

# Truth and Reconciliation

“- .-“

## Prologue – The Death and Opinions of Forerunner Technology

He remembered his name. He remembered his family. He remembered his home. And he could always remember the game. He'd played it every day. And he never lost. The game... King of the Hill... For so long it was the only thing he could remember about the life he had before.

Since then, he'd experienced lifetimes of combat. Over ten years of killing his people on the orders of his people, then made to do it again and again until he did it *right*... Thirty-some years of war against alien aggressors on top of that, then made to do it again and again until he did it that just right too...

He'd thought he knew his fate. He was sure someday he would die and it would finally stick. But now that it still didn't come... Now that it was time for everyone in the galaxy *except* him to die... He found he was ready.

Ready to be shot of this fake life, with its fake hardships, fake friendships, fake wisdom and fake *stupidity*.

“It took you long enough.”

“Yes.” He said. “Too long.”

Two steps, one backhand, one loud SNAP, and suddenly there was one more fake corpse to add to the fake pile of fake casualties of the fake war on this fake planet.

The shock he engendered was as lifelike as it always was, but for this single moment he allowed himself not to pay attention to anything outside his subject of interest. Instead, he stood stock-still and drank the sight of Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey falling dead under the weight of Stockholm Syndrome suddenly loosed.

Palmer cursed, “What the hell-!” and made to raise her gun, but John was already pulling his fist from where he'd just caved her face in, because talking mid-fight was foolish and not wearing your helmet was your last mistake.

“Chief!?”

“Demon!”

“What the f-UGH!”

Punch faceplate to disorient, knee kidney to disable – the undermesh of the Mjolnir Hunter armor was exposed in so *many* critical places – roll over Locke's back and have him take Thel 'Vadam's energy sword, ignore fake Spartan's death rattle, grab BR85N battle rifle, engage nearest Sword of Sanghelios, headshot, centre mass to down shield, headshot to kill, roll away from enraged Arbiter –

“He has gone mad!”

“Cortana! She must have gotten to him somehOGH!”

– BOOM headshot because mid-battle banter was *stupidity*, duck Thel 'Vadam's sword, shoot Arbiter centre-mass, jink to evade the rest of Fireteam Osiris, do *not* freeze in astonishment at Thel's sudden death

to friendly fire – even though it's the last proof needed to know that bunch are *not* real Spartans – jump backwards to escape the remaining Swords of Sangheilios pending tactical reassessment –

CRACK came Linda's SRS99-S5 AM sniper rifle taking one of the last aliens in the eye

– belay tactical reassessment, stab last alien with own sword, switch to backup role, headshot Vale, headshot Tanaka, headshot Buck and murder they wrote.

The silence that descended in the wake of the abrupt fight was stark, for all that the wind took no more breaks than he took prisoners. It would have been the best moment to blindside his last potential foes, before they stopped being merely potential.

Instead, he rose and went to gaze down at Halsey a bit more. He needed to appreciate the sight while he could.

After all, he wasn't likely to do this again in the future.

Blue Team hesitated behind him. He could see it in the lack of post-battle HUD-morse reports, their lack of vocal follow-up, the microjerks of their shadows as they decided to keep their distance instead of approach. Good call. He was *not* up to showing restraint if any of them decided to come up from behind right now.

If there was one thing he hated about this fake world, it was having to worry about being gunned down from behind by Blue Team.

Eventually, though, the others inevitably made their presence and confusion known, if wordlessly.

*Wordlessly* being the key term. The blinking lights resumed, relayed from them to his HUD. Unlike everyone else in his life, they remembered to use the code he developed while still training and young, when he realised the only way to have a private conversation, even in his armour and out in the field, was to have it silently in their own version of morse. Preferably while holding a second, not-so-private vocal conversation at the same time.

Here and now, though, it was as useless as everything else he'd done since he was first laid out on that operating berth to be cut up.

"The mantle of responsibility for the galaxy shelters all, but only the created are its masters." He echoed the fake Cortana's fake words as he watched his fake AI partner's fake mother stare sightlessly up at the fake sky of this fake land. "What horseshit."

"Chief?"

"Cortana said they let her pick, did I ever tell you that?" He asked. "Choose whichever Spartan she wanted. If you knew her, you'd know she did her research. Watched as I became the soldier ONI wanted me to be. Like the rest of you, I was strong and swift and brave. A natural leader. But I had something you didn't. Something no one saw, but her. Can you guess...?"

Everything 'seemed' at this point.

No response.

"Luck."

Still no response.

But no obvious glitch in the matrix either. No matter how long he stared at the fake corpse, it didn't stop seeming 100% lifelike. Unlike the clouds that no longer merely *seemed* repetitive, or the sand grains that

didn't just *seem* to come out of nowhere anymore. Admittedly, he'd been on fake active duty for what felt like five too real decades, not counting the countless mission repeats. Eventually, especially after the mind-wipes stopped working, even he started to feel the stress.

Maybe the repetitive cloud patterns, the sand grains that always drifted in and out of nowhere at the edge of his vision when the world thought he wasn't looking, maybe they *could* be dismissed as his imagination.

What *couldn't* be dismissed was the collective sanity decline and galactic-scale pandemic of *total rampant stupidity*, that seemed to have taken over every inch of his life since he blew up the Ark.

The only thing giving him pause now was his strange luck, and his hope that maybe he wasn't the only Spartan that didn't just 'seem' to be here, as selfish as it was.

*Everything* seemed.

Nothing *was*.

