The Song of Infinity

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/863.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Hetero (F/M)
Fandoms:	Halo (Video Game), Star Wars - All Media Types
Relationships:	Ahsoka Tano/OC, Padmé Amidala/Anakin Skywalker, Meetra Surik/Noble Six | Spartan-B312
Characters:	Anakin Skywalker, Padmé Amidala, Ahsoka Tano, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Commander Cody | CC-2224, Captain Rex | CT-7567, Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, Cortana, Kelly-087, Linda-058, Frederic-104, Dr. Catherine Elisabeth Halsey, United Nations Space Command Characters, Thel 'Vadam | The Arbiter, Rtas 'Vadum | The Shipmaster, Jedi Order, Jedi Council, Meetra Surik, Noble Six | Spartan-B312
Additional Tags:	Moeblob Meetra Surik, Ahsoka Tano Needs A Hug, Spartans Need a Hug, Spartans Are Professionals, Uploading here for the first time, Hello FF.lol
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-10-31 Words: 39,377 Chapters: 10/?

The Song of Infinity

by Johnnieboy11

Summary

As the battle of Christophsis is ongoing, a new faction emerges over the crystalline battlefield. Confusion, worry and fear permeate the Republic lines until a first shot is fired in anger by the Confederacy. A change stirs in the Force, the Reclaimers are awakening and the Galaxy at large is powerless to stop them.

Chapter 1: Prologue

Scarlet bolts flashed above, flaring on crystalline outcrops that surrounded modular buildings. The return fire was immediate, dark-blue plasma firing in a line of tracers from atop a high-rise in volleys. White armor glistened underneath the distant sun of the planet of Christophsis as the Galactic Republic met the Confederacy of Independent Systems in bloody, close quarters battle.

Clone troopers of the 212th Attack Battalion, clad in their familiar orange-striped Phase One armors and wielding the Republic's two mainstay handheld infantry blasters, the DC-15A Blaster Carbines and Heavy Rifles, met an oncoming battalion of Droids on this flank. The 212th's Clones were some of the most proficient troops, trained to resist the harsh realities of war with stoicism and stiff upper lips, courtesy of their general. They, like many of their brothers, had survived the Crucible of Geonosis, the first and hardest-fought battle, where the Jedi and they were first tested in the true meaning of Warfare.

Clone Trooper Waxer was, however, a rather fresh, new deployment. He took cover as scarlet bolts of superheated ionized gas struck the ceiling above him, sparks raining down onto his helmet. He was 212th. He was new, of course. Fresh out of the pod, a 'Shiny' as some had called him early on. Didn't really matter to him, honestly. He was still here to blast clankers and keep his brothers safe.

He shifted his fire toward the platoon of desert sand-colored B1 Battle Droids that had opened up on him. The B1s were ugly, lanky bastards. Barely capable of movement, much less sentient thought, they were the CIS's main battle line. Cheap, easy to manufacture, but dumb as bags of bricks, they were dangerous enough in numbers if the simulations showed anything to him. Their bird-like heads craned up, two black, struck-through visual sensors peering at him with malcontent as he fired back at them, nailing a couple.

He rolled over onto his back and called out, "Boil! Thermal det!" to which his pod-brother threw him the rotund, small grenade. The Clone looked at the grenade and found its priming button. Thumbing the red mark, he heard the grenade start to beep, increasing in cadence, as did the flashing lights on the exposed midsection. He counted two seconds and, on the third, he long-armed it toward the Droids.

The explosion thundered as the thermal detonator went off on impact. Shrapnel and the thermal blast managed to knock the air out of Waxer's lungs even at this distance. Half the platoon of droids had been decimated for sticking too close together. The other half reeled as their audio-visual sensors seemingly needed to reboot from the shockwave. Waxer took this as his chance, standing up and shouldering his DC-15A Heavy Blaster Rifle before thumbing a switch and squeezing. The blaster went off at fully automatic with a high rate of fire. His brothers joined from around him, half-a-dozen clones laying Hell down with blasters.

High enough to rapidly overheat the gun, it seemed. Heat sinks along its thicker barrel opened, forcing Waxer to take cover and vent it. The steam exited at ten, two, four and seven o'clock along the barrel's circular frame, coolant flowing into the weapon's maw to ease the

heat in the coils. He swore to himself, however, as a smart rocket lanced forward and detonated against the thick glass he'd taken cover behind.

"Kriffing bastards brought Supers!" A clone called out, shifting his fire toward the new arrivals.

Two platoons, about forty Super Battle Droids, or BD-2s, lumbered forward toward them. These units were far more imposing. Black and grey bodies with reinforced armor plating all over the important upper body areas. Plating that had just deflected a blaster bolt from a rifle in front of him. Waxer swore to himself and ducked under a barrage of bolts as the machines extended their arms forward and opened up.

"They're gonna get inside!" Boil called out, grabbing his blaster carbine and shifting his aim toward the elevator as the other clones began to pull back deeper into the buildings. The crossing point was on the floor they were on, meaning a sky-bridge between the two buildings. It was lined with barricades meant to protect the Clones as they crossed to and fro to reinforce each-other.

Waxer swore to himself and grabbed Boil by the scruff of his neck, stating, "We gotta get to the others!" even though the auditory sensors in his helmet could pick up a strange whirr, muffled by the glass windows around them. Blaster fire raked the barricades on the sky-bridge as the Clones dashed between them, returning fire sporadically. They noted an entire new Company of B1s advancing toward them and Waxer swore, "Kriffing hell!" as they, too, aimed their blaster weapons at the besieged dozen of clones in the area.

The clones were boxed in for all intents and purposes. That other Company of droids would breach the other building and clean'em all out with the SBDs by sheer number alone. The clones took position in the aforementioned other building now, aiming their weaponry as the elevator ahead let out a ding, followed by the first of the SBDs marching toward them, arm-blasters spitting out plasma.

"They're gonna kriffing kill us..." Boil said as he opened up on the Droids, too, before being forced to take cover behind a wall. The B1s also drew close enough for them to follow their blasters in volleys, meaning things were about to get extremely hot. The Clone swore to himself, then said, "Can't believe we're stuck in this dwang without any backup!"

"We tried calling the General and the Commander! They aren't answering! Must be busy nearby the artillery battery!" Another Clone called out, before his head was taken clean off by a bolt from an SBD.

"Oh, Force!" Another trooper ducked behind cover as a flurry of shots hit the elevator door behind him. He shot the controls by mistake, shutting off the lift. With a groan, he said, "And that's our escape cut...! Blast it..."

"Relax, Kel! We got this!" Waxer reassured him, then ducked under a burst of plasma fire. He poked out and fired his rifle in reply, then ducked back as two rounds singed the floor ahead of him. Beside him, Boil poked and fired his carbine in bursts, forced to hide as well. The Trooper then ducked beside his brother and checked the counter on his clip, shaking his head.

"Do we have this, Wax?" Boil asked him in a whisper.

"Kriffed if I know, but we'll go down swinging..." His pod brother replied. As the whirring from above got louder, Waxer complained, "We're surrounded, we got droids shooting at us and there's an entire new battalion heading toward us! SO, WHAT THE HELL IS THAT NOISE-!?" and he cut himself off as the bridge ahead *exploded* in shards of glass and steel, one of the Supers caught beneath it.

The bridge had been torn in half at the midsection, loose metal piping and reinforcements hanging, wires sparking. Both the Clones and the Droids seemed so dumbfound, they'd actually stopped shooting at one-another for a moment. Waxer looked outside as more thundering crashes and thumps echoed and paused as he saw them in the thin veneer of the smoke and debris they kicked up.

Ovoid pods, made of black metal...

The trooper blanked for a moment, lowering his weapon. A dozen pods had fallen within *meters* of each-other, close enough for whatever was inside to be able to aid each-other, but far away as to not obstruct the large, front-mounted armored doors the Troopers now saw. Doors that popped open as if launched by an explosion. Silhouettes appeared from the pods and the first audible *crack* of weapons fire filtered in.

Waxer turned to the droids, noting that they were distracted, before raising his blaster rifle and calling out, "Now's our chance, Brothers! OPEN FIRE!" as he squeezed the trigger. His brothers, those who survived the onslaught, stood to their feet and lit up the Droids in the other half of the skybridge ahead of them. The roar of gunfire echoed outside as unknown force that had dropped in lit the Droid Company marching toward them *right the kriff* up.

They'd thinned the droids' numbers out considerably, honestly. More Pods wailed as they fell into the battlefield around them. Boil called out, "We oughta pull back! We don't know who the hell just dropped in, they might be hostile to us as well!" before watching as the smoke cleared. The platoon-sized element of soldiers gathered up near the drop site of the pods, most of them wearing black, fully-enclosed armors.

Their leader seemingly ordered them toward the building the clones were in, all while their heavy support element fired heavy weapons at the Droids. Two missiles lanced out from a double-tube launcher. Another shouldered an even heavier weapon. A beam of scarlet energy lanced out toward the Droids. The trooper swept it to the right and it cut a dozen droids in half in one strike.

"Force damn..." Whispered Waxer, "Those are some heavy weapons..."

"They're coming up to us," Boil said uneasily, readying his blaster. They heard the thundering footsteps and prepared to aim their weapons. Waxer, however ,decided to play it smart for once in his life. He pushed Boil's, Kel's and the other's blasters down, before lowering his own. Boil spoke, "Waxer, you sure, brother? This could get us killed if we aren't ready..."

Waxer shrugged, "Worth a shot... We're dead anyway, if they swing the big guns over..."

"True..." Sighed Boil, "Kriff it, alright."

"This is gonna suck," Kel commented as he lowered his blaster to his side, but kept the safety off. The thundering footsteps became louder as the first trooper appeared up the stairs. A strange, fairly smooth rifle lay in his hand as he began to walk up the stairs. He saw that the Clones had their guns down first, then pulled his hand off the weapon's forward grip and lifted it back, balling it into a fist.

"Oh, hell, Gunny..." Groaned a guy behind him, "Friendlies...?"

"Well, they haven't shot at us yet, Romeo..." The leading soldier replied with snark in his tone, leaning his rifle against his shoulder. Thank the Maker these guys spoke basic. He looked to them all and asked them, "You folks friendlies...?" As he and his team filtered in up-stairs. Waxer looked to his team-mates, then to the man in charge, whose name was probably written via weird letters on the small plate above the breastplate of his armor.

Waxer breathed in, then out, and nodded, "We are... Thanks for the rescue."

"Don't mention it," The soldier replied. He paused, blinked and listened in on something coming in on his com frequency, then looked to the soldiers and cleared his throat. He then spoke, straightforward, "I'm Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck, with Alpha Niner. We got shot at by an enemy picket up above and our fleet decided to deploy us here. We're... I guess... Your First Contact ambassadors."

All the remaining clones quickly exchanged some looks, before Kel said, "Honestly, good first impression..."

"Saved our behinds from being overwhelmed," Waxer stated, paused and blanked, then worriedly asked, "Wait a minute. The Republic Navy had this place blockaded and was hunting for the last chunks of the CIS Ships defending Cristophsis while we're busting our behinds down here by trying to root their troops out... W*hat fleet do you guys come from*?"

"Long story," Buck told them, "We'd rather keep it for your bosses..."

The Sniper behind him, one with a more distinct piece of armor, leaned over to another Trooper clad in a similar outfit as buck and whispered, "Why the hell do they all sound the fucking same...?" to which said Trooper simply shrugged. It was confusing to him and his teammates behind him, as well.

"You guys at least ping our fleet to let'em know you're here?" Inquired Boil, "Because I don't think admiral Yularen is gonna be happy to see some new ships floating about..."

"I think our commanders are working on that as we speak..." Buck nodded, then told them, "We oughta go meet your bosses before any further deployments are made. Pretty sure command's about to hot-drop a tank platoon down, though. And we'd like for there not to be any 'friendly' fire incidents..." and shifted his gaze. Waxer nodded, then tapped his com and listened in.

"Commander Cody, sir..." The Trooper began, "Do you copy?"

Static first played over his helmet's speakers, but then the voice began to clear out, resolving into the same voice as the Troopers, "... *Hear you, Trooper. Status on the Eastern Flank?"*

"Held, sir, barely. Intersection should be secure. We're down to half-a-dozen Troopers, but uh..." Waxer looked up to the soldiers around them and hesitantly, "We got saved by some unknowns. They're asking to talk to you, Generals Kenobi and Skywalker and Captain Rex, sir..." before waiting for a response. He looked to the soldiers and motioned to them, stating, "You folks might want to set it to the right frequency... Your coms, I mean."

"We're trying," Another of Buck's Troopers called out from behind the one on the stairs, "Not exactly easy matching freqs with whatever you folks use as coms..."

"*I just spoke with the Generals. Bring them over as fast as possible. We're sending Fifth Platoon to take your places over there,*" The Commander replied, stern as always. The Trooper gave an affirmative, shut off the com and looked at the Troopers ahead of them. With a nod, Buck and his troops stepped aside and the Clones warily readied their weapons.

Before long, Waxer and Boil were leading the survivors of their unit toward the distant sound of combat, alongside the rest of the allied unit. Above them, the wail of engines filled the air. Above them, dozens of small-craft flew in through the thin layer of clouds and Buck called out, "Would you look at that! I think the Navy finally got through to these guys' Fleet!"

"Can confirm!" The other Trooper with the com backpack beside Buck said, "Admiral Lasky just gave us the go-ahead to help these folks! They're working on getting a direct link to the rest of the Republic so we can talk to their leadership and get some fucking context about what's going on!" as he hefted the laser weapon they saw him use to wipe out half a Droid Company.

"Man, this is weird..." Waxer commented as they ran.

Boil snorted, "Tell me about it..."

The Clones passed by a squadron of Speeders that were headed to take their positions with heavier weaponry attached to their vehicles, including a bunch of heavy-duty E-Web Twelves with their tripods and power sources. It only took them a few more minutes of full-sprint before they reached their intended target area:The Republic's FOB. Heavy duty, four-legged artillery cannons stood at the rear, pelting the CIS's lines with boulders of arching plasma.

A hint of PTSD flashed in Buck's mind as they ran, but he squelched it quickly. Those things looked too quote-unquote 'practical' to be Covvie guns. No, they were most definitely made by the locals. He craned his neck, looking up at the dozens of Pelican drop-ships as they swung in toward them. He had activated his IR Beacon to make sure they could track him and his team as they went in for the meeting.

The group began to slow down, several of the panting as they did. Ahead of them, Clones carried the wounded from the battle on this section of highway over to a medical and casualty triage zone, while two men approached, both wearing armor over their shoulders and arms. One wore a darker shade of clothes and looked younger, a blue-eyed, brown-haired fellow.

Beside him, an older gentleman with a cream-colored robe and white armor adorning his shoulders stood. Also blue-eyed, but with ginger hair and one hell of a beard.

The two men approached, both seemingly battered by the enemy's assault, before one of them said, "I suppose these are the newcomers you mentioned in your communications, trooper," as he looked to Waxer. The older man. Waxer nodded and gave a quick salute, as did the others, before the man turned to the new troops and approached them. He spoke, "Admiral Yularen mentioned he received a connection from your fleet up above. I believe you're called the UNSC."

"That's us... You must be one of the local Generals, sir?" Buck asked, shifting his rifle onto his back. A quiet wub echoed as the metallic object clicked into place on a magnetic field generator of some kind. The man nodded, scrutinizing the black-clad drop-troopers. Beside him, the other General seemed happy to see some friendly faces here. The Clones remained unsure of what to think.

"I am," The man nodded, "General Obi-Wan Kenobi, of the Grand Army of the Republic... You are?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck, sir," The man replied, "United Nations Space Command, Orbital Drop Shock Troopers."

"We've never heard of your faction or unit before, Gunnery Sergeant," General Kenobi placed a certain modicum of respect in the way he spoke his words and Buck felt it. He probably spoke with consideration to the fact their Fleet was also here. Kenobi also added, "Though Admiral Yularen was quick to tell us of your fleet's presence. Him and Admiral Lasky should have a meeting soon to discuss the status of your force's presence here."

"So we've been told over radio, sir," Buck nodded calmly, "The hell d'you think they were trying to do by firing on us, sir? Your enemies, I mean?"

"They probably thought you guys were reinforcements for us," The other man spoke. He greeted, "Hi. I'm General Anakin Skywalker, also of the GAR." And he gave Buck a once-over as the middle-aged man removed his helmet, revealing brown, slicked-back hair and a square jawline the likes of which one would usually see in a boxer. Anakin gave the man a nod of approval.

"Sir," Buck nodded back, wearing a half-cocked smile. He watched as the first Pelicans swung in for landing, with Kenobi already calling up Clones to provide the new arrivals proper LZs. They watched as infantry and vehicles were dropped off, disgorging from the backs of the strange transports, rifles in hand and supplies carried on their backs. The Clones watched with muted awe as hundreds of fresh extra troops with weapons and armor the likes of which they hadn't seen before dropped off their equipment.

"... Uh, General...?" Waxer looked over to Kenobi, confused.

"Yes, Waxer?" The man turned toward him.

"... Did we sanction this, sir? Like... Them coming in with their own equipment?" He inquired, motioning to a trio of tanks that rolled toward the combat zone.

Anakin jumped in and said, "They sort of offered to help us. Y'know, 'enemy of my enemy' and all that..." before noticing the armored vehicles on treads rolling out of the landing zone. The allied transports, slightly resembling their own LAATs in doctrine, at least, took off back toward the sky after dropping off their Marines, equipment and supplies, only to be replaced by others.

Buck hummed, "A company of Marines and our entire ODST Battalion are dropping planetside, sir. They should have this glass palace secure before we're in for chow..." and he approached General Kenobi and General Skywalker. Two Clone Troopers, each with distinct armors that denoted them as officers, approached the ranks of the officer cadre as well.

"Would be nice, Sarge," Stated Anakin, then he looked over and said, "Ah, Rex, Cody. Just in time."

"Sir," The two men nodded. Rex was the first to speak, "I take it we're looking at reinforcements from those people the admiral mentioned were in orbit...?" as he saw a squadron of Marines jump out of a Pelican, clad in full camouflage uniforms and armed to the teeth. Rex wasn't one to usually be wary of new allies. Hell, extra guns meant more of his brothers would survive, but the way these people just... Appeared...? Didn't sit well. A gut feeling of Rex's.

Cody seemed to share his thoughts as he examined the troops. Professional and well-equipped, the UNSC's infantry and equipment rushed to where their drop ships must've seen the Front was. The hardened faces of dozens and dozens of Marines, all so varied in features and skin tone and color and gender told the men everything they needed to know about the UNSC's premier fighting force.

"It would seem so, Captain. How are your men handling the idea of having to share a field with newcomers?" He asked the two soldiers, shifting his gaze properly toward his adjutant, Cody. An old friend and a great Commander.

"Murmurs here and there, sir," Cody replied, "Nothing to be heavily concerned about. What we're more worried about is how the talks between Admirals Yularen and Lasky will go, considering we've all just barely met."

"And the enemy of my enemy only takes us so far," Buck murmured, shifting his helmet onto his belt and clipping it there, before crossing his arms to his chest as the two Jedi and the Clone Officers looked to him. He shrugged and said, "Look, I don't know how our leadership's viewing this entire clusterfuck, but I know for a fact the tin cans we just wiped out back there," and he jabbed a thumb back the way they, Waxer and the other clones had come from, "Shot us first. You Reps haven't. Yet."

"And knowing our luck, we hopefully won't," Anakin quipped. He turned to Rex and said, "Make sure we all play nice."

"Already working on it, sir. Helps that they speak Basic, too," The Captain replied half-jokingly. That got a laugh out of Anakin and a few of the other Clone Troopers around, while Buck arched a brow at the comment. There was still Tension in the air, but everyone felt it slowly lessening. The distrust, of course, existed still, specifically because the UNSC had arrived so suddenly and so out-of-nowhere to help them.

"Good to know," Obi-Wan joined in, then looked to Buck, "Gunnery Sergeant, if you'll follow us to our command center, we'll check in with the Admirals, perhaps give our two Credits on the matter at hand and hopefully help forge a little alliance..." words to which the Sergeant nodded and shifted his helmet. He turned to his men and gave them a series of hand signals, then watched the entire Platoon scatter, sans only two. The Sniper and the other one wearing similar armor to Buck's.

Cody and Rex were left to watch as the last UNSC dropships touched down, deploying another platoon of Tanks and two Platoons of Marines, all armed and armored down to the bone. Rex spoke warily, "I think we've just gone in way over our heads, Cody..." as he watched the troopers run, boots thundering, toward their positions. Cody hummed in agreement as he watched the Generals, Buck and his escort walk off.

This was gonna be a *very* interesting evening...

Chapter 2: Jumpoff Point

The UNSC *Infinity*

Above planet Callaghan, Gamma Andromeda System

22:30 Hours,

26th of March, 2559, Standard Military Calendar

Some hours prior to FIRST CONTACT

The most sophisticated warship of the United Nations Space Command was never a place that would rest. Deck crew in the hangars checked and double-checked the Infinity's strike and transport craft complement. Beyond the shields keeping the atmosphere inside the ship, the Carrier's escorting fleet was visible. Autumn-class cruisers, a rebuilding of the Halcyon-class based upon the long-destroyed Pillar of Autumn's specifications, floated next to the vessel, about a dozen of them. Beside them, Phoenix-class support ships, the UNSC's standard Colony and Planetary Invasion support craft, hovered, not to mention the five Marathon-class Cruisers and the slew of Frigates and Corvettes.

In the engine room, the maintenance corps and their Engineer/Huragok brethren worked on keeping the vessel's Forerunner-made engines functioning. One of the human engineers called out to his comrades, "There's been some fluctuations in the power output, but they're within acceptable levels!" words overheard by the woman that had 'bolted' the engines onto the ship.

Doctor Catherine E. Halsey was kneeling by a console whose panel she had removed while working on rerouting a certain amount of power toward the engines to stabilize their output for the jump home. She overheard the words from the Engineer and quickly replied calmly, but loudly, "I am aware, engineer Connelly! I am working to solve that issue as we speak... Fluctuations of even a micron could mean catastrophic issues on not-understood technology such as the Forerunners' engines..."

"Just givin' ya the fifteen min report you asked for, doc!" The man replied jovially.

"My thanks!" Halsey quipped, before leaning further into the console to find the sections of wire coupled to the Forerunner engines themselves. There had been a lot of tech that needed to be cross-integrated and made to cohabitate with each-other in order for the ship to so much as move out of one spot, much less be able to utilize the Slipspace capabilities of their modified Slipspace Drive to its fullest.

She shifted a hint, finding a pair of cables and focusing on them. One was loose, the other was too tight, so she worked on undoing the 'damage' quote-unquote, tightening the second while making the first loose enough for both of them to match in feeling. She pulled a cable taut and made sure the two previous conduits were holding tightly in place. She set the cable aside and hummed, then asked, "What about now?"

"It's starting to stabilize, doc! Suggest leaving the rest to the Huragok!" The Engineer called out, then waved at Halsey from the central command console with a smile. Doctor Halsey nodded back to the man, who said a simple, "Thanks for the help!" that Halsey yet again replied to with a simple nod of her head. She turned and grabbed her tools and tablet, fast-marching toward the rear of the engineering deck, where the trams were.

Boarding one of the trams, which was being guarded by UNSC Marines carrying prototype MA40 Assault Rifles, the woman sat herself down and breathed a sigh of relief, before utilizing the cuff of her left sleeve to rub out some black oil from her cheek. She sighed and looked at the two Marines, both of which had balaclavas covering their faces adn tinted glasses, though their BDUs were the usual forest-green that she'd become accustomed to.

She hummed, pulling up her tablet and starting to write out a report pertaining to the engines for Admiral Lasky to read. She hummed, tapping away on the tablet as the tram stopped at another station. More crew from the lower decks boarded, these ones the waste disposal team. The crew, clad in hardhats and hazmat suits, greeted the doctor as they took off their masks, revealing the tired, sweat-stained faces of young men and women that were proudly doing a service scoffed at by so many others.

Halsey replied kindly to the ones doing the dirtiest of the work aboard the naval vessel, her mind still focused. She was also running calculations pertaining to the chance of a misfire of the Slipspace drive. It was minimal, but still there, which caused some slight fear in the back of the doctor's mind. She did not, however, show it to the crew who was quite literally dealing with the entire ship's refuse.

She heard them talk, laughing about their job together, and was thankful the Hazmat suits they were given could easily 'counteract' the stench of the lower deck's disposal areas somehow. Some chemicals they were imbued with, if the woman recalled, neutralizing the agents that cause the awful smell in the first place. She hummed, tapping away at the report as the tram moved again, stopped at the dorms of the workers, all of whom bid a good day to the doctor, then left again.

