had resulted in the fear of being held prisoner waning a bit.
This was not a problem for Dare. In fact, she knew just how to turn it to her advantage.

“I'm afraid it is out of my control,” she said, pouring sympathy into her voice. Playing into the stereotype of females being overly compassionate. She rose to her feet and made her way over to the door. “Please, enjoy the rest of your stay with us. You may call the guard if you need anything.”

Not giving him a chance to respond, she left the room.

“So I take he cracked within the day?” Maybourne asked with a chuckle. He took off the headset that had granted him a fully 3D VR recording of the interrogation session. Dare's New Earth counterpart took a moment to smooth out his previously styled hair before looking across the shared desks at her. The attempt to look suave was only slightly undermined by the dark bags that were beginning to form under his eyes.

“Within an hour, actually;” she chuckled back. “Not too surprising. He is a mercenary, after all. His only loyalty is to his own wallet. Once he realized he had only one way to guarantee he didn't fall into Fiefdom hands he started hollering to the guard that he wanted to see me again. Spilled everything he knew in exchange for immunity and assurance that his disclosures never became known to his former employers.”

“Smart play. Will we be following up on that?” her counterpart asked. The ONI Agent couldn't detect any suspicion or recrimination in his voice. He genuinely seemed like he didn't care either way and was just curious about how she was handling the situation. She tried to figure out which way he would have preferred to handle it.

On the one hand, treachery didn't seem like the kind of thing the officers of Homeworld Command would take kindly. They would want to back up any promises they made, at least as general policy. On the other hand, maybe that was why so many of them seemed to hate Maybourne. She suspected that this was a veiled test of character. There had been several times he seemed to be testing her since she started working at Camelot. She was never entirely sure, though, as there were never enough signs for her to conclusively decide one way or the other.

It took a lot of effort to hide how much this annoyed her.

“Of course,” Dare replied. “He obviously won't be telling people about any of this directly, but it will cement his belief that the Coalition and the people of Earth are safe to make deals with. That will determine how he speaks of us to others and a thousand other subconscious signals he will give to those around him to the same effect. Having such a reputation is invaluable in the cultivation of informants.” She raised an eyebrow as she continued. “Really, this shouldn't be surprising to you. We've done this with every subject we've made such deals with.”

Maybourne nodded with a look of approval. He then leaned back in his chair and stared at her over their adjoining desks. The office started to seem very confining as he fixed her with a piercing gaze.

“I have to admit, you aren't quite what I expected when I first learned I'd be working with you,” he said.
This was...strange. If she didn't know any better she'd swear he was abandoning subtlety and just approaching his query head on. That didn't make any sense, though. He hadn't worn her down to the point where she might give something up out of sheer exhaustion. True, she hadn't been getting much sleep lately, but she wasn't psychologically battered down. What was he playing at here?

“Might I ask what you mean by that?” she asked. She hardened her stare, giving the impression that she felt insulted.

The man chuckled in response. “I think we both know it had nothing to do with your character,” he said. “I was referring to your people and their recent history. The Human-Covenant War was devastating on a level my people have no comparison for. Such an environment is typically not conducive to the more...subtle methods of information gathering. Frankly, I expected to be fighting against the institution of a torture program.”

“ONI is not so petty as that,” Dare insisted. “We haven't allowed the barbarity of our enemies to infect us. Especially not when it would interfere with our efficiency. Torture is an ineffective, unreliable means of gaining intelligence. It would be counter-productive. Therefore, we do not employ it.”

“That's comforting to hear,” Maybourne replied. His tone indicated that he wasn't buying her explanation. At least, not completely. She supposed that was the best she could hope for. After all, it was such a preposterous lie that it was amazing that even she could say it with a straight face.

In fact, ONI regularly employed so-called 'enhanced interrogation techniques' in its routine operations. As well as other inhumane and wasteful programs. Dare shuddered to think of how many had suffered needlessly in the continued search for the mythical 'truth serum', for instance. Really, one of the best parts of her current assignment was that she was able to operate almost entirely without interference from ONI Command. She hoped her successes here would be enough to convince Director Osman to pursue less brutal policies.

Right. And the Brutes were going to give up raiding to pursue lucrative careers in gardening and interior decorating. Still, she had to try.

“Alright, enough naval gazing,” Maybourne said with a shrug of his shoulders. Once more, the jovial mask was back on his face. “I assume he gave up some useful tidbits?”

“Absolutely,” she said. She tapped away at her console before withdrawing a data crystal and handing it over. Her colleague plugged it in and began perusing the intelligence she had gathered.

His eyes jerked to a halt. He muttered quietly to himself. All Dare could make out was something that sounded like “Carinthian.” Suddenly, his hands blazed across his console, his eyes darting across documents and transcriptions at what seemed like superhuman speeds. After a few minutes he sat back and declared, “I've got him!”

“You located Netan?” Dare asked.

He chuckled again. “Not quiet, my lady,” he said. Ah, there was the annoyance again. “Our good friend Alesio the Mercenary said that he overheard some friends discussing a Lucian officer they were being assigned to guard soon. One they referred to as 'that Carinthian bastard'. Apparently, he had a reputation for being demanding and abusive toward his staff. 'Carinthis' is a province formerly governed by the System Lord Amaterasu. It's people are stereotyped as being shifty and unworthy of trust, liable to renege on deals or stab you in the back. Very few are trusted enough to rise in the
ranks of the Lucian Alliance. Hard as that may be to believe for a pack of thieves and killers.”

“I presume you have a guess as to the identity of this individual?” Dare asked, hoping to cut off his monologue before it went on too long.

“Just so,” Maybourne replied without losing a beat. “There is only one Carinthian of note among the Lucian Alliance command structure high enough to warrant protection but arrogant enough to abuse his subordinates. His name is Aur’c...and he is a personal agent of Netan himself.”

Dare's mind raced for a moment to call up the relevant information. Her eyes narrowed as she reviewed everything she could recall about the individual in question. “There was nothing about Aur’c belonging to such an ethnicity in his file,” she said.

“That's because it wasn't in his file,” her counterpart replied. “Au’rc is the illegitimate son of Netan's brother. The Carinthian lineage comes from the man's mistress. It's basically the family shame, although everyone knows about it.” He smirked. “Netan made it clear early on in his career that anyone who brought up Aur'c's heritage would be dealt with...severely. So, it became a public secret. No one talks about it openly. Gossip, on the other hand...”

There was no need to ask how he had gotten this information or why he hadn't reported it. Both agents knew to keep their sources a closely guarded secret if at all possible, as well as the importance of occasionally ‘forgetting’ to report some intel you believed would give them away. Any Agent worth his or her salt knew to have at least one ace in the hole.

Instead, Dare jumped on her console and pulled up all of the relevant files. Her fingers flew across the keyboard. Renewed energy coursed through her veins, banishing the fatigue as she allowed herself to realize what this could mean. If Alesio had revealed the names of the guards in question, and they were able to track them down, and Camelot was able to get an extraction team there in time, and they managed to take him alive...

“That's right, my lady,” Maybourne said with a smile. He knew as well as she did that they had already narrowed down Netan's location to a few systems. Getting intelligence out of someone so close to their target could provide—

“The last link in the chain leading to our quarry.”

If this panned out, their search would be over. They might even be able to justify giving themselves a full-night's sleep. The bare-bones cot in the back of their office that they alternated sleeping on had grown rather tedious. She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind. Any rewards would have to wait until when and if this lead actually went anywhere. For now, there was work to do.

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

The hallway was quiet. It was always quiet. He was starting to hate that fucking quiet.

Time to interrupt it. Grogan smiled to himself as he pressed a button on his gauntlet.

The virtual 'explosives' his team had attached to the exterior of the holographic building went off, filling the training hall with artificial noise. The practice jamming tech went off next. It wasn't enough to block the Spartans' sensors, but their range and effectiveness would be impaired. Every
advantage was needed.

The team surged forward. They poured through the 'hole' they had made through the exterior wall. Grogan was in command again, with Taylor and Satterfield clearing the right and left flanks as they went. The final squadmember, another ODST, checked the rear. They were all focused on their task. All determined not to let the Spartans get the drop on them once again.

Distant weaponsfire echoed throughout the training hall along with the fading sound of other breaching charges. The fireteams were all assaulting the building at the same time. The idea behind the exercise being that Majestic would respond to multiple breaches from multiple directions, a scenario that Spartans found themselves in far too often. It was also pretty much the only way non-augmented infantry would stand a chance. Divide the enemy's attention and some of your people can slip through the cracks. The merely-human teams had numbers on their side.

It wouldn't be enough. They needed another advantage.

<Red Two and Red Three, take Delta approach. Pursue objective> he ordered via signals. To their credit, neither Satterfield nor Taylor hesitated at the change in plans. They split off immediately and pushed toward their goal with speed and silence.

Good. Grogan reached down into one of his equipment pouches and thumbed on the device. Time to test the advantage. His mouth went dry as he stayed on high alert and moved forward with the other member of his team.

It took only seconds to encounter opposition. This was also good. For once, the supersoldiers' almost supernatural ability to intercept him was exactly what he wanted.

The contact came, of all places, from above. They had entered a large room, clearly some kind of loading area, filled with fake cargo and with a high enough ceiling to actually hold shadows. The darkness immediately drew Grogan's eyes. The 'ceiling' was artificial, of course, transparent on the outside to allow a clear view for the instructors. Theoretically, there should have been no way for anyone to be suspended from it.

Unless they had somehow embedded a cable into the roof of the training hall itself. That's what Grogan would do, anyway. He couldn't pull down his full optics unit—that would be far too obvious —so he made do with the limited sensors built into the interior of his helmet. A quick scan and...

“One o'clock high!” he commed at the same time he opened up. The Spartan that had been suspended from the ceiling dropped down and rushed behind rows of fake crates. Grogan and the ODST managed to score some hits as the target fell, but the energy shield held. The Spartan, on the other hand, fired back and managed to down the ODST. Grogan swore and rushed into his own cover.

Buy time. All he had to do was buy time.

There were ghosts on his motion tracker. That's all the Spartans ever showed up as—pale echoes of what might be signals. Grogan tried to count them. One...two...were they all there? Had he tricked the entire Fireteam Majestic?

He shook his head and maneuvered through the room. It didn't matter. He just needed to keep as many of them busy as possible. He emptied his vest of practice grenades. He fired over cover, trying to keep the enemy at bay. He did everything he could to seem like he was consumed by desperation
rather than simply stalling. Just keep them busy...

New cover. He sprinted into the open, dove for safety, and—Grogan's armor froze up. He crashed to the ground, stiff as a board. His HUD revealed that his back had been riddled with simulation rounds, overwhelming the armors ability to absorb and dissipate the incoming fire. He was out of the game. But there was still hope...

The holographic facility vanished, revealing the well-lit training hall.

Grogan got onto his knees and glanced around. He'd only managed to lure in two of the opposition. His hopes were fully dashed when he saw the other members of his squad, the ones he'd sent away, lying prone on the ground with a Spartan over them. Satterfield was holding the mission objective in her hand: a simple ration case that had been designated their package for this exercise. They'd actually gotten their hands on it this time. That didn't matter, as the mission had been to obtain and extract with it.

“On your feet!” an authoritative voice called out.

Grogan and everyone present jumped up and formed an orderly line. The Spartans of Majestic Team on the left, the three 4-man squads of non-augmented soldiers on the right. Everyone stood straighter as the officer in charge of the exercise approached.

“Congratulations, OPFOR. You managed to acquire the package before being taken down. Not many can claim to have done so against a team of Spartans,” the Master Chief said. He walked to a point in front of Grogan's team. The simulation squadleader wondered if the predatory feel of the Spartan's gait was real or just his imagination. “I noticed something odd during the test, though.” He walked directly up to Grogan. “Anything you'd care to share, Captain?”

Well, it's not like he'd expected him not to notice. “Sir, I used some gear to trick the enemy's motion trackers, sir,” he said. He reached into the equipment pouch and pulled out the device. It looked like a compad that someone had cracked open and then stuck pieces of various electronics to...which wasn't far from the truth, actually. “I wanted Majestic to think my team was still together. Give the others an edge to complete the objective.”

The Master Chief took the offered gadget. “This isn't standard equipment. Not even for our jury-rigged operation.” His visor tilted back up, the only indication that he was looking at Grogan again. Despite the fact that the supersoldier's face was hidden, the Captain could feel the cold stare boring into his eyes. “I'd ask who made this, but considering the makeup of SG-9, that would be rather unnecessary, wouldn't it?”

“Sir, the idea—” Grogan began.

“—was yours and you alone should bear the penalties, is that right?” the Chief finished for him. The Captain swallowed. “Unsanctioned appropriation of military property aside, you do realize that this was not a part of the exercise, correct? This was not the scenario you were to play out.”

“Sir, with respect, no battle plan survives contact with the enemy, sir,” Grogan replied. He stared straight ahead with his posture in perfect form as he talked. No attitude, no emotions. “In the field the scenario can change without warning or logic. I do not believe I violated the spirit of the exercise, sir.”

“That's not for you to decide, Captain,” the Chief replied. Somehow, his steady and almost
mechanical voice seemed to drop several degrees without noticeably changing in any way. “And I am well aware of the unpredictability of combat. Hence why Majestic is not briefed on exactly what kind of opposition they will face in these exercises. Sometimes they are even given outright false intelligence. The chaotic and unpredictable nature of combat is accounted for in the program, a fact which you are well aware of. I have also not failed to notice that you did not ask permission to use this device. If it does not violate the spirit of the exercise, why did you assume I would refuse?”

Grogan remained silent. The Master Chief stared at him for a while. At last, the supersoldier spoke again.

“Improvisation and unpredictability are assets, but a commanding officer should never be kept out of the loop,” he said. The gaze seemed to intensify, the giant's posture becoming more aggressive. “Not letting Command know what is at their disposal can get people killed. Your behavior was unacceptable. As punishment you will serve latrine duty for three days. You will also be barred from this program for the next three exercises.”

“Sir, understood, sir,” Grogan forced out.

The Master Chief nodded and moved off. “Fireteam Majestic, you allowed the enemy to take possession of the objective. Can you explain why...”

The rest of the debriefing went by in a haze. As far as disciplinary actions went, that was about as light as it got. Hell, considering what he'd pulled, some would consider it a reward. Grogan didn't. Really, he didn't even care. The Master Chief's anger didn't matter to him.

They had lost. Again.

The team discussed things as they took off their armor. Grogan didn't really listen. He was going over the scenario, again and again, trying to figure out the best approach they could have used. Trying to find the holes in his strategy. Trying to find the way to win next time.

“It's probably for the best, anyway,” Satterfield said. Grogan turned to look at her in confusion, taking note of their surroundings for the first time.

Apparently, they were in the locker room, about to hit the showers. Or having just emerged from them. Judging by the still-damp hair, the clean fatigues they were both wearing, and the fact that they were the only ones still in the locker room, it was probably the latter. He must have gone through at least an hour completely on auto pilot.

“What do you mean?” Grogan asked. “We lost. Now I won't get another chance for who knows how long.”

“I'm just saying that we've got enough on our plates,” his closest friend defended. “We're being sent on more missions than any other team in Camelot. We've all been working ourselves to the bone this past month. Maybe a bit more time for R&R will be good for you.”

Grogan had to fight down a snort. “You know me better than that. I won't be satisfied until we pull off a win.” He forced a smile onto his face. “This'll just give me more time to plan. No defense is impenetrable, and I'll find the way through those Spartans yet.”

Satterfield sighed and rolled her eyes. “Right. Because this is all just a game to you. Not taking it personally at all.”
The grin faltered. “I’m fine. Really.” He received a flat stare. Satterfield crossed her arms as she leaned back against her locker. Now he was getting annoyed. “…is there something I can help you with?”

“Oh come off it, Carl. You’ve had this look on your face ever since the debriefing. Like you’re either about to kill something or burst out in tears. We both know—”

“What is this, a therapy session?!” Grogan snapped, a bit more viciously than he intended. He bit down on his frustration. It wasn’t her fault; she was just being her. Calm down, regroup, push forward. He looked his friend in the eye. “Look, I appreciate what you’re doing. But I’m fine. Really. Maybe I’m getting a little too serious about this, but I’m not going crazy or anything. I don’t need a heart-to-heart or whatever. I just need a little quiet right now. Okay?”

The flat stare had been replaced by a look of genuine concern. Satterfield’s lips were pressed into a thin line and her left eyebrow was doing that twitching thing that happened whenever she was really holding herself back. Eventually, she sighed. “Just...remember you can talk to me, alright?” He nodded, and she left.

Quiet. Nothing but the sound of his own breath. He tried to start his planning again, but found he was too wired. Something was seriously bugging him. He sighed and decided maybe it was for the best. The locker room wouldn’t remain vacant for long, anyway.

“Alone at last, huh?”

Grogan nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Easy, man,” Taylor said as he moved to his locker a few feet away. “Didn't mean to give you a heart attack.”

The shock was quickly replaced with annoyance at the fact that the ODST had managed to sneak up on him. It seemed like he just couldn't stay on point today. Grogan decided to deflect with humor. “If you're gonna ask me to arrange a rematch between you and the Major, don't bother. He'd probably break your arm next time just to teach you a lesson in humility.”

Taylor chuckled lightly but didn't stop whatever he was doing. After rummaging around in his locker for a minute, he pulled out a small object and threw it to the other man. Grogan caught it and took a look.

It was a small replica of what looked like a Roman Legionnaire crossed with a medieval knight. It was about an inch tall, armored head to toe, and had a shield almost large enough to block its entire body.

“Say hello to 'Legionnaire Larry','” Taylor said, shutting his locker and taking a seat across from Grogan. “That's what we called him when we were kids, anyway. The official name was 'Grand Protector'. It was a statue in the center square of the first colony established on my homeworld. I ever tell you about my homeworld? The place I was born, I mean.”

“No, but I'm sure it'd make interesting dinner conversation,” Grogan replied, deciding subtlety wasn't called for here. Whatever this was, he wasn't in the mood for it, and he tried to make that clear in no uncertain terms.
“It was called 'New Albany,”’ Taylor said, ignoring him. “I left to join the Marines at 16. The recruiters weren't looking too hard at birth dates thanks to the War. I got transferred off-world, fought hard, and eventually worked my way into the ODSTs.” His face hardened, transitioning to an expressionless mask. "The Covenant glassed New Albany before I had a chance to go brag about how far I'd come. Turned everything I'd ever known growing up into molten slag. After that, I started pushing myself even harder. Voluntary calisthenics, exercises, classes on advanced anti-Covenant tactics. I put myself through twice the shit any other ODST did, and that was already five times what the average Marine went through. Worked myself so bad I actually passed out on a march.” Somehow, he managed to both grin and wince at the same time. “Don't think I'll ever live that down. Colonel Silva, my CO at the time, told me I had to either get my shit together or get booted back to the regular Marines. He wasn't about to let a tired, ragged mess get any of the others killed.”

Silence. The ODST stumbled a bit, clearly trying to figure out what to say next. It seemed he hadn't exactly planned out how this was going to go. He struggled a bit, almost forcing some words out a few times, before finally deciding enough was enough. He stood up, nodded to the other man, and started walking away.

“Taylor,” Grogan called out. The ODST paused and looked back. “You forgot this.” Grogan tossed back the figurine. He was beyond done with this conversation.

Taylor stared at the thing for a few seconds. It looked like he was a thousand miles away. Abruptly he shook his head, walked over to his locker, and threw the souvenir back in.

“Fuckin' memories.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Boredom. That was his sole companion in this dreary excursion. None of his entourage to revel with, none of his favored prostitutes to slake his lusts, none of the lowly minions he so loved to terrorize. Just himself. Bored.

Aur'c, Agent of the Lucian Alliance and trusted brother to Netan himself, scowled as he poured himself more expensive liquor. He looked around the bare, peasant accommodations that surrounded him. Unacceptable. Utterly unacceptable for one of his standing. He drank the entire glass of sweet, sweet nectar in one swig.

Perhaps worse was the inactivity. Here, he had no messages to deliver. No operations to oversee. No failures to execute. No books to keep. No tasks worthy of his status and abilities. No responsibilities of any kind. He was simply expected to sit...and wait.

Enough. Enough! Aur'c rose to his feet and stomped over to the exit. This room would constrain him no longer! He threw the door open, only to be confronted by an armed guard. The armed guard. It took a concentrated effort of the will, and a deliberate feeding of the internal fires of outrage, for Aur'c not to recoil in fear.

"Do you require anything," the mercenary asked. "...sir?" he added, needing to make a visible effort to show the proper respect.

"I wish to take a walk," Aur'c announced, pouring as much regal condescension into his tone as he could. He felt a burst of pride at the fact that his voice did not waver. This was replaced by rage once he recognized the emotion. He should not feel pride at being strong; he was not a coward. People like this simpleton should not—did not—intimidate him. Normally, he would have reprimanded this commoner for his insolence.

However, as the hired thug's next words indicated, circumstances were far from normal. "I'm afraid that will not be possible at this time. Sir." The man gestured back into the room. Into the prison.

Rage. Rage coursed through Aur'c's veins. He trembled in front of the door, every part of him screaming to strike down this insolent wretch and teach him his proper place in the grand hierarchy. The casual shifting of the guard's grip on his staff weapon dissuaded him.

Aur'c had already tasted the bite of that staff. The feeling of its stock smashing into his gut and driving the wind from his lungs. Over a week ago, well into his imprisonment in this rotted slum on this dreary, backwater world, he had broken protocol and tried to contact his brother directly. He had asked, respectfully, to be sent elsewhere.

In response, Netan had scolded him as if he were a misbehaving child and instructed his own guards to strike him. The imprisoned Agent still had the bruises from that...lesson.

The mercenary continued to wait for a response. Aur'c continued fuming silently. This went on for
Eventually, Aur'c snapped “Fine!” and slammed the door in the man's face. He stormed back to the chair and desk, only slightly terrified that the mercenary would take offense, kick down the door, and deliver another 'lesson'. Thankfully, no such thing occurred. Aur'c sank into his chair and slouched, wallowing in misery.

This whole thing was a punishment. It had to be. Netan, that smug, arrogant bastard, had sent him here as a punitive measure. That was the only possible explanation for why he had been trapped in this desolate room for nearly two weeks. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't like Aur'c had meant to kill the bureaucrat. He had only intended to deliver his own 'lesson' by beating the man's teeth in. It had served the little prawn right for daring to make reference to Aur'c's parentage. The fact that the now-deceased wretch had been a Lucian Alliance officer of some renown was entirely inconsequential.

Another drink. That was what he needed. A better one this time. He reached beneath the desk, past that strange parcel which Netan had given him under the pretense of having him deliver it to an operative. A deception intended to lure him to this prison without complaint. It took a concerted effort of will to resist the temptation to kick the bauble in frustration. It might have some value for all he knew, and it wouldn't do to anger his brother even more. At last, he grasped the bottle of wine. He had been saving it for a special occasion, but found that he needed the comfort just now. He looked around for a corkscrew. Perhaps he could demand his 'guards' to fetch one for him. It was a demeaning enough task to count as a form of revenge, and—

The door exploded inward. The deafening bang reverberated through his body and stung his ears. The flimsy wooden barrier swung and crashed against the wall as if someone had kicked it in. Aur'c's first response was a spike of dread. Perhaps the mercenaries had grown bored and were going to have some fun at his expense. He had just turned in shock and fear, scrambling out of his chair, when he saw a small object arc into the room, bouncing twice before stopping less than a foot away. A bright flash blinded him. He was utterly helpless, unable to perceive anything around him, his fear rising to overwhelming heights as he screamed in dread. He returned to himself only to find he had been forced onto the floor and was being restrained. He heard voices speaking to one another. Wait...

A quick glance to the side confirmed what he suspected: the Tau'ri had come for him.

A month ago, this would have been the worst possible thing that could have happened to him. Now, though, he felt a sigh of relief. The Tau'ri had the reputation of treating their prisoners rather well. Far better than the Goa'uld or the Ori had done...or even his own people. Perhaps he could turn this to his advantage, somehow.

Aur'c was about to shout, about to demand he be shown the proper respect, when something drew his eyes away from his captors. It was Netan's parcel. It had begun to glow with a strange orange-yellow light. A rather familiar shade, actually...

Suddenly, it all clicked. The isolation, the abusive guards, Netan's anger at being contacted, everything. It seemed that the bonds of blood did not mean quite as much to the leader of the Lucian Alliance as it meant to his half-brother.

This was not a prison.
Not a prison at all.

Peripherally, he saw the Tau'ri restraining him notice the glow himself. The warrior went stiff. He turned to his comrades and shouted, “Bomb! Fall ba—”

Then Aur'c, Agent of the Lucian Alliance and trusted brother of Netan himself, knew no more.

The Stargate deposited a large group of people into a public square. The group was composed primarily of merchants from the another Coalition planet and was therefore dressed in common civilian garb.

Grogan resisted the urge to scratch at his shoulder. The unfamiliar clothing was rather uncomfortable and the heavy satchel he carried was digging into him. He stuck close to the other members of the strike team, helping a member of SG-7 carry a crate supposedly filled with trade goods. Unlike most of the missions he had taken part in, this was strictly a stealth op. They couldn't afford to tip off their target that they were here until the last possible second. To that end, they had come in disguise.

Major Barnes, leader of SG-7, was playing the role of head merchant to the rest of the strike team's common laborers. He waited his turn behind the actual merchants who had come through the Stargate first, ready to present his false identification and paperwork when the time came. Grogan reminded himself to thank Rak'nor for the general use IDs the next time he saw him. The Free Jaffa warrior always delivered; apparently, it paid to be a protege to two of the Coalition's most respected founding fathers.

The strike team members grunted and groaned a bit as they carried their burdens toward the safe house. Camelot's OCA-1 was a dream come true for SG-Teams, but without the strength enhancing perks of being within the exosuit itself the stuff was an absolute bitch to lug around. Why couldn't the Free Jaffa hurry up and make forklifts commonplace, already?

Eventually, they arrived at the nondescript building that was their destination. Barnes knocked on the door and supplied the appropriate password. The door opened, and the strike team filed in. There were four personnel already stationed inside the safehouse. Two were ODSTs, one of whom had kept a rifle trained on the door until the identity of the guests had been confirmed. He shut and secured the entrance the moment all of them were through. The other had kept a close eye on the surveillance readouts to ensure that no other units were moving to assault the building while the inhabitants were distracted.

The other two were technicians who immediately went about assisting the strike team in gearing up. Another downside to all of the high-tech wizardry contained in the OCA-1 was that it required a lot of work to don and maintain them. Thus, the presence of support personnel who looked only slightly uncomfortable being deployed in a stealth op. Grogan suppressed a smirk as he realized that, from their perspective, they were basically being sent on a spy mission straight out of a sci-fi knockoff of James Bond. He wondered if it would deflate the tension if he made a crack about ordering a martini. He decided it would probably just piss them off and kept his mouth shut.

“Any changes?” Major Barnes asked as the rest of his team suited up.

The ODST not keeping a watchful eye on the security system shook his head. “The target is still in the safehouse. Standard guard detail, no major activity. Doesn't look like they suspect a thing.”
“Briefing did say he was laying low,” Barnes said, nodding in satisfaction.

That made a lot of sense. Apparently, the jackass had gone berserk and murdered the Lucian equivalent of a 'Made Man'. A lot of people in the crime syndicate were demanding his head on a platter. This had only sweetened the deal in the eyes of Command, as the target could be better convinced to talk if he had nowhere else to go.

Grogan wished he was working with his squad here. Col. Mitchell had his reasons for not sending SG-9, as well as for choosing him to serve as a replacement for a member of SG-7 who had recently been KIA. Still, listening to an unfamiliar commander prep for the final leg of the mission, he couldn't help but wish the others were here. At least Captain Taylor and his squad were also present, so there were a few familiar faces.

Said Captain was suiting up across the room. His eyes met Grogan's briefly before both turned back to what they were doing. They were just a bit awkward around each other after that last training exercise. It wasn't like a falling out or anything, they were just a bit...hesitant. Nothing a few more days wouldn't put behind them.

The room was briefly blocked from view as his helmet was lowered onto his head. The visor automatically depolarized, restoring Grogan's vision, but then the HUD started malfunctioning. The various displays kept disappearing and partly reappearing on a loop. There was never any detailed information, just a bunch of zeroes where his vitals and other readouts should have been. “Lieutenant Conners,” he said, drawing the attention of one of the techs. “Something's wrong with my HUD”.

The member of the UNSC's support services immediately walked behind him and said that he would need to plug some kind of diagnostics device into a data port on Grogan's OCA-1. Specifically, the upper back side just below the neck support in the exosuit, which required the SGC trooper to squat down to allow the shorter man convenient access. The technician plugged in and started some diagnostic scans. This left Grogan hunkered down by the floor, straining his calves and looking like he was trying to pop a squat in full armor. At least he didn't look stupid or anything...

“So...you're Captain Grogan?” the technician asked.

Grogan was tempted to tell the man to focus on his damn job already. However, he knew that mouthing off to the ground crew was something no sane airman ever did, so he decided to just answer the question. “That's right. Heard of me?”

“You could say that,” Lt. Conners said from over Grogan's shoulder. “That stunt you and Captain Hailey pulled in the training program got every technician and engineer on base an hour-long lecture on the appropriate uses of official resources.” Grogan grimaced behind his visor. He'd had a feeling that would come back to haunt him. The tech's tone of voice changed drastically as he continued and if the member of SG-9 didn't know better, he would think he'd heard admiration creeping in. “Of course, we also heard that you came pretty close to beating the Spartans in a training exercise. That true, Captain?”

This was surprising. Grogan hadn't considered that his reputation might actually go up as a result of the training program. Nice as this was, it felt wrong to have people respect him for a personal failure. “As far as I'm concerned, there is no 'close','” he said. “You either succeed or you don't. In the field, 'close' means someone's going home in a coffin rather than a bus. 'Close' means civilians get gunned down in the crossfire. I don't shoot for 'close' in the field, so I sure as shit don't shoot for it when I'm training.”
There was a pause in the conversation, the sounds of the rest of the strike team being the only thing to fill the silence. Grogan considered that he'd been a little harsh with the guy. Memories of the conversations he'd had with Satterfield and Taylor started popping up before he shoved them back down into his subconscious where they belonged.

“...right,” Conners said after a bit. “I guess I should have figured.”

Grogan turned his head slightly, not sure what the technician was talking about. He realized that this could be misinterpreted as a threatening gesture. “How do you mean?” he asked in as non-aggressive a tone he could manage.

“Well, you know, you're getting a...high reputation around base,” Conners replied. “Even most of the ODSTs seem to respect you. And they don't respect very many people. It's why the Colonel's been fielding you so much.”

“I'm just another grunt, Lieutenant,” Grogan replied. The last thing he needed was people thinking he was some kind of hero. He'd leave that kind of thing to the likes of O'Neill and Mitchell. “Don't believe the hype.”

A chuckle answered him from the tech, who was still standing out of his line of sight. “Yeah, well, if you're gonna pull another trick like in the exercise, just try to be more discreet about it, okay? I really don't need any more of my bunk time cut down because Command thinks the egg-heads need a talking-to.”

Grogan winced in sympathy. “No problem. Sorry about that.”

“Don't worry about it. You—here we go!”

“What's up?” Grogan asked. “You figure out what's wrong?”

“Yeah. Sorry about the wait. Some bumps in the road are inevitable when you're dealing with a new armor system, especially one that's as cobbled together as ours,” the UNSC technician explained. A tapping sound accompanied his words, indicating he was already working on the solution. “The problem was the on-board biomonitors. Normally, the armor's medical suite would gather data on your vitals from your neural implant; basically tapping into the data that naturally travels up your spinal cord. You New Earth types don't have implants, unfortunately, so the science team had to use some scanning tech reverse-engineered from Goa'uld sensors. Impressive stuff, but integrating it with existing software has been a bit tricky. This should just take a second...”

Something stuck out to the SGC trooper. “Wait, your implants work with biomonitors?” That hadn't been in the files he'd read concerning UNSC cybernetics. Then again, the other government hadn't exactly been forthcoming where it came to that kind of thing, so it made sense he'd have incomplete information.

“Oh, yeah,” Conners replied, still tapping away. The casual nature of the answer suggested that this was not classified information. “There are a whole lot of functions you can get out of a neural implant. Most of them are reserved for the higher end models that flag officers get, but even the more basic ones the ODSTs and I have enable biomonitoring, Friend-or-Foe identification, and tracking systems.”

Grogan blinked. “You mean people can track you wherever you go? Do you get them taken out if
Conners sounded perplexed as he replied. “No, not really. Even if we do leave for the private sector there's no telling whether we might be recalled. Why bother going through the removal surgery?”

“You don't find it creepy or anything?” Grogan asked. “I mean, you could be tracked anywhere you go. I get why it's useful in combat, but at home isn't it kind of...” an invasion of privacy? he finished mentally.

“Um, no not really,” Conners said. “It's no different from the GPS function in a civilian compad. Wait, do you guys not have those yet?”

“Not really, no,” Grogan replied. “Hailey's talked about a GPS function in that fancy smartphone of hers but most people don't have one of those.” Besides, she could always just leave it at home. A neural implant was, quite literally, a part of you.

“Eh, you'll get used to it,” the Lieutenant assured him. “Alright, this should do it. Any change?”

The various readouts that comprised the HUD vanished entirely before they started reappearing one at a time. Within seconds, everything from the armor's integrity to the aforementioned biomonitors were fully online and displaying the relevant data.

“All green,” Grogan confirmed, deciding to let the conversation end here. Any curiosity or Orwellian dread could be saved for when they were all safely back on base. Conners moved away after that, helping the rest of the strike team with their preparations.

Suiting up took several hours. Normally, it would have taken a fraction of that time, but the lack of non-portable equipment and a bare-bones support staff took its toll. It didn't matter. They would have had to wait for nightfall anyway to execute the extraction. The troopers who suited up first passed the time in the ways soldiers from any era did: they played cards, told exaggerated stories of their past, or the took cat naps.

Eventually, the sun went down, and the appointed time came. A beeping sound came from Major Barnes' gauntlet. He glanced at it and pressed a button, silencing the alarm. “Fall in, people,” he ordered. “Time to earn our pay.”

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The neighborhood was quiet. Well, to be more accurate, the slum was quiet. Only an extremely generous person would call the piecemeal shacks and sheds buildings, let alone houses. Most of the wage-slaves (the Coalition wasn't quite the utopia Teal'c and Bra'tac had envisioned just yet) had collapsed into their bunks and were sleeping the sleep of the physically drained. There was very little activity visible throughout the 'residential' area.

Grogan resisted the urge to shift nervously. The target's guard detail was about about 20 meters away and might hear the motion. Thankfully, a video feed in the top left of Grogan's visor provided an elevated view of the glorified garage the target was hunkered down in. It was surrounded by a small fenced-in area which contained some bits of random debris and another shed that the guards were using as a barracks. He could see two of them outside walking patrol routes. The feed's enhanced vision functions indicated there were two more in the barracks itself.

It would have been nice if Grogan had been able to use the full capabilities of his own armor's
enhanced vision. Unfortunately, the extra equipment would narrow his field of view far too much, so the fancy stuff was stuck flipped upward to rest flush against the top-forward of his helmet. He really hoped they worked out how to miniaturize the reverse-engineered alien tech enough to fit inside a standard helmet soon.

Still, having a sniper pair on overwatch was always reassuring. They were the ones so generously providing a bird's eye view of the target location. Grogan glanced at the church tower sticking up into the air a few blocks away. The guardian angels couldn't have asked for a better perch. Also comforting was the full fireteam of four ODSTs hidden behind cover about 15 meters behind him. Immediate backup was a luxury an SG Team was rarely afforded and the members of SG-7, as well as their temporary replacement, appreciated it. Command must have really wanted this guy.

Solid as the setup was, Grogan couldn't help but get the jitters. They were mere moments away from initiating contact. No matter how many operations he took part in, he could never seem to get rid of the surge in his pulse that happened at this point.

Deep breaths. Serenity. Focus on your job. A voice, Major Barnes', came over the secure comms.

“Execute.”

Grogan rose out of cover. He raised his assault rifle and fired two short, controlled bursts into one of the pacing guards. A few soft puff’s from the suppressed weapon and the hostile was down. Several other shots were fired from nearby, the other members of SG-7 taking down the other sentry as well as the two in the barracks by firing through the thin walls. Their heat signatures made them child's play to pinpoint.

The entire security team was downed within three seconds, all with barely a sound. The UNSC really did know how to make superb suppressors. Apparently, they were absurdly expensive and wore out quick, but goddamn were they worth every penny. Grogan knew what he wanted for his birthday this year.

The team moved in. They closed the distance at a dead sprint, their practiced steps barely registering as a whisper in the silent night air. The team split into two pairs. The first confirmed the kills in the barracks before moving toward the far entrance. The other, composed of Grogan and another member of SG-7 named Captain Stark, took their positions at the rear entrance. They moved up the short flight of wooden steps that ran flush with the shack itself.

Stark ran a sensor over the door. There were no electronic security systems in place. There were some rather sturdy locks, though, which necessitated a breaching charge. Stark applied one and stood on the other side of the door from Grogan with his finger above the button on his gauntlet that would detonate the small explosive.

Once they were ready, Grogan sent a signal to Major Barnes. A small timer appeared at the top of his visor. It counted down from five. Four. Three. Two...

The door exploded inward. Stark tossed in the flashbang.

Grogan and Stark waited for the flashbang to go off. Once they heard the detonation they rushed in, weapons at the ready, ensuring that the target didn't try to escape the back way. They were barely through the door before the other pair had the Lucian on the ground and in restraints. On further inspection, Grogan realized the man who had bagged the target was none other than Major Barnes himself. It seemed he liked to lead from the front. The final member of SG-7 stood a few paces
behind his superior, all but shaking his head in amusement.

Wait.

Something was wrong. Camelot had bagged quite a few Lucian prisoners considering its brief operational lifetime and Grogan had been present for many of them. This particular target wasn't acting how he would expect. There was no shouting, no crying, not even a panicked glance at the forces that had him at their mercy. Actually, he seemed completely focused on a point just beneath a nearby desk.

The desk that had just started glowing.

By the time Barnes froze in shock, Grogan had already grabbed Captain Stark and shoved him towards the exit. The two of them barely made it to the doorway, Stark stumbling in confusion and Grogan sprinting with adrenaline, when the blast hit them.

He couldn't remember the explosion itself. As far as Grogan's memories were concerned, one moment he was in the shack and the next he was several meters outside, lying face first on the ground with his head spinning and his ears ringing. Immediately, he knew he had been knocked out. It was probably a bad sign that he was familiar enough with the experience to recognize it right away, but for the moment he focused on getting his bearings.

First things first, he looked for his rifle. It was lying about a foot away. Grogan crawled over to it. He picked it up and examined it thoroughly. It looked mostly fine. A little scorched, but fully functional. Okay. Next.

His HUD was still functioning. His eyes danced over the information displayed there. System status indicated that his armor was battered, scorched, and peppered with shrapnel, but had not been breached. No debilitating damages. His body was in similar shape. He'd suffered a minor concussion but nothing he couldn't power through. He glanced down at himself to visually verify the report. No punctures, no twisted limbs, no serious pain indicating internal injuries. He was okay. The OCA-1 had certainly proven its worth today.

Next, he analyzed his surroundings. He froze. The shack was a burnt ruin. An explosive...the glowing desk. The Lucian Alliance had set a trap. They must have used some kind of naquadah-based IED, most likely cobbled together from staff weapon fuel cells if the visible glow was any indication. Something like that should have blown with far greater force than it did, meaning it was poorly made. They'd been damn lucky. At least...he'd been. The situation finally sank in.

A series of red-lettered alerts appeared in the bottom left of his visor. Or maybe they'd been there all along, and he just hadn't wanted to face them. That area of his HUD was reserved for team alerts and emergency signals. The information displayed there stopped him cold.

Major Barnes was dead. As was the other member of SG-7 that had been in the room with him.

Oh. Oh, God. Half of his team was down. Was it happening again?

Someone groaned just to his left. A quick glance confirmed its source: Captain Stark was alive! Grogan scrambled onto his hands and feet, awkwardly stumbling forward before falling almost on top of the injured man. Stark had been further from the epicenter, but it seemed part of the shack had fallen on top of him while Grogan had been thrown clear.
According to the chain of command, Major Kyle, the leader of the ODST team, was the current field CO. Said Major came over the comms and demanded a SitRep.

“This—this is SG 7-Two,” Grogan commed sluggishly. He started shoving scorched planks and other debris off of his comrade. Stark, just getting his bearings, nodded his thanks and accepted the hand up. “Beta Team-Actual, there was a suicide charge. SG 7-Actual and -One are KIA. 7-Three and I are battered but fully functional, sir.” He was about to request recon by the sniper team (maybe there was a malfunction and someone was still alive in the ruins) when a bright green flash drew his attention.

The church tower had exploded. A ball of green fire rose into the air and debris rained down for blocks in every direction. The top, where the sniper team had been perched, was completely obliterated. An alert popped up on Grogan's HUD informing him that their overwatch was now KIA.

Oh, shit.

“Beta-Actual, we're moving to the fallback point,” he said. He tapped Stark on the shoulder and gestured to the cover the ODST Team was behind. They needed to get out of the open before the small yard they were in turned into a killzone. He met no disagreement and the pair started double timing it to relative safety. Something kept nagging at him, though.

Why had the explosion been green? There were no goa'uld weaponry he knew of that produced that color. It confused him for a moment before he recognized it as the aftereffect of a fuel rod cannon strike. But, the Lucians didn't use Covenant weaponry, and the Banished had stuck to simple raids ever since the rescue operation. No one at Camelot had seen the aliens for well over a month.

A bestial roar rang out. It was soon joined by another, this one coming from the opposite direction. Then, there was another, in yet another direction, and another, and another, until it felt like they were on an entire world of savage beasts out for their blood. The motion trackers in the bottom right of the humans' visors suddenly lit up with a swarm of red dots in every direction.

The Brutes were here.

Grogan and Stark jerked to a halt. They raised their weapons, scanning the ramshackle buildings and alleys around them, looking for hostiles. A series of canisters flew into the yard, pumping out some kind of gray smoke. The gas quickly flooded the entire area and reduced visibility to a few feet at best. The pair of SGC troopers pulled down their enhanced vision packages. It would reduce their field of view, but they should have no difficulty seeing through that haze.

To Grogan's shock, the sensors did little to pierce the clouds of obscuring gas. It must have been some kind of high-tech compound the Covenant cooked up before their empire crumbled. Grogan could still see better with the gadget than without it, but the clear-as-day effect he'd been expecting was far from what he got. Even the motion tracker started jumping and pixellating until it was utterly worthless.

Weapons fire rang out from the fallback point.

Spiker rounds flew past and embedded themselves in the unpaved ground. Clumps of dirt were thrown into the air, adding to the reduced visibility. The pair of survivors dove to the ground and trained their weapons forward. A group of red blobs vaulted over the low fence concealing the ODSTs position. Thankfully, even an OCA-1 wearing Marine was still significantly smaller than a
Brute, so there was no friendly fire. Unfortunately, any relief they might have felt was outweighed by the fact that trained ODSTs seemed to be fleeing in terror.

“Contact! Contact!” Major Kyle's voice rang out again. “Fall back via auxiliary escape route! Regroup at rendezv—” The comm cut off in a scream. Another blob appeared in Grogan's vision. This one, though, crashed through the wooden fence rather than jump over it. The SGC trooper saw the ODST fall backwards onto the ground before a cloud of the strange smoke flew past, obscuring the entire scene. When it passed, a nightmare had taken to the field.

It was easily the largest Brute Grogan had ever seen. It was wearing incredibly thick armor, with only the beast's head being visible. One arm ended in what looked like an enormous version of a medieval mace—a solid metal cylinder with spikes protruding from the tip and sides. The other arm ended in an equally huge, 3-fingered metal claw that looked like it could crumple a tank like a beer can. The Brute's face was scarred on one side, a fact which only made its feral grin all the more heart-stopping. Light from the burning shack reflected off of its eyes, making it look like an unearthly inferno burned behind them. It stood triumphantly over the mangled corpse of Major Kyle.

The remaining ODST's opened fire. After a moment of shocked hesitation, Grogan and Stark followed suit. Most of the rounds bounced off the thick metal of the armor. When any shots impacted the seemingly unprotected head, they were stopped by a personal energy shield. The Brute roared in pain...or maybe that was laughter.

The beast surged forward. Normally, something that large would be slow if not outright ponderous in its movement. Grogan had read about the enormous 'Hunters' the Covenant had fielded—effectively living tanks that could shrug off even heavy weapons fire. Lethal as they were, they were extremely limited in their movement, making them relatively easy to outmaneuver. The Brute, on the other hand, moved with an almost Spartan-level of speed. Its armor must have been powered somehow. There was no other way for it to move so fast.

One of the ODSTs didn't react in time. He turned to run as his comrades provided covering fire, but hadn't taken his first step before the beast was upon him. Seemingly unconcerned with the bullets impacting directly in front of its face, the Brute raised its mace-arm high in the air and brought it down on the human soldier's head.

The helmet was instantly flattened. The visor exploded in a shower of reinforced-glass fragments and human gore. The blow hit with such force that the ODST's legs were snapped like twigs and his corpse smashed into the ground.

The humans kept firing on it. Casually, almost lazily, the Brute raised its other arm. The claw opened up wide, giving a hollow cylinder at the center of the 'palm' a clear line of sight. It glowed red for a moment before a red beam of energy lanced out and punched clean through one of the ODSTs. The soldier collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Grogan only saw a snapshot of the event before being thrown flat on his ass once again. This time, there was no numb disorientation. Instead, a searing pain erupted over his chest. He glanced down only to find his armor partially melted and scorched. The beam weapon must have kept going and hit him after killing the ODST. The poor bastard must have absorbed enough of the blast to save Grogan's life. The onboard medical suite reported second degree burns across his pectorals.

Adrenaline started coursing through his body. He rolled onto his hands and knees, ignoring the agony in his chest, and rose to his feet with his weapon ready. He started to aim at the power-armored freak when enemy fire began pouring into the open space. There were hostiles in practically
every direction opening up on the humans, who were still getting their bearings after being ambushed and having two COs cut down in as many minutes.

Everything really went to shit after that.

“Fall back! Fall back!” someone shouted. It could have been Stark, it could have been Taylor, hell, it could have been Grogan himself. There was no real way to tell who it was. The roar in Grogan's ears made that impossible. It wasn't necessary, anyway, since everyone was already sprinting in any direction that didn't seem to have enemies in it.

At first, he tried to keep close to the other members of the strike team. Stark in particular. He'd be damned if he saved that guy's life only for him to buy it now. That all passed after a few seconds, though. There was no way to maintain any kind of group coordination in this environment. The world was just...chaos. Complete and utter chaos.

The 'smoke' constantly rolled throughout the slum's streets, dense patches of it blocking entire paths and structures only to move on the next second, making the surroundings themselves fluid and constantly changing. The visual enhancement package produced a disorienting collage of night-vision and infra-red as it tried to cope with whatever the hell the gas actually was. The chaotic jumble of shacks, huts, and other cobbled-together structures of various sizes robbed the environment of any sense of order or coherence. The aimless, curving 'roads' that resulted from a settlement arising organically turned the place into an impossible maze at the best of times. Hostiles seemed to appear from nowhere, the motion trackers having been rendered useless by the enemy's jamming, and fired lethal spikes of red-hot metal at any humans they saw.

Run.

That was all you could do.


Run down streets, through alleys, over piles of trash. Run past homeless people cowering in whatever corner, hole, or ditch they could find. Especially run away from hostiles, since engaging them would pin you to one location and let the enemy zero in on you. Just...get away. That was the only thing going through the mind.

At one point, Grogan entered an alley, only for a Brute to appear at the other end. Several spiker rounds impacted his armor before he could react. Thinking fast, he dove to the side, crashing through what passed for a wall and into some poor bastard's home. There was no time to feel bad about endangering civilian lives as he sprinted through the filthy hovel and exploded out the flimsy front door.

Out. He needed to get out. Out of the smoke-filled slum, out of the labyrinth of death, out of the nightmare. Eventually, he managed it. He sprinted through a smokey alley and onto a street only to find it clear. Open. The view stabilized as the armor's systems were finally able to make sense of his surroundings. Grogan felt like he had been trapped under water and had finally breached the surface. He could breathe again.

The relief only lasted a moment. Instincts soon kicked in, and the veteran was on the move again. He kept running for a few minutes to put some distance between him and the hostiles. Once relatively secure, he took stock of his injuries. The burn started to make itself known now that he wasn't in immediate danger. He withdrew a small syringe of salve and slid it into a port built into his armor;
this type of injury was fairly common in a galaxy with energy weapons, so the engineers had planned accordingly. The pain slowly faded and was replaced by an icy numbness. The injury would require better treatment back at base but it would keep for now.

Grogan activated his armor's tracking functions and cross referenced them with the detailed map the advance team had provided. Within a couple minutes he had determined roughly where he was and how to get to the rendezvous point.