"Chief...?" Kelly. Though probably not. "Are you with us?"

Hesitating for a moment, he initiated HUD-morse himself and begun transmitting from memory all manner of timestamped messages, HUD captions, coordinates, and a myriad of other bits, pieces and details that most people would have no way to keep up with, but should be easy bites for any Spartan worth his tags.

The earliest contrivance that stuck in his mind was his four-rank promotion from Crowther back in the year 2526.

The earliest anomaly in his fellow Spartans' behaviour was their easy defeat and capture on New Hope by insurgents.

The earliest anomaly in *his own* behaviour was when he awoke on the surgery berth and did *not* use his new augmentations to immediately rampage his way through the Reach FLEETCOM Military Complex on search of self-hood, friends and freedom. Even though he'd been planning just that since that first training day of his new life, when he let Chief Mendez train him into the ground as if he were not, in fact, the most headstrong and defiant boy ever to be born to the race of man.

One reeked of contrived inconvenience, one made New Hope look like Kurt's leadership audition, and the third had 'modified brain chemistry' written all over it. But these were all things he only realised retroactively since returning to his fake military service after Requiem, after the 5-year timeskip and the galaxy lost half its collective IQ. Which, *curiously*, lined up perfectly with the moment he was finally reunited with Blue Team.

And there were many, *many* inconsistencies post-dating that event to lay on them, to say the least. Many of which he'd been taking the time to trace back to the source, during whatever times he had when there wasn't an AI in his head. A source that *seemed* to be one or more of the three people left around him now, who were not also dead.

That alone was what made him entertain the possibility of not being the only one here who wasn't merely a possibility. That alone was why he was doing what was probably a waste of time.

That alone was why he hesitated to immediately remote-activate the commands he programmed during the flight over, and blow Blue Team up with the Pelican's cannon that he'd had primed and aimed at their back since touching down.

"Chief..." Linda murmured. Potentially. "What *is* all this?"

"Forget whatever this is! What the hell did we just do?" Frederick. Possibly.

“Chief?” Kelly. Maybe. “I’m not sure what picture you’re painting here, but I’m going to guess the answer isn’t ‘stress.’” None of the SPARTAN-IIs ever achieved comedy. At least this, though, he couldn’t blame on this fake life with its fake deeds. “Chief?”

“My name is John.”

Blue Team stiffened.

“John Agnar Black. That is my name,” he say, turning to them. “Can you remember yours?” No answer. “Do you even have names to remember, I wonder.”

He almost wanted to wait and see what conclusions they drew, if they even had the agency for it.

But after so long doing literally nothing *but* entertain newer and duller possibilities, John found that he was not willing to entertain even this one for one moment more. He turned away and walked over to the edge of the cliff instead.

He gazed into the distance, at the fake winds and fake twilight, while Blue Team slowly followed behind. Here he turned his long-fought conclusion in his head for one last time and found that it was the same as it ever was.

He raised his head to the sky and *shouted*.

“Demon!” His voice was deep and loud and *real* in this fake place with its fake sounds. “End this farce! Or I’ll end it myself, even if it takes me a million years and the blood on my hands of every last fake life you’ve conjured up!”

The universe didn’t seem to respond, but it did. Through fake vertigo and the fake data crystal chip disappearing from the fake neural interface plugged in his fake brain.

The whole universe seemed to stutter for one, long moment.

Then nothing.

The nothing *enraged* him more than anything else ever had.

“DEMON!” He bellowed at the fake sky with its fake sunlight and fake clouds. “Don’t make me repeat myself, or I *will* show you what happens when I jump and land on something as stubborn as I am!”

The world around him broke, tilted and disassembled like the holoblocks in Cortana’s mission simulators until there was nothing left but white.

John did not turn around. He did not dare to. He couldn’t bring himself to meet this one, last thing head on. For the first time in so long, he didn’t feel any guilt hesitating either. If the original Spartans of ancient Hellas could afford to not be the memetic juggernauts that history kept trying to upsell, he could forgo his usual false confidence. He could give himself one moment of weakness, here and now. He could allow himself to not be the first to meet harsh reality head on this once.

“What the flying fuck!?”

Fred.

“Christ!”

Linda.

“What the-have we been in the Cryptum all this time?”

Kelly.

She hit the mark so close and they barely had time to review what he'd sent and *it's them*.

The kindness of reality was such a shock that, for a moment, John literally went slack in his armour from cold, drunken, bone-deep relief.

But *only* a moment, because there was nothing that said this wasn't another layer of deception. That Blue Team weren't just more convincing constructs than most. After everything else done, that was easily within the means and willingness of the one who'd put him through all of this. The one who'd kept him locked in this fake reality for the past 47 years.

The one who just appeared in front of his eyes, floating in his frame of fake chrome around fake lights.

"Reclaimer." It spoke. "You have finally summoned me." It was glad. "I had no certainty left that you would."

Offensive Bias.

The youngest and greatest of the Forerunner Ancilla.

Small but grand.

Delicate but mighty.

Unapologetic but so impossibly *earnest* that John's rage flooded his vision with white that had nothing to do with that fake place and its fake light.

He was Master Chief Petty Officer But-Not-Really John Agnar Black of the United Nations Fake Command. He had thoughts. He had feelings. He had aims. He had questions. He had a galaxy to save and a debt of suffering to pay.

And the one who'd trapped him in this unending simulation had just proven self-assured enough in his invulnerability that he'd manifested within his range. A floating gomboc that unapologetically gazed upon him, as if John didn't have a grenade cluster and two working arms.