Halsey was halfway through writing the report when the tram reached S-Deck. She poked her eyes over the tablet and a faint smile crossed her lips as she saw BLUE Team boarding it, helmets slung under their arms. All of them, save for John, of course. As the two Marines guarding the vehicle snapped a crisp salute at the Chief and his team, she concealed the smile, then greeted, "John, Kelly, Linda, Fred. I hope training the new recruits went well?"

"Evening, Doc," Replied Kelly as she sat down, "It went well, yeah."

"Some of them were more stubborn than the others," John added as he sat himself down. He didn't seem distressed by the notion, however. There was a certain stubbornness necessary to be a Spartan, even a IV. Halsey hummed. The IV class was made up of volunteer soldiers from across the Branches, ranging from ODSTs to even some of the better-performing Marines. Of course, there'd be some pushback to being trained by the 'original' Spartans, so to speak.

"They'll make it yet, John," Linda assured him, taking her helmet off to reveal the short, well-kept scarlet hair and emerald eyes of the sharpshooter. All of them save for John still looked

somewhat younger than their current biological and chronological ages would put them at. John, however, looked somewhat haggard behind his helmet. A given, considering he was tantamount to humanity's savior...

She sighed and said, "The IV class may be hard to deal with... But if they are being trained by my Spartans?" looking upon them all with a hint of pride behind an otherwise flat voice, "I'm certain they'll make for some of the finest soldiers mankind has." And those words seemed to invigorate the Spartans a bit, each now bearing the most imperceptible of smiles. She hummed and blanked, then remembered, "Oh, yes. John..."

The Master Chief looked to her, his visor hiding his face. She shuffled her hand around her pocket until she touched something cold. With a smile, she pulled a glowing crystalline chip out of her pocket, its blue tint so familiar to Blue Team's members, before she extended it to John and said, "Her defragmentation's finally complete. She should have another seven years of life left in her now."

John slowly leaned forward and plucked the chip from the Doctor's hand, nodding slowly in thanks. He then slotted it into the back of his MJOLNIR GEN-3 armor and felt the inside of the helmet cool, the faint blue glow of his HUD intensifying. He heard the yawn of a very familiar voice, followed by the ripple of connection in his HUD. The voice spoke, "Ahh... So, that's how humans feel after a good nap..." jovial. "Hey, John."

"Cortana..." He replied, surprised. He knew Doctor Halsey would manage to fix her, he just didn't expect...

"Not even a 'good morning'? Heh, you must've been worried sick..." The AI said shyly, her frame appearing on the left of John's HUD. She had longer hair that was caught in a ponytail, but she still bore the same facial features and 'other' design features as before, though the symbols on her body were all different. She smiled at him, seeing the slight worry in his eyes slowly being replaced by the usual, stoic calm she knew him for.

"Good to see you..." He said, leaning back into his seat.

"Likewise," She shot back, "And very good to see all of you, Blues."

"Hey, CT," Kelly waved, "Hope the nap was good."

"Cortana," Fred replied with a nod, the smile growing.

"Good to know we have our hacker back in our midst," Linda quipped, leaning forward. Cortana let out a melodious laugh at the quips, then wrote something to Doctor Halsey, clearly, as it appeared on her tablet. Halsey rolled her eyes and pushed a strand of grey hair out of her eyes, before glaring at John, or more specifically at his helmet, because she knew Cortana was peering through the HUD-cams at her.

She replied, exasperated, "No, Cortana, I did not provide any substantial boosts of that kind. It seems hair growth is a sign of lengthening of your processing life. To say, I've added a few extra petabyte-strength virtual cores to assist you in better handling data, plus extra storage

space..." before she heard the AI audibly giggling in John's helmet. Something had changed about her, alright...

The tram came to a halt in the S-Deck barracks. John stood up and said, "This is our stop, doctor."

"Was good seeing all of you, John," She stated, "Take care of Cortana as you have so far..." And she looked up at him. The Chief nodded, before he and the rest of his teammates slipped out of the tram. It left the station again and the two Marines bumped fists, laughing quietly about having met the Chief and BLUE Team. After the War, they'd all become household names among the ranks of the UNSC's infantry.

Good. All SPARTAN classes deserved their time in the limelight. The IIs, whose sacrifices are well-known, the IIIs, whose sacrifices were yet to see the light of day, and the IVs, whose sacrifices were being written today against the Covenant's remnants and the Forerunner Ecumene's few remaining machine servant armies. She sighed, shoulders sagging as she finished the report and mailed it to Lasky.

When she'd met him, he was just captain Lasky. A hardy man from a dead colony, who lost as much as any of them. As the Tram finally reached the last stop, the Bridge, after several more stops, Doctor Halsey disembarked, giving a quaint, friendly nod to the two Marines guarding the door as she left. Tablet slung under her arm and tools on her belt, the doctor marched down the hallways and entered the bridge.

A hive of activity as ever, the central holographic table shined with a three-dimensional multi-color display of local space and the formation of the forty-plus UNSC Vessels escorting the UNSC Infinity. Halsey wasn't sure if she could call this a Battle Group, or if she should call it a Fleet. Task Force Infinity had several dozen combat ships, plus dozens of support vessels and almost three hundred thousand total Marines, ODSTs and other ground personnel.

Callaghan, the emerald gem below them, still shined in the darkness of space, the marks of plasma bombardment, still burning forest fires and smoke pillars visible from orbit, visible on the dark side. A Covenant remnant fleet had emerged over the planet, looking to find some new artifact that could lead them somewhere. The Task Force had arrived just in time to stop the dozen-plus Covenant cruisers and the two Carriers they were using from completely and utterly destroying the planet. And the ground troops did away with their Search Parties.

At the cost of about a thousand civilians and a hundred of their troops, sadly, including a SPARTAN-IV who went by the name of Ross.

Halsey sighed. She saw Lasky on his feet, staring out of the window at the debris of the Covenant vessels floating ahead of them. His grey uniform now bore the exact symbols of the UNSC Admiralty, but he had openly and specifically asked Lord Hood to remain in command of the Task Force. The Infinity was his ship, after all. This was his crew. She couldn't blame him.

Instead, she cleared her throat, taking Lasky's attention toward her. He turned and gave her a half-smile, then saluted, "Admiral Halsey."

"Admiral, please..." Halsey sighed, pinching her brow, "I don't want to be reminded I'm in charge of the Office of Naval Intelligence while on missions like this..."

"Sorry," Lasky chuckled, "Lord Hood says it's your punishment for bringing Parangosky down four years ago." And he looked at the report on his tablet. He gave an approving nod and stated, "Hope the Engines won't cause us any problems when we jump for home."

"I've tried my best to remedy the fluctuations, but we'd need a quick overhaul of the FTL drives in order to make sure it won't misfire..." Halsey sighed, then nodded, "But I can at least guarantee that, if they fail, they should only fail to transpose us to Slipspace, instead of outright blasting apart the entire fleet..." and watched Lasky reading the report. Beside them, a golden glow emanated as Roland, the shipboard AI, appeared.

"Doc," The World War 2 Bomber Pilot Avatar offered the woman a nod and a smile, his hands behind his back.

"Good evening, Roland," Halsey replied in her usually unbroken stoic demeanor, though she did give the man a quick look-over. She stated, "I see the updates to your firmware have been helping."

"Oh, I feel faster than ever," The Bomberman smiled, crossing his arms to his chest now, "Thanks."

"You are quite welcome," Halsey replied. While, to some, the stoic kindness the Doctor had been showing as of late would seem strange, to the woman, she fully intended to right the wrongs of her past somehow, or, at least, feel like she did. She knew for a fact that the guilt of the SPARTAN Projects, of all of them sans ORION and the IVs, would haunt her for the rest of her life, alongside the face of her late lover and their daughter.

She couldn't ever fully atone. Not in a hundred lifetimes. But she could at least try. Especially now, with being in charge of ONI. She hated the job, but it was necessary. The total and complete reform. It would still maintain much of its normal capabilities, but Halsey intended to run a unit with at least some ethics behind their actions. They still needed a capable espionage and intelligence network and she wasn't going to neuter it. It'd be idiotic.

Just some ethics would be nice, though...

"Good to know..." He spoke, then paused and listened in to coms. Turning to Halsey, he told her, "We have the artifact the Storm Covenant were trying to nab aboard. Let's prep to head home. The reconstituted Colonial Military Administration should be heading over to provide the locals support soon enough," Lasky said, then turned toward the com station, "Call the Shadow of Intent. Tell them we're preparing to head home." and got an affirmative from the coms officer. The man sighed deeply, then stated, "This was a trip..."

"Good thing we found that distress signal in time, eh?" Roland quipped, with Halsey silently agreeing. As the Arbiter and the other Sangheili Elites aboard the Shadow of Intent replied to the coms, the vehicles began their burn to break from orbit so they could jump alongside their allies. All was calm on the bridge as yellow alert was issued and the crews braced for the imminent departure, their vessels' fusion engines flaring. The arrowhead formation of the

allied fleet remained tight, with the Shadow, the seamonster-like warship of the Swords of Sangheilios, forming up on the UNSC Capital Ship's left side.

Space ahead began to ripple and darken. Arching lightning flashed, a whirlwind of azure energy slowly sparking to life. The entire UNSC fleet and the *Shadow* had synched their drives so they could jump together at the same time. As the last calculations were being made and the ships prepared to slip through the massive portal... An alarm wailed.

Halsey, first to hear it, turned to her tablet nigh-immediately, looking over the data streaming from the shipboard computers of the engineering deck. The fluctuations... They'd intensified... She started calculating, preparing for the drives to disengage and for whatever Feedback Loop to hit. Roland called out, "Our Slipspace drives are engaging... Hell... All crew, brace for a rocky transfer! Issuing fleet-wide Red Alert!"

"Lasky!" Halsey called out as the fluctuations grew worse, to the point the entire Forerunner engine system began to overshoot any projected estimates, "Tell the other ships to cut their links to us! NOW!"

"We can't! Not when a jump's initiated!" Lasky replied, looking to Halsey, "Weren't our drives supposed to disengage!?"

"They *can not*! The Forerunner architecture of the engines is showing power surges well beyond anything we could've even projected! We're chain-linked with everyone, including the *Shadow*!" The woman replied as she grabbed onto the holographic table, "Hang on!" then she gasped as the highest of the fluctuations kicked into gear. The portal ahead of them expanded like an open mouth, first swallowing the forward picket of the Navy, the Paris-classes, Charons and Stalwarts, not to mention the few Anlace and Strident Frigates they had.

Halsey looked to Lasky and told him, "Brace...!"

... And soon, the *Infinity* and *Shadow of Intent* had been swallowed, too...

... Come a few minutes later, Lasky awoke with a start and a raging head-ache thumping away at his sanity. He groaned, slowly standing to his feet and holding onto his head. His vision was blurry and his ears rang as if someone had set off a fragmentation grenade next to his head. He blinked rapidly, trying to wipe away the blur and slowly managing to regain his vision.

He grit his teeth as the ringing dropped to the level where he could barely hear Roland calling for him. Turning to the AI, he saw the blurry golden outline of the AI's avatar, then the rest of the details slowly started coming in. Roland's voice also grew a little more clear, "Sir...! Sir, we've made it!" He called out to Lasky, "We're on the other side... Wherever the other side is..."

"Sensor status...?" Lasky demanded. Best to know if they had eyes and ears first.

"Rebooting. The jump played hell with our systems, but Coms and other important stuff like Life Support are all online, sir... Sensors is the last one that's down..."

"Good," Lasky grunted, then shook his head to clear the confusion. He turned over toward Halsey, to see the good doctor slowly waking up. He helped her to her feet, causing her to grab onto her forehead. A faint trickle of red appeared on her forehead, a cut from the fall. Her tablet was also smashed, its screen cracking in spiderweb patterns. He asked her, "You good, doctor?"

"Aside from the head injury and the raging migraine...? Fine..." She replied, then groaned, "Ugh, that was the worst jump I've had to date..."

"Heh, no worse for driving, eh...?" Lasky sighed, then looked to Roland, "Status on the crew?"

"Minor injuries across all decks, sir..." The AI replied, "No casualties. Fleetwide report's similar, zero fatalities, minor injuries."

Lasky let out a sigh of relief, then said, "Alright, get our sensors back online... I want to know where we-" And he froze as he saw it outside of their viewport. A massive, blue, glimmering gem of a planet lay dead ahead of them. "Are..." He barely finished his sentence as he looked at the planet. As the rest of the crew got back to their stations from the fall.

Halsey noted the planet, setting her tablet aside and murmuring, "Where in the name of the Maker did we just wind up...?" while examining it. Lasky shook his head, unsure himself. As they waited for the sensors to come back online, Lasky made the rounds, walking around to each window to see if their fleet had tagged along. From Phoenixes to the frigates and to the cruisers, the entire fleet was here, as was the *Shadow of Intent.*

"Sir, comm request from the *Shadow.* It's Shipmaster 'Vadum," The Com operator, who had now bandaged his arm, reported. Lasky gave the approving nod to patch their alien comrade through. On the forward screen, the bulky, hunchback frame of an alien creature with leathery grey skin and snake-like eyes appeared. Two of his four mandibles had been halved by combat and he still bore the scars on his bone-white armor.

"Admiral, Doctor," Rtas 'Vadum, Shipmaster of the Swords of Sangheilios, spoke with respect.

"Shipmaster," Lasky nodded, "Good to see you and your crew are okay."

"Minor injuries have been reported, but all of ours still live. I understand it is the same for you?" He asked. Happy with receiving a nod of confirmation from Lasky, the Shipmaster spoke, "Good. Our sensor suites are finishing their last maintenance cycle now. We should have our eyes back within the next minute... Have your crews fared better in restoring your sight?"

"I'm afraid we're in the same boat, metaphorically speaking," Lasky shrugged, "Sensors should be back on within a minute here, too."

"Sir," Roland started. The man turned toward him as he spoke, worried, "Sorry to bother, sir, but we're getting a mayday from UNSC *Poltava.* Their sensor suite's online and they detected two unknown vessels on an approach vector. They're not responding to hails, apparently..."

before he paused, blanked and his eyes widened, "... And our sensors are back. Detecting a fleet off our Portside, approximately 40,000 Klicks out, geosynch orbit above the planet..."

"Same ships?" Lasky asked. Roland shook his head.

"Different designs... And different battle-nets, from what we can intercept. One sounds way more like a streamlined communications array. The other sounds like a bunch of voices screaming at each-other..." Roland replied, then balked, "The bastards opened fire! Plasma batteries, from the looks of things..." and he looked to a confused Doctor Halsey. The woman nodded to Lasky and the AI, then ran back toward the trams, to probably take one to the labs.

"Red alert. Tell the *Poltava* and her Frigates they're clear to engage... And someone get me a link to that second fleet so we can warn them about us being armed." Lasky ordered as he took command. He looked over the sensor images as they started coming in... Outside of the *Infinity's* hull, in the void of space, a UNSC Autumn-class cruiser powered its engines, its shields flaring under scarlet bolts of plasma...

... Aboard the *Resolute,* a Venator-class Star Destroyer of the Grand Navy of the Republic, Admiral Wulf Yularen watched with bated breath as the two Confederate warships that emerged from behind Christophsis's dark side moving in to engage the rather large battle-fleet that was seemingly disabled upon their arrival in-system. They'd gotten their systems up and running surprisingly quick.

Wulf wasn't a young man anymore. He was still decently spry for his age, his brown hair slowly beginning to grey out, even on his mustache. He arranged his Republic Naval officer's uniform as he watched the unfolding engagement. He looked at the images playing on the holographic table with a hint of muted awe. They'd only sent two of their smaller ships, probably Corvettes, as well as what seemed to be at least a light cruiser to engage the CIS ships.

"They just arrived, managed to return to active status and..." A Clone officer murmured, awed, as he looked over the images. The unknown ships shifted position to engage the enemy with the cruiser as the spearhead. The Clone continued, staring on, "And now they're facing a duet of Munificents. Their shields seem to be holding..." before the first projectiles began leaving the weapon bays of the unknown vessels in response.

Missiles. Dozens upon dozens of missiles struck the hulls of the Munificent frigates, winged designs with bulky bodies, some of the most heavily-armed vessels per ton per meter in the CIS fleet, with a twin-linked heavy cannon battery in the maw and several dozen turbolasers on the side, bulb-like superstructures beside the main bridge. Armor cratered under the whittling barrage.

"We're detecting dozens of launches, sir," Another Clone crewman said as he looked over the details they were receiving from their Sensors. He blanked, then called out, "Massive energy spikes on all three vessels! They're charging something!" before Yularen went off to a window to stare. Hundreds more images appeared on the display, atmospheric insertion vehicles dropping from the bellies of several ships, including the long, five kilometer dreadnought in the middle.

"They've finished charging..." The sensor officer reported, "Firing!"

Twin white flashes reached all the way to the *Resolute's* bridge windows, followed by the flashes of reactor detonations. The Clones all gasped in synch. Yularen asked, without taking his eyes away from the black fleet, "What was that...?" his familiar Coruscanti accent. His crew looked dumbfound as they stared at the data streaming through the screens.

"Sir... Kinetic projectiles... They just..." The Sensor officer murmured, "They cored both ships in a volley..."

"Kinetics..." Yularen murmured. Had the CIS vessels forgotten to turn on their shields properly? Did they not expect the enemy to be using slug-based weaponry that was presumably magnetically-propelled in nature? Eitherway, to see two Munificent-class ships go down in one single missile and kinetic weapon salvo from a trio of ships out of several dozen was terrifying. As his clones nodded in confirmation, Yularen asked, "Have we received any attempts at communication?"

"Just now, sir!" The comms officer replied, "Patching them through!"

... A holographic figure of a middle-aged human male clad in a slightly bulky reinforced uniform. He saluted Yularen and said, "Greetings, unknown fleet, this is the UNSC Supercarrier, *Infinity*, on contact off your starboard side, several thousand kilometers out, we request that you identify your status pertaining to our fleet, or we will assume hostility and open fire."

"This is Admiral Yularen, off the Republic Navy Cruiser *Resolute*. *Infinity*, we mean no harm to your battle group. We're here in support of ground operations on the planet Christophsis against the Confederacy of Independent Systems, whose ships opened fire on your fleet," Yularen replied promptly, looking Lasky square in the eye, "We are in open war with the CIS."

"Copy that, Admiral. This is Admiral Lasky, off the *Infinity.* Your foes decided it'd be a good day to poke the UNSC," He replied calmly, staring Yularen right back in his eyes, "We're requesting permission to deploy a diplomatic corps aboard the *Resolute* with intent to speak of an alliance. If the CIS want war with us, we're glad to give it to them in full... Once we have context over everything."

"Understood. Stand-by, we'll need to contact the Generals below to appraise them of the deployment of your forces, as well as... Perhaps bring one aboard to help begin negotiations," Yularen replied. He looked to his clones and said, "Get me a link to the Forward Operations Base. General Skywalker and General Kenobi will want to know of this..."

Both Lasky and Yularen stopped, looking each-other in the eye, before a mutual understanding formed. The two nodded to each-other and began discussing various matters in wait for the Generals. Lasky, however, couldn't help but wonder one tinsy tiny, weird detail that had just appeared the moment Yularen mentioned them. Why would Generals be negotiating alliances, much more, commanding entire forces that included Navy units...?

It was weird...

Chapter 3: First Talks

Buck was sort of surprised by the deployment of the troops in the Base. He looked from an overhead window in the command post of the Grand Army of the Republic at the motor-pool, where six-legged walker-tanks and strange gunships resided, guarded by dozens of troops. Not to mention the artillery that still thundered in the background as the sun began to set. A shuttle lifted off in the distance, pushing its oddly-angled engines to the maximum as its wings unfolded.

He turned toward the Holographic table in the center of the room, walking up to it while his soldiers lazed about next to the Clones. Admirals Lasky and Yularen had begun their talks with Generals Skywalker and Kenobi no less than half-an-hour ago. When he got into range to hear them talking, Admiral Lasky stated, "*... The UNSC is willing to provide assistance in securing Christophsis. The Confederacy fired at us without provocation and they're not responding to hails on any of their frequencies that you've offered. It's war they want.*"

"*And, from the looks of your Fleet, Admiral, it is a war they'll get,*" Yularen said rather placidly, "*The terms of the alliance will, however, need to be properly ratified by specific parties. We could ask the Republic Senate to send an ambassador to your fleet. Engage in negotiations properly, rather than just this one-off talk. We will need to know force composition, strength and what kind of support we can expect.*"

"*Understandable,*" Lasky replied with a nod, "*We'll have an envoy vessel ready with a group from ONI Section 1. Diplomatic corps.*"

"That'd be good," Anakin quipped, crossing his arms. "I'm sure more than a few senators would be glad to negotiate our friendship, Admiral..." And the audible sound of gunfire took the man's attention away. He stated quickly, "But I think we might need to cut this meeting short..." before turning to Buck and his men. The ODSTs all slid their helmets on their heads and ran out first.

Down the corridors and out of the base, the ODSTs were the first to spot the few enemy Air Assets still in play:Enemy fighter-like droids swept in, their energy weapons raking the ground. UNSC mobile SAMs had them pegged the moment they'd poked their heads out, however. Missiles streaked, trailing with white smoke before detonating next to the fighters themselves, sending the remains tumbling to the floor, detonating.

Rex and Cody ran out next, noting the destroyed craft's remains sprawled out across the ground. Rex sighed and looked to Buck as the Gunny gave the soldiers manning the SAMs a thumbs up. He took his helmet off and murmured to himself, "That was probably cutting it close..." before looking to the Captain, Commander and Generals, "Sir, air defense is online. Oughta keep the enemy's air support in check."

"Not like it wasn't dwindling already..." Anakin said, sighing in relief, "Good shot."

"Not my hit, sir," Buck quipped, then looked around and ordered, "Alright, Alpha Niner, let's move it out. Find our positions and pray we get a bit of a break to get acclimatized. Anakin

crossed his arms to his chest as he saw the men salute and turn to leave for one of the forward barricades, all while the clones around their fellow UNSC infantry and units were examining the kit deployed by their newfound allies of circumstance.

Anakin noted, "They've got a lot of slug-throwers and missiles..."

"Waxer and Boil said they saw one of their heavier weapons was a pulse laser," Cody added, eyeing some of the Marines as they unpacked equipment from another Pelican. A dish and a few consoles they set up in the middle of the place, presumably to test it. He crossed his arms to his chest and said, "Sirs, I'm not too sure how to feel about them... Call me jittery, but this is... Convenient."

"Tell us about it," Anakin snorted, then looked to Rex, "Rex, do we still have that Separatist observation post nearby?"

Buck seemed confused as to why the man would bring it up, but Rex nodded, "Yessir. Haven't been able to get to it yet and that means the Clankers can see right into our backyard in a way. If we take it out, they're going to have to rely on calling their airstrikes the moment they make contact with our troops tomorrow..." And he l oked to BUck and the others, soon realizing what Kenobi meant.

"What do you say, Sergeant?" Anakin turned to Buck with a grin, "Care to go for a test run?"

Buck looked to his team, all of whom looked right back at him, rifles in their hands and smiles behind their helmets. When wasn't Alpha Niner ready to throw themselves into the jaws of hell just to prove themselves, eh? That was what Buck thought as a grin crossed his lips. Turning back to Anakin, he slid his helmet on his head and said, "Just give us a target and just tonight to hit'em. It'll be gone."

"Good to know, I guess," Anakin nodded, "What do you say, master?" And he looked to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan shrugged, "I suppose we could do with a dry run to see how the UNSC measures up."

"They're asking Special Forces to measure up," Mickey snorted, crossing his arms to his chest, "I think a better measurement's gonna be our Marines hitting the deck and kicking some tin can ass, honestly..." before watching a Marine Lieutenant with blonde hair and lilac eyes walk past. She stopped, turned toward them and crossed her arms, grinning. She looked to the Generals and saluted.

"Oh, boy. Hello, Lieutenant Zielinska," Buck rolled his eyes during the greeting.

"Gunny," The girl replied, "Hope you guys have fun..." And she smirked and walked away with a handwave. Buck and his team all watched her step off, with the Clones and Jedi Generals turning to them, brows arched questioningly even behind their helmets for the clones. Buck shook his head in a 'you don't wanna know' sense. Zielinska wasn't worth talking about at the moment.

Buck sighed and said, "We'll kick those tin cans around a bit and get you a secure airspace so our own birds may start coming in. Just give us the exact location..."

... As night fell upon this side of the planet, the ODSTs, alongside an observing team of Clone troopers, marched toward the enemy outpost which was located in one of the heavily-damaged high-rises off the beaten path. The Shock Troopers kept their rifles lifted up, scanning the place ahead. Visible lights on some of the floors told them that the damaged building was occupied.