He just hoped there would be someone else there to greet him.

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For the second time in his life, Carl Grogan knew what it was like to be hunted.

He glanced around the empty street. There was no one visible. He double checked his motion tracker. All-clear.

He leaped from cover into a dead sprint. He crossed the five or so meters in what felt like the blink of an eye and slides into the nearest concealment like a baseball player. He paused briefly to check his motion tracker. A few seconds passed before a red blip showed up at the outside range of the sensor. Sure enough, the hunter was right behind him. The Brute had to be using its own sense of smell or something. There was no other way it could be tracking him so effectively yet not know exactly where he was.

Time to change tactics. Grogan looked around before spotting something a short distance away: a shoddy stone wall. That gave him an idea. He rushed over and attached a small object to the bottom of it. He rushed down an alley. Just far enough to be able to detect the hostile when it reached his former position. He waited, his heartbeat thundering in his ears.

He pushed the button on his gauntlet the second the red blip reappeared. A crash rang out as the breaching charge he’d set went off, causing the decayed wall of heavy stone to collapse on the pursuing Brute. Said beast roared out in pain and indignation.

The sound faded rapidly in the background. Grogan was already sprinting away at top speed. He needed to loop back around if he wanted to reach the rendezvous point. His worry that he would be the only one there was joined by the new fear that there had been someone there, but they’d have left already. The Brutes had been keeping Grogan on the run for well over an hour judging by his mission clock.

It took another ten minutes to reach the rendezvous point. It actually hadn't been particularly far from where he’d set his trap, but he’d stopped several times to ensure he wasn't being followed. There didn't appear to be enough Brutes to perform a proper Sweep and Clear, but the savage aliens were making up for their deficiency in numbers with sheer enthusiasm. It paid to be careful.

Hoping against hope, Grogan sent out his Friend-or-Foe signal on the strike team's secure channel. There was an immediate response: friendlies present; all-clear; safe to approach. It took every ounce of his willpower not to spring up to full height and sprint toward his comrades.

The rendezvous point was in a small field that appeared to be used for recreation. Specifically, it was a small fenced off portion of the field being used as a garden. It was on a slight hill, granting a commanding view of the area, and had decent concealment in the form of short stone walls and bushes.
“Good to see you made it, Captain,” Taylor said as he waved from behind cover. Grogan made his way over and crouched down himself.

There were four survivors. Five, counting Grogan himself. There was Captain Taylor and Captain Stark, whom Grogan had expected. The other two were a surprise, although upon reflection they probably shouldn't have been. Lieutenant Conners, the technician from the safehouse, and Sgt. Reese, one of the ODSTs assigned to guard him. The tech looked distinctly out of place in his Free-Jaffa civilian garb and carrying a sidearm. The obvious fear behind his eyes reinforced that impression. Turned out the safehouse had been hit as well and these were the only two to get out alive.

“Major Barnes and Major Kyle are KIA,” Taylor pointed out. “Pretty sure that means you're in charge, Captain.”

Grogan swore mentally. The ODST was right. Chain of command did place him as leader of this ragtag group of survivors. He needed to figure out what to do. “Anyone been able to raise the local authorities?” he asked. Having to answer that question would buy a little time for him to think up a plan. This was a planet technically allied with the Freedom Coalition after all. Theoretically they should be able to call for aid.

Everyone looked to the technician. The man jumped slightly as he noticed their attention. Grogan had to repeat his query for his benefit. “Afraid there's been n-no success, sir,” the Lieutenant said. “The Coalition wasn't informed we'd be conducting this op—there wasn't time to go through the proper channels. Still, we tried raising the planetary garrison, but couldn't get through. Every frequency was dead silent. No traffic, no response. There's nothing approaching a local telecommunications grid, so there's no calling the cops, either.” He ended his explanation by shrugging helplessly.

This made no sense. It had been well over an hour since the suicide charge went off. Between the general chaos of the death-maze and the sound of Brute weapons-fire, there should have been more than enough to draw the attention of any half-competent military. So where the hell was everyone?

“Think the Brutes eliminated the Coalition forces?” Taylor hazarded.

“Doubtful. There would have been more signs of battle and it would have tipped us off. The airwaves would be full of comms traffic, at the very least,” Grogan said. “More likely someone was paid off. Someone inside the Coalition command structure took down the comm grid and has been stalling the response forces. There's no telling how long it'll take for help to finally get here, or if they’ll even come in force right away.”

Taylor swore passionately. “This day just keeps getting better and better. How long before Command declares us overdue and sends reinforcements?”

“Twelve hours,” Grogan said, voicing the answer they all knew already.

“You, uh, think we can hold out that long?” Conners asked. He visibly cheered up as a thought occurred to him. “The Banished are guerrilla fighters, right? Hit and run types? So, that means they can't stay here long or they risk getting hit back. We can wait them out...”

“Contact on motion trackers!” Sgt. Reese, the ODST still performing lookout, commed. Instantly, everyone was on high alert, weapons at the ready as they crouched behind cover.
“That answer your question, Lieutenant?” Taylor growled.

“Stow the chatter!” Grogan ordered. “The Lieutenant might be right, he might not. Here's the plan: we head west, away from the Stargate. Eventually, either they give up and leave, or we loop back around and double-time it to the 'gate. Clear?”

There was no time to respond. The red blips were closing far faster than they should have been, and the enemy had already come into view. The Brutes started firing. The humans fired back.

They retreated in an orderly fashion, two by two, one pair providing cover for the other in an alternating pattern. Once they'd put enough distance between them and the enemy they'd break contact and run full out. Just like they were trained.

Then, the power-armored Brute showed up again.

The beast half-laughed, half-roared as it charged toward the humans. It ignored the fire they poured onto it, the other hostiles forgotten. The most the bullets could do was scratch the surface of its thick armor. That thing must have had the density of a starship's hull to stand up to that kind of fire. It didn't even need energy shields.

“Full retreat! Fall back!” Grogan shouted. He took care to strip any panic out of his voice. He needed to sound authoritative, but unafraid. His subordinates immediately complied with his order and abandoned any attempts at covering fire. There wasn't anything they could really do against this monster. Like before, it proved too late for one of them. Sgt. Reese at least manage to take a few steps before he was taken out.

The Brute didn't crush his enemy, this time. Instead, it shoved it's mace-arm forward in a stabbing motion, forcing the spiked-tip into the Marine's back and straight through his chest-plate. The beast then lifted him into the air and held him there like some kind of twisted trophy. The human soldier went limp, looking like some victim of Vlad the Impaler as he sank down the spike, leaving a trail of blood as he went. The beast howled at the top of its lungs, celebrating its triumph.

Grogan only saw this for a moment before turning around and sprinting away himself. He would remember it, though. The scene would be burned into his mind in high definition for the rest of his life. Now wasn't the time to strike back, though. Now was the time to stay alive.

His breathing had almost steadied when the Brute hunter stalked into view.

The survivors of the strike team tensed behind their concealment. It had been several hours since their meeting at the rendezvous point and they had been on the run for the entire time, evading hunting parties, skirting ambushes, and escaping death by the skin of their teeth. The hope that the enemy would give up on their own had dwindled and all but faded away. The Brutes were relentless. However, if the humans could start taking down some of the hunters, the enemy commander might decide to cut his losses and be satisfied with the kills he'd already scored. It was worth a shot. Particularly since none of the humans fancied continuing this game of cat and mouse until they dropped dead from exhaustion.

The alien audibly sniffed as it approached the trap. Grogan had no idea how it could smell anything from inside a fully-enclosed helmet. Maybe it lacked the filters that Camelot built into its armor?
Whatever the case, the Brute was moving right where they wanted it.

It bent down, picked something off the ground, and visibly sniffed at it. It was a small, damp rag. The survivors had stolen it from a clothesline and Conners had rubbed it all over his sweaty head and neck, ensuring it positively reeked of his scent. It seemed Grogan's hunch about one of the ways the Brutes were tracking them had been correct. The target was in position. He sent the signal.

Three of the survivors rose to their feet and opened fire. Stark, Taylor, and Grogan poured high-velocity death onto the enemy. The alien stumbled back under the force of the blows and bumped into a stone wall. “Now, Lieutenant!” Grogan shouted.

A blast rang out as Conners triggered the last of the breaching charges from his place behind cover. Just like earlier in the night, the wall collapsed onto the enemy.

Unlike earlier, the Brute had managed to leap partially out of the way. It erupted out of the bit of rubble that fell on it like a shark breaching the surface of the sea. Either it was lucky, or the bastards were learning.

“7-Three! Plan Beta!” Grogan shouted. Stark stowed his rifle and drew the pins on the last two grenades. They had used up all of the others at various points during the chase. Hopefully, they would be able to kill an enemy this time rather than just stall it. Stark moved to flank.

Meanwhile, Grogan and Taylor worked to keep the Brute pinned down. These hunters were clearly Banished elites and had a firmer grasp on tactics. This one had rushed right over to a small alcove surrounded by stone walls (it looked like the gutted remains of an Empire-era building) that provided adequate cover. It had moved entirely too fast, though thankfully not as fast as the big one with the murder-arms. The trapped hostile stayed behind cover as it returned their fire. Suddenly, it stopped, making everyone nervous. If it just held still a few more seconds...

A primal roar rang out from the cornered enemy. Before anyone realized what was happening, the Brute had smashed through one of the walls that surrounded it, circled around, powered through another wall to flank them...and ran right into Captain Stark.

The pair crashed to the floor, the SG Trooper falling on his front with the hostile landing right on top of him. The human was all but crushed under the immense weight of the mammoth alien. “Keep firing!” Grogan shouted, desperation crawling into his voice. “We've gotta get it off him before—”

The grenades went off. As Grogan had feared, they had been trapped underneath Stark's body. There was nothing any of them could do as the finest high-explosives the UNSC had to offer tore the sole survivor of SG-7 in half. The Brute was lifted into the air, spun around, and dropped on its back. It groaned slightly, shook its head, and started to get up.

A red haze descended over Grogan's vision. He shot the Brute. He kept shooting it. His rifle clicked dry, he reloaded, and he resumed shooting it. Enemy fire started flying through the air. Some of it hit him, damaging his armor and making it difficult to stand still. He kept firing. The creature's armor was starting to dent and buckle. Soon, he would have blood...

Something struck him across the head. Grogan whirled, only to see Taylor shouting something at him. The words were drowned out by the sounds of battle (or maybe that was just the roaring in his own ears) but the meaning was clear: they had to fall back, or they would all die here.

Instantly, his mind was jerked back into operation. No one else was going to die on his watch. He
nodded to Taylor and moved to form an orderly retreat. They provided cover to give the un-armored Conners a chance.

Grogan had a terrible feeling that this night was just getting started...

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Four hours. That's how long it had been since they'd lost Stark. It had been eight hours since the initial ambush. At least, that was what the mission clock said. If you'd asked him, he would have said it had been at least a month.

“Okay. Five minute break,” Grogan said, willing his breathing to slow. “Then we take the Stargate.”

The other members of the strike team nodded before practically collapsing to the ground. Nearly the whole night had passed without a single pause. The Brutes continued to be both relentless and cunning in their hunt. They had kept on the trail, sure, but they'd also sent out units to cut off potential avenues of escape. The humans had been trapped in the same part of the city the entire time. Any one of them would probably be able to draw a complete, photo-accurate map of this entire slum by the time they got back. Hopefully, that would be happening soon.

This was the endgame. Soon, they would charge straight toward one of the sentries cutting off escape, trusting to sheer audacity to let them pass without losses. Then, they'd spend several minutes sprinting. First away from hostile territory, then looping back toward it. Back toward the Stargate. They couldn't keep dodging the hunters for much longer; exhaustion or luck would kill them long before help arrived. They would either escape in the next few minutes, or they would die. The only acceptable delay was this quick breather. They couldn't afford to be too exhausted going into the final stretch.

Grogan took stock of the soldiers under his command. Taylor was doing alright. A spiker round had punctured the outermost layer near the lower back, but there was no bodily damage to the Marine himself. Mentally, he was holding up remarkably well, considering he'd lost his entire squad less than half a day ago.

Grogan turned away to look at something else.

Conners wasn't doing nearly as well. He didn't have any armor weighing him down, but he was clearly less used to physical exertion. That was saying nothing of the lack of protection. Civilian fatigues did nothing to shield a man from even light damage, a fact that the bloody bandage covering half the man's face attested to. He'd barely avoided taking a spiker round to the face an hour before. Unfortunately, when the munition struck a wall it dislodged a bit of stone, which struck him and tore a gash across his left cheek. He was sitting a few feet away, leaning back against a wall and making a visible effort not to put his hand on the wound.

“Oh, God,” the technician said. “I feel like I'm gonna pass out. I can't believe I'm still functioning.”

“That's the adrenaline, Lieutenant,” Grogan said. The tech turned his weary-but-desperate eyes to him. “We're almost through this. Just a little while longer.”

Taylor grunted his agreement and handed Conners his canteen. The tech took it eagerly, drinking about half of it before he realized what he was doing. “Oh, shit. Sorry, Captain, I—”

“Don't worry about it,” the ODST replied, waving it off. He opened a port below the chin of his
helmet and inserted a straw built into the canteen. The rest of the water was gone within seconds.

That was it. Not including Grogan himself, there were only two survivors out of the original fourteen.

His first command had not been going well. Being chased throughout a city by Brutes was easily the second worst experience of his entire life. Constant terror, growing physical exhaustion, mounting injuries, and guilt were weighing him down like a pack full of lead.

There was a sound just to his right.

Grogan jumped back, raised his weapon, and took aim...at a rat. At least, some kind of vermin that looked like a cross between a rat and a gerbil. He growled angrily and rushed forward, intending to squash the thing between his fingers. The pest leaped and scurried away just before he could reach it. Grogan kicked a stone after it, hitting only a small metal bin with a clang.

“You okay, sir?”

That drew his attention back to the other survivors. Conners was staring in the opposite direction, apparently wary of unseen threats and paying no mind to his superior. Captain Taylor, on the other hand, was looking right at him, his expression hidden behind his visor. It took Grogan a second to realize the voice had come over a private comm channel that the ODST had just opened between the two of them. Conners would be unable to overhear.

“I'm fine, captain,” he replied.

“How about your injuries?” Taylor asked, pointing at Grogan's damaged armor. The chest-plate was still weakened by the energy weapon, with the burn remaining beneath. In addition, spiker rounds had punched through at several other points, most of them when he was trying to kill the Brute that had killed Captain Stark. The armor had kept them from going too deep, but the puncture wounds would still require professional attention. They were small injuries...but they kept piling up. Taylor continued talking. “The pain-killer effect of the burn salve must have worn off by now.”

“The antibiotic and sterilization functions will last a few hours yet. Before you ask, the squirts of biofoam have stemmed the bleeding in the spiker wounds,” he replied, careful to keep his voice professional. “I'm fine, captain. You just worry about getting ready for the final push. There's no need to concern yourself about me.”

“With respect, sir, that's bullshit,” Taylor said. He pointed in the direction Grogan had kicked the stone. “That racket you made could have given away our position. That doesn't exactly speak well of your mental state. We all need our heads in the game if we're going to make it out of this. So. I ask again: are you okay, sir?”

“Oh, just peachy!” Grogan snapped. “It's all sunshine and fucking rainbows in my neck of the woods! Think I'll take off for a stroll, pick some flowers, see the sights. That what you wanted to hear, Taylor?!!”

The ODST just kept staring from behind his visor. Then, he reached up and de-polarised it, revealing his face. His eyes were steady, but neither cold nor angry. “I lost people today, too,” he said.

Grogan opened his mouth. He closed it. Then, he opened it again. Then, closed it. Eventually, he found himself leaning back against a wall and sinking to the ground, his lips moving of their own
volition. His voice was a plain monotone. “This happened to me before. Seven years ago, when I first joined the SGC. My squad was on a mission, got ambushed. On the run for hours afterward. Stranded. Behind enemy lines. No fall-back. No backup. Hostiles in pursuit the whole time. Only managed to survive because another SG Team showed up. The longest night of my life. Felt like a fucking lifetime. I...” he started to choke up, forcing the words past the lump in his throat. “I was the only one to make it out. The only survivor of my team.”

Silence. He wondered what the other man would think. How would he respond to a confession of such utter failure? Would give voice to the guilt the SG Trooper had felt all these years? Would he demand to be put in charge in his place? Grogan had to admit, it would make sense.

“I get it, man,” Taylor said. Grogan looked at him with wide eyes. The ODST had no more judgment in his gaze than before. “I lost my squad today. Not the first time it's happened, either. Probably won't be the last. We're fighting the guys that the Covenant at the height of their power couldn't contain, and there are going to be casualties. People like you and me—we're survivors. We escape when others don't, we live when others die. We're the ones God really fuckin' hates, cause he leaves us behind to deal with the loss and the guilt.” He looked his superior straight in the eye. “But you don't have to do it alone. You've got your squad back at base. You've got everyone else in the SGC. Hell,” he smirked, “you've even got me. For all that's worth. Just remember: you're not alone.”

There were no more words after that. Grogan waited another thirty seconds, then declared the break over. Time to make the final run.

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Before, Grogan had struggled to conceal his heavy breathing from his subordinates. He had wanted to be their rock, the invincible leader, and tried hard to hide any weakness. Now, it was all he could do not to lean against a nearby building for support.

“How's it look?” he asked, his voice still out of breath.

“Area around the 'gate looks clear,” Taylor answered from his perch atop a small storefront. They were in the open market area a short distance away from the Stargate. It had been closed for the night, although morning was less than an hour away. The moon had already set, forcing the humans to rely more on their armor's baseline enhanced VISR mode. Neither of them had pulled down the full package. After the ambush, Grogan didn't know if he could ever bring himself to use it again.

“That makes sense, right?” Conners asked. His voice was even worse than Grogan's. Sweat was pouring in rivulets down his face and his panting was audibly dehydrated. It wouldn't be long before he collapsed. “I mean, Brutes aren't the most disciplined soldiers. Maybe none of them were patient enough to settle for guard duty.”

That was certainly possible. Grogan probably would have agreed with him, had he not seen how these particular Brutes conducted themselves. Still, Banished elite or not, a Brute was a Brute. There had to be a limit to their professionalism.

“Let's move out,” he ordered. Conners looked about ready to make a run for it, so Grogan put a hand on his shoulder. “Don't get cocky, Lieutenant. The final stretch is always the most dangerous part of any mission precisely because people get overconfident there. We do this by the book. Understood?” Said lieutenant gulped and his eyes widened, but only for a second. He quickly steeled his features and nodded, holding his nearly empty sidearm at the ready.
The buildings were packed tightly together this close to the Stargate. This world relied heavily on trade, and everyone wanted their shop close to the 'gate to hock their wares to visitors. The humans settled for an alley for their approach. It was narrower than they would have liked, but it was the least open direction they could see, and they were in a rush. The hunters had certainly figured out what they were up to by now. They only had a few minutes at best before this whole area was swarming with Banished.

Taylor took point. He approached the alley from the side, creeping toward the entrance while holding flush with one of the shops. He pulled an object from an equipment pouch and drew a couple wires from it. One he plugged into his helmet, the other he bent and snaked around cover. After a moment of analyzing the feed from the fiberoptic probe, he stowed the device and sent the all-clear signal. The other survivors moved up behind him.

They moved slowly, cautiously, eyes jumping between their motion trackers and the surroundings themselves. Taylor, still on point, was splitting his attention between the front exit and the rooftops. Grogan took up the rear, similarly dividing his attention between the rear entrance and the rooftops. Conners, being the most vulnerable, was in the center, his head twisting this way and that as his nerves really started getting the better of him.

There was nothing on the motion trackers. Some of the buildings were thin enough to spot heat signatures, but those were just the locals sleeping in the back rooms of their shops and polluting the view. There were no roars or sounds of lumbering alien killing machines.

Taylor was almost at the exit when it exploded.

Specifically, a stack of shipping crates that had been just barely in sight were smashed to pieces and flung across the exit, soon replaced by the towering form of a Brute hunter. Its face was concealed by its helmet, but Grogan could swear the thing was smiling. It must have anticipated this move and lain in wait for them.

“Formation U-1!” Grogan shouted. Taylor immediately went prone. Conners defied Grogan's fears by not hesitating, instead falling to one knee as he was supposed to. Grogan himself remained standing. Each having a clear line of fire, they opened up on their enemy. Two UNSC Assault Rifles and one sidearm flashed and spat high-velocity death. On any regular opponent, it was a textbook tactic that would have cleared the path in seconds.

The Brute just shrugged it off.

The coordinated fire was having an effect, the armor starting to show damage quickly, but it wasn't enough to stop the beast from rushing forward and closing to melee range with the prone ODST. It lifted up a colossal foot and stomped directly on the Marine's head. There was gut wrenching sound as the helmet visibly deformed under the blow. The Brute raised its foot again, heedless of the rifle- and pistol-fire hammering its armored form.

A roar split the air. However, it didn't come from the Brute.

It came from Grogan.

The SG Trooper charged straight at wannabe-sasquatch, firing his rifle all the while. The weapon clicked empty. He didn't bother reaching for another magazine; he'd run out hours before. Instead, he threw the Assault Rifle aside and drew his combat knife. He'd cut this fucking thing’s throat out for what it had done. He'd stab it in the heart, then chop off its nuts, then gut it, then cut off its head so
he could have it mounted over his bunk. This freak would pay for everything that had happened tonight. He roared again, raised his blade high—

And was slammed straight into the wall by a sweeping blow of the Brute's forearm.

The pain was so agonizing it actually choked off the scream that wanted to burst out of his throat. He'd taken the hit on his center mass—directly above his still-fresh burn. It felt like some of his ribs had cracked, too. Grogan felt like passing out. The pain, the blunt force trauma, the exhaustion, everything seemed to hit him at once. It took him a half second to realize he hadn't fallen over yet. It took another half to realize that this was odd and to open his eyes to figure out what was going on.

The Brute was holding him up. It had one hand gripping the frame of his armor and the other drawing a spiker from its waist, completely ignoring the pistol rounds bouncing off its armor. It pulled its arm back like a bowler getting ready to throw.

Then, it swung the weapon forward, and rammed the twin bayonets through Grogan's chest.

The weakened OCA-1 chest-plate gave way. Warning lights and alerts flashed across his visor. It was getting hard to breathe. There was surprisingly little pain. This should hurt more, shouldn't it? Some distant part of him was aware that he was going into shock. Most of him, though, was just...tired. Tired of this whole damn night. And his eyelids were getting really heavy.

The Brute leaned forward, bringing its helmet closer to Grogan's. The alien's protective covering split just above the snout and opened in clam-shell fashion. It reminded him of the elaborate headgear sported by the elite Jaffa under the Goa'uld Empire.

This creature, though, resembled nothing those parasitic tyrants had ever commanded. Its muzzle lifted up in a grin as it bared its sharp teeth at him. It snorted. Or maybe it laughed. It was hard to tell. Grogan's eyes were drawn to the enormous maw that the creature was showing off. The jaws were opening wide. Was it going to eat him?

His view was interrupted when blood suddenly exploded out of the Brute's mouth. Grogan fell to the ground and the impact jarred him half-way back to wakefulness. It restored enough of his curiosity to turn his head just in time to see the last of Taylor's bullets punch through the top of alien's mouth and scramble its brains. The Brute fell and seemed to shake the ground with its impact.

Things started getting a bit hazy after that. He could tell there were people hovering over him. They were doing something to his chest. What...

The world rushed back into focus. Grogan breathed, in and out, in and out, deep, deep breaths. He blinked his eyes clear. Taylor was standing over him, the ODST's face visible behind the shattered remains of his visor. A line of blood was running down his face, but otherwise he seemed okay. He was holding a spiker whose blades were stained red. Conners was closer, having just removed a syringe from Grogan's chest port. It was connected to a large cannister the technician was holding.

The readouts on his HUD finally drew Grogan's eye. The spiker's bayonets had punched through the armor and entered his chest, forcing two of his ribs apart and puncturing one of his lungs. Said lung had started filling with blood. Conners had injected him with biofoam, which forced out the blood and expanded, inflating the lung while remaining porous enough to allow breathing. It still felt like he was hyperventilating, but at least he wouldn't be drowning in his own bodily fluids. He had to remember to buy some stock in whatever company made this sci-fi miracle shit.
“Can you move, Captain?” Taylor asked. The voice wasn't over the comms this time, instead coming out of the gaping hole where most of his visor used to be.

“I can if you can,” he wheezed. The ODST smirked and offered him a hand, which he took. Grogan immediately started swaying on his feet. Taylor grabbed him and put an arm under his shoulder.

“Lieutenant, go to the Stargate and dial Camelot,” Taylor ordered. The tech nodded and ran off while the pair of wounded soldiers stumbled after him.

The courtyard was empty. It seemed Conners had been half-right. The Brutes had only left one of their own on guard duty. Dumb piece of shit must have drawn the short straw or something. The pair had made it about half-way when a blue flash illuminated the entire area. Grogan's armor automatically toned down the enhanced vision while Taylor raised his free arm to shield his eyes. The light dimmed slightly after a second, allowing them a better look.

The Stargate was open. They'd made it. Conners lunged for the open wormhole, but checked himself. He looked back out at the courtyard and seemed relieved when he saw them. He raised his arm and started shouting something, probably telling them to hurry the hell up, but paused, his eyes growing wide.

The world exploded.

Once again, Grogan found himself lying on the ground in a daze. He glanced down and saw that his armor was even more scorched than before. He looked around him and noticed that he appeared to be lying just to the side of a shallow crater. Motion drew his eye to the edge of the courtyard.

It was the Beast. The power-armored Brute from earlier that had torn through an ODST squad like they were nothing. It was looking down the length of its left arm, the barrel of its energy weapon smoking and faintly glowing red. Apparently, that thing had an area of effect mode. More Brutes appeared, flowing around their leader into the open. The hunters had caught up with them. The barrel of the Beast's weapon began glowing brighter, sending light shining between its claws and painting the whole scene in blood red.

A glowing orange spear of energy flew from the side of the courtyard and struck one of the Brutes, lifting him off the ground and slamming him into a wall with enough force to crack it. The Brute let out a pained grunt, but was still intact enough to get back on its feet.

The assembled aliens turned to face what looked like a platoon of Free Jaffa warriors rushing towards them, bellowing war cries in common goa'uld and firing their Staff Weapons wildly. The Coalition Guard had arrived. Better late than never. The Brutes roared in unison and charged, tearing into the Jaffa.

This was their chance. Grogan frantically looked around until he saw Taylor lying a short distance away. He crawled over to the wounded ODST and, seeing he was still alive, dragged the both of them to their feet.

“Come on, Marine! We're almost home!” Grogan forced out. It was hard to breathe, let alone talk, but he had to get the both of them moving. There was no telling if the Coalition forces would win this fight. Even if they did, there was still a chance they'd been in on the ambush and only turned on the Banished afterward. They could easily pose as rescuers and then arrange for an 'accident' to happen during treatment. The only safety was on the other side of the 'gate. He started pulling the both of them toward the blue light and away from the hell-colored scene behind them.
It took a couple steps, but Taylor got the idea quickly enough. For ten meters the two broken soldiers stumbled drunkenly toward their salvation, each half-carrying the other. Spiker and Staff Weapon-fire filled the air around them. A few rounds hit Grogan, one of them punching through his side. It was a minor injury, a drop in the bucket at this point, and he powered through it. The relatively short distance felt like a decathlon. Every step was a herculean effort.

Finally, they made it to the Stargate. Grogan painfully rasped some voice commands into his helmet, instructing it to broadcast the Iris codes that ensured they wouldn't slam into the protective shield like bugs on a windshield. They stumbled up the gentle ramp leading to the 'gate itself, narrowly avoided tripping over the smoldering remains of Lt. Conners, and half-fell through the wormhole.

A quick journey outside of time and space, having their molecules disassembled and reassembled, and they were there. The pair separated on their trip to the floor, Grogan landing on his side and rolling onto his back. They were home. They were safe.

“Captain! Captain, can you hear me?”

Grogan opened his eyes. Satterfield was there, clad in scrubs and wearing medical equipment around her neck. What was going on? Had the infirmary needed her to serve as a medic again? She took some of the scanning tech she was wearing like a stethoscope and started examining him. He groaned and tried to push her away.

“T-taylor,” he forced out. “Make sure Taylor's okay. 's what's important” He could feel consciousness slipping away, but he'd be damned if the ODST died because people were too busy fussing over him.

“Captain, I...”

Something about the look in Satterfield's eyes jerked Grogan back from the brink of sleep. A ball of lead formed in his gut. He started turning his head, ignoring the medic's pleas that he hold still, and kept going until he could see the other survivor.

Captain Taylor was lying on his belly. He wasn't moving. Nobody was trying to treat him. Grogan spotted the problem immediately:

There was a spike of hot metal sticking out of the back of his neck.

The Brute in the alley had failed to crush Taylor's skull. It had, however, damaged and warped his helmet, deforming it to the point that more of the neck seam was exposed. A stray round had hit that exact spot. Judging by the location, it had penetrated the thinner material just far enough to sever the spinal cord. A one-in-a-million shot in the middle of a chaotic, poorly lit battle with a fairly inaccurate weapon. Pure, dumb luck.

That was it, then. He was alone. Carl Grogan was the sole survivor of yet another butchered unit.

The darkness swallowed him whole.
Hey, guys. We're so sorry for the delay. RL popped up for both of us and, even with the buffer we had set up, we just couldn't keep posting chapters until now. We'll try to keep to a posting every three weeks from here on out. Emphasis on 'try'.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Interlude 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude 1

The atmosphere in the debriefing was dead. That was the only way the Master Chief could think of to quantify the mood he was witnessing. A heavy oppressiveness that seemed to push everyone down with a weight that was almost crushing.

It had been less than six hours since the only survivor of the ambushed capture mission had stumbled through the Stargate. Camelot personnel stationed temporarily off-base with Freedom Coalition troops had come under attack at roughly the same time and the officers of Camelot HQ had been scrambling to get a handle on the situation ever since. The infirmary was full of casualties and there had been more KIAs in the past few hours than in the two months that the initiative had been in operation.

Now, the officers of said initiative had found a spare moment to regroup and reassess. Every relevant person that could be spared had gathered in the briefing room and taken their seats. Several seconds passed in absolute silence. No one spoke or even moved beyond breathing and occasionally glancing at the others.

Perhaps it was exhaustion. One could easily explain this behavior as everyone just catching their breath. However, the Chief had spent most of his life in face-concealing armor surrounded by other soldiers in face-concealing armor. He knew how to read body language and he didn't need Kelly's social skills to recognize when soldiers were demoralized.

They'd taken a massive hit. Everything seemed to be falling apart at once and they all knew it. Even worse, these were the officers whose job it was to keep this kind of thing from happening. Self-perceived guilt was a sure way to sap any soldier's morale. Several more seconds passed; it seemed no one wanted to be the one to break the silence.

“The Aur'c mission was a trap,” Col. Mitchell declared. He turned to the intelligence officer, Major Dare. The other spook, Maybourne, was currently analyzing the intel that was still pouring in through the Stargate and thus had been excused from the briefing. The colonel continued with a solid, unshaken look in his eye. “Netan used his half-brother as bait to ambush us, correct?”

Like that, the spell was broken. Everyone save the supersoldier visibly became more alert and responsive and the meeting was underway. Mitchell had behaved as any CO was meant to and bounced back first, dragging his staff to their feet with him. The Chief's respect for the SGC officer rose another notch.

“That's correct, sir,” Dare replied. “It's clear now that the enemy has become aware of our existence. The extent of their knowledge of Camelot in specific is currently unknown, for instance they could believe us to be a division of the Coalition or purely SGC, but at the very least they seem familiar with our methodology and have adapted accordingly.” She grimaced. “Netan has most likely gone to ground by now. We will likely not be finding him any time soon.”
“Putting us back to square one. Not to mention making this whole mess a waste of time and good soldiers,” Mitchell sighed before visibly brushing the subject off. “We’ll address that in its proper place. For now, I want to know what the hell happened out there. Please continue, Major.”

The ONI Agent straightened slightly as every eye turned back to her. The Chief noted that the career spook must have been exceptionally winded to show even a hint of unease. “Captain Alston Taylor was pronounced KIA upon arrival in the Embarkation Room. A Type-25 Spiker round penetrated an already damaged armor section at the base of the skull and severed the spinal cord; the heat of the round inflicted further harm by scorching the major nerve endings and damaging the brain directly. There was nothing the medics could do.”

Several of the UNSC officers visibly grimaced at the news. They were all ODSTs, so naturally they were saddened by the loss of their own, but the reaction made the Chief wonder if this particular captain had been a significant figure in their ranks. A respected veteran of the Human-Covenant War, perhaps? The Spartan dismissed that line of thought as irrelevant and abandoned it.

Major Dare continued. “The other soldier to make it back through the Stargate did not suffer the same fate. Unfortunately, Captain Carl Grogan lost consciousness immediately upon arrival and has since been placed in a medically induced coma. Any direct debriefing with him will have to wait until the Infirmary clears him. Luckily, the mission recordings from both Grogan and Taylor were intact and the Intelligence Wing analyzed what we could of it in the time allotted.”

The major pressed a button on her compad. The room lights dimmed and a 2-D image was projected onto one of the clear smart glass displays on the wall. Time seemed to slow as the Spartan’s mind tore apart what he was seeing.

The image showed a Brute warrior wearing an armor set unlike any the Chief had ever encountered. It looked like a more streamlined and utilitarian variant of the Chieftain armors the aliens had started wearing toward the end of the War. Those, however, had all been unique, each one customized by the individual to reflect their lineage and past battlefield accomplishments. They had included a veritable spectrum of colors and ornaments welded onto the armor plating. As the major tapped away at her pad and more images were displayed, some containing several Brutes, he saw that all of the armor sets were uniformly streamlined and colored a basic gunmetal gray. The Chief speculated that this was new gear given to a new unit and that customization would come over time. He didn't spend much energy on that thought, however, as his experienced mind focused on searching for any signs of weakness.

The armor sets provided near total body coverage. This was unusual, as Brutes tended to go for minimalist designs that left large patches of fur-covered hide exposed. Thick armor plates covered the majority of the warrior’s body while thinner areas like the joints were covered by some kind of tight under-layer. The heads were covered by full helmets with polarized visors. The architecture looked a lot like a Brute designed version of the Spartans’ own MJOLNIR armor system. The Chief doubted the aliens’ designs were true powered armor, though, as the strength-obsessed Brutes would almost certainly see such functions as a sign of weakness.

The armor looked...remarkably solid. It was clear to him that a lot of care and expense had gone into their design and manufacture. This was not the gear of a common warrior. He would need more data and time to study them, but even a glance at these hostiles gave him one very significant fact: these were the new Brute elite.

“These Brutes utilized armor and equipment we have never encountered before,” Dare said. The Chief tuned back in, having managed to complete his preliminary analysis in the time it took Dare to
cycle through five pictures and continue speaking. “They were able to successfully ambush the strike team and eliminate seven out of the ten soldiers present within two minutes of initiating contact.”

The last image was replaced by a video. Information listed in the corner of the screen identified it as having come from Capt. Grogan's helmet cam. It showed a nondescript, poorly-built wall from a short distance away.

Suddenly, a group of ODSTs vaulted over it and a new hostile smashed through into the battlefield. Every officer present at the briefing stiffened slightly as a portion of the intimidation factor conveyed itself through the footage. Even the Spartan tilted his head slightly.

“This,” Dare declared, freezing the video on a shot of a truly massive Brute, “is Decimus. He's a top lieutenant to Atriox himself and essentially serves as the alpha's personal attack dog. He is also one of the most respected and feared warriors within the Banished. This is the first sign we have seen of him in nearly a year. ONI had previously concluded he had been killed in a raid on a Sangheili colony.”

As he watched the elite Brute tear through the human soldiers, the Master Chief reconsidered the possibility of the new Brute armor being powered. There was no other way a creature as heavy as a Brute wearing all that protection could move as fast as the behemoth in the footage. It was also possible that Decimus was the only one whose armor sported that feature, as his protective gear was noticeably different from the rest of his 'pack'. The melee weapon the replaced the Brute's right arm and the clawed energy weapon on the other were certainly unique. The colors were likewise distinct, featuring a base color of black with blood-red highlights. Further observation became difficult, however, as what looked like smoke grenades flew in and obscured the battlefield.

“What are those devices?” Col. Mitchell asked after Grogan's enhanced sensor package failed to penetrate the fog. “Some kind of Covenant gear we haven't encountered yet?”

It was a fair assumption. Most of Camelot's targets had been Lucian Alliance, and the crime syndicate had yet to field a significant amount of Banished gear. It had seemed like the Brutes were hesitant to share their technology with their new human allies. There were a lot of former-Covenant weapons that had yet to see use in this campaign and it was natural that Mitchell would assume this was one of them.

“Actually, no, sir,” Dare replied. “To my knowledge the UNSC has never encountered these devices before. We've tentatively dubbed them the 'Type-4 Anti-Sensory Grenade'. The gaseous substance they released must contain some sort of advanced particles designed to disrupt sensors. It's likely that the research department will be able to find a way to counteract its effects, given time.”

The retort 'It won't do these soldiers any good' was written across the colonel's face for a moment. It vanished quickly and the CO motioned for her to continue.

The next hour was spent going over the specifics that Dare and Maybourne had pieced together. More images and footage was shown with the major providing information that had not been available to the ill-fated strike team. The Master Chief watched as he learned the details of the botched operation. This was a type of story he had seen many times before.

Despite the familiarity, the Chief started to feel grief of his own creeping into his mind. Grief and...guilt?

The Spartan took a moment to analyze that feeling. This was, indeed, far from the first time he had
encountered stories of good soldiers being ambushed by an alien threat and struggling for hours to avoid eradication, only for a bare handful of them to make it out alive. He had seen or heard of this happening hundreds of times on scores of planets over the thirty-three years of his career and he had long become numb to it.

Yet, now he was feeling affected again in a way he hadn't experienced since his early days of service. A single thought kept pushing itself into his consciousness and he decided to stop ignoring it.

*You should have been there.*

That was, of course, irrational. Blue Team had been executing its own duties at the time and a single fireteam could hardly be relied upon for every single mission, nor be everywhere at once. The career soldier took care to examine the facts with as objective a mindset as possible. Dr. Halsey had taught him that well, at least. What was different now than before?

Before, his only duties involved being on the battlefield himself. He had been overseeing the training program when the ODSTs and SG Troopers had walked into a meat grinder. The Master Chief had always considered himself a field agent and seeing other soldiers bleed and die while he was safe at base...bothered him.

It also bothered him because he had been studying some of the casualties specifically prior to the mission. He was relieved that at least Grogan had survived. It seemed his assessment of the young captain had been indeed been accurate. It would take further testing after the injured man returned to active duty but the Spartan was confident that the SG Trooper would be a part of Phase 2. This made him feel all the worse for not being in the field when contact was made.

This emotional response would have to be confronted (perhaps he could talk to Halsey about it later?) but for now he refocused on the briefing.

“This ambush was not an isolated incident, as I'm sure you've all noticed,” Col. Mitchell said once Dare had finished her report. “Camelot assets and allies across multiple systems have all come under attack within the last twenty-four hours. This bears all the hallmarks of a planned, coordinated offensive. Reports were still coming in as of the start of this debriefing. It looks like the enemy has decided to take some initiative, people. Any thoughts?”

“This strikes me as highly unusual behavior, sir.”

Everyone paused and turned to the speaker: the Master Chief himself.

The Spartan was almost as surprised as they were and he had to resist the urge to shift uncomfortably in the reinforced stool that held up his armored bulk. He rarely spoke out at these meetings unless addressed directly and he knew that several of the other officers had begun thinking of him as part of the scenery. The leader of the Spartan IIs had simply never been much of a talker; taking the fight to the enemy was his forte.

This made his decision to speak up now a bit of a mystery. He would try to downplay and redirect the conversation if challenged on it. If the Chief was being honest with himself, however, he spoke out mostly to distance himself from the unfamiliar emotions that were pulling on his subconscious like a child tugging on their mother's sleeve.

Col. Mitchell recovered first, as before, and motioned for the Spartan to speak.
The Chief suppressed the impulse to clear his throat and offered his input. “The Banished/Lucian Pact is not a traditional military. While the Lucian Alliance has sovereign-level control over a few planets, for the most part both halves of the Pact are crime syndicates. Even the Brutes have targeted the least defended planets within Free Jaffa territory to raid rather than hitting anyone with the means fight back. The typical response from such organizations to an increase in interference by government forces would be to find ways to avoid said forces. New smuggling routes, faster raids, tighter security, more money committed to bribing authorities, etc. Directly engaging the enemy military is a course with far too high a risk/reward ratio. The sheer expense of what we are seeing now should have outweighed any desire to retaliate. This is especially true considering how badly the Lucian Alliance suffered the last time they decided to declare war on a sovereign nation with its own standing military. To put it bluntly, sir: something is wrong with this picture.”

The entire room stared at him. It was probably the most anyone there had heard him say at once. The Chief could tell from their expressions and body language that several of them, mostly the ODSTs, hadn't thought him capable of such analysis. This was also unsurprising. Most humans tended to fall into one of two camps in regard to the Spartan-IIs: they either worshiped them as demigods, or dismissed them as dumb muscle. The Chief had never given any thought to the former. He had always credited Dr. Halsey's efforts at education for the latter being wholly untrue.

“Good point, Master Chief,” Mitchell said with a nod. The colonel didn't seem to share the surprise that many of the others had felt. “Anyone have an explanation?”

“It's probably egotism, sir,” another officer, this one from the SGC, offered. He was a veteran of the SGC and probably knew more about the Lucian Alliance than anyone save the colonel himself. “They've recovered most of what they lost fighting the SGC for the past few years. Netan probably feels untouchable now and wants to send us a message. He can't bring himself to let our interference go unanswered.”

That certainly made a degree of sense. From what the Chief had learned from reports, almost all of the major threats the SGC had faced had suffered from narcissistic personality defects. He just couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than that...

“It could be an exercise in psychological warfare,” Major Dare suggested. “Camelot, however limited as it may be, has been the first real response to the threat that the Pact poses. News of the medical clinics alone has spread light-years beyond the actual reach of said facilities. The enemy might be trying to establish themselves as unbeatable in the eyes of the general public and crushing their first major opposition post-Merging will go a long way toward achieving that goal. It will be far easier for them to operate if people think of them as an inevitable burden of the times rather than an enemy that can be beaten.”

This approach also held merit. Unfortunately, few of the other officers seemed to be considering it as most of them were directing glares at the intelligence officer. It was clear to the Chief where the collective subconscious had decided to place blame for the current catastrophes. The Spartan himself was inclined to agree, although not as vehemently as the others seemed to. He recognized that Camelot was operating as a skeleton crew in a number of areas and that type of setup inevitably leads to mistakes. That said, responsibility for intelligence did ultimately lay with the Intelligence Wing.

“Whatever the reason, the fact of the matter is that the enemy has made a conscious effort to change the nature of this conflict,” Col. Mitchell said, forcing everyone back on track. He turned to the Chief. “How close is Fireteam Majestic to being ready for action?”

The Spartan resisted the urge to frown as he forced his mind to work through the administrative
problem. “As Spartan IVs they can be fielded immediately. I was planning on putting them through a final series exercises before clearing them for duty through the Stargate but that can be waived given the circumstances.”

“Do so,” Mitchell ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the Chief replied. Now he had to work to keep the grin out of his voice as he offered his next suggestion. “Additionally, this will clear more time for Blue Team to be deployed in the field as we wait for the next S-IV fireteam or teams to arrive.”

“About damn time,” another officer and SGC veteran opined.

Once again, the room fell quiet. “You have something to say, Major?” the colonel demanded.

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied, sitting up straighter and adopting a steady expression. “Colonel, we all know that Camelot was only intended to be a stop-gap measure. A temporary fix to minimize the damage the enemy inflicted while a larger, more conventional response was being prepared. Well, sir, it's been damn near half a year and the enemy just launched an honest-to-god offensive. Where are our Daedalus class cruisers? Where are the joint operations between SGC and Coalition military divisions?” He pointed to Major Dare. “Hell, all we keep hearing about is how huge and experienced the UNSC is. Where are their forces? A couple fleets of their capital ships would make a damn big difference considering both halves of the enemy Pact have their own. What gives, sir?”

There was a general rumble of agreement. Neither side was happy with their own nation being called out, but there was no denying that everyone present was growing impatient with how long the bureaucrats were taking back home.

The colonel glanced down at his compad for a second. Or maybe he was just lowering his eyes because he didn't have a satisfactory answer. “I have been in regular contact with Command via our scheduled comms through the Stargate. Your concerns are not unknown to me and I have mentioned them on several occasions. General O'Neill has assured me that things are being readied back home and we will continue to be supported in the meantime.” His words lacked the fire that his voice normally carried and he visibly suppressed a grimace when mentioned O'Neill's name. The Chief knew that his current CO held an almost hero worship level of respect for the leader of Homeworld Command. It seemed that the dissatisfaction he clearly shared with his subordinates was clashing with said respect in the man's mind.

No one was satisfied with that answer. More than one SGC officer, and even a few of the ODSTs, turned their gaze toward Major Dare. She was the one with the most direct line to high-level information within the UNSC. Unfortunately, if she knew anything about the delay on their end, she didn't seem inclined to share. The Chief had to admit that he was curious himself about what was taking so long.

Just what had the UNSC been doing for the past several months?

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

Three Weeks Ago

The UNSC had been wasting its time. That was what Luis Ruffalo told himself as he inspected his appearance in the mirror for the millionth time. By the end of the day his actions would render the UNSC’s efforts to harm his people utterly moot. He could do this. He had done harder things in his
forty seven years. He would—

“This will go a lot faster without you squirming,” his wife, Caroline, said.

Ruffalo grimaced and bit down a retort as she finished working on his hair. “You're certain about the gray?” he asked as he inspected her handiwork.

“Yes, dear,” she said with a nearly audible roll of her eyes. She had never stopped teasing him for his efforts to conceal his advancing age. “Having a bit of gray hair at your temples makes you look distinguished, not old. It will help them take you seriously.”

Ruffalo simply grunted in response. As if anyone would have any difficulty taking a man of his wealth and power seriously. Still, his wife was more skilled than he in this area and he had never been so proud as to refuse expert help. He reflected that it was strange that Caroline, the first leader of organized labor in Venezia's history, was so skilled at makeup. He supposed that that contradiction was one of the things that drew him to her in the first place. Perhaps—

An alert pierced the air of the expansive bathroom, echoing off the marble surfaces. Ruffalo snatched his compad from its perch on Caroline's makeup table and answered the call.

His eyes widened at what he heard.

“I need to go,” he said, all but leaping out of the chair. He rushed to his closet and donned his finest business attire as fast as he was able.

“What's going on?” Caroline asked. She had followed him silently into the walk-in closet and stood with him between the rows of expensive formal wear. Her hand had drifted to her waist where, as always, her emergency pistol rested in its concealed holster.

“The diplomat has arrived,” Ruffalo said as he buttoned up his shirt. “I need to get to the landing pad immediately.”

“I thought he wasn't supposed to get here for another three hours?” Caroline asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“He's probably trying to throw me off balance. It's what I would do, anyway,” the businessman admitted. Another alert drew his attention to his compad. He started tapping away, gratefully accepting his wife's assistance in putting on his tie as he did so, only to find an encrypted video feed from the planet's orbital defenses.

Ruffalo had agreed to allow the visiting diplomat to bring three ships with him: one to transport him and two for escort. Apparently, the foreign official took that as permission to bring three capital ships straight into the heart of the star system.

They were a strange design: what looked like a copy of the ancient Egyptian pyramids on Earth enclosed in a kind of web-like black frame. He had read about these in what little intelligence his agents had gathered on the new half of the galaxy. From what he had seen, these ships would be more than a match for the jury-rigged fortifications that defended his planet.

“That's the diplomat?” Caroline asked as she looked over his shoulder. “Shit, he really is trying to make an impression.”
“More like he's trying to intimidate us,” Ruffalo replied. He covered his unease with a scowl. “Fortunately, I have never been one to scare easily.”

His wife chuckled. “That is one of the things we share in common,” she said, helping him into his suit jacket and straightening it. That was it. Preparations were complete.

The spouses turned and faced each other. They stood awkwardly and Ruffalo, unsure what to say, found his mind drifting to the business of the day. The itinerary would have to be moved up, the expensive meals prepared early, security would have to be briefed, so many things to do and the future itself riding on it. Tension started building deep in his gut—

“Hey! You okay in there?” Caroline said. She knocked on his forehead three times as if trying to summon him from the recesses of his own mind.

Ruffalo suffered a moment of stunned disbelief before he burst out laughing. She was the only person on the planet that would have the audacity to do something like that. Anyone else would have found their head on a pike within the hour. He moved forward and circled her in his arms.

“I won't fail, darling,” Ruffalo promised. “I'll win this for us.”