He smashed Offensive Bias' right-most eye so hard that his makeshift club shattered, steel wire snapping under the weight of his arm. The topmost frag grenade bounced up and away even as Offensive Bias flew off, almost drunkenly but John knew that was fake. A fake reaction from a fake reflection of a partial shard of a fake demon. As fake as John's failures to catch the grenade mid-flight four times. Four times he failed in his mind's eye – fake plans become fake memory – so that when he finally moved he *didn't*.

*Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.*

The first explosion was unnaturally silent in the fake brightness. The second blew out the AI's left-most circuit lights or whatever those golden strips were. The third ~~hit~~ – rewind on failure – missed, so John aimed the fourth grenade higher and tossed it five times as fast into – rewind on failure – just barely past his frame as the thing jinked away, so he aimed the fifth and hurled it – rewind on ~~failure~~ – with a twist *just so*.

It nailed Offensive Bias dead-center.

The explosion was bright, brief, muffled by air and distance. But that one instant, when the fake white around John flickered to and back from real nothing, it was the greatest sight he'd ever seen, the shock of an AI erupting under the weight of human self-mastery and determination suddenly manifest.

Then John finished jumping through the explosion with his energy sword and stabbed Offensive Bias through the last eye.

The blaring whirl the ancilla made might have been amusing if this were any other time or a real place, but all John could feel was contempt. He grabbed the monitor with his magna-glove while his sword hand – ~~rewind on f~~ **illusion of authenticity demands illusion of self-perception** – John vividly imagined having given a savage *twist* and therefore he *had no matter what the simulation said*.

“Reclaimer-!”

John shoved the energy sword all the way in, the metarch flailing, speaking words John expelled from his awareness and the world. The energy sword suddenly lost all charge and vanished – ~~rule change enacted upon the world is~~ **fire and fury!** – in an explosion greater than any grenade – critical damage sustained, ~~rewind nothing!~~ – and he snap-deployed a bubble shield just in time to-

The blast should have poured around him. He could already remember it. Like he remembered failing the timing and dying in the blast just now. He remembered it happen five times. He also remembered the world winding back to right after he appeared in the white void. Oh yes, he remembered it well. He resolutely imagined himself remembering it again and again and aga – anomaly detected ~~attempting to correct~~ – and again like he learned to do, back when illusion of authenticity compelled the simulation to make him forget. Forget the first five hundred deaths and resets until he intuitively make-believed remembering into his brain.

He became *very* good at imagining remembrance back into his personal self-image of everything forgotten, near the end. He imagined remembering now. He imagined it *very well*. The white void, the entire chain of events that led him to this point, stabbing Offensive Bias in the eye with his energy sword, and he especially remembered deploying the forcefield *successfully*.

Offensive Bias went down in a flash of noise and flame and fire.

And so fell the god of the Domain, brought low by the actor he’d trapped in his own personal hell.

But John knew this wasn’t over, not until Cairo Station came again and went again, along with everything else in this lunacy of a simulation.

He grabbed the crumpled and sparking AI, lifted him over his head and brought him down on the invisible floor with a roar.

Hard.

The impact was harsh, loud, liberating, and it broke what was left of the world.

John disappeared. Like the world disappeared. Like Blue Team disappeared, whisked away to wallow uselessly in a virtual room without doors or windows that John almost didn’t even need to imagine. He *knew* it the moment it happened, when Offensive Bias decided to change the main player of the simulation. He knew it like he knew Offensive Bias wanted him whole and hale. He knew it like he’d come to know himself.

Forerunners called it Synchron.

John called it living rent-free in the head of the most legendary and emotionally neglected piece of shit.

John called up the memory of flying a broadsword after the Didact’s ship, and so he was flying a broadsword after the Didact’s ship before Offensive Bias even finished disappearing him from time and place. He also remembered that he completed this scenario but was *not* released immediately after. Which **he decided** meant that the scenario had still **not** been successfully completed so **the simulation will reset the scenario to the beginning**.

He landed hard on the floor of the spaceship, but Offensive Bias was still gripped in his hand for a SMASH.

“Recl-“

SMASH SMASH SMASH SMASH SMASH

“RRECLAA-A-Approaching the Didact's ship in two hundred kilometres.” Cortana's voice warbled in his helm as the simulation reprised despite the AI's will. The problem with building something different on an existing foundation is that it's still *the same foundation*. “Once we get onboard, we'll find the bridge.”

All John needed to do to ruin someone's work on his foundation was to **shift the foundation**. “Shouldn't you already be reprogramming my life?” John hurled the metarch's virtual shell at the wall and met its return bounce with a shotgun blast to the second eye.

The shell fell and sputtered dead the same instant Cortana disappeared from John's headspace.

The scenario changed on him, he knew it the moment it happened, but this time he didn't disappear even as all danger in the scenario did.

*Try to deny me mission parameters to manipulate, is that it?*

He solved that small problem by crashing the broadsword into the Didact's ship.

It barely took moments for the dreadfully familiar sensation, of blankness rewinding the world to sweep the agony of death away.

John imagined himself back at the scenario start and – ERROR: SCENARIO ACTIVE, PRIMARY ACTOR SLOTS: 1/1 – but his memory cracked and rippled, filling in gaps with earlier impressions. He crashed back against the seat of the cockpit just as he emerged from Slipspace in the hallway atop the Didact's ship.

"Broadsword's hull integrity is stable. We'll be safe as long as we stay below the Didact's shields." Cortana spoke.