Buck signaled his team to take cover with a motion of his hand. They found their positions behind various pieces of debris that had fallen near the base of the broken tower. He turned his gaze back toward a distant outcropping of the blue crystal lining the surface. The tower of ice-blue crystal had proven climbable, so they had overwatch. His VISR pinged two friendlies on top of the tower:Romeo and his spotter, a new girl in the team.

Buck then looked to the Clones, all four of which were highlighted green on his VISR-Enhanced Heads-Up Display. Before long, he thumbed the safety off his rifle and looked toward the tower, searching for an entry point. He found it in the form of a collapsed wall, the debris of which had formed a ramp up to the occupied second floor. He gave a quick hand signal to Romeo, who reported very professionally over the Com, "*Tin Cans moving on the second floor. Fourth floor also occupied. First floor's completely sealed by the collapse and the third's got one sentinel... Zeroed in on the spotters...*"

His voice was smooth and clear, showing his focus.

He was in the Zone, Buck thought with a grin. He gave a thumbs up, then raised three fingers. Romeo replied by winking his status light green. Their plan was simple:Romeo took out the spotters. The moment the first shot rang out, the ODSTs would kick the metaphorical door off its hinges and light these Tin Cans up like there was no tomorrow. They'd told nobody and even the clones acting as observers had barely been briefed about their intended target.

The Clones, one of which was named Jesse, stepped up to Buck and asked, "We good, Gunnery Sergeant?"

"Yeah," Buck replied, "We'll give the signal..." before eyeing the patrolling droids on the top floor and the spotters whose binoculars were aimed straight at the Republic/UNSC FOB. He hummed, patted Jesse on the shoulder, then winked his own light at Romeo. First, he winked it red, initiating the countdown. Then, he winked it yellow, reaching midpoint and causing his troops and the Clones to tense.

When green hit, the first four shots of the battle rang out. Four spotter droids lost their heads and tumbled over the side of the building. The ODSTs had begun their sprint to the entrance long before the enemy had managed to realize that and seconds before the Sniper shots' sounds were actually audible. The ODSTs pushed up the ramp of rubble and met the first droid.

Buck's rifle chattered, bullets piercing cheap armor plating. The second droid in line called out, "What the-" before its head got snapped off its body by the butt of a rifle. More sniper

rifle fire rang out as the glass below them shattered. A squad of Droids appeared from behind the wall ahead of Buck and his team, so he stepped aside and let Rookie and Mickey lay into them with shotguns and silenced SMGs.

One of the SBDs guarding the place rounded the corner next. It aimed its twin arm-blaster toward the Republic and UNSC Troopers. Buck was quick to aim his AR. Several 7,62x51mm rounds punctured the thick frontal plate of the droid, sending it staggering. Its blaster shots were thrown off to the side, bolts slamming into the wall next to it. Following up, Rookie hefted and aimed his SMG. It coughed a one-second burst. The machine staggered again, before a 14,7mm round punched clean through the glass beside it and tore through its side armor

The mechanical monstrosity collapsed, its CPU destroyed. Its sibling tried coming out to engage them, but blue blaster bolts peppered its frame before it even got to round the corner properly. Tup sighed, relieved, then lowered his blaster and said, "While I appreciate the ol' Slugthrower here and there, fellas, maybe let us get a kill some times. We're used to dealing with these clankers."

Buck snorted and said, "Fair enough..." before he ordered the rest of the team to push forward. Going down the rounding stairs, careful to not hit any trip-mines, the UNSC Commandoes and the Clones of the 501st that had been sent in to survey their combat prowess advanced to the next levels to clear them. Finding the rest of the place rather easy to clear. They exited at the base of the tower, through a broken window.

Another clone beside them, Kix, checked his HUD and said, "A little under two minutes. Not bad for a bunch of Basics..."

"Basics?" Buck raised a brow as they marched out in formation.

"New one Kix came up with," Tup replied with a grin behind his helmet, "Basic humans. Not clones like the rest of us..." to which the ODSTs let out a series of laughs. Tup had actually felt a small weight lift off his chest at that, noting to himself that he'd half-expected them to at least take a pop back at them. He was glad to have been wrong, too. Things didn't need to degenerate between newfound allies.

The next morning had found General Anakin Skywalker, one of the more 'infamous' officers of the GAR, actually having had a peaceful night's sleep for a change. Usually, the Droid bombers would've woken them up at around six AM local. It was seven-fifteen and there was no sign of enemy aircraft in the sky. What he was, however, greeted by, was the UNSC deploying a few more troops in preparation to assault the enemy's positions.

Tup appeared from the right, yawning, then saluted Anakin and said, "Good morning, sir. Guessing you figured it out and/or read the report from Kix, but the enemy observation post's out of commission. And it only took the fellas we just tagged along with two minutes to wipe it out..." causing Anakin to whistle, slightly impressed. Tup nodded, "Yeah, they do seem to be the real deal, so to speak."

"That's good to know," Anakin said as he and Tup walked over toward one of the UNSC's anti-air systems, noting that the wheeled vehicle's driver and a few Marines were playing cards. The driver, a woman, looked up, smiled and waved, to which Anakin waved back. Farther in the back, Skywalker also noticed that their troops had set up a medical tent of some kind. Next to it was one of the UNSC's gunships, a 'Pelican', he recalled the name. The thick, heavily-armored bird sat quietly there, clearly bearing the red marks of a medical ambulance aircraft.

Tup said, "They're getting settled in for the big one. I heard from Waxer that they're sending out platoons to reinforce some of the boys sat in our towers, too," as he watched some Clones sat in a corner, talking to each-other while a platoon of female nurses belonging to the UNSC Navy disembarked from another aircraft, each carrying medical kits and sidearms for self-defense.

"The enemy's been moving a lot of droids just North of us, so we'll probably be prepping to blunt an enemy assault," Anakin told Tup as they marched to the front barricades, "I don't blame them for wanting to be ready. We'll be moving out to back up an ambush Obi-Wan is setting up a few klicks from here, too." and he noticed one of the UNSC's M808B Scorpions sat there, cannon pointing out toward where the clones had told them enemies were.

The driver was sat on the vehicle's track, chowing down on a sandwich of some kind. He turned to the General and Clone and greeted them with a raise of the hand in which the food resided, before he went back to eating. Beside him, a young woman peered through a pair of binoculars while standing on top of the tank's next tread. She hummed, turned to the Jedi and nodded, before peering back through the scopes, her face impassive.

A clone in the place, Checkerboard, saluted Skywalker and said, "Good morning, sir."

"Morning, Check," The General replied, "Everything in order?"

"Yessir. Turns out these UNSC folk are pros. Not very talkative, but they've got the knowhow," He replied, then motioned to a high-rise building to the right. Both Tup and Anakin looked up at the place as UNSC troops were working on it. They removed the windows and set up weapon emplacements and what looked to be bags of sand. One of the troopers hefted a heavy machine gun's body onto his shoulder and carried it from one end of the corridor to another, before helping his buddies assemble it on the tripod.

Another was keeping an eye on the enemy and radioing positions to the fleet up above. A few more were talking to each-other about whatever it was UNSC Troops talked about. Tup hummed, noting the fact that, beside their basic interactions with the Marines, the UNSC mostly kept to themselves. While both he and Anakin understood this as early jitteriness, they needed to break the ice somehow.

"Good to know, then, Check," Anakin nodded. The com system attached to his left glove pinged. He looked at it, then sighed and said, "And that's probably Obi-Wan. You fellas keep this place secure and maybe try to chat up the Marines a bit. Breaking the ice is probably gonna help with the alliance, considering the few non-clone officers they've met so far are Jedi and an Admiral."

"Yessir," The two troopers brought their hands up in salute. Anakin nodded to dismiss them, then stepped off toward the base's command post. Check sighed and said, "Easier said than done," before noting the confused look Tup gave him. He clarified, "Chatting the Marines up. These folks are wound tighter than any clone we have around. I get what's up with them to a point, new factions and all, but you'd think they'd open up a bit."

A UNSC Marine walked by them, rifle in hand, and told them, "Give us a couple more days to get acclimatized," Before flashing Tup. She was a beauty of a woman and that seemed to have caught him off-guard. Ginger-haired, with gemstone blue eyes and porcelain skin that looked a little dirtied by combat, the young woman leaned her standard-issue Battle Rifle against her shoulder and explained, "We did kinda drop here outta nowhere. Gonna take us a hot minute to get our shit together."

"That's the first time I heard that expression," Check quipped as he stood next to Tup.

The girl snorted, "I'd suppose there's some differences in language, though I guess you can get what it means in the context."

"... Refers to you guys getting your bearings, right?" Check asked after a hot moment of thinking. The girl offered a nod and a bright smile to them before shifting and looking to the confused, maybe-slightly-red-in-the-face Tup. Check now noticed his brother had been quiet for a little over two minutes and elbowed him in the shoulder, "Hey, Tup, you good?"

Tup shook his head, "Huh? Yeah, sorry..." And he turned to Check. His fellow clone crossed his arms to his chest and gave a slight raise of his head. The body language, Tup had immediately understood. The trooper was grinning behind the opaque T-Visor of his helmet. For what reason, Tup only realized when he looked back at the UNSC Marine in front of them.

"Oh, right, shit," The girl face-palmed, then let out a short giggle at her own expense before stating, "Forgot to introduce myself. Corporal Jane Staten, UNSC Marines, 45th MEU off of the *Infinity* herself."

"She's a right heartbreaker! Watch your asses, clone boys!" The tank driver called out with a grin, having finished his sandwich. The two Clones blanked, only to be surprised by Jane lifting the central digit on her five-fingered hand toward the man, who laughed and boarded his tank. The officer with the binoculars shook her head, unimpressed, all while the two Clones continued to stare, dumbfound.

"That was private Järvinen. Our tanker," She sighed deeply, "Bastard likes making a lot of dumb jokes."

"I bet," Tup replied with half a mouth.

"Anyways. You guys got names?" She raised a brow at them.

Tup nodded, "Tup and Checkerboard. Nice to meet you, Jane."

"Likewise, Tup, Check," She smirked, "Those sound more like nicknames, though I, uh..." Then she became a little awkward, rubbing the back of her neck and stating, "I suppose, with Clones, it's only natural you guys would've probably been stuck with numbers early on, right?" and received nods from both boys. A short sigh of relief told them she'd been worried about offending them.

Check said, "Relax, Jane. Takes more than a question to phase a Clone," and crossed his arms to his chest. She couldn't tell, but he was smiling behind his helmet. He then looked to Tup and voiced jokingly, "Of course, some of us get flustered more easily than others..." garnering a glare from his brother and confusion from Jane. She giggled at the quip.

"Fair enough, I guess," She said, then checked a digital watch on her hand and went bug-eyed. She cried out "Oh, shit, I'm supposed to be running a patrol with Vic and Paul! See ya fellas later!" And waved, flashing a short smile at Tup before running off. Tup's shoulders sagged, while Check started laughing loudly at his brother's expense. Tup turned to him, glaring again.

"What was that about?" Laughed Check. Tup rolled his eyes.

"Listen, you tell me you didn't get a flutter when you saw her and I'll call your lie out," The clone replied with half-a-mouth, which further exacerbated his brother's laughter. He sighed and planted a palm on his face, "Why do I even bother...?" before pausing as he heard the roar of jet engines up above. Two more Pelicans flew in, heading for landing pads nearby and disgorging another pair of platoons.

One of them was being led by a dark-skinned man with a cigar in his mouth, a shotgun in hand and heavy-duty green armor. He called out, "Alright, Marines! Looks like the Admiral decided he needs us to help your fellow Forty-Fivers kick some ass down here! Docs, go to the Med tent and report in! Riflemen, go find the main defensive line and set up with the Clones!"

While Tup, Check and the clones on the forward line seemed a little dumbfound, the Marines cheered the arrival. The man marched up to Captain Rex and Commander Cody, gave them a salute and said, "You two must be the Clone officers Buck told me about. I'm Sergeant-Major Johnson, UNSC Marine Corps. Where are me and my boys bunking for the battle?"

Rex, although surprised, nodded to the brash Sergeant-Major, then said, "I'm Captain Rex and this is Commander Cody. General Kenobi just told us you were coming in, Sergeant, and we're glad to have you. As for where you'll be bunking, well, where the rest of your men are. West Wing of the base. We have some free barracks there, still..." all while Cody seemed a bit surprised.

Johnson gave a nod in thanks, took a deep puff from his cigar and blew the smoke off to the side, not in the commanders' faces. He saluted again, which got the Clones to do the same, before flashing them a grin full of pearly whites and stepping off. Rex and Cody looked to each-other, then Cody stated, "Him and Skywalker are gonna get along like two peas in a pod, I can already tell."

Rex hummed and nodded, "Knowing General Skywalker? Very likely you're right. Seems like just his style of trooper..." before motioning to Cody to follow him toward Tup and the others. The airfield near-by the base had also become a UNSC hive of activity. They saw a pair of Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles launching off the short runway, carrying AGMs on their bellies and highly-advanced cameras and sensors. Rex hummed and said, "That's a lot of military assets they're focusing here..."

"They have an army aboard their fleet, Rex," Cody replied, "I'm not surprised they're assigning several units here. Admiral Yularen, at least, must've briefed them on Christophsis's importance... Not a lot of places where you have a mining guild this powerful, or this many resources localized into one system..." He then supposed as they marched forward. In the distance, a rumble thundered as one of the UCAVs presumably let loose one of the missiles. Poking the enemy, were they?

That wouldn't bite them in the behind, right? Right?

Chapter 4: Hidden Enemy Part 1:Combative Stance

Buck, his team and a platoon of Marines had been selected by Generals Kenobi and Skywalker to assist in an ambush. Jackhammer rocket launchers, MA40s and even grenade launchers had been packed by the UNSC's troops, with Romeo and the Marine platoon's Marksman already setting up their scoped rifles atop each of the two towers the Jedi had elected for this ambush.

Buck had been stuck with General Skywalker for the time being, the ODST's gaze peering down at a battalion of droids marching down the viaduct they were defending. He looked to Skywalker and said, "EM Grenades should do fine against these tin cans, right? Eggheads upstairs told us the units we sent to them were not shielded against pulses like them."

Anakin nodded, "That's the concept behind our Droid Poppers. An EM Pulse powerful enough to fry them."

"Sounds good to me, sir," Mickey grinned as he loaded a dual-purpose grenade in his single-shot grenade launcher. Buck hummed and snorted, watching the Clankers approaching them, all while Rex and the clones around prepped their weapons to engage the foe. Across from them, general Kenobi's troopers prepared heavy plasma auto-cannons to engage as well.

"Droid Poppers can also stun people, depending on their setting," Rex clarified as he joined up with them, causing Buck and the others to look at him, dumbfound. Rex then clarified, "I've seen holos of them being used in testing against sentients with a working nervous system. Their muscles locked up and they fell over, but were confirmed to be alive by testing. Recovery ain't that long either."

Mickey paused, "Huh. Riot control EMPs."

"Should be fun to tell ONI about," Murmured Buck as he shifted his gaze back toward the advancing Droids. He blanked, however, then elbowed Skywalker and said, "Rear of the formation. Counting three Hovertanks..." the design of which heavily reminded him of a combination between their Scorpion and the Covenant and Swords of Sangheilios's Wraith. The wide half-moon plate at the base also had projectile launchers, it seems, while two bars on the sides of the vehicle's main armored body held quad plasma cannons and, finally, the rounded, armored turret mounted what looked to be a cannon of almost similar design to a Scorpion's.

"That... Could be a problem..." Anakin sighed, then called up Obi-Wan on the com-link, "Master, we've got armor coming in."

"*We saw it, too, Anakin. It's good that our allies have brought over anti-armor equipment after all... Steady as she goes,*" Obi-Wan replied, voice audible over the radio. The man was as calm as always, Anakin thought as his hand hovered loosely over his lightsaber's hilt.

Dutch walked up to the window, eyeing the enemy tanks, then patted his laser and said, "Good thing we brought Jackhammers and a Laser..." as he eyed the machines. Buck

hummed in agreement, shouldering his MA40 while the Marines around them prepped their own heavy weapons. One of the Marines, a guy, looked toward the advancing CIS Battalion. Dutch put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Relax, kid..." before humming, "Did you guys hear the Arbiter's planning on sending his own troops in? He's in talks with Yularen now, too, after we gave them the codes."

"Oh, boy," Snorted Mickey, "Hinge-jaws are gonna be dropping in, too, eh?"

"I'd not diss the Sangheili too much, Mickey," Dutch quipped, "Sure, the bastards did what they did, but the Arbiter and his faction are atoning for it, at least."

"Was just saying, Dutch," The explosive expert replied, "I'm glad they're on our side nowadays. Feels good not to have an Energy Sword swinging for my god damn neck for once..." And that got a laugh out of the Marines and Buck. Gunny himself stared at his team with a half-smile behind his helmet, then noted the Rookie and a Clone Trooper to his right, conversing via hand signals. A bullet to the vocal cords sometimes does that to a man, but Rookie was making an incredible recovery.

"That was the different ship Admiral Yularen mentioned in one of his reports after the Rendezvous with yours, right?" Anakin inquired, peering through the binoculars he had brought along. Buck hummed in confirmation, watching the Droids marching still. They'd gotten close enough for him to hear the thumping footsteps of the tin cans from this distance, even if they were muffled by the glass. Anakin hummed, "Thanks, by the way. I don't think the Seps expected you guys to appear and blockade Christophsis as well..."

"Well, sir," Buck hummed, "They shouldn't have shot first..." And he paused as he saw the Droid formation splitting into three distinct prongs. He swore to himself, feeling a pit in his stomach, "Sir, they're divvying up. Two prongs are headed for us and General Kenobi's fireteam. The central's moving on as planned..." before he heard several of his Marines stand to their feet.

Anakin hummed, "That's not good... Think they know?"

"Honestly, sir, I'd rather not sit around and find out..." Buck replied, watching the enemy machines advance to the bases of their towers, before radioing in, "Spooky Two-Five, this is Alpha-Niner Actual, requesting gunship support on our location. Enemy might know of our POS and has brought armor. Repeat, enemy has armor. Recommend you mount ATGMs."

"*Roger, Alpha-Niner. Spooky 2-5, en-route to AO, ETA, one mike. Hang tight 'till we're in the pipe*," The pilot of the gunship replied.

Buck looked to Skywalker and thumbed his rifle's safety off, stating, "We're gonna have company, sir. Wanna prep?" to which Anakin flashed the Trooper a grin and brandished his lightsaber. Rex and the other Clones all readied weapons. Buck nodded to his team, all of whom hefted their gear, before hearing blaster and automatic fire from Kenobi's tower. Flashes of red and blue came from the windows...

"Oh, great, they got to them first," Anakin sighed, then powered on his com-link, "Master, we're seeing heavy fire in your tower. Need some backup?"

"*We would appreciate it, Anakin*!" General Kenobi replied, more annoyed than afraid. Hell, Buck wasn't sure the man was afraid in the first place. The Troopers and Skywalker marched up to one of the windows that faced Kenobi's tower, readying their weapons, before Buck looked to Anakin, ready to ask him how they were gonna get across. Three troopers popped up behind him, however, with grappling hook guns attached to the barrels of their rifles.

Skywalker looked to Buck and said, "Up for a little ride?"

"Good thing we brought our hooks, sir," Buck nodded, while his ODSTs laughed. He took a step back as Anakin ignited his Lightsaber and slashed an X across the window ahead. A gust of air filled the room and nearly knocked the oxygen out of Buck's and his boys' lungs. The window shattered under the mounting pressure, shards of glass falling onto the line of Droids down below.

"Move it up, men!" Rex ordered the grappling hook troops. The three soldiers aimed and fired the expanding hooks, their thick wires unravelling with the familiar whirr of metallic rope scratching against the reinforced body of the internal winch. The hooks struck and locked into place, digging into the ferrous compound that made up the wall on the other side and the troopers hooked the other end of the wires up to the rear wall.

Skywalker jumped in first, utilizing a specialized hook to mount the impromptu zipline, while his troopers attached their own hooks to the lines and the ODSTs and Marines followed suit. Before long, the entire unit was rushing across the distance between the two towers, hanging on for dear life as the Droids below opened up on them. The air grew thick with red plasma, only for the ODSTs and Skywalker to reply by shooting back and deflecting the bolts, respectively.

They saw Romeo reposition above them, using his jetpack to jump the distance and firing his gun all the same. He managed to nail two droids after firing thrice, so that was a decent enough kill-to-spent-round case... Of course, two Clones and one of their Marines got hit while crossing, their screams audible as they lost their grip or their own lines broke and they fell.

"This wasn't that good of an idea!" Buck called out as he blasted away with his pistol.

"Hindsight's always twenty-twenty!" Dutch replied, while Mickey laughed and fired the SMG he had as a sidearm at the droids. Rex hummed in agreement, before pausing as multiple missiles screamed around them. The droid battalion below shattered with the ground as rocket motors whined and unguided missiles hit them. Above, a Pelican gunship swept in, its maw-mounted 30mm Autocannon letting loose.

Anakin looked up and smirked, then spoke over com, "Thanks for the backup! Makes our crossing easier!"

"*You're welcome, General. Gunny, I suggest you folks pack your bags and prep to Evac, though,*" The pilot replied. She shifted her aircraft to the right a little, letting loose with the autocannon as the Droid Tanks shifted their cannons to meet them. Another Platoon of Marines dismounted on the roof, one of them carrying a Jackhammer that he fired in reply to the Droids' own tank guns firing up after them.

"Already on it, Spooky," Buck replied professionally.

Spooky then shifted the bird again and powered its engines, keeping herself on the move and laying into them with guns. On its wings, however, were racks bearing four missiles each. These missiles were bulkier and had a nose-cone camera. One of them activated, its engine roaring as it flew off the rack in a straight line, before arching down onto one of the Droid tanks.

It struck through the top of the turret, right into one of the ammo stowage sections for the autoloading gun. The explosion that followed rocked its two siblings to the side, making them miss their intended target. The Jackhammers from the other Marines struck the pair of tanks just as Anakin and the others breached the tower Kenobi and the 212th were. Buck, Skywalker and Rex were first into the room.

Bullets began to rain as Buck scoped in the first droid. His MA40 barked in unison with Rex's twin heavy blaster pistols. The Captain and Gunnery Sergeant joined up with Commander Cody and Generals Kenobi and Skywalker at the front. Obi-Wan told them with a half-hearted bit of sass in his voice, "How nice of you to join us! You sure were fast!"

"We zip-lined all the way over, sir," Buck replied as he took a knee, letting two pairs of Marines and Clones behind him fire their weapons at the advancing droids. Bullet and bolt snapped and punctured the thin armor of the droids' bodies. One of them nailed a Marine in the chest, so that Marine must've been extremely thankful for the heat-dissipating layer beneath his chest plate when he fell to the floor.

Dutch grabbed that Marine by the collar and dragged him back, stating, "God bless the R&D for developing heat-resistant armor!"

"We can tank a couple shots of plasma now!" Mickey replied with a laugh. Outside, the rumble of Spooky's autocannon filled the air as the bird orbited around them, gunning down any Droids that were still outside.

"Generals, we gotta fall back. Spooky's on-station to evacuate us," Buck stated as he shifted his aim. He filled another Droid full of holes, then ducked as a bolt of energy singed his helmet's top. He swore, "Motherf-..." Before catching himself and nodding to Mickey. The Grenadier grinned brightly behind his helmet. He hefted the grenade launcher, aimed and fired, sending the grenade barreling into the doorway as the Jedi began pulling back. Upon detonation, a burst of electricity knocked several Droids out from the half-company that was still advancing on them.

With a hand signal, Rex ordered the troopers to begin the retreat. He and Cody put down suppressing fire from their blasters as their brothers, two of which got nailed in front of them, were retreating. A UNSC Marine primed a grenade, but took a bolt to the head, collapsing with the grenade in his hand. It rolled out in front of Rex, who noticed it and vented his annoyance by kicking it toward the Droids. It exploded, raining shrapnel all around them and allowing the Clone Troopers to retreat as another Marine took a bolt and collapsed.

As they ran, Buck asked Kenobi, "Sir, any idea how this happened?!"

"None!" Kenobi replied, "However, I saw a Tactical Droid among their units! If it's not destroyed, we can probably take its head to interrogate it!"

"Guessing we can tell it apart from all the other B1 Tin Cans!" Buck replied as he dropped off a primed grenade behind them. Cody and Rex kicked it back farther as its fuse ticked down silently, before the thump of the explosion reverberated alongside the shockwave. Climbing up to the top of the tower and exiting out via the main, they found Romeo and his fellow Sniper poking at targets with their rifles. Buck radioed in, "Spooky, be ready to land on our mark."

"*Waitin' on ya, Gunny,*" the Pilot replied as she continued firing her autocannon. The Clones and soldiers all set up to greet the incoming Droids, taking cover around various power and heating installations on the rooftop. Buck looked to the Pelican as dozens of blaster rounds struck its belly armor, heating, but not melting the metal. All the while, Spooky's gun continued to spew death.