“For Venezia,” Caroline corrected. The husband smiled; she was always thinking of their people. He nodded, kissed her goodbye, and made his way to the front door. The mask of the esteemed professional was firmly in place by the time he encountered one of his staff.

A bodyguard greeted him in the lobby. The soldier pressed a finger to the side of his helmet and, having confirmed that the area was secure, opened the door for his leader.

The newly elected Prime Minister of Venezia walked out of his mansion and into the early morning air. The large estate he had claimed as his own stretched out before him, the immaculately maintained yard and shrubbery bringing a smile to his face as he remembered his own humble origins. He smiled again as he turned and saw his family crest emblazoned on the side of his personal limousine. A valet opened the door for him as he approached and Ruffalo climbed in.

The vehicle departed the estate soon after he had taken his seat. Armored security vehicles surrounded it on all sides to make any ground-based attack effectively impossible. He couldn't take any risks, especially given how unstable things had become recently. His mind drifted to reflecting on the emblem he had adopted for his family.

It featured the usual ornaments. Oak leaves frame the sides of the crest and a scroll with Latin lettering written on it formed the bottom. The exact phrase was unimportant; Ruffalo himself barely remembered what it translated to. It was the center of the image that represented his achievements.

It featured a depiction of a weapon. The firearm had a trigger and pistol-grip as was common in weapons produced by his species, as well as a shoulder rest and large barrel which marked it as heavy ordinance. However, it also featured organic curves and a unique magazine that bore many hallmarks of Covenant design.

This was the 'Venezian Cannon', technically designated the Type-58 Fuel Rod Cannon, and it symbolized everything Ruffalo fought for.

It was weapons like these that allowed Venezia to survive after seceding from the Unified Earth Government. Having grown tired of the neglect and abuse of their supposed homeworld, Venezia
had severed communications with its former government in 2543, wagering that their former masters would be far too busy with the Human-Covenant War to bother with a single Outer Colony going dark. They had been correct. However, without the ability to trade their staple export, tantalum, with other human worlds, the Venezians soon found themselves in dire economic straits. Even by their absence the bureaucracy of Earth bit them.

Then the Covenant collapsed in 2553, the kig-yar made contact, and the isolated human world experienced for the first time how profitable inter-species trade could be.

The Prime Minister's thoughts were forced back to the present as his convoy pulled to a stop in front of the Capitol. He passed through security checks and dodged what other representatives tried to pin him down on the way. Only one of them, General Kennedy, made him pause. The look in the Secretary of War's face was not encouraging.

"We have a situation, Prime Minister," the officer (and former mercenary captain) informed him. "A mass protest has broken out in the center of the Monarch City. Thousands of people have packed the streets, sir."

A ball of dark matter formed in Ruffalo's gut. "How is this possible?"

"The malcontents are getting clever, sir," the general said. "They managed to coordinate it in total secrecy. We didn't even know it was happening until the streets were filled with people holding signs and screaming for our heads."

The Prime Minister resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. He had to project calm, confident authority. Always. "Are they visible to the envoy?" he asked.

"Negative, sir," the general replied. "The diplomat's ships are still on approach from the opposite side of the planet. However, they will read visibility range within the hour."

"Disperse the rioters. By any means necessary," the Prime Minister ordered. His General nodded and moved away to fulfill his duties. There would be blood today, after all.

*Forgive me, Caroline.*

Ruffalo's wife was an avid supporter of freedom of speech. That and anything that brought 'power to the people', as she put it. It was this attitude that allowed her to rally the working people of Venezia behind her, which was why Ruffalo approached her in the first place. Having the lower classes on his side was a powerful asset for a man seeking dominance over his adopted home planet.

It had taken much time and energy to convince her that he shared her concern for the peasantry. Ruffalo wondered when he had started to actually care. To genuinely want to help the people of his world. Was it possible that he truly didn't, and the impulse to provide for them merely came from the wholly unexpected infatuation he had developed for his arranged spouse? Would his concern for their well-being fade in her absence? Whatever the case, he couldn't afford signs of discontent during these negotiations. Venezia needed to look strong.

If all went as planned, it would not be a lie for long. The economy would rise out of depression and the discontent that had kept the nascent parliament up at night would be a thing of the past. Everything depended on today. Eventually, the Prime Minister arrived at the landing pad on the edge of the Capitol grounds. A small entourage stood behind him, security and patricians both, and they all awaited the new visitors with tense expectation.
A call from the control tower informed them of the diplomat's location a second before the red streak in the sky marked it for them. Ruffalo watched the unfamiliar shuttle enter the atmosphere of Venezia and eventually make its downward. The strange, pyramidal craft (what was it called again? Ha'tak? No, those were the capital ships. Tel'tak—that was it) hovered about ten meters above the pad.

Ruffalo's guards tensed as the Tel'tak did not immediately land. Instead, part of the vessel's ventral surface opened and a series of metal rings descended to form the outline of an upright cylinder. There was a bright flash and, to the Venezians' shock, four individuals materialized inside the rings.

The group was human. Three of them were clearly soldiers, each carrying some sort of weapon that any Venezian would immediately recognize had been modified to feature a stock and trigger. The fourth was dressed in simple but clearly expensive clothing and carried himself with an air of authority.

The Prime Minister recovered before any of the others, standing straight and firm as the ship moved off and landed on its designated site. These intimidation tactics were getting rather tiresome. Had he not been so desperate, he might have considered calling off the summit right there. He had destroyed men for less in the past. Alas, things were as they were and he forced himself to swallow his pride.

The visiting delegation walked toward the small assembly of Venezian officials, stopping a few steps away and waiting expectantly.

“Ambassador Lao, I presume? I am Prime Minister Ruffalo. Allow me to welcome you to Venezia,” Ruffalo said, walking forward and bowing slightly to show respect.

The diplomat smiled politely and bowed back, confirming that Ruffalo had indeed learned the proper greeting. Lao said, “I thank you for extending the offer to visit your beautiful planet, Prime Minister. The Lucian Alliance most appreciates any opportunity for profitable trade.”

Ruffalo smiled back. He gestured to the doors behind him and lead the delegation to the vehicle bay, where they entered his private transport and embarked on a tour of the planet's most relevant sites. The trip to said locations was spent at first in small talk. Ruffalo took particular pride when the ambassador complimented his taste in vehicles; this limousine had not been easy to acquire. He was skilled at small talk, all of the little details that could make or break a deal, and played his roll with a master's touch. His youth spent as a street con artist had not been wasted.

The party finally arrived at a mining facility. Each member of the delegation was given hard hats as they walked through the above-ground segments and watched the precious tantalum ore being extracted and shipped to the refinery. Particular care was given to highlight the efficiency and skill with which the site was conducted.

“This is all very impressive, truly,” Lao said, having to raise his voice over the sound of machinery. “But I fail to see how it is of any value to my organization. Few of our existing trading partners would have need for such a substance. Fewer still are unable to acquire it for a lower price than we would demand.”

Ruffalo smiled. “Patience, Mr Ambassador. All will become clear soon,” he promised. That part of the tour concluded, the party got back in the limousine and made its way to another facility. Security here was far tighter, with armed checkpoints and state-of-the-art surveillance systems ensuring no unauthorized parties would enter. The Ambassador looked intrigued but skeptical as they entered what his host clearly thought of as the crown jewel. The Prime Minister took a private satisfaction at the way Lao's mouth dropped open when they entered the building proper.
There were weapons. Rows upon rows upon rows of weapons. Most were modified Covenant
designs, many having been manufactured by the alien empire itself, while a growing few were
entirely of Venezian make. Energy weapons of every caliber, from simple plasma pistols to fuel rod
cannons, were present. All of them had been modified with additions like ammo counters, detachable
magazines, and iron sights. There was enough firepower in this one building to conquer any of the
more lightly defended human Outer Colonies.

“This, Mr. Ambassador,” Ruffalo said, “is what my people offer the Lucian Alliance.”

“Where—where did you get these?” Lao stammered. He quickly regained his composure, but the
damage had already been done. Ruffalo knew he had his mark right where he wanted him.

“We have developed certain...non-human contacts that our former government would not approve
of,” the Prime Minister answered. He ushered the party into the executive section of the arms factory.
Serving staff opened the door to a conference room and the Venezians and the Lucians took their
places on opposite sides of the table.

The next hour was spent giving a carefully selective version of the history of Venezia. Contact with
the kig-yar following the end of the Great War had quickly lead to an economic boom the planet had
never seen. It turned out this particular species had turned to piracy in the chaos following the
dissolution of the Covenant Empire. They were looking for a way to offload the weapons they were
stealing from supply caches and deserted bases. The Venezians were looking for someone to move
the mined tantalum that had been gathering dust ever since the secession. Agreements were made,
trade began that continued to the present, and the obscure Outer Colony became the premier hub for
black market arms dealing in the galaxy. Several alien nations made contact and started buying from
them. Even a few of the more remote human colonies were now among their clients.

By this point Venezia's independence had become known to the general public. Malcontents, wanted
felons, and anyone who disliked the UEG flocked to the planet. Among them were skilled engineers
and researchers that had been burned by their government in one way or another. Ruffalo had
carefully hired the most skilled new arrivals and set them to work on improving the weapons they
brought in rather than simply reselling them. This lead to the Ruffalo family skyrocketing in wealth
and influence.

Meanwhile, the beginnings of a government had arisen. The Venezian Militia began as a means to
maintain order in the face of so many arrivals of questionable repute and so much increased trade. As
wealth accumulated, the Militia leadership leveraged their power and established the Venezian
Parliament, which had appointed (at his subtle convincing) Ruffalo to his current position.

“I can see why you thought the Lucian Alliance would be interested in doing business with you,”
Ambassador Lao chuckled. A server refilled Lao's glass with imported scotch. The bottle was now
empty but Ruffalo just waved the server off, still having an almost full glass himself. He had learned
long ago never to drink as much as your mark.

“I am pleased you see it that way,” the Prime Minister answered. “My people and I are very
interested in expanding our business with you.”

Technically, it wasn't a lie. Ruffalo and the rest of Venezia were indeed 'interested' in establishing
business with the new half of the galaxy. He simply failed to mention that a more accurate term
would be 'desperate'. A year prior his planet had indeed been on top of the world, reveling in its
success and newfound wealth, confident that they would exist for generations as an independent
Then, the UEG had finally taken notice of them.

First, trade with human worlds completely vanished. There were no explicit laws passed, of course. Officially, the UEG refused to acknowledge Venezia's independence and had worked hard to downplay any information hinting at it. As far as the authorities on Earth were concerned the Outer Colony was simply experiencing a bit of civil unrest that would be sorted out in short order.

Meanwhile, the Earth government used its UNSC attack dogs to start intimidating all of Venezia's other trading partners. Following the Human-Covenant War the largest human nation had gained renown as the one that had 'beaten' the Covenant. Everyone was afraid of them, and the threat of military action was enough to reduce trade by 78%. The independent colony found its once-booming economy in shambles. Most expected its leaders to cave and submit to UEG rule within months or else find themselves deposed in a popular uprising. As much as it enraged him, Ruffalo had to admit that it had seemed inevitable. Earth would conquer his planet without having to fire a shot.

Then, the Merging happened.

All at once, an entire galaxy full of potential trade partners had appeared, and it just so happened that Venezia was ideally situated to take advantage of the radical shift in the interstellar landscape. The planet was within range of several of the new star systems. It had been a simple matter to convince Parliament to allow Ruffalo to contact the Lucian Alliance and begin negotiations. After all, as Lao had said, the Lucians and the Venezuelians shared many similarities.

Lao stood and walked to the the windows that looked down at the factory floor. He stood there for some time, his mind clearly buzzing with possibilities. Ruffalo caught a glimpse of the man's expression in the glass: pure greed and ambition. The Venezian covered his grin by sipping daintily at his drink. Sunlight shone through the bullet-proof glass that covered the exterior wall, glinting off the crystal glasses full of rare liquor and making the room feel alive and full of possibilities. A grin tugged at the Lucian diplomat's lips. “Yes. This would correct a rather significant imbalance in recent affairs,” he whispered.

Abandoning his position by the window, Ambassador Lao walked back to the conference table and picked up his own drink. “To trade,” he said, raising the glass in a toast. The Prime Minister followed suit. “And all the possibilities therein.” They drank to that.

It felt like a weight had been lifted off Ruffalo's shoulders. Trade was going to resume. The economic hardship and subsequent civil unrest would finally come to an end. No longer would Caroline lie awake at night, fearing the violence that could easily erupt on a world of anti-establishment loners that had just had prosperity snatched from their fingers. He allowed himself to grin openly now, wondering how much business he could funnel to his own enterprise—

The ambassador coughed.

Lao grimaced in sudden discomfort. “Pardon me, I—”

He coughed again. Then again. Soon, he was in the middle of a fit that left his face turning purple. Ruffalo was about to call for a doctor when the Lucian diplomat's face went taught and he started bleeding from his nose and eyes. White foam appeared on his lips and he collapsed onto the table, his body wracked by violent convulsions.
“Master Lao!” one of the Lucian bodyguards shouted. The soldier surged forward and tried to restrain the man lest he injure himself in his thrashing. Ruffalo had leaped to his feet by this point and was staring blankly, unable to understand what was happening. Everyone had fallen silent, unsure what to do, the only sounds coming from the afflicted man writhing and choking in his servant's grasp like a crazed animal. Lao's jerking reached a crescendo that practically ripped him free of the bodyguard's grasp.

Then, all at once, the ambassador fell silent. His body went limp. His face was left an unrecognizable mess of blue skin and facial features contorted in indescribable agony. Blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, and mouth, further staining his visage. There was no need to call for a doctor. Anyone could tell that Lao was dead. The silence in the room became absolute.

The sound of shattering glass drew everyone's attention.

It was Lao's drink. He must have dropped it when his initial coughing had turned truly horrifying. The receptacle had just rolled off the table; the liquid itself lay in a puddle on the lacquered surface. Ruffalo's stunned mind reached the obvious conclusion a split second before the remaining foreigners did.

“Wait—”

“Treachery!” the Lucian soldiers shouted, raising their energy weapons at their former host.

“Weapons down!” the captain of the Venezian security officers, still on the other side of the room, shouted as he and his team raised their own firearms. Tensions skyrocketed, an explosion of violence but seconds away.

“Wait, please!!” Ruffalo shouted, rushing forward to stand between the groups of agitated killers. No one had opened fire yet. There was still a chance to defuse everything. Venezia had nothing to gain by assassinating a Lucian official, surely the rest of their leadership would realize this. He could still salvage things.

Then, the Venezian security captain's head exploded, everyone with a weapon opened fire, and hell was unleashed.

Ruffalo found himself being thrown back into a wall. He collapsed to the ground, rounds from energy weapons flying everywhere. As his head fell back against the paneled surface his eyes were drawn to the exterior windows. To something past the neat hole punched through the bullet-proof glass.

One of the Lucian capital ships had entered his planet's atmosphere. There was no doubt in Ruffalo's mind that they knew what had happened. They must have been monitoring the ambassador's vital signs or otherwise eavesdropping on the meeting. How had they beaten his security? Perhaps one of the guards had sent a message out when everyone was distracted by Lao's demise?

His curiosity was dispelled when bolts of energy emerged from the ship and flew down out of sight. The ground shook as the bombardment began. Ruffalo tried to get up, tried to stop this insanity, tried to be the ruler he had aspired to be his entire life...but he was too weak. He became aware of the smell of burning flesh and glanced down to see a smoking, burned hole that had been punched into his chest.

Luis Ruffalo felt his head fall back against the wall again and sat, helpless, as he watched an alien
force begin laying waste to his planet while chaos and death erupted all around him. Everything he had built would be burned. Everything he had claimed through strength and guile would be reduced to ash and cinders. His life's work, gone in a day. Venezia was doomed.

It was even worse than his most pessimistic of nightmares. His last moments of consciousness were spent hoping Caroline had died in the first blast, so she wouldn't have to see her own dreams die in front of her.

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The sound of an alert brought Admiral William MacArthur out of deep thought. Thinking was about the only thing he would be doing in his current assignment. He had been trying to think of what he had done to piss HIGHCOM off enough to land him here. He and Fleet Admiral Hood had never exactly seen eye-to-eye but sentencing him to this dead end assignment was too much.

A quick glance at his terminal confirmed that the wargames he had been sent to oversee were not due to commence for another day. Who would be trying to contact him, then? It was probably the Endurance having another mechanical failure. The old warhorse had survived many battles with the Covenant, almost the entirety of the war, in fact. She was a relic and sadly in this post war era was really showing her age. She would be the death of him, he was sure. He dragged a hand across his face and sighed before sitting up in his chair, resigned to his fate. He pressed the button to fully activate his desktop terminal.

A bolt of energy surged through him when he recognized the source of the message. MacArthur immediately used the terminal's biometric scanner to open the ultra-secure comm and started reading. His eyes came to a screeching halt after about ten seconds. He went back to the beginning and read again, reanalyzing each word and image, as thoroughly as he dared. It took a moment to process what he was looking at. It was just so unexpected as to seem unreal. When that moment passed, however...

The admiral practically lunged for the comm function of his terminal. “Admiral to bridge,” he said.

“Bridge here, Lieutenant Monroe reporting,” came the response. A window opened on the screen showing a properly dressed but obviously bored officer. “What do you need, sir?”

“Issue Alert Level Alpha-1,” MacArthur ordered. “Repeat, Alpha-1. I want every ship on full alert and ready to depart at the earliest possible moment.”

The lieutenant paused, clearly taken off guard. “S-sir? What’s—”

“I said SCRAMBLE, goddamnit!” the admiral shouted. He leaped from his station and started donning the rest of his uniform, uncaring that he was now out of visual range of the terminal. It took him a moment to gather the needed articles of clothing since he had tossed several of them carelessly around his quarters when he first entered a few hours ago. Back when this had been a milk run in the ass-end of the galaxy. He kept scolding the sluggish officer as he moved, more angry at himself for his lack of discipline than anything. “I will be making my way to the bridge immediately and I better see the whole damn fleet coming to full readiness by the time I get there. Is that understood, Lieutenant?”

“Sir, yes sir,” came the reply, the flag officer's fury clearly having burned away any shock.

MacArthur reached over and terminated the call without bothering to glance at the display. He shut
down the terminal, looked in the mirror to make sure he looked presentable, and rushed to get to his post.

It seemed the malcontents on Venezia were finally facing the consequences of their recklessness. It was time for the UNSC to once again swoop in to rescue an Outer Colony from an alien menace. Hopefully, resolving this mess would see Admiral MacArthur back commanding a Core Fleet where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again for the delay. All I can say is that we try.

Note: A lot of people have been wondering when we'll see some naval action in this story and hopefully the next chapter will scratch that itch. Coming up: UNSC vs. Lucian Alliance.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Interlude 2

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude 2

Orso System
Unified Earth Government
6 Months After Merging of Galaxies
Three Weeks before Brute Ambush of Camelot Capture Mission

Fifteen warships of the United Nations Space Command tore holes in reality and re-entered the physical universe. The rogue planet Venezia lay before them, waiting to be rescued from its attackers. All that remained was to close ranks and advance on the enemy.

“Report status!” Admiral MacArthur barked from within his cocoon of a safety harness. The intense g-forces of battle maneuvers made such precautions necessary, but he had always hated not being able to move freely about the bridge.

“We have arrived within five hundred kilometers of our intended destination,” his astronavigator, Lt. Ibanez, said. “The rest of the fleet had similar success. Moving into attack formation now, sir.”

The Admiral allowed himself a moment to marvel at the precision of modern slipspace drives. Late in the War, someone had figured out how the Covenant managed precision jumps and applied said knowledge to humanity’s own warships. The newest, most advanced ships were capable of even greater precision than what he had just witnessed. No longer would fleet officers have to worry about their forces arriving thousands of kilometers off-target and taking precious time to link up again. Now they could be coordinated and in the fight within minutes.

At least, theoretically. MacArthur scowled as he noticed something on his tactical display.

“Lt. Levy, please get Cmdr. Zim on the line,” he ordered. The Endurance was, once again, falling behind. Said communications officer reported that the errant ship’s thrusters were behaving sub-optimally. MacArthur was unable to completely hide his disdain for the so-called ship as he ordered, “Tell the Commander to redline his reactor if need be. I want that ship in its proper position. Now.”

The order was sent and the ship obediently accelerated into place. MacArthur sighed quietly.

The Endurance was easily the largest source of frustration in his current command. Theoretically, it was the most powerful ship he had. It had originally been a Flight I Marathon-Class Heavy Cruiser, one of the most venerable ship types in the UNSC Navy before, during, and after the War. The Endurance itself had proven its worth by fighting and surviving over ten years of combat...before being gutted by a plasma torpedo barrage during the fall of Sanzar. She drifted there for 15 years, surrounded by other derelict ships, until 4 years prior when a UNSC salvage operation discovered it was still usable.

Needing every hull it could get, the Navy had ordered Endurance towed to Mars to see what could be made of her. It was there the ship had been given its current purpose as the test bed of new technologies for the UNSC’s New Fleet Initiative program. Systems pioneered on the Endurance would, hopefully, become standard for a post-War UNSC Fleet.
Over the next two years she was stripped down and rebuilt from the ground up, using her solid frame as the basis. New and improved reactors and engines were built; life support systems were redesigned and revamped; sensors, ECM, communications, network and computer control systems were upgraded to the absolute bleeding edge.

Then, came the big changes.

Weaponry. That was where the *Endurance* really became interesting. Gone were the Archer, Howler and Rapier missile pods. They were replaced by silver strips five meters wide and six across, mounted laterally along the hull to house the UNSC's first attempt at guided Plasma Torpedoes—twelve emitters divided equally between the starboard and port sides. Additionally, her network of secondary deck-guns and point defense cannons had been removed in favor of Covenant-derived laser cannons, useful for both anti-fighter and general point defense purposes. Her primary and secondary MAC guns had been removed entirely in favor of an energy projector stripped from a CCS class cruiser that had been shot down over Reach.

The ship's defenses continued the streak of interest. Her armor had been upgraded and thickened using the latest in Titanium-A Battleplate. More importantly, the entire system had been topped off with Covenant-derived energy shields, with a few Forerunner inspirations thrown in. This ship and her armament was as close as the UNSC engineers had yet come to replicating the fearsome Covenant naval forces that had overwhelmed system after system over the course of the War.

And for all the technological wonders in her hull, the *Endurance* was a complete and utter disaster.

The problems began almost as soon as the ship had finished her retrofitting. On her first shakedown cruise an accident in her reactor control systems had forced a hard shutdown less than a day out from the yards. The ship had to be towed back to Sol to find and rectify the problem, a process which took far longer than anyone had liked. Her second trip out of the yards a month later saw her reactor completely SCRAM due to a fault in the laser enhanced cooling systems. They would have to be completely replaced, putting the ship in drydock for an additional two months.

Tests of the targeting, fleet battlenet, ECM, and shield systems went off without problems. Even testing the ships energy weaponry had gone smoothly...within optimal testing environments. It wasn't until the ship was testing her weapons and defensive systems in full battle conditions that things went horribly and spectacularly wrong.

The *Endurance* had powered up her port and starboard plasma arrays for a full alpha strike. It was to be the first true demonstration of her killing power and the selling point for implementing the energy weapons throughout the UNSC fleet. Then, a malfunction occurred in the shield grid, preventing the small 'windows' from opening to allow the plasma torpedoes through. To their credit the crew caught on to the problem and attempted to abort the firing sequence. Unfortunately, they failed to prevent the firing of half of the ships plasma torpedoes right into the ship's own shield.

The plasma had nowhere to go but right back into the hull of the *Endurance*. The crews of the surrounding ships had the pleasure of reliving the various battles of the War that had seen countless human ships destroyed by Covenant weapons as the plasma burned into the hull and ignited the interior atmosphere, melting hull plating and components and crewmen alike. Some of the plasma even reached and ruptured the capacitor banks of the plasma emitters that hadn't fired, triggering additional ignitions after the fact. It was such a visible failure that word had leaked to the press about it. Though the ship would be saved and eventually towed back to Earth for yet another refit and repair, it caused the fleet immense grief in the public relations department as HIGHCOM had to try to explain why the UNSC was playing with weaponry that had burned countless human worlds to
The *Endurance* had been built into working order and deemed fit for deployment more than a year and a half later. However, that didn't stop her from remaining a flawed ship that was a maintenance nightmare. The ship had developed a reputation as being cursed and was informally known throughout the fleet as 'The Big Back-Fire'.

It was an outright disgrace for a Marathon to be reduced to such a state. The Admiral would have refused it entirely if it weren't the only ship available to fill the empty slot in his roster. It was a testament to how depleted the UNSC Navy had been at the end of the Human-Covenant War that such a monstrosity was fielded with utmost sincerity. The ship had been placed in the rear of the formation, as much out of embarrassment as caution.

Admiral MacArthur sighed in disgust. The last thing he needed to deal with was another of *Endurance*'s quirks during a combat situation. As if the rest of his paltry force was anything beyond 'serviceable'.

Most of the rest of the fleet had been manufactured in the late-War and early post-War, a time where humanity had scrambled to throw everything it could into space to replace the forces lost in the final days of the Covenant assault. Refining the new technologies in time to be useful for this would have been far too expensive for a humanity that was struggling to avoid total economic collapse following the ravages of the Human-Covenant War. Pushing too hard could have resulted in the UEG itself falling apart from the strain, meaning economics and efficiency ruled the day in ship design. The prioritization of speed in manufacturing, the necessity of low costs, and the infamy from the *Endurance* incident resulted in most of the Navy using older, more proven but less advanced equipment.

None of the other ships possessed energy weapons and while all the ships in the fleet had energy shields, only the command ship (an Autumn Class Cruiser) and two others (a pair of Strident-Class Frigates) were equipped with shields rated worth a damn. The rest of his fleet, consisting of eight more support ships (three Stalwart-Class Light Frigates, one Paris-Class Heavy Frigate, and four Charon-Class Light Frigates) and three more primary ships (all Halberd-Class Destroyers), were reliant on late-War weaponry and standard armor plating.

This was insulting. An officer of MacArthur's caliber should have been commanding one of the Core fleets. Those were the armadas that contained ships like the *Infinity*. Vessels with true killing power that could stand toe to toe with any other force in space. His ships could barely handle the strain of their own equipment (adding energy shields on top of everything else without improving reactor output had not been the best act of prioritization) and he wouldn't trust them to handle any extended engagement with an equal or greater foe.

Growing tired of self-pity and having ensured his fleet was on the right course, the Admiral fully turned his attention to the planet he had been sent to liberate. Before, he had only peripherally registered the locations of the enemy ships; just enough to know he wasn't flying into an ambush before making sure his forces were ready. Now, he examined the situation in detail.

The UNSC fleet had arrived to find the planet on fire.

Whatever defenses the rebel government of Venezia had cobbled together were nowhere to be seen. Although, the scattered pieces of debris being pulled into the planet's atmosphere provided a fairly obvious hint as to what had happened to them. If any of them survived at all they must have fled early into the battle, abandoning their people below to be sacked.
MacArthur decided that most of them had probably survived.

A pair of enemy 'Ha'taks' were in high orbit and occasionally fired a shot into nearby solid objects. Either they were being thorough and hunting down the survivors or they were exceptionally bored and taking pot-shots at debris. The fate of the defenders didn't occupy his attention long. His eyes were almost immediately drawn to the planet itself. Toward where the third and final Ha'tak was hovering in low orbit...firing energy weapons onto the cities below.

A spike of rage shot through MacArthur. He was reminded of the countless populated worlds the Covenant had glassed. The billions of innocents they had slaughtered. He remembered watching helplessly from the bridge of his first command as his own homeworld was burned to molten glass by the implacable alien menace. Now, these glorified mobsters had the gall, the sheer goddamn audacity to replicate those atrocities themselves?

Admiral William MacArthur decided he was going to enjoy this far more than he should.

The enemy capital ships drew his attention again. The pair in high orbit had oriented to face the UNSC fleet and were moving almost sedately to engage. They failed to take any recognizable formation, each seeming to be charging an opponent independently of its comrade. The third Ha'tak didn't even bother to stop its bombardment. The Admiral marveled at their arrogance.

MacArthur pushed a button on his command chair, opening a line to the rest of the fleet. “All ships: prepare all MAC guns for synchronized barrage. Support vessels will fire first with Primary vessels following 0.5 seconds afterward. T-minus 20 seconds,” he ordered. The Support ships would take down whatever shields the enemy possessed and the Primary ships would take the kills. This should be over shortly.

The two armadas closed rapidly with each other. The clock ticked down. Ten. Five. Four. Three, Two, One.

“Fire!”

Each of the fifteen UNSC vessels unloaded their armaments upon the enemy. The Admiral felt his cruiser shudder three times in rapid succession as the Magnetic Accelerator Cannon that ran its length launched their ferric and depleted uranium payload. Lines appeared on the tactical display representing the 600 ton projectiles as they flew toward their targets, creating a beautiful tapestry of death. The AI controlled targeting computers would ensure maximum probability of each unguided shot scoring a hit. It would take several seconds to cross the almost hundred thousand kilometers separating the two forces. The Admiral found the wait almost intolerable, the only comfort coming from the joy of seeing a fleet of ships at his command unleash hell upon his enemies.

“Enemy ships firing,” the tactical officer announced. Several teardrop shapes of orange light emerged from the Ha'taks and flew toward the UNSC fleet at high speeds.

“Engage evasive maneuvers where practical but do not break formation,” the MacArthur ordered the fleet. “All ships brace for impact.”

“Admiral, a word?” a new voice popped up. A holographic figure appeared over one of the Admiral's armrests and looked up at him with a concerned expression on its simulated face. It was York, the artificial intelligence assigned to the Inheritance. Like all AIs, York had designed his own avatar, choosing to model himself after a 19th Century-era soldier of the British Empire. This made it only slightly comical as the mustached, red coat-wearing figure hastily tried to issue a warning. “Sir,
I have analyzed the enemy weapons-fire heading toward us and they seem to be far more powerful than initially projected. I recommend prioritizing evasion over maintaining formation.”

It was all MacArthur could do not to laugh. Everything he had read about Goa’uld weaponry from ONI reports made them out to be a joke. The staff weapons were particularly memorable—inaccurate and designed for aesthetics over practicality. Even the ones on their fighter craft were short-range and unguided. The ludicrous designs of the capital ships themselves indicated that no more logic had gone into them than any other element of their military. Complying with the AIs warning would only waste time and energy.

“All ships,” the Admiral commed, “evasive maneuv—”

MacArthur felt himself thrown against his restraints. The straps keeping him attached to his chair dug into his flesh and bruised his skin with the sheer force of impact. The bridge lights flickered, creating a disorienting effect that the Admiral had to force himself through while gritting his teeth in pain.

The experience only lasted a pair of seconds according to the mission clock, but it felt like an eternity. MacArthur glanced around him to see that the rest of the bridge crew had been likewise affected. One of them had broken through their restraints and been slammed into their console. A trail of blood flowed down from an obviously fractured skull.

“All ships,” MacArthur coughed, drawing the attention of one of the armed guards stationed in the bridge. “Lt. Roberts is injured. Tend his wounds as best you can.” Said soldier nodded and unstrapped himself from his own seat, a foldout portion of the bulkhead just to the fore of the sealed hatch. There could be no opening the bridge in the middle of a battle. The wounded officer would just have to make due with the basic first aid kit the crewman carried until after battle stations were lifted and he could be transported to the infirmary. “Status report!” the Admiral ordered, having regained his balance.

“Multiple impacts along our forward and starboard shields. Our shields are still holding but are badly depleted,” Lt Flores reported. “We’re also getting reports of electromagnetic feedback being translated from the points of impact into our power distribution system. Circuit breakers have been tripped and junction boxes fried across the system, which has increased re-charge speed. The surge
also placed unexpected strain on the reactor, pushing it to 95%. It's stabilizing but won't be within normal parameters for another thirty seconds or so. No hull breaches or significant internal damage beyond that.”

That made him blink. The 'Staff Cannons' of the Ha'tak were orders of magnitude more powerful than anticipated. They acted in a manner not dissimilar to a MAC round but also had the effect of electromagnetic pulses upon impact. They resembled a fusion of the UNSC coil gun technology with the Covenant's energy emitters. It was bizarre.

Regardless, they had come out of the barrage alive and mostly intact.

Small blessings, the Admiral thought. “Status on the rest of the fleet,” he ordered. The tactical display in front of him showed him everything he needed to know. Given the surprise he'd just suffered, he decided to be cautious and get confirmation. He promptly wished he hadn't.

Four of his ships had been hit in the enemy's initial barrage. His command ship had been among them, obviously taking the brunt of return fire, and had survived with minimal damage. One of Primary ships (a Halberd-Class Destroyer) and one of his Support ships (his only Paris-Class Frigate) had been destroyed outright. Last was the Raszcak, one of his Strident-Class Frigates, which had also survived due to its energy shield. Unfortunately, its weaker Frigate-grade shields hadn't protected it as well and it had suffered severe internal damage. Its captain reported a potential rupture in its reactor fuel lines and internal fires that had yet to be contained. The crew may have to abandon ship if the situation worsened. The Raszcak was unquestionably out of the fight. A fact that became readily apparent as her engines misfired and she fell out of formation. The rest of the fleet had managed to avoid the enemy shots either through evasive maneuvers or the energy projectiles simply missing their target.

That left Admiral MacArthur with twelve ships: three Primary (his Autumn class command ship and two Halberds) and eight Support (one Strident, three Stalwarts, and four Charons).

And the Endurance, if he was being generous.

York, whose hologram had winked off at some point during the confusion, reappeared over MacArthur's armrest with grave expression on his holographic face. “Sir, sensor readings lead me to estimate that each enemy round has the firepower equivalent of a 200 megaton nuclear strike. I strongly recommend evasive maneuvers be prioritized in light of this knowledge.”

The flag officer wasn't stupid enough to let embarrassment or injured pride blind him to reality. “Agreed,” he said. He turned to Lt. Ibanez. “Transfer control of emergency thrusters to York. We can't afford to rely on human reaction times.” The order was followed and the AI nodded and vanished. Between controlling the point defenses and maneuvering, the redcoat-wearing computer program held their lives in its grasp now more than ever. The Admiral turned to his comms officer. “Instruct the fleet that I'm loosening the restraints on their maneuvers within the formation and to keep nothing less than a 1,000 kilometer spread between ships. Evasion has risen in priority, but they are not to stray too far from their assigned positions and pressing the attack is still paramount.”

MacArthur tapped his tactical screen, pulling up a long-range feed of Venezia's surface. The bombardment wasn't nearly devastating enough considering the power of the enemy weaponry. That was one of the reasons he had been so confident that his ships could weather the barrage with little difficulty. The Lucians must have been pulling their punches when attacking the surface.

It made a degree of sense, considering the nature of the enemy. Bombarding the surface with 200
megaton-per shot weapons would render any planet uninhabitable in short order. This would both
destroy any hope of profiting from the planet's inhabitants as well as kill most of the people who
would otherwise spread news of what had happened there. There was no profit in it. Only fanatics
were satisfied by glassed planets. It was rather strange for the UNSC officer to fight an enemy
capable of understanding the concept 'restraint'.

“Sir, enemy Capital ships are launching fighters,” the tactical officer reported. “Multiple wings of
'Death Gliders' and 'Al'kesh' incoming. I estimate at least one hundred enemy craft.”

“Launch fighters,” the Admiral ordered. The last thing his battered ships needed was to fend off a
flock of buzzards while they rallied. “All squadrons.”

Three flights of the fighter-bombers emerged, two from his command ship and one from his
remaining Strident. He fought down another pang of frustration at how few fighters he had at his
disposal. Every one of his ships had the capacity to carry at least one squadron of them, yet those that
had just launched represented the entirety of his fighter support. There weren't even any
Broadswords among them, forcing him to rely on the now-outdated Longswords. Supply problems
truly were the bane of the new Navy. He kept an eye on the Ha'taks in his peripheral vision, the
enemy apparently needing to recharge their weapons for another barrage just as his own vessels did.
That, or they thought their pilots could use the experience.


“Primary MAC at 77% power and climbing,” Lt. Rico reported from his weapons station. “Recharge
is currently below optimal rate due to priority being given to the energy shield.”

He had to hand it to the fleet engineers who designed the new Series 9 MACs. Those guns certainly
charged fast. Unfortunately, in his confidence the Admiral had ordered all of the fleet's MAC guns to
fire in the first volley. Now, they had to wait for the magnetic coil-based weapons systems to reach
full charge before firing again.

"Have the fleet target Ha'tak Alpha and prepare to concentrate fire. Standby to ripple fire all missile
tubes and salvo fire our MAC guns. I want to hit that son of a bitch with everything we have."


The Admiral noticed his bridge crew giving furtive, almost nervous, glances at each other. He
understood what those meant. The fleet was reverting back to the tactics pioneered in the early days
of the Covenant war: massing firepower on a singular target while eating enemy fire in turn, hoping
to kill the enemy before being whittled down themselves. It didn't exactly inspire confidence.
Unfortunately, the sheer power of the Ha'taks had left him with precious few options.

"Status of our fighters?" he asked.

"They're reaching optimum range now, sir."

The rival fighters reached weapons-range of each other. The Longswords fired first, their guided
missiles apparently having a longer reach than their enemies' energy weapons. Intelligence suggested
they were unguided projectiles with low accuracy, like their infantry Staff Weapons, but intel had
already bit him in the ass once today and he wasn't about to bet anything on it.

The missiles closed the distance. The Longswords had been traveling at flank speed, over 15,000
kilometers per hour, when they launched their ASGM-10s. The missiles added their own velocity on top of that, making their actual speed closer to 20,000 kph—roughly 4,000 meters per second. Far faster than the human eye could see.

The lead Death Gliders didn't even have time to realize they'd been fired upon. They flashed against the dark backdrop of space and vanished into clouds of rapidly cooling vapor and flying shrapnel. At least a dozen hostile fighters were obliterated in the blink of an eye.

The Admiral was unable to keep his eyebrows from shooting to his hairline as he saw at least 75% of the surviving hostile craft dodge the remaining missiles. They twisted through space, arcing in random directions and alternately accelerating, decelerating, or dancing into defensive sidesteps. Their movements were so erratic and unfamiliar that it almost looked they were teleporting out of the way. What he was seeing defied everything he understood about the limitations of manned space-travel.

The battlefield descended into mild chaos as the dueling craft pursued each other, quickly crystallizing into a number of separate dogfights taking place in close proximity. Groups of fighters ganged up on stragglers; individual craft swooped in to reinforce already embattled allies; missiles and energy bolts flew through the void in intricate and chaotic patterns. The enemy weapons proved, once again, to be far more accurate than anticipated. They must have been guided by similar computer systems to those that guided MAC rounds. Whatever the case, the smaller Staff Cannons they featured proved effective and several Longswords winked out of existence as the battle raged on.

MacArthur opened a small window on the side of his tactical display and replayed some of the footage, doing mental calculations as he watched. There was no mistaking it: those maneuvers should have been impossible. Those craft weren't being remotely operated. Visual readings clearly showed occupied cockpits. How, then, could the pilots survive such intense g-forces? Their skeletons should have been crushed to dust within seconds. It took him a moment to recognize the only possible answer.

Inertial Dampeners. The enemy had to possess technology that artificially negated the effects of inertia. No one in the UNSC had ever dreamed that such a thing was even possible! A ball of dark matter fell into the Admiral's gut as he imagined the sheer scope of potential applications for such technology.

Several more of the Longswords blinked red on the tactical display. MacArthur bit back a curse. The design of the UNSC fighters was working against them, here. The Longsword was originally intended to chase down pirates and guerrilla craft prior to the start of the War. As such, their design had favored raw speed over maneuverability or armor strength. Additions and modifications had been made over the decades, naturally, but they weren't enough to make them as nimble as a craft that could literally defy the laws of physics at will. The fleet's already minuscule fighter complement was diminishing at an alarming rate.

This wasn't to say the battle was a repeat of the one-sided dogfights of the Human-Covenant War, of course. The experience and skill of the UNSC pilots was going far to compensate for the unexpected technological deficiency. If anything, the enemy was taking even greater losses than they were inflicting. Unfortunately, the Death Gliders had outnumbered his fighters from the outset; attrition, as always, was not humanity's friend.

Besides which, the Navy had been suffering a serious deficiency in pilots following the slaughters of the Human-Covenant War. The Longsword division would take decades to recover even without
further losses due to the simple fact that it took too long to train skilled pilots. The Admiral ordered
the fighters to withdraw and take defensive positions around the larger capital ships. The pilots
immediately obeyed and used their superior speed to their advantage, reaching the safety of the main
formation within seconds.

MacArthur's eyebrows threatened to make another display of shock as he saw the enemy craft refuse
to break off pursuit even as the Longswords entered range of the capital ships' secondary guns. Some
of the Death Gliders even got a few more shots off at their rivals before the fleet's point defense
cannons targeted them. Impossibly maneuverable as they were, they couldn't quite avoid the
coordinated 50mm high explosive projectiles from multiple UNSC warships working in unison while
also trying to take down retreating enemies. The Endurance even managed to make itself useful by
utilizing its laser batteries to take down four Al'kesh that would have been out of range of sub-light
shells. Only a handful of the enemy craft managed to abort and flee back to the safety of their own
larger siblings.

That had been an inexcusable mistake on the part of the enemy commander. Were they probing the
fleet's defenses for weaknesses?

The Admiral's train of thought was interrupted as he was slammed into the side of his command chair
and held there for an unbearable length of time. The force relented after a moment, leaving him once
again anticipating a significantly bruised torso when this was all said and done.

The enemy Ha'taks had apparently elected to rejoin the battle.

“ Majority of enemy barrage evaded,” York's voice announced. “The rest of the fleet is reporting
similar success, although the Istanbul came close enough that it's ventral shields were reduced to
15%. I estimate that the Lucian forces can only manage 10% of the accuracy shown by Covenant
vessels.”

The Admiral suppressed a growl. More small blessings that didn't really help anything. “York,
coordinate with the rest of the fleet. Ready all MAC guns on Target Alpha,” he ordered. “Let's see
what another barrage will do”

If these bastards wanted a fight, he would give them a fight.

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Dust fell from the ceiling as the ground shook. The petite woman shrank further into the blanket
draped over her sitting form and shot a fearful look upward.

“Don't worry,” Caroline Ruffalo said, giving a practiced smile. “The enemy stopped targeting this
area hours ago. Those are just tremors from kilometers away. We'll be safe down here.”

The woman, one of the East Wing maids if Caroline was remembering correctly, nodded in
acceptance, although her eyes still harbored some fear. That was as much as could be expected,
really. The shelter they were all sitting in had been built several dozen meters beneath her husband's
estate as the place they were all to run to if the UNSC decided to take back the planet by force. The
young woman trembling in front of her was essentially living through the nightmare that had haunted
the nights of every Venezian for the past 15 years.

“Would you like some water?” Caroline asked. She pulled a bottle from the ruck strapped to her
back and offered it. The maid smiled again and accepted the drink. Caroline smiled back, knowing
that the drink would be more useful than the servant realized. Sating her thirst would offer a minor
relief that she could cling to, a feeling of self-determination to keep her from drowning in panic and
despair. The labor leader offered a few more words of encouragement before moving off and seeing
to the rest of the survivors in the bunker with her.

Most of the estate staff had managed to enter the protection of the shelter when the alarms sounded.
Caroline estimated that only four were trapped outside when the doors sealed shut. They were almost
certainly dead now, incinerated by the blast that had annihilated all structures above the surface. The
Lucian Alliance must have blamed her husband for whatever had gone wrong in the negotiations.
They must have been quite upset considering they targeted Luis' estate and holdings before attacking
the Militia.

Caroline fought back the pang of loss. Her husband was almost certainly dead. It was hitting her
surprisingly hard considering she had originally married him out of political calculation. The words
of her father echoed in her mind—instructions he had given her as a child when she had to look after
her younger siblings.

Stay focused. Stay strong. Look in control. Be their rock, little lady, or you're no good to anyone.

She comforted the rest of the survivors in short order. There wasn't much she could do except offer
encouragement and pass out water bottles and blankets. She restrained a sigh of frustration as she left
the common area and made her way down the cramped hall to her husband's office. The pale ceiling
lights shining on the bare concrete walls certainly didn't improve her mood any. She entered the
room and set the door to remain open rather than seal shut; she wanted to hear if anything happened
to the others. The possibility of a gas attack or whatever was not particularly pressing in her mind.

Caroline switched on the monitors lining one of the walls and sat behind the room's only desk. She
activated the computer system's connection to a hidden sensor post far to the south. A cable had been
buried several meters below the ground to ensure no jamming could cut the aspiring Prime Minister
off from his planet. She used the unmanned post's transmitter to access whatever remote feed she
could find and images of the planet above materialized across the multiple screens.

What she saw was not encouraging.

The destruction up above had been extensive. Everything in sight was either flattened or reduced to
scorched ruins by the warship's bombardment. None of the civilian utilities could still be functioning
in the wake of such an all-out attack. The generator hidden toward the very bottom of the shelter was
the only reason she had power at all.

Most of the satellite network had been destroyed, but she used her husband's access codes to tap into
what few had evaded the enemy's notice. They showed utter devastation across the planet's surface.
Entire sections of the landscape had been burned to ruin. Cities had been laid to waste and bodies
filled the streets. The beautiful and vibrant planet she had come to call her home was being destroyed
before her eyes and she was helpless to stop it. Carnage beyond her worst nightmares greeted her
through the low resolution feed that flickered and pixellated on her screens.

Caroline had never witnessed a glassing. In fact, Venezia had been completely passed over by the
Human-Covenant War. She had always assumed that news reports of the War had been exaggerated
for propaganda purposes. She had thought it was purely due to negligence that Earth failed to notice
her planet going dark. If this present horror was a taste of what it had really been like, though, she
had been sorely mistaken.
The Lucian ship was continuing its bombardment of the more populated areas, apparently deciding their message would not be complete until as many Venezians were dead as possible. The labor leader snarled at the screens. She imagined shooting down the ships and slowly butchering every murderous barbarian inside. Fantasies of vengeance threatened to overwhelm her before she shook her head and forced herself, again, to focus.

*Be their rock.*

There had to be something she could do. She ran a scan across the remaining military data net and found that some of the Militia remained active. She was surprised; she honestly hadn't expected them to last this long. It seemed that the Lucians had deployed a limited amount of ground forces to the industrial sectors, probably looking to loot the weapons factories. The Militia survivors were attempting to deny them through defense and, when unavoidable, sabotage.

Caroline decided that the Militia was doing the right thing already. She could have used her husband's access codes to contact General Kennedy and demand he redeploy his forces to assist the civilians, but she didn't need to be a soldier to know that was foolhardy. The Militia no longer had the means to fight the warships and abandoning the industrial sectors would only free the enemy to strike wherever they wished once the looting was completed. Better to keep them focused where the least people were. The best way she could help was to coordinate disaster relief.

People would need shelter, clean water, and safe food. Evacuations and rescue operations would have to be organized and coordinated. The populist leader used the remote transmitter to access all of the contacts she had made over her career. She hunted down every vehicle depot that had not been destroyed, every factory that had useful machinery, every region that could house refugee camps, the homes of specialist engineers, etc., etc. Everything outside of the military's direct control was taken into account. It helped that she'd prepared for this kind of scenario before. Her information was limited and some of the resources would be destroyed later, but it would be a start. She would save as many of her people as she could.

*It wouldn't be enough.*

Caroline knew that. She also knew the only place she was likely to get the help and resources she needed. She sighed and briefly slumped in her chair. The UEG had won, after all.

Hours passed as she desperately tried to save as many as she could. Eventually, she took a deep breath and leaned back in her seat. There was a lull in the sack and she decided to take advantage of it. She wouldn't do anyone any good by burning herself out. A quick drink of her canteen and one minute of rest was all she would spare.

Caroline decided to check her equipment as she waited. The combat harness was properly secured over her basic vest armor. Multiple pouches contained full rifle magazines, some fragmentation grenades, and spare mags for her sidearm. Her assault rifle was leaning against the wall. She picked it up and checked it over again. It was an old MA-5; an heirloom from her father, actually. She had learned everything she knew about being a leader from him. That, and how to protect herself. Her husband had often teased her that she should start using some of the energy weapons his factories produced. She had resisted, despite never really being able to explain why.

*Another pang of loss ran through her. She fought it down with difficulty.*

Luis had to be dead. She had found no reference to him in any of the communications she had
eavesdropped on. Besides which, whatever clusterfuck had caused this catastrophe was almost certainly the result of something going wrong in his negotiations. There was no way the Lucians would let him escape.

Luis Ruffalo had been a ruthless businessman and an aspiring dictator, but there had been good in him. Caroline had seen that. She'd even been able to pull some of it to the surface and get him to do right by their people. Now, all of that would be undone.

Another tremor shook the ground. She checked her rifle again before getting back to work. This time she laid it on top of the table rather than off to the side. She didn't like to fight, hated it in fact, but she'd be damned if any enemy took her alive. She idly wondered how the battle in space had gone before losing herself in her work.

Admiral MacArthur decided he needed to end this battle. Now.