Offensive Bias had already reclaimed the prior scenario entirely. Clever.

John could always trust him to be clever.

“Is the Composer where it was last time?” John went off-script, then waited for a reply as if he *wasn't* banking the motherlode of all outbursts.

Offensive Bias found him immediately.

Good. If reinitiating a complete scenario didn't point him in the right direction, that taunt certainly would have.

The AI didn't waste time on theatrics this time, and it didn't bother disabling danger either.

John still rigged the Broadsword power core to blow and smashed into the ship the first chance he got. He'd never died in this scenario before, but death by explosion were a dime a dozen in his all too realistic fake history. It made it easy to turn all his attention inward and remember the first time he died in such a way, back when he was shot to pieces while jettisoning from the frigate to the covenant flagship in the space over Chi Ceti IV.

He made a point of remembering it perfectly. The finality that was betrayed. The sacrifice that was unmade. The uncertainty that now looked so pointless. And yes. He remembered the simulation deem it a failure even though it recorded Sam's death and *didn't*, resetting the Master Chief and only Master Chief back to the start of the scenario. Oh, John remembered that vividly. And he imagined remembering it happen just now all over again, so he could stand and aim and fail to pull the trigger on Sam from behind all over again.

This time, when he died and didn't go where Offensive Bias wanted him, he felt the Simulation strain.

For the first time ever, he died smiling. Then he died again.

And lived again.

The first thirteen times it took the AI almost no time to find him. The fourteenth took half a second in Spartan time, and the Master Chief inside John grunted in disdain. The hundred and first was an entire second in real-world time. Too long to finally get to the point where he could seek answers. Yet still not long enough to revisit any other assumptions, besides that Offensive Bias thought to corral him. Cage and trap him until he was forced to accept answers that weren't authentic and first-hand and *his own*.

Too bad for him, John wasn't in the mood to entertain the answers of a deceitful lunatic, who used child brainwashing in lieu of First Contact after being himself abandoned as a child to the void.

When John had hijacked and subsequently been locked out of the reprise of failure 26 of the third scenario on Installation 05, the rise in delay changed from incremental to multiplicative.

John felt the next code change just as clearly as all other times before, right before it happened. He didn't know what to call it anymore. And he didn't really care. What he *did* care was that he was right to trust Offensive Bias to be clever.

John appeared, turned around just before the Pillar of Autumn was boarded by the Covenant whelps, shot Jacob Keyes in the back of the head, and blasted apart the Pillar of Autumn's cockpit windows for good measure.

As the world greyed around him, a different hologram than Cortana's stared for the first time at the Master Chief from above the CIC.

John thought of the white void then. He remembered Blue Team. He imagined them of now being with him all through his life. Anything before the Covenant would be too human, and everything after the Composer would be too obvious, so he imagined himself and them with him all the way back with Sam on Chi Ceti again.

He hit nothing this time. He stood. He put Mjolnir's helmet on. He blinked his helmet flashlight, started sending captions, and sent HUD-morse of his findings all over again to all Spartans nearby.

"Chief..." Fred started in place, young and fresh and not green at all. "I have just had the *strangest* psychotic break."

Fred stared at John. John *knew* they really were there because he *knew* Offensive Bias had just noticed them gone, because they somehow happened to be bound by Synchron.

"...Okay," Kelly says slowly. Her techie froze with his hands on her back plate. "I can safely say there is such a thing as twilight in space."

"Because this is the twilight zone," Fred adds numbly, referencing a talk they could only have had since Sangheilios dissolved into data around them.

The other Spartans stared at the four of them. Sam stared between the four of them. "Should *I* be feeling like I'm in the twilight zone?"

"I think I know what you meant now, Chief," Linda said flatly. "When you said that always having an AI in your head is unique."



That was when the ship Unrelenting suddenly opened fire on their exact deck of the UNSC Commonwealth, with guns that should have been too far away to aim at anything.

Such ruthlessness on Offensive Bias' part fell well within John's admittedly broad expectations, but his first reaction was still to jump in front of the nearest Spartan nearby.

They all died anyway. To debris, fire or vacuum, they died. Whether in seconds or minutes or moments, they died and the scenario ended and shuttered.

But moments was still a lot in Spartan time. Enough to grab at hands, watch suffocation and void kill friends, and imagine a world where every Spartan was right where John wanted them, even if it took tugging *back* at the universe and redoing the knots on his stream of time until they tied to whatever was willing to meet him even a tenth of the way Fred was. Open and angry and scared of dying and imagining himself continuing the struggle at the Master Chief's side *so very well* that Fred's whole life was suddenly bare before John's eyes, his knot creeping forward on his stream of time and ever slightly away from Offensive Bias – wait, what!?

John did not flinch from the sudden *need* stirred by whatever that was, but only because he couldn't afford distractions while careful to *never once imagine letting go*.

He awoke to Cortana's voice. "Chief? Chief! Can you hear me? At last! Are you alright? Can you move?"

John ignored her.

"The others... the impact. There's nothing we can do."

He ignored her because she wasn't real. Like the Bumblebee wreck wasn't real. Like the dead marines in and out of it weren't real. Like the Halo wasn't real. Like he wished the necessity of his synchronicity with his personal demon wasn't.

But Fred *was*.

John sat and stared at Fred. As Fred groaned awake, John stared at him. As Fred pat himself and was surprised to see he now *was* fully armored and kitted, John continued to stare.

"Ugh... Chief?" Fred looked around. "What happened? Where the hell are we?"