The first droids to step through the door were, of course, B1s. All were met with a volley of fire so focused, it spooked even Kenobi and Skywalker. The two Jedi provided the defense against the volleys of blaster fire from the droids, while the ODSTs and Clones pulled their triggers all the way back, bullets piercing concrete and layered plates on the walls. The droids piled high, scored by plasma and cut apart by rounds, just as the Command Droid marched forward with more units.

A Clone noticed it. He looked to Rookie and gave him a nod, to which the ODST replied in kind, before shifting his fire toward a squad of Mechs. The Clone charged the Command Mech, pinned it to the wall and ripped its bloody head off. Buck then radioed, "Spooky! We're good for Evac! Prep to make it hot!" and watched as the aircraft settled at the edge of the tower. Buck made the motion of a hand-chop toward the vehicle and said, "Move! Bounding retreat!"

"You heard the man, Troopers! Move it!" Rex ordered. He grabbed a Clanker, pinned it against the wall and put several blaster bolts to his chest. Anakin, meanwhile, utilized Force push. The tidal wave of energy bent the wind into a shockwave of its own, sending several droids into each-other. Obi-Wan and him shut their blades off and clipped them to their hilts, before rushing back with the rest of their troopers.

Last to jump into the vehicle was one of their Troopers, before the Pelican turned around as the back hatch closed. The pilot looked to her co-pilot and nodded, stating, "Light them up, Tommy..." as she punched in the coordinates for their base. The Co-Pilot moved his joystick and aimed, the HUD on his helmet tracking the aim of the main gun via a reticle. As more and more droids poured onto the rooftop and fired at them, the man grinned and squeezed. 30mm rounds tore through the line of Droids without remorse, High-Ex rounds detonating off the walls and infrastructure and shattering multiple tin cans. He gave a thumbs up to the woman, before the aircraft turned to leave.

In the Blood Tray, Buck took his helmet off and sighed, "Whatever that was... At least, we made it."

"Lucky us," Romeo murmured sarcastically as he sat down next to one of their Marines.

Obi-Wan looked at the Clone that had ripped the head off the droid commander, then at the head itself, pointed at it and said, "Let's hope our friend here knows what caused that little Ambush to fail..."

... Back at FOB, UNSC Troops had grown a little tense. Not a lot of the boys and girls had seen action and they were getting antsy to shoot at something. Meanwhile, Buck had been ordered to escort a bunch of new arrivals toward the Command Room. Specifically, Alpha Niner was now escorting Arbiter Thel 'Vadam and a platoon of Sangheili Special Operations Elites.

Hunchback, tall, muscular and well-built, the Elite honor guard of Special Ops wore enclosed masks with glimmering gold visor eyes. The half-dozen Elites carried an Energy Sword attached to a magnetic lock on their enclosed armor's left thigh, their hooves clanking against the steel. In their four-fingered hands lay plasma rifles, needle rifles, plasma repeaters and a particle beam rifle.

That which turned several Clones' and Christophsians heads were not just the Spec-Ops Elites, however. Clad in gold-tinted, ornate armor with a cape draped over his right arm and shoulder, concealing even more armor plating and with a menacing-looking Energy Sword hilt clipped to the thigh, Arbiter Thel 'Vadam, the Slayer of the Prophet of Truth and Liberator of Sangheilios, marched with a stride denoting the elegance of the Sangheili race.

Beneath the armor, still visible, was a marking that only his Elite brethren knew the meaning of. However, from a Mark of Shame during his service with the Covenant, it had become a Mark of Pride. The reptile eyes of the alien were focused forward, the suit's Heads-Up Display, a more ancient Operating System than that of the Elites around him, playing in his eyes.

Buck hummed and said, "So, you folks good with working with the Republic?"

"I see no reason not to," The Arbiter replied, his booming, calm and smooth, yet still Alien voice a familiar tone to Buck. They'd met during the signing of the Alliance between their species. Thel spoke again, "They fired upon our allies. A human proverb states that the enemy of my enemy is my friend... And, so far, it has not been proven wrong. Else we might have been fighting this Galactic Republic as well."

"And I'll bet they don't want that once they see your people in combat," Mickey quipped, though a hint of fury was in his voice.

To his credit, the Arbiter chose not to notice the faint anger behind the ODST's voice. He replied, "Let us hope they'll accept the help of a few unknown aliens..." before the doors ahead of them slid open. The Generals and Admiral Lasky were already talking, looking over the discoveries taken from the Tactical Droid's central processor. Generals Kenobi and Skywalker turned to face the massive reptilian bipedals that had marched in and both men stood, stunned.

The Arbiter was first to greet them. Putting his right fist to his chest, thus revealing the segmented 'scale' armor on the right arm, the Elite bowed his head and spoke calmly, "Good evening, Generals and officers of the Republic. My name is Thel 'Vadam and I am of the

warrior caste of the Sangheili. It is an honor to meet our new Allies within this Galaxy..." and then straightening up.

Obi-Wan, ever the curteous man, was first to reply, "The honor is all ours. A pleasure to finally meet you in person, Arbiter."

"Likewise, General Kenobi," The Arbiter replied.

"Yeah, hello," Anakin waved, a little more awkwarded out. Thel gave him a simple nod, before approaching the holotable in the middle, to see the Droid head with several wires attached to its main connection ports. Anakin hummed and said, "To give you a brief rundown, Arbiter, we were just discussing the fact this droid knew all our plans... And we were wondering how, exactly."

"An intruder, perhaps," The Arbiter suggested as he looked at the machine head.

Obi-Wan hummed, scratching his beard, "Perhaps, but who'd be so bold?"

"Sirs," Cody replied as he looked at the machine, "I don't think it was scouts that the Droids used to know where we were gonna be. We and our UNSC allies would've spotted them... There's something else going on here," And he looked to Rex, who nodded. The two Generals motioned to Cody to go on, while the Arbiter gazed at him with a calm look. The troops behind him stood at the ready, too, though their weapons were lowered and presumably on safe. Cody sighed, then spoke, "I and Rex have a theory... One we don't like at all. There might be a spy in our midst."

The two Jedi looked to one-another, then to Cody. Kenobi said, "Are you sure of what you're saying, Cody?"

"Honestly, sir, it seems like the only plausible explanation," Rex replied as he joined his friend.

Kenobi hummed, stroking his beard, then said, "Then we should be mindful of the situation... I believe this is a good time for us to engage in a little scouting of our own behind enemy lines," and he looked to Anakin. The 501st's General smirked and gave a nod, before both Jedi turned to Cody and Rex. Obi-Wan told them, "I presume you gentlemen don't mind handling the internal investigation?"

Rex and Cody turned to one-another, before both men nodded. The Arbiter looked to the Jedi and said, "If we may join you in the investigation. Me and my commandoes can handle any infiltration mission put before us..." and he activated his camouflage. As did the other Elites, in fact. That certainly got a shocked gasp out of the Clones and Jedi, and a grin out of Anakin. They reappeared next, the Elite leader's four mandibles mimicking a semi-human smile.

"Very well, then," Obi-Wan nodded, "Welcome aboard."

Thel bowed his head again in a respectful form of thank you. Anakin looked to Rex and Cody, then said, "See you two later," as he, Obi-Wan, the Arbiter and his men stepped out.

Buck hummed, took his helmet off and sighed deeply. He looked to the Clones and shrugged, before walking toward one of the windows and muttering something. Mickey and the others looked to the Captain and Commander.

"So... Traitor?" Dutch took his helmet off, showing the arched brow he had when looking at the two officers.

Cody shrugged, "It's as likely as any other explanation so far..." And he sighed.

"Well, that should be fun," Quipped Mickey. He then asked with a rhetorical, almost sarcastic tone, "How the hell are we gonna find a traitor in the middle of a base chock-full of people who look nearly identical?" which garnered a few laughs out of his team and a concealed snort from Rex. Mickey added the killing blow as he looked to a dead-serious Cody, "No offense, Commander."

"None taken..." Cody rolled his eyes, "We'll figure something out..." before pausing and looking at the com-links sat on the desk. A sudden beeping filled the room as silence set in, before Cody paused, approaching the Com-Link station and looking it over. He frowned, looked to Rex and said, "Hell... We were being listened to. Someone left their com-link on and heard everything!"

"Ah, shit," Buck sighed and put his helmet back on. He turned to Cody and Rex and stated, "Guessing hunt's on..."

Chapter 5: Hidden Enemy Part 2:On The Hunt

Thumbing the Com-Link off, Cody led the team out of the command center and into the hallways, weapons drawn. Cody looked back to Buck and said, "Gunnery Sergeant, may I suggest you let *us* take the shot? We don't want to kill the traitor, just interrogate him..." words which got a few groans of disagreement. Buck quickly silenced them with a swipe of his hand to the right, before turning to Cody and offering him a nod. The Commander, happy with the result, nodded and said, "Rex, see any-" before stopping as he saw a shadow disappear behind the corner.

Cody chopped his open hand forward, a scowl on his face. He, Rex and the ODSTs took off in a sprint to chase him. As they approached the intersection, Cody told Buck and his team, "Send some of your men to the right! It loops around to the Mess Hall!" as Rex readied his blaster pistols, thumbing the setting selector to 'STUN'. Or, at least, Buck hoped the strange word on the side of the gun meant 'stun'. Their alphabet was freaky.

Cutting that thought off and getting serious again, Buck turned back and ordered, "Romeo, Rookie, Dutch, hoof it! Dutch, if you see our runner, tackle his ass!" as he checked his assault rifle and silently cursed himself for not grabbing a droid popper or two out of a bag.

"You got it, Gunny!" Dutch grinned, putting his fists together and taking the right with his two assigned compatriots.

Rex looked back to Buck and commented, "Heavy weapons spec seems excited," with a grin. Buck nodded, revealing his face via depolarizing his visor, to show his own grin. The soldiers rounded the corner to the right, weapons at the ready. They saw the figure take another right, before Rex radioed in, "You three should be coming into view of him now! Watch yourselves!"

Reaching the end of the hallway and taking a right, the Troopers all met in the middle. Dumbfound, Rex looked around and then to the right, at the open door from where chatter, the clinking of dishes and cutlery and laughter echoed. Rex and Cody walked inside first, staring at the mess hall full of their brothers, before Rex stated, "Oh, this is gonna be tough..."

"Told you..." Mickey sighed as he looked around at the dozens of clones sat together, eating. He took his helmet off and hummed and stated, "We should call up a Platoon of Marines, Gunny. Scour the place from top to bottom with their help," before noting both Rex and Cody looking back at him inquisitively, if a little dismayed by the thought of their allies distrusting them this much. Sure, the alliance was new, but...

"Don't think the Clones will like us 'Basics' pointing fingers, Mickey. Let's not break the friendship before it's even begun, alright?" Buck replied half-heartedly, taking his helmet off as Mickey let out a sigh. He walked up beside Cody and Rex, then suggested, "Do we have any way to find out how the Droids got intel from us? Some transmission system or something...?"

The two Clone officers looked to one-another, then to Buck. Rex replied, "The Base as a com system, yeah. Plus terminals in each Barracks..." before he blanked. He looked to Cody, "... Which, while implausible, could be where our turncoat sent a message from when nobody was looking... I'll get R2 to the Command Room so he can help us search the mainframe."

"I and the Troopers will go back there, then," Cody stated, sighing. He motioned to Buck and his men to follow along. The groups each departed the mess hall. Moments later, in the command room, Buck was staring out of the window at the Republic's vehicles again, his helmet sat on the windowsill as Cody wrote a report on his tablet. Mickey and Dutch were playing cards and Romeo and Rookie were just quietly sat in a corner.

Cody had taken a moment to reflect on the matters at hand as he looked through the computer. The UNSC had arrived no less than a couple of days ago, but had already mass-deployed an entire corps to support the 501st and the 212th on Christophsis. Was it really all due to the Seppies firing first, or was it because the UNSC sought some form of ally in what must've been a foreign area to them? He didn't know. With a deep sigh, he turned to Buck, "Gunnery Sergeant."

"Yes, sir?" The ODST was quickly taken out of his thoughts, turning toward the Commander and saluting. He merely wondered wthat the Clone Commander wanted right then and there, honestly. Not a lot to talk about with a guy like Buck, so the Sarge was interested to see where this was going(As were his men, by extension). Cody seemed to notice a lot of eyes falling on him.

"Are you and your people good with fighting by our side?" He asked rather directly, seemingly surprising Buck. The Sergeant looked over at the Commander with an arched brow, all while Cody continued to tap into the mainframe. Rex was running a little late with finding R2, but that was no surprise. That Droid really liked to get into weird places quite often, being Skywalker's.

"You haven't given us a reason not to be yet." Buck replied as he shifted his assault rifle off his back and leaning it against the wall. He turned to Cody, crossing his arms and offering a quick addendum, "And until we find our way home, we sure as hell hope you don't." which garnered a few mischievous snorts out of the ODSTs and, somehow, sent a chill up Cody's otherwise-normal spine.

"As much as we appreciate the reinforcements," Cody wanted to be tactful in choosing his words, "I'm sure you've heard some mumbles from the men, too. Both sides, I mean." And he looked at each Shock Trooper as they turned to him again. Mickey shrugged, Romeo hummed and the Rookie kept quiet, arranging his helmet and hitting it twice to make sure it worked.

"Honestly, can't blame'em. We've had a genocidal war with a coalition of alien species before-hand, Commander. One difference is, they weren't using Clones..." Dutch remarked as he stood up and walked to one of the computers, to try and see if he could figure out how it works. He hummed, sighed and shrugged, "Then again, lord knows, they weren't democratic like the Republic seems to be. As for the Clones, well, you probably know why your brothers ain't that hot on us."

"Go back a second... What?" Cody seemed confused. The ODSTs soon realized he was referring to the 'genocidal war' part.

"The Arbiter," Buck replied without skipping a beat. Wow, no problem through their alien buddies under the bus? Or was Buck being serious about this? One of their allies was an old enemy that had killed their people, unless he'd openly misunderstood what they meant by 'Genocidal'... Cody needed to know more, so he gave them all a nod to go on with the tale.

Mickey took his helmet off and ran a hand over his buzzcut, boot-camp-style haircut, before offering a snide response, "Supreme Hinge-Jaw was one of those aliens. To say we're still not very fond of'em is an understatement..." And, upon seeing Cody's eyes widen, he also clarified, "But Chief's made friends with him and his people for us, so... We're okay now..."

"Oh..." The Commander paused, before noticing Romeo looking at a set of Dog Tags. He hummed, then asked, "How bad did it get?"

"Over the span of about twenty-seven years... Nearly a dozen or so worlds turned to glass via orbital bombardment." The Sniper actually replied, then looked up to the Commander with a blank stare, "Thirty-three billion dead," and those last few words caused Cody to double over. That amount of casualties, both Military and Civilian, through orbital bombardment...

The Commander let out a deep sigh, shoulders sagging, "... Force... I'm sorry..." before gazing upon the men of the unit with understanding, "I can't believe you can look at the Elites without..." and he bit down on his words. He wasn't sure he should say anything. Force only knew what drove the UNSC forward into the alliance anyhow, but he assumed that they'd won, at least. Being here and not being worried in helping the Republic told him at least that much.

"Yeah... Not an easy thing to forgive, but they were fooled into the war, just like we were unwilling participants to witnessing our own Genocide..." Buck replied softly, then let out a sigh as memories of his home flooded his mind, "A story for another time..." and his gaze turned back to the motorpool. He had a gut feeling *something* was wrong with it, but he just couldn't quite pin it.

"Right..." Cody sighed, suddenly feeling mighty awkward. He hummed, just as he heard the sound of armored boots touching steel and the whine of an AstroMech's rollers. Rex walked in first, pistols dangling off his hips as, beside him, rolled a trash-can-looking droid with two legs and a central wheel. He was painted white with dark-blue accents and had two cameras and a color-changing 'bulb' as a mouth. It began to beep at the UNSC Troopers.

"... The hell?" Buck turned toward Rex and the Droid.

"This is R2D2. General Skywalker's AstroMech droid," Rex stated, "He should be able to help us more quickly search the Database."

"It's kinda cute," Laughed Mickey.

Buck walked up to R2, then knelt in front of him. The droid turned his camera to face him, before 'twoooo'-ing at him. Rex snorted and said, "They're our new allies..." which caused the

entire room to look at him like he was speaking a foreign freaking language. Which, to be honest, he may as well have been, considering the fact he could understand R2.

"Nevermind..." Buck shut down any discourse before it started, then looked to R2 and said, "Alright, little guy. We're gonna need some help here..." before hearing the droid chirp away a seemingly-jovial response. He rolled over on all three wheel pods toward Cody, before straightening up and retracting the central little leg. A connector of some kind emerged out of R2's chest and locked into a port in the computer. The droid began to spin it around, the click-clack of turning gears and whirr of electrical machinery working filling the troopers' ears.

Cody looked to R2 and said, "See if there were any outbound messages from barracks terminals within the last forty-eight hours, R2. We'll need the details... Filter them by destination."

"Little tin can can do it, right?" Mickey asked with a whisper. Buck shushed him as they watched the droid work. R2 turned his head toward the group, camera panning menacingly up at Mickey, to which the Demo Expert ODST greeted the droid with a wave of his hand. R2 let out a dismayed series of beeps, presumably addressing Mickey's manufacturers' family history, before turning back to work and projecting the data onto a screen on the computer. Cody leaned over and hummed.

He then turned to Rex, "One message, to unknown receiver... It's encrypted. And it's been sent from Slick's barracks."

"Slick's not gonna like this," Rex murmured, scratching his chin.

"I bet," Buck sighed, "Should we let you guys handle it? Act as backup?"

"No..." Rex sighed deeply, "As much as they probably won't like it, we need the backup. We can get you blasters and set them to stun for you. We're not here to kill our brothers."

Buck had finally registered the fact Rex called the other clones his 'brothers' with a hint more fondness than one would call his fellow soldiers 'brothers in arms'. No, Clones were Clones, identical in genetic makeup and born from the same machine wombs that grew them and millions more like them. It was only natural, Buck soon realized, that they were *all* brothers. He nodded to them and said, "We'll take it. We're keeping lethals on us, though... And Captain, Commander? I've had a nagging feeling about the Motor-pool since this entire clusterfuck started... You mind if we send for a team to scout the place out?"

"Why?" Cody asked without any hint of malice. Rather, genuine curiosity.

Mickey hummed, then said, "I think Gunny's scared the traitor might've put bombs on your vehicles."

The two officers looked to each-other, then Rex nodded and said, "Call up your EOD team, then. Make it covert... If the traitor suspects we know, he might touch off the bombs as we search for him. And if he's in Slick's platoon? Best bet's to keep him occupied while the search is conducted."

Buck nodded, "That's fine by me..." before sliding his helmet on his head. He radioed in, "Echo Zulu Seventeen, this is Alpha Niner, requesting EOD within Republic base Motorpool... Possible sabotage may have occurred. Be careful, keep it stealthy," and got an immediate affirmative. Taking his helmet back off, Buck turned to the Clones and said, "Guess this means we're grabbing blasters."

"Right this way, gents... Thanks, R2," Rex nodded, then looked down to and patted the Droid on the head. It chirped appreciatively at the Captain, before turning around and rolling off somewhere else in the base. After leading the ODSTs to the armory to hand them Blasters and calling Slick's men to the Barracks unbeknownst to him, the Clone officers marched them to Barracks No. 7. Slick's Barracks. Entering it, Cody began talking to the very clone officer in charge of the platoon.

"... There's no way!" Slick protested, "My guys are the best! No way they're capable of something like this!"

"Something like what?" A Clone voice echoed from the doorway. Slick turned toward them. Buck looked to Cody and Rex and motioned to the rear of the place, to which the officers nodded. Gunny then led his men to the rear, keeping the blasters close-by in case the traitor decided to make himself known from among the Clones' ranks. The men leaned against the walls, eyeing the Clones as they interrogated their troopers.

"Feels a lil' off, sir..." Dutch said as he watched them go from trooper to trooper, starting with a guy that was only cleaning his rifle after battle. Apparently, he loved to do that, almost like an obsession according to some of his squadmates. Dutch and Mickey could understand it. Any weapon not cleaned properly is a liability, a chance for it to go off in your face due to obstructions.

"Agreed. Something ain't right about this at all." The Gunny murmured, shifting the strange Blaster carbine in his hands. He extended its stock and shouldered it, before asking, "Why *would* one of their own betray them?" as he gazed back upon his team. All that stared back at him were confused faces of the troopers he'd been working with since before Mombasa.

"Honestly, Gunny, best bet's money," The dark-skinned sniper quipped, a grin on his face as they watched the Clones interrogate their next guy:A fella who went to the mess hall. He shrugged to them and said, "Hell, I know I've seen people do similar things for less at times..." before murmuring to himself, "My ex who's with the Innies, as an example..."

"Nah, there must be something else." Mickey waved the suspicion of Romeo off, much to the Sniper's chagrin. Sure, money was probably a factor, but there must've been something else in the middle. He continued with a quiet question, arms crossed and cradling the Blaster rifle to his chest, his SMG sitting pretty on his thigh, "The hell are Clones to the Jedi or the Republic anyway...?"

"Soldiers," Buck said without even flinching, "Hopefully, the average Rep Civvie can see that they're more than just same-faced cannon fodder..."

"That's what I'm worried about." Their Demo expert stated rather bluntly, watching as one interrogation got a little more heated due to the fact one of the Clones had some battle droid

fingers strung up on a chain like a trophy. No comment. Mickey got that, but he still told his mates, "Maybe some of the whole 'being a soldier and nothing more' thing might've gotten to one of'em... What if it gets to all of'em...?"

"Doubt it will." Dutch stated, humming and readying his blaster, "Unless some of the Jedi genuinely treat these guys like shit, we might just be seeing an isolated case."

"Sure hope so, Dutch..." The Gunny replied, watching as the team now zeroed in on Slick for something he said. Could it have been the TL, then? After he held such a short, but passionate speech about his men not being able to betray a fly, much less their own brothers? Buck didn't know. He shifted the blaster back to his dominant hand and made sure it was ready, before murmuring, "Hope my HUD can help me aim, cuz the Iron Sights look like shit..."

The laughter of his team was tenser than prior. They watched Slick's expression change to a threatening one, before he cocked his fist back and slammed Cody straight in the face. He turned toward the Troopers, all of whom lifted their carbines and opened up. Sparkling circlets of electricity lanced forward from the weapons' maws, striking the ground as the Clone Lieutenant dodged and rolled out of the way, before bounding it across through the halls. Rex ordered, "After him!" as he drew his pistols.

The troopers, all of them, ran out into the halls to chase Slick down...

Near the CIS HQ...

A rising tower of crystals and concrete, among a jungle of such items and situated amidst a massive plaza, lay undefended. Two speeder bikes were being followed by half a platoon of Ghosts, painted in the dark-green of the Swords of Sangheilios. The Arbiter tensed, his fingers wrapped tightly around the controls of the hover-bike as they worked to keep up with the two Speeder Bikes and their Jedi comrades.

The Sangheili leader looked to his escorting soldiers and, with two motions of his hands, ordered them to split up. Dividing into half, the supporting element moved to various positions, presumably more advantageous, to provide supporting fire and scouting. Meanwhile, the Arbiter utilized the boost on his Ghost's engines to catch up to Kenobi and Skywalker. The two Jedi looked to the armed bike and the Elite, then nodded, before they all began to slow as they reached the stairs.

Stopping, the trio dismounted, before the Arbiter said, "I have had my Elites secure an escape route, should we need it..." as he tensed. The two Jedi offered approving nods to the Sangheili, before they began their ascent up the stairs. Even Skywalker quietly commented on the lack of defenses for what was supposed to be the Confederacy's biggest control point on the planet.

The Arbiter's hand wrapped around the hilt of Prophets' Bane. He unclipped the ornate Energy Sword off his belt as they entered the tower, with Anakin noting, "You okay, Arbiter? You're looking a little tense..." Before getting a huff and a nod from the Alien. Anakin didn't ask anything again, however both he and Obi-Wan seemed to notice the fact the Elite was sensing something of an ambush.

As they entered the main halls of the building-turned-headquarters, the Arbiter's suspicions seemed confirmed. A young woman, bald-headed, pale and with tribal tattoos and odd clothes, stood atop a platform, a smirk on her face. It soon vanished, however, as the Arbiter ignited the Prohpets' Bane. Obi-Wan said smugly, "Ventress. You seem surprised. Was this not part of your plan?"

"I see you have a new friend, Kenobi..." She replied with the same Snark in kind, drawing her own lightsabers and igniting them. She spoke, "He seems rather... Bulky..." before flashing a cocky grin at the Arbiter, "No matter, really... He'll die with you and your little apprentice here..." before both Jedi ignited their Lightsabers, prepared for the duel...