He had lost two more capital ships since the Death Gliders' ill-fated assault. The Halberd Ticonderoga and the Stalwart D'Flores had fallen victim to follow-up shots from the Ha'taks. A single salvo from the Staff Cannons was enough to kill any of his ships that had weaker shields and potentially disable the ones that had stronger. This had forced him to fully embrace evasion taking priority over attack. His previously orderly and concrete formation had turned into a fluid thing that resembled the chaotic orbit of electrons around atomic nuclei. It was a decision that still galled him, but it couldn't be helped. The UNSC Navy was already spread thin. It couldn't afford to lose ships like this, even those as under-powered as most of his fleet were.

The Ha'taks had followed their initial success by wading into the center of the UNSC formation and firing shots at will. It was clearly a tactic adapted from terrestrial naval warfare: send a heavily armored warship into the middle of the enemy formation and thereby force said enemy to restrain their fire for fear of hitting their own ships. It worked well in ancient, aquatic naval combat. What the enemy commander failed to realize was that the extreme distances of space travel (MacArthur's ships were thousands of kilometers apart) had rendered such tactics ineffective. All they were doing was ensuring each of the Admiral's ships was roughly the same distance from the enemy. The return fire from his fleet were drowning the enemy Ha'taks to the point their shields were continuously lighting up like golden halos. The lack of any formal military education system in the crime syndicate had never been more apparent.

This clearly amateur strategy only served to infuriate the UNSC flag officer further. He should be mopping the floor with these idiots. Instead, he had been forced to keep his ships on the defensive, focusing on dodging while occasionally firing MAC salvos or energy projector strikes to soften up the enemy shields.

What few Archer and Howler salvos they had fired had scored negligible damage. Most were intercepted by the enemies' point defenses. He couldn't risk the few Shiva nuclear missiles he had without some kind of advantage. Just what the hell was powering those Ha'taks that let them stand up to this kind of punishment?

Abruptly, one of said enemy vessels moved away from its twin to pursue a target: Raszcak, the badly wounded Strident-Class Frigate that had been disabled in the initial salvo. The Admiral ordered several of his other ships to cover the Raszcak's retreat. It was relatively easy, since the Ha'tak had
opened holes in its point defense coverage by moving away from its partner, which had decided to stop and hold position. The energy weapons and Archer missiles bought enough time for the human vessel to gain distance.

The Ha'tak's shields then flared brighter than before.

The Admiral leaned forward in his seat as much as his restraints would permit. That shield was behaving erratically—flaring in brightness and then dimming noticeably within the span of several seconds. These were the latest in a line of oddities that marked this particular ship apart from its sibling. A thought that had been building in the back of his mind finally pushed forward into his consciousness.

“Lieutenant Flores, analysis of the enemy shields,” he ordered his sensor officer, praying he was right.

“Reading massive fluctuations in their shield grid. Based on these readings I estimate Ha'tak Alpha's shields at 30-40% capacity, sir. Estimate for Ha'tak Bravo is 50-70%,” Flores reported. She shrugged helplessly. “There's no way to increase accuracy without detailed knowledge of the enemy equipment. It's completely new tech to us, sir.”

“Do you believe the enemy shield is malfunctioning?” the Admiral pressed.

That particular Ha'tak stood out for reasons other than its shield. Its weapons fired at a noticeably lower rate than its sibling, for instance. The external appearance of the ship was also revealing. The surface of its central Pyramid was noticeably marred, with gray armor plating haphazardly welded over the bronze-colored hull. It looked less like an Egyptian pyramid than some derelict replica from an old planetary festival. Upon further examination, all of the enemy ships featured some extent of external damage that any self-respecting military would deem unacceptable.

That was what had solidified the Admiral's epiphany: the Lucian Alliance was not a military. They were a crime syndicate. Keeping a fleet of capital ships operational was a monumentally expensive task, hence why it was normally the exclusive wheelhouse of sovereign nations. The various leaders of a gang of criminals were not likely to want to foot the bill to keep their security forces up to standard, either. The Lucian navy must have been in a constant struggle to get the funding needed to stay operational. They were probably used to coasting on the fact that few other factions had warships that could challenge the raw power these 'Ha-taks' were demonstrating.

This was both tactically and strategically significant. Tactically, it meant that the weaker Ha'tak might suffer some sort of equipment failure if pressed just a little harder, which would allow the UNSC forces to open a hole in its defenses and take it out. Strategically, it meant that the Lucian Alliance was probably even less capable of sustaining losses than the UNSC was. It was a gamble, but if they destroyed just one of the enemy ships then it was likely the rest would flee. This wasn't the fanatically devoted Covenant, after all. No...these were thieves, bandits, slavers, and drug dealers. Kill a few and the rest would scatter like the cockroaches they were.

Lt. Flores took a moment to answer the Admiral's question. “I-it's possible that their shield emitter net is behaving abnormally, sir,” she forced out. She hurriedly amended that statement by adding, “but it's impossible to tell for sure. Again—Sir—this is entirely unfamiliar technology. We just can't know for sure.”

He decided that was enough.
"Status of Ha'tak Bravo?" MacArthur demanded.

"Holding position. For whatever reason she's not moving to support Alpha."

Possible equipment failure? Internal politics be at play? Something else? He didn't know, but he was thankful that his enemy was obligingly coming to him one at a time.

"Keep your eyes on Bravo while we focus on Alpha. If he starts moving to support position let me know immediately. Have the fleet continue to focus its efforts on Alpha, but don't let Bravo think we're ignoring him."

"Aye, sir."

The battle had continued to rage on as the conversation went its course. Secondary fire from heavy railguns and Archer missiles, even the laser batteries and plasma torpedo launchers from the Endurance, began focusing their fire on Alpha. The pursuing Ha'tak slowed but still continued to chase the wounded Raszcak.

It wasn't enough.

The Admiral ground his teeth silently. He couldn't risk one of his nukes, or a coordinated MAC barrage, without some degree of certainty. He couldn't waste his most valuable ordnance on anything other than a killing stroke.

There had to be something he could do. These enemies were untrained, undisciplined, and cocky. Their shields were being drained. The Staff Cannons were easier to evade than plasma torpedoes had ever been and the UNSC ships had gotten used to dodging their fire. It was likely that only one enemy ship needed to be destroyed to achieve victory. There was a clear path to success.

Except it involved potentially losing more ships. Perhaps the majority of them, in fact, if anything else unexpected popped up. Admiral MacArthur had no interest in obtaining a Pyrrhic victory.

There had to be a way to use the enemy's incompetence against them. The situation reminded him of the overly aggressive behavior of Covenant ships—how they would viciously attempt to hurt the enemy over all other considerations, often exposing themselves to damage unless a strong commander was holding the reigns. His mind reviewed all of the most successful tactics that had been utilized against the Covenant during the War. After a moment, a particular maneuver leaped out at him.

It had been invented mere months before the end of the Human-Covenant War. A maneuver that had been born of utter desperation, but had achieved an impossible victory and saved countless lives. His fingers danced across his tac screen as a plan solidified in his mind. It would be risky for both the Endurance and the Raszcak, but it was doable if they acted quickly.

“*Inheritance to Endurance,*” the Admiral commed while furiously typing orders for the rest of the his fleet. He couldn't trust his instructions for the battlegroup's black sheep to anything other than verbal contact. Orders started flowing from his mouth the second the commander of said vessel appeared on his tactical screen. “Commander Zim, I have just instructed the crew of the Raszcak to abandon ship. The Endurance will close on the pursuing Ha'tak at maximum sustainable speed and fire a full strike of all weapons into their shield. You will then pass by the enemy at close range and use the planet to slingshot your way back to formation via the course I am transmitting to you now.”
The commander's eyes widened momentarily. “Sir, my ship—”

“I am well aware of the erratic nature of the *Endurance*, Commander,” the Admiral interrupted. “I have factored it into my strategy. Now follow your orders.” The subordinate officer hesitated for only a moment and then nodded. The comm terminated, and the feed returned to a display of the battlefield.

"Lets hope to Christ this works...." The Admiral whispered.

The situation changed drastically. The wounded *Raszcak* deployed its Pelicans and escape pods, the entire crew bailing out of the ailing vessel. The pursuing *Ha'tak* would be within range for their point defenses to target the survivors within twenty seconds. The air in the bridge on the *Inheritance* seemed to get heavier as the officers anticipated a slaughter. All of them except the Admiral.

Before the *Ha'tak* could begin its butchery, the *Endurance* surged forward as she redlined her engines. It took several seconds for the enemy to spot and orient on to the new threat, apparently having been too focused on its prior prey.

A white pencil thin beam of light slammed into the *Ha'tak*'s shields, causing them to flash in a golden halo, rings of light spreading out from the point of impact like ripples in water. Before they could recover, the shields were struck again by a dozen spheres of blue-white plasma. The tremendous thermal and kinetic energy from the *Endurance*'s one-two punch of Energy Projector and Plasma Torpedoes caused the enemy shield to flare brightly and almost obscure the ship from view. Unfortunately, none of it was enough to penetrate the *Ha'tak* itself.

There was, however, a substantial effect on the *Endurance*. The rather 'delicate' ship had been struggling to manage her waste heat for the duration of the battle. The strike from all her weapons combined with the surge to maximum thrust had pushed the ship over the edge. Its emergency vents activated, sending plumes of white-hot plasma into space as the automated safeties desperately tried to prevent a meltdown. The prototype systems glowed red where they had been attached to the exterior hull, making the elderly craft look like it was burning from the inside out. The ship's exhaust died down as all major systems, including shields and primary thrust, would be rendered inoperable until the reactor stabilized.

Fortunately for the crew of the frankenstein-ship, it was traveling at several thousand kilometers per hour at the time and the lack of friction in vacuum meant that it maintained said velocity even as it raced past the enemy with barely a hundred meters between them. The enemy had not moved quickly enough to place itself in the human ship's path. If it had, the *Endurance* would almost certainly have died in the collision.

Now, to see if the enemy took the bait.

The more advanced weaponry and shields would mark the *Endurance* as more pressing a target than the *Raszcack*'s escape craft. The venting would mark it as temporarily vulnerable. Seemingly buzzing them and then running away would be interpreted as an insult. In short, everything about the attack had been calculated to draw the enemy's attention solely on that one ship.

It worked flawlessly. The *Ha'tak* immediately forgot about finishing off its prey and turned to pursue its most recent attacker. Multiple Staff Cannon shots raced out, closing the distance with a target no longer capable of evasion.

Fortunately for the crew of the *Endurance*, their luck held for the second time. The gravity well of
Venezia took hold of them and pulled them out of the way a fraction of a second before impact. The Lucian commander had been too eager to respond to the apparent insult, as expected. The retrofitted Marathon-Class Cruiser disappeared around the far side of the planet with its pursuer close behind.

"All ships, re-orientate bow on these coordinates and hold your fire until my mark," MacArthur barked over the comms.

The eight remaining frigates, the Admiral's Cruiser, and his last remaining Destroyer oriented on where the indignant enemy ship should soon be reappearing. Utilizing a high-g slingshot around Venezia would take less than 3 minutes. He just hoped the Endurance would last long enough to get the Ha'tak into position.

For once, it did not disappoint.

The Endurance appeared first, looking for all the world like it was fleeing in terror. The pursuing Ha'tak appeared close behind, right on its prey's heels. It fired another volley of Staff Cannon shots.

This time, the luck of the Endurance ran out. These shots had been more carefully aimed than the first and they struck true. The Cruiser was instantly annihilated by the equivalent of a half-gigaton nuclear strike. A moment passed and the flash faded, revealing an expanding cloud of what had been a veteran ship of the UNSC and its crew. The Ha'tak crashed straight through it in a spiteful replication of its enemy's seeming bravado.

"Fire!" the Admiral shouted. The remaining fleet had deliberately been waiting to use their primary armaments, not wanting to miss an opportunity due to waiting for the magnetic coils to recharge. Now they would reap the reward for their patience. The Inheritance felt deathly still and quiet as the volley launched.

The enemy Ha'tak didn't even alter its course. Its commander must have been confident that this volley would be as ineffective as the first. The Admiral tried to force the enemy to keep making that mistake through sheer willpower. Its shields may have been flickering a bit but it was clearly nothing to worry about. The enemy was powerless before them. Victory for the Lucian Alliance was assured.

Then, a shiva nuclear warhead detonated in the Ha'tak's face.

The escape pods from the crippled Raszcack had been launched with care. Half of their number, crammed full, had been aimed toward space where the survivors would be recovered following the battle. The other half had been launched toward the planet entirely unoccupied...save the one that contained the Strident's only nuclear ordinance. Which had been set on a course that intersected exactly where the Endurance had lead its pursuer.

It took a moment for the flash of the detonation to clear on the tactical display. The image that replaced it was far more encouraging than previous results. The enemy's shields had gone from flickering slightly to fluctuating wildly. Arcs of electricity passed over it, covering each hemisphere in its own lightning storm. The normally translucent barrier had turned nearly opaque by the effort to protect the vessel from the shiva's detonation. The desperate shimmering reminded MacArthur of a man trying to keep multiple plates spinning on top of poles, frantically turning from one to another in a futile attempt to keep the system from falling piece by piece. Remarkably, the shield looked like it might actually pull it off.

Then, the MAC rounds hit.

The Admiral would be annoyed by how many times his sensors were being overwhelmed if he
weren't pushing against his restraints in sheer expectation. Had it worked? Had his gamble paid off? The Ha'tak reappeared on his screen after a moment.

Minus its shields.

“Fire Primary armament!” the Admiral shouted. The weapons officer of the *Inheritance* complied instantly, having withheld his fire in the previous volley in accordance with his orders.

As before, MacArthur felt his cruiser shudder beneath him as its Series 9 MAC gun launched three 600 ton shells in rapid succession. As before, the lines representing the shots' trajectory appeared on his tac screen.

Unlike before, the Lucian commander put their ship into evasive maneuvers. It seemed the enemy had finally realized their peril. The nature of their maneuvers revealed to the UNSC that the capital ships also possessed inertial dampening technology. A moment of doubt passed through MacArthur's mind.

He needn't have worried. The enemy had reacted too late. This time, the Admiral was not disappointed.

Two of the MAC rounds hit the central 'pyramid'. They crashed through the hull and back out the opposite side, dragging a trail of debris and fire out with them. The last shot, however, hit the scaffold-like superstructure. Part of the structure was shattered but most of the effected area was bent and warped out of shape, making it look like some cage that had failed to contain whatever monster had been trapped within. It also had the effect of sending the craft spinning wildly as the core portion continued to erupt in flames and secondary explosions. The UNSC forces were treated to the absurd sight of what looked like some kind of spinning firecracker in space.

It only lasted a moment. The damage to the main portion of the ship had been far too devastating. The shattered hulk of the Lucian Alliance Ha'tak erupted into a miniature sun as whatever alien reactor powered it completely destabilized. This flash, too, faded away, and only a cloud of rapidly expanding gasses and molten metal remained. The Admiral felt a silent cheer pass through the bridge as the officers reveled in their success.

The effect of this victory on the remaining Ha'taks was delayed, but dramatic. Both ships went dormant for several seconds, as if the occupants were having a hard time believing what they were seeing. Once reality set in, they apparently decided they weren't being paid enough to put up a real fight, and the Lucian Alliance forces pushed out of orbit at flank speed. The Admiral denied any requests to pursue. He watched as the enemy jumped to Hyperspace and disappeared from sensors. The battle was won.

The war, on the other hand...

The Admiral opened the comm again. “*Buenos Aires* and *Klendathu,*” he ordered, singling out the two frigates that had the most ground forces in their holds, “launch all Marine units to restore order to the planet's surface.” He took a moment to consult his own station "Have *Grissom* move to assist the *Raszcak*. I want the crew rescued and the ship salvaged if possible. Everyone else, take up protective positions in high orbit. These bastards won't take the UNSC by surprise again."

MacArthur sat back in his restraints and allowed himself a deep breath. Five ships. He'd lost five ships in this 'victory'. Six if the wounded *Raszcak* succumbed to its wounds before she could be stabilized. This was in addition to the lost Longswords and additional damages to his surviving ships.
The Navy couldn't afford these kinds of losses anymore. Hell, they couldn't afford them back in the War when this kind of result was the best case scenario.

Not to mention the small matter of the thousands of UNSC personnel who had lost their lives in the battle for Venezia. Many of them had died due to his own overconfidence and the Admiral refused to hide from that fact. Families would soon receive messages informing them of lost loved ones. Children would be left without their mother or father, perhaps orphaned entirely. He had failed to protect them.

MacArthur felt particular guilt for the crew of the Endurance, whom he had sent to die. He had ordered them to execute a 'Keyes Loop', charging straight at the enemy and missing collision by a hair before using the planet's gravity to slingshot back into the action. It had been named after its inventor, Commander Jacob Keyes, who had later gone on to command the Pillar of Autumn, another test-bed ship with a much better record. The poetry had not been lost on MacArthur. Unlike in the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV, the Loop had not been used to lure plasma torpedoes to hit an enemy ship and had not resulted in the survival of the human vessel. He'd hoped that the Endurance's energy shield would recharge in time to save it. That was one of the main reasons he'd picked it, in fact. Still, he'd known the probability was low.

He took a moment to glower at the planet growing larger in his nav display. It hadn't been worth it. Command should have left those rebel scum to burn in the fire they'd set for themselves. Since when did Innies warrant UNSC protection, anyway? The Admiral shook his head. There was no room for such irrationality for someone in his position. The strategic value of Venezia certainly justified the price.

Next time, though... Next time would be different. He would be ready, and the other officers of the fleet would know what the enemy was capable of. The UNSC wouldn't be caught flat-footed by these thugs again.

Admiral MacArthur watched his forces deploy on the tactical screen and idly contemplated how convenient it was that the war games that had placed him within response range of this incursion had also granted him exactly the forces he would need to keep a foothold on the rebel planet until a true occupation force could arrive. A number of factors had conveniently aligned to make a striking victory possible.

Venezia belonged to Earth again. The anti-UEG symbol it represented had been removed. The Insurrection was dead.

MacArthur grinned to himself. There was no possible way Hood could sideline him now. He, and his good friends at ONI, had ensured it.

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The screen showed the Lucian guard's head being destroyed by a 14.5x114mm high-velocity round. The so-called 'Prime Minister' of Venezia was shot dead shortly afterward in the ensuing firefight.

"Excellent shot, -010," Director/Admiral Osman complimented. The pair of former Spartans watched the recorded feed, the flag officer recognizing the time-stamp identifying it as coming from Naomi's SRS99-AM Sniper Rifle. Her signature weapon.

"Thank you, sir," Naomi-010 replied in her typically stoic tone. "Although, I can not take total credit. Staff Sergeant Geffen inserted the toxin into the Lucian diplomat's beverage."
“Of course,” Osman said, nodding. “All of Kilo-Five is to be commended for their success. I've come to expect nothing less from you all.”

The appreciation was actually genuine. Thanks to Kilo-Five's involvement, the operation had been a complete success. At that very moment Army and Marines units were securing their hold on the remaining major population centers. Meanwhile, the fleet had been reinforced and fully assumed control of local space. Venezia was back within the fold and its rebellious leadership had been eradicated by forces not connected in any way to the UEG or ONI. Now, no one could doubt the necessity of UNSC protection in the new galaxy. Any hope of the Insurrection returning in force had been shattered. A smile grew on the ONI Director's lips.

Somehow, her sister managed to look skeptical despite being concealed behind her polarized visor. It was subtle enough not to be noticed by the room's third and final occupant. The Director, though, had never lost her ability to read Spartan body language.

Osman suppressed a sigh and admitted the truth, her tone implying it had been her idea alone to do so. “Of course, it was hardly an unqualified success.” She turned to the room's other occupant: her chief scientist. “What do you make of the enemy fleet, Dr. Glassman?”

The doctor had been staring unblinkingly into space up until this point and it took a moment for him to respond. It looked like he had missed everything the others had been talking about, finding the non-scientific portions of the briefing of little interest.

Osman knew it was only an act. Anyone who could survive and rise to the top of any ONI section, even the Research and Development wing, had ears like a fox and a mind like a steel trap. His position in the increasingly crucial field of the development of military technology would also grant him considerable clout with any UNSC officer or politician. One would be a fool to be unwary around him.

Glassman began in an expressionless monotone, having abandoned the standard emotions he displayed when in the field under prying eyes. “The functionality of their technology is what one would expect,” he said. He pressed some recessed buttons built into his tortoise-shell glasses, pulling up several windows on the holographic projector showing the enemy 'Ha'taks' in still images. “Energy shields to protect against damage. Projectile energy weapons that require a brief recharge as primary ordinance as well as faster, less-powerful versions for point defenses. Small, nimble craft for fighter/bomber functions. Nothing we haven't seen before. In fact, the enemy weapons are less impressive in some ways than the Covenant plasma torpedoes. These seem to be unguided and must rely on sophisticated targeting software like our coil-gun weaponry.”

An expression of disdain briefly replaced the expressionless mask that was the doctor's face. Osman wondered if it was genuine contempt for poor design or another attempt at misdirection. The former would fit the scientist's penchant for perfectionism. However, it might be yet another mask, one all the more powerful for its plausibility. The head scientist was a puzzle that one could never be quite sure they had solved. Osman couldn't decide if she admired him or despised him for that.

Glassman pressed at his glasses again. This time, the images transitioned to videos showing the enemy's more impressive feats in the battle for Venezia. A twinkle of what might have been anything from admiration to frustration to envy appeared in his eyes for an instant before vanishing, replaced by more non-emotion as he continued. “It is in raw power alone that the enemy held an advantage. Each enemy projectile fired at the fleet possessed an estimated yield equivalent to a 200 megaton nuclear detonation. Additionally, the Ha'taks possessed shield grids with ratings far beyond anything our fleet has at its disposal, a fact that has rendered our primary weapons system, the Magnetic Accelerator Cannon, largely ineffective. These offensive and defensive capabilities would require a
previously unheard of level of power to operate. I estimate that the Ha'tak reactors, or at the least those observed by Admiral MacArthur's forces in the Orso System, produce, at a minimum, a level of output at least five times greater than anything the UEG has ever theorized. Judging by the intelligence reports you have sent me I deduce that the substance 'naquadah' is the fuel source being utilized. Perhaps even the 'heavy naquadah' we have seen some brief references to. According to the intelligence shared with us by Stargate Command, it is the basis of all Goa'uld technology."

The doctor refrained from speaking further. He had answered the queries posed to him and was now waiting for a response.

"Are there any broader implications, Doctor?" Osman prompted.

The doctor's eyes seemed to grow distant for a few moments before he refocused, as if this wasn't something he had dedicated considerable thought to before the meeting even began. "It certainly puts some things in perspective."

"Explain," Osman demanded, growing impatient but taking care not to show it. Glassman pressed at his glasses again and the holographic display projected against the wall shifted. A wireframe image of a New Earth capital ship appeared and rotated in place. Windows and graphs periodically popped up, each one identifying and elaborating on some visible component. Osman examined and analyzed each while she kept one eye on the doctor.

"The 'BC-304 Battlecruiser' is the only military vessel of capital ship size in the New Earth fleet. As you can see by these energy graphs here," Glassman said, freezing the image and causing several particular windows to expand in size, "remote scans have detected a higher energy output than even the Ha'taks. We had previously concluded that the readings were faulty, perhaps due to interference from the unfamiliar design and technology of New Earth vessels. Given the events in the Orso System, we must assume until proven otherwise that the readings were indeed accurate. The New Earth fleet may be far more capable than previously assumed." Once again, the indecipherable spark of admiration/frustration/envy appeared in Glassman's eyes before vanishing.

"The New Earth fleet utilizes standard weapons, Doctor," Osman objected, more to observe the doctor's response than because she actually thought he was wrong. "They possess standard railguns, of an admittedly high output for their size, as well standardized anti-ship missiles and nuclear weapons. Certainly effective enough for their means, but nothing that would take advantage of such a large source of power. Perhaps your revised estimate was in error."

Glassman nodded, treating the objection as a simple request for clarification. "You are mostly correct, Director. While it is true that New Earth does utilize more standard weapons, we now believe that they have been...economical in regard to certain details."

The doctor pressed a button and the wireframe image of the -304 rotated to display other portions of the vessel. Eight points were highlighted by square frames. "These structures have become increasingly interesting following the revelations concerning naquadah power," he explained. "Without knowing of the potential power output they would be easy to overlook. In fact, the fleet did overlook them for over a month. They have been almost seamlessly integrated into the hull, perhaps concealed within a protective shell except when being deployed."

"Some kind of energy projector?" Osman prompted, reminding her subordinate that she was not quite as dense as he seemed to think.

"Exactly right, Director," Glassman confirmed with just the right inflection to recognize her insight without seeming patronizing. "It is currently unclear exactly what type of energy they project. The
design is clearly different than the main guns on the Goa'uld or even Covenant vessels. Whatever the case, there is a high probability that the forces of New Earth have a significant technological advantage over the UNSC in terms of naval craft. Even with the leaps in naval technology we have developed in the past several years, we may be back where we were at the beginning of the Human-Covenant War."

Naomi was rocked back on her heels, moving practically a micrometer in shock. Osman just regarded the doctor coldly. "That is a bold claim, Doctor Glassman," she said.

The doctor stared back unflinchingly with the air of someone issuing a simple response. "It is not one I make lightly, Director Osman. Any true examination of the engagement between Admiral MacArthur and the Lucian Alliance 'fleet' makes it clear the enemy was toying with them. A mix of War era and post-War designs, some of them the finest ships we have produced to date, and they only managed a single kill. A feat only possible due to the enemy's overconfidence. It is equally clear that had the Lucian Alliance even a micron of training and skill in operating as a cohesive fighting force, MacArthur and his fleet would have been destroyed."

There was no use denying the obvious, and Osman wasn't in the habit of wasting her own time. "I agree. Anything else, Doctor Glassman?" she asked.

Glassman nodded, "One final point, yes." Another button press, and the New Earth ship was replaced by footage of the Lucian ships performing maneuvers over the course of the battle. "I concur with Admiral MacArthur's conclusion that the enemy performed maneuvers that would have fractured the spine of any of our vessels. While the artificial gravity fields on our ships do provide some limited inertial compensation, it pales in comparison to what the enemy is capable of. A competent enemy will be able to maneuver in ways that render unguided sub-light weaponry less effective to the point of irrelevancy."

Osman nodded and closed her eyes briefly. "Your points are made, Doctor Glassman." She opened her eyes, leaned forward, and further hardened her impassive features into stone. "But I didn't bring you here to tell me what I already know. This is your field, doctor. Give me options."

Glassman nodded back, equally stone-faced. "Of course, Director," he said. "Our top priority must be power generation. The acquisition of naquadah generator technology by any means is paramount. Having both small scale generators and large scale reactors would be ideal. I would recommend obtaining them from New Earth."

"We can acquire several functioning examples in short order," Osman replied. This had already been a goal of hers prior to the battle for Venezia. Now, it had moved to the top of her list.

"Full cooperation from New Earth would be better," Glassman countered. He was smart enough to recognize what 'acquire' normally meant for ONI. "Reverse engineering is a slow and arduous process. We're still trying to understand much about how Covenant technology functions. There is only so much that can be done without detailed instruction on fundamental principles, and the Covenant engineers we have captured have proven to be poor teachers. It may simply take too long to modernize the fleet without cooperation from those who already have a firm understanding of naquadah."

That would be significantly more complicated than the standard approach. Osman considered it for several seconds. It did offer some interesting possibilities if handled properly...

"I also recommend using Goa'uld and New Earth technologies to upgrade both UNSC defenses and weaponry," the doctor continued. "As for defenses, acquiring inertial manipulation and Goa'uld shield technology will make our ships faster, more maneuverable, and able to absorb more enemy
fire. Stargate Command also has access to a metal known as Trinium which, according to them, makes the hulls of their ships significantly stronger and more resilient than our own. As for weapons, it has become clear that our standard weapons systems and even the Covenant-derived energy weapons, such as those sported by the *Endurance*, will not be sufficient. We need to go back to the drawing board and develop something a bit more...,” he actually grinned slightly, “potent.”

Osman blinked in mild surprise, a look which she quickly shifted into one of appraisal. "I'll spare you the details of how monumental an endeavor what you are suggesting would actually be. I assume you already have some ideas about just what we would use to replace the weapons systems the UNSC Navy has been refining for over 400 years?"

The Doctor nodded, another grin splitting his normally inanimate features. "I do, Admiral. Nothing more than theory at present, but with the unwitting help from our new 'friends' we can develop these weapons in a fraction of the time it would otherwise take.” Glassman picked up his TACPAD from a nearby table and with a few quick keystrokes sent the data to Osman's terminal. The admiral pulled up the information, and a smile of her own slowly settled over her features.

"Yes, I can see how these would be very effective, doctor. It requires the naquadah technology you emphasize, but when acquired..." Osman leaned back in her seat, her mind racing with the possibilities.

Osman returned to the present and fixed a hard stare on her chief scientist. "As it stands now, HIGHCOM has ordered the fleet not to engage the Lucian Alliance ships under anything but the most dire of circumstances. They are to maintain a defensive stance and will not proceed with offensive operations against the Lucian Alliance, or the Banished, until such time as our deficiencies are addressed and overcome."

She didn't need to say any more. The importance of the task he was being entrusted with was either unknown to Dr. Glassman, or else he just didn't care. Carrying the future of the human race on his shoulders didn't seem to have the slightest impact. Either he was outright insane or his ability to mask his emotions rivaled former Director Parangosky, Osman's teacher, herself. It was impossible to tell. Once again, she was torn between admiring this man or wanting to have him killed.

"Understood, Director,” he replied. “I will make sure the rest of the Research and Development division understands this, as well."

"See that you do," Osman said. The discussion continued for a while before she dismissed the researcher to continue his work.

The Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence of Admiral of the UNSC Navy had much work to do, herself. She suppressed a grimace as she felt another migraine approaching. It had likely been building for much of the meeting, but her focus on the future of the UNSC and the enigma that was Dr. Henry Glassman had kept her from noticing. She hesitated a moment before reaching for the pain suppressants. Her sister would not judge her, but it still took a bit of effort not to hide her infirmity.

“What will become of Venezia, Admiral? And the losses in MacArthur's battle?” Naomi asked. Osman was puzzled for a moment; the career sniper had never really cared about the aftermath of a mission unless it was to gain new insights into her enemies and how best to dispatch them. She realized, gratefully, that her sister was simply trying to distract her from the pain.

“What will become of Venezia, Admiral? And the losses in MacArthur's battle?” Naomi asked. Osman was puzzled for a moment; the career sniper had never really cared about the aftermath of a mission unless it was to gain new insights into her enemies and how best to dispatch them. She realized, gratefully, that her sister was simply trying to distract her from the pain.

“The UNSC will occupy the planet it until a proper government can be reestablished,” she replied, leaning back and staring into space as she focused. The pain quickly faded behind the combination of suppressant and her enthusiasm for her work. “The Lucians ravaged the infrastructure but not..."
beyond salvaging. Admiral MacArthur seems to have been right about the Ha'taks pulling their punches. A local leader, 'Caroline Ruffalo', survived the bombardment and has reached out to the Marines on the ground. You gathered data on her prior to the strike when you were shadowing her husband.”

Naomi nodded in recognition.

Osman continued. “The locals trust her so we'll use her for now. She has organized and distributed the shipments of humanitarian aid we have sent. This will ease the transition back to appropriate governorship, keep the local workforce alive, and remind them all who saved them from the incompetence of their prior leaders. Ruffalo's background characterizes her as an anarchist, however, so she will have to be removed permanently in the near future.” Naomi nodded again. Assassinations were well within her area of expertise.

“As for the Navy...” Osman sighed. “The loss of five ships was unacceptable. Both sides of the battle lost a third of their forces, and the UNSC can not afford such an equal distribution of casualties.” She turned to her most prized agent and the fearsome armor she wore. “It is abundantly clear that upgrading the fleet is of utmost importance. To that end, I have a new mission for Kilo-Five.”

The armored Spartan perked up at that, her frame shifting a few millimeters in excitement. Osman grinned.

“You have been recovering off-world packages from our source on New Earth. That approach has been effective but far too limited. While I arrange the official exchange between the UEG and our stellar neighbors, you will obtain assets more...directly,” Osman explained. Her smile was both wistful and predatory. “Just try not to have too much fun, Naomi. A few corpses is advantageous; too many is a mess.”

Chapter End Notes

*Peeks head into door* So...been a while, huh? Hope the chapter was worth the wait. There's, uh, no need for the torches and pitchforks, right? Guys?

Note: In all seriousness, we should be able to get back to a regular posting schedule now that the holidays are over. The next several chapters are all in the late stages of development so, barring any disasters, there shouldn't be another gap like the one we just had. Sorry again for the wait.

Note: This is, without a doubt, the most ambitious battle sequence we've produced to date. It's certainly more detailed than the naval battles in Halo 5: Reclamation. Please let us know how we did. All feedback is welcome so long as it's constructive.

Thanks for reading and for your patience.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper.
Chapter 15 Fallout

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15 Fallout

One Week After Ambushed Capture Mission

Things had been going so well...

Lieutenant Colonel Jameson grimaced as Captain Lewis, SG-4's medic, loaded the body onto a stretcher. This was the first time he'd lost a soldier in combat. He'd lost people before he'd joined the SGC, of course, but those had been from afar. He'd never had to personally see a subordinate gunned down because of his orders.

How was he going to relate what had happened here? He would have to explain what had gone wrong to the brass as well as why a good man had died serving Uncle Sam. Writing a letter to inform Ortiz's next of kin was something he dreaded but he'd be damned if that task was given to some pencil pusher who'd never even met the fallen soldier. It was all a mess.

"Make sure we take the damned thing back with us," Jameson growled. The third (and last, now) member of the squad nodded and loaded the ruined device onto the cargo rover with the other captured gear. The gadget had been spherical, about the size of a beach ball, but now sported a massive pair of holes from where an ODST had shot it.

With the most unpleasant task done, Jameson made his way over to the other Camelot troopers keeping the area secure. The grassy clearing they were standing in was roughly twice the size of a football field, with a small forested area surrounding it and a Free Jaffa town about ten minutes away. Most of the open space was taken up by a cargo ship that Command said was set to transport a large shipment of Kassa. The hull of the ship, an old transport built by the Goa'uld Empire, showed signs of the stray weapons-fire that had hit it during the ambush. The surviving Lucian Alliance thugs were kneeling twenty yards away with another Camelot soldier guarding them.

"I take it you know what that thing was?" Jameson prompted the soldier on guard duty.

"Yes, sir," the ODST replied, never taking his eyes off the prisoners. He had been the one to spot and neutralize the thing on his own initiative. "We call it a Romeo Foxtrot—a 'Radar Fucker'. It's a piece of Brute tech that screws with motion trackers. Makes ghost signatures swarm the readouts."

"That's why it looked like we were being ambushed by dozens of hostiles," the Colonel replied, working hard to keep the defeat out of his voice. The ODST nodded in response. Jameson didn't think there was any anger being directed toward him but the feeling would certainly be warranted.

The SG-Team leader had read about those devices in reports. The official designation was the 'Type-13 Infantry Jamming Unit' and it had been specifically designed by the Covenant to create false returns on motion trackers. The phantom readings were hard to distinguish from real ones on their own, but their chaotic 'movement' were easy to recognize for anyone familiar with them. Jameson had never encountered them in the field, though, so the effect hadn't registered. Combined with his relative unfamiliarity with motion trackers, this had lead to him countermanding his own orders, moving his troops into defensive posture in response to imaginary threats, and generally fucking up
the battle plan to the point where the Lucian mercenaries were able to bounce back and inflict serious
damage.

In a very real sense, the death of Captain Ortiz was his fault.

The veteran officer stamped down on that line of thinking immediately. There would be time to
flagellate himself when they were back at base. In the here and now, he needed to keep his head in
the game and prevent anyone else from falling victim to his own stupidity.

“Sir, we've opened the cargo bay,” the ODST Team Leader said over the comms.

“Copy. On my way,” Jameson responded. At least they'd succeeded in their objective. He could take
comfort in that, at least.

That thought evaporated the moment he got a look at the cargo bay. There were a mere four—no,
five, there was one in the back—crates in there. The vast majority of the room was conspicuously
empty. The Colonel ordered the crates opened. A quick bit of hacking opened the electronic locks
and revealed that the containers were, in fact, full of the Lucian Alliance’s primary narcotic. The intel
had been right on that score. The question was: Where was the rest of it?

“Omega-Two: with me. -Actual: start planting the charges,” Jameson barked. The towering brick
shit-house that was the second member of the ODST squad fell in line as his comrade started
attaching the cobbled-together portable dispersal units. The gadgets would inject a compound,
created by the Camelot science team, that would render the drug useless without the harmful fumes
produced by incendiaries.

Jameson immediately marched out of the ship and toward the POWs. A quick glance was all he
needed to single out the leader. “You,” he barked, pointing at the gangster, “You're coming with
me.” The man, like the rest of Lucians there, was disguised as a peasant. The simple brown clothes
might have let him pass as a commoner if it weren't for the gold chains he wore around his neck.
Vanity was often the undoing of pissants like him.

The man showed no sign of moving. Omega-Two thundered over, hauled the restrained prisoner to
his feet with one arm, and gave him a shove toward the colonel. Jameson gestured to the ship and the
trio made their way back, the prisoner in front with -Two a few paces behind. They entered the cargo
bay to find -Actual wrapping up the disposal.

“Where's the rest of it?” the SG-Team leader demanded. “There's supposed to be a full shipment of
Kassa here. Is it late? Still stashed away?”

The mobster chuckled, smirking from behind his neatly trimmed goatee. “It is far from here, Tau'ri
filth,” the criminal spat. “You see, we know now what you are. You are not an army. You are
simply a small band, sent off on a hopeless mission to appease the pampered nobility you are slaved
to. We know the way to beat you.” He straightened his posture and adopted a defiant expression as
he stared directly into the colonel's visor. His voice rose steadily as continued. “Numbers. Instead of
large shipments at distant intervals, we now make many smaller ones, continuously. The animals'
raids have given us all the funds we need. We are larger now than you could ever be and already you
are spread thin. For every shipment of Kassa you intercept, ten more shall slip past unmolested. For
every slave you free, twenty more will be sold. For every raid you interrupt, a hundred will have
been executed light-years away! This is the end of the Tau'ri dominance of the stars! From this day
forth, the galaxy belongs to the Lucian Alliance!”
The cargo bay fell silent. It was a marked contrast to the moment before, when the man's rant had risen to such a pitch that his voice filled the room. The officer and the mobster stared at each other without speaking for several seconds. Then, the leader of SG-4 nodded to Omega-Two.

Before Jameson realized what was happening the ODST had brought his clenched gauntlet straight up into the restrained man's gut. The POW collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath, his expression of triumph replaced by agony. Omega-Two preceded to kick the man a couple times before Jameson intervened.

“Hey, hey!” he shouted, moving in and physically separating the two. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?!”

“...teaching this punk a lesson, sir,” the ODST replied. His helmet tilted slightly and Jameson got the impression that the UNSC trooper was genuinely confused. Did he think this was what the nod had meant?

The CO sighed. “When I nodded, I meant for you threaten him. Put the barrel of your rifle against his neck or work the slide or something. What you just did was an exercise in unnecessary force, Captain.”

The helmet leaned forward in disbelief. The raised eyebrows were practically painted on the opaque visor. This obviously wouldn't go anywhere but an extended argument. Deciding he'd dealt with enough shit in one day, Jameson motioned for the prisoner to be taken back to the others.

The leader of SG-4 stood alone in the cargo bay. The taunting words of the Lucian echoed in his mind. The destroyed Kassa, for which one of his own soldiers had lost his life, occupied a measly corner of it. The expanse of empty space seemed to laugh at the officer. At his failure.

It was the smell that would haunt him.

Rak'nor stood a few paces from the scene, examining the aftermath of a slaughter. The house of healing, so recently built by the Tau'ri to aid those afflicted by kassa addiction, had been burned down. The smoldering rubble was only now beginning to cease sending noxious smoke into the air.

Bodies were laid out in an orderly row just before the ruin of the sanctuary. The smell of their burning flesh had combined with that of the chemicals stored within the building to create a truly horrifying stench. Rak'nor was sure that the only reason he wasn't openly gagging was the need to appear stoic and in control before his warriors.

It was impossible even to tell which body had belonged to whom. They had been reduced to sculptures of blackened flesh and dirty bone, hairless, lips shriveled back to reveal char-stained teeth, even the markers of their sex reduced to unrecognizable horror. The heat of the inferno had stripped away their identities as well as their lives.

Outrage welled up in the reformed Jaffa's chest. It replaced the bile and beginnings of vomit that had threatened to embarrass him in front of the assembled Free Jaffa warriors. He focused his eyes on the wreckage—on the still-visible barricades that had been erected in front of the only exits. The attackers had ensured that none escaped the inferno.

What monsters had done this? Had there not been enough loss of life in recent years? Were the
galaxy-spanning wars not enough to sate the bloodlust of the wicked? Anger and disgust warred within him, the struggle making it difficult to maintain his composure.

He remembered the last time he had visited this particular house of healing. How the grateful locals had bestowed Warrior Mitchell with honors in gratitude for the work that now lay in ruins. The impoverished had been given a symbol of hope for the first time since the Rebellion had overthrown the Goa'uld. Now, there would only be mourning for the lives lost and the blow to their dreams.

His refined instincts alerted Rak'nor that someone was approaching him from behind. Officers of the Freedom Coalition Planetary Guard were moving in patrols to ensure the security of the site for his inspection, but they were all in view. This was a new arrival. The sound of their footsteps and steady breathing indicated they were not attempting an ambush. Still, he kept a ready grip on his staff weapon as he turned to face whoever had business with him.

“Milord?” Jen'lok, Captain of the local Guard garrison, said as he approached. He started, as if remembering something important, and hurriedly bowed in the manner demanded of the servants of the Goa'uld Empire. He must have been one of those recruited from the servants rather than one born to warrior's service. “I have a report for you, milord.”

“I am not a lord,” Rak'nor replied while suppressing a scowl. He really should focus on the task at hand, but he found himself unable to let this old-world display pass uncontested. “Nor do I require those of lower rank to bow as if I held pretensions of divine might. A simple salute is all I require.”

The Guardsman stiffened before nodding and pressing a fist to his chest in respect. Rak'nor returned the gesture. “What is it you report to me?” he asked.

“It is as we feared,” the captain said. He handed over a dataslate displaying a list of names with the word 'deceased' displayed next to them. “Several of our informants within the local branch of the Lucian Alliance have been found murdered. It seems the attack was not limited to the house of healing after all.”

Again, the outrage welled up in Rak'nor's chest. The house of healing had contained several members of the Lucian Alliance who had turned informant, true, but it had also housed several civilians. Innocents who had nothing to do with the prisoners sharing a roof with them. That the Lucian dogs would go to such depths of depravity to destroy those they viewed as traitors reminded him far too much of the petty cruelty of the old Empire.

Something occurred to him that allowed him to resist the pull of anger. “Several of these are not marked as deceased,” he pointed out. “Are they still living?”

“We are unsure, mil-sir,” Jen'lok replied. “We have not done a specific search for them. We only know of these deaths because we encountered news of them in the search for those who attacked the house of healing. I...had not considered it a priority.”

“I do!” Rak'nor said. Days had gone by; what if one of their informants had been hiding only to be found and killed while the servants of the Coalition milled about? “Send Guardsmen to find these men and determine if they are alive or dead. Immediately!” The captain nodded and moved off at a brisk pace. “Wait!” Rak'nor cried, his mind catching up to his speech. The captain stopped in his tracks and turned back to his superior, who by this point had rushed to catch up with him.

“Countermand that. Being so blatant may lead our enemies to informants that have yet to be discovered. We cannot afford any more of our sources to be slain needlessly. Instead, organize a search to form a complete list of all suspicious deaths that occurred in the city in the last three days.
As you do so you are to quietly check on those not yet confirmed dead. Secrecy is paramount. Do you understand?” Another nod and affirmation. The captain departed with his newest orders.

Rak’nor, servant of the Freedom Coalition and personal agent to Councilor Teal’c himself, sighed quietly. He had to be more careful. Swift, decisive action was necessary, but had to be tempered with wisdom and restraint. That was one of the first lessons his teacher had imparted to him. He would need every one of those lessons in the days ahead, for the attack on this house of healing had not been alone. Every one of the houses Mitchell had established had been attacked on the same day. They were on nearly a dozen worlds, light-years apart, and somehow the enemy had executed a coordinated series of strikes that would have made the Coalition proud. Worse still, numerous agents within the Lucian Alliance had been found dead on planets spanning the breadth of Free Jaffa space. Even some Lucian officers that weren’t cooperating had been murdered, making Rak’nor suspect the purge had been used as an excuse to excise particularly incompetent members from the organization.

This...this was something special. Something they had not seen before from the crime syndicate. Rak’nor looked again at the fading wisps of smoke rising into the air from the site of senseless butchery.

There would be consequences for this. There were already whispers among the common people about a new enemy having emerged. Memories of the seemingly unbroken chain of escalating threats over the past decade would trigger fear across all of occupied space. It would be impossible to keep downplaying the threat for much longer and the Free Jaffa would soon call for retribution and security. Many on the Council would demand a military buildup to counter the resurgent Lucian Alliance and their alien allies. Rak’nor winced as he thought of how his people could ill afford such a course as they were still struggling to recover from the assaults of the Ori.

He could only hope that his friends among the Tau’ri were having better luck than he.

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Atriox examined the bodies laid out before him and snorted in contempt. Humans. They looked even smaller and more frail in death than they did in life. Sometimes he felt he could simply crush the whole lot of them as if he were stomping on insects.

However, he was not fool enough to let appearances deceive him. The humans had more than proven their worth in the Great War. These dead vermin before him were but the latest to threaten the interests of the jiralhanae.

The warriors of ‘Camelot’ were not the only ones to have fallen in the recent trap. The primitives that inhabited the planet had attacked in the end, only to be slaughtered in short order. The lord that commanded them had apparently decided that the bribe given him was only worth hours of silence rather than the day that had been promised. The pitiful brawlers of the so-called ‘Free Jaffa’ had been left where they fell to send a message about what happened to those who fought the Banished. Besides, they were not worthy of further attention.

Those belonging to Camelot, though, had been collected, transported through the Stargate, and displayed for his appraisal. The broken remains of his newest conquest. Disappointingly, only one of them had left behind a head intact enough to mount on his flagship, and its body was so mangled that the head was the only thing worth salvaging. A bit of writing stenciled into the corpse’s sheared armor drew his gaze: ‘Stark’. A name, perhaps? He picked up the already cleaned and preserved skull, looked into its vacant sockets, and bared his fangs in a feral grin. It would suffice.
Camelot. They had harassed his packs and cut into their profits for months. It had taken all of his self control to resist the urge to strike back at once. It was what most alphas would have done and denying the instinct had felt like he was struggling against his very nature. He had managed it, though, and committed himself to planning out the ideal method and timing of his vengeance. As he examined his fallen enemies, noting the expressions of terror and pain he could see past their visors, he came to a simple conclusion:

It had been worth the wait.

“I trust you are pleased with the results?”

The obnoxious voice nearly spoiled his reverie. The Alpha of the Banished turned to face the hologram beside him. Astarte. Contacting him from her little kingdom on the rim of the galaxy rather than meeting him in person. The goa‘uld witch was wearing what he recognized as the human equivalent of a smug grin.

“I am indeed satisfied. For the moment,” he replied, careful to keep the annoyance out of his voice. Atriox himself had commanded the offensive from his flagship. However, much as he might hate to admit it, the inter-planetary coordination of the strikes in question would have been impossible without Astarte’s spies providing crucial knowledge. Clinics, listening posts, informants, and a number of other assets possessed by the enemy had been identified and then struck simultaneously, leaving no time for news to spread and defenses to be raised. This was in addition to the well-baited trap that had netted him so many dead Camelot warriors. Astarte had provided additional aid by setting up lines of communication for the forces to better coordinate. It irked him that she had proven so essential in this triumph. He decided to refocus the conversation on the road ahead. “This is merely the beginning. Continue to provide the knowledge we require and the human meddlers will learn to fear drawing our gaze.”

The grin on the goa‘uld’s face deepened, further confirming Atriox’s assessment of her personality. She was as vain as any sangheili fleetmaster and would relish the fear of her adversaries, even if they never knew of her existence. It was enough that they fear the results of her machinations. She would be the ghost haunting the recesses of their minds, never visible, never making itself known to them, but always present. Always lurking. She craved that fear as her former masters had craved the worship of their slaves.

“I will indeed continue to bestow the intelligence you need to strike hard and true,” Astarte replied. “Enjoy your trophies, worthy jiralhanae. You have certainly earned them.” With that, the hologram disappeared, the spherical projector hovering in the air for a moment before lowering gently to the ground.

Atriox grunted and rolled his massive shoulders. He turned back to the far more enjoyable task at hand.