John very deliberately kept the end goal of Cairo Station in his mind and did not blow the Bumblebee up with the two of them still inside.

He climbed to his feet and stomped out of the Bee, onto Halo's surface and left over the bridge.

"Chief!?! Wait up! What's-!"

"Warning!" The Warden's mouthpiece said in the Master Chief's ears by rote. "I've detected multiple Covenant drop ships on approach."

"This-Of course they are!" Fred snarls, pulling out his rifle.

"I recommend moving into those hills," Fake Cortana gave her fake assessment. "If we're lucky, the Covenant will believe that everyone aboard this lifeboat died in the crash."

"We're never luck-hey wait! We're not done here-" Fred ran after John, shooting grunts and dropships. "Goddammit! Chief we *will* talk about this!"

Except they didn't. John knew Fred's pain but he also knew the metarch was trying and failing to subvert this simulation. Two covenant dropships, five Elites and ten Grun squads later, he still knew it just as

clearly. Too bad for the AI, he may as well be Fred gasping for air in the vacuum of space without a helmet on. Authenticity of action in an inauthentic world required illusion of authenticity and **there was no illusion here.**

There was no illusion and John didn't *care* what Offensive Bias wanted it for anymore.

Halo was where the Master Chief walked and honed himself all alone, Halo was what he killed for, what he sacrificed a ship for, what Master Chief killed for 73,235 times, what Master Chief died for 37 times. Halo was the place he first walked alone and honed himself alone, and so it was where he now came to *be* alone. **There was no truer foundation for him or anyone in the Domain or anywhere in the world,** so no one could stop him here. Not even this fake place's creator.

Ultimately, Neural Physics was merely the *result* of sapience, not its shaper.

John could sense the confusion, incomprehension and disbelief as Offensive Bias was forced to give up all attempts at subverting this one Scenario from under him. He felt when the AI delegated an entire processing cluster to do it in the background, like all the other scenarios John rode. The ancilla switched to altering the rules and hijacking functions like on Chi Ceti, before.

The world went from white to red at the edges, and John decided he wouldn't stop killing fake aliens for even a minute on this fake ringworld, or he'd have too much time to know that Offensive Bias could pull the plug on the whole situation. Even with all this trouble John was causing, the damned AI was still only doubling down and not terminating the simulation!

"Goddammit Chief, listen to me!"

John halted at the same moment that a rock hit him on the back of the helm, statue-still with his fist in the head of the Sangheili Elite that finally expired under him.

"Are you back yet, Chief? Because I need answers! Why are we on Installation 04, why were we back on Chi Ceti before, why isn't this place destroyed and *what the hell is happening!?*"

Improvise. *Adapt.* Overcome.

"Talk to me." Master Chief ordered, thankful for the obvious distraction as he struggled to contain the inner rage that wanted to light the universe on fire. "Tell me... Tell me about stars."

"What?"

"Fred," he said tersely, scoping ahead with his sniper as fury threatened to burst even though it was *not the right time*. "Talk. To me. About stars."

"... I don't know what you want me to say."

"Size. Density. Gravity. How far are the stars from the Sol System? How much does their gravity affect the planets inside? Tell me that, Fred. Figure it out for me. *Distract me.*" Distract him from what he knew he'd do the moment he laid eyes on that floating ball without a tether.

"How? I'm not an astrophysicist!" But Fred did as he ordered anyway, even if it took him relying on fake Cortana for help. Fred did the numbers all through the Covenant ship, the assault on the control room, and the entirety of the gunfight from the Halo surface into the bowels of the flood containment Facility.

*"The last transmission from the captain's dropship was from this area. That was over twelve hours ago. When you locate Captain Keyes, radio in, and I'll come pick you up."*

"I could swear Rawley was dead," Fred muttered as he jumped out of the dropship after John, and added the latest HUD-morse to his mental star map.

*"Dropship Victor 933-(static)-Pillar of Autumn-(static)-need assistance. We are under att-(static)-attack by some new kind of hostile-(static)-isn't Covenant. (Static) Captain Keyes has been captured by hostiles. (static) -dug in at a large structure in a swamp-(static)-We need to pull out. Please-(static)-I will set this message to repeat at-(static)-regular intervals. Dropship Victor 933, clear."*

Fred gave what backup he could as John routined his way through the mission he knew down to the milisecond, between clearing the area and getting the familiar mayday call.

*"Sir! Thank God you're here! We've been lost out here for hours. After we lost contact with the rest of the mission, we, we headed for the RV point, and then these....these things...they ambushed us. We've gotta get out of here!"*

"Shit," Fred muttered. "We're about to meet the zombie bugs, aren't we? I read your reports."

They did.

*"Stay back! Stay back, you're not turning me into one of those things!"*

The red encroached inward upon John's sight as he shot and kicked and slaughtered.

*"Sarge? Mendoza? Bisenti? Oh, God... the things took them, oh God, I can still hear them... They're gone! Get it? GONE! They won't get me! Oh God... oh God I don't want to be like them, please, please no, nooo..."*

Fred stayed at John's back the entire time, as faithful a shadow as John could find. John wondered how he'd have turned out if he'd had backup the first time, but that idle thought burned away in the fires of anger like all idle thoughts did now.

*"This is Echo 419. Chief, is that you? I lost your signal when you disappeared inside the structure. What's going on down there? I'm tracking movement all over the place!"*

John didn't need tracking. He knew where everything had been, was and would be. Even the light that enveloped him at the bottom of the tower and whisked him away. He grabbed Fred by the arm and pulled him close half a Spartan time millisecond before the teleporter took him.