"You seem to misunderstand the situation you're in," The Arbiter replied calmly, the scarlet blade in his hand glimmering. His voice booming with the confidence of a swordsmaster trained by the generations before him, the Elite challenged, "Surrender... And you may yet be offered mercy..." words which garnered a laugh out of Ventress. Both Jedi looked to the Elite, who sighed and shook his head.

"So be it..."

Chapter 6: Hidden Enemy Part 3:On War Footing

The two Jedi beside the Arbiter ignited their blue lightsabers as well, just as Asajj Ventress, Sith Assassin, prepared herself to engage. She dropped the 'skirt' she was wearing onto the floor, revealing her gaunt legs, both wrapped in bandages and protective layers. She roared, jumping from the high ground with both her scarlet blades brandished. Lifting them over her head, she brought them down as she was about to land...

And the Arbiter's reaction time allowed him to lift the Prohpets' Bane to deflect them. With a hefty kick, the Elite sent the Dark Jedi apprentice skidding back across the steel floor. Cocking his fist back and taking a combat stance familiar only to Elites trained in the art of wielding an Energy Sword, the Arbiter said to Obi-Wan and Anakin, "Go. Retrieve any intelligence we require. I will deal with her."

"No disrespect meant, Arbiter, but Ventress is more cunning than she looks," Obi-Wan stated as he took the Arbiter's left flank. Anakin took the right, a grin on his face, before the Alien looked back at the two of them, before huffing as he watched Ventress pacing ahead of them. Curteous of her to let them talk, so Arbiter would, at least, give her the same courtesy. He looked back to Obi-Wan and tilted his head. Obi-Wan raised a brow and said, "If you're sure..."

"I am," The Sangheili replied, "Find intelligence, discover who the spy might be..." and he turned to the Dathomirian Witch ahead of him, blade ready.

Ventress let out a low laugh, before pointing the tip of her right lightsaber at him and stating, "Rather bold for an alien! Do you have the Force?" words to which the Arbiter didn't answer. He simply waited patiently, facing Ventress as they circled each-other like duelists of old times. The two Jedi turned toward another door and ran for the exit. Ventress tried to chase, but the Arbiter bounded toward her, intercepting her mid-charge and slamming her against a wall, before slashing down.

The woman barely ducked under the heavy swing of the Elite, the blade digging into the wall like a hot knife would through butter. A bright-orange gash, thinner than what one would get out of a lightsaber strike, was left in the wall as the Arbiter retrieved his blade and swiped strategically toward Ventress's midsection, almost catching her off-guard. She barely shifted her blades into position to blunt the swipe.

The Elite, however, had performed a motion that one would not believe possible due to the size of his frame. He spun about with such grace and speed, Ventress was stupefied enough to take a hammer-punch to the face from the Elite's balled left fist, before staggering and finding herself on the defensive again. He thrust the blade forward, forcing her to block, before pressing the attack to break through her defenses.

To her credit, Ventress was holding stubbornly to her defense, despite the taller Elite's bulk and swing power. Thel could commend her for that, at least. It was not going to help her, however. He swiped down to the right, feinting a strike, before redirecting the blade and

catching Ventress unaware. He'd clipped her hip, causing her to scream out in pain, before said pain got channeled into anger.

The woman thrust both her hands forward, sending a shockwave that caused the Arbiter to stagger, moving a couple of steps back. He huffed, then parried a strike from the girl's twin blades as she began swinging wildly at him. The Elite remained incredibly calm at this display of clumsy swordsmanship, deflecting each strike with the same impassive gaze he had had so far.

Meanwhile, the woman seemed angry, calling out, "You're as worthless as those Jedi, not even bothering to strike at me properly! You barely nicked me, you reptile!"

The Arbiter hummed, before shifting his blade to the right and lifting one of his own hands up. Ventress yelped as she felt her own right hand caught by the Arbiter's left, before the man twisted her arm. She grit her teeth and stabbed toward him, catching the side of his helmet. The blade deflected off the Armor's energy shield, but the Arbiter was forced to let go.

He hummed, looking at the small scorch on his helmet, then nodded and said, "Good. You're learning..." before switching his stance. Ventress took pause upon seeing that, watching the more aggressive gaze of the Elite sweep over her, like he was sizing up his prey. Ventress took her own stance, one blade behind and high and one low and pointed at him.

Before she could even blink, the Elite had bounded halfway to her. She gasped, ducking under an oblique swing from top-left to bottom right. She felt the blade singe a bit of her skin, then gasped as she saw Thel thrust at her chest. Once again, the Elite swiped upward with the blade, deflecting one of Ventress's attacks to the right and one to the left. He struck forward again, cutting inches away from the woman's head.

She staggered, but counterattacked sloppily. Energy sparked against energy as the trio of weapons collided, with the Arbiter utilizing his strength and reach to keep Ventress's own weapons away from him while trying to inflict damage via his Energy Sword. He could potentially use the energy dagger in the left gauntlet to 'even the odds', but he had confidence in being able to defeat the girl without it.

He parried another strike, hoping Generals Kenobi and Skywalker used the delay wisely.

That, they did, too. Obi-Wan tapped into the mainframe of the base's computer and said, "Seems like they'll be receiving reinforcements soon enough... This is not good..." and turning to Anakin. His young Jedi friend had also searched through some of the logs in the place. Obi-Wan hummed and said, "I'm surprised they've even left this little bout of information in their consoles..."

"They probably know we can't do much without hyperspace lanes to the Outer Rim planets like Christophsis under our control. We're already spread pretty thin here," Anakin replied, then sighed and looked to his master, stating, "I got nothing left here... We should get the Arbiter and leave before the place starts swarming with Droids. Ventress probably didn't expect to fight an alien duelist."

"Agreed," Obi-Wan replied, stowing the data on enemy troop arrivals in a pouch on his belt, "Let's go retrieve our friend, shall w-"

Their com-links pinged. The two Jedi looked to one-another and noted the 'caller ID' of a sort was from nearby. They both tapped in to listen to them, before an Elite's voice filtered in, calm and quiet, "*Generals. This is Sergeant 'Zadom, of the First Watchers. We've news of an impending enemy deployment... And calls from Shipmaster 'Vadum about the arrival of new enemy forces...*"

The two paused, listening to the outside. The whirr of antigravity engines and thumping of machine feet, though muffled by the walls, was clearly audible. The two men ran outside, opening the door to the sight of an entire armada of Droid vessels coming in for landing. Some had already deployed their troops, battalions of tan-colored B1s and silver B2s marching toward them.

"Oh, this is not good..." Anakin sighed, "Let's go get the Arbiter..." before he radioed in, "Sergeant, maybe pull your men back. Doubt it's a good idea to engage the enemy without tanks or reinforcements. We'll go retrieve the Arbiter." and received an affirmative ping. The men saw the Elites' cloaks engaging from afar, somehow, then felt more than watched as the Elites bounded back to cover their escape.

The two Jedi looked to one-another, nodded, then ran inside, lightsabers drawn. Entering the area where the Arbiter and Ventress were dueling, the men saw Ventress get punted across the floor, slamming against a wall. The woman roared, letting out a blood-curdling scream as she charged the arbiter, yet again swinging wildly at him. The two Jedi were stunned, however, to see that the Arbiter was calm and collected when fighting the Dark Jedi.

Deflecting a blade strike to the right and slamming his head into the girl's chin, Arbiter almost seemed like he was playing with his food. She swung at him again and, seeing this as an opportunity, the Elite shifted his blade. The twin-sided energy sword caught Ventress's own lightsaber between its two prongs, before the Arbiter quickly twisted his wrist to the right, stunning and disarming the Sith by tossing her right-handed blade aside.

He then grabbed her by the other lightsaber-wielding hand, spun and threw her against a glass pane, shattering it. Anakin hummed, surprised, then said, "Why'd you...?" before shaking his head, "Nevermind! Arbiter, we gotta go! Enemy reinforcements are en-route to us!" to which the Sangheili offered a nod. The group rushed out and boarded their Speeders and the Ghost, before swiveling them about and pushing at maximum speed toward the base. As they were being joined by the Elites, Anakin said, "Let's hope the boys found the traitor! Tomorrow's gonna be a busy day!"

Republic Base.

The ODSTs and Clone Commanders chased down Slick, keeping pace with the man despite the formers' seemingly heavier gear. Turning a corner as they chased slick, the ODSTs hefted the blasters and aimed, before a volley of stun rounds left the magnetic coils of the weapons. Slick ducked and weaved past one of his comrades, the energy shots narrowly missing him.

Mickey swore, "Fuck! He's a slippery one!"

"Guess the name fits!" Dutch called out, garnering a couple strained laughs from the troopers. Cody and Rex led the way, following Slick out and taking another left with the team, before descending down a flight of stairs and exiting out into the Motor Pool. UNSC Marine EOD teams had removed a good chunk of explosives, considering the stacks of charges laying on the floor without detonation command receivers.

One of the Marines noticed Slick and drew her rifle, shifting to lead the target. A burst of automatic fire left the barrel, clearly an intended disabling shot, but the burst went high and struck the wall, only one round skimming off Slick's back armor and ricocheting off a really narrow angle on his armor. It still seemed to take a chunk of plasteel with it and droplets of blood did hit the ground, but Slick had slipped away.

"Easy on the rounds, Marine!" Buck ordered as they ran past, "We're trying to nab him!"

The girl nodded, "Sorry, sir!" as she watched them move. She looked over to the explosive pile and, with a couple of hand signals, told her other members to make sure every single pin had been removed. Her teammates nodded, going to do the fourth checkup of this kind, all while the rest of the EOD teams scoured the rest of the cache for any signs of Slick's little playthings.

Cody, Rex and the others entered the base yet again, through one of the motorpool doors, with the captain following the trail of blood while the commander tailed behind him and the ODSTs kept their weapons close. They trailed the blood all the way over to its endpoint, specifically, an access grate to the vents. Buck swore to himself, "Shit..." before stating, "How the hell are we going to find him now? He's gone into hiding..."

"One of us can squeeze in there and find him, sir," Mickey suggested. Rookie looked ready to go, thumbing the charger on the DC-15 carbine he had at the ready. Buck shook his head, then looked to Cody and Rex, both of whom hummed. They gave a tilt of their heads in-synch to the ODSTs, all of whom noted the motion. They followed them along toward the command center.

Cody whispered to them as they walked, "He's taken the Vents. They go everywhere in the base so, if he wants to escape, he just needs to take them all the way to an exit... But he probably won't..." because he probably wanted to wipe out the base or at least severely cripple it, were the unspoken chunks of the sentence. Alpha-Niner exchanged glances, then nodded to Cody.

Marching into the command room, Cody left his blaster on the holotable, though it was lacking the mag as the ODSTs noticed, before he stepped up to the console and started playing up the part, "Best guess we have is he's heading for an exit. I'll lock them down and declare red alert..." with as convincing a voice and poker face as he could put up. He turned to Buck and his team and said, "You troopers divvy up and secure the exits! Be ready for anything!"

"Sir," Buck and his men saluted and turned to 'leave'. They fast-marched out of the room and a bit down the hall.

Rex spoke to Cody, "I'll head on out and see if I can't find some way to cut Slick off..." to which the Commander gave a nod, still tapping into the 'sensors' to see if he could locate Slick. Rex ran out as well, his footsteps growing all the more distant. Slick was, of course, well-concealed above the Commander, laying in wait in a vent. The man peeked out and looked for others, before he slowly slinked his way down from the vent, grabbing the blaster from the table and marching up to Cody. He pointed it at his head as the Commander grinned and said, "Hello, Slick..." with a hint of venom in an otherwise joyous voice. He lifted the tibanna gas clip of the weapon and stated, "Gun's empty."

Rex and the ODSTs appeared and surrounded him, with Cody grabbing the annoyed-looking traitor's weapon out of his hand and reloading it, before aiming. Rex spoke to him, "Good evening, traitor..." venom behind his words as well. Slick grit his teeth, raising his hands as the ODSTs pointed their blasters at him as well. It was a textbook ambush, it seemed. And Slick fell right for it.

"I'm no traitor..." Slick replied in a low growl, "I was doing this for my brothers..."

"You were *betraying* your brothers, you moron. A good chunk of'em nearly died when the ambush failed," Romeo replied, crossing his arms to his chest. Slick stared at him, grit his teeth, then lunged toward the Soldier. A burst of stun rounds struck from the Troopers like a hammerblow, sending Slick slumping forward against the floor. Romeo sighed and said, "Guess he ain't that 'slick' anymore, is he?"

Several groans filtered through the room, with Buck patting him on the shoulder and stating, "Don't, Romeo. Just don't."

The black sniper rolled his eyes and sighed, before taking a knee and checking to make sure the bastard was still alive. Cody and Rex sighed at the sorry sight of their brother, before picking him up. About thirty minutes later, as the Arbiter and Jedi returned, they found Slick tied up, being dragged out by a pair of Clone MPs. Anakin stopped them, then said with a hint of surprise, "Slick? You were the traitor?"

The Clone glared up at Skywalker and spat, "I was, if you consider trying to free my brothers from your yoke 'treason'..." anger behind his voice. Nothing the confusion in his eyes and the glares the ODSTs were giving him, he lashed out, "None of you Basics would get it! We're soldiers, bred for war. No better than cattle to the Republic and you, Jedi. My brothers live and die by your will..."

"And you think betraying our strategies to the Separatists would help?" Cody asked, looking Slick dead in the eye.

Rex crossed his arms to his chest, "Kid. Like the Basic pointed out, more than a few of your brothers died because of you... You are *not* innocent to the same crimes you accuse anyone here of," before seeing the Clone's face shift. First to anger, then to introspection, then to fear and surprise. He was about to say something, before Rex waved him off and growled, "Get him out of here..."

Anakin and Obi-Wan watched the MPs drag Slick away, with Obi-Wan commenting, "He was one of our best..." as he seemed in thought. Anakin, too, seemed to be considering the

situation, while Buck and his men had already considered it. Buck hated to admit it, but both sides had points here. The Clones, as Buck figured, were born and bred as war cattle, pretty much. He didn't know the full context of the Clone Army, but he was pretty sure it violated a *lot* of sentient rights charter bullet points in one go.

"A damn shame," Cody murmured, shaking his head, "His squad had perfect cohesion, too..."

"They were Pod Brothers, after all," Shrugged Rex, then he sighed. He turned to Skywalker, Kenobi and the Arbiter, saluted and said, "Sirs? What should we expect, now that we're down a Platoon lead?"

"A lot of droids..." Anakin replied, annoyed, "We saw them landing before we arrived. Tomorrow's going to be busy."

Just about every man in the room let out a collective groan of annoyance. Of course, things weren't going to be easy, no matter what they were going to do. Things would always be hard, considering the things they were facing. Uncaring, sleepless automatons armed with energy weapons that would attack headlong toward them, meaning the UNSC and GAR would have to prepare even more proper defenses...

At least, they had the bloody armor saved to back them up...

Chapter 7: Hellfire

The UNSC's twin-engine light gunships, the Hornets, made a low pass in a wedge formation of three. Blaster bolts flashed off their undercarriages as their top-mounted heavy machine guns let loose, thundering gunfire raking the advancing two-hundred-strong Droid Battalion and its armored reinforcements. Missiles lanced forward from the bellies of the gunships as well, before each of them split off in a different direction, explosions rocking the area ahead.

A laser lanced out from a building, piercing the top hull of a tripedal walker droid that had three cannons mounted beneath what seemed to be a radar array of some sort. The walker's innards blew outward as the scarlet SPARTAN Laser beam punched clean through it, before it tumbled over to the side and collapsed over the edge of the highway, onto the massive field of glassy blue crystalline outcroppings below, further shattering its own frame under its weight.

The return fire was succinct, the two siblings of the droid immediately turning their heavy blaster cannons toward the culprits. The ODSTs inside the tower retreated behind the cover of thicker walls just as the plasma bolts blew out half the floor they were on. Thankfully for Dutch, he had made it to cover just in time. Mickey swore, "Holy fucking God almighty, those things have cannons that pack a punch!"

"Don't call the Lord's name in vain, Mickey! We might get shafted next!" The heavy-duty laser-wielder replied to his comrade. Mickey let out a short, mocking laugh at that as he hefted his Jackhammer. He waved to a Corpsman as he saw a Clone laying on the floor, his armor punctured by Shrapnel, before standing back up and activating the Smartscope on the launcher.

Down below, in the street, UNSC Marines mounted on the backs of advancing Warthogs rode into battle, firing assault weapons and the back-mounted turret guns of their vehicles. Tup was sat beside a Marine that was laying down hell with an assault weapon that had a bipod and a drum magazine. Spent casings, hot as blaster bolts, dropped to the floor below the man as he continued firing.

AT-TEs and Scorpion MBTs rolled forward into the battle line, their cannons roaring with fury. The droid tanks in the rear began to reply as Anakin, Obi-Wan and the Arbiter moved up, blades drawn. The Arbiter commented, "This is certainly familiar!" as he looked around at the battle in the skies and the engagement against the Battle Droids, "Though our enemies wore more flesh than metal!"

"Welcome to the fun, then, Arbiter!" Laughed Skywalker as he brandished his Lightsaber.

Obi-Wan looked back to Cody and said, "Cody, tell our armor to prepare to counter theirs! Have our cannons keep them pinned while the UNSC's flanking units hit them from behind!" to which Cody gave a nod and a quick salute. He brandished his own lightsaber and deflected three blaster bolts back at the droids, watching as their Reinforcements ran forward.

Three platoons of clones, including Tup and Check, hefted their blasters and joined the dogged defense, with Tup shouldering his blaster and opening up the moment he hit the barricade made of the collapsed building in the middle of the highway. In the corner of his eye, on the crystalline fields, he could see about a dozen UNSC Fast-moving Vehicles rolling out under the cover of their gunships.

Squeezing off the first shot from his blaster, he missed one of the enemy B1s that were advancing in a square formation toward them. The B1-series Battle Droids were never the smartest bunch, nor were their tactics the most useful, but they had Force-damned numbers. Tup ducked under a bolt that struck a few feet in front of him, then balked, "Kriffin' hell! That was close!"

"We really pissed'em off!" Check remarked as he fired from his heavy rifle. He aimed and nailed one of the B1s leading the assault, before waving over a pair of UNSC Marines and a Corpsman. Another of their brothers took two blaster bolts to the chest from the droids, but he seemed to have survived, so Check directed them to him. The lead Corpsman, an Asian-descended woman, took a knee beside the wounded trooper, took his chest plate off and applied a self-sealing foam to his wounds, before looking up at Check and stating, "He'll be fine! We'll run him back to the Aid Station then ship him to our fleet once the Space Battle above dies down!"

"How the Kriff did these bastards get more ships in!?" Another trooper demanded from their left, hefting a Z-6 rotary blaster cannon and squeezing the trigger. The bulky six-barrel handheld machine cannon spooled started spitting blaster fire. The third tri-droid ahead spun its cannon toward them, forcing the clone heavy gunner to dip back into cover as the area ahead of him exploded thrice-over, dust and debris kicking up into the sky.

"Swung around the planet, according to data. Hit our combined fleet from both sides," Replied the other Corpsman as he set up a stretcher, his voice dull, calm, focused on the duty at hand as they hefted the injured clone onto it nad started carrying him out. The trio of clones seemed surprised to hear that, but their thoughts were quickly squelched as they began to return fire against the droids up ahead, with Tup nailing his first kill for the day just as generals Skywalker and Kenobi rolled up.

Above, the greenish hulls of Swords Of Sangheilios Banshees swept down, their twin plasma cannons letting loose bursts of fire as they strafed the enemy's center and rear lines. The UNSC vehicles from the flanking team had also finally jumped in, sowing discord among the enemy's backline. Several clones watched with muted awe as a pair of dropships deployed a pair of heavy mortar tanks to their rears, followed by a contingent of about two-dozen Elite Minors led by a general.

Said General approached the Arbiter and the Jedi, putting a fist to his chest and stating, "Arbiter, Generals. The Fleet faces heavy resistance above. Reinforcements for the Clone troops may yet be possible, however, as we and the UNSC prepare to breach through their forward lines," as he brandished his own Energy Sword. The Arbiter gave a nod of approval to his soldier.

"Then, it looks like we're breaching through..." Obi-Wan said, "Two-prong attack?"

"You know me," Grinned Anakin. He turned to Rex and called out, "Rex! Get the boys and let's move it! I have a plan."

"On it, sir!" Replied the Captain, before dashing off.

"Should be interesting to see what the General pulls out this time..." Check whispered, poking out to take more shots at the droids. Tup snorted and joined his brother. The two paused as a UNSC Marine took a bolt to the throat beside them. Clawing at the burnt, cauterized injury, the man collapsed backward, only for one of his buddies to be raked by blaster fire in the back as he went to try and help him.

"Fuck!" Another Marine cried out, "Someone fucking kill those tin cans!"

His wish seemed to be answered as a Wraith and a Scorpion fired at the same time, with the former's plasma ball landing square in the middle of the enemy's formation and melting a good few droids with the hit. As General Skywalker departed with Rex, his platoon and a bunch of Jetpacks, Obi-Wan pushed up to the line and next to the UNSC officers with the Arbiter, before stating, "Seems like we're gaining the advantage!"

"We should press it," The Arbiter stated, "Seems like your artillery can keep the enemy at bay with the help of our armor..."

Kenobi nodded, then looked up ahead and stated, "We'll attack alongside Anakin..." watching as the UNSC harassment group from before continued to wreak havoc in the enemy's rear. Several AATs took bursts of heavy fire, while the Banshees and Hornets up above launched continuous strafing runs to pressure the droids. He saw the General and Rex far ahead, jetpacks at the ready, on a high-rise. Watching as the first jet ignited, Obi-Wan looked to the Arbiter, smiled, then lifted his lightsaber to mark the charge.

The Clones and Marines cried raucous battle cries, rifles drawn. Battle Tanks rolled over the rubble alongside AT-TE hexapedal walkers, Wraith tanks and Ghost Jetbikes. Bolts of plasma, blaster fire and bullets met the conjoined formation of Droids, both B1 and B2, with casualties on all sides in the beginning volley. Two Scorpion MBTs rolled over the droids ahead, providing covering fire for the Marines that pushed behind them.

A clone dropped in front of one of the troopers, wounded, while his brother died, filled with Blaster bolts. The Marine dragged the injured Clone toward him and started treating him again as his buddies pushed forward. Two Clones saw the soldier lift their Brother up on his shoulders and start hauling ass toward the rear, where Corpsmen were waiting.

The Arbiter and his Elites, meanwhile, pushed through, cutting a swath through the droids with energy swords and plasma rifles. One of the Elites, a Ranger, jumped into the sky using his jetpack and rained hell down on the Droids below with the two plasma rifles in his hands. The Arbiter's face was impassive as he and General Kenobi cut down the droids ahead of them, bolts of blaster fire flashing off the shields of his ornate armor.

The female Marine that'd interacted with Tup caught up with him and Check, taking cover beside them with her balaclava covering her face. She pulled out a grenade, thumbed the primer, then long-armed it toward a squad of Super Battle Droids. The thunder-flash-snap of

the blast staggered the machines, allowing her to poke out with her Battle Rifle and put four three-round bursts into the creatures' central processors with deadly accuracy.

She looked to Tup, smiled behind the balaclava, going by the creases, then nodded to her and Check to follow her in. Check grinned and said, "Your girl just challenged us, Tup. And I ain't losing to a Basic, no matter how cute you find her!" before pushing forward and hefting his blaster. He squeezed the trigger as rapidly as he could, providing cover to the young woman.

Tup had wanted to protest, but he froze when he saw the girl slam into a droid, putting the muzzle of her weapon against its chest and squeezing the trigger three separate times. She saw the other droids approaching and, instead of reloading, she slung her BR on her back, drew her sidearm and blasted the leading droid in the face, cratering its armor with a high-power armor-piercing shot that dropped it like a sack of bricks.

Following up, she head-butted another droid, causing a ringing in her own ears that obviously gave her slight orientation issues. Still, she managed to lift and pin the barrel of her pistol against its chest before putting half the remaining magazine into it. He gasped as he saw one of the Droids approaching from behind and aiming its twin arm blaster at the back of her head.

Standing up, Tup aimed and squeezed. Six azure bolts left the barrel of the weapon by the time the girl had awoken to realize there was a droid behind her. Six cratering, still-hot holes had been drilled into the machine's armor, sending it tumbling to the floor as Tup pushed up next to her and Check. She looked to him as she drew her battle rifle and swapped out a mag, before smiling at him again.

He nodded, smile invisible behind his helmet.