Scores of armored jiralhanae stood at attention, the light from twin suns glinting off their armor and weapons. It was a scene out of the old legends. Atriox knew that the Legions of the age before the Covenant had often gathered in such a fashion. The temporary camp they filled to the brim was, admittedly, a poor substitute for a castle or pirate bay, but the effect was not diminished. The ranks of hardened raiders stood straight and still with nary a whiff of impatience pheromones, a testament to the respect they held for him.

It was every bit as magnificent as Atriox had dreamed as a pup when his sire told him stories of the
kings and pirate lords of old. That the sangheili had banned such stories under pain of death had only added to their appeal in his eyes.

Now, to fulfill another cherished duty straight out of the legends.

“Decimus! Come forth!” he bellowed. The rows of assembled warriors stood even straighter as their greatest champion was summoned by their Alpha.

A mighty juggernaut thundered toward him. Decimus, proclaimed by many to be the fiercest warrior among the Banished, bowed his head and released submissive pheromones when he reached his place. The rest of Decimus' pack hung back, allowing their leader to accept praise on their behalf. Even with his head bowed he still nearly towered over Atriox. The beta fell to one knee and bowed more deeply to compensate for the disparity. Satisfied by the display of proper respect, the Alpha allowed himself a moment of familiarity.

“Rise, my friend. Rise,” he said softly, extending a hand to the jiralhanae on his knees. The Beta took it and allowed himself to be pulled into an embrace. Atriox said, “It has been too long, my pack-brother. I see you have not waned in your skill.” The pair separated and clasped wrists.

Decimus had changed little over the years Atriox had known him. His fur was brown compared to his alpha's dark gray. It was also less full and vibrant, but that was simply due to the amount of time he spent in armor, which had its own appeal. The beta also had a white stripe running from his brow across his scalp. The fur there had grown bleached after a sangheili had slashed at him with its energy sword. Along with a scar that ran down his cheek, it made him look the definition of a warrior. Decimus had never lacked willing females when mating season came around.

All of the beta's body save the head was covered in the unique armor designed by the top engineers within the Banished. It had only just been completed when they finally pushed back against the humans. The thick powered-armor carried memories of that battle. Energy weapons had left scorch marks and projectile weapons had etched scratches into the outer layer. “Your armor is marred,” Atriox pointed out.

“It is of no consequence, my Alpha,” the other insisted. “My armor's inner workings remain untouched. I shall wear these marks as badges of honor.” He bared another grin. “It was a release to finally strike back at our foes rather than allow them to run rampant. Now, they know how the jiralhanae treat threats.”

The predator's grin stiffened on Atriox's short snout. That had been dangerously close to a rebuke. Decimus had previously chafed under his alpha's insistence that he wait for the ideal moment to strike back. Such an attitude was perilous for a beta to entertain, and even worse for an alpha to tolerate.

“Indeed they do, my Beta, and all the more so because it was well planned,” Atriox replied while emitting mild warning pheromones. The other jiralhanae bowed his head in apology. For any other, Atriox would dispense swift punishment for the implicit challenge to his methods, but he had always given a bit of slack to his Favored.

Decimus' pack was small, a mere twenty-three warriors, but that small size had granted a mobility and refined level of skill that made them fiercely effective. Many from Camelot had fallen to them the night the trap was sprung. Atriox gestured to the ground before him and his subordinate obediently fell back to a knee.
“Proud Decimus, for the blow you have struck at our enemies” the Alpha said, raising his voice to once again be audible to the assembled warriors, “I elevate you and your pack to the highest level of authority within the Banished. You will answer to none save myself. I also give you a new name: the Honor Guard. Your sole duty from this day forth will be to pursue and slay the,“ he snorted, “warriors of Camelot and any who would directly oppose us. Continue to bring glory to the jiralhanae, Beta Decimus, and further rewards shall be heaped upon you.”

“The thrill of battle is all the glory I require, my Alpha,” the beta replied, “but I thank you for the honor you have bestowed upon me.”

“Spoken like a true jiralhanae,” Atriox chuckled. The assembled warriors laughed with him.

There was little further in the way of ceremony. Jiralhanae had rarely been awarded honors in the old Covenant, and what few times it occurred were short and tentative. The sangheili had tolerated no ceremonies to honor the achievements of the jiralhanae. Part of Atriox wanted to invent newer, more lengthy rituals to replace those that had been erased by his former masters, but the prospect of such gaudy events was simply too unpleasant to contemplate. His warriors did not require such displays of appreciation in any event; they understood how much he valued them.

The newly dubbed Honor Guard departed shortly afterward. There was much work to be done. The camp was nearly empty in short order, with the Alpha’s personal guard being the only ones not readying to depart. Atriox permitted himself a brief moment to once again examine the bloodied corpses before him. Their armor was pierced, scorched, and in many cases bent out of shape. The design was clearly meant to increase the wearer’s strength and durability. As if that would help them match the power of a jiralhanae. The gear would have sold quite well to smaller nations that craved the advanced technology of the more relevant powers. Unfortunately, some sort of fail-safe had triggered and incinerated the important components, preventing any serious attempt to learn from them.

It did not matter. The blow had been struck. The remains of these fallen would be preserved and displayed on his command ship as trophies. Kassa, slaves, and other spoils would flow throughout the stars. Fear and respect for the jiralhanae would reach heights never dreamed by his forebears. A golden age of piracy had begun in earnest, with the Banished as its champions. Atriox growled in satisfaction.

Business was going perfectly.

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The curtain was white. It was a standard color, found in infirmaries wherever the people of Earth set up shop. This one served as the partition between each ‘room’ in the Camelot HQ Infirmary and was the only visible object other than the unfamiliar medical equipment. The sounds of labored breathing from other patients, the drone of machinery far beyond anything the average grunt could begin to comprehend, and the whispered conversation of medical staff were the only sounds available. Antiseptics provided the only scent.

In short, there was nothing to distract Carl Grogan from his thoughts.

The sound of footsteps broke the monotony and the wounded soldier latched onto it like a life-preserver. His trained ear picked out four distinct patterns and matched them to sets he’d become intimately familiar with. His spirits plummeted right back down as he discerned the identities of the new arrivals.
Grogan had been both longing for and dreading this meeting since he had regained consciousness a few days ago. It was a source of frustration and minor self-loathing for him, since there really shouldn't have been any ambivalence at all considering who these people were. It wasn't fair to them. He steeled himself and tried to smile as they pulled open the curtain and entered his glorified enclosure.

“How are you holding up, Captain?” Major Williamson asked. The other members of SG-9 were right behind him, Satterfield even bothering to pull the curtain shut to give them some privacy. Grogan silently nodded his thanks to his oldest friend.

A few seconds passed in silence before Grogan realized he hadn't answered the question. “Oh, you know,” he shrugged, “resting up. Looking forward to getting out of this...place. It's been less than a week and I'm already going stir crazy in here.” He tried to laugh and gestured to their surroundings. Everything was a drab white-gray except the wall behind him, which was bronze colored and covered with rows of fading hieroglyphs that stood out like a sore thumb. Col. Mitchell really needed to have this place painted. The contradiction was almost enough to give someone a headache.

The others didn't take the hint. They wanted to know how he was doing, not what he thought of the decor. He knew that and they knew that he knew that. The room got really awkward.

“We were sorry to hear about the rest of the strike force,” Williamson said, cutting straight to the chase. His voice softened as he continued. “I know how hard it is to lose people under your command.”

The superior officer looked his subordinate straight in the eye with a look that combined both strength and stoic consolation. It was one of several 'Officer' expressions the Major had perfected over the years. Grogan himself was still practicing them in mirrors. It should have been exactly what the doctor ordered.

Instead, it only made the wounded soldier feel worse. He didn't want to be comforted. He didn't need to be—the others were the ones who had died. He fought down his frustration (the Major was only doing his job, there was no need to get pissy with him) but the room still rose several more notches on the awkwardness scale.

Williamson looked like he was about to say something else when Hailey cut him off. “How's the transplant feel?” she blurted out. She was referring to the vat-grown organ that had replaced his pierced and ruined left lung. Just one of several injuries that would have killed him if it hadn't been for the UNSC medical gear that fell into their laps a couple weeks ago. He really had to thank General O'Neill for whatever strings he pulled to make that happen.

There was a tinge of uncertainty mixed with the enthusiasm in Hailey's eyes. Grogan had seen that look before. She wasn't sure how to handle this situation, so she was covering her anxiety and social ineptitude with scientific enthusiasm. It triggered enough sympathy to humor her.

“Feels fine, I guess,” Grogan said. “Good as new. I'm supposed to be discharged tomorrow.”

“Amazing,” Hailey enthused. She started talking faster as she went on, making the others shift uncomfortably. Grogan's patience started running out quick as his obnoxious squadmate prattled on. “The UNSC's ability to clone entire replacement organs is revolutionary. Did you know it only took them a few hours to grow and implant the one they gave you? Not to mention the fact that the equipment here is built to be semi-portable. The top-of-the-line hospitals in the UEG are supposedly...”
able to do it in minutes! Can you—"

Satterfield gently grabbed Hailey’s shoulder and the scientist/soldier trailed off mid-ramble. She frowned, but accepted the interruption. The more socially developed member of SG-9 turned to Grogan. “It’s good to know your body is adapting well to the transplants, sir. You took quite the beating out there,” she said.

“It isn’t all bad,” Grogan said, feeling his aggravation settle back down but still not exactly at ease. “I’m a lot better off than I would have been without the whole joint op thing we’ve got going here. Besides,” he forced a smile, “it’s had at least one benefit: I finally took a break. You guys should be relieved.”

No one laughed. Satterfield and Williamson forced some half-hearted grins of their own; Hailey, still unsure how to respond to any of this, kept up her frown and hung back. Suddenly, Grogan wished for the blank monotony he had been lamenting a few minutes prior.

The other members of SG-9 tried to make some light conversation. They talked about messages they had sent and received from back home, the increasingly few new arrivals that weren't really enough to bolster their ranks, and whatever else was relatively safe conversation for a man still technically recovering from intensive care. Eventually, the squad kind of realized that the visit had hit a dead end and they said their farewells. Hailey and Satterfield walked out with Williamson close behind.

“Major?” Grogan asked. His superior paused and turned around to face him. “Did you get the files I asked for?”

The Major sighed and closed his eyes briefly before looking at Grogan with a grim expression. It was a familiar look. He'd had it when Grogan refused the offer to be sent home on temporary leave in consideration for what he'd been through. Camelot couldn't afford to lose skilled soldiers right now; Grogan needed to be there. For some reason, this explanation hadn't satisfied his superior officer.

“You're sure you want to do this?” Williamson asked.

“Sir, I can either do it now, or after I'm discharged,” he answered, trying not to let his impatience show. “I'd rather do it while there are fewer distractions.”

Williamson sighed again, but walked back toward Grogan’s bedside and handed him a small tablet computer. “This is everything I could get clearance for. Just...be careful. Understood, Captain?”

Grogan nodded, trying not to be too eager as he took the tablet. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” The Major left. Grogan turned the gadget on.

There was a folder on the desktop. Its contents were marked classified. This was it: one of the main reasons he had refused the offer to be shipped home. Grogan stared at it for a moment. Then, he jabbed his finger on the screen, and opened the files.

It was a dossier. A familiar image greeted him, making him grit his teeth and grip the tablet with white knuckles. It was him. The armored, King Kong-looking freak. The one that had killed so many of his brothers.

His name was Decimus. According to the rest of the ONI dossier Williamson had gotten him, the Brute had been one of the first to join the Banished when Atriox was first putting his operation
together. Decimus was young at the time but already renowned throughout Brute society for his ferocity and skill in battle. He was apparently a bit of an adrenaline junkie, charging head-first into impossible odds seemingly for the sheer thrill of it, a personality quirk that the rest of his kind just ate up. His signing on with the aspiring pirate lord lent legitimacy that allowed Atriox to rise to power far more quickly than he ever could have otherwise.

Decimus was a major player. He was probably Atriox's right-hand man. Yet, this was the first confirmed sighting of him since the Merging. None of the survivors of Banished raids had described anything like what had torn through the Camelot squads right in front of Grogan's eyes. What had the Brute fighter been doing all this time? Had the Brute Alpha been holding him back like a trump card, waiting for the ideal moment to strike? That didn't fit with the characterization ONI reports had painted concerning the Brute race.

Grogan scrolled back to the beginning of the document and stared at the picture long and hard. It was relatively poor quality, having been salvaged from some security system that had survived a Banished raid. It was the only confirmed image of the freak...until Grogan came back from the ambush with his armor's mission recording intact. The official picture would probably be replaced by one from his helmet cam before long.

Another image appeared before Grogan's eyes, this one from his memory alone. It was Taylor, lying dead in front of the Stargate, his record as a survivor broken by a lucky shot from some animal barbarians who wanted to pillage and burn everything that people like the ODST had sworn to protect. The others who had died on that fucking planet came back as well, from the annihilated SG-7 to Conners the technician. So many had died...and Carl Grogan had survived. Again.

Decimus.

Grogan made sure to burn that name into his mind, along with the picture. He read the whole dossier over again. Then again, and again, until he had the thing memorized to the slightest detail. Then, he started making his own additions using his experiences. He would know how to face his enemy.

He would be ready, next time.

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“This is a goddamn mess, isn't it,” Harry Maybourne said.

It was a statement rather than a question. This was appropriate, since there was little Dare could provide to counter it. She just nodded and ran a hand over her haggard face. The two of them were sitting in their broom closet of an office, trash bins full of used coffee filters, struggling to muster the energy to bounce back. They had just gotten out of another extended meeting with Col. Mitchell and the rest of Camelot's command staff concerning the state of their operations. Recent events had been...disruptive, to say the least.

First, there was the ambush of the strike team sent to apprehend Aur'c. It was now abundantly clear that the information leading to the trouble-making nephew of Netan had been deliberately leaked. The guards that had supposedly let slip that they were guarding a 'Carinthian bastard' must have intended Camelot to put two and two together. The fact that numerous other sources reported overhearing the exact same thing was all the proof needed in hindsight.
A stack of papers sat accusingly on the corner of Dare's desk. Councilor Teal'c sent Free Jaffa intel reports through the Stargate once a week and she had spent the better part of the past day pouring through them to find information relating to the disaster. It was a process not helped at all by the calligraphy/hieroglyphics that the nascent government brazenly insisted be referred to as plain text.

She permitted herself a moment to glower at the offending documents before picking them up and placing them in a biometrically locked crate on the floor next to her desk. It would be taken to Camelot's secure storage depot in a few hours. She had printed out the most important files, a practice upheld with all vital intelligence to avoid losing crucial assets to an electronic warfare attack.

The problem was that there simply weren't enough personnel. Camelot only had two intelligence officers to piece through all of the data they were getting. A fair amount of said data came from their own fieldwork, which was its own drain on time and resources, but most of it came from the Free Jaffa. Unfortunately, the former slave warriors had yet to master the difference between extraneous trivia and essential intelligence. This had lead to Camelot being buried under a deluge of information with only a small fraction of it actually being in any way useful. With expectations as high as they were, mounting exhaustion, and the unshakable feeling that the enemy would begin outpacing them soon, finding any needle in the haystack was just too appealing. Dare had been too eager for a win.

People had died because of that eagerness. Soldiers had walked right into a trap because of intel she had a hand in providing. It was a tragically common occurrence in intelligence work, but every time still seemed to leave a stain on her soul. She set the feeling aside with the ease of habit.

The dead were beyond mortal worries. The living, on the other hand...

Allied assets across Free Jaffa space had been hit in a coordinated strike that no one had imagined possible. Every one of the clinics had been hit, with only the first and largest managing to fight off the attackers. The rest of them had been burned to the ground along with everyone inside. The assault had been as thorough as it was barbaric.

Burning to death was a horrible way to die. The Human-Covenant War had shown Dare a thousand different ways for a human body to be twisted beyond recognition by extreme heat. Planetary bombardment didn't leave many intact corpses, but the plasma weapons wielded by the Covenant's ground forces had provided more than enough examples. She had seen many of them, perhaps thousands, as she had struggled to find any way of halting the alien juggernaut exterminating her species. The reports on the ruined clinics only triggered a momentary echo of sorrow before it faded away. She refocused on the current situation.

What was worst of all, from a strategic point of view, was that the Lucian Alliance had executed an organization-wide purge of double agents and informants. At the same time the Brutes were hitting Camelot's assets directly, their Lucian partners had went about plugging nearly every leak that Dare and her insufferably blunt colleague had been utilizing up to that point. They were operating blind and deaf.

All of this had taken place over the course of twenty four hours. Literally telling her that up was down wouldn't have turned her world on its head more than the events of the past few days.

“What the hell is taking HighCom so long to get its shit together?” Dare asked the air. “We need a major commitment of resources to get this done.”

Her counterpart snorted. “That's unlikely to happen, at this point,” he said. “The existence of Camelot lets the higher-ups say that they’re being proactive without actually committing to the fight.
They'll use us as an excuse to sit on their asses while the Pact runs rampant.”

“I'm...not used to that,” Dare admitted. As horrible as it was, the Human-Covenant War had been impossible to ignore. No one could have dismissed Covenant activity as unimportant.

“Understandable,” Maybourne said, once again seeming to read her mind. “The question is: where do we go from here.”

Dare blinked. “What do you suggest?” she asked.

Maybourne sat up straighter and looked at her with an intensity she had never seen before. The fatigue had vanished entirely and only an unbreakable determination and deep cunning shone out from behind his eyes. For just the briefest of moments, Dare understood why this man had managed to become a king. “I suggest we shift to a new target: the spymaster.”

Dare sat back in shock. Suddenly, everything made a lot more sense. “You think we're dealing with more than just a reactivated network. You think there's a high-ranking intelligence officer out there.”

“After the events of the past few days, I'd say there's no doubt about it,” the other veteran spy insisted. “This operation was executed flawlessly. I doubt there was a single part of it that didn't go off like clockwork. That takes more than just a network. That takes direction—a skilled coordinator moving pieces behind the scenes. And to pull it off without anyone noticing before the blow was struck? You're damn right we're dealing with a high-level officer.” The ONI Agent recognized the look of frustrated pride in her colleague's face. It seemed he didn't like be outmaneuvered at his own game. She wondered if he was immune to the guilt she felt, or if indulging in this kind of anger was just his method of coping. He continued. “Nothing in the history of the Banished or the Lucian Alliance indicates the presence of someone capable of this. There's a new player on the field; someone we've never dealt with before. In fact, I'd bet anything they aren't even human.”

“Now you've lost me,” Dare admitted.

“Think about it,” her regal counterpart said with a scoff. “You and I both know that even if we'd captured Netan, the threat of the Banished and the resurgent Lucian Alliance would be far from over. The political landscape is still too messy and fluid for the kind of international cooperation necessary to fully quell what amounts to a crime syndicate in league with a guerrilla army. This would be compounded by our ignorance of this new enemy's existence. There would still be years of work ahead of us; the game, as they say, would be far from over. Yet this spymaster decided to execute a plan so intricate and extensive that the only possible explanation for its success is the direction of one such as they. They revealed their own existence despite there being numerous other strategies to pursue. Why? Why would they do that?” Dare was about to answer when Maybourne cut her off, the question apparently rhetorical. His hands started moving in large, expressive patterns as he spoke, as if he were performing in a stage play. “It's simple: Ego. This individual wanted us to feel how outclassed we were. They wanted the satisfaction of not just defeating their enemy, but in crushing it beneath their boot like an insect. They wanted it so much that they were either willing to compromise their single greatest asset—their invisibility—or they were completely blind to that outcome. I've only seen that kind of behavior from one group during my career.”

“The goa'uld,” Dare realized. Maybourne nodded and smirked, evidently quite pleased with his theatrical revelation. A question occurred to her. “Why would the Lucians accept a goa'uld as an ally? Wouldn't they fear a return of their old masters, or at least hate them enough to kill on sight?”

“Look at where the Lucian Alliance was before the Merging,” Maybourne said, waving his hand
dismissively. “Netan was maybe a month away from being killed by his own people. Organizational cohesion was at an all time low. The Alliance probably would have broken into a number of smaller syndicates from infighting, the threat of whom would be negligible at best. Now, they're swimming in more profits than they ever were, Netan’s position is firmly entrenched, and the people of Earth are powerless to stop them. That level of success can overcome a lot of hostility.”

That certainly made sense. A light went off in Dare's mind as her subconscious made a connection. “You think it's one of Ba'al's people, don't you?”

Now it was her counterpart's turn to blink in surprise. The smirk briefly vanished only to return accompanied by a glint of respect in the man's eyes. “That's right,” he confirmed. “Ba'al was the only System Lord that ever had my respect. He was a genius at espionage and unconventional warfare. He's the only one that would have trained his subordinates in the tactics our adversary is using.”

“That didn't make him immune to his race's Achilles Heel,” Dare added, her mind racing. “His pride and lust for dominance killed him in the end, same as the rest of them. So that's what we'll aim for.” She tapped away at her console, her mind already processing what types of intel she'd need. She had studied every available report on the behavioral patterns of the goa'uld in her preparations for this assignment. She knew the kinds of mistakes her prey was likely to make. Even with the such a big break, however, the enormity of the task still weighed down on her. “Assuming we'll have the time and energy to actually exploit the weakness,” she grumbled.

“Yes,” Maybourne admitted quietly. “Always assuming that.”

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Paris, France.
Stargate Earth
1 Week Before Brute Ambush of Camelot Capture Mission

Formal events had never been Jack O'Neill's thing. He had always considered himself more of a blue collar kind of guy. Someone who always distrusted the men at the top and liked to keep things low key. Someone who would never willingly step foot in any kind of ballroom in full dress for all of the high-society fuckwits to gawk at over champagne and croissants. Carter liked to joke that he put up more fight over dressing up than her goddaughter Cassie ever did...in the few times her field work didn't keep them apart. She was currently at the SGC, sleeping off her cosmic jet lag after being recalled from Camelot HQ. Even when they were on the same planet they were worlds apart.

For the millionth time, Jack regretted accepting the promotion to general officer.

The head of Homeworld Command reflected on this as he sat at the table of high-ranking officers and politicians in an elaborately decorated Parisian banquet hall. His boss, President Hayes, was sitting a few tables away with his UEG counterpart, Charet, chatting about whatever bureaucratic bullshit occupied their attention at times like this. He couldn't imagine anything actually important was going on. This dinner was essentially an after-party, with 'New Earth' (O'Neill was still annoyed that the other guys' nickname for his planet had stuck) food and UEG music to further drive home the whole 'friendship between nations' idea. The real show had concluded about an hour ago in an entirely different room of the elite hotel/resort/palace.

The press conference had been planned for weeks. It was the first official visit to O'Neill's version of Earth by the president of the Unified Earth Government, Dr. Ruth Charet, and it had been hyped up accordingly. Press from both the UEG and Earth's international community had been invited to cover
the event. It had been decided to host the visiting dignitary in Paris in order to present the best possible image to their new interstellar neighbors. The visit itself would have been enough to completely occupy the media for weeks.

Then, they dropped the bombshell.

President Hayes, still in his position as official UN representative of Earth to the UEG, had been the one to make the announcement alongside Charet. The pair had stood on stage behind a lectern, neither in the exact center, and had taken turns reading out the script that had been written, debated over, and re-written ad infinitum. They had informed all of humanity that both the UEG and 'New Earth' were going to exchange technology in the interests of cooperation and furthering relations between the two polities.

New Earth would give the UEG the science behind naquadah reactors, including the secrets behind the advanced power-plants that were used by the BC-304 Capital Ships.

In return, the UEG would give New Earth the science behind its hydrogen-powered vehicles, including detailed schematics and the assistance of skilled engineers to aid in adapting Earth's infrastructure to support the new fuel source.

O'Neill grimaced and took another sip of the admittedly rather good French wine he had been served. He'd probably have to buy a new car in the next few years, what with gasoline becoming obsolete. Hopefully, someone would come up with a way to convert the classics to the new power source, because he'd be damned if he was giving up his Camaro. There were some things you just didn't mess with.

He tried to focus on that rather than his discomfort over giving up such valuable tech to another nation. It had been hard enough for him to accept the Russian Stargate program when that had become a thing, but this? The UEG was a massive, interstellar empire that could easily crush Earth through sheer weight of numbers. They already had a massive foothold in the Sol system thanks to all of the warships, space stations, and other facilities that had made the jump with them during the Merging. The only advantage Homeworld Command had was the advanced alien technology that (from what the spooks had reported) outclassed anything from the UEG pound for pound. The only thing that let him sleep at night was the fact that the newest generation of reactors, which had already been installed on all of the '304s, had not been a part of the deal. In fact, no one had thought to mention them at all. Everyone was double-dealing and trying to slip things past each other.

At least Hayes and Charet seemed to be getting along well as they enjoyed their high-class meal a table away. The other diplomats let them dominate the conversation, obviously, and while O'Neill couldn't hear them over the live music, things seemed to be going well. That could all be an act, of course, but he could hope. He just had to trust that his President knew what he was doing.

O'Neill thought back to when the deal was being hashed out. There had been a lot of debate about the details of the exchange. The naquadah tech was being handed over to the Office of Naval Intelligence, the UEG's intelligence agency, who would have complete control over how it would be distributed. This made a degree of sense. Naquadah was incredibly powerful, and any sane government would want to keep a tight leash on where it went and what it was used for.

Still, the thought made the career military man...uneasy. The NID was nothing like what it had been under Maybourne (he was still having Mitchell keep a close eye on the supposedly-reformed pain in the ass; if he so much as twitched wrong he'd be out of Camelot in a heartbeat) but his experiences with clandestine intelligence divisions had left him rather wary of spooks in general. He tried to
shrug it off and let people like Charet tend to that while he worried about his own country's problems.

The decision of what to do with the hydrogen tech had been far more contentious. A new organization had been formed to deal with tech acquired from extra-terrestrial sources: the Adaptive Technologies Division. It was a cooperative effort between the UN and the IOA, although the command structure was set up so a member of the latter was in command of the whole show.

Alexander Pierce had sat in the back of the conference room the entire time. The newly minted head of the ATD had remained silent and let the rest of the room occupy all of the attention. The Director of the IOA, Michael Higgins, had been the one to argue for ATD's behalf, but O'Neill wasn't fooled. There had been a shift in the power structure within the IOA. He was sure of it. The organization was far too opaque to be sure exactly what was going on, but the head of Homeworld Command did have some sources of his own, and those sources told him that Pierce was quickly becoming one of the most powerful people within the international body.

IOA Director Higgins had proposed that the hydrogen technology be shared with a single private corporation. This would ensure a degree of quality control as all focus would be on one business, while also allowing for a more efficient distribution since every country would only have to deal with one company.

Hayes had outright refused the idea. The man had been adamant that such a course would be tantamount to creating a global monopoly; it would destroy the very concept of Free Enterprise and the capitalist system. He had proposed that the technology be made freely available over the internet—a sort of official data leak. This would ensure a largely equal playing field for anyone with the skill and brilliance to make use of it. O'Neill had vocally and vigorously supported his Commander in Chief in the arguments that followed. He did it partly because he could see Hayes' point, but mostly he was just glad that his country was still capable of asserting itself against outside forces.

Eventually, they had reached a compromise. The tech would be initially given to the ATD, who would share it with five separate corporations. The idea was that the relatively small number would minimize the inefficiency and red tape while also providing for the competition necessary for capitalism to flourish. Everybody wins. Supposedly.

O'Neill sat back in his chair and wondered if anyone would notice him duck out early. The announcement had been made, the meal had been eaten, and the press seemed to be winding down. Most of them weren't even filming anymore from their enclosed space at the back of the room. He hoped that Hayes and company had gotten their money's worth. The pageantry had been as tedious as it had been expensive, all fancy clothes and minutely plotted tours and fortuitous photo opportunities. All of it had been designed to assure the public that things were going well and peaceful relations were moving forward.

One of the individuals sitting with the heads of state turned to look at the General's table. Out of all the general officers seated there, O'Neill was the one he zeroed in on. Jack smiled cheerfully and raised his glass to salute IOA Director Higgins. The man's eyes narrowed and he turned back to his table.

The two of them had butted heads rather heatedly as the deal was being ironed out. Higgins had been citing the successful track record of Camelot as leverage to move the deal forward. The fact that both nations had proved capable of cooperating to face a mutual threat had cast the potential for more cooperation in a very positive light. Everyone was in a pretty good mood over it.
Then, old Jack O'Neill had to open his mouth. He had pointed out that Camelot had only ever been intended as a stop-gap solution. A delaying tactic to buy time for a more substantial response to be organized. It had been several months, and said response was nowhere in sight.

His objections had been dismissed as irrelevant to the current topic of conversation. Even Hayes had shot him a look saying to drop it. Higgins had yet to stop being surly at him, taking Jack's concern for his subordinates and friends as some kind of personal attack. It was all he could do not to glower at the table containing the heads of state. It seemed that the politicians were content to use Camelot as a political tool and leave Teal'c and the Free Jaffa to fend for themselves.

O'Neill decided that he had had enough. He was about to excuse himself from the table and slip out the back when a server came up behind him. “There is a distinguished party interested in speaking to you,” the formally dressed man whispered. He pointed to a part of the room just to the side of the live band. “They are waiting.”

The server walked off before O'Neill could demand an explanation. What the hell was that?

“Something wrong, General?” Colonel Borodin, the commander of Russia's new BC-304, asked with an arched eyebrow. The condescending prick had been getting on O'Neill's nerves all night.

He decided that whatever was going on had to be more pleasant than this. “Please excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, trying to use the manners that Carter had been struggling to instill in him, “I'm afraid there is some urgent business I must attend to. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

It was a struggle to resist breaking into a jog as he left the hellish confines of his elaborately padded and crafted seat. Most of the rest of the room seemed to be either consumed with their own discussions or sneaking surreptitious glances at the more powerful individuals sitting at another table. The dance floor had opened, with a few of the braver attendees venturing forth to show off their skills. No one seemed to notice one General smoothly make his way over to a window just to the side of the live band. Everyone was in their own, personal world.

O'Neill, on the other hand, was aware of everything. His training had fully kicked in the moment that server had sneak ed up on him. He was still embarrassed about that; maybe he was losing his touch. The years of time spent as a field officer resurfaced and he carefully analyzed every detail available to him as he walked.

He noted the servers moving throughout the room and extrapolated their destinations and paths. None of them were near enough for concern. There also were no bulges hinting at concealed weapons. He dismissed them as threats but made sure to be aware of their positions just in case.

He also noticed that no one was getting up from their table to follow him. Not that he expected them to, of course. That would be far too obvious. Heads turned this way and that, but none of them seemed to linger on him for any appreciable length of time.

He saw a commotion a few tables down. Inspecting it out of the corner of his eye, he saw it was the result of one of the dignitaries having too much to drink and spilling wine on his shirt. A server materialized at the poor drunk's side and assisted him in wiping down the stained area. O'Neill dismissed the minor scene as irrelevant, however much he might have wished to point and laugh at an aristocrat being taken down a peg.

Finally, he analyzed his destination. It was a small, out-of-the-way corner of the room, unlikely to be noticed by anyone due to the live band playing right next to it. The tunes were classical in nature but
unfamiliar in composition. Apparently, the musicians of the UEG had spent the years leading up to their 2558 innovating on the classical styles. Whatever the case, it should provide adequate cover for a hushed conversation.

The exterior wall provided one side of the corner, with thick, bullet-resistant glass looking out over a meticulously maintained lawn. Patterned curtains that probably cost more than O'Neill's house blocked much of the view. They still afforded enough of an opening to make him wary of sniper fire, though. High-velocity rounds wouldn't be stopped by any kind of glass, reinforced or not.

He was almost within ten meters before he finally spotted her. She was alone, standing half in shadow, the dark gray of her clothing blending in perfectly. O'Neill noticed that she was occupying a dead zone in the security system. He hadn't been involved in setting up the protection for this event, but he had pieced together enough from his observations to know that none of the partially concealed security cameras placed in chandeliers and above mounted artwork would be able to see her.

It was rather impressive that this person had found a way to be secretive in a gathering with this much security. Keeping VIPs safe had become a far higher priority in the heightened tensions following the Merging. Even now, he could glimpse through a window some of the APCs that lined the streets leading up to the building, as well as the multiple fortified checkpoints and patrols of armed infantry making their rounds. Nothing could get within ten miles of this facility without permission.

The woman stepped very slightly forward when he got within range. She had to raise her voice slightly to be heard over the music, but somehow managed to do so in a way that wouldn't carry more than a few feet. “General O'Neill. It is an honor to meet you,” she said.

“Rather curious means of contacting me,” Jack replied. He walked over to the window and pretended to enjoy the view. He glanced at one of the security cameras out of the corner of his eye. “I'd offer to shake hands but I'm not sure that's such a good idea. I might give it a tug and force you to make an unscheduled appearance on film. You know how good paparazzi are at getting things like that.”

A chuckle and the ghost of a grin answered him. “Indeed,” she said, never having raised her hand. “I take it you know who I am, General?”

“You're Admiral Serin Osman. Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence,” he replied.

If the woman in question was surprised, she gave no indication of it. She just inclined her head slightly in respect. Even her body language and motions were subdued and difficult to interpret.

“You recognize me. I'm flattered,” Osman said.

“I make it a point to know everything I can about the top spooks,” O'Neill retorted. She wasn't wearing her uniform or insignia, which had complicated matters, but it had only taken him a few seconds to place the face. “Never know when you'll run into their handiwork.”

Or the people you've hurt to get it done, he added silently.

“Quite so,” she nodded. “I imagine you would be familiar with the feeling, considering Stargate Command was wholly clandestine for over a decade. I was rather impressed that you were able to accomplish such a masquerade, General.”
O’Neill couldn't tell if that was a retort or a genuine compliment. He would have sworn there was the slightest hint of admiration in the words of the spymaster. That could have been feigned or it could have been real. Either way, it was an attempt to manipulate him.

“I wasn't a general at the time. There were a lot of people who believed it was the right way to handle things, and a lot more that put their lives on the line to get it done,” he replied. “So, tell me. What's with the cloak and dagger? Got any messages for the Washington Post?”

“Not quite,” she said, either not recognizing the reference or refusing to acknowledge it. “I simply wished to express my organization's interest in aiding in the fight against the Banished. Camelot can only do so much, after all.”

That certainly got his attention.

“Strange way of going about it,” he replied. There was a break in the conversation as a server walked up with a platter of glasses filled with champagne. Jack took one and sipped at it, as much to buy time as to look less conspicuous. The server didn't seem to notice his shadowy visitor, as if the spymaster was able to blend into the wall at will. He waited until they were alone again. “I take it the UNSC as a whole isn't backing you up on this?”

“Bureaucracy tends to bog down any process, including those that require immediate and decisive action,” Osman pointed out. “A fact which you have considerable experience with.”

O'Neill grimaced. “Granted,” he said. He stared out the window for a moment, taking in the mix of artistry and overt military defense. Contemplating how much things had changed in less than a year. “Just what form would this support take?”

“Little things,” she replied. “Clearing up some of the red tape behind the scenes, for instance. Name something, anything, that Homeworld Command has been struggling with in regard to the Unified Earth Government. I’ll see to it personally.”

“You mean you can't predict exactly what I'm going to ask for? What, did you miss your scheduled riffling through my trashcan? I could leave the lid a bit looser if you're having trouble prying it open,” Jack said. He received silence in response. It was what he'd expected, except...there was no tension in it. No hostility, no reprimand for insubordination, no knee-jerk snap from a bruised ego. The spymaster was just waiting for an answer. Jack's eyes narrowed as he continued staring straight ahead. “Camelot needs a better infirmary. We've done what we can, but our medical science is still centuries behind yours and emergency treatment can't always wait for scheduled dialings of the Stargate. Problem is, both sides are still keeping their best gadgets to themselves, so we probably won't get the equipment for well over a year. Long past the point where the operation is supposed to have run its course.”

Osman nodded. “You'll have authorization tomorrow,” she said. “The equipment should be in Camelot by the end of the week.”

O'Neill's eyebrows shot up and it took a concentrated effort not to turn and gape at her. If she could actually deliver on that, it would not only prove her worth as an ally, it would save lives. “That's...impressive. I take it you plan to offer more beyond this assist?”

“Indeed I do,” she replied, with an audible grin. “It would all have to be strictly black, of course. Intelligence gathering and analysis would be the most significant contribution we could make. Our apparatus is unmatched in all space. We could use that to help destroy Lucian Alliance and their
Brute allies.”

Which would also allow you to directly gather intel about the Free Jaffa not only without interference or complaint, but with our active participation, Jack thought.

Could that be what this was all about? Spying on Teal'c's people? He doubted it. Jack O'Neill was no sucker. He knew Osman was trying to get her hooks into him for later, or at the very least make sure he had a positive opinion of her and her organization. She was trying to gain assets in 'New Earth'. This had to be part of a long game.

Still, it wasn't like he was getting much help elsewhere. The estimate he'd given of one year for the new infirmary was, if anything, laughably optimistic. Fast tracking that request would save lives. Hell, even the second half of the offer was hard to turn down. Every report he got from Mitchell was dominated by requests for more resources and of particular concern was the skeleton crew intelligence wing the headquarters had been saddled with. The cooperation of an organization with ONI's resources wasn't something he could dismiss out of hand.

“And what exactly would you expect in return for all of this?” he asked.

“For the moment, nothing,” Osman said. “Those of us on the other side would simply like you to remember how we conducted ourselves in a time of need. Perhaps, in the future, you will be in a position to return the favor.”

“...hard to argue with that logic,” O'Neill said. His ghostly visitor nodded and he got the distinct impression that this meeting had come to a close. “I take it this is a 'don't call us, we'll call you' kind of deal?”

“Correct,” came the reply. The General made to leave, preparing to weave his way through the celebration and into the night. He was stopped short when the chief spook added something more. “Of course, much more could be accomplished in the future if cooperation continues. Perhaps your SG Teams may even be...augmented in some fashion.”

O'Neill's head whipped around only to find Osman gone. A dim flash drew his eyes to the ground. There was a small object, smoldering and emitting an acrid smell, lying on the marble tiles. It had to have been a holographic projector of some kind. Osman had never been there at all. He thought back to the conversation, specifically to a faint buzzing sensation he had felt in his molars. He’d dismissed it as either his imagination or the result of the bizarre tunes (since when did classical music have 'electric flutes'?). Now, he wondered if it had anything to do with the signal transmitting Osman's image.

That was a lot of tech to burn for something that could have been accomplished with a simple phone call. Not to mention the task of inserting Agents to plant the device and draw him to it. The Director of ONI had pulled out all the stops to impress on him just how valuable she would be as an ally...and how terrifying a threat as an enemy.

The general pulled out a handkerchief and picked up the ruined gadget. He found it had already cooled to room temperature. Thermal sensors would mistake it for random debris, making it even harder to find if deployed in the field. It was about the size and shape of an ice cube. Its features had been reduced to molten slag by the self-destruct charge. Once again, O'Neill found himself impressed by the level of technology the UNSC could just casually throw around.

There was pretty much zero chance they'd be able to get anything out of what was now effectively a
paperweight, but he believed in being thorough. He pocketed it and walked away silently. He weaved his way around the social and economic elites attending the event, his mind racing with activity. He wondered how the day's events, public and clandestine, would shape the wider world in the days to come.

Chapter End Notes

Good news, guys! I was out sick for a while, so we actually have an excuse for this chapter being late. Cool, huh? Guys?

Note: The bit at the beginning of this chapter is ripped off of a scene in Finishing the Fight. One of the things I most admire about Aratech's story is the way the Halo characters are more jaded than the ones from Forgotten Realms. It's not that the Chief and co. are evil or anything. They're just more ruthlessly pragmatic, which most people would and do find off-putting. This makes sense considering they just went through being on the losing side of a 30 year long war of ethnic cleansing. It contributes to the culture shock that most cross-over stories don't pay enough attention to, imo.

Note: When I wrote the O'Neill section I tried to include details that showed his competence as a soldier. This would include powers of observation as well as no small bit of intellectual capacity. Did we pull it off?

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 16 Getting Back in the Action

They ran for almost an hour before they heard the battle.

The unmistakable sound of UNSC firearms echoed over the arid terrain. They were accompanied by the equally recognizable, but far less comforting, sound of spiker fire and the high pitched whine of plasma weapons. Carl Grogan felt his hands grip his rifle a bit tighter as he sprinted toward the engagement zone. There were Brutes up ahead...

Eventually, the members of SG-9 and one of their three ODST squads reached a gray, rocky hill that recon had identified as the best position to take. Each soldier slowed and crouched as they started to ascend the relatively low obstruction. They went prone as they reached the summit.

Camelot forces were currently pinned down in a corner of what had clearly been some sort of commercial enterprise. A small stage had been overturned to serve as makeshift concealment for the defenders. Debris from the rows of chairs that had sat before it littered the field, having been destroyed by the weapons-fire racing back and forth across an open killzone. Meanwhile, several dozen civilians were crouching, terrified, in the middle of what little defenses the Camelot troops had been able to cobble together. The hostiles, almost entirely Brutes but with a few Lucian mercenaries as well, were firing from an area dense with makeshift sheds and goa'uld cargo units.

The mission had been a simple one. Intelligence had determined that the Lucian Alliance would be holding an auction on this planet in which valuable plunder, including jaffa slaves, would be sold. A small strike force had been dispatched from Camelot HQ to raid the auction. The objective had been twofold: recover valuable materials and civilians from enemy hands while also raiding the Lucian's records for any intel leading to the current location of Netan. It was the sort of thing Camelot had been doing for months.

The distress call had come through the Stargate almost immediately. It turned out, Intelligence had grossly underestimated the enemy defenses. The strike teams had found themselves under fire from both Lucian mercenaries and, more importantly, the new Brute elite. The 'Honor Guard'. A heavy firefight had commenced and things had started to go bad. SG 4-Lead had insisted in his comm that the mission could be be completed, but they were going to need help.

Then shit had started to go really wrong.

Reinforcements had been dispatched within minutes. SG-9 was, as usual, called in for the toughest assignment. It looked like Colonel Mitchell didn't think any less of Grogan for being the only survivor of the Ambush. It was simultaneously a relief and, to his own confusion, a source of considerable frustration. The whole thing would be infuriating if it wasn't so exhausting.

None of that was on Grogan's mind at the moment, though. The first thing he'd seen when he crested the hill was a member of SG-4 taking a spiker round in the neck. The trooper fell down behind cover, clutching feebly at the wound gushing blood through the seams of the OCA-1, already dead.
even if their body hadn't realized it yet.

A white-hot spike of rage coursed through Grogan. These were the animals that had killed his people. These were the freaks that had haunted his dreams every night since he stumbled through the Stargate at HQ. His rifle creaked under the strain of his white-knuckle grip. It took everything he had to keep from opening fire until the order was given.

When it was, no one hesitated.

The entire hilltop opened up at once, along with the two ODST squads that had put themselves in flanking positions. The Lucian mercenaries were cut down in seconds, almost as an afterthought. The Brute Honor Guard, frustratingly, remained as durable as they had ever been. Their advanced armor and naturally hardy physiology bought them enough time to orient on the new threat. The Honor Guard continued to prove more intelligent than the rest of their race by moving to new cover and falling back to a more favorable position rather than charging headlong into enemy fire.

Things quickly turned chaotic for the reinforcement team. Spiker rounds impacted the hillside, kicking up gravel and obscuring vision. One Brute picked up a fallen Lucian's Staff Weapon and fired it one-handed, sending clouds of sand and dirt into the air as well as turning several spent spiker rounds into shrapnel. One such round grazed the side of Grogan's helmet. The armor was durable enough that it only succeeded in leaving a scratch.

That, and making the soldier inside even more pissed off.

It was getting difficult to even see the enemy. They needed to take a new tack if they wanted to end this quickly. Major Williamson ordered the main line of ODSTs to pin the brutes in place while a squad of troopers moved to flank the enemy. VISR mode was ordered to help allow the troopers to see through the obscuring clouds.

That included Grogan. A couple ODSTs, Satterfield, and he were going in. He felt his heart pounding a bit faster in his ears and his mouth go bone dry as he slid back down the hill. Charging toward any Brute, much less these ones in particular, was just about the last thing he ever wanted to do.

Memories of the Ambush kept threatening to materialize in front of him but he held them at bay. He wondered if this was some sort of test—if the Colonel wanted to see if he still had what it took to fight the Brutes. That thought drove him onward past all resistance. If this was a test, he was damn sure going to pass it.

The group entered the camp from the eastern side. They came upon a pair of Brutes firing away at targets just out of sight. The human soldiers moved silently into what cover and concealment they could find before opening up.

The hostiles responded quickly. They shifted their fire to the new enemies, sending spiker and plasma rounds into the crates and shack walls the humans were crouched behind or next to. Several spiker rounds penetrated a couple inches through a wall right next to Grogan, forcing him to be careful not to impale himself as he moved in and out of cover to fire. He felt like his subconscious couldn't decide if it wanted to run and hide or charge the alien freaks and rip their guts out. He kept shooting one of them in the head, focusing as much as possible on his current task to keep his emotions in check.

The brute didn't get the drop on him.
He was aware of the hostile—no one would convince him otherwise. His situational awareness was still sound. He just wasn't able to react in time.

Grogan saw the blip on his motion tracker. He noticed the hulking form move around a corner. He tried to pivot into better cover. The problem was, he had been distracted. The struggle in his own mind extended his reaction time the extra half-second the enemy needed to finish drawing a bead on him and open fire.

The OCA-1 armor held up; none of the spiker rounds punched through. The problem was that kinetic energy didn't just go away and he'd already been thrown off-balance by trying to move out of the line of fire. Grogan found himself knocked backward into a wall. Sheer luck kept him from landing on the spiker rounds still sticking through it.

Assault rifle rounds started peppering his attacker. This made the alien pause long enough for Grogan to scramble around the other side of the bronze-colored shed he'd been crouched behind. A quick glance confirmed that it was Satterfield who had bailed him out. He'd definitely be buying the drinks next time they were on leave.

Apparently, the Brutes took this as their cue to bug out. They began falling back all across the base with only one of their number KIA in the process. Grogan rushed forward to new cover and opened fire again, hitting one of them in the backside as they ran. Returning fire forced him to duck down. He grit his teeth and growled.

“All units, fall back to the defender's position,” Major Williamson commed. “Repeat: all units fall back.”

Grogan's head whipped around to look toward the hilltop. He could just make out the rest of the rescue team making their way down, carefully picking their steps to avoid impaling their feet on the carpet of metal projectiles. A glance back confirmed that the enemy was still retreating. Why the hell were they letting them get away?!

“Sir, the civilians,” Satterfield answered his unspoken question over a private comm.

His rage dropped out from under him and Grogan took another look at the main plaza. Most of the defenders were down, wounded or dead or in desperate need of resupply. The ramshackle defenses had been worn down to the point of collapse in numerous places. The former slaves were still huddled in the center of it all, many wounded themselves, vulnerable to being recaptured or slaughtered. The proper course of action was clear even if they hadn't just received direct orders.

Grogan pushed aside the shame that washed over him and nodded his thanks at Satterfield, who shrugged to brush the whole thing off. They made their way back to the rest of their unit and helped secure the area while the civvies got ready to move. Within minutes they saw a Banished dropship take off along with the last of the Lucian transports. A quick check of the UNSC UCAV drone-feed showed that the Camelot troopers were the only remaining combatants on this part of the planet. It would be shocking to see Brutes willingly abandon a fight if it weren't so infuriating to see them escape.

Grogan couldn't resist flipping them off as they fled. He shook his head and moved to assist the others. Williamson and the commander of the original strike team conferred in the background as he settled in.
“When the Honor Guard showed up I knew we had to pick which objective to focus on,” the CO of SG-4 was saying. “I decided recovering the civilians should take priority, sir.”

“Understandable,” the Major replied, nodding. He sighed as he continued. “I take it the other objectives are a bust now?”

“We could hear demolition charges going off throughout the camp,” the commander of the ODST half of the strike team interjected. His tone made it clear which objective he would have chosen to prioritize. “The Lucians loaded up most of their stolen gear and equipment while we were pinned down. What the enemy couldn't take with them, they scuttled. Sir.”

“Maybe. I'm ordering a search anyway, just to be thorough,” the Major replied in a stern tone. The ODST hadn't come right out and second guessed his superior, but he'd come close. "Get back to the gate and request a Tech team and an Air defense team for cover. We're not getting flanked by an air assault while the techs work."

The ODST nodded curtly. "Yes sir.”

Satterfield's voice came over the comms, interrupting any potential conflict within the ranks. “Sir, one of the civilians says that a group of captives was taken to another part of the camp prior to our arrival. They're asking if we can check on them.”

That news tightened Grogan's gut. If there were slaves elsewhere while the fighting was going on here, they were likely either dead or long gone.

“All the more reason for a search,” the Major said, and started issuing evacuation orders. Within an hour the civilians and strike team survivors would be escorted to the Stargate. SG-9 and the remaining ODSTs, lead by Major Chevalier, and a tech team from Camelot conducted a search for any other civilians or surviving intel. Maybe they'd find some good news in all the mess.