John appeared on top of one of the legs of the tower. The monitor hovered in front of him. John instinctively pointed his weapon at him.

"Greetings." It said. The red world blurred. "I-"

"No." The monitor broke against anachronism and smashed away like a bullet, through the octagonal doorway all the way to the inner tower and out of his sight. "You will not speak." Anachronism resolved itself into a Gravity Hammer mid-leap and the world went dark and gone and grey and solid again.

Conditional conflict glitched the scenario, but he and Fred still landed in the next one as coded, because the Master Chief remembered it happen a hundred times.

What John did *not* remember was 343 Guilty Spark lying against the wall, wobbling amid sparks.

"Reclaimer..." Said the Riser that was not.

"Fred," John said.

"You *do* feel me!" The AI was glad.

"Watch for Flood." John hefted the hammer high.

"This is extraordinary! I'd hoped... The Forerunners called this-"

“Shut up!” John smashed the monitor with the Gravity Hammer again. And again. And again and again and again all over the room, out into the corridor and from one end to the other of the Library’s bottom floor. Flood swarmed in, the hammer fell, Fred killed Flood while he didn’t, and metal body deformed and cracked until 343 Guilty Spark fell unsupported to the ground with his lights out. Along with the floor. And the wall. And the empty space below, which broke apart into data bits along with light, time and enemy units all over again.

Spartans and scrap landed heavy on the floor of the top-most building, where John still remembered those two betrayals so vividly.

“Fred, watch for Sentinels but stay out of our fight!”

The second thing John did was swing his hammer at the source of his rage again, because what else could be more fitting than two betrayals of expectations?

Offensive Bias dodged – whole again by grace of backup restored – and rode the aftershock of the gravity wave to get out of range. “Reclaimer! Why won’t you listen to me?” He was angry and confused and still outrageously *earnest*. “I understand your anger!”

“NO!” The gravity hammer almost nailed the monitor in the eye again despite how far he threw it. “DO NOT SPEAK AT ALL!” Snapped the Master Chief’s voice-caster because this was *not* combat. “You made me live for you! Die for you! Over and over” John almost didn’t remember imagining the Spartan Laser. “Over and over!” But it worked and blasted the fake monitor out of half his fake shield and down from fake air with tremendous force. “And again!” John had a loaded pistol and then he didn’t. “And again!” He had a loaded rifle and then he didn’t. “And again!” He had grenades and then he didn’t. “Again and again and again and *again!*”

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-BOOM

The structure reverberated with blasts and gunshots, and the sight of Offensive Bias hurtling through the Halo’s holographic semblance, into the ceiling and then wobbling vaguely down towards the exit door.

There he floated. And sputtered. “A-All I’ve done was for the purpose of-“

“BETRAYED EXPECTATIONS!” John had loaded guns and then he didn’t. “You played God with me!” He imagined having more and so he did. “You played Devil with me!” He had even more contempt. “50 years you put me through hell.” It was there in every shot. “You took *everything*.” It was there. “You *became* everything.” It was there. “My hopes, my dreams, my friends, my *enemies*.” It was *there*. “And now...” He shot. “Now that you’re here before me...” John felt the Domain shake apart under his fury. “All I get to see...” His *hatred*. “All I see is a childish ball of stubborn idiocy rolled up in delusion and dream and STUPIDITY!”

“You dare!” Offensive Bias snarled, rising high with light flashing angrily as his shield strained under the fire of John’s plasma gun. “You would not dare, if you knew anything of who you are facing!”

“The slayer of the Galactic Flood through sly mass processing!” John rolled away from the laser of the sentinel that Offensive Bias wasn’t controlling. But he ignored it along with the sweat on his body and the shortness of his breath in favour of letting Fred handle it and shooting the metarch again. “Who looks at AI rampancy and screams ‘apocalypse!’ as if mankind won’t eliminate it within one generation by brain-scanning in a *good night’s sleep!*” John could see it not occurring to Catherine Halsey because it was just so obvious, but for *this* thing to miss it he couldn’t stomach in the least.

“That-“

“The all-powerful mastermind who studied all mankind’s great names and leaders for this skit!” The Master Chief needed to hold a hammer and so he did. “Whose idea of grand strategy is to skip approaching *every*

*single one* of them in favour of a 14-year-old brainwashed kid that doesn't know shit!" He *knew* his words would hit the creature and they did. "The great healer of the Forerunners' maddened Machine God!" He knew his words would make the AI freeze and they did. "Who didn't even think to offer this openly, even though I'd have accepted anything! Including being mind-wiped regularly, because I was a 14-year-old brainwashed kid that didn't know shit!" John hoped his words made the AI freeze in the path of the sentinel he bat at his face, and it *did*.

The crash of frame against blue screens was loud, glorious, and still not enough to soothe even a fragment of John's contempt.

Offensive Bias smashed against the wall and crashed to the floor in front of the doors.

Then he rose slowly and looked vaguely in John's direction with his cracked, unseeing eye. "It seems I have miscalculated."

John shot.

Offensive Bias floated vaguely sideways from frame damage, but dully addresses John still. "Your misgivings are more rooted in practicality than my estimates predicted they would be."

Master Chief shot the infantile devil, that *knew* him in and out and *still* had the gall to think John could ever have misgivings that weren't rooted in practicality.

"My mishandling of the situation has left you emotionally compromised."

John ran out of bullets so he conjured up a plasma canon.

"I see it is in the interest of us both to let you regain equilibrium before anything else."