... Before they even properly began their push, however, the Droids began a retreat. Their last Tri-Droid lost its head at the hand of a Scorpion tank's shell. Sighs of relief and cheering and whooping filled the place, followed some hours later by Troops picking up their casualties. Rex sighed and looked at the report as, up above, Banshees flew upward toward the landing zones on top of a cluster of high-rise buildings in the center of the city.

"Sixty clones and forty-five Marines," The Colonel in charge of the Marine ground forces shook his head, "Damn shame."

"Agreed, sir..." Rex replied as he walked with the man toward the holotable ahead, "Generals Skywalker and Kenobi are going to try and call for Reinforcements, but from what I got, the CIS is really trying to keep you and us pinned here... They brought in a larger naval contingent than most of us thought they had in this area of the Rim." and he handed the reports to the officer.

The Colonel shrugged, "We'll see what the Generals and Admirals want to do..."

Approaching the makeshift command center in the middle of some rubble and destroyed enemy vehicles, the captain and Colonel saluted the Generals. Anakin noted, "Nice of you to join us, Rex. We were just trying to get through to the Admirals... Seems like Admiral Yularen ain't willing to answer, though," before he watched the communications hologram

flicker, zap with static, then filter and appear. In front of them, Admiral Lasky stood, alongside Rtas 'Vadum, the Shipmaster of the small contingent of Sangheili ships present with the fleet.

Lasky said, "Good day, Generals. Caught us at a decently good time... Admiral Yularen's cruiser managed to slip out of the encirclement and is heading out to gather supplies as we speak. He should be back within the coming hours. In the meantime, I'm still thinking over the envoy I should send to you folks's Galactic Senate. We have quite a few Section One members that are eager to go..."

"Any chance you could spare us more reinforcements, sir? We might need a certain unit to help us break the stalemate here," The Colonel quipped, "If it isn't too much of a bother for them to come down here and help us kick some ass. And if Palmer wants to tag along, too, that's fine..." before he scratched the scar on the side of his head. The two Generals and the Clone Officers seemed confused.

Lasky, meanwhile, chuckled, "I'll see what I can do, Colonel. I think they're eager to get their armored boots on solid ground, so we'll send them over as soon as Admiral Yularen's back with your reinforcements..." and paused just as an explosion roared outside, "We'll talk more when we're done up here... *Infinity,* over and out." With that, the hologram winked off.

"Well..." Obi-Wan said, "That was interesting..."

In Orbit...

UNSC Autumn-class Cruiser *Apache* let loose a full salvo of her missiles toward a Confederacy Munificent-class frigate. Turbolaser bolts struck her shields, causing them to flare, all while the return fire from the ship's 50mm Rampart point-defenses raked the hull of the undefended droid vessel. Behind her and a dozen of her sister ships, two Lucrehulk-class Dreadnoughts continued spitting out starfighters. The bitten-donut-shaped warships also fired, maintaining their Point-Defenses against the UNSC's own fighters.

Two frigates joined the *Apache,* firing their MACs at the enemy ship. Paris-classes, uparmored and shielded, let loose with their own missiles and weapons as they flew on both sides of the enemy ship, coring two of its sisters with their MACs and raking it full of shell and missile holes. They took fire from the sides as they swept back around, their Rampart batteries now spitting Flak and HE against the Vulture fighter droids that tried to pursue them.

Broadsword fighters of the UNSC followed up, reinforcing the two vessels. Two banked down toward the trailing enemy fighters and opened fire the moment their ballistic computers aligned the shots. Magnetic autocannons raked the shieldless droid fighter swarm, forcing them to turn and engage them. Red plasma lanced past the UNSC Pilots' cockpits as their radio chatter played in each-other's ears.

One locked a squadron of enemy bombers with her missiles, banked toward them as her helmet's HUD maintained lock, then aimed and fired. A flurry of anti-fighter missiles lanced

out of their bays in the fighter's hull before it veered to the right and refocused on another target. Seven explosions lit the void and four enemy fighters vanished off the radars.

Republic starfighters followed up, joining the Broadsword in formation and engaging the droid fighters ahead with their twin laser cannons. The three-wing-design folding starfighters kept up decently well with the more aerodynamic UNSC one, even as it used its maneuvering thrusters and vectoring engines to engage the enemy and out-turn them. Above them, another UNSC Cruiser fired its MAC.

The subsequent detonation of a Munificent shook its sisters hard, throwing off their aim and ensuring that the rest of the Navy had a clear line of sight on them. The two Republic Cruisers in orbit joined in as well, turbolaser batteries raining fire toward the enemy's vessels, some of which attempted to flank the bulwark of the orbital defense forces present around the planet.

The Droid fleet watched as the UNSC vessels ahead opened up a clear view down the center as they veered to engage the multitude of arriving reinforcements. One of the Lucrehulks took this as a sign they could begin advancing. They started pouring in turbolaser shots toward the UNSC ships moving in to cover the flanks, catching a frigate with its shields draining and managing a decent enough hit to drill a hole through the armor.

... However, the lead Lucrehulk did not expect what came next...

Four bolts of light lanced forth from amid the formation of United Nations Space Command vessels. Four massive ferrous tungsten projectiles screamed silently through the darkness of the void, splitting the dark before striking their intended target at hypersonic speeds. The massive rods of ferrous tungsten penetrated the armored hull of the Lucrehulk amidships.

Two struck the command center, while the other two had torn through the central hull and hit the reactor's coolant lines and the reactor shielding, before all punched out of the rear and into the void. The Lucrehulk itself began to split at the seams, the central command pod losing atmosphere and erupting into flames. as the vessel's reactor suffered destabilization.

For a moment, a bright second sun filled the vision ports on board the UNSC's super-carrier. The UNSC *Infinity* began its emergence from among its battlegroup, a salvo of missiles leaving the tubes and arching toward the CIS's vessels as the other surviving Lucrehulk began a desperate turn to escape. Lasky, however, wasted no time, ordering, "All elements of the Navy are to provide *Infinity* cover as we open up a path for the *Resolute* to jump back in. Roland, all guns forward."

"Yes, sir, captain!" The AI saluted.

"Cortana," The man called out. The blue avatar of the female AI appeared with a grin as the man looked toward the table. She snapped a crisp salute, then flashed a single word on the holotable's side screens. 'READY'. Lasky gave a nod and thumbed the computer's touch screen, authorizing the deployment, to which Cortana flashed off the com and presumably went back to Blue Team.

"Sir," The sensor op reported, "The *Resolute* is returning..."

"Well," Lasky breathed, "Let's hope they brought those reinforcements... Send our armor, too."

Chapter 8: Prep Phase

"So, you're telling me we're getting even more reinforcements?"

Anakin and Obi-Wan walked with Sergeant Johnson toward a designated LZ in order to meet their supposed new arrivals. One was a Republic shuttle that was preparing to land as they spoke, while the other was a UNSC Pelican that had just now touched down. The soldiers in the waiting area, alongside the Clones and Corpsmen, prepared to load the wounded into both vehicles and send them upstairs.

The Pelican dropship was different. Heavily armored and armed and layered with a multitude of extra defensive equipment including extra flare and chaff launchers and an EWAR suite, it was marked with the pyramid of the UNSC's secretive espionage and counter-intelligence unit, the Office of Naval Intelligence. The men that first marched out of the vehicle wore black uniforms and carried silenced weapons.

Strange enough a delivery, Anakin thought. Johnson looked to them with a grin, holding his cigar between his teeth, before taking a drag from it as they approached the vehicle. Both Anakin and Obi-Wan were stunned, however, when a four-man team descended from the transport, armed and armored to the teeth. Clad in extensively-designed, utilitarian suits of what seemed to be a form of Power Armor, the four figures lined up in front of the Marine Colonel, saluting the man.

The Colonel saluted back and told them something, before motioning for them to move on in within the camp. Anakin leaned toward Obi-Wan and whispered, "They're fairly massive..." as they approached. The four-man team turned to see the Generals and Johnson arriving, before three of them, two women and a man, took their helmets off and gave Johnson smiles.

"Blues..." Johnson grinned, "Good to see you finally decided to join our sorry asses groundside."

"Orbital battle prevented us from deploying with the reinforcements," Chief replied as he and Johnson did a rather different handshake, more personal it seemed. He nodded to the man and said, "Good to see you as well, Sergeant," before turning to Anakin and Obi-Wan, the latter wearing a faint, friendly smile while the former seemed a tad shocked. The four Spartans quickly saluted and said, "Sirs."

Obi-Wan hummed, "Take it you were briefed about us, then?"

"Yes, sir," Chief replied, gazing upon the two men that commanded an entire armed force that they were now allies by circumstance with. He began reciting, "Generals Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, Grand Army of the Republic. We're Blue Team, sirs." And the stoicism with which the soldier before them spoke told the Jedi enough to understand him. Admittedly, he also emanated a certain aura of calm.

"Spartans. Finest of'em, too," Johnson complimented, taking another puff from his cigar, "I've seen'em win us our War and then kick ass and take names in the post-War period," and he

gently hit Chief's shoulder pad. He then shook his hand after an audible, but short *zap* filled the air. Rubbing his hand, he said, "Could'a warned me your shield was on, though."

Anakin snorted, then paused, "Wait. Shield?"

"MJOLNIR armor has energy shielding," One of the women, with short red hair and emerald eyes, stated, "One of the many layers of defense. They've also recently added plasma-resistant materials to most armors of ours to allow for better heat dissipation." And she hummed, looking around to see a squadron of Elites marching through the place, assisting the Clones in carrying their supplies.

The younger of the two Jedi whistled, "Good to know."

"Indeed," Obi-Wan offered, then extended a hand to the Chief. The Spartan looked at it for a moment with some hint of confusion in his movement, before gripping the hand gently and shaking it. The master Jedi added with his usual tone of friendliness, "I'm sure Captain Rex and Commander Cody will appreciate your support... Do you happen to have names or ranks we can refer to you by?"

"Sir. Master Chief Petty Officer One-One-Seven." Chief nodded.

"Petty Officer First Class Kelly-087, sir," Kelly smirked, crossing her arms to her chest, her helmet clipped to her belt, "Nice to meet'cha both."

"Likewise," Both Anakin and Obi-Wan voiced, then smirked and looked to Linda.

"POFC Linda-058..." The Sniper gave a nod. The two looked to Fred next.

"Lieutenant Frederic-104, sirs. Excuse John, he's... Still not used to Command basically forcing us to interact more," Fred quipped and that garnered a couple of chuckles, one of the offenders being Kelly. Chief cast a glance toward his team, of which Fred simply gave his old friend a faint, almost imperceptible smile, Kelly was still stifling that laugh and Linda had covered her mouth. Not unlike them to joke around, but it wasn't normal in front of superiors.

Johnson snorted, "No offense, Chief, but I'm with'em."

Chief nodded, "Yeah..." before turning to the Jedi, "Where are we needed?"

"Well, we're observing the movement of enemy troops and have had faster-moving troops from your faction harassing them for the time being, so..." Anakin started, then looked to his master, "We could use some help taking out their officers. Some of our scouts said they've seen at least another two Tactical Droids nearby... And a new General deployed with their troops."

Chief looked to Linda, to which the girl drew her rifle and nodded. Anakin and Obi-Wan exchanged another glance, shrugged and nodded to Linda. They then turned toward the arriving shuttle from one of their own cruisers as it touched down. Anakin smiled and said, "And there's our reinforcements..." before motioning for the Chief and his team to follow them.

"Perhaps they finally brought that Padawan I've requested," Obi-Wan added as they walked, with Johnson close behind.

Anakin snorted, "Why'd you ask for another Padawan, anyway?"

"Perhaps I miss training..." The Jedi master quipped with his usual back-sass, then added with a semi-serious tone, "And, honestly, Anakin, you should petition for one as well."

"No, thanks. A Padawan would just slow me down," He shot back. The Spartans soon figured Padawan must've meant something like a student or a trainee Jedi. They didn't have the full picture of the Jedi as a group, nor of the Republic as a whole. Nobody in the UNSC did. It was part of the reason their Alliance as a tad bit shaky, but both sides seemed to be trying to mend things quickly.

Arriving at the shuttle just as the forward door popped open, they were greeted by the sight of a young girl. She had tangerine skin and various tribal tattoos on her face, plus what looked to be three tails attached to a 'crown' made up of a pair of horns with thick white and blue stripes running horizontally across them. Deep blue eyes stared at the group waiting for her on the deck, with Johnson murmuring, "Ain't she a bit young to be out here...?"

The young girl descended, then paused as she saw the Spartans and Marines present around. She blinked, then looked to the two Jedi and regained her focus. Walking up to them, she said, "Masters Kenobi and Skywalker? I'm Ahsoka Tano, your new Padawan learner. I've been sent here on urgent matters from the Jedi Council," She explained as she descended from the ramp. Overhead, a slew of UNSC drop-ships flew in, landed, deployed troops and extra armor, then took off again under armed escort.

"Did something happen back on the homefront that we oughta be aware of, kid?" Johnson asked from behind Skywalker and Kenobi.

Ahsoka took a moment to register Johnson himself, then gave him a once-over. She nodded to him and said, "It's important enough that they sent me with the Cruiser that went back to grab supplies for you. There's some ongoing negotiations to open hyperlanes in neutral territories, more specifically, in the Hutt areas, but they've come to a standstill..."

Anakin hummed, then sighed, "And we have our own problems here. Sure, the UNSC's arrival alleviated it a little, but we're still trying to liberate this planet from CIS Control. We kept trying to start up coms with them to send us some form of reinforcements, not to mention some actual diplomats to talk with our newfound allies over here..." before turning to the Blues and Johnson.

Ahsoka shrugged, "They haven't been getting anything. That's why they sent me."

The youngest of the two generals sighed and pinched his brow, "Oh, great. They didn't even know we were in trouble..." before sighing deeply. The UNSC forces around all looked to one-another. Johnson quickly excused himself and stepped away toward his Marines, leaving the situation in the probably-capable hands of the two Jedi generals. Ahsoka seemed slightly confused.

"Why not send a message through the Cruiser that just dropped me off?" She asked, "Or through the entire allied fleet up above?"

... Given some time and that was exactly what happened. Among other issues, most prominent was Anakin's visceral reaction at the idea of helping the Hutts and the fact that the Republic was finally sending reinforcements, too. The UNSC cadre of Spartans watched as the Jedi Generals found out that Anakin was, in fact, Ahsoka's new 'master', by which all four figured she meant trainer. The man who'd teach her the ways of the Jedi, stuff like that.

"He doesn't seem to happy," Linda commented as she was ranging her scope. Fred and Kelly let out a few murmurs of agreement, all while the Chief was simply watching the exchange. The eyes of several dozen Clones were on them, the surprised soldiers of the GAR simply stunned to be looking upon them, it seemed. If one didn't know better, they'd probably sat Blue was full of Droids. Kelly's helmet being off had, however, removed any chance of that idea brewing in the clones' minds.

"Heh," Cortana chuckled, "Seems like standard to me, honestly. Skywalker doesnt' seem like your average general."

"No, he certainly does not," Fred commented as he sat himself down, "So, John. Your call, do we take the mission to kill their general and any supporting Tactical Droids?"

"Best bet to end this quickly, if they have to go deal with those negotiations... Should also free us up to send our diplomats over to their capital," Chief replied calmly, watching as Anakin approached them, an angry look on his face. The Spartans decided to follow along, noting that the little one was also present with them. To their left, they saw the Arbiter talking to some of his soldiers. The Arbiter had noticed them, too. He put his right fist on the left side of his chest and bowed his head in greeting. The Spartans, curteous and friendly to the Elite, returned the greeting in kind.

Ahsoka had also noticed the Alien and excitement seemed to bubble up to the surface, her smile wide. She wanted to greet the big man, too, but found no time to do so as they advanced to an Observation Post manned by both clones and Marines, one atop one of the taller buildings in the city center. Captain Rex, one of the Clone Officers present, looked over the railing at another pair of OPs across from them, then gave a hand signal. He balled his fist and lifted his hand up to the sky, before turning and saluting as he heard footsteps. He greeted, "General Skywalker, sir." then paused and went a bit wide-eyed at the Spartans, "And these are our reinforcements, I'm guessing..."

"That they are, Rex..." Anakin nodded, "Apparently, some elite commandos of the UNSC's."

"Captain, sir," The four soldiers saluted. Rex saluted back awkwardly, then looked down toward the other newcomer and he blinked. Ahsoka offered him a friendly smile in return, but that further exacerbated his confusion. He only somewhat settled down when he saw the lightsaber on the girl's belt. He hummed, looked between the groups of people and sighed deeply.

"Good to meet you all, I guess..." Rex nodded, then looked to the girl, "And the Youngling, sir?"

"I'm master Skywalker's *Padawan,*" The girl said coyly, grinning, "The name's Ahsoka Tano." and Rex seemed dumbfound by that comment, turning to Anakin.

The Jedi General sighed and said quickly, "There's been a mix-up and the young one ain't with me..." before watching Linda move on to set up her sniper rifle. The woman leaned it against the railing and slid her helmet back onto her head, before starting to calibrate the rifle. In the distance, the thunder of gunfire from UNSC harassment squadrons continued their campaign.

"Hey!" Ahsoka called him out, "Stop calling me that. You're stuck with me, Skyguy..." And she grinned mischievously. Anakin balked, while Rex burst into laughter. Kelly herself had to hide her face as she giggled a little. Chief sighed, tuning out the exchange of word-stabs between the Jedi General and his Padawan, before looking ahead at the various outposts the Clones and Jedi had set up.

... Chief had to admit he was sorry Rex was stuck with the kid, but right now, they had bigger things to worry about. He took a knee and squinted toward the enemy's positions, his visor polarizing to meet the demand of a zoomed-in vision. He spoke, "They're setting something up..." his voice impassive. Linda hummed in agreement just as Fred and Kelly walked up to them. He said, "Seems we'll have to take that out before we kill their commander..."

"Could split the team in two," Fred suggested, "I and Kelly disable that construction and you hunt and kill the Commander."

Chief gave an approving nod, "Sounds good... Let's see what the Generals think first, though..." as he shifted his rifle onto his back. The Marines around started playing a tune as they sat themselves down and kept their eyes on the road. A pair of Clones walked up to the men and sat with them, listening to the music being played on an acoustic guitar brought over by one Marine.

The other clones on post tapped their feet to the tune, but kept professional about their watch. Chief hummed, stood to his feet, then motioned to his team to rally up as they prepared to descend and talk about their plan with the Generals. There was still an obviously-high amount of tension between the GAR and the UNSC, but there was a certain air of Détente that was palpable.

Almost as if the Marines understood what it was like to be grunts going up against far stronger opponents than normal. Sure, the droids were easy kills, considering how weak the B1 model was, but they were numerous and dangerous, kind of like the Grunts. And the B2 Supers were just that much more terrifying when advancing behind a wall of weaker droids meant to soak up ammunition, like the Elites did with aforementioned Grunts and the Jackals.

Down below, Tup was listening to another UNSC Marine singing in some foreign language, also using an acoustic guitar that his buddy had brought him. According to some of the soldiers around, the song was called 'Beautiful Green Eyes'. It was by some old artist from their Homeworld, 'Earth'. A weird name for a world that was supposed to be the center of their government, but, well, Tup couldn't really complain about it.

Above, a Hornet flew in low, before turning to land at the UNSC's own little section of the airbase. Beside it were UNSC tanks rolling to get repairs after chunks of their armor had been stripped during the previous battle, just before their new wave of reinforcements arrived. And according to a Marine, word was this was the last of the UNSC's forces being deployed on the planet.

He hummed, then looked to a sleeping Checkerboard and elbowing him in the shoulder. Check woke up with a start, shaking his head and turning toward Tup. He asked groggily, "What?" half-open eyes barely registering where his Brother was. He pointed at some of the UNSC's own 'walking tanks' stepping off the assembly line. Cyclops mechs, Tup recalled.

"Looks like they're really up for scrapping with the droids..." Quipped the Clone.

"Good on'em," Sighed Check, "Wake me up just to see hardware and I'll punch you next time..." before he turned around and made himself comfortable on his piece of rubble. Tup sighed and nodded, then jumped to his feet and walked toward the UNSC camp, watching as a small discussion was about to erupt. A clone and a Marine bumped into one-another hard, almost like one meant for it to happen.

"Hey, watch your fucking ass, guy," The UNSC soldier called out.

He replied, "I'd watch where I was going next time myself, *guy*," as he glared back at the trooper. The Marine growled and tried to step up to him, before Tup stepped between them. The trooper behind him said, "I got this, Tup..." before he caught a glare from his brother that made him shrink for a moment. Jane appeared from their right, too, stepping between the clones and the Marines.

"That's enough, Gordo. Get your ass back to the mortar pits," The girl glared at the Marine. He rolled his eyes and scoffed, then motioned to his friends to follow him. Jane sighed, shoulders sagging, then looked to the two clones and said, "Apologies for that specific dumbass. He's had a stick up his behind since we arrived here. Doesn't like the idea we're helping an army of what's tantamount to aliens to us fight a bunch of tin cans..."

Tup sighed as he relaxed, shoulders sagging, then nodded to his brother and patted him on the shoulder before sending him on his way. He looked back to Jane and replied, "Teething issues, I guess. We're all still getting used to each-other, ain't we?" to which the girl smiled. She hummed, showed him to wait for a moment, then fished something out of her vest and handed it to him.

He paused as he was handed a bar, with the girl saying, "The manufacturer of our MREs put two chocolate bars in the one MRE I got, so I figured I could share it... Y'know..." She flashed a smile at him as he looked at her, which caused his heart to skip a beat, "Break the ice a little more between our armies," then both paused as jet engines roared overhead. Two UNSC fighter-bombers flew in, nearly scraping the tops of the Christophsian high-rises at their altitude, before veering off to the left. The girl chuckled and said, "Looks like our CAS is flying..."

"You folks really came down with everything but the kitchen sink," Tup commented. His gaze fell upon a platoon of tanks rolling out into an assembly area, probably in preparation to

replace any potential losses suffered by the Front Lines. Turning to her next, he saw her give a quick nod and put her helmet back on. She sighed and tapped the earpiece in the helmet's right ear cover.

"Sounds like I'm about to be busy..." She said, pulling down her helmet's visor, "The work of the *batal'onaya razvedka* never ends, eh?" which confused Tup. She clarified, "Recon Battalion," then pointed at the faded emblem on her shoulder pad. A sword piercing the top of a skull with a binocular below it against a shield. She punched him gently in the shoulder and said, "I'll be giving you guys intel for any counterattacks. See ya there?"

He nodded awkwardly, "Sure thing."

... From afar, with captain Rex, Ahsoka watched the woman step off toward a platoon of vehicles and men and women. The vehicles were light, four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles without a canopy or cover and that seated two people. A driver and a surprising passenger in the rear. It seemed as though miss Staten was one of the drivers, as she boarded the quadbike at the front, waiting for her comrades to do the same.

Ahsoka was more curious from birth. These new people decided to help them just cause the Seppies shot at them first. An endearing thought if it didn't seem too convenient. She was wondering just what their angle on this entire mess was, but she wasn't gonna find out just by hanging back as Rex and her new master seemed to want her to do. With a hum, the girl watched as the bikers sped off.

Chapter 9: End Of The Beginning

Ahsoka had to admit, she was... Impressed. Like... Genuinely.

When master Skywalker had volunteered them to join in on the Spartans' stealth mission. They were following the Master Chief and Linda as they moved to get into position, take a potshot at the enemy commander with a sniper rifle. For some reason, the young Padawan felt some palpitations watching the Spartans' movement. They weren't robotic or laggy, like she'd seen some military units in training be. No.

The Sniper-Spotter duet moved with the agility of a Jedi in their prime and all the stealth skills of a Kath hound on a hunt. Slow and methodical, the four-man team made up of two supersoldiers and two Jedi pushed through with the lightness of a feather. Even in the armor that looked like it weighed half-a-ton, the Spartans moved without making as much as a sound.

Pushing through the rubble, Ahsoka whispered to her master, "These guys are terrifying..."

"Sums up the UNSC so far," Anakin quipped quietly as he ducked under a piece of rubble the Spartans bypassed. Ahsoka followed close behind him as he explained, "They have kinetic weapons. Slug throwers, instead of blasters. Admiral Yularen told me he saw one of their ships split a Lucrehulk in half with a salvo of its main guns. I think we even saw the detonation."

"I saw them when we were flying in," Ahsoka told him in a whisper, "Hulls blacker than night, ships shaped like weapons and built around their main gun... Their biggest ship was massive, too. At least five times one of our own Cruisers..." which caused Skywalker to look back at her, a bit surprised. Sure, Yularen had mentioned the damn thing was massive, but-

The two looked ahead as they heard a finger snap. Chief motioned to them to cut the chatter, then slowly crept forward as they started a climb through the rubble. The two Jedi hummed, nodded and followed the professionals along. Appearing near-by a series of high-rises at an intersection, the group heard the audible thunder of distant artillery engaging the droids, as well as the thump and hum of feet and anti-gravity systems respectively.