XXX-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

The Goa'uld never did this...

That was what kept going through Grogan's mind as he looked at the remains of the jaffa civilians. He'd always thought that no evil could shock him after his early career fighting the Goa'uld Empire. Following that up with the annihilation of the Replicators and the indoctrination of the Ori had only solidified that belief. He had thought he was implacable.

The nightmare in front of him proved him wrong.

None of the bodies were in one piece. They had all been disemboweled, which was horrible enough, but it got worse. Their heads had all been cut off, making it impossible to determine what had belonged to whom. The bodies had also been skinned and portions of flesh carved from torso and limbs.

Several had been dismembered. Grogan was no expert, but he knew enough about forensics to tell that the limbs had been removed while the victims were still alive. Some had been cut with precision while others had been ripped off with force. The limbs in particular had large portions of flesh removed, leaving behind ragged wounds that couldn't have been the product of any normal cutting implement.
Meat had been piled up in some places and separated into more precise portions in others. Small bowls of thick liquid sat nearby, with many of the pieces of jaffa lathered in their contents.

The heads had been scraped bare. Scalps, faces, eyes, ears, and noses were missing and Grogan tried very hard not to look at the small bits on skewers resting near the bowls of liquid. The bloody skulls had been carelessly tossed aside rather than carefully collected to be polished into trophies. Only the skulls of enemy warriors made for fitting ornaments, according to the ONI files on the aliens.

The entire horror show was right next to a campfire...along with utensils, spits, and other cooking implements. The putrid stench of death was enough to make anyone queasy.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened. The Brutes had grown bored and hungry and they had decided to kill two birds with one stone. The nickname for the alien race had never seemed more appropriate.

“Oh, god...” Satterfield said, audibly restraining herself from vomiting. Her posture sagged and her left hand instinctively left her rifle to cover her mouth, not that it would have helped with the helmet in the way. Losing control of her stomach would be particularly unpleasant considering Camelot personnel weren't permitted to remove their helmets save in the case of life-threatening injury. Breathing in the stench of her own vomit would not be conductive to her mental well-being for the remainder of the mission.

Satterfield had only arrived a few seconds ago and thus was still taking the scene in. Grogan had arrived first and had used the time to get a handle on his stomach. The Major and Hailey had gotten side-tracked trying to salvage some data out of the scorched remains of the Lucian business section and were a few minutes behind.

“Straighten up,” Major Chevalier barked. None of the ODSTs had so much as flinched at the carnage. “You call yourself a soldier?”

That made the pair of SG Troopers tense up.

“We're solid,” Grogan insisted, coming to the defense of his friend. He gestured with his head to the hellish scene. “You'll have to forgive us if this packs a bit of a punch.”

The ODST shook his head. “Try fighting the Covenant sometime, light-weight,” Chevalier said. “If they caught you, they'd torture you for intel and then throw you to the Grunts. They'd work you over for days and laugh as they tore and broke you apart, before finally eating you. The lower races never got much solid food in their rations, you know. Shit like this?” he gestured to the horror show around them. “It's not rare.”

“T-the Grunts? You mean the unggoy, right?” Satterfield wheezed, straightening. The ODST nodded curtly. Satterfield she resumed talking, her voice seeming distant and breathy. “I s-suppose that behavior makes sense. Members of an oppressed under-class often take satisfaction in abusing anyone classified as lower than they are. That way, they can play out the oppression of their daily lives with themselves in the dominant position. It's classic Repetition. Basic psychology...”

Grogan knew his friend well enough to see what was happening. She had encountered something that had thrown her off-balance, so she had retreated into a psychological analysis of something more distant to cope with it. It was what she needed to do to stabilize herself. Hailey sought refuge in physics, Satterfield looked for it in people.
The ODSTs, unfortunately, didn't know her that well. They all visibly tensed, clearly shocked that she would empathize with the filthy aliens that had committed such atrocities. The UNSC troopers had always remained professional in the field...but this might have crossed the line.

“Fireteam Bravo, report,” Major Williamson commed.

Grogan's hand practically flew to the buttons just beneath his chin to respond. “Civilians are KIA, sir. No survivors.” The sensor sweep and search had confirmed that much.

“Copy that,” the Major responded. “Our search is a bust, as well. Move to link up at the edge of the camp. This mission is over.”

"Mission failure," an unknown ODST said not very quietly.

Indeed it was. It was hard not to feel defeated as they moved out. Some slaves had been liberated, but others had died and any intel that could have lead them to Netan was lost. The trail to the Lucian leader was now cold as death. The utter silence of the once-busy camp as the Camelot soldiers moved through it only served to highlight their failure. Grogan couldn't help but notice the relatively small size of the temporary facility.

The Lucian Alliance had set this place up specifically for the purpose of selling a lot of their illicit wares at once. It was a pattern they had executed many times over the years. However, he had never read of one so small prior to the last few months. There had been less than a hundred slaves there and not all that much stolen cargo or kassa. Even the targets Camelot had hit in its early successes had been larger than this one.

The civilians took a bit of time to get going. They were in surprisingly good condition given the circumstances. The slavers probably knew that disheveled 'property' would draw lower bids from prospective buyers. Grogan's grip tightened on his rifle. The bastards shouldn't have gotten away.

Eventually, the civvies were escorted to the Stargate where they met Rak'nor, who had just come through with a cohort of warriors. The jaffa citizens would be taken to a temporary facility until the appropriate authorities could figure out where exactly they all came from and get them home. The Camelot troopers watched as the line of former captives marched through the gate. Rak'nor and the Major exchanged nods at the end, as salutes were forbidden in the field.

One of the civilians, a woman carrying a young child in her arms, paused to look at her rescuers. Her eyes locked on Grogan's visor. She looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Tears started to flow down her face and she settled on smiling weakly at him. The look of deep, profound gratitude in her eyes actually froze the veteran soldier in place.

Their little moment passed quickly. The baby started crying and, sparing the soldier a last grateful glance, the mother turned to follow her people. The civilians passed through the 'gate and were gone within seconds. Grogan's frustration seemed to disappear with them.

For the moment, at least.

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Weapons-fire rang out in the training hall below. It was a sound that was beyond familiar to the Master Chief. The staccato of ballistic small-arms and the cracks of conventional explosives were practically the ambiance to the world he had lived in since he was six years old.
Yet, they seemed subtly different now from the thousands of times he had heard them over the course of his career. They made him want to shift on his feet and keep checking the time displayed on the top left of his HUD. It was hard to concentrate when his instincts were screaming at him to grab the rifle off of his back and leap into the fray.

The small balcony felt rather empty with only himself and Blue Three occupying it. There were no desks or other equipment. The Spartan's augmented minds and advanced armor made any additional gear redundant. The empty space only served to make the Chief feel more like he was wasting his time. He was growing impatient with this whole 'training program' nonsense and almost wished they had never thought it up.

Impatient...

He decided that was a good word for it as the exercise played out below almost unheeded. He felt impatient to leave, impatient to gear up, impatient to pass through the Stargate and into the field where he belonged. To no longer be sitting in Camelot HQ filling out paperwork and, as his old friend Sergeant Johnson might have said, 'sharing a seat with his ass'. It was the perception of inaction that was plaguing him.

The revelation only served to make the Chief more frustrated. He was hardly idle here—the training program was strategically important, far more so than any one field assignment. This was a worthwhile endeavor. The pure logic of it should have eliminated the conflict he felt over his new duties.

Instead, they proved powerless, and the sounds of battle below called to him like the Sirens of Greek myth he had read about in his training over thirty years prior. He mentally set his feet and faced the problem head on, using his will to brute force his emotions into submission and focus on the task at hand.

He was observing another training exercise. The conflict was over within seconds of contact being made (his bout of naval-gazing self-reflection had lasted only a moment). This was expected. The Spartan-IV fireteam had taken losses. This was also, unfortunately, expected.

The Master Chief suppressed a sigh as he watched the exercise wrap up from his vantage point. He was standing in the spot that had once housed the base commander's throne, although that was due to its superior view of the room rather than any symbolic intentions.

The holographic landscape blinked out of existence to reveal the scene below. The simulated forests were replaced by an open room containing several prone soldiers and a few upright Spartans. The recently arrived Fireteam Lima regrouped and lined up for inspection. OPFOR for this exercise rose to their feet and lined up next to them. Blue One then entered the ground level of the hall and proceeded with the post-exercise assessment. The Chief had delegated that task to him to ensure continuity should something happen to Blue Team's current CO.

At least, that was the justification the Chief himself had provided. It was even true, up to a point. If he was being perfectly honest, however, his decision was more due to him just not having the stomach for it at the moment. He had hoped that the next group of S-IVs would take longer to be transferred. This would have freed Blue Team up for more field ops. Unfortunately, the assignment of another team of Spartans seemed to be the one aspect of supply that the higher-ups didn't feel like dragging their heels over.
The Chief had begun to suspect that there were ulterior motives at play. He suspected much of the brass thought of Camelot as strategically irrelevant to the security of the UEG. They probably loved the idea of the Brutes focusing their efforts elsewhere rather than on their colonies. These admirals or politicians would have no interest in investing more resources into fighting the Banished, which would explain the supply problems. To them, Camelot was little more than an excuse to bring the Spartan-IVs up to a higher standard for deployment elsewhere.

A spike of frustration rose up from the Chief's subconscious. Such an attitude would make it considerably more difficult to achieve victory. In fact, it might actually lead to a total loss.

True defeat was almost alien to a Spartan II. The battles that the Covenant had won over the course of the War had been due almost entirely to their superior naval power. The Spartans were ground-based fighters and they always achieved their objectives, even if the broader conflict was lost. That had almost been enough for them.

Now, though, the Chief was more involved in the strategic side of war. He wasn't just focused on the immediate mission. His work with the training program and frequent meetings with Colonel Mitchell had been his first steps into the world of a true commissioned officer. The campaign against the Banished/Lucian Pact was his mission, now, and if it failed, he failed.

The Master Chief had only really experienced failure once in his military career. It had been in a glittering landscape of blue light orbiting Earth. The enemy had been defeated and the battle had been won. He had accomplished his mission. Yet, in that artificial construct he had been utterly powerless and had to watch one of the few people in the galaxy that still called him 'John' fade into nothing before his eyes...

The career soldier crushed those emotions down without mercy. Such distractions would only lead to problems in the performance of his duties. He knew that.

He had been getting distracted disturbingly frequently of late. They were encroaching on more and more of his spare moments. Memories and doubts haunted him as he tried to rest in his bunk, as he waited for admittance to the Colonel's office, as he waited for the technicians to assemble his armor around him.

That was going to stop. Right there and then. The Master Chief forced himself to breathe steadily and focus, once again, on the task at hand. There was a mission to complete. His mission. A Spartan never failed; humanity couldn't afford it. He poured his will into tuning out all distractions.

It wasn't working.

The Chief felt his heart-rate increase and his breathing deepen. Sweat started rolling down the back of his neck despite being enclosed in climate-controlled armor. Memories of the siblings he had lost over his career, of the friend he had lost in that ethereal prism orbiting Earth, rose before his mind's eye like physical things. His usual strategy of mentally pushing them away and focusing on his mission wasn't working. He closed his gauntlets into fists so tight he could almost hear the super-dense metal strain in protest.

He felt like he was in a feedback loop. The more energy he poured into controlling his emotions, the more wild and out of control they became. The sound of his breath was starting to drown out the outside world. His hands threatened to start shaking. It was becoming harder and harder to stand still.

What the hell was going on?
The Spartan II program had given him extensive training in every theater of war known to humanity. He had studied war from all eras from Hannibal to Patton to Cole. Strategy and tactics from all schools had been covered and mastered. Whatever this was, it was something that he had never been taught. It was an enemy he didn't know how to fight...

A blip on the Chief's HUD drew his eye. Blue Three was attempting to get his attention. He looked to his right and saw Kelly manning her position guarding the door. She made no outward sign that anything was happening. There was no turn of the head or spoken words. Instead, she removed her left hand from her weapon and dragged two fingers across her visor, following it up with a pair of silent taps before returning the appendage to its prior place. The whole move was over in seconds and probably looked like she had just wiped some dust off of her visor. It was one of several signals that Spartans had developed over the years and shared with no one outside their family. The meaning of this one was simple:

Cheer up. We're all in this together.

The Chief blinked in shock. His pulse started slow and his breathing calmed. He felt a laugh try to escape his throat before he strangled it, turning it into a highly unconvincing simulation of a cough. This only served to make the other Spartan shift slightly in silent amusement. For the millionth time, he wondered if his sister was literally psychic. His suspicions only deepened as he realized his anxiety had fallen to well within acceptable levels. Not only had Kelly known he was struggling with something, she had known how to help him through it.

“The training program is progressing well, sir,” she commed.

“It is,” the Chief replied, sighing quietly and gratefully accepting the change in subject. He felt himself mentally regain his footing as he glanced down to see the soldiers collecting their gear and falling out. This exercise had reversed the roles that had been standard up to this point: the non-augmented personnel had been assigned to defend a position that the Spartan-IVs had to assault. It had all gone well enough and didn't merit particular comment. “It's not the progression of the exercises themselves that interest me, though.”

The OPFOR for this exercise had once again been lead by Captain Carl Grogan. The New Earth officer had previously shown improvement in morale following the radar jammer incident. He had encouraged his subordinates following their defeats, building them up and making them trust him as any officer should. He had even started bridging the divide between the UNSC and New Earth troopers. Considering how vital unit cohesion was in any combat situation, this had been truly promising.

Now, though, Grogan was off to the side again, avoiding conversation with the others and looking like he wanted nothing more than to start again right away. The change in demeanor was...unsettling, and deepened the unease in the Chief's already unstable gut. He placed a waypoint over the captain's head to point him out to Kelly.

“Grogan signed up for more exercises as soon as the Infirmary cleared him,” he said. “I need to have a stronger grasp of his character if he is going to be a part of Phase 2. I want to know where this drive is coming from.”

He didn't mention the detail that was really troubling him, mostly because he wasn't sure how to articulate it. It was the look in Grogan's eyes following each defeat—the expression of unflinching will and focus that almost made the Spartan himself want to shift into a guarded stance.
The Chief had seen that look in some of the best officers he had served under. Captain Jacob Keyes had sported that look after the fall of Reach. Pursued by a Covenant armada for light-years with no hope of rescue, his ship scuttled on an alien construct of unknown origin and purpose, captured and tortured by the Covenant for days by the time the Chief and a squad of marines had managed to come for him, and the first thing he did when his cell opened was chastise the supersoldier for taking such a risk in rescuing him. He had even picked up an enemy weapon and scolded one marine, a fellow captive, who was close to cracking. The blow to the leather-neck's ego from being called out by a swabbie had done more to keep him together than any threat ever could.

The Chief had also seen that look in some of the worst officers he had ever shared a battlefield with. He remembered one, a Colonel Darwin, who had stubbornly insisted on assaulting a fortified enemy position head-on. He had sent good soldiers into the line of fire in waves for nearly a solid day, throwing his troops into a meat grinder, rather than take a different approach or fall back to reassess. Any suggestion to alter his tactics or allow the Spartans to assist was met with hostility and agitated recriminations from the officer. Blue Team had watched, dumbfounded and powerless, as an entire division was decimated over what was, strategically, a minor objective. It had taken years to figure out that the colonel's actions had been driven by egotism—his pride couldn't bear admitting defeat, so he chose to salve the wound with the blood of his own soldiers.

The Master Chief couldn't tell which type of officer Carl Grogan fell into. Was he a valuable asset, or a dire threat? How would Grogan's combat abilities be affected if his emotional state worsened?

“Maybe he just doesn't like to lose,” Kelly replied with the smallest possible hint of a smile in her tone. For a Spartan II it was the equivalent of a laugh. “He reminds me of someone else I know.”

The Chief frowned quietly to himself. “Maybe,” he admitted, almost whispering. His voice rose to its normal volume as he continued. “You've always been better at reading people than I. Still, I won't move forward with so little certainty. We need more intel.”

A light went off in the Spartan's mind as an idea occurred to him.

He analyzed it for the better part of a minute. He looked for weaknesses and drawbacks, hoping a better approach would present itself, but eventually decided it was the best course of action. They needed intel; they needed to understand. He needed to understand.

This time, the Chief did turn and look directly at his sibling, making some standard remarks about the exercise out loud to distract from the real conversation continuing via a system of HUD flashes.

<Blue Three, I want you to find out everything you can about Captain Grogan. Personally.>

Kelly's body shifted a few millimeters in surprise. <Sir, wouldn't Blue Two be better suited to this duty?>

Linda had always been the best of them where it came to intelligence work.

<Not this time> the Chief replied. <I want you to interact with Captain Satterfield and gather intel through her. She's been trying to reach out to you for some time and taking advantage of that will be more natural than having Blue Two suddenly take an interest with no explanation. Besides which, while Two has better espionage skills, what I need here is a psychological assessment, and none of us is better suited to that than you.>
Kelly seemed hesitant, but only for a moment. Her posture returned to its super-human perfection in a fraction of a second and her reply over the comms was crisp and succinct. <Yes, sir. Consider it done.>

The heat of the twin suns bore down with the weight of an angry master's gaze. It was the kind of heat that left one's body leaking sweat like a decayed water-skin and one's armor feeling bulky and ill-fitting. It was the kind of heat that sapped one's patience as rapidly as it stoked the fires of their thirst. Even one native to a desert still found it difficult to bear.

All of it paled, however, to the frustration Rak'nor was feeling thanks to the individuals in front of him.

“I am afraid I must request an exception,” he said, resisting the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow. He gestured behind him, saying, “As you can see, there are Coalition citizens that require travel through the Chappa'ai.”

The space thirty meters behind him was filled with poorly clothed, exhausted people. They were spread out, divided into many small groups as they sought what shade they could from the trees and buildings that occupied the desert oasis. These were the liberated slaves that had been rescued by Camelot a day prior. It should have been a simple matter to pass through the Chappa'ai and return them home. Yet, here they were, struggling to arrange something that should have taken mere minutes.

A dismissive grunt was what he received in response. “Do you have orders that they are to leave this minute?” asked the Guard captain, not even deigning to glance up from his station beneath a cloth-covered awning.

Rak'nor took a moment to center himself before responding. “Strictly speaking, no, but—”

“Than they wait,” the captain snapped. The hint of a vindictive grin tugged at the corners of the bastard's mouth.

Rak'nor felt his own lips compress into a thin line. They didn't have time to wait. The rescued slaves' homeworld had enacted strict security policies following the raid that had taken their people. Travel to there through the Chappa'ai was only permitted at certain times per day. If they did not make the journey soon, they would have to wait in the inhospitable climate for at least a day and a night. Some of them might not survive it.

Deep breathing would normally help quell the temper he felt rising in himself. Master Bra'tac had insisted he learn several Jaffa meditation techniques and they had served him well. Unfortunately, the hot desert air made deep breathing almost painful and rendered that tactic ineffective. His gaze flicked from the Guard captain to the Chappa'ai a few meters away.

A large amount of cargo was currently passing through to another planet. Carts full of bronze crates were pulled by pack animals into the upright pool of light and across the stars to their location. The hieroglyphs engraved on the containers' sides marked them as weaponry and general military gear. They also shared the emblem of one particular group that had truly began earning his ire of late.

The representative of the Reh'neg Consortium was watching nearby with a satisfied grin on his face. He was ornately dressed, as officers of the trade corporation tended to be, and was granted shade by
the servant next to him holding an embroidered parasol over his head. It was easy to deduce why he seemed so happy despite the surroundings: the transport of such important cargo meant a tidy profit for him and his masters.

Trying to argue with the merchant would be a fruitless endeavor. Rak'nor knew better than to take on an aristocrat's greed with a frontal assault. Instead, he turned back to the Guard captain and tried once again to make headway there.

“Please, I implore you to understand, brother—” he began, but was interrupted by the captain looking up sharply from his work. The local warrior had a fire in his eyes that had Rak'nor subtly shifting into a guard position despite the heavy desk separating the two of them.

“I understand a great many things, 'Agent of the Council,'” he sneered, rising to his feet and placing his closed fists knuckle-down on his desk. “Such as the need for those weapons to be transported to their intended destination. The attacks of the vile aliens must be answered and there are warriors in distant provinces that require arms. Such matters take priority over a few meager peasants who don't have the strength to wait in the sun for a bit.”

Any response the veteran warrior might have given was cut off by the merchant lord, who had decided now was a good time to butt in. “I am afraid the good Captain is quite right,” he said as he sauntered over, his servant struggling to keep up and maintain a steady grip on the parasol with his sweaty hands. “We are bound to a quite strict schedule and simply cannot tolerate delays. Much of these supplies are destined for outposts that lack a Chappa'ai and must therefore be transported by Reh'neg ships, which follow precise timetables. Planets across the breadth of Jaffa space are responding to the threat of marauders and we supply countless of them. I am sure a warrior as experienced and learned as you does not need me to explain the complexity of wartime logistics.”

Rak'nor grit his teeth and refused to voice the retort that threatened to escape from his lips. The one in which he offered to give the greedy wretch a first-hand demonstration of just what he knew about war. Unfortunately, the smug glance that the merchant shared with the Guard captain indicated quite clearly where the local warriors stood in this matter.

This was almost disorienting. Rak'nor felt like he had been transported to one of the parallel realities from Master Teal'c's stories. How could any warrior see a group of their own people in need and ignore them? Much less at the behest of greedy traders? Was he being bribed? That seemed likely, but it didn't explain the vindictive glee constantly struggling to show on the local warrior's face.

The heat certainly wasn't making this any easier. Rak'nor had to force himself not to drink from his waterskin, as needing to quench his thirst would be a sign of weakness. It was made all the more grating by the dainty sips the merchant lord took from a glass of iced water his servant produced from an insulated container. The aristocrat was confident enough of his mastery of the situation that he felt no need to put on a brave face. The servant himself showed no outward signs of envy, but Rak'nor noted that the lower class worker's eyes lingered on the precious liquid a fraction of a second longer than they needed to. Anger pounded just a little stronger on the walls of Rak'nor's patience.

Deep breaths it was, then. He tried to use the slight pain from the hot air to take the edge off his frustration. The protege of Masters Teal'c and Bra'tac forced himself to work past his feelings and approach the situation logically.

The Guard captain had reacted strongly when Rak'nor had claimed kinship with him. He had also spoken of the Free Jaffa Council in a derogatory manner, which was almost unthinkable. The warriors serving the captain had remained steady behind him, one seeming even to chuckle silently.
inside his helmet. Rak'nor combined that with his prior knowledge of this particular planet and its inhabitants.

This planet, Aenar, had formerly been ruled by the System Lord Atum. Atum had been the bitter rival of Rak'nor's former master, Apophis, and although his mark had been burned away, his former allegiance was publicly known. Several of his own warriors still bore the emblem of the dead tyrant—a curved snake inside an oval. There was still lingering resentment between many jaffa over the wars that had been waged between them at the behest of the goa'uld. The offending captain still bore the tattoo on his forehead that marked him as property of Atum—a top facing semi-circle with five lines emanating from it to simulate a shining sun. That could be enough to explain the local Guard's behavior, but it felt incomplete. It didn't account for everything.

What was strange was the fact that none of this resentment had been felt upon their initial arrival on Aenar. The local government had been nothing short of accommodating to Rak'nor and his charges. This was not to mention the prestige that Rak'nor himself carried by being an Agent of Teal'c and Bra'tac. He politely refused special treatment wherever he could, but suddenly encountering the opposite was still a bit of a shock. If anything, his station seemed to make this particular captain think less of him and take great pleasure in lording what little authority the local warriors had over him.

Suddenly, it all clicked into place. The resentment of higher authority figures, the pleasure taken in petty domination, the rift between the governing leadership and the warriors that served them. This was a familiar story to any who had lived under the Goa'uld Empire: it was a tale of frustrated ambition.

Aenar had been hit hard by the Replicator assault four years prior. Desperate for aid, its leaders had approached the Freedom Coalition and offered to fully embrace the democratic ideals that the friends of the Tau'ri preached. This had lead to the establishment of a ruling Council of Elders, elected by popular vote every four planetary cycles. Pleased with the success, the Coalition had sent ample aid and resources to help the planet rebuild what they had lost. Disaster had been averted and countless lives saved.

Unfortunately, by doing so the local leadership had to overturn centuries of tradition. Prior to admittance into the Coalition, advancement in this planet's society had been determined by martial skill. The most accomplished warriors were the ones to rise and join the ranks of those favored by the false gods. Individuals like the infuriating captain had seen their clear path to success destroyed before their eyes and replaced with an utterly foreign system of rule.

They couldn't openly disagree with the move, either. Even if they didn't fear reprisal by the Coalition at large, the situation had been so dire that the vast majority of Aenar's civilians wholeheartedly agreed with the change. Speaking out against it would only result in further shame and loss of status. The present situation with Rak'nor provided a perfect opportunity to vent this frustration without consequence.

This was...problematic. The juvenile outbursts of the goa'uld had demonstrated time and again how dangerous a person could be when their ambitions were thwarted. If Rak'nor pushed now—especially if he tried to pull rank—this disagreement could easily escalate into violence. He had little doubt that his forces would prove the victor over whatever paltry resistance this local garrison could offer. However, such a battle would cause a diplomatic incident that the Free Jaffa simply could not afford given the current state of the galaxy.

“"I will...respect your decision, Captain," Rak'nor forced out. The merchant looked pleased. The captain seemed disappointed for a moment, no doubt having hoped for a chance to beat him into
submission, but quickly took solace in the minor victory he perceived himself to have won. The proud warrior, trained by Masters Teal'c and Bra'tac themselves, turned on his heel and marched away before he did something truly foolish.

Thoughts of how he was going to explain all of this to his charges filled his mind as he made his way back. They had gone through so much, survived so much, and now they would have to suffer because of bureaucracy and spite?

They took the news rather well, all things considered. Their faces only fell a little as Rak'nor projected his voice loudly enough to reach them all. There were neither questions nor objections. Perhaps they were simply grateful to going home at all. Or perhaps they had been so abused that they no longer had it in them to push back against those in authority.

Rak'nor clung to hope that it was the former.

“I take it we'll be arranging their housing for the night?” his lieutenant said, shaking him out of his thoughts. The lieutenant handed him one of the water-skins and they both took a brief sip. Rak'nor made sure to savor the feeling of relief while it lasted.

“We will quarter them in the local inn,” he informed his subordinate.

The lieutenant's eyebrows rose in surprise. “That will be expensive, sir. I doubt we will be able to afford the fees in addition to the price for food and water.”

“We'll all have to go hungry tonight,” Rak'nor confirmed. “They can survive an empty belly for a night. They will not survive freezing in the frigid air that descends upon deserts once the suns go down. Doing without ourselves will help keep any frustration from growing unmanageable.” He sighed and wiped some more sweat from his brow before turning his gaze to his charges.

They were disheveled, tired, and struggling to cope with an unfamiliar heat. From what he had heard, their world was generally rather cold. Their patience was admirable considering they were less used to it than a native of Chulak. He saw a mother cradling a crying babe, trying fruitlessly to calm the suffering child. They had been given a privileged position in the shade of a large tree, but that did little to comfort one too young to understand such things. Perhaps it was time for the babe's feeding. If so, the mother made no move to provide it. Undernourishment may have robbed her of the ability to produce milk. Rak'nor had heard of such things happening to ill-favored slaves during the days of the goa'uld.

There was still the spark of hope in the mother's eyes, though. The pale blue orbs lacked the dead, cattle-like glaze that marked those broken in spirit. These people had not given in to despair. They had tasted freedom and the thirst for it still burned in them with far more power than any mortal need. The spirit of the Free Jaffa still clung to life within them.

“We might be in better luck than you think,” the lieutenant spoke up. He gestured back toward the Chappa'ai. Specifically, to the collection of minor traders waiting to the side of the central plaza. “They will probably sell some of their wares at a discount.”

Rak'nor had nearly forgotten about them. These were local dealers, looking to transport some crops from the moisture farms buried underground several kilometers away. The bizarre, subterranean foliage native to the planet was low in nutrition but prized for their exotic taste on other worlds, making them a crucial trade good. Those tasked with transporting it had likewise had their journey delayed by the arms shipment. It was likely that their wares would spoil in the heat. Tau'ri
refrigeration technology had yet to reach widespread usage.

For a moment, he was puzzled by the Reh'neg's behavior. The merchant lord had been right—planets throughout Free Jaffa space were rearming in the face of what many feared would be yet another extended conflict. This scene was one that was echoed daily on scores of worlds. Didn't the Reh'neg also transport foodstuffs? Wouldn't this affect them as well? He quickly realized that whatever losses the trade corporation suffered in spoiled food would be outweighed by the profits they made from arms shipments. They could withstand the blow.

The smaller traders, unfortunately, had no such safety net. Many would have to sell their companies to avoid financial ruin. If the war went on too long, the Reh'neg Consortium could well be the only traders left among the Jaffa.

“...I shall ask them,” Rak'nor said. The food was low in nutrition, but still contained enough fluid to cut down on water expenditure; it would get them through their stay. He hated to take advantage of people in need, but he had to look after those he had taken responsibility for. Every coin saved counted in their current predicament.

The traders were unhappy, but as capable of seeing their own sorry state as Rak'nor's subordinate was. They haggled a bit but were convinced to go low enough. Glittering coins were exchanged beneath scowling, sweating faces. The warrior tried to ignore the resentful glares the traders sent toward the freed slaves. Challenging them on their misplaced frustration would only make the situation worse. He reflected on the state of affairs as he supervised the orderly distribution of the foul smelling roots.

In a way, this was a reflection of the state of the Free Jaffa Nation, only in miniature. Balancing the costs of re-armament with the needs of the downtrodden and the dispossessed was an excruciating ordeal and the traders weren't the only ones struggling to meet expectations. For many, it would be outright impossible. Bankruptcy loomed for people across the galaxy.

Rak'nor feared that if the war went on long enough, the Free Jaffa would fall apart.

XXX--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------XXX

The bridge of the Juggernaut was both a source of pride and of shame for Atriox. The jiralhanae alpha had spent many hours designing it. Many hours more, and a considerable investment of funds, had been required to renovate the command center of the former-Covenant dreadnought into something worthy of his race. That was time that could have been spent planning raids, managing logistics, or any of the other tasks required of him to hold his Banished together. It went against the pragmatic, strictly functional approach that had granted him such success.

Still, he reflected, it is quite the sight.

The bridge would have been utterly unrecognizable to its former shipmaster. Gone were the purple and blue surfaces that dominated the vessels of the old Covenant. The old materials had been stripped away and the bulkheads were now a proper metallic gray—the same shade that dominated all jiralhanae designs. The only color for a true weapon of war came from the blood of enemies.

The control consoles had also been replaced. There were no organic curves or soft edges remaining.
The equipment on the jiralhanae vessel were boxy and utilitarian, made of sharp edges and unyielding metal. This displayed the simplicity and sturdiness of their masters. The consoles were mounted around the holographic projector that dominated the center of the room, with the technicians standing before them. There were no seats; only the alpha had the right to rest on the bridge. This was far better than how the weaker aliens coddled themselves.

Not that other races would be able to easily appreciate the superior design. The lighting in the bridge was far dimmer than they would like, owing to the jiralhanae's origins as nocturnal predators. They naturally preferred lower lighting. The sole exception were the overhead lights on the very perimeter of the bridge. These were slightly brighter to better illuminate the upper section of the bulkhead.

The height of the bridge had been doubled during the redesign for practicality sake. This had necessitated the sacrifice of the deck space immediately above, but had been well worth it. How else would Atriox have displayed the proof of his conquests?

Trophies adorned the walls of his headquarters. Weapons, flags, and priceless artifacts were mounted in a nearly continuous display of the power and success of the Banished. The newest additions were the Staff Weapons and battle armor of the Free Jaffa. The snake-like designs of the helms vaguely reminded the jiralhanae alpha of a sangheili skull, which only increased their value as trophies.

Proudest of all was the bulkhead space directly behind where Atriox stood. This displayed the crest of his clan: a scarlet gravity hammer imposed over the blue spiral of the galaxy. Clan crests had been outlawed in the Covenant but prominent clans like his had maintained knowledge of them in secret. Now, they displayed them openly. The smaller clans who had lost their crests to time were now devising new ones and Atriox encouraged this practice. His race had much ground to recover from their centuries of servitude. They could not afford to rest.

Not that Atriox was resting. Oh, no. He stood, proud and tall, on the elevated platform overlooking the holographic projector and the technicians laboring around it. In battle, it showed his forces engaging the enemy so that he might direct them most effectively. Now, it showed the solar system in which his ship was currently taking shelter for its latest retrofit. Atriox grinned to himself and pressed at the smaller, private viewscreens mounted on the perimeter of his command platform. He brought up the controls for the hologram and soon the display zoomed out until the merged galaxy itself was presented for him to tower over.

Anyone entering the bridge would see the galaxy surrounded by jiralhanae, with Atriox towering above them, and the crest of his clan looming above and behind him. A glorious image.

This was the galaxy as it truly was. Let the other races claim their sovereignty and livelihoods. His people went where they wished, took what they wished, burned what they wished. That was the very definition of domination. That was the world of the jiralhanae.

The Galaxy was their territory.

It was all perfect. The entire bridge had realized the designs he had labored to produce. It was even clean. Absent were the clumps of fur and other signs of habitation the jiralhanae typically left behind. Atriox could have ran his clawed fingers over any surface and found not even a trace. The majesty of it all was well worth the inner voice chiding him for his womanly vanity.

The alpha's ambivalent thoughts were interrupted by a giant storming onto the scene. Decimus, the greatest of his betas, practically charged to the holographic console to gaze up at his leader. The chieftain of the Honor Guard was wearing his powered armor, as always, although he did not keep it
polished to a shine as Atriox would have done.

“My alpha,” Decimus said, practically fuming, although he did remember to press his bare fist to his chest in salute. “I must discuss the most recent battle with you.”

Atriox’s lips curved downward in a slight scowl. This was hardly appropriate behavior for a beta, even one as exalted as this. The alpha nodded and turned to descend from his command platform to have a closer conversation with his old friend. He moved past the lowly unggoy tasked with cleaning the bridge. The wretched creature grabbed his cleaning implement and scuttled away, knowing better than to be visible for whatever was coming. Atriox ignored it as he walked the relatively short distance to the only seat in the bridge: his throne.

It was a thing of solid metal. Bare of padding or comfort of any kind, built of hard angles and sturdy construction, it was nothing like what a sangheili lord would use. Its back was composed of many long blades welded together with the arm-rests shaped to look like hilts. The only ornamentation it possessed rested on the outermost blades of its high back: a sangheili skull on the left, and a human's on the right. Atriox removed his gravity hammer from his back and rested it on the side of his seat as he lowered himself into it.

Decimus came forward, only slightly below eye-level to Atriox despite the elevated position of the throne. “My alpha,” he repeated, “I must express my displeasure at the battle. It did not satisfy my pack’s lust for glory.”

Atriox’s eyes narrowed slightly. He pressed the controls on the arm-rests of his throne, bringing up several flat holograms displaying the jiralhanae in question making war on their enemies. “I see little that required improvement,” he pointed out. “Your Honor Guard behaved flawlessly even in your absence.”

“That is not the issue,” Decimus countered. His nostrils flared and his pheromones grew agitated as he continued. His bare fists, lacking the weapons that normally tipped his arms, were clenched tight. “They were winning. Total victory would have been achieved had they been allowed to press on. Instead, they found themselves called to retreat. Why?”

Now, Atriox’s lips parted slightly to reveal his fangs. “Their purposes had already been achieved. The Banished way of war is built upon mobility. None of us can afford being tied down to one spot for very long. Moreover, word reached me that the human demons were present and moving to join the battle. The risk was too high for the reward. We lost nothing by retreating into the shadows.”

“Aside from a warrior's pride!” Decimus countered. His voice and pheromones were growing more aggressive each moment. It was clear that this had been a long time in the building. “This is far from the first time you have ordered strong jiralhanae to abandon the field of battle. Our enemies live when they should have died. Victory is vague when it should be clear and overwhelming. The galaxy does not fear us as it should, and it is because of your—”

Atriox leapt from his chair with a snarl that grew into a roar. The bridge echoed with the sounds of his displeasure. His jaws parted, revealing his strong and sharp fangs, and he snatched up and hefted his gravity hammer. The weapon glowed and crackled, bathing the bridge in its pale blue light. His own pheromones charged out and smothered that of his subordinate. The crew flinched and hunched slightly, their eyes glued to the deck, despite the anger not being directed towards them.

Decimus, at last, realized his mistake. He immediately fell to one knee and began uttering submissive pheromones and chants of supplication.
Atriox, alpha of the Banished, allowed his roar to fall. “You must remember your place, beta,” he growled. “I am alpha of the jiralhanae—not you. It is I who command the legions—not you. It is I who dictate their tactics—not you. We have risen to power and glory under my leadership. You have neither the right nor the standing to question me.”

Decimus released more submissive pheromones. He held out his hand with the palm facing upward. Atriox waited a moment to ensure his point was made. He then removed his primary hand from his hammer and dragged the knuckles across his beta’s palm.

“Your concerns are noted, alpha of the Honor Guard,” he spoke. “I will see to it that more decisive victories are allowed for you.” His growl returned. “But never challenge my authority again. I am alpha. I will not hesitate too defend my position from any. Not even you.”

The dismissal was clear in his tone and scent. Decimus kept his head bowed as he rose, saluted, and departed the bridge. Atriox returned to his throne and leaned back, deep in thought.

There were many in the Banished that would have agreed with his beta’s complaints. For centuries, the jiralhanae way of war had been to charge into combat and not let up until either the enemy had been annihilated or they had. The Hierarchs had taken firm advantage of that battle doctrine during their years of servitude to the Covenant. But now, things were different. In order to not just survive, but to thrive, the Jiralhanae had to adapt. Under his leadership, they had.

Though not without resistance.

The Banished method of striking and fading did not sit well with many of them. If even loyal Decimus was frustrated enough to bear his complaint to the very throne itself, what were the less trustworthy subordinates willing to do?

Something would have to be done. Atriox needed a way to appease the more conservative members of the Banished. A more direct application of war that would not deviate too far from his strategic doctrine. The Alpha of the Banished scowled as he realized what he would have to do.

A few presses to the throne's controls deployed an opaque energy barrier in front of Atriox. The rest of the bridge would neither be able to see nor hear what occurred here. A few more presses and several minutes of waiting resulted in a hologram being projected before him.

“Lord Atriox,” Astarte said from her petty kingdom half a galaxy away. One of the tufts of hair above its eyes was raised in a kind of annoyed inquisitiveness. “To what do I owe the honor of this call? We were not scheduled to speak again for some time.”

Atriox ignored the veiled reproach in the alien's words. Now was not the time to take offense. “The issue is business, as always,” he said. “My packs require a hunt to sate their thirst for glorious battle. I propose a new objective for our Pact.”

The jiralhanae's short muzzle split into a feral grin, his pale fangs glittering in the blood red light of the energy barrier.

“The complete and utter destruction of Camelot.”
Note: More inspiration taken from Finishing the Fight. Specifically, the ODST's admonishment of Satterfield's emotional reaction is pretty much a direct lift of Sgt. Johnson's dialogue in that fic. It's pretty much our goal to strive for Aratech's level of success in depicting the more jaded mindset of the UNSC in contrast to characters from other settings. Let us know how we're doing.

Note: It was tempting to name this chapter 'Spot that ripoff'. What can I say? I like incorporating good ideas into my stories. See if you can spot all the elements borrowed from other works.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 17 Private Interests

Grogan had to force himself not to punch the ground as the holographic terrain vanished around him.

“Fall in,” the Master Chief called in his augmented voice. Hailey could call him crazy all she wanted, Grogan knew that guys lungs were enhanced; there was no other way for it to sound that loud and overwhelming. He tried not to feel a bit of resentment toward the supersoldier. After all, the Chief wasn't on the squad that had just kicked his ass.

The participants of the training exercise filed in and stood in a straight line for inspection and debrief. The Spartans of Fireteam Epsilon stood to the right of the regular troopers that had just failed to defend a location from their assault. Grogan stood immediately next to one of them, feeling smaller than ever next to the towering behemoth despite the fact that he'd been the last to fall in this exercise.

The Master Chief walked up and down the line, posing questions and highlighting areas that required improvement. Satterfield (before she had quit the program to play medic) described him as a harsh taskmaster, focusing on the negative and rarely if ever dispensing praise. His AAR's had been more than enough to shatter the egos of some of the SGC's and ODST's best hotshots. She theorized that his strict approach resulted from frustration at being saddled with desk duty instead of field work.

Grogan didn't care. He drank up every criticism, every fault, and wracked his brains to come up with solutions for next time. He had earned every reprimand the Chief dished out and it would be far worse to be coddled than corrected.

Eventually, the debrief was over and the non-augmented troopers were dismissed. It had been determined that the Spartans would train for longer than a regular human could bear, so another batch of mere mortals was about to be brought in. As everyone else filed out, Grogan found himself welded to the ground.

The Master Chief noticed his failure to comply with orders instantaneously and Grogan found himself remembering that Colonel Mitchell had given the Chief broad discretionary authority to deal with the participants as he saw fit. He tried not to show his nerves. The Spartan moved with effortless speed to a position a couple feet in front of the SG Trooper. “Was there something unclear about my order, Captain?” he demanded.

“Sir, request permission to continue participating in the next exercise, sir,” Grogan said, resisting the urge to swallow nervously.

The Spartan just stared at him. Slowly, so slowly it was hard to notice, the Master Chief’s visor depolarized. The color drained from Grogan's face. Was he about to become the first rank and file Camelot soldier to see the Chief's face? Why now? It didn't make any sense. Then, the process abruptly stopped half-way, just enough to show the outline of the super-soldier's features. Just enough for the effect of a hard stare to make it through the translucent super-tough material.

The moment stretched out. Grogan stood ram-rod straight and stared resolutely at a point above and
to the right of the Chief's shoulder. Unflinching, inflexible, by the book. Solid.

“...permission granted,” the Master Chief said, his visor returning to its normal opaque state. He turned and addressed the Spartan-IVs and the second batch of non-augmented personnel, who by now had entered the room. “Captain Grogan will be joining the second unit of exercises. He will be placed at the lowest rank of the squad's chain of command. This will simulate the too-common occurrence of a survivor of a destroyed or scattered unit linking up with an already established one. Take your positions.” He spun on his heel and left the room.

Grogan was still rooted to the spot, only now it felt like his stomach had joined his feet on the floor. Why had the Master Chief picked that of all things as his justification for letting Grogan keep fighting? Was the super-soldier as perceptive as he was strong? Was he being sadistic, or just communicating that he understood? No answers made themselves known.

It took the impatient order of his new squad's CO to break him out of his funk. He rolled his shoulders, moved around the new holographic urban environment that had sprung into existence, and got back to work.

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“It will only be a moment longer, sir. We thank you for your patience.”

Major Dare stood back as Colonel Mitchell nodded curtly at the man. The messenger bowed in response, his long robes shifting as he did so. The clothing style of the working class tended toward the utilitarian regardless of species or culture, as form was a distant second to function for those who worked with their hands. Having clothing that loose and elaborate marked this particular jaffa commoner as a palace servant type rather than a manual laborer. There would be no scrubbing the floors for him. His manicured fingernails, simple but clean hair-style, and bronze ring on his finger reinforced the notion that while he may be a servant, he was an elite servant. Even the subaltern in the Ma'sam Fiefdom functioned in an overt hierarchy.

The messenger left without acknowledging anyone else. It was as if Dare and the two ODSTs serving as bodyguards standing in the corners of the room had been rendered invisible. This had been the most common response to Mitchell's retinue since they stepped out of the Stargate onto the Free Jaffa planet 'Urso'. Apparently, 'the help' didn't warrant acknowledgment.

The ornately carved wooden door closed behind the messenger and the Camelot personnel were left alone. Mitchell rubbed a hand over his face, visibly trying to contain his frustration. They had been waiting for over an hour already and the mountains of paperwork and various administrative duties back at HQ would not stop accumulating simply because the Jaffa had demanded a meeting to discuss Camelot's future operations. Dare certainly shared his frustration.

The room was too cramped to pace the floor without difficulty. There were no consoles or comm units to occupy the time. The wait stretched on with the slow speed and agony of an improperly extracted tooth.

The only noise, aside from the breathing and shifting of the room's four inhabitants, was the fluttering drapes by the windowsill. The drapes were elaborately embroidered with detailed depictions of Jaffa battles in vibrant colors. Doubtless they were the battles the Reh'neg had helped supply, since this palace was owned and operated by them.
The figures depicted were conveniently lacking the insignia that would identify them as serving the System Lords Sokkar, Ba'al, or Anubis, all of whom had been supplied by the Reh'neg and all of whom had been mortal enemies of the current leadership of the Free Jaffa. Dare wondered how far the merchants' white-washing of their own history had reached.

The rest of the room matched this ornamentation, with carved furniture and intricately woven carpets partially covering the polished marble floor. Whoever decorated this place had clearly wanted to make an impression, although in Dare's opinion they could have put more effort into making sure the colors actually matched. The drapes were a variety of colors related to battle (primarily red for blood and orange for staff weapon fire), the carpets tended toward blue, and the ceiling was black with pricks of white, possibly meant to simulate a starry night sky, and all of them had disparate highlights. None of it meshed together. The room felt more like a paint factory explosion than anything with a coherent theme or design. Whoever was responsible for this place had clearly been too enthused about showing off their own wealth to bother with taste.

Dare realized with a dawning horror that they had been waiting so long she had actually been reduced to picking apart the errors of an interior decorator.

Thankfully, the palace servant returned before she could start fearing for her own sanity. He lead them out of the waiting room and through a meticulously clean hallway to another set of ornate wooden doors. This entry actually had gold trim on the edges. A pair of Jaffa warriors flanked the entrance and held their full length staff weapons at a ready position.

The servant stopped and turned to face them just before the door. “I'm afraid your guards will have to wait outside, sir. Security, you understand,” he explained.

There was no overt condescension in his tone, but he was wearing the neutral-yet-authoritative expression of a man who expected to be obeyed. The ODST guards shifted slightly in place. Mitchell just nodded at them and, without a word, they moved to take up position to the left of the door. The Jaffa guards glanced at each other before the one in the way reluctantly moved to the right. The servant was evidently satisfied with this and opened the double doors with a dramatic flourish.

“Colonel Mitchell of the Tau'ri has arrived, my lord,” he announced. The Camelot officers followed him into what turned out to be a kind of conference room.

The first thing Dare noticed was the decor. Unlike the glorified cell she had spent the last several hours in, this meeting place was spacious, with the long table in its center taking up a relatively small percentage of the floor. The rest was mostly open with more elaborate carpets and a series of high windows opening through the palace's stone exterior. Tapestries covered the interior walls and chandeliers of gold and silver provided what artificial light was needed. Unlike in most Jaffa residences, these lights were electrical rather than candle or gas.

The conference room was also more unified in color than the garish waiting room. Although, considering that color was gold, it did little to make the room feel less overbearing. The hints of silver and purple offsetting the primary color only further drove home the message that the entire room was trying to impart: I am richer than you are.

The room itself only occupied Dare's attention for a moment. The Jaffa elite who had called for this meeting were far more interesting.

One was a representative of the Reh'neg Consortium. The 20 centimeter wide disk with the
corporation’s logo engraved onto it, suspended from a gold necklace over the man's chest, would have marked his employer all by itself. His silk robes and what looked like several kilograms of jewelry weighing down his hands and ears were just more excessive bragging. The overweight merchant was sitting at the central table and helping himself to the bowl of exotic fruits that rested there. He looked up and nodded amicably at the new arrivals as if he hadn't been expecting them.

The trade executive was not alone, however. Dare's eyes were immediately drawn to a figure standing just to the side of one of the tall windows. Bright sunlight shone directly in through the opening, making difficult to distinguish the man's features. Someone less experienced in combat and thus not instinctively looking for ambush points might not have noticed them at all. The only details she could make out were that they were roughly two meters tall and wearing thick armor. Suddenly, her hands itched for the sidearm she had been forced to leave behind.

She still had the concealed pistol hidden up her sleeve, of course, but she didn't want to reveal that unless she absolutely had to. Mitchell would probably throw a fit over not being informed about it.

The figure didn't move until the doors had sealed shut behind them. They simply watched for the several seconds it took for the servant to announce the guests and depart. When the unknown figure did walk forward, Dare noticed Mitchell tense in front of her.

“Councilor Yat'Yir,” the Colonel said. “I wasn't expecting to see you.” He glanced around the room as if he hadn't already taken in the entire place the second he entered. “Where are Councilor Teal'c and Councilor Bra'tac?”

Dare's mind raced as she mentally brought up every scrap of information she had read about this particular Free Jaffa leader. Yat'Yir would most accurately be described as a warlord. He was the absolute sovereign, or 'Lord' as he styled himself, of the Ma'Sam Fiefdom. He had assumed that position when his former ally and master, Councilor Gerak, had died in the course of the Ori War. He was an outspoken militant and no friend to the people of New Earth. This was not who either of the Camelot officers had expected to meet here.