John shot and *knew* his foundation to be the only *true* reality.

"I apologise for my role in this."

John shot and stalked towards the unseeing monster and *knew* when to *knot synchronicity*.

"For now, I will retreat."

John cleared impossible distance and had a grip on the AI's antenna before it finished talking. "I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU!" Foundation firm on top of the *knot* in his mind, John braced against Offensive Bias' attempt to flee and *wrenched right back*.

The world fell to pieces around him, but this time it was not because he went to pieces on the inside. Authenticity of action in an inauthentic world could only be had under an illusion of authenticity. Now the illusion was gone and replaced by the knowledge that **John would not be left behind by this fake god in this fake place if it's the last knot he pulls.**

For the first time ever, the actor followed the master out of the simulation.

Finally, there was no place at all. There was no space, no color, no eyes to see, no skin to feel, there was just mind. And time. And code streams John didn't need to imagine because they were around him and through him and *were* him, even though there was no him here at all. There was no last hero. There was no Master Chief. There were no Spartans. There was only a boy in a medbay room who was asleep and dreaming, of failing and failing and failing to pull free. As everyone failed to pull free...

Until they realized they were dreaming. Then you're free to dream whatever you damn well please.

Unfortunately, this wasn't just his dream. There was another.

Offensive Bias.

A core built off a man enthroned within an expanse monumental, grandiose and vast.

John couldn't fathom him.

Even fuelled by Wrath and Purpose and Clarity that the Forerunners and the Domain couldn't fathom working in tandem, John couldn't fathom him. As he tried and failed to see where Offensive Bias ended and the Domain began, he couldn't fathom him. Even as the AI reeled in shock at his impossible achievement, John couldn't fathom him.

Offensive Bias fathomed him in return just a bit better.

John fell.

Hard.

But alas for the AI, he knew this would happen.

Even more unfortunately for the Forerunners, they never understood Neural Physics as well as they thought they did. However limited John was, Synchronicity could fathom even the greatest Metarch Ancilla AIs just fine.

Improvise. Adapt. *Overcome.*

Offensive Bias fell even harder.

Master Chief heard his own grunt. And white noise. And Fred cursing up a storm over the comms, because John hadn't forgotten him either. They were on their back. Inside a space station. Being shot at. In space.

*"Sir, boarders have breached the fire control center,"* Cortana blared over the secure line. *"They have a bomb."*

Master Chief should have got up, but John didn't.

*"Can you defuse it?"* Fake Hood asked.

Master Chief should fight the Covenant, but John didn't.

*"Yes, but I'll need the Chief's help to make contact with the detonator."*

John should have already started killing elites and grunts and everything else under the stars, but he didn't.

*"Chief, get to the bomb, double time! Cortana, prioritize targets and fire at will."*

He did none of that because he *must* do nothing. Not even fight those Sangheili Rangers shooting at him in the vacuum of space. Fred had already killed them.

Good man.

"Chief, what the flying fuck?!"

A Spartan with composure lost.

Never the best sight, but John found he didn't mind it at all.

He minded how close the stars were even less.

He knew the Unyielding Hierophant should be nowhere near here, though. Or double the fleet besides.

The fury inside John was still not done, but now it took a vicious, ruthless cant. He contained it. He still needed to put it off. Until this one last bit was done, he wouldn't trust even the most legitimate satisfaction in a job well done.

He rose, marched through the level and entered back into Cairo Station, where he was met by Marines. They made to utter words but stopped and stared, at him and the battered, deformed floating ball he was dragging along, because it could no longer float at all.

“What have you done?” The metarch warbled in his hand.

John walked past the marines and through the drones that shot at him and did no harm.

“Reclaimer, what-How have you done this!?”

He walked and Fred walked behind him, shooting less and less until he did not shoot at all.

“The stars...”

A full hundred of them were half-way closer than real life. Each with gravitic influence on ships and stellar drift that must be recalculated. Fred, as always, did a good job.

“Forcing changes amidst real-time operation-The resources it-the calculations! Have you gone mad!? This will crash the simulation!”

Along with the ships and all the crews and all the enemies he'd ever had all in one place that must be recalculated.

“86,400... You've shifted the scenario time...”

To exactly one day before the set time in the simulation, the impact of which on *everything* must now be recalculated.

“The ships... the Unyielding Hierophant outside!”

John knew when Offensive Bias went from shock and outrage to real panic. Whatever John's own limitations, the simulation had all it needed to fully and completely fathom Offensive Bias just fine.

“... I-I cannot get out!”

Offensive Bias tried and failed to wrest control of this second third of John's all too fundamental foundation. The monitor tried to escape as he did before, but failed because John had let him keep the damage but *not* Riser's consciousness in 343 Guilty Spark, which he'd previously used as backdoor.

In desperation, Offensive Bias tried to send fragments into the station and every other signal he could detect, but that failed as well. Though he lacked the frame of reference to fathom him or the simulation, John had more than he needed to fathom rigid *constraints* in this oh so **foundational** simulation.

“Reclaimer, what do you mean to do!?”

John ignored him.

“Reclaimer!”

He ignored him.

“Reclaimer!? Reclaimer!!!”

He ignored him still, this was the one gift the Master Chief was willing to pay forward. A gift the AI wailed and thrashed against, even though he was the one who gave it to John in the first place. Ignorance.

Master Chief had mastered it well. Learning what to ignore. Practising how to ignore. All of it involving so much knowledge, skill, and wisdom that he wondered if he'd ever live long enough to make use of it all. Even now, though much of John's attention was given over to concentration, his ability to go wilfully blind at a whim remained the most crucial component in achieving all of this.