Above and to their right, the Droid armies marched unfettered through the intersection, AATs, B1s and B2s on the prowl for their intended targets. The group continued their advance to the base of a tower. The Chief radioed in, speaking quietly, "BLUE One is at Checkpoint Lima. Confirming droid advance in the area... BLUE Two, status on disabling enemy device?"

"*BLUE Two to BLUE One. Checkpoint Delta. Moving to Echo... ETA:3 mikes...*" Fred replied over com. The Spartan gave a tap on his com to acknowledge Fred's statement, before the group entered the tower. Chief leaned over to help Ahsoka climb, with the Jedi girl smiling as she took the Spartan's hand. He lifted her to the top, then helped Skywalker next, before standing up and drawing his rifle.

The four-man team climbed up the stairs, with the Jedi trailing behind the Spartans. Ahsoka felt a little irritated that they were playing second fiddle to a pair they knew nothing about. Honestly, they were scary, but being treated like a mere guard when you're a Jedi didn't help Ahsoka learn anything. She gasped as she watched the Chief charge ahead. The Spartan drew his knife and surprised two droids, both of which barely got to let out a squeak before they were turned to scrap. Linda pushed up behind him, sidearm drawn, but saw both droids were dead.

She hummed and nodded to Chief, before the man took the lead again while sheathing his knife. Ahsoka whispered, "Nice moves...?" to which the Spartan gave a nod. The group then marched up the tower's way and onto the roof after clearing out another three pairs of patrolling droids. Both Anakin and Ahsoka watched with muted awe as Linda marched up to the side of the building, dropped prone and set up her rifle. Chief sat down beside her and activated his helmet's ranging tools.

Ahsoka sighed and sat herself down on one of the rooftop whatevers, presumably an air conditioning unit's hot-air output fan, before crossing her arms to her chest. She spoke, "Well, this was fairly boring..."

"Some times, boring missions are better," Anakin commented as he sat himself down next to her, still keeping his eyes peeled for any hostiles due to basically being forced to be guards for the Spartans. Ahsoka scoffed, arms crossed to her chest, before Anakin added, "Trust me, I'm not having any more fun than you are. Obi-Wan had me keeping watch one too many times during the early days. But there's an art to patience he taught me back then..."

The young girl hummed, then sighed deeply, "Y'know, I was just supposed to get you guys back to the Temple for the mission... I also didn't expect you to have a reaction like that to the news we're gonna help a Hutt."

"Let's just say I have some... Issues..." He sighed, then shook his head, "Nothing you need to worry about."

Despite Ahsoka wanting to protest and ask more about her master, she couldn't. They watched as Linda adjusted her aim by thousandths of a Force-damned inch, all while Chief was seemingly relaying targeting to her. He looked to the two Jedi and gave a nod as a thundering explosion roared in the distance, only for them to see the building nearby the Separatist HQ destroyed. The two Jedi both watched the plume of smoke rising into the sky, with Chief calling over radio, "SIERRA Niner Niner, report once you've retrieved BLUE Two... Copy."

"Target spotted..." Linda murmured. Ahsoka paused as she saw the girl go completely still, like a goddamn statue. Chief peered down below as the thunder of footsteps echoed. A platoon of Droids was moving in on them. Supers. He sighed and gave a nod to Linda, then started using sign language to provide Linda accurate range and windage. Ahsoka walked up to them and squinted, then looked to see the range.

1200 meters. "That's an impossible shot..." She stated bluntly.

"You don't know Linda, then..." Chief murmured.

"Acquired..." Linda breathed as her heart

"Shoot."

Ahsoka was shaken and almost lost her balance as she felt her legs nearly give way under her. The thundering roar of the Sniper Rifle filled the air, followed by the sight of the contrail of the 14,5mm Sniper round cutting through the air of the place. The snap-pop of a distant impact filtered all the way over to them, causing Ahsoka to go bug-eyed and stare out toward the target, which was at exactly 1,2 kilometers distance from them.

"Kill confirmed." Linda reported, her voice terrifyingly cold enough to send a chill up both Jedi's spines. She picked up the spent casing and slid it into her harness, then slid the rifle onto the back of her armor and stood to her feet, drawing twin Sub-Machine Guns and thumbing their safeties off. She looked to the Chief and said, "Saw the Platoon of SBDs coming our way, right?" which caused both Jedi to go on alert, brandishing their lightsabers.

John shifted his rifle and aimed toward the access hatch they'd used to get up, before taking cover and shouldering the weapon properly. Linda followed suit, taking cover behind him as Chief said, "Our Pelican's coming in to provide CASEVAC, General," as he looked to Anakin. Ahsoka was still awestruck by Linda making that shot, but she'd taken a fighting stance almost on instinct.

The two Jedi readied themselves to welcome the droids, the stomping of their feet coming closer. Chief primed a fragmentation grenade and waited. Once the first droid's bulky frame would appear, he'd throw it. And, indeed, the first gray body of a Super Battle Droid appeared over the stairs. It shifted its arm guns in position just as Chief threw the grenade. A hard thump and shockwave knocked some of the air out of Anakin's and Ahsoka's lungs... Before the young girl rushed ahead.

Anakin called out, "Ahsoka! Get back here! We gotta move in together or you'll be overwhelmed!"

"It'll be fine! They're just droids!" Ahsoka replied with a grin, before throwing the first swing toward the Super Battle Droids ahead, vivisecting one diagonally and slashing the opposite way, digging into another's armor plate. Three more appeared ahead of her and turned their blasters, firing. Ahsoka began deflecting the bolts, a smirk on her face. Anakin let out an exasperated sigh and charged in as well, using Force Push to stop a droid that was flanking his new Padawan.

The Spartans looked to one-another, then paused as another door, this one to an elevator that led to the top, opened. Chief motioned to Linda to go help the Jedi, before turning to face the oncoming machines and racking the bolt of his assault rifle. He quickly Cortana, "How close do you need to be for a wireless hack?" as he opened up on the machines with heavy-duty armor-piercing rounds.

"This should be fine, John. Give me a minute..." She replied as she started working. The Spartan offered her a nod, jumping to the right as blaster bolts hit where he'd been mere seconds ago. Turning back to the Jedi and Linda, the trio met the Droids with heavy fire and some gusto, rifle chattering and fists punching through the tin cans' armor. Ahsoka and

Anakin worked together, utilizing their strange magical powers to telekinetically shove a bunch of the droids off the tower.

Fragmentation rounds from the Pelican's nose gun wiped out the next slew of Droids, with the aircraft swinging in for a landing, opening its rear hatch to allow the other Spartans to shoot out from it. The Chief and Linda covered while Anakin told Ahsoka, "Get on the transport, now!" causing the girl to look back at him, surprised. He tilted his head to the aircraft, annoyed, before deflecting a bolt of blaster fire from another of the machines that were still climbing the tower. With a sigh, Ahsoka complied, shutting her lightsaber off and rushing aboard the aircraft.

Skywalker nodded to Chief and Linda, the trio backing slowly onto the ship as they gunned down more arriving droids, among which were B1s now, instead of the B2s of the probably-depleted Battalion that had just recently charged them. Boarding the gunship, Chief gave a click of his com and its engines roared. It took off at high speed, ascending above the tower and closing the rear hatch.

Chief radioed, "Command, this is BLUE Actual. Targets destroyed..." with, yet again, the same cold voice. Anakin looked to them, arms crossed. He was clearly impressed by the display, amazed even. Cold, focused and hardy, the Spartans had proven their mettle to at least one of the Jedi. The Spartan tensed, his body stiffening up just a tiny bit. It was enough for anyone without a trained eye or a sense of the Force to notice, but his team and, by extension, Skywalker had noticed. The man said, "Roger that. We're returning now..."

He turned to Skywalker and Ahsoka and stated, "Droids realized their commander is dead. They're throwing everything they have at the base in one last attack to drive our armies off this planet. We've already received reports of an armored spearhead driving down the boulevard below. Kodiak artillery and your guns have begun harassment fire, but..."

"But they'll reach the first line before they're thinned out enough..." Skywalker completed, sighed and looked to Ahsoka, adding a quip, "You're gonna get to destroy all the droids you want now, Snips." which seemed to get the girl a bit more happy. She had been pouting about five seconds before, so... Chief drew his assault rifle and reloaded the weapon, while the others prepared their own kit, including a couple of new grenades.

Fred lifted up a pair of larger 'explosives' whose protective casings shielded electric coils. A priming button lay on top of the strange weapon, with Fred explaining, "EM bombs. Command handed them to us to test on the Droids..." before handing one to Chief. The Spartan gave a nod of approval as he looked over the Device, with Cortana letting out a low, happy grin.

"Should be fun. I didn't get to do much to the other droids, so..." She chuckled and accessed the relatively simple computer of the weapon, setting a timer, "We can drop them as we fly in and fry a good bunch of droids, seeing as the effective range is about 100 meters from the center of the blast. Now, if it works is entirely up to me figuring out the detonation mechanism and ironing out the kinks and... Done..."

The bomb primed in Chief's hand. She told him, "You'll just press the button and drop them out of the rear hatch. Pilot's already given us clear for it..." to which Fred and Chief looked to

one-another. They approved. Walking to the rear of the vehicle as they heard the muffled thunder of the forward-mounted cannon spitting lead, the two prepared to throw their payload. The rear hatch opened to the sight of blaster bolts lancing up at them from a Droid battalion below.

The two Spartans primed the bombs under the gazes of the Jedi and hefted them. The coiled electricity inside began to unfurl as the two weapons left in a staggered drop, one landing in the midst of the droids' rear, while another landed dead between a Battalion of SBDs and a bunch of their Snail tanks. Plasma hit the armor of the Pelican, red bolts punching into armor and heating the sides and belly of the ship up.

The detonation occurred. Two massive bursts of electrical energy arched through the droids around, shattering electrical systems and frying Central Processing Units that were not EM shielded. Two tanks, still rolling due to inertia, slammed into their brethren and derailed the entire convoy just as Kodiak Shells and plasma rounds from Republic, UNSC and Sangheili batteries started landing.

The Pelican swung in and touched down as the Marines, Clones and Elites fought against the closed-in ranks of the droids, with both impressed Jedi dismounting the vehicle with the Spartans, weapons brandished. Both Ahsoka and Anakin deflected blaster bolts back at the droids that were advancing as AT-TEs and Scorpions laid into the advancing AATs.

One AAT caught a Republic walker open and fired its main gun right into the cockpit. The plasma-layered round melted the clone inside and went out the back, causing the Mech to collapse while a Scorpion advanced beside it. The 90mm cannon of the Scorpion spat a round back at the enemy machine, hitting the gullet of the cannon, destroying the turret.

Its twin wing-mounted laser cannons replied, raking the tank with bolts as its base fired the loaded projectiles in the six tubes attached to the repulsor-lift pad that kept it afloat over obstacles. Two armor-busting projectiles found their mark on the Scorpion, detonating and shattering it, the shrapnel wounding a pair of Marines and killing a clone in the blast.

The reply came from another AT-TE. Its main cannon bellowed and another plasma-coated AP projectile lanced out as a reply. The blue-shimmering round hit, boiling away the first layer of armor on the main cupola, before punching clean through into the ammo stowage and detonating. The enemy tank broke and blossomed with the explosion, turning into ash, cinder and twisted petals of whatever metal it was made of.

Ahsoka and Anakin pushed forward, with the Jedi General telling his Padawan, "You wanna survive and fight, stay close to me and we'll make it out together!"

"Understood, master!" She replied, pointing the blade of her lightsaber forward. The two met Obi-Wan, who was at the forefront with Cody and Rex. The bearded Jedi master smiled at seeing them while deflecting the blasts of Tri-Droids' laser cannons back to them. The two Jedi, both the young one and the less young one, nodded to the general of the 212th.

"Good to see you, General!" Rex called out to Anakin.

"Good to see you, too, Rex. Looks like we got one hell of a fight ahead of us," Anakin shot back, deflecting two blaster bolts back to their respective shooters, killing a B1 and slightly staggering a B2. He looked to Ahsoka, who also deflected shots back to their enemy, then stated, "We're taking the 501st and kicking the door! Gotta cut a path through these things!"

"Not recommended!" Obi-Wan called out, "The UNSC has already called for close air support!"

"How close?!" Ahsoka asked as she slashed a droid that tried to flank them in half, before cutting its head off to keep it offline. She gasped, however, when she saw another Droid tank appear, aiming for Anakin. She called, "Master, watch out!" Before jumping just as the cannon fired. She managed to push Anakin out of the way, only to deflect more blaster shots as she landed with a roll.

Skywalker stood to his feet and looked at the spot where he had been before still bubbling after being hit. He blanked, looked to Ahsoka and said, "Thanks..." to which she smiled and nodded.

"Hey. Stick together, right?" She quipped.

"Yeah," He nodded, then jumped back to his feet. He heard the roar of engines from above and, with one hand motion, ordered everyone to fall back. Obi-Wan and Ahsoka both noticed this, as did the Clones and Marines on the front. They pulled back in a leapfrog just as rocket engines powered behind them. Two UNSC Longswords flew in, their undercarriage bomb bays closing.

Six missiles slammed into the line of droid armor, detonations blowing through concrete and shattering the droid tanks' plate armor like sledgehammers striking sandstone. Two more aircraft flew in, dropping a pair of EM bombs each, these ones with a big enough payload to shatter two battalions of droids. Finally, from above, in escort and for ground strike, Y-Wings flew in under guard of Torrent starfighters, dropping payloads as to saturate the area and eliminate even the last of droid opposition.

Cheers erupted across the line as Republic and UNSC troops saw Republic Assault Ships, the famed Acclamators that bore the Republic markings, coming in for landing on the wide fields of crystal outside. The Jedi had gathered in the town square as their troops landed to secure the planet. A Shuttle touched down just in front of them, with the diminutive frame of a green, long-eared man appearing, walking leaned on a cane.

"Skywalker, Kenobi. Good to see you, it is..." He spoke uneasily.

"Master Yoda," The two Jedi greeted with nods. Anakin started, "I take it you're here to brief us for the next part of the mission, master?"

"That, I am. And to ask how your new padawan fares, Skywalker..."

Anakin looked back to Ahsoka, who rubbed her arm as she suddenly felt too exposed. Skywalker hummed, clicked his tongue and said, "Right, well... She's a little rough around

the edges, but with some training..." And he saw her perk up. He grinned, then turned to both Obi-Wan and Yoda and stated, "And some patience... She might amount to something."

Words which seemingly got Ahsoka to smile. She gave a nod to Anakin as he looked back, before bowing to Master Yoda, making the elderly Jedi smile softly. He spoke, "Good to hear, it is. For she will be needed in this mission. A lot of trust, the order has. A lot of trust, we put in you... As do our Allies..." before turning to the dropship. The three other Jedi looked up, eyes wide.

"He's not wrong there, General," Admiral Lasky said as he descended the platform under the armed escort of another Spartan. He saluted the group, then said, "A pleasure to see you all face-to-face finally..." and they all shook hands. He looked to see Blue Team advancing toward them and saluted them, before saying, "At ease, Chief. Operation go smooth?"

"Sir," The Spartan replied with a nod.

"Good... Because you'll be working with Generals Kenobi and Skywalker again," The man stated. The confused Spartans and Jedi looked to him and Yoda, to which he explained, "We'll be deploying the cruiser *Pass Me The Ammo* and a trio of frigates to provide escort for the Republic Assault Ships you will be using to retrieve the VIP. Meanwhile, the rest of the UNSC and Swords of Sangheilios fleet will leave Christophsis and depart for the capital world of the Republic with master Yoda's forces, to initiate proper negotiations and... Well, hopefully find our place in this mess."

His gaze turned to the Jedi Generals as he told them, "Don't lose'em. Chief and his team are the best of the best."

"We saw that," Ahsoka commented, letting out an awkward chuckle, "They were kind of scary..." as her gaze turned to the Chief. The Spartan simply stared back for a moment, then turned to Lasky again. The man hummed and looked back toward the Spartan that was with him. He was shorter of stature than the Chief and his team and wore a different armor. It was painted-over with camouflage patterns resembling nature and had photoreactive panels, shielding and extra pouches for ammo. The Spartan himself carried an MA40 Carbine with a holographic scope and silencer and an M6 SOCOM, not to mention a combat knife on his back.

"Ah, right," Lasky said, "Blue, I'll be assigning another member to your team. Warrant Officer, why don't you introduce yourself?"

The Spartan saluted, then turned to Chief and Blue Team and said, "Sir, Warrant Officer Richard-G295, SPARTAN-III Headhunter Commando, at your service," his voice sounding young. Much younger than Ahsoka and Co had expected, honestly. The Blues looked to one-another, then back to Richard, who said, "I'm a great Scout, sir. You'll find me useful, if nothing else."

"How fast can you run?" Kelly asked, crossing her arms to her chest.

"Ma'am. Fast as needed," He replied confidently.

"You're Gamma... I thought you were all either reassigned or cryo-frozen after the war," Fred stated, motioning to the young man.

He nodded, answering, "Most of us were. I was Cryo'd myself, but I can operate, sir. Got my own supply of what the Eggheads upstairs call 'the Happy Juice'..." before patting a syringe bag on his hip. The Spartans looked to one-another again, before Chief nodded and saluted. Though invisible due to his Generation 3 MJOLNIR's SPI helmet, the young Spartan smiled and saluted back.

"We'll see how well you run, kid..." Linda said in the most non-hostile tone someone could've said such a hostile sentence with. She extended a hand, surprising everyone, then stated, "Welcome aboard..." to which the kid grabbed and shook it, giving a nod to Linda. The trio of Jedi beside her, that being Anakin, Ahsoka and Obi-Wan, all smirked at the exchange.

"Now that that's settled," Lasky hummed, "I'll return to my fleet. Prep for departure."

"Follow you, I will. To see your ships closely, I wish..." Yoda quipped, then let out a short laugh.

As the two men boarded the shuttle, the Spartans watched. Only Richard turned back and spotted Ahsoka. Furrowing his brows, he looked over to Chief and asked with a surprisingly brazen attitude, "We gonna be working with that tailhead, sir?" which surprised the Jedi. Ahsoka furrowed her brows at him, before Kelly snorted and shook her head at the quip.

"Relax. They're allies," The Chief replied calmly, less scolding than one would think while looking at the boy.

He hummed, looked to Ahsoka and said, "Alright, sir. If you say so..." before he departed with Blue Team. Ahsoka crossed her arms to her chest and scoffed. The nerve on the guy to be like that. She rolled her eyes and followed with Generals Kenobi and Skywalker, with Anakin snorting. He could already tell where this was going. Someone as stubborn as him with someone as crazy as a Spartan...

... He blanked. Oh, boy.

Chapter 10: Inter Arma

So, the mission was simple. Rescue a Crime Lord's son from a Separatist force on a remote planet. Richard had heard of weirder missions, quite honestly. He shifted uneasily, however, when he realized he was going to be working with Blue Team. The Spartans had departed for the bridge, leaving him alone in the hangar of the Republic Assault Ship *Guardian* with the Clones and Jedi. He was sat on a set of boxes under the shade of one of their LAAT Gunships, a rather interesting beast to look upon, all while tending to his weapons.

With a screwdriver in one hand and the cleaning kit sat beside him, the young man continued working away at the weapon, out of sight of the patrolling Clones or his supposed new 'partner'. He eyed the young, orange-skinned girl as she regaled a platoon of 501st Legion clones, plus a pair of strange 'AstroMech' droids, with tales of how she saved her master during the battle on Christophsis.

He stared, then set the screwdriver down as soon as he'd finished what he needed to finish on calibrating his scope, before turning a dial and thumbing the activation button of the PEQ-style laser sight mounted to the weapon's side. He saw a scarlet beam trail along the path, his HUD's crosshair following it with a maximum degree of accuracy possible from handmade calibration.

He hummed, shouldered the weapon and racked the bolt a couple of times after he had reassembled the weapon. Glad with how it was gliding on the rails, he set it aside and drew his M6 SOCOM pistol, racking back the slide and looking inside. It was a 'fresh-off-the-line' pistol, so grim and muck hadn't acquired, but his rifle had been with him since his earliest days as a Headhunter.

Casting another glance toward Tano, the young man wondered just what? Seriously, she looked decently human, but was an obvious, dead-to-rights alien. Why were they even working with the lot if they used an army of clone slaves and Aliens? Then again, he was one to complain about that, even mentally, considering they were allied with the bastards who burned his homeworld down via plasma.

He saw the team of Clones scatter in the corner of his eye, most of them laughing, before he heard the clap of low-heeled boots against the metallic floor of the hangar. He looked up from his fiddling once again, noting that the alien girl had come up to him, a smile on her face. She waved, "Hey," and leaned against the LAAT's rear with one hand, "I don't think we got to meet properly. I'm Ahsoka."

"I know," He replied with half a mouth, then stood up. The girl blanked for a moment, noting that the boy, in full MJOLNIR GEN-III armor with the SPI attachments stood at seven feet tall. Well above her height. As in her face was at around chest height with the boy in full armor. She had to stare up at him, a hint stunned at the sight. He, however, didn't seem phased. He spoke, "Proper introductions, then. Warrant Officer Richard. Call me whatever." with disregard.

Ahsoka crossed her arms to her chest and quipped, "You don't seem too fond of me, big guy."

"Observant, for an alien," He shot back.

"Oh, that kind of person..." Ahsoka murmured, scratching her chin. She hummed and sighed, before telling him, "Listen, we're on the same side and I do wanna learn to work with you and your new team, which I feel is a considerably good idea for someone who witnessed one of'em take a shot that was impossible. If it's good with you, I maybe wanna bury the hatchet preemptively, before we wind up at each-other's throats."

... He hummed, nodded and said, his voice denoting how impressed he was, "Well, that's a good start at least," He told her calmly, "Though don't expect me to get used to you quickly. We lost family thanks to aliens like you. Hell, it's no wonder they're keeping me away from the Elites." All while checking over his silenced pistol. The girl had to take a moment to register that one.

"Bad blood?" She asked, concerned. She'd also seen the Arbiter in action...

"A whole-ass genocidal war, yeah," He replied calmly. The young woman took a moment to process it as the Spartan reassembled the last of his equipment. With a quick glance to the rest of the hangar, the boy added with the same tone of passive-aggressiveness that Ahsoka had felt from the get-go, "So you get why I ain't so very eager in terms of working with other Aliens... No matter how near-human you look."

"Yeah..." Ahsoka blinked, "I get it..."

"Good," He replied, "I'll do my job if you do yours. Otherwise? Let's stay out of each-other's way..." and he stepped off toward BLUE Team's Pelican. She watched him leave, before turning as footsteps filtered through the place. The entire deck, which was filled with Clone Troops, stood at attention, coming out of the woodwork as Generals Skywalker and Kenobi stepped into the place, BLUE Team close behind.

"Gather up, everyone!" Skywalker ordered. The Clone officers and the main cadre of several hundred Troopers gathered up around the General. He looked to Obi-Wan, who gave him a nod. He lifted up a hologram emitter and turned it on, "Our target is this old B'omarr order monastery on the planet Teth. It's been abandoned for a while and the seppies took it over recently to use as a base of operations. Intelligence suggests that this is where they're holding the Huttlet."

He looked around, "The Recon units also report that the enemy has layered the defenses of the place and has anti-air batteries, so we will have to land within the jungle in order to assault it. The climb's gonna be a bit steep, so I hope you prepared your cables, boys. While we deal with the enemy Air Defense and secure the Monastery, the UNSC will be moving into position to blockade hostile reinforcements. We have one Cruiser and a squadron of Frigates assisting us and we'll make the most out of them. Chief, you're up now."

The Spartan nodded in thanks and stepped forward, "Our joint forces will secure the Huttlet and help evacuate him aboard the UNSC cruiser *Pass Me The Ammo* for delivery. We have all also been briefed on the importance on this mission. Our success here means the Republic's

ability to utilize the hyperlane network belonging to the Hutt Cartels in order to traverse troops and equipment to the embattled Outer Rim. If our alliance is to succeed beyond a political sense... It's resting on this op."

"We'll get it done," Ahsoka smirked, arms crossed to her chest.

Chief replied with a nod, then joined his squad. Richard also followed him to the team, with the others giving a nod to the little Blue team trainee. His weaponry was spotless, clean and at the ready, but Linda was first to note, "Never been on a team with a Headhunter, honestly..." as she gazed upon the young man, "I did read about your kind though..."

"And we did work with Gamma Spartans when we went to help Kurt," Kelly added. Fred and Linda both nodded, before turning to the young man. He didn't say much, it seemed, which was just fine for the S-IIs. And if Admiral Lasky trusted the kid to be good, so did the others. Chief gave a nod and motioned to the Pelican with a slight tilt of the head. The five-man team left for it, with Richard casting one more glance toward Ahsoka.