Yat'Yir scowled at the mention of his rivals on the Council. “It was I who demanded this meeting. Councilors Teal'c and Bra'tac have a great many duties that demand their attention. Thus, this present task has fallen to me.”

It was obvious that no one bought that. This warlord had intentionally arranged this meeting to exclude the most pro-New Earth members of the Jaffa High Council. The question was what he intended to get out of it.

“Threatening sanctions if we didn't come immediately did seem out of the norm for them,” the Colonel said.

“A necessity, in consideration for our previous...disagreements,” Yat'Yir said, moving forward the last few steps to normal speaking distance. The scowl had only deepened on his face.

Dare could make out more of his features now that he was fully away from the window. There were similarities and differences between what she saw now and the image she remembered from the intelligence reports. He still bore the black tattoo on his forehead that marked him as a servant of the Goa'uld System Lord Montu, for instance. It was a vicious design: a pair of lines crossed into an X with what resembled a stereotypical target circle over the meeting point in the design's bottom half. The top half of the X featured two harpoon-like barbs on each branch while the bottom of the branches were each curved with a small circle jutting off to the left; it took Dare a moment to realize
that they resembled the ends of a human femur.

The symbol of his former master may not have changed, but the rest of Yat'Yir's features certainly had. A long and jagged scar now ran down his face and over his right eye. The eye itself was covered by a metal eyepatch that, from the color and race of origin, Dare guessed probably contained trace amounts of naquadah. The other eye was cold and hard, the only life in it coming from the glint of ambition. His previously smooth scalp now sported what looked like a burn scar on its left side.

“‘Disagreements’?” Mitchell scoffed. His stance shifted slightly to indicate he wasn't backing down. “Is that what you call following your boss when he sided with the Ori? Not many were happy with either of you, if I remember right.” The Colonel's tone, while professional, was icy enough to hit like a gust of cold wind.

The Councilor's intact eye instantly shifted from cold calculation to fiery rage. “Do not speak of what you know nothing about, wretched Tau'ri!” he spat. “My ally Gerak and I never truly joined the false gods. We merely deceived them to gain access to their strange powers.” His expression shifted to smug condescension. “It was a stratagem that I seem to recall being the deliverance of the Tau'ri. Or have you forgotten when Gerak used his abilities to eradicate a plague the Ori had inflicted upon you?”

Dare couldn't see it from her position behind him, but she could tell Mitchell's eyebrows had shot to his hairline in disbelief. The colonel's posture shifted again. This time it looked like he was either about to hit the jaffa warrior or start a real shouting match. Either way, she knew this was likely not going to end well.

Thankfully, the Reh'neg executive decided to involve himself in the proceedings. He stood up and walked over to play mediator. “We must not hold the proud and noble Warrior Mitchell to unreasonable standards, Lord Yat'Yir,” he said. “He is, after all, merely a field commander and can hardly be expected to stay in touch with the goings on of high politics. The fierce scars you bear from your defeat of Warlord Cyphon, former general of the Ori invaders, are unfamiliar to him, therefore he did not recognize the falseness of his words.”

Yat'Yir smirked. Mitchell's hands clenched at his sides, but he didn't say anything more. It seemed he had regained his mental footing after the shock of seeing an old problem rear its ugly head.

“Now!” the executive said while clapping his hands. “Let us commence business, shall we? We are all quite busy and I am sure would appreciate concluding here quickly and returning to our normal duties.”

The Colonel and the Councilor agreed, not taking their eyes off each until they had both sat down on opposite sides of the table. Dare sat to the left of her superior while the executive sat to the right of the warlord. One side for each represented party. It was a fairly standard arrangement for this kind of meeting, aside from Dare and Yat'Yir facing empty seats.

What was not standard was the furniture itself. The table was far lower than what one would find on either Earth. In fact, it was only half a meter above the ground. The seats compensated for this by being reduced to simple cushions, meaning they all had to sit cross legged to avoid having their legs jutting under the table. The only positive to the arrangement was that Yat'Yir looked almost as uncomfortable as his opposites. It was fairly obvious that he preferred to sit in a high, backed chair; a throne if at all possible.

The merchant lord rang a bell and a servant entered carrying a tray of what looked like an analogue
to hot tea. The steaming liquid was poured into gilded bowls placed in front of each person. Yat'Yir and the executive drank immediately. Dare followed Mitchell's lead in wordlessly declining.

“Oh, I do wish you would sample some of the cuisine, Warrior Mitchell,” the executive objected. “This drink comes from the planet Denkar, several thousand light-years from the nearest world with a Chappa’ai. Our ships are only able to travel there thrice annually.” He gestured to the bowls of fruit. “Or perhaps you would like to sample these fruits? They come from the planet Lek Tong. That world does have a Chappa’ai, but its leaders enforce strict limits on trade. The price of this table’s contents alone could finance an entire Legion for weeks.”

Mitchell's eyes never left Yat'Yir. “Thank you, Gracious Host,” the Colonel said, using the appropriate title given the circumstances. He was going for a diplomatic tone but didn't quite pull it off. “However, I fear we have already eaten prior to our arrival. The diet of a Tau'ri soldier is strictly regulated and we can't afford to deviate from it. Not even for such...delicacies.”

Dare suppressed a wince. Refusing offered refreshment was a surefire way to insult nearly any host. It would be even worse for a people as formal and old fashioned as the Jaffa. Did Mitchell honestly think their hosts were going to poison them? Or was he just being petty and deliberately insulting them? How deep did his past with Yat'Yir really go? She was tempted to drink herself to mitigate the damage, but she suppressed the impulse. Defying her superior would be far more offensive to her hosts than the refusal itself. That was in addition to it making Camelot look divided and weak.

“I see,” the merchant replied, his tone making it clear he didn't buy it for a second. Curiously, Yat'Yir didn't seem inclined to reply himself. The warlord just sat back, continuing to stare hard at Mitchell, and let the other speak for them both. Dare wondered just how close the leader of the Ma'sam Fiefdom was to the Reh’neg Consortium. The merchant continued speaking, his voice switching from overt friendliness to a more restrained business-like demeanor. “As pleasantries seem to have been outlawed amongst the Tau'ri sometime in the past weeks, I propose we simply address the business at hand: the war with the Lucian Alliance and their new alien allies.”

Paradoxically, Mitchell seemed to relax slightly at this. He obviously preferred getting to the point as a general rule. A running joke among the UNSC personnel at Camelot suggested that Colonel Mitchell was almost a closeted ODST in how he always pushed to get to the heart of a matter.

“Now, the first matter of discussion,” the merchant said. He pulled out a small, pyramidal shaped device and placed it on the table. It projected a blank, bronze-colored holographic rectangle about half a meter above the table. Judging by the way the merchant was examining the construct and tapping away at its surface, Dare surmised it was some type of Goa’uld portable computer whose interface was only visible from one direction. “Ah, here it is: Camelot raids within Free Jaffa territory. I fear these battles have been quite unsatisfactory, Warrior Mitchell.”

“I'm gonna have to ask you to be more specific about what the problem is,” the Colonel replied. His expression never wavered as he turned to look at the merchant. Dare could tell, however, that he was keeping a close watch on Yat'Yir out of the corner of his eye. “Our operations have been cleared with the Jaffa High Council.”

Yat'Yir's frown deepened into a scowl. There was no need to ask which way he had voted when that issue had come up.

“Of course, of course. No one is accusing you of violating Jaffa sovereignty,” the merchant said. “We simply wish to express our concern with your warriors' conduct during said battles. Specifically, their refusal to make any substantive effort to recover lost property and resources.”
Now it was Mitchell's turn to scowl. “I remember another representative of the Reh'neg bringing this concern to my attention some time ago. I gave my answer then. It hasn't changed since.”

A cold expression appeared on the merchant's face. “Yes. I had heard. Sadly, circumstances have changed in the interim between then and now,” he said. He tapped at the window some more, apparently bringing up unseen figures. The next several minutes were spent listening to the trade representative describe various aspects of his company's business, mostly about just how much of it there was. He finished with a simple, if substantial, declaration. “There has been a 67% increase in military spending in the Freedom Coalition alone following the Merging. Much of that increase has been facilitated by Reh'neg convoys and shipping apparatus. This is in addition to the arms manufacturing companies that we have invested heavily in. As such, the state of our organization has taken on far greater significance in regard to matters of defense. Simply put: the financial well-being of the Reh'neg Consortium is now one of your chief concerns.”

The sheer gall of that statement was not lost on Dare and for a moment she wondered if Mitchell might launch himself at the little pissant. She was amazed at his restraint when he didn't. The room descended into silence for several seconds. “Weird,” Mitchell replied with faux-confusion, “Usually, it's my superiors who inform me of that kind of thing rather than a lobbyist from a foreign power.”

“Have no worry, we will be discussing this with them directly in the very near future,” the Reh'neg executive said. “We will not be demanding any formal commitments to be made at this meeting. Lord Yat'Yir and our organization simply want to impress upon you, for the sake of decorum, the importance of Reh'neg assets.”

“I'll be sure to keep that in mind,” Mitchell said. He was as unyielding as before, but Dare noticed a distinct lack of the confident refusal that characterized his last interaction with the trade corporation. She understood why. Several corporations on both Earths had been pushing for closer economic ties with the Jaffa in a post-Ori Galaxy and the Reh'neg Consortium had been at the top of the list of jaffa organizations they had wanted trade deals with. Those businesses, in turn, had pressured politicians across New Earth and even the UNSC to a limited extent. Some of those political leaders held the purse strings for and provided oversight to the Camelot mission. Combined with the support from the Free Jaffa, pressure to support the Reh'neg was coming in from all possible fronts. Keeping the Reh'neg happy was now something Command was concerned about. It was a most uncomfortable position Colonel Mitchell now found himself in. “Is there anything else that needs to be 'impressed' on me?”

“Yes. It relates directly to the first issue, in fact,” the merchant said. More tapping. “Camelot has invested a frankly shocking amount of resources into what the Tau'ri have termed 'Medical Clinics'. The Coalition government has matched and, in some cases, exceeded the funds you have committed. These houses of healing served little to no military benefit. The majority of them will have to be rebuilt following the recent attacks and consequently will require more defensive assets to keep them secure.”

“A waste of wealth and warriors,” Yat'Yir spat. “The Jaffa hardly gave a thought to such places before. Those weak enough to require healers were expected to overcome their afflictions through their own might. Your efforts will only coddle them and lead to the weakening of the Jaffa as a people.”

What the warlord failed to mention was the fact that only the presence of goa'uld symbiotes had allowed such a perspective to emerge in the first place. The larval form of the goa'uld would be implanted into the body of a jaffa, whose immune and regenerative systems were magnified.
exponentially as a result. That said symbiotes were no longer available in large enough quantities to sustain the Jaffa without the drug tretonin, and that those not in the warrior elite of the Goa'uld Empire never got them to begin with, was likewise not mentioned. The peasants had always relied upon conventional medical care. Investing in modern medicine just meant that the people had access to treatment beyond ancient folk remedies.

A muscle in Mitchell's cheek twitched, telling Dare that he was aware of the elitist bunk the Councilor was shoveling. She was almost tempted to egg him on just to see the petty tyrant be dressed down.

“We all have our differing opinions on the healing trade, I am sure, but that is not the reason for its mention today,” the merchant said, shooting the warlord a look. There was no outright incrimination in it but it still communicated displeasure. The merchant continued speaking to smooth over any bruising of his colleague's ego. “Rather, it is the expense of these institutions that concerns us. The 67% increase I mentioned earlier is hardly unique, I am afraid. Most factions of the Free Jaffa have needed to greatly expand their investment in military matters following the resurgence of the Lucian Alliance. The conflict has gone on too long for even the most incompetent sovereigns to overlook. This leaves precious little funding for...projects...like your 'clinics'."

“The Coalition brought this upon themselves and refuses to learn,” Yat'Yir interjected again. He shook his head and sneered as he continued. “Over the past years they recklessly diverted funds away from their fleets and armies and poured them into fruitless endeavors like the 'Jackson Hall of Learning' and so-called 'welfare programs'. Their endeavors have failed to create a secure galaxy. Now, they take resources that should go to defending the Jaffa people and waste them on more of the same folly?” He snorted dismissively. “The Ma'sam Fiefdom has not made the same error. We have maintained our martial power ever since the overthrow of the Goa'uld. This crisis finds my people well prepared.”

Yat'Yir had inherited control of all military forces loyal to his former master/ally Gerak. Since Gerak had controlled enough military power to put the Jaffa High Council almost entirely under his control for a period, that was a substantial force. It had actually been a mystery as to how the warlord was getting the funding to keep such a force in operation without oppressively taxing his populace. If Dare had to guess, the substantial position the Reh'neg had in this meeting went a long way toward answering that question.

“The clinics have practical uses in addition to humanitarian ones,” Mitchell answered, cutting off any smooth talking the merchant might have offered. “Treating victims of Kassa addiction, particularly those who were formerly employees of the Lucian Alliance, has proven an excellent source of intelligence. Currying the favor of the common people also increased the number of informants providing said intelligence. Major Dare here could describe their effects more thoroughly if you like,” he said, gesturing to said Agent for the first time.

The merchant merely glanced at her for a moment before turning his gaze back to the Colonel. Yat'Yir didn't even bother doing that. He just snorted as if the suggestion was a bad joke.

“I doubt we will require anything that Miss Dare could offer, thank you,” the merchant said. Dare resisted the urge to flip him off. “As for your 'informants'. Tell me: were any of them among the swaths of Lucian dead that mysteriously appeared a short while ago?”

“...perhaps,” Michell admitted, speaking low enough that he practically muttered the word.

“Indeed,” the merchant said dryly. “Also, the supposed intelligence you gathered has not enabled
you to stop the upturn in Lucian Alliance activities, nor the raids performed by their alien allies. We humbly recommend the termination of your program and your commitment to more productive endeavors. If it continues, we will push for all Jaffa funding to be pulled from it regardless. The distraction cannot be afforded at this time. We are a people under attack and teetering on the brink and this foolishness must end. This brings us to the final note of discussion.”

Yat'Yir's scowl morphed into a predatory grin.

“Item the third,” the merchant lord said, “The Freedom Coalition has lead the response among all factions aligned with the Jaffa High Council. However, its armies have been slow to marshal, slower to produce results, and its friends among the Tau'ri have proven largely impotent. The Jaffa people are growing tired of this failure to face the current crisis. If this is not rectified, swiftly, than we at the Re'hneg will put our support behind the motion to give full authority to the Ma'sam Fiefdom to prosecute this war in Free Jaffa space.”

Silence descended upon the room. The Banished raids were happening almost exclusively within Free Jaffa Territory. This action, if carried through the political process, would mean the end of Camelot's mission.

Dare wasn't fooled. Both the merchant and the Councilor were hoping for that outcome. This whole meeting was just a formality so they could say they gave the Earth people fair warning. She noticed Mitchell's hands form into white-knuckled fists. Yat'Yir continued to grin.

“Councilors Teal'c and Bra'tac will no longer be at the head of our defense,” the merchant explained unnecessarily. “Nor, I am sorry to say, will the Tau'ri.”
Chapter 18 Errors in Judgment

The smoke was still rising just shy of the horizon. The black clouds were too high to choke the soldiers waiting in ambush, but that didn't stop the smell from reaching them. That was the problem with fighting aliens who could scent like bloodhounds: you had to stay downwind.

Captain Jones, member of SG-11, shifted as he lay prone half-way up the hill. He couldn't stand that smell. He'd been at Camelot for a few months, his first post since being admitted into the SGC, and already he was more familiar with the stench of burning bodies and sacked villages than he'd ever expected to be. A small part of his consciousness pointed out that it was impossible for him to be smelling the carnage. It was too far away and, even if it were closer, the filters in his helmet would remove the offending particles before he could detect them. Unfortunately, that particular part of his rationality was having a hard time holding onto the wheel at present.

At least most of the ODSTs were occupying the other elevated position on the far side of the 50 meter wide pass. Any more of their teasing and he might just snap at them.

The Free Jaffa Guard SG-11 was sharing space with were far more pleasant. They were all focused and professional. A lot more so than him, if he were being honest with himself. Both sides had stressed that this mission was intended as much to ease tensions between the SGC and the Jaffa as it was to strike at the Pact. Everyone needed a win to get the general public to calm down and not riot in the streets. Jones took a breath and forced himself to focus. He checked the detonator he held in his hands, confirming it was all set for the seventh time.

A thunderous roaring started echoing over the barren terrain. The SGC Officer's head snapped up and his eyes locked on the direction the noise had come from. It sounded like a jungle cat mixed with a particularly destructive piece of industrial equipment. In the distance, more dark plumes started reaching into the air. These, however, were dark brown rather than black. Jones adjusted his grip on his detonator in anticipation. He knew what this meant.

At least twenty shapes of twisted metal charged into view. They were plain gunmetal gray, save the scarring and dark blood stains decorating their sides. Jones grit his teeth to stop their chattering. The enemy convoy was approaching.

The most numerous was the Type-52 Infantry Support Vehicles, or 'Prowlers', and they were the Brute version of a Humvee or Warthog. A single pilot sat in the rear with a gunner manning a plasma cannon at the fore. Two tracks ran along each side of the vehicles (tipped with sharp metal spikes, naturally) and served to keep the vehicle aloft and propelled. A Brute crouched atop each of tracks. This was the preferred troop transport for the savagely aggressive aliens and they made up the bulk of the convoy.

It was the other type, the eight support vehicles split between the fore and rear positions, that drew Jones' hardening eyes. They were simultaneously advanced and unbearably primitive in design. A blue-white jet of anti-gravity kept the rear of the vaguely motorcycle shaped vehicles aloft. They weren't what propelled them, though. That function was reserved for a pair of three meter tall wheels set at their fore, the blades of which both gripped the ground and tore it up like an industrial tiller.
from hell. They were strong enough both to pull the vehicle itself and tear up APCs like they were made of tissue paper. They were among the most feared and hated vehicles in the known galaxy.

The Type-25 Rapid Assault Vehicle. More commonly, and accurately, known as the Brute Chopper.

Jones felt his blood start to boil. He'd wondered what had left that kind of carnage in its wake when he examined the ruined villages they had been too late to save; he hadn't been particularly happy to have that question answered. He'd seen those nightmares rammed straight into his fellow soldiers, the stream of brown kicked up by the wheels stained read as they sowed the earth with blood and gore. The perpetrators of those horrible crimes sat mid-way down the six and a half meter long vehicles like mounted cavalry. The Brutes.

They were approaching the line of explosives. 300 meters to killzone.

The village...Jones had seen the slaughter of the village through the drone video feed. Had seen what this punitive expedition, sent to punish the locals for trying to strike back at the Lucians, had done. The humans had arrived too late to see anything, but the aftermath had been more than enough. Imagination and memories had filled in what the tail end of the atrocities hadn't directly shown. He'd seen the aliens truly earn their nickname.

It had been too long since they'd tried to save a village from the Brutes. Operations were being restricted more and more as Camelot became overwhelmed, meaning the Banished were free to raid to their heart's content. It had been weighing on Jones, even keeping him up at night. He was lucky his bloodshot eyes hadn't scrubbed him from the mission.

200 meters.

Innocent people...children...all slaughtered. Torn apart, burned alive...eaten.

100 meters.

Jones' body started shaking. So much death. So much pointless suffering. All of it was for what? To fill the wallets of a bunch of gangsters and alien savages? Was that what life meant to these bastards? Unspeakable horrors played out across his vision as if his visor was playing back the footage. Again and again he saw it. Again and again he saw how he and the Guard had failed to protect these people. Had failed to create a safe galaxy after more than a decade of fighting. A quick glance to his side confirmed that the rest of his squad was also feeling the weight of what they had seen. They were shaking and tensing too.

The Brutes looked like they were slowing down. It might have been a trick of the light, but it was enough. Suddenly, he couldn't wait anymore. With a roar of his own Jones triggered the explosives buried in the pass.

The second line went off harmlessly. The enemy was too far away, and it had been meant to grind the convoy to a halt rather than destroy it. The fire and thunder rose into the air, making a cataclysmic show but accomplishing nothing.

The first line met with more success. The leading Brute vehicles were hit by the force and shrapnel of the buried explosives. One had it's wheel well jammed with debris, sending the entire thing spinning up and over and slamming its driver into the ground with enough power to sound like an aftershock of the bombs that had killed it. Another rider was struck with enough force to dislodge him from his mount. The alien was caught in the path of another Chopper and torn to pieces like its
former victims. The rider of the offending vehicle reacted too late, swerving to avoid the now-dead Brute and careening straight into a third Chopper, destroying them both in a ball of orange fire and smoldering shrapnel. Jones roared in triumph.

Then, the rest of the convoy pushed through the smoke and entered the field. The early detonation had killed four out of the twenty enemy targets.

Both Jones and the rest of SG-11, minus their commander, opened fire without orders, shouting their rage to the heavens as they did. The Free Jaffa warriors with them joined in after a moment’s hesitation.

“Open fire!!” Col. Hollis, leader of SG-11 and commander of the mission, shouted from a few feet away.

It was too late. The enemy had oriented on SG-11 and the Guardsmen near them. The rest of the friendlies were ignored in favor of the first to take the field.

The humans didn't care. All of those alien barbarians were going to die. Rifles and Staff Weapons opened up from both hilltops. They were less accurate than had been planned, the vehicles still moving freely rather than pulling up short, but hits were still landed.

Unfortunately, the enemy decided to fire back.

Massive spikes flew through the air, launched by the vehicle-grade spikers mounted on either side of the Chopper wheels. Lengths of hot metal the size of Jones' forearm slammed into the ground all around him, shredding the foliage that had concealed them and obscuring the battlefield through the sheer amount of debris they kicked up. Jones ducked back into cover just in time to see Col. Hollis get impaled through the chest and flung three feet back through to air to hang lifelessly from a nearby tree, the spike having punched through enough of the wood to keep him suspended. Jones swore violently. He started to think that maybe triggering early had been a mistake as he peeked out from behind cover.

The Prowlers had also gone on the attack. Unlike the Choppers, their weapons were on a swivel mount, so they could move perpendicular to the humans while still firing. Balls of blue-white plasma crashed into the hills, setting fire to plants and melting soil into glass. The Brute passengers clinging to the sides likewise opened up, their hand-held Spikers less powerful but no less deadly than their Chopper counterparts.

Said scout/assault vehicles were still charging directly at the hilltop. Rifle and Staff Weapon fire bounced harmlessly off the armored fore of the Choppers. Return fire forced most of the humans to duck out of sight to avoid suffering their commander's fate. Jones realized, a second too late, that the Brutes weren't going to stop. He'd just risen to his feet to run when the first Chopper reached him, bowled him over, and tore him to a thousand bloody pieces.

The Brutes had already left by the time SG-9 arrived.

For whatever reason, the mines had been triggered early, leaving the Brutes with enough numbers and awareness to charge one side of the trap and punch through. The mission had failed.
Not that the enemy hadn't suffered losses. Seven derelict vehicles, mostly Choppers but a couple Prowlers as well, were still smoking in the killzone, with a few dozen Brute bodies interspersed around the ambush point. The glimpses of scorched fur Grogan could see with his Visr's zoom function weren't quite enough to counteract the frustration.

“You're sure they engaged before the order was given?” Major Williamson asked. He was talking to Major Barstad, the ODST that had taken charge after SG-11 had been wiped out.

“Positive,” the ODST replied. “We saw rifle fire at least two seconds prior to the order going out, followed by Staff Weapon fire. You ask me,” he said, his shoulders not quite tensing, “the trigger man lost it. Couldn't take the pressure.” He paused before adding, “Sir.”

“Save the speculation for when we're back at base,” the Major replied. His voice allowed no room for disagreement. He sighed. “We need to get their data recorders.”

The ODST just nodded, his professionalism too strong to allow any more mouthing off. Grogan's was just barely up to the task. Nothing would have satisfied him more at that moment than to rip off the prick's helmet and wipe the smug look from his face.

“We're burning daylight, people,” the Major said. “Police the dead and the wounded and let's get back to base. We're finished here. Mission failure.”

Everyone was somber as they trudged back to the warthogs. They could still glimpse the last wisps of black smoke kilometers away that marked the dead village. Now, the smoke of their own failure marked the valley where a strike team of Brutes should have been slaughtered like the animals they were. It felt like failure was in the air of that miserable planet.

Satterfield was the one to break the silence on the way back, opening a private comm to Grogan and Hailey. They were sharing a transport Warthog and their speech was occasionally interrupted by the rough terrain making them instinctively grab the hand-holds.

“This is going to hurt relations with the Free Jaffa,” Satterfield said. “Taking down this Brute strike force was supposed to bring us closer together. Diplomacy could be set back months.”

“That's what you're concerned about?” Grogan demanded testily, shaking him head. “We should be more worried about Councilor Yat'Yir and his Reh'neg buddies. They're going to have a field day with this cluster-fuck. Earth is closer than ever to being edged out of this conflict and that Ori-loving prick getting as much power as Gerac had.”

“There's a cheerful thought...” Satterfield replied in tone that made Grogan wonder if she honestly hadn't thought of that. He knew his friend didn't share his career ambitions, but someone with her rank should really apply her mind to broader strategy.

Not that the tactical sphere was unimportant. Grogan took the opportunity to go over what went wrong with the ambush. As much as he hated to admit it, the ODST had probably been right: the trigger man must have lost his nerve. Honestly, SG-11 had been the wrong choice for this mission. They'd been getting pretty flaky of late and it was obvious the stress was getting to them. They should have been rotated out for psychological evaluation but the SGC had rejected that because they didn't want to look weak in front of the ODSTs.

Captain Jones in particular had been taking the atrocities committed by the Brutes pretty hard. His emotions had gotten the better of him and it had gotten his people killed and cost them the mission.
Grogan refused to allow that to happen to him. The people fighting alongside him were not going to die because he couldn't handle the emotional strain. He decided then and there to distance himself further from the plight of the Free Jaffa. He'd leave the empathizing to Satterfield. She was better at it, anyway.

No...he needed to do this like the Spartans did. Like the Master Chief did. Cold, calculating, and precise.

The banquet hall was brightly lit and full of loud revelry. Music played from stage occupying one of the four walls, adding to the cacophony and making normal conversation all but impossible. Jugglers, jesters, and other kinds of entertainers were scattered here and there, adding to the chaotic jumble of motion and activity. A fire breather sent a plume of flame into the air to the laughter and applause of the inebriated guests.

Members of the Lucian Alliance made up the bulk of the inhabitants, and the members of the crime syndicate were enjoying the wine, expensive food, and luxurious surroundings to their fullest. Three rows of tables were occupied, the center and longest of them belonging to the crime syndicate. Delectable serving wenches in skimpy outfits moved back and forth to fill up goblets and replace trays of expensive fruits and cooked meat. Occasionally, a wench would squeal in surprise as a frisky officer pulled her into his lap for the pleasurable company. None of them dared protest, but smiled and gave every indication of enjoying the company as much as their admirers. The mid- and high-ranking Lucian officers were enjoying themselves, and they did so as they always had: raucously.

The most Draven could manage was a weak smile. Things had not been going well for the Second since the Merging. The Lucian Alliance had bounced back from years of decline, true. Their hated Tau'ri enemies and their jaffa allies were now struggling to keep up rather than blocking them at every turn. Profits were flowing as swiftly and smoothly as the mead and wine that now surrounded him. Camelot had proven to be nothing more than a minor annoyance that would soon be sidelined.

But Netan still sat at the head of the main table.

The center row was occupied by the Lucian Alliance officers. A year prior, Draven would have been seated just to the right of the head. If things had gone as planned he would be in the Chief Executive's seat by now. Things, however, had not gone as planned, and the number of allies he saw was a bare fraction of what had once been.

All of Draven's plots had been undone by the formation of the Pact. Now, far from being next in line to the throne, he was struggling to avoid being assassinated by Chief Executive Netan. The plots were almost getting too hard to keep up with. Draven's attempts to get his own schemes off the ground had been blocked at every turn. He passively accepted a cup of wine from a wench and shot a glower at the figures seated at the heads of the other tables.

At one sat the Goa'uld witch known as Astarte. She drank from a crystal glass rather than a goblet, her dainty grip occasionally bringing the ludicrously expensive wine to her lips. It was still galling to Draven that his organization had allied with one of their former oppressors. He had grown up under the heel of the Goa'uld Empire and agreeing to work with one of their ilk, even as a tentative ally, left a bitter taste in his mouth.
To the witch's right sat Chun, her puppet king. The backwater sector of space he 'ruled' had seen an influx of coin and resources since he bent the knee to the oppressor. In theory, he should be unfailingly loyal to his mistress, but Draven could recognize a kindred spirit when he saw one. Their eyes met and for the briefest of moments he entertained hope that an alliance could at last be formed between them. Neither had much left to lose.

The contemptuous sneer on Chun's face banished all thoughts of such from the Second's mind. It was obvious that the former servant of the System Lord Yu still viewed the Lucian Alliance as little more than a collection of bandits. He had been visibly holding in his disgust at the current company ever since the banquet had started.

A fire of outrage was rekindled in Draven's heart as he recognized this. Immediately, he began plotting his revenge. He had destroyed less powerful men than this trumped up lackey of a senile pretend deity. It would be child's play to send the offending wretch's life into a tailspin of failure, debt, and disgrace. Draven sighed as he allowed himself to be pulled back to reality. The witch would never allow such an act, even if Draven did still have the power to do so. Which, he did not.

More promising were the individuals seated at the third and final table. At it head sat the alien savage known as Atriox. The creature's raiders had provided the loot and slaves that fueled the Lucian economy and was thus untouchable by any Second, much less one that had fallen out of favor. An Alliance was likewise out of the question. All entreaties to that end had been laughed off by the alien.

*The Jiralhanae respect only strength,* it had said when the Second had tried to covertly speak to him. *"Why would I waste words on one who has not the might to even hold on to his position? Go away, little vermin, and leave the plots to those with the means to execute them."*

Draven had resolved then and there that Atriox would die, too. It did not matter how long it took or what needed to be sacrificed. Once he had achieved the rank of Chief Executive, the current leader of the Banished would be decapitated and its head displayed on the bridge of its flagship. Perhaps he could take the new one that was under construction at Astarte's shipyards. Such interesting rumors about that had reached his ears on that front.

Far more promising was the creature to Atriox's right. The titanic bulk of its own Second, Decimus, sat there, its ever-present armor dully reflecting the plentiful light between the scratches and burns that marked it. He couldn't rule out the possibility that he was imagining things, but Draven felt sure he saw the creature sitting with discontentment in its posture. His dwindling spy ring had informed him that the hit and run tactics favored by the Brute Alpha didn't set well with its Second. That was a rift that, if worked carefully, could be exploited.

The only difficulty was in contacting the alien. Decimus was nearly always in the field, either taking part in a battle or on his way to a future one. Contacting it was certainly possible, but not without being so obvious about it that any leader would know of it, much less ones as skillful as Netan and (damn the witch and her master Ba'al) Astarte.

Motion drew his attention to the goa'uld's table. Or, rather, a lack of motion. Chun and one of his agents were currently engaged in what they no doubt thought of as a clandestine conversation. Unfortunately for them, their idea of being inconspicuous involved sitting perfectly still and holding their drinks suspiciously close to their mouths without actually drinking any of it. It was almost enough to make Draven laugh.
What stopped him was the fact that Astarte seemed totally unaware of the occurrence. The Goa’uld was examining the room as a whole, doubtless reveling in the power and wealth she had accumulated, utterly blind to what was happening at her own side. Was it an act? Would Chun find himself choking on poisoned wine soon, his painfully obvious plotting his undoing at last? Or was Astarte so arrogant as to think her underlings incapable of ever moving against her?

Wheels began turning in Draven’s mind. The Lucian Alliance Second, one who had come so close to the throne of the Chief Executive, began walking down mental roads he had been barred from for nearly a year. The plotting of the amateurs was guaranteed to explode in their faces. If by some miracle it didn’t, Draven would make sure to correct that aberration. The chaos of betrayal would make good cover for a humble but strategically important maneuver.

Oh, yes. There was potential in this. At last, Draven smiled, picked up his mug, and took a sip of rather excellent ale. He looked forward to the day he would drink the wine his ‘masters’ were currently enjoying.

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The screen flared white as the demolition charges went off. It took several seconds for the UAV’s black and white enhanced video feed to clear.

The relatively small explosives had succeeded in setting off the stockpiled energy weapons and their power cells, leading to a domino effect that reduced a storage compound the size of a city block to a molten crater. Warehouses, multi-story administrative/barracks buildings, and vehicle bays had vanished without a trace, turned to vapor and molten gas. Smoke rose into the air, obscuring part of the target area, as what debris remained intact rained down in a ten kilometer radius. There wasn’t much. The intense heat of hundreds of tons of Covenant-era plasma munitions being set off at once tended to leave little evidence behind.

“We’re sure that was all of it?” Col. Mitchell asked in a voice that was only half joking. The explosion had been large, but there was every reason to be thorough in this case.

“Our strike team did a thorough scan before setting their charges,” Dare confirmed from her place standing next to the projected video. She matched the stares of the Colonel and the assembled officers seated around the conference table, careful to conceal her emotions. “Everything matched the storage records. The last of the Venezian weapons in Lucian hands have now been destroyed.”

Which was a relief for all concerned. Goa’uld weapons were certainly potent when they connected but their ergonomics were shit, thus making them unwieldy. Covenant weapons, though their punch was less and lacked the kinetic component common to Goa’uld weapons, were more accurate and therefore more deadly. The conflict would be going even worse for Camelot if all the Pact was equipped with Covenant equipment. So far the Banished had yet to share with their Lucian Allies. It seemed as if there were limits to the cooperation between the two groups.

“Fuckin’ A,” an ODST Major grunted. “About damn time we got some good news.” The other ranking UNSC officers in the briefing room murmured their agreement. The potential trouble that the Insurrectionist planet Venezia might have introduced to the conflict had grated on them badly, and for good reason. Venezia had been the heart of the lingering Insurrection. During the war, those factions that were too radicalized to work with the UNSC fled to Venezia to seek shelter, rest, refit and eventually rebuild.

None ever quite believed the Covenant would ever truly exterminate humanity. They thought it was just some grudge that the Aliens had against the UNSC, not humanity at large. For them, the
Covenant war hadn’t been a war of survival, it had been a reprieve. The Insurrectionists at Venezia had always intended to pick right back up where they left off once the Aliens went home. Seeing that problem nipped in the bud was definitely a boost to morale.

“Don’t get too excited,” an SGC Major countered. “That complex wasn’t just for storing the weapons; it was a whole outpost in there. A new one, too, so it was still under construction. There were a lot of civilian contractors that just got vaporized. People who were too poor and desperate to have anywhere else to go.” There was more murmuring, but this time it was in disagreement. Even several of the other SGC personnel seemed inclined to agree with the ODST.

“They knew what they were getting into when they started working for the Lucian Alliance. They were not innocent bystanders,” Mitchell countered, silencing the room. Despite his words, he had a pronounced frown on his face as he turned from the video, now having reached its conclusion, and looked to Dare. “Excellent work Major,” he said. His face visibly soured as he continued. “Convey my...congratulations...to Maybourne, as well. You both performed admirably.”

Despite herself, Dare felt her spirits rise at the praise. It had been far too long since Camelot Intelligence had pulled out a big win like this. Leaking false reports that there would be a gap in the FCI surveillance net to the Lucians had yielded far more dramatic results than either she or Maybourne had dreamed. Finding a cache of hundreds of tons of plasma munitions was a significant entry in the credit column. It felt good to see tangible returns for their labors.

Despite her disagreement regarding how the discovery had been handled.

The briefing ran its course. “Dismissed,” the Colonel said. Everyone started to file out of the room. “Major Dare, stay a moment. We have matters to discuss.” The door, one of the few pieces of Goa’uld tech to still see use in Camelot HQ, descended to the ground and shut with its unfamiliar thunk. The room fell silent as the Commanding Officer seemed to gather his thoughts. “You still disagree with my decision,” he said, matter of factly.

“That is correct, sir,” Dare replied. She had advised against destroying the plasma weaponry when the nature of the 'valuable assets' they had heard about had been discovered.

“They would have killed a lot of people,” Mitchell argued, again.

Dare suppressed a sigh. They had started this conversation before the demolition order had been sent. It seemed now was the time they were going to finish it.

“The Lucian Alliance kill people regardless,” she countered. “Those weapons were unique, meaning they would be easily traced. Their presence would have provided a number of trails to follow. We could have learned more about the Lucian Alliance distribution network in a month than the SGC has managed in nearly half a decade. This is in addition to the potential destabilization of the Lucian Alliance internal structure.”

“You still think it was a power play,” Mitchell said, leaning back in his chair. The skepticism was clear in his voice.

“It makes the most sense, sir,” Dare defended. “Those weapons should have been distributed weeks ago. Instead, they were hoarded in a secret location until being moved to that complex when the coast looked clear. Someone inside the Lucian Alliance wanted them as an ace in the hole. It was a power play which, if allowed to progress, would have divided the enemy—”
“While putting more powerful weapons in the hands of a murderous crime syndicate!” Mitchell countered firmly. “It would have been chaos!”

“With all due respect, sir, you’re exaggerating a bit,” Dare said. It took an effort to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “The Venezian weapons are more effective than the modified goa’uld gear the Lucians currently rely on, true, but not enough to truly turn the tide. The additional loss of life would have been minimal and counter-balanced by the gains in intelligence. Sometimes you have to sacrifice some lives in order to save more, sir.”

Mitchell stared back at her, his eyes hardening. “There are a lot of dead civilians on that planet,” he said, gesturing to the stilled final frame of the video still projected on the wall, “that show I already know that fact, Major.”

“Yes, sir,” Dare admitted grudgingly.

“You don’t think I’m going far enough, do you?” the Colonel asked. There was the smallest hint of vulnerability behind the officer’s words. It was clear he was arguing with himself as much as with the Major. “You think I'm holding back.”

Dare hesitated for the briefest of moments before deciding to give it to him straight. “Yes, sir. I do.”

“We can’t let our enemies make us forget who we are,” Mitchell insisted. His hands closed to fists as they rested on top the files strewn across the table in front of him—reports of losses and set-backs, mostly. “How we conduct ourselves in a war is at least as important as whether or not we win it.”

Now, Dare was starting to get riled. This was exactly the sort of argument she had been holding in for years as she worked for the Office of Naval Intelligence. Having it made to her, over issues she felt were invalid, rankled. “I understand that, sir,” she said. “However, I think some of your reservations are misplaced.”

“Like the nerve gas?” Mitchell replied with a pointed look that wasn’t yet hostile. “Is my not wanting to engage in chemical warfare one of those 'misplaced reservations’?”

Dare took a deep breath and resisted the urge to close her eyes. “DX-13 is a species-specific neurotoxin. It would only target Brutes and, considering the aliens’ propensity for going into battle in armor that leaves large stretches of hide uncovered, would prove particularly effective in countering their natural durability. It makes sense, sir.”

“For fuck’s sake, humanity—on both Earth's, by the way—banned chemical weapons with international treaties following the first World War! And even up to the Covenant war it was never realistically considered.” Mitchell said, rubbing his temples.

“Comparing mustard gas with a targeted neurotoxin is a textbook false equivalency, sir,” Dare countered. “The toxin would not devastate any ecosystems outside the Brute homeworld where there would be fauna with closer genetic ties. Additionally, there are no Brute civilians on jaffa planets, so one of the chief motivations for the ban would not be an issue.”

Mitchell’s features solidified into something utterly unyielding and impenetrable. It was clear that Dare’s arguments would only push the SGC officer deeper into his misguided moralism. For just the briefest of moments, she felt kinship with her superiors at ONI. She shook that thought off with a feeling of deep revulsion. She was not like them; she would never be like them. But she had to find a way to make her CO understand the difference between acceptable pragmatism and immorality.
These SGC types, good as they were, were a bit too idealistic. A sentiment shared by many across UNSC command structures.

“My decision remains unchanged, Major,” the Colonel said with a tone of absolute finality.

Dare nodded curtly. She wasn't going to win this argument today. “Yes sir,” she replied. It was obvious that this discussion had reaffirmed the Colonel's methodology in his own mind. That exercise in psychological therapy concluded, the commanding officer dismissed her. She hoped the rest of the day would be less frustrating and pointless.

It was all she could do not to laugh at the improbability of that.

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It had all gone so wrong. Katsaros, a Second of the Lucian Alliance, stared with hollow eyes at the report. All of the weapons he had taken from the treacherous Venezia had been destroyed by the Tau'ri. It wouldn't matter that he had concealed them and moved them under Draven's orders. It wouldn't matter that he'd had no choice. The higher ranked Second would shift all blame to Katsaros.

There was only one possible result: a Death Mark.

It was only a matter of time until Netan ordered his assassination. He would need to go to ground, hide until a solution presented itself. Much as he loathed to admit it, it might be time to consider cutting a deal with the people of Earth...

Chapter End Notes

We are, in fact, not dead. Sorry for the delay.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.
Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 18 The Cracks Begin to Show

“Package secured! Repeat, package is secured!”

Major Richards smiled. It was turning out to be a very good day.

For one thing, he, an ODST, had finally been given command of a mission. The standing policy of only allowing SGC officers command had been dropped. It was an obvious ploy to keep the UNSC personnel from growing too unhappy with recent events, as well as a way of compensating for a lack of replacement troops, but he didn't care. He and his Marines were just happy to finally get a chance to show the limp-wristed chair force pukes how to really fight the Brutes.

And show them they had. The small band of aliens had almost closed in on the target when the Camelot Strike Force arrived. Now, they had been driven back and were nearly in full retreat. Seeing the enemies of the UNSC lose ground before them was a sight that would never fail to raise the spirits.

That was the first reason morale was high. The second, arguably more important reason, was that they had captured a Lucian Alliance Second.

Richards turned a corner in the chaotic layout of the jaffa village, and there he was. Katsaros. On his knees, his wrists bound together with zip ties, and a pair of guards keeping both him and the area secured. The gangster had recently contacted Camelot begging for amnesty after some plot failed to reach fruition. Apparently, he thought a bunch of pissed off ODSTs were less scary than his own people. The major grinned behind his visor. Hopefully, he'd be allowed to dispel that notion personally after they got back to base.

Having seen to the primary objective personally, Richards returned to the front lines. He arrived just in time to see the remaining Brute regulars break from the corner of the village they'd been pushed to and make for the distant treeline.

“Squad B advance by fire teams! Don't let them fall back!” the major ordered. His Marines obediently pressed forward, rushing to cut off the retreating forms of the aliens from the stretch of deciduous forest they were running towards. Sporadic return fire occasionally came close to downing one of the human warriors, but that only seemed to increase their desire to run the Brutes down. Their speed increased, boots thundering on the grassy soil, and MA5C Assault Rifles cracked in a staggered rhythm as the squad advanced forward.

It would only occur to the major hours later that Brutes rarely retreated, and even more rarely tried to fully run away, and therefore this behavior was out of character for them. It would also occur to him that by ordering his troops to pursue, he was putting them in a position without any real cover or concealment. There were a lot of reasons his instincts should have been screaming at him to abort. But, he didn't.

None of those reasons were apparent to him in the heat of the moment. He was too thrilled to finally
be in command again, too happy to see their evasive enemy finally put on the defensive. Most of all he was too angry. He had seen the Brutes tear into human colonies in the Human-Covenant War. He had seen soldiers and civilians slaughtered and entire worlds glassed. The hate that those events spawned demanded blood. Here, at last, that thirst would be sated. If only for a while.

The Camelot troops had just closed to a position to block the enemy retreat when the ground beneath them exploded. Blue-white flashes of plasma seared Major Richards' vision before his visor automatically polarized. The flashes quickly faded and the clouds of smoke were blown away by the wind. They revealed something the Major had least wanted to see.

A formation of Honor Guard had emerged from the forest, with the distinctive form of the Beta Decimus at its head.

“Fall back! Squads A and C provide covering fire!” the Major shouted. The soldiers who he hadn't ordered to their deaths hunkered down behind the village huts and tried to cover their comrades' flight.

The survivors of the initial strike didn't last long. A long beam of red light emerged from Decimus' right arm and scythed through the retreating humans. The bisected remains fell to the dirt and rolled to a lifeless stop. A veritable storm of spiker fire forced the remaining humans to duck into cover as the new arrivals linked up with the Brutes who had feigned retreat and started pressing the attack.

The enemy pushed closer. Return fire was largely ineffective. The enemy was barreling towards them at deceptively high speeds and the Honor Guard armor was simply too thick. Some Brutes fell, but that only seemed to enrage the others, who roared and pushed closer.

Richards swore to himself. “Get the package out of here! Repeat, evacuate the package!” he shouted. He'd be damned if this mission failed; damned if his ODSTs had died for nothing. He sighted down his Battle Rifle and took aim at Decimus' head, knowing it was pointless. They'd all be dead in moments.

Then, a beam of red energy lanced out...and hit a Brute.

The Honor Guard warrior was vaporized from the hips up. His pelvis and legs collapsed to the ground, momentum propelling them forward in a graceless heap for a meter or so. The Brute advance slowed in shock.

A new voice came over the comms; one that produced relief and anger all at once.

“Blue Team and Fireteam Foxtrot moving to assist,” the Master Chief's voice said. Within moments two team's worth of Spartans had taken the field and were pushing the enemy back. The Spartan Laser that they carried proved up to the task of cutting through Honor Guard armor.

The Brutes only lingered for a few moments before breaking and falling back, as if the arrival of the super-soldiers was enough on its own to make them turn tail and retreat. The remaining Camelot soldiers regrouped, tended the wounded, and prepared to move out.

The Major scowled behind his visor. Once again, the Spartans had swooped in and stolen all the glory. Typical.
“He’s not as wrong as you might think,” Maybourne said.

Dare pinched the bridge of her nose and sipped her coffee. The fluorescent lights hummed and the newly installed fans in the air vents whirred, adding to the sleep deprivation-induced headache. Coffee could only do so much, and she didn't want to start relying on stimulants. She'd seen too many of her colleagues fall into substance abuse to keep up with the mounting pressure back in the War. Having this discussion again on top of the medical symptoms was the last thing she needed. “The compound is a targeted neurotoxin. It would be effective against the Brutes,” she explained, once again, to her New Earth counterpart.

“Believe me, I understand where you're coming from. I've thought about it myself more than once. The problem is, it could change the rules of the game,” Maybourne countered, folding his hands on the table. “The Banished have allies now. They can get a nerve gas of their own. Using it would kill potential slaves, of course, but it would allow them to loot other valuables more quickly and easily. I imagine that's one of the reasons why the UNSC never actually deployed it prior to the Merging?” His eyebrows raised questioningly; it was a rather irritating and smug motion.

Dare suppressed a growl. The two of them had been arguing a lot of late. “The Colonel shot it down. It's over. Can we please move on?”

“Of course,” her counterpart said with a surprising lack of attitude. Maybe he could tell she wasn't in the mood. He dropped his eyes from hers and looked at the monitor on his side of their desks. “Let's get back to what our new friend told us.”

Katsaros had told them a lot. In exchange for sanctuary and safe residence on New Earth, the now-former Lucian Alliance Second had given them the most detailed and accurate picture of the inner workings of the Pact that they'd seen. It was more than they'd ever dreamed they'd get.

“The cracks are starting to show, I think,” Maybourne said. He glanced up from his computer monitor. “I recommend we widen them.”

“I concur,” Dare replied. A maelstrom of possibilities whirled through her head. Eventually, she picked out a relatively small number of them to pursue. “I say we start with Draven.”

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Everything had been going so well, Draven thought bitterly.

He took another sip out of his wine bottle. Uncharacteristically for him, he had not bothered to have the precious liquor poured into a chilled glass. He had not had it served to him at all. He simply called for a bottle, met the servant at the door to his office, snatched it out of the lowly wench’s hands, slammed the door in her face, and proceeded to get quietly—but deeply—drunk.

Just a year, he ruminated. Just a year prior his ascendancy to the throne of the Lucian Alliance had been assured. The war with the Tau'ri had been going disastrously, profits were impeded on every front, popular support for Netan had not waned so much as evaporated, and Draven had an entire stable of allies backing him up. Now, all of that was gone. Reversed. His latest plan, to trade the modified Covenant weapons from Venezia to other Seconds in exchange for favors, had been foiled and perhaps his last true ally and fellow Second, Katsaros, had reportedly been killed. It would doubtless be his own turn, next. He took another sip, grimaced, and laid his head on his desk.
It was some time later that a skull-splitting howl tore Draven back into the land of the living. He lifted his head to find a piece of paper stuck to his face. The report confirming that his Venezian weapons had been destroyed. He smacked it away and noted that he'd have to burn that when he got the chance. He groaned piteously, and was suddenly very thankful that no one could see him in this state. He grew angry, his pride roused, and reached around for whatever thing had been impertinent enough to interrupt his...slumber. His eyes remained closed as the light from the illuminators was too bright to countenance sight at the moment. His hands closed around a sphere resting in the upper right corner of his desk. His communicator orb. Someone was calling him. Reluctantly, Draven opened his eyes, focused his vision on the orb, and was jolted back to full consciousness. He knew that series of numerals.