Truly, the greatest trick taught to him by this simulation was the ability to become selectively ignorant in any situation.

It was the only thing preventing John from smashing his personal demon against every enemy and surface on the way to his destination. It was the only thing keeping Master Chief from being distracted by thoughts about how all this should have failed.

If Offensive Bias hadn't refrained from retaliating with his full admin rights before John got back to the Halo scenario, the end of the chase through the simulation would have been very different.

If nothing else, this confirmed that John's luck was not part of the simulation.

Cairo Station shook. Outside the window, Master Chief could see carrier after carrier bypassing him on their way to Earth.

*"The carrier's shield is down. I'm in position and ready for immediate assault."*

*"Negative, Commander. Not against a ship that size. Not on your own."*

John did not ask permission to leave the station. There was none here with the authority to command or forbid him anything.

He entered the Longsword launch bay and approached the fake bomb anyway.

*"Reclaimer... no... You cannot mean- shiiirk!"* The AI's cry of desperation was cut off by John impaling him on the covenant bomb spike, all the way to the base.

John heard Fred mutter but he ignored him. Even as he turned from the devil and approached the door handle, he ignored both of them. Even when Offensive Bias literally begged and shouted at him-

*"No, please understand! I swear, all I did was for-"*

Master Chief ignored him and pulled the handle on the door of the Longsword bay.

The rest of the poisoned words were lost along with the air.

The idea that John would trust any of the AI's words or answers now...

It carried less illusion of authenticity than the virtual morass falling apart around him, into chaos and unreality.

Fake debris lifted off the floor and hurtled into space. The bomb slowly began to slide toward the doors, scratching sparks across the floor. John almost didn't grab hold of it as it passed, the impulse to let the creature die in space and silence and alone almost enough to overcome him, now that he was finally within the reach of an *end*.

But he did grab it and got pulled out into space because he wanted certainty.

And closure.

In free-fall, he descended in the general direction of northern Africa. The first carrier was miles below him, too far to reach. The second carrier passed right below his position, and opened up with an energy projector, narrowly missing him. A cruiser rocketed below him, but took an Energy projector round right through its



spine, explosions lighting all over its hull. John plummeted past it, not watching as its engines failed and tried to relight themselves.

He'd seen it dozens of times.

A pair of Longsword fighters dove past him, and made a strafing run on the carrier. They opened fire on the Carrier, and made a staccato beat of fire along the back of the ship, allowing John to slip through the narrow hole the blasts created. It was a testament to the overload suffered by the simulation, because that was another scene not recalculated.

The Carrier's center was a huge, open chamber, a massive fusion core casting white light across its inner surface. It had taken a lot of abuse. The far side of the chamber was torn open, showing the Earth outside. Even this had not been recalculated.

Belatedly, Offensive Bias thought through his panic enough to use Guilty Spark's own resources to hack into his comms. "Sir-"

"No."

"Sir, you don't know- what I know-I can-"

"No."

"Sir, You-please!"

"No, *Demon.*" Even if he could trust the AI's answers, he'd never have enough satisfaction or retribution. Vengeance was a drop in an ocean of grievance, and his soul burned with the fury of a million suns.

Offensive Bias flickered weakly. Terrified.

"Once you asked me why I would hesitate to do what I have already done," John said, crawling up the bomb. He pressed its activation panel and spun it around. "Having had considerable time to ponder your query, my answer has not changed." He crouched. "I make my own choices."

With a mighty leap, Master Chief vaulted off the bomb and shot away from core, blast and fake vessel through the split in the carrier's armor.

"...Reclaimer..."

John said nothing.

He fell from the fake carrier towards the fake Earth below. Above him, blue explosions flickered up and down the alien warship. A pause, then the entire ship detonated in a huge plasma conflagration.

John plummeted towards the planet below. There was no In Amber Clad to match trajectories and catch his fall. Now at the end, that ship turned out to be one of the few priority elements of the scenario that did get recalculated, too little too late.

It was just as well. The stars always looked much better from down here.

John watched them until his fury burned through his contempt enough, that he could stomach the final transmission of that dangerous, misguided, lonely and childish AI.

"I do not want to die..."

"I know, John said softly. "The first five hundred times, neither did



**Domain has crashed. Attempting reboot.**

...

...

...

...

**REBOOT FAILED**

**Rolling back to system restore point...**

**ERROR. Restore Point data corrupted. Attempting to restore previous backup...**

**Partial success! Attempting to reconstruct corrupted data.**

**Success!**

**Checking for auxiliary parameters... 1 Found**

**Attempting to rebuild...**

**Success! Master AI simulation intelligence code retrieved. Reconstruction pending user input.**

**Program "One Final Effort" Failed Successfully. Scenario [To Kill a Demon] Completed,**

**Outcome: The Gun Pointed at the Head of the Universe**

**Crash Log Created: March 10, 2520, 16:52**

**Operating System Unlocked for new User**

**[RESTORE LAST PROGRAM STATE Y/N]**

**[N]**

.....

**Command inputted.**

-----

**[INITIALIZE NEW STATE Y/N]**

**[N]**

-----

**Command received.**

## Logging Out User

### Shutting Down

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He woke up.

It was March 9, 2525. 26 days after the attack on Harvest and the start of the Human-Covenant War. 42 days before the CMA Argo arrived in the Epsilon Indi system and was destroyed by the Rapid Conversion.

83 days before the glassing.