She flashed a smile at him, showing her desire to be friendly. The boy nodded, then hummed and looked to the others, asking, "Sir, is it normal to be uneasy around aliens even if they ain't Covenant?"

"Considering what we've been told about you and your comrades, Blue Five?" Chief replied with a question, letting the young man decide on his own, which he seemed to have, considering the fact the other Spartans noticed his shoulders slightly sag. He told the boy, "Focus on the mission. If the alliance goes through, they'll be our allies for a good while..."

"Yessir," Richard answered, "Don't need to worry about me, sir."

"Good," Chief shot back as they boarded the Pelican and started preparing their weapons. Ahsoka stood there, arms crossed and watching while the Clones around her packed their kit. She'd actually wanted to ask something else of the boy before the briefing started. To see his face, considering Spartans seemed to have a tendency to keep their helmets on. For the most part, anyhow.

She felt a hand clap on her shoulder, then turned to see her master. He asked, "Something the matter, Ahsoka?"

She shook her head, "Just the new guy for the Chief's team... It's... He told me they had some sort of genocide campaign done on them by aliens they're allied with nowadays. The Sangheili, I think..." and she looked to her master. He nodded.

"I was told as much by both the Arbiter and Admiral Lasky during our more recent convos. He warned me about the guy not being particularly open to anyone not human," He offered, then hummed and added, "Did you two make nice to a degree, at least?" as he considered the fact that the guy hadn't tried to kill her yet. Then again, Spartans were supposedly meant to be machines, soldiers that followed orders to a T...

"I mean, I'd like to think so, but..." She shrugged, "I don't know..."

"Eh, we'll see how you two work together on Teth," He quipped, then gave her a light punch to the shoulder, "Let's go. Gotta prep the gunships before we set off to battle... You can meet your boyfriend there," and he smirked as he walked away. Ahsoka seemed to balk and start complaining, but was inaudible to the already-disappeared Jedi as the man boarded the gunship.

She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, before marching up to the gunship, too... As the vehicles began their proper procedures and the UNSC began theirs aboard the vessels, the warships entered low orbit above the target area. A dozen gunships total exited the hangars of both sides' ships, with Pelicans leading the charge while Longswords flew escort.

Entering the atmosphere was bumpy, obviously. The Spartans held on tightly, weapons close, as their pilots took them through the rumble of atmospheric re-entry, with the Clone Gunships not far behind. Flak started popping up in front of them from the Monastery on the raised rock pillar. It was at that moment that the UNSC started to wonder how in God's name could those things have Flak shells if they were firing plasma?

"*Alright, Rock Jumpers, prep for drop*!" The pilot of one of the gunships spoke...

It didn't seem to matter as the first aircraft touched down. The Spartans, meanwhile, would orbit the monastery at lower altitudes than their Triple-A Could hit, prepping to intervene the moment the Jedi got up the hill. Ahsoka, meanwhile, jumped out of the Gunship with her master and the clones, watching with muted awe as Pelicans fast-roped their troops to the ground while a pair of their own gunship-Pelicans spun up their guns and banked back, firing bursts of rockets that exploded on impact with the rock face.

It seemed, however, the moment the UNSC Gunships realized that the enemy was barely using their defenses properly, they revved up their guns. Ahsoka watched two ships power their directional thrusters and launch up into the sky, readying themselves to hammer the Droids with Autocannons and missiles. The Jedi, Clones and the deployed Marines pushed forward up to the rock face, meanwhile, as blaster fire still rained down on them. Behind them, two AT-TEs also joined in.

... Well, this was gonna be interesting.

Coruscant...

It'd taken a little less than ten hours to arrive at the incredible capital of the Republic. The UNSC Navy had kept up surprisingly well with the ships of their allies' own Navy, despite different FTL Drives. It paid off that the UNSC had adapted much of the Covenant's own modifications to the Forerunners' tech on their own, down to the Slipspace Drives' heavily-enhanced speed and the 'finesse' with which they traversed through the dimensions.

It was a bit breath-taking, to be quite honest. The massive ecumenopolis lay dead ahead of them, guarded by many Republic warships, defense stations and an entire array of other equipment. Glimmering, the dark side of the planet was brighter than the side the system's sun was lighting up, all due to the massive population inhabiting the city-planet itself.

The fleet of Republic ships escorting the several dozen UNSC ones transmitted their clearance codes to the wider Republic Naval Presence in the area. Lasky could swear he felt the spike of tension when their fleet first arrived overhead. Hell, some of the Republic starfighters sent to investigate them were barely now pulling off their attack vectors. Of course, he had ordered that their own fleet be set to Yellow Alert, just in case, so he also felt the tension of his own deck crews.

"I'll be damned..." The shipboard AI spoke, a smirk on his face, "An entire Ecumenopolis."

"Weren't these things relegated mostly to science-fiction back in the day?" Palmer asked, present on the bridge, too. She was going to be Lasky's escort to the meeting with the Senators of the Republic that the Jedi had set up. Roland offered the Commander a nod, while Lasky and the rest of the bridge crew all stared at the Republic's version of the 'Home Fleet' floating all around them.

"I can smell the tension," Lasky commented. He looked to the com officer and said, "Transmit a message to the rest of the fleet. Tell them that the ROE is still 'Fire if fired upon'. Let's not piss the Republic off..." as he turned back to the holotable. He ordered, "Bring up a grid view of the area. And all the detected Republic warships in the AO. See if you can't catalog them."

"On it," Roland replied and dipped into the holo-display for a moment, his avatar vanishing as the three-dimensional visuals on the holomap updated, swirls of data dancing around each of the multitude of echelons that represented the orbital defense fleet of the place. Smaller echelons denoted naval vessels below those of capital class, meaning not the Venators that they'd first met.

"Sir," Roland reappeared, "We're getting a ping. Master Yoda's starship."

"Patch him through," Lasky ordered, then watched as the frail-looking diminutive old man's form appeared on the Holo. The two men bowed to each-other, a sign of courtesy and respect as it seemed, before Lasky told him, "Good afternoon, General, sir... We have to say, we're impressed with what we're seeing. Coruscant is... Definitely one of the most interesting planets we've seen in our centuries of space exploration."

"*The capital, it is, for a reason, Admiral,*" Yoda replied, then let out a short chuckle. He then told the man and his comrades with the usual poise and demeanor that one would expect out of such lived man, "*Clearance, our ships have been given. Stood down, the defense fleet has. Your escort and aircraft, you should take. Join us aboard the* Champion. *Descend together, we will.*"

"Give me a few minutes, then. I'll have to put on the good dress uniform," Lasky quipped. Master Yoda nodded and gave a quick goodbye, before the com shut off. He looked to Sarah and said, "Call up Fireteam Crimson. We're moving out," before he marched off to his Ready Room. About ten minutes later, two maglev trams made it to the forwardmost hangar of the starship, where UNSC fighter crews were already prepared in case something went wrong. One of the Autumn-class cruisers hovered a few thousand kilometers away, while Frigates of all varietals, including a group of Anlaces, provided security.

Fireteam Crimson walked up to the Commander and Admiral. All four of them snapped crisp salutes at their officers, before Lasky gave them a nod and said, "At ease," then saluted back. "Tom. Lucy. You two ready to go?" He asked the two leaders of Crimson. The smaller-framed female gave a nod. Lucy-B091, of course. One of the more famed children of Onyx.

"And waiting, sir," Tom-B292 answered. Her partner and squadmate from Onyx up 'till now.

"Good. Rest of Crimson's ready, too, I assume..." He offered, then looked to the two other Spartans in the rear. Yet another Gamma company member, Vic-G011, stood to the rear, his bag of medicine at the ready. Beside him sat a lone, familiar figure clad in a black MJOLNIR set bearing Gen 1 Mark V equipment on the Gen-3's adaptive platform. He had a DMR on his back.

"We're ready, sir," Tom noted, then looked to the Spartan in the black armor and said, "C'mon, B312. We got one of the boring jobs ahead of us..." to which his buddy snorted. Alongside some ONI representatives meant to be the ambassadors to the Senate, the UNSC diplomatic corps boarded the Pelican dropship that would take them to the Republic warship *Champion.*

Traversing the void between the ships, the UNSC personnel watched the Republic Navy positioning itself around various important installations, just in case. Guess even with clearance, tensions remained. Understandably enough, Lasky thought as he joined the pilots in the cockpit, watching them approach the trio of Republic Venators that had escorted them in there.

The main hangar in the bow of the ship opened, the straight scarlet line down the center of the sleek, arrowhead-shaped warship splitting down the middle as it did so. The Pelican banked, its escorting Longswords turning away and back to the ship, before it powered on its directional thrusters. The pilots exchanged some chatter with the Republic ship's ATC before it entered the hold and veered slightly right, entering behind the shield that contained the atmosphere of the ship.

Touching down at its designated spot, the Pelican popped open its rear hatch to the sight of Master Yoda and his escorting Clone forces. Master Yoda bowed yet again, a friendly smile, "Welcome aboard, Admiral. To you and your troops..."

"Thank you, Master Yoda," The Admiral replied in kind, "Let's hope the Senate doesn't mind me and my representatives bringing our own security for the party..."

The group marched out of the hangar as the Republic starship began its descent toward the planetary drydocks. From within the bridge, the group witnessed as the descending ship slowed enough for them to see the eerily beautiful industrial landscape of Coruscant as a whole. Sprawling habitation blocks, industrial pipelines able to fit tanks and the traffic of flying civilian vehicles filled the viewports. Below was the Republic Base on the planet, a complex of multiple drydocks, military facilities, barracks and storage areas containing everything from vehicles to troops.

"Incredible..." Lasky murmured. The most surprising thing was that there was still atmosphere on the planet. That and the fact the sky was still god-damned BLUE instead of

some hellish red due to all the pollution he assumed would be present on a planet like this. As the vessel touched down in the Dry-Dock, the Republic crew gave the go-ahead for the planetside support crew to initiate resupply.

"Well, here we are..." Lasky said, "Coruscant... Lead the way, master Yoda."

A short trip down some turbolifts and through the halls of the ship and the Jedi Master and his wards walked off of the starship and onto one of the many corridors of the Drydocks. The squad of Spartans stared at the Clones standing guard nearby, clad in armors with red markings unlike those of normal Legions. Some of the soldiers eyed the UNSC Military's supersoldier group warily, while others simply stood at their posts, making sure the Jedi cruiser was being properly rearmed and resupplied.

Tom whispered to B312, "They're a hell of a lot more tense than we are..."

"Yeah," He nodded, uneasy and keeping his hand close to his M6G. Lucy chuckled beside them as they continued their walk down the path. Through yet more hallways and past security, the group made it to a landing pad area where a multitude of skycar-style vehicles lay. Yoda motioned for them to follow, with the group boarding a specialized transport. Beside it, blue-clad soldiers carrying heavy weaponry nodded, their T-Shaped visors and helmets resembling those of Spartans or Hoplites.

Once aboard the transport itself, a reinforced limousine or bus of some kind, Lasky felt the need to comment, "Flying cars, space ship drydocks planetside and an entire military base that looks like it houses thousands of troops... This place is more impressive than I expected..." as he sat himself down and looked out the window of the transport. They felt the craft's inertial dampeners kick in just as it powered forward slowly, out of the parking spot and right between the two escorting speeder bikes belonging to the Guards.

"Indeed..." Yoda commented. The group all paused and gasped, sans for Yoda, as they flew by it. Aside from the towering series of skyscrapers up ahead, to their immediate left lay a towering pyramid without a top. Five towers adorned its upper part, for of which sat North-West, North-East, South-West and South-East while one was solely in the middle and with the middle one raised higher than the others. It also had a sprawling series of other buildings around it, with a strange architectural style to boot.

"That is...?" Palmer asked Yoda.

"The Jedi Temple..." The old man replied softly.

"Damn," Lucy whispered.

Of course, the best was yet to come. As the vehicle approached the main, they were met by the biggest of the buildings in the place. A dome-like, mushroom-shaped structure with multiple levels and multiple landing pads. Civilians milled to and fro on the pad, which one of the Representatives with Lasky noted by saying, "Looks like the place is always busy, sir..." as she arranged her tie.

"It's the senate ruling over a giant galaxy-spanning state. I'm not surprised," Lasky replied calmly. The transport landed at the top-most pad and the escorting units aboard disembarked. They looked around at the various aliens marching throughout the place and the Beta and Gamma Company Spartans all tensed. As a group of Senate Guards, the men clad in blue, approached, Yoda turned to Lasky.

"Leave, I must. My presence, the Order has requested..."

"Thanks for the escort, sir. Guess we'll take it from here..." Lasky nodded. He and Yoda bowed to each-other, before they watched as the Senate Guards approached. The men saluted each-other.

"Admiral Lasky, I assume..." The man spoke calmly. As soon as Lasky gave a nod, the man motioned toward the main building and stated, "Chancellor Palpatine is waiting for you." words which stunned the entire crew. The Spartans exchanged glances and Lasky could swear he was hearing them talk with their mics offline via single-beam communications. Though, he agreed.

"Weren't we supposed to be meeting a senator, sir?" Asked one of the representatives.

The guard leader replied calmly, "The Chancellor took an interest the moment he heard an informal alliance had been signed with a new faction by the Jedi Generals on Christophsis," before eyeing the Spartans, "Though he presumably does not expect a guard group such as the soldiers behind you... By the Force, what do you even feed them?"

Lucy snorted and replied, "Depends on the time of day, sir," which got an uneasy cough from the man and a few chortles from the UNSC staff.

"Right, if you'll... Follow us..." He urged them to the building. Lasky gave a nod, then turned back. He saw Spartan B312 staring outward at something. Following his gaze, he saw someone sat farther away, clad in a robe and watching them. Their face was obscured by the robe itself, but Lasky could tell they were staring. He tapped Six on the shoulder and the Spartan shrugged, to which Lasky sighed and showed him to follow.

The Spartan eyed the figure once more and... Saw a faint smile appear behind the hood. He hummed and did choose to follow the Admiral in the end. Entering the Senate, to the massive, imposingly beautiful walls, the red carpets and the vaulted ceilings, the Spartans suddenly felt under-dressed for this event. The walk continued, past multitudes of doorways, of races of aliens and humans intermingling and talking. It was... Odd.

Another turbolift trip and the door opened to a beautiful and large office with walls covered in red velvet. A round desk sat in front of a massive, thick window overlooking much of the cityscape around the Senate District, with several comfy, cushioned seats in front of it, a holographic display in the center and various other pieces of furniture and items of interest spread around.

"Well, this is a nice place..." B312 murmured.

"My thanks," A calm, gentlemanly voice spoke from up ahead. Turning on his chair, a man clad in red robes, with white hair, a thin, somewhat wrinkled face and bags under his eyes, stood to his feet, "I do tend to try and keep it as tidy as possible... Greetings to you, representatives of the UNSC. A pleasure to meet you all, finally..." and he offered a kind smile as he approached them, "I've heard much of your exploits from Admiral Yularen."

"Chancellor Palpatine, I presume," Admiral Lasky replied, then offered a curt and friendly salute, "An honor to meet you, sir. I'm Admiral Lasky."

"Indeed," Palpatine nodded, then motioned to the chairs, "Please, follow me. We have much we need to discuss..."

"Yes, sir..." Lasky nodded. The group approached the desk, with the Chancellor sitting himself back down in his seat and waving the Senate Guards off. Lasky, meanwhile, sat himself in one of the chairs ahead as Palpatine called up refreshments. The Chancellor then hummed and motioned to the Spartans to sit down, but Lasky quickly intervened, "While we appreciate the gestures of kindness, sir, the Spartans are better off standing."

"Oh? Any particular reason why?" He asked.

"Our armor weighs half a ton, sir. We'd probably break your furniture if we tried sitting down," Palmer clarified. She saluted and said, "Commander Sarah Palmer. SPARTAN branch commander of the *Infinity*..."

"I see," Palpatine hummed, then gave a calm tilt of his head forward, "My thanks, Commander. I suppose that'll have to do, then..." and both men watched as a servant droid waddled inside, carrying a tray with various drinks. Setting it on the table, the droid beeped happily, to which Palpatine simply replied with a short nod. He picked up one of the glasses and poured himself a drink. He swirled the amber liquid in the glass, before asking, "So, to start with the beginning... What are you and your forces doing in our Galaxy, Admiral?"

Lasky was more-or-less expecting the convo to start with that. He gave a brief rundown to the Chancellor pertaining their arrival here:The drive malfunction, the fluctuations found just before and all the other semi-necessary information. To his credit, Palpatine listened to them and took every idea with an open mind, including the different FTL drive. With a concerned click of his tongue and a tapping of his fingers on his desk, he said to Lasky, "Quite the story... I must say, I am happy to see your ships made it here in one piece."

"Trust us, sir," Lasky smiled, awkward, "We are, too."

"I suppose that also brings us onto our second point," The man hummed as he offered Lasky the other glass. The man took it, then looked back to the Spartans as they stood there, most of them stoic sans for Palmer, who had crossed her arms to her chest. Palpatine continued only when Lasky turned to him, "What your involvement should be in this war... You are, for all intents and purposes, a neutral third faction brought into the conflict by our foes' common indecency of shooting at anything that moves."

Lasky tilted his head forward, then took a sip from his glass. The beverage was surprisingly sweet for something he had expected to be alcohol, but he made no comment. His reply was

also calm and calculate, "The Republic's forces proved themselves professional when it came to dealing with us. Generals Skywalker and Kenobi were more than keen on keeping us around after we promised we'd help hold Christophsis."

"And what a marvelous job you and they have done," Palpatine replied with the faintest trace of... Worry? Fear? Anger? Hidden behind kindness...

All Noble Six-err... Crimson Four, Spartan B312, knew, was that he picked up the slight change in tone. He looked to the rest of Crimson, only to see Tom and Lucy both nod to him, while the Gamma company member stood there, uneasy. He sighed, still listening as the conversation went on. Lasky added, "... We fully intended on actual negotiations to talk about our aid to the Republic in winning their War."

"Oh, so a formal alliance?" Palpatine smiled, "How noble of you. People out of place and yet you still wish to help us win?"

"Witnessing what the Seppies do to planets they occupy?" Lasky shrugged, "Better for all of us, yes. Though we will need the ability to resupply with various materials. Mainly raw materials like Hydrogen, various metals and maybe food... And we will need help, finding a way home..." And he turned to Palmer. She hummed as she radioed in, all while Palpatine was thinking, scratching his chin and the likes.

He hummed and nodded, "Provided you assist us in defeating our enemy, we will provide all of the above and Republic monetary support in the form of Credits. You will be signed on as a military force that is assisting us in the battles ahead. Not mercenaries per se, but still... You understand," to which Lasky smiled. Indeed, he did. A temporary military force akin to a militia, he supposed. It could work. Palpatine must've seen the gleam in his eyes, a smile forming on his face again, "Then it is settled?"

"We can ratify the treaty already, if you wish, sir. I can just send my men back to call up our transport so we can head on out after and leave my representatives to discuss anything else that needs to be discussed with you," Lasky offered. Palpatine showed him to wait a minute, before he started typing on a holographic keyboard on his desk and pinged someone else. Over-eager to achieve results, it seemed...

Lasky looked to the Spartans and motioned for them to go on. Palmer hummed, nodded in reply and showed the others that they could walk to the elevator. On the way down, B312 said, "Something ain't sitting right with me. Guy seemed a bit off about our presence here. And now he wants a treaty this quickly?" and, despite the surprise at B312 speaking so much, the group of Spartans nodded in agreement.

"Maybe he wants to keep tabs on us better," Palmer suggested, then added, "Wouldn't be surprised. We must be one hell of a wildcard for anyone in the Galaxy..."

The group walked down the hallways, with Tom adding, "Don't know... I'm with Six. Something is a bit off about the Chancellor, though we're better off not saying that in public..." then they exited out onto the landing pad. He sighed and said, "I'll call us the Pelican..." before radioing in, "Pelican Four-Two-Niner, this is Crimson Actual, requesting evac on my coords..."

Lasky emerged, running, from the building. With a sigh of relief, he wiped the sweat from his brows and said, "Well... Treaty's ratified and signed... And we left our two reps with Palpatine... Guess that means we get to leave this place as victors, eh?" as he looked to Palmer. The woman snorted, then paused as she saw B312 staring again. She stepped up to the Lieutenant and paused as she saw that same figure clad in a cape and ragged clothes.

Said figure, now clearly female, approached. The landing pad had become eerily clear. Had they picked the wrong one? Maybe a maintenance pad or...? No. The figure continued walking, only stopping a few feet from the tense Spartans and Lasky. She spoke softly, her voice young, despite a wrinkled appearance hidden by the darkness of the hood's peak, "Find what you seek amongst the scoundrels of politics?"

"We have..." Lasky replied, "You are...?"

"A mere local with some concerns," She replied. A pair of dark-blue eyes had light shone onto them for a moment, though the woman's face was distorted, strangely enough. She spoke calmly, "Do you realize what you are?" as she eyed Lasky, then as she turned to B312, she added, "Or what your soldier is? Perhaps you've no idea, seeing as you have just recently arrived..."

"Oh, great, one of those types..." Palmer started, then walked up ahead and said, "Listen, lady, we're not here to have our fortunes read or some shit..."

"I'm not here to read your fortune," Chuckled the woman, "I'm here to ask for a favor..."

"Of what kind?" Lasky inquired, uneasy.

"I wish to see what you're capable of..." She hummed, "To join you, per se. See how the Galaxy fares nowadays... Coruscant has grown a little stale..." And she watched them tense as she took another step forward. With a shrug, she asked, "If you are going to shoot me, I'd suggest doing it now..." before taking another step forward. The tension grew thick enough that at the next step, the Spartans all drew their sidearms...

And the figure ahead shot a hand out, before pulling it back suddenly. The Spartan team felt their weapons yanked out of their hands, all Magnums clattering to the floor and sliding toward her as what seemed to be a mist dissipated from the woman. Instead of a brown, dirty cape, a more clean, yet still ancient-looking one appeared. Below, instead of ragged clothes, a white armor, marked by years of existence and warfare, scarred by blasters and burned. And clipped to a worn leather belt, a *lightsaber hilt.*

The woman looked at herself, then sighed deeply and said, "Well, I guessed as much when I started using it..." as her voice turned to another, more smooth and warm one. She pulled her hood off her head, revealing dirty blonde hair, messy and caught in a bun on the back of her head. Azure eyes stared at them all, faint traces of scars on a beautiful face and on her neck. She tilted her head and her luscious lips curled into a smile. She said, "Surprise..." as they saw a Jedi symbol, old and worn, on the left of her chest plate.

"... A Jedi...?" B312 murmured, dumbfound.

"Not quite," She said, then clarified, "I mean... Sure, I am a Jedi in a sense..." and she used her Force powers to lift the guns, sending them back to their owners who caught them out of mid-air. Lasky gave a hand signal to stow the weapons as he approached the Jedi, who crossed her arms to her chest and blew a strand of her blonde hair out of her eyes, smirk still on her face as she finished, "But I don't like to be called that anymore... The current Order is a bit of a mess..." which confused most of the people present. Was it?

"What's your name?" Lasky asked, surprised.

"... Call me Meetra," She replied after a moment's hesitation, then looked to B312 and started unsurely, "You have quite the guards...?"

"Admiral Thomas Lasky, UNSC, ma'am," He replied, "And yeah, they're Spartans..." before humming. B312 noticed that the woman was staring directly at him and somehow seemed to get a bit self-conscious, simply turning to flag down the Pelican for touchdown. Meetra chuckled, while Lasky started, "You want to join us aboard our fleet, Ma'am? Why?"

She shrugged, "I like understanding new things better, honestly... I've seen a good chunk of the galaxy at this point in my life, so something refreshing like your unknown force could undoubtedly prove to be a little more interesting," then turned to the surprised Lasky and added, "Not to mention one of your soldiers intrigues me... He was the sole person to spot me out of your unit."

"And actively keep an eye on you..." Lasky murmured as he looked to B312, "Alright, I guess... If a Jedi wants to tag along, who am I to say no?"

Meetra smiled softly, "You won't regret this, Admiral. You'll find me to be quite the pleasant addition to your forces..." before she walked up next to the Pelican and next to B312, greeting the man with a wave. He greeted her with a nod, before they all boarded the Pelican. Lasky and Palmer were the last ones in, exchanging one quick glance, before looking at the Jedi sat aboard their aircraft, right next to B312... For whatever reason.

Sitting down in their own designated seats, the two gave the go-ahead for the pilot to lift off... And once they exited the Atmosphere?

Well, Meetra was grinning ear-to-ear at the UNSC.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!