

## Outcrop

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PEGASI NOVA

FOURTH CYCLE, 8 UNITS, 1ST REVOLUTION OF THE 9TH AGE OF RECLAMATION

Khalo 'Suzum closed her eyes and stretched her legs beneath the lightly bubbling surface of the hot spa waters. Despite the soothing water, her jaw remained tense. Her husband, Ship Master Nom, and two sons had been called to join the war against the humans a few weeks prior, and the solitude without them was giving her entirely too much time to think up horrible deaths they might have encountered. Nom, to his credit, was good about sending regular dispatches to her to keep her in the loop about what was going on—the unclassified stuff anyway—but that still left for many units per cycle to herself. As an aristocrat, her occupation consisted of circulating in high society, a task that, while mind-numbingly dull for the wife and mother of three warriors and a warrior in mind and soul herself, left her with far too much idle time. Sympathetic to her cause, her friends had all but insisted that she visit the new spa at Pegasi Novi. They told her that it would help her relax and take her mind off things.

Thus far, she was not impressed.

Touching her finger to her temple, she waited impatiently for a response from what was supposed to be her own dedicated concierge.

"Youths these days," she muttered bitterly to herself.

"Yes, ma'am?" the young adult sangheili female asked.

"This water is far too cold," Khalo spat. "Where is the *hot* water?"

"Oh, sorry, Miss—"

"Mrs."

"Mrs. Yes. Um, the water is heated by the planet. Most of our clients say it's too hot."

"I'm not most of your clients. Are there any springs closer to the source?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. You could try—"

Khalo terminated the call and pinched the bridge of her nose between two granite-like fingertips.

"Screw it," she muttered to herself. "If I can't get a nice, *hot* bath, I'll go swimming."

She got her equine-like hooves under her, put them on the bottom of the pool, and stood up. Towering over a unit above even her husband, she was tall by sangheili standards, and surrounded by other, shorter females, her height was pronounced. Stepping out of the pool, she grimaced at the feeling of the water running down her muscled shoulders and snapped her mandibles testily. Putting her hands on her hips, she looked around for her good-for-nothing assistant, and then, deciding it wasn't worth the hassle, she stalked off towards the beach.

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OUTCROP

MARCH 4, 2525 0800

"Don't run, Billy!" Billy mocked to himself bitterly. "Don't get dirty, Billy! Don't climb, *Billy!*" He threw a rock, then repeated the words he *knew* he would hear in his head: "Don't throw rocks, *Billy!*"

Scoffing with frustration, he kicked at the dirt, jammed his hands in his pockets, and trudged down the road towards the docks. His dad never let him have *any* fun, and all *he* did was work, fixing up hover-bikes and other mechanical things, and if Billy had to fetch *one* more wrench, he was going to throw up! He was nine years old, and he had more important things to do!

So, he ran away.

He and his father lived on floor 135 of Outcrop High-Rise Alpha. The big boy—no, young man!—that he was, Billy had summoned the elevator himself, negotiated the sky lobby transfer all on his own, and ridden the countless floors to the ground level. His father probably didn't even know he was gone, yet. He hadn't

chased after Billy when the boy called him a Mean Old Fun-Killer. He'd just laughed and said over his shoulder that Billy would understand one of these days. At least they weren't in his shop on the ground floor; the Mean Old Fun-Killer might have asked for a wrench and would definitely have known when Billy didn't give it to him that something was up.

The self-congratulations on navigating the lift had been short-lived, however, and now the boy was staring at the ground, kicking rocks, and avoiding the mild Sunday-morning pedestrian traffic