Katsaros was calling him.

If the Second was not dead, perhaps the reports were wrong. Perhaps there was a way out of his trials after all. Perhaps...

The next minute was a mad dash to make himself presentable. He straightened his hair, placed drops in his bloodshot eyes, drank a liter of water to quench his parched throat, and generally put his dress back in order. It would not do to let anyone see how far he had fallen in his darkest hour. His task done to the best of his ability, Draven adopted a stern expression, pressed a recessed button on the sphere, and answered his ally's call.

The holographic image that appeared above Draven's desk was not Katsaros. At first, Draven did not recognize the man. It was not anyone from the officers' ranks of the Lucian Alliance. Its dress was elaborate enough to resemble the servants of the Witch Astarte but lacked the secret insignia. It also lacked the the utilitarian militarist style of the Warlord Chun's people. It certainly wasn't one of the barbaric aliens of the Banished. The robes it wore looked almost regal in design, but did not match the smug and, frankly, irritating face the human male sported. It was as if a peasant had broken into his lord's closet and started parading around the room in his robes like a fool.

It took several seconds for Draven's addled mind to dig up an answer as to the man's identity. His eyes widened in horror as he realized who it was. It was, in fact, a person that few in the entire galaxy would recognize by sight. Draven, however, had come within a hair's breadth of being Chief Executive of the Lucian Alliance and had thus examined all of the intelligence documents regarding significant figures of the Tau'ri. He knew who was staring back at him with those cocky eyes.

"Maybourne," Draven growled. "How did you get this number? Why are you calling here?"

"My my, such hostility," the image replied. "I'd try to calm down, mister red eyes, a hangover won't agree with such a mood."

Draven felt a vein burst somewhere within himself. "How dare you speak to me thus!" he shouted, slamming his fist on his desk and sending the stationary rattling. It did indeed produce painful consequences in his aching skull, but he was beyond being concerned with something as trivial as pain. "How dare you contact me within my home! Do you have the slightest clue who I am?? Do you have the slightest clue what I could do to you?!"

All levity vanished from Maybourne's face. "I know exactly who you are, Second Draven," he said. "Moreover, I know how dire your situation is. I know how close you are to death. Most importantly, I know how desperately you need a solution to your current...troubles."

Draven's anger cooled slightly. The spymaster had used his title, Second, with a modicum of respect,
which was refreshing considering how often it seemed to be used in mockery by his own peers. The rest of the Tau'ri filth's speech took a moment to sink in. His mind started to regain its former speed as the possibilities started to make themselves known to him.

A thousand possibilities and potential stratagems whirled through his mind in the blink of an eye. Some more palatable than others. He would have to be careful. “Why would you ever want to help me, Tau'ri?” he asked, making the first move in this game.

Maybourne smiled. “Let's just say we were both a lot happier a year ago and start from there.”

The Interrogation Room was well-lit and sparsely furnished, with only a simple table with a pair of chairs on opposing sides. The subject was chained to said table at the wrists and ankles. Primitive security cameras, of jaffa make but based on New Earth tech, were mounted in the corners. Armed guards were stationed outside in the event of an escape attempt. It was a fairly standard setup for Dare. There were only one main difference.

She was on the wrong side of the glass.

The door to the Interrogation room opened and an unusually plainly dressed Harry Maybourne entered. Maybourne had taken the lead in this particular session out of necessity, since the subject had refused to so much as speak to a lowly female like Dare, regardless of the cover identity she had fed him. Thus, the male half of Camelot Intelligence had opted to take the reins.

Dare sighed and sipped at her coffee, trying to ignore the way her hands were starting to shake with the habit. Her body needed more sleep and less caffeine. Unfortunately, it would get neither until there was some sort of break in the status quo. She resisted the urge to sit down, opting to stand in front of the one-way glass in the Observation Room deep within an FCI detention facility.

“Greetings, Warrior Li,” Maybourne said, placing his right fist atop his open left palm and bowing.

The subject perked up a bit, his expression indicating suspicion. He had not expected a prisoner to be treated with respect. However, it also indicated satisfaction at the honorific. Maybourne had correctly deduced that ego stroking would be the way to go.

Not that it was a difficult deduction. Li's master, the Warlord Chun, was legendarily proud and inflexible. It made sense that his subordinates would feature similar dispositions. Any hint of disrespect would result in the prisoner shutting down and no valuable data being gathered from any of it.

In fact, it was just this connection to Chun that had drawn attention to Li in the first place. The seasoned warrior and trusted confidant of the Warlord had been spotted light-years away from his territory, attempting to gather intelligence on the Lucian Alliance through contacts dating back to the Goa'uld Empire. This immediately drew the attention of the FCI, as they had been watching Chun ever since the warlord started rebuilding his shipyard with an inexplicable influx of wealth. They were following an adage that Councilor Teal'c had picked up on New Earth: if you want truth, follow the money.

Back in the Interrogation Room, the Camelot Intelligence officer moved to his own side of the table and sat down. “Are you well, Warrior Li? I trust you have been given every courtesy owed to one of your rank?”
“Who are you?” the prisoner barked. “Why am I being held here? I demand answers!” His accent resembled that of a New Earth Far Easterner, possibly of Chinese descent, but was far rougher and with emphasis subtly shifted in key syllables, indicating language drift. This was indeed a former servant of the System Lord Yu. A sense of confidence was rising behind the prisoner's eyes with every demand for information. He clearly thought he was in control of the situation. Dare grinned from behind the mirrored glass.

“Of course, of course,” Maybourne replied. He placed a small metal pyramid on the table which projected a hologram over the surface. The prisoner's expression turned confused for a moment as he examined the list. His eyes widened in horror as he realized what it was: the names of all of Ba'al's former lieutenants. Dare smiled again.

Maybourne continued speaking. “First, the introduction: I am Samson of the Tau'ri. I was allowed by your hosts,” the prisoner snorted contemptuously, “to interview you. As to the why, well...” He gestured to the list. “I came to discuss my trade. Specifically: the hunting of goa'uld.”

“The false gods have all perished. Every jaffa child knows this,” Li said, his eyes glancing toward the table. Fearsome a warrior he may have been, he would have made a lousy poker player.

“So I have been told,” Maybourne said. He gave no indication of having picked up on the obvious lie. “But we are both wise enough to know that what children are taught is not always the way things truly are.”

“Even if that were so, what does it have to do with me? With my lord?” Li demanded. His voice rose as he tried to steer the conversation away from sensitive topics.

Maybourne reached out and pressed a button on the metal pyramid. The image changed to that of the shipyard that orbited Chun's capital.

The prisoner started to sweat noticeably. “You—you dare!?” he demanded, his voice rising in pitch. “You dare suggest that our military might is somehow connected to-to a goa'uld witch!?”

Dare's coffee stopped half-way to her lips. That insult had been gender specific. There was only one unaccounted for servant of Ba'al that was female. Had this idiot just let slip the identity of the Pact's spymaster?

“Perish the thought!” Maybourne insisted. “I merely mean to suggest that one as powerful as your master would have little difficulty aiding me in hunting down one of his former oppressors. The glory in such a deed would be not inconsiderable.”

The prisoner stared blankly. After a moment, his eyes grew distant as possibilities clearly raced through his mind. Dare tried to will the one idea she wanted into his subconscious: 'We don't need the goa'uld any more.'

“I...” the subject said, “I will need to speak to my master concerning this...alliance.”

Dare grinned again.

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“Atriox said. “How soon

“You will have three targets in the Gamma-Nine Quadrant, Beta Thrax,” Atriox said. “How soon
will you be able to raid them?"

The beta in question examined the hologram of the star systems in question with a speculative expression. “The first two we can hit in rapid succession, if the Guard regiments are as poorly outfitted as the goa'uld shadow master suggests. The third will take more doing. It is more heavily defended.” He paused before continuing. “Alpha, forgive me, but I do not understand. The first two targets have little in the way of plunder available. Should we not save our strength and strike at the greater prize?”

“The third target will not be so defended for long,” Atriox said, looking down at him from the bridge command platform. “Your strikes on the other two planets will draw attention away from it. The force necessary to take the third will be less than if we attacked at once. We will be able to take vehicles, slaves, and a supply of the 'naquadah' substance that powers the goa'uld technology. That, beta,” he said, stressing the other's subordinate rank, “is why you will be striking the other two first.”

This course of action was met with nods and assenting pheromones from some of the assembled ring of betas. Others, however, remained silent in a sign of skepticism. They longed for an explosive and glorious battle rather than certain success. The Alpha of the Banished decided that now was the time to shift the focus of the conference to the ongoing campaign against the forces of Camelot. That should assuage the bloodlust of the more traditional minded of his betas.

Just as he was about to suggest this, he was interrupted by the surprising and most unwelcome sound of the bridge hatch opening. Atriox, standing on the elevated command platform overlooking the holographic projector and the betas surrounding it, looked forward with narrowed eyes. There was only one being in the galaxy who would dare interrupt this. The only one who had arrived to this conference late.

Decimus strode in, clad as always in his battle-worn armor, flanked by two members of his Honor Guard. The proud, accomplished beta had a look of fierce determination in his eyes. Eyes which were locked directly with his alpha's.

“Atriox!” the beta bellowed. All of the jiralhanae present paused in shock. Even the lowly unggoy scrubbing the floors flinched and stared wide eyed. None had ever dared address the Alpha in such a tone. “I challenge you for leadership of the Banished!”

A stunned silence descended on the room.

None were more shocked than Atriox. This...this made no sense. Decimus had always been one of his most loyal and trustworthy of subordinates. What could have prompted this betrayal? He only managed to force one word past his stunned lips: “Why...?”

“Why?!” Decimus bellowed derisively. “It is how you lead! Hiding in your ship like a sangheili while the true warriors fight your battles for you. Ordering us to fight in ways that dishonor tradition and the jiralhanae's pride. By the old gods, just this past mission you ordered my Guard to retreat upon arrival of the human demons! As if we could not hope to match them in combat!” He gestured around him, taking in the room and its occupants. “All here know that my pack and I have brought glory to the jiralhanae. We have slaughtered countless enemies and waged battle in a way that would make our ancestors proud. Our claws and fangs have been blooded while yours” he punctuated this statement by pointing viciously at the alpha, “remain dry. I deserve to lead the Banished. Today, I shall prove it.”

Atriox's eyes did not leave those of Decimus. However, in his peripheral vision he noticed several of
his other betas nodding their agreement. It seemed the chieftain of the Honor Guard was not without
friends. Refusal or deflection would not be permissible if he wanted to maintain his grip on power.

Not that he would have considered doing so in any case. The rite of challenge was a fundamental
law in jiralhanae society. It was the means by which any worthy warrior could ascend the ladder of
power. Denying it would make Atriox no different from the sangheili that had barred his kind’s
advancement for centuries in the old Covenant. There was but one answer he could give. His lips
drew upward on his short snout, revealing his sharp fangs as he responded in a calm, almost
unconcerned, tone. “So be it.”

The alpha turned and descended to the deck. His rebellious beta walked forward and around the
holographic emitter/command platform. Neither took his eyes off the other for even a moment.

The broad space of empty deck just before the throne would do for a battle ground. Atriox drew the
gravity hammer from his back. Decimus clenched the powered claw on the end of his right arm and
slashed the spiked mace attached to the left through the air. There would be no beams coming out of
the claw’s palm, as that would violate the ancient rites of the challenge, but it was still more than
powerful enough to crush even an armored skull. Atriox donned his Chieftain’s helmet. The world
narrowed to a slit before the device’s onboard HUD activated and gave him full field of vision. He
would need every advantage in this battle.

The pair of Honor Guard took up position by the hatch, a traditional place ostensibly to prevent the
current alpha from fleeing. The other betas formed a circle around the challengers. The highest
ranked of them stood just before the throne; he would serve as judge for this contest. It was mostly a
ceremonial position, since these fights were typically to the death. The judge would serve only to
announce the start of the fight and to identify violations of the rite.

The combatants stared at each other across the empty circle. Atriox spoke, his now-destroyed
relationship with the younger warrior compelling him to voice some regret. “I built the Banished. I
lead us to victory. I would have been happy to have you by my side as I lead our people to ever
greater heights.”

Decimus snorted in contempt. “I have lead the packs of the Banished into battle. It is I who have lead
us to glory.”

Atriox shook his head in disappointment. “There is more to war than winning battles. That is a fact
that you, and many alphas and betas before you, failed to realize. I had hoped you would be
different.”

“I am different,” Decimus insisted. He held his claw in front of his face and closed it into a fist. “My
actions have made us strong. Feared. Respected. I will lead the Banished into glory unknown to our
kind for millenia. Prepare yourself, weakling. Your time is past.”

The words ended. There was no more posturing. Both combatants nodded to the judge, who held a
hand upright...then let it fall with a roar that was echoed by all of those present not about to engage in
mortal combat. The challenge had begun.

Yet, silence descended. Neither jiralhanae moved. The only motion was from that of breathing. The
only sound, that of the ventilation system. Both alpha and challenger stared into each other's eyes.
Neither blinked. Neither turned away. The air thickened and the observers began to shift
uncomfortably.
Then, as if by some unseen signal, they charged.

Decimus was, naturally, faster. He was younger and encased in powered armor more advanced than Atriox's older, Chieftain's armor. He held the advantage in strength and speed. Atriox, however, was craftier.

The beta clearly expected the alpha to lead with a gravity hammer strike. A downward swing, utilizing the gravitic technology of the weapon to increase the power of the blow a hundredfold. Perhaps the strike would come from another direction—the side or upward. Whatever the case, Decimus was prepared to dodge and counter.

So, naturally, Atriox elected not to strike at all.

Instead, just at the critical moment, he planted his weapon firmly on the deck and pivoted out of the way. Surprised, Decimus attempted to arrest his charge...thereby walking blindly into the tail end of the hammer which Atriox had elevated a meter off the deck.

The challenger tripped and barreled into the ground. He roared with frustration, rolled to his feet, and charged again. This time, Atriox performed another feint, and once again the beta found himself on the ground.

“Fight honorably, you coward!” Decimus roared as he surged to his feet with the force of an erupting volcano. He charged again. This time, he was prepared. He predicted the direction of the feint and, utilizing his speed and reflexes, landed a blow with his mace arm.

The Chieftain's helmet on Atriox's head shattered. The side caved inward, crushing the alpha's features and digging a long gash into his muzzle. Bits of flesh dangled, severed by the sheer strength of the blow. Decimus followed up with a strike to the chest that sent his opponent flying through the air and onto the holographic projector. A mighty crash rang out as the side console was crushed and the intricate projection above flickered and died.

The world spun in the vision of Atriox's remaining eye. His hand spasmed and he realized his gravity hammer had fallen from his grasp. He could see it on the deck, a meter or two away. Far too distant to be any good. His beta and former friend was advancing slowly, apparently savoring the kill. The challenger's right 'hand' was opening and closing menacingly. It seemed a crushing death, perhaps strangulation, was how he was supposed to taste defeat. The clawed hand surged forward—

To find a blade, drawn from a sheath in Atriox's gauntlet, plunging into the barrel of the energy weapon that formed its palm.

A red glow shone outward between the claws, bathing the room in flickering rays of blood red light. Decimus had but a moment to stare in horror before his right forearm exploded. The beta howled in pain and the ring of jiralhanae recoiled from the heat of the blast. The room quickly settled and they gained a clear view of the challenger.

He was forced to one knee, his arm shredded and broken, all of his will dedicated to blacking out the pain, and he was just about to rise to his feet when the gravity hammer connected with maximum power full on his chest plate.

The would-be ascendant beta flew through the air and impacted the Throne of Swords. The seat exploded in a shower of blades and flying metal. The observing betas shielded themselves as best they could, but some were still injured and left bleeding. Decimus' landed, stunned, among the
wreckage. His exposed head was lacerated severely by the shrapnel and his eyes were blinded by the blood flowing freely from his scalp.

Then, another blow from the gravity hammer landed. This time he was forced downward into the deck.

“Did you think I did not know the secrets of your armor!” Atriox demanded as he landed blow after thunderous blow. Blood dripped from his own wounds and mixed with that of his beta on the deck as he shouted. “I was there when our engineers crafted it! I approved their expense and construction! Did you think I did not know every secret, every side, every weakness of my forces?! Did you think my stratagems were forged in ignorance?!”

Eventually, even the mighty armor of the Honor Guard had to bend. Atriox exploited every weakpoint, every design flaw, every avenue of attack. Combined with the power of the gravity hammer, there was no doubt of the outcome. Decimus found himself with his limbs broken, his chest being crushed by a caved in chest plate, and his head resting in a growing pool of blood. He managed to blink his eyes clear in time to see his alpha raise the gravity hammer high above his head. The killing blow was about to land.

Then, Atriox paused. He kept his eyes on his enemy but his words were directed toward the judge. “Call the victory!” he commanded.

“A-Atriox remains alpha of the Banished,” the judge announced, confused.

Then, all present fell to a knee and released submissive pheromones. Even the pair of Honor Guard by the hatch showed the appropriate respect. The Alpha had successfully defended his position from a challenger.

Decimus licked his bloody lips and wheezed an attempt at a question. No words were formed, but there could really only be one thing on his mind. It was on the minds of all present.

“I choose to spare this fool's life,” Atriox said, addressing the room at last. “I do this because I know many of you echo his concerns. I do this to show that I hear you, and that I am willing to show mercy to those who disagree with me.” He snarled, and all present lowered their eyes to the deck. “There will, however, be penalties for the insolent. I will allow him to live, but in shame. His pack will be lowered to the bottom of our rankings; they will need to work their way upward if they wish to find glory once again. This one, however, will no longer be their alpha. He will be a direct servant to me until such a time as he redeems himself with a glorious death. Now, disperse, and return when I call you!”

Within moments, the bridge/throne room was nearly empty. Atriox sat on the remains of his throne as one of his healers attempted to stitch together his ruined face. The pain concerned him little. His focus was entirely outward.

This would not be the last time he was challenged. It would be a while yet, as all would be cowed by the defeat of Decimus, but none could have missed the wounds Atriox had taken in the fight. And there were others who shared the disgraced beta's doubts.

It just didn't make any sense. How could the leader of the Honor Guard, one of the first to join the Banished, challenge his alpha? The unfamiliar stirrings of paranoia started to nibble on the edges of his mind. Had someone else suggested the idea to Decimus? Was there a conspiracy within his ranks to depose him? Or, perhaps, was it one of his new 'allies' that had instigated this attack?
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper
Chapter 20 Confiding and Loss

Machines beeped. Doctors and Medics moved about, talking to each other or posing questions to their patients. Air circulated out of the vents. The Infirmary was much as it was the last time Grogan had been a guest there.

For that matter, so was he.

How had things gone so wrong? The enemy was a bunch of gangsters and raiders, nothing compared to the Goa'uld or the Replicators or the Ori. Camelot was made up of the best of the best of two nations, both of whom were well experienced fighting interstellar wars with inadequate resources. Yet, here he was, out of action with the enemy still rampaging freely.

Out of action because of his own mistakes. His own inadequacy.

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One week prior.

No smoke rose from the rehabilitation clinic, but the light was still failing. This particular day had come to an end and a cool wind blew in with the setting of the binary suns. It was the brief period of transition between the brutal heat of the day and the piercing cold of the night. Desert climates like these were always painfully bipolar and unforgiving.

Grogan couldn't feel it in his armor, but several of the Coalition guards around him were visibly taking comfort from the reprieve. They were federal troops from a more temperate world and they had been shifting uncomfortably in the heat all day. The crowd of locals that had come to watch didn't share the guards' relief. They knew that the drop in temperature was only a prelude to the cold night and they started bundling up while they could.

SG-9 was standing outside the final rehabilitation clinic. The reinforced walls and fortified entrances had not been breached. The interior hadn't been set on fire. None of the inhabitants had been killed. In fact, there had been no attack at all, let alone one as brutally effective as the purge three months prior.

Despite this, it was being shut down. Boxes of medical supplies were being loaded up, under guard, to be shipped to military units fighting the Banished. The medical personnel had already been evacuated and reassigned. The Camelot troopers were standing off to the side, facing outward, ready to fight off any half-baked raid.

The doors to the clinic opened in Grogan's peripheral vision. A line of prisoners moved out, chains clinking around their wrists and ankles, heads covered with burlap sacks, stragglers being shoved forward none too gently. They were loaded into the backs of transport Warthogs and, once the
paperwork had been signed and stamped, taken away to be transferred to a regular jaffa gulag for some good ole hard labor. It would be an uncomfortable ride; the backs of those vehicles weren't padded, heated, or enclosed. The UNSC didn't exactly give a fuck when it came to prisoner handling.

Grogan was ambivalent about the rough handling. These prisoners were Lucian Alliance, after all. Too many of Stargate Command's soldiers had died fighting these opportunistic gangsters for him to be all that liberal about their treatment. Still, he'd be lying if he said he hadn't noticed the way some of them were shaking from Kassa withdrawal. Prisons in general weren't known for treating addicts well. Jaffa prisons, even those in the Freedom Coalition, certainly weren't going to put forth much effort to ease their suffering.

A sigh escaped his lips before he could clamp down on it. None of this should have been happening. The clinics had been working, both in gathering intel and in treating the victims of shoddily refined narcotics. Not to mention the valuable experience the jaffa doctors and nurses had been getting under what amounted to a first-world medical internship. That hadn't been enough for the bean counters, though, and now it was all over. Word was that the clinics set up and run exclusively by the Coalition were next on the chopping block. Everything was being trimmed down in favor of the war machine. Necessary, but a damn shame.

The Warthogs kicked up the powdery, dry dirt from the un-paved road as they pulled away. A cloud of the stuff drifted past Grogan's field of vision. His pulse jumped and his hands tightened on his weapon. Memories of the Ambush flooded his mind, the dirt and dust threatening to morph into clouds of snow-blind particles. His eyes darted around the perimeter, searching for anything that looked like a concealed Brute. Nothing. He cursed his nerves yet again. He'd been on edge a lot lately.

The sound of raised voices drew Grogan's attention. A local civilian was talking animatedly at the Coalition Guard captain, gesturing at the clinic and then at a line of other civilians seated by the side of the road. It took a moment for their hunched, blanket-covered forms to register; these must have been the civilian patients that got booted out of the clinic. They had stalled until the absolute last moment before leaving and now sat closer than the small crowd of onlookers.

The conversation was going south, fast. The Jaffa captain had obviously not been particularly interested in what this man had to say from the beginning. The loud, insistent confrontation the civvie was putting up was not endearing him to the warrior. The captain's stance became noticeably more tense and his grip on his staff weapon was tightening. This could get ugly fast unless he intervened.

"May I offer aid, good folk?" Grogan asked in the local dialect as he moved forward. He had to stop this from escalating to violence. Colonel Mitchell was present on this mission but he was busy half-way around the perimeter and Satterfield, who was normally the one he'd rely on for public relations, was with him. The only other Camelot personnel nearby were ODSTs, who would probably welcome the entertainment, and Hailey, who would accidentally escalate it herself with her brusque attitude. That left him with an excuse to occupy his mind with something other than potential flashbacks.

"Ah! Tau'ri!" the local said, his face brightening. He was an old man with a white beard and slightly hunched back. He carried himself with an air of strength, but it was clear from the way he moved and his plain brown robes that he had never been a warrior. "Perhaps you can tell me where my people might find treatment now that this house of healing is derelict? This one has been most rude and unhelpful," he said, gesturing contemptuously at the guard captain. Said warrior rolled his eyes and took the Camelot trooper's presence as an excuse to leave and return to his own duties. The local
civvie scowled at his back before looking pleadingly at Grogan. “Where can I take them? They have not finished their recovery.”

Grogan shifted uncomfortably. Despite being hidden behind a polarized visor, he found himself unable to meet the old man's eyes. He recognized him now. This had been the same local leader that had personally thanked Col. Mitchell for the clinics all those months ago. The one who had presented him with a wreath and a small, informal ceremony.

“You may take them to the house of healing in the center of the city,” Grogan almost muttered the answer provided to him in the briefing.

The local leader's face fell. Disbelief mixed with frustration as he responded. “But...there is no room there. We have checked. Even if there was, my people cannot afford the treatment they offer.”

This was obvious. This particular area was noticeably impoverished, practically a slum. The crowd of able bodied, poorly-clothed civvies who were sitting and standing around to watch the depressing show demonstrated this. They weren't working because there were no jobs for them to perform. Wartime depression was hitting this world hard. The fact that the clinic had been free of charge was probably the part of the program that had most endeared the off-worlders to the locals.

Grogan's throat tightened as he responded. “I'm sorry, good sir. There is nothing more that we can do for them.” He motioned back away from the clinic. “Please, stand aside.”

Now, the local's face shifted to an expression of betrayal and anger. He didn't respond in words. Instead, he surged forward, probably to grab Grogan by the shoulders and shake him, but it was enough to trigger the soldier's combat instincts. The jaffa civilian found himself face-first in the dirt before either of them knew what was happening. The rest of the Camelot security team had their weapons up and facing outward almost as fast.

The civvies all gasped. A few of them looked like they wanted to move forward, but held back out of fear. Most looked a second from running away as fast as their legs would carry them.

“It's alright. Situation is secure,” Grogan said into his comms. He held his left hand up in a placating manner to calm the civvies. “A local just got a little handsy is all.”

Everyone stayed on alert for a minute anyway. This could easily have been a distraction planned or exploited by attackers. When nothing happened, Grogan motioned a couple of the civvies forward. They cautiously picked up their leader and sat him down next to the trembling kassa addicts. They handed him a rag for his bloody nose.

Grogan spent the rest of the mission mentally cursing Command, the politicians, and all of their red tape and penny pinching.

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The awkwardness was starting to get ridiculous. Satterfield stared back at the opaque visor of Blue Three, wondering why the Spartan had approached her off-duty if she didn't have anything to actually say. Were the Spartan-IIs really so insular and anti-social that they couldn’t even hold a casual conversation?
The pair of soldiers had made their way to the Mess Hall after finishing their volunteer duty in the
Infirmary. They sat on opposite sides of one of the tables, specifically the one designated for Spartan
usage. It was the only one with stools solid enough to support the weight of an armored up Spartan-
II. They felt like sitting on a chunk of solid hull plating.

Satterfield felt awkward sitting in Spartan territory, despite the hall being empty at this point of the
day. She felt like she was trespassing. This seemed a good enough excuse to broach a subject that
had always bothered her about the most senior of the Spartan generations. “So...do Spartans ever
take off their armor?” she asked. “I only bring it up because it's, you know, a bit restrictive,” she said,
gesturing meekly to their seats. She hoped the respect came across in her tone and gestures.

There was a pause before the reply.

“We turn the armor in at the end of the standard day, unless we're in the field,” Blue Three said in the
near robotic voice common to the S-IIs. “The Fireteams often go sans helmets while on base.”

“Not Blue Team, though,” Satterfield pressed, her heart beating madly. This was a risky subject to
broach since it was potentially so personal. Still, she was ambitious, and the lure of understanding
Blue Team was too much.

There was another pause.

“No. Not us,” Blue Three replied. Then, she fell silent.

A wave of annoyance passed through Satterfield. She was about to say something, anything, when
something unprecedented happened: the Spartan actually sighed.

“This is...difficult, for me,” Blue Three said. She leaned forward, causing the stool to groan in
protest, and placed her forearms on the table. She tilted her helmet slightly, just enough to indicate
that her expression had changed behind the opaque visor. “Members of Blue Team—Spartans IIs,
that is—aren't used to socializing outside our own program. We've never had the time.”

“So, what changed?” Satterfield asked before another pause could force its unwelcome way into the
conversation. She was hanging on every word.

A pause came just the same.

Satterfield was on the verge of screaming in frustration when the Spartan answered the question. The
words were hesitant, like those of a young child who hadn't yet gained confidence in their speech.
“...curiosity,” Blue Three answered. “New Earth is...so different. The Merging changed so many
things. Our lives have been dedicated to preserving humanity and now there's a whole galaxy of
them that aren't in the UEG. We...I...want to know more.”

Suddenly, the Spartan's demeanor changed. She sat upright, her speech became more confident, and
the moment of vulnerability passed as if it had never been. “I propose an exchange,” she said.

“...an exchange?” Satterfield asked.

“Yes,” the Spartan responded. “Social bonds are typically developed through the growth of mutual
understanding. Such growth can only come through each side increasing their knowledge of the
other. I propose that we take turns disclosing some fact or set of facts concerning ourselves to facilitate this. It is the most efficient approach I have been able to devise.”

The rehearsed, thought-out tone of that speech was not lost on Satterfield. It sounded like something an ambassador or politician would say. Her eyes narrowed briefly before she realized that this was exactly what she should have expected. A Spartan would approach any challenge like they were formulating a battle plan. The social element would naturally lead any research into the diplomatic sphere, since the outcomes of political conferences often had direct impacts on the actions of the military. The connective tissue was obvious in hindsight. The Spartan had probably gotten this idea from the Hydrogen Deal that had been hatched a while back.

“That's how you want our conversations to go from here on out? I tell you something, you tell me something, repeat?” A nod answered her. “That sounds reasonable,” Satterfield said. “I guess we could start with me. Is there anything in particular you'd like to know about me?”

“How was your squad formed?” came the response, with no pause at all. The Spartan rushed to cover up any potential misstep. “If that's not too personal, of course.”

“No, that's fine,” Satterfield assured her. She sat back, careful not to fall off the back-less stool, and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. Her eyes traced the web of cables mounted onto the stone/alloy ceiling and the LED lights they powered. After a moment's reflection, she turned back to her conversation partner. “Technically, the current SG-9 was put together about five years ago, but most of us met in the SGC training program about a year prior to that.”

She spent the next several minutes detailing how she, Hailey, and Grogan had originally met while being made ready to fully join the SGC as an SG Team. She told about how Hailey was even then being held back from promotion due to her insubordination, how Grogan was the most driven to protect his friends, even how she herself had gained the reputation for developing crushes on civilian personnel due to her brief infatuation with Dr. Daniel Jackson.

Particularly, she told Blue Three about the memorable week they'd spent training under the legendary SG-1.

“They'd set up a false Foothold Situation,” Satterfield explained. “We were still dealing with the Goa'uld at that point, so having a situation where our own people turned out to be either impostors or otherwise under some form of mind control was still considered a threat of the highest order. It still is, actually, but people aren't quite as terrified of it as they used to be. Anyway, we didn't know it was a drill, so when we ‘infiltrated' Cheyenne Mountain under Col. O'Neill's orders, we were under a lot of pressure.”

“And Major Williamson was not the leader of your squad at the time, correct?” Blue Three asked.

“That's right,” Satterfield answered, glad that the Spartan was still interested. “That was Elliot. He's a Major now. Commands SG-17. Anyway...” The story ran its course until it got to the rather dramatic ending. “Testing Elliot in particular was one of the main objectives of the scenario. So, at the end, when we all thought the game was up, they threw him a curve ball. Hailey had been arranged to be ‘out of contact' with the rest of us and was supposedly making her way to the Gate Room to blow the whole place sky high. Elliot made a sacrifice play, 'disarmed' the sabotage without using lethal force, and earned himself a commendation.” Satterfield's face screwed up in wry irritation. “None of us were particularly pleased about Hailey keeping us in the dark, even though she had orders. Grogan and I had some fun with her over that.”
“Captain Grogan was not happy with being kept in the dark?” Blue Three asked with what could almost be a hint of interest.

“Nope. Neither of us were,” Satterfield replied. She smiled coyly as she continued. “I won't go into details about how we got back at her, but suffice to say she knew how we felt about it.”

There was another pause. This time, though, it seemed like the super-soldier was mulling over what had been said rather than just letting the dead air hang, which made it far less frustrating.

“I can understand not wanting your fam—your squad-mates to keep secrets from you,” Blue Three said.

Another pause.

This time, Satterfield took it as a cue to push. “So, what about you? Any stories about Blue Team's early days?”

The Spartan stiffened. Satterfield imagined the Spartan's mind was racing to come up with something that wasn't classified. Just how clandestine were the origins of the Spartan-IIs?

“There was...one time, during training,” Blue Three said. Satterfield's ears perked up. “We were charged with making our way across a stretch of wilderness. It was a thick, deciduous forest region on the planet Reach. We made it to the Pelican we were to evacuate on but Cadet-117, the Master Chief, smelled a trap.”

“What made him think that?” Satterfield asked.

“Our chief Instructor, CPO Mendez, was always throwing surprises at us,” the Spartan replied. It was impossible to tell, but Satterfield would have sworn there was just a hint of fond nostalgia in the normally robotic voice. Blue Team's relationship with their Chief Instructor must have been rather positive despite where this story seemed to be headed. Blue Three continued, “We decided the 'guards' present with the dropship were probably hostiles that needed to be subdued. So, we executed a classic 'wounded man' gambit. One of us, Fhajad, used his boot to cut his thigh. He was always one of the best at manipulating people. I played rabbit and lured them in, using my speed to our advantage. We had the hostiles subdued in a few minutes, piloted the ship ourselves, and arrived back on base without incident.”

“I imagine the 'guards' were Marines?” Satterfield asked, chuckling. The Spartan nodded but remained as stoic and unemotional as ever. “They must not have been very happy about that.”

“That would be an understatement,” Blue Three confirmed. “The Marines provided OPFOR for nearly all of our training exercises. ODSTs specifically were called in for the later stages. Tango Company in particular took it pretty hard. None of them were happy with losing so often to a bunch of—.”

Suddenly, the super-soldier went rigid. Satterfield was instantly on alert, half convinced there was some kind of threat that had just invaded the Mess Hall. When nothing appeared, it became clear that the Spartan was reacting to her own speech. Had she almost let something slip?

“So—um—what happened between the training program and the formation of SG-9?” Blue Three asked in a rather obvious attempt to change the subject.
Satterfield decided to oblige her. Pushing for more details would only destroy whatever progress they'd made that day. "A few things happened. Our team was split up, mostly for bureaucratic reasons. The exception was Hailey, who actually looked set to advance in rank to an official Science Team before she let her big mouth get away from her again and set back her career. In the meantime, I was assigned as a temporary replacement to SG-3, Elliot got his own squad, and Grogan was assigned to SG-9."

"Captain Grogan is one of the original members of SG-9?" Blue Three asked.

"No, it was around before him," Satterfield clarified. She hesitated to say more, but decided that there were plenty of ways the Spartan could find out on her own and it wasn't like the super-soldier was a known gossip or anything. She winced as she continued. "But he is the only survivor. All three of his squad-mates from that time were KIA. After that, General Hammond decided to bring us back together under Williamson. Best assignment we've ever had."

"Why wasn't Captain Grogan just promoted to squad-leader?" Blue Three pressed.

"Command thought he wasn't quite ready yet," Satterfield replied. It was a partial truth. The full reality was that a lot of people were worried about how Grogan would cope with having his entire team shot out from under him. She had actually been asked to keep an eye on him and inform Command if there were any 'warning signs', which she still felt guilty about. "He doesn't handle loss well..." she whispered to herself, forgetting in her fatigue that the super-soldier would be able to hear even the quietest reflections.

The foliage glistened in the sunlight. Tree branches and vines swayed in the breeze, alien wildlife moved this way and that, and sun rays peeked through the thick canopy twenty meters above. The jungle had recently endured a torrential rain, meaning everything was either moving in the winds or shining with the residual moisture. One could almost feel the overwhelming humidity through the climate controlled OCA-1 armor. There was so much water in the air that the sun rays hit clouds of mist. It was a nightmare to fight in because the Camelot troopers were surrounded by motion and barriers to sight.

The Master Chief had really gone all out with this particular training exercise. Equipment whose proper function the rank and file couldn't even guess at had been re-purposed as humidifiers, small trays of water had been placed throughout the hall to stand in for rain puddles, and there was even background ambiance that must have been recorded in a terrestrial jungle. Maybe some eccentric member of the Science Team used the audio as a sleeping aid, because there were few other explanations for why Camelot would even have it. The effect was so good it could easily become distracting.

Carl Grogan, however, wasn't distracted. His mind was focused and his eyes were locked on the pedestal holding the objective. He crouched thirty meters away, shrouded in holographic ferns, and waited, holding perfectly still to avoid detection via motion tracker. The anti-sensor camo matting he was draped in let him blend into the green foliage perfectly. If the Spartans were having half as much trouble with their sensors as the non-augmented personnel, there would be no way to detect him.

Weapons-fire erupted from beyond the defensive perimeter, only to fall silent after a pair of seconds. Spartans only ever needed a single volley to down an opponent. Grogan knew that the pair of
ODSTs he'd left on sentry duty were downed.

It didn't matter; this was part of the plan. Grogan tried to convince himself of this as his grip on his rifle tightened. Hopefully, sacrificing troopers like that wouldn't come up in the field any time soon...

A blur rushed into the scene. Grogan could barely make out any details as the super-soldier covered the ten meters to the objective in less than five seconds. The Spartan picked up the MRE standing in for something of value.

A small cylinder, laid carefully in cover a meter from the objective, flashed and released a deafening crack. The Spartan's armor locked up; he was vulnerable.

Grogan threw off his matting and opened fire. The simulated rounds peppered the armored behemoth and the super-soldier was downed.

Stage one of the trap had worked.

Grogan pressed a button on his gauntlet, activating stage two. Canisters of reverse-engineered snow-blind (whose use had been cleared with the Master Chief; he wasn't about to repeat past mistakes) had been scattered around the field, hidden beneath holographic foliage and terrain. They activated, spraying their concealing clouds and obscuring the battlefield even more.

The mere mortals serving as OPFOR wouldn't have to worry about it. Hailey was to thank for this plan. She had written a sensor program designed to cut through the jamming compound. One that was not yet made available to the Spartans.

Adrenaline surged through Grogan's veins as he pulled down the enhanced vision package. Memories of the Ambush, of snow-blind and roaring Honor Guard and the disastrous results of his first field command, tried to batter down the walls of his disciplined mind as his field of view was narrowed.

But he'd expected that.

In fact, the reflexive nervousness he felt whenever thought of snow-blind came up was one of the reasons he was using it in training. He wanted to conquer that fear, to show his subconscious who was boss. As he maneuvered around the battlefield, listening to the weapons-fire of his squad-mates, he took pleasure in how his hands remained steady on his weapon and his mind remained—mostly—clear.

That thought, and all others, was driven from him as he was violently thrown to the ground. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, which was enough time for the other Spartan who had attacked him to put a trio of simulation rounds into the back of his head. He was relieved of the actual objective in short order.

The comms were a mess after that. Grogan's squad had to adapt to the loss of its commander, which provided a distraction for just long enough to allow the Spartans to exfil without further losses.

Another failure.

The post-exercise debrief went as usual. The Spartans of Fireteam Epsilon got an unusually brutal chewing out over their recklessness. There was no excuse for rushing to grab what they thought was the objective without verifying that they weren't walking straight into an ambush. Some of the other
non-augmented troopers were audibly holding in grins at what they perceived to be a minor victory.

Grogan wasn't among them. They had lost, and that was still as unacceptable as ever. This was a fact the other members of the squad made sure to mention in the locker room following the exercise.

“Can I ask you a question, Captain?” one of them, an ODST lieutenant, said.

“Granted, lieutenant,” Grogan grunted back, using the trooper's rank because he honestly wasn't sure what his name was. He split his focus between the conversation and rubbing his own sore muscles. The combat may have been strictly practice, but getting knocked on his ass and stuck in rigid armor for however many minutes had been far from comfortable. This was compounded by the fatigue he felt from continuing to participate in the exercises on top of his regular combat duties.

“Why exactly did you have to be the one to carry the real objective? It made you the priority target,” the lieutenant demanded. “Sir,” he added after a moment.

The implied criticism was clear in the soldier's tone. The tension in the room started to rise as the participants of the exercise, SGC and UNSC, started paying attention. This was beyond the last thing Grogan needed.

“I wanted the damn thing where I could see it,” he answered with a stiff frown. He didn't know this soldier. Didn't know how far this conversation was going to go. If it had been Taylor, there would have been no worries. Unfortunately, Grogan hadn't really gotten to know any of the other ODSTs since the Ambush.

“Is that how they taught you to do things in the SGC?” the lieutenant asked.

Grogan set his shoulders and stared the man down. “More or less,” he said. “Was that all, lieutenant?”

“It's just that maybe one of us,” he said, gesturing to the other ODSTs, “should be squad-leader next time. Maybe then we wouldn't lose so many—”

Grogan's fist contacted with the man's jaw before he could finish the sentence. He was out like a light and hit the floor with a dull bang. There was no thinking involved, before or after the blow. The ODST had made the mistake of becoming the personification of Grogan's deepest fears, and paid for it.

Another ODST stepped up to take their punishment. Their attack was blunt, full of brute force that would doubtless have shattered him. If it had connected. Instead, he weaved around the strike with ease and repaid the attack tenfold. The SG Trooper only stopped raining blows upon his adversary when someone put him in a headlock from behind.

This just pissed Grogan off even more. He set his feet, grabbed the arm around his neck, and channeled all of his pent up frustration and rage into swinging his attacker off his feet and straight into a locker with a resounding bang. The grip lessened. Grogan executed a trained escape maneuver, landed a strike on his disoriented attacker, and moved off to greedily suck in air.

The locker room had erupted into chaos. Months of growing tensions and frustrations were now being vented in the form of a massive brawl between the SGC and UNSC personnel. Grogan had only a moment of horrified realization of what he had done when someone shoulder checked him into a locker. His head hit hard, and he faded out of consciousness.
That had been several days prior. Since then, he had been confined to the Infirmary, ostensibly to recover from his injuries. Grogan lifted his right arm and was pulled up short after about an inch. The restraints hand-cuffing him to the bunk and the curtains cutting him off from view of the rest of the room suggested a more punitive motivation. He lay back and stared at the ceiling, his mind racing and his gut hollow.

No excuse. There could be no excuse for his behavior. What the hell had been going through his head that punching an allied soldier seemed like a good idea? He could barely remember what had even been going on at the time; he certainly couldn't remember anything that happened after it all got started. The ODST had said something to him. Something he still didn't want to face. His eyes started dancing back and forth, desperately trying to find something to distract himself with. Maybe that was part of the point of his isolation—force him to confront his demons. Unfortunately, he wasn't in the mood for that particular game, so he kept looking with mounting desperation.

It was the silence that did it.

There was no sound other than the machinery keeping the ICU patients alive. The low rumble of conversation that normally saturated the Infirmary had abruptly died down. It was as if everyone was holding their breath.

There was, however, a whisper. A...hint of potential sound. Something almost imperceptible even in the near total silence. It had a rhythm to it, like footsteps, but it was far too quiet. No human could make so little noise as they walked on a bare stone surface. A feeling of familiarity was warring with confusion in the SG Trooper's head. What was it...

Grogan's eyes only had a fraction of a second to widen in recognition before the curtain was pulled back to reveal the Master Chief. As always, the Spartan was in full armor. The incredibly advanced soles of the MJOLNIR boots had masked his approach, giving Grogan a taste of what it would be like to be on the receiving end of a Blue Team surgical strike.

It wasn't pleasant.

The Spartan paused at the entrance. He turned around and Grogan could feel the glare in the super-soldier's voice as he addressed the rest of the room. “As you were!” he barked.

The tension broke. Many of those Grogan could glimpse around the Spartan's armored bulk jumped slightly as the unnaturally loud voice rang throughout the room. The shock only lasted a moment before everyone rushed to look busy. The Chief turned back to the small enclosure without further comment, but Grogan would swear he saw an almost imperceptible shake of the head. The curtain was shut in short order, and the pair was alone.

Silence ruled in the tiny 'room'. A thousand different things to say ran through Grogan's mind. Excuses, confessions, pleas, resignations, what have you. None of it was adequate enough to warrant saying out loud. Eventually, so much time passed that he wanted to scream at the super-soldier to just get on with it already. Nothing he could do would be worse than this uncertainty.

“You've been scrubbed from the training program. Colonel's orders,” the Chief explained in his
Grogan's lips compressed into a thin line. He honestly would have preferred a Drill Instructor-style shouting session to the quiet disapproval the Chief was giving him. It felt like he was being chewed out by his father or something. 'I'm not mad. Just disappointed'. Funny how that always managed to hurt worse than outright anger.

The punishments themselves were...expected. That didn't make it easy, though. The training program had dominated his spare time. It was actually a relief that he would have additional penal duties since he wasn't sure what to do with himself otherwise. He was about to acknowledge the message, and respectfully ask why a Spartan was the one delivering it, when the super-soldier spoke again.

“How are you recovering?” the Chief asked.

Grogan blinked. Small talk? After everything that had happened? And from a Spartan? “Er...alright, s—I suppose.” It felt wrong not to call the Chief ‘sir’ but, outside of the training program, Grogan technically outranked him. Something that was a bit difficult to keep in mind with the super-soldier towering over him in an enclosure barely large enough to contain the two of them. It felt like there should have been clouds circling the Spartan's head, he looked so tall.

“I...have been speaking to Blue Three,” the Chief said.

Grogan blinked, unsure he had heard right. The fourth member of Blue Team had never been directly involved in the training program. What could she have to do with this?

“Are you aware that she and Captain Satterfield have been working together in the Infirmary?” the Chief asked.

“I...guess so,” Grogan replied. “I-I mean yes. I was aware. She's mentioned it to the rest of us.”

“They have...gotten to know each other,” the Spartan said. Then, he shifted in place. It was almost too small to see, like all Spartan-II body language, but Grogan had been trying to pierce the veil of that armor for months. He would almost swear that the super-soldier looked...awkward? The Chief continued. “The subject of SG-9 came up in their conversations. You, in particular.”

Inwardly, Carl Grogan cursed his friend. What the hell was she doing blabbing their personal details to anyone, much less a soldier of a foreign power? A spike of anger raged through him and he had to struggle to stay in control. Satterfield was going to lose a few teeth over this.

The only thing that kept him in the moment was the Spartan's bizarre behavior. The Chief seemed to be struggling with what to say. “I...” he said. “She...” he said next, after a brief pause. “You...”

The Spartan sighed. This was the most spectacular display of emotion Grogan, or any SGC personnel, had ever seen from a member of Blue Team. Just how badly had he fucked up that a Spartan was getting emotional?

“No one can decide how many Spartan-IIs fought in the Human-Covenant War,” the Master Chief said.

Grogan just stared.
“They know there’s only four of us left. That, at least, has been declassified,” the Chief continued, not noticing or not caring about the lost expression that surely had to be plastered on his audience's face. “But the number of us during the War hasn't been. Never. Nobody in high command wants it known how many of us died to protect humanity. How many of us fell to the Covenant” He paused, and the visor turned directly to the man cuffed to the bunk. “It was thirty-three. There were only ever thirty-three of us. Now, there are four.”

Grogan’s mouth fell open. “Why—”

“I was their leader,” the Chief interrupted. His voice was growing less robotic, more infused with suppressed emotion with each word spoken, making the situation even more surreal. “Every time one of them died...I felt it. Like a weight, dragging me down. Twenty Nine times, plus those who died in the augmentation process. It...it never stopped feeling like it was partly my fault. That I could have, should have, done more...”

Suddenly, the situation clicked in Grogan's mind. He found himself unable to sit up even to the limited extent his restraints enabled. The sheer enormity of what the Chief was doing felt like a weight pushing him back down. He had been anticipating many outcomes of the brawl, but an impossible moment of kinship with the Master Chief himself? A moment where the super-soldier actually tried to reach out and connect with him? His mouth opened and closed several more times before he rediscovered his voice.

“How...how did you do it?” Grogan asked, feeling like he was asking his old man about the facts of life. Or a master sensei the secret to enlightenment. “All that...for so long...how?”

The Spartan's hands clenched and unclenched repeatedly. It took even longer for him to find his voice. “Honestly? I don't know.” He shook his armored head. “Maybe I haven't. Maybe there isn't a way. I know I can't save everyone; I try to focus on the ones that I have saved. Other than that, I've just focused on completing the mission. On protecting humanity. No matter the cost.”

Grogan latched on to those words. He memorized them, dissected them, promised himself to pour over them until he understood. He was struggling to come up with a way to thank the Spartan when the Chief straightened and began speaking in his normal, all-business tone. Apparently the heart-to-heart was over.

“Rest up, Captain,” he said. “You're out of here in thirty, and we still have a war to win. After that...well, we'll talk. Depending on how you handle things from here on out, there may be more for you in the future.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper

End Notes
Well, I'm sure this is a surprise to just about everyone. Don't worry, I still plan to write my version of Halo 6. It's just that when Jon Harper contacted me about a story idea he had, I found myself totally pulled into it. I grew up with Stargate SG-1 and the opportunity to do something in that world—while working with another person for the first time—was just too much to resist.

I've been working with him on this story pretty closely for about a couple of months now and we've finally got enough done to feel confident about posting the first chapter. We hope you enjoy what we've put together and welcome you to join us on another journey through the land of fanfiction.

Thanks for reading. Love you guys.

Slipspace Anomaly with Jon Harper

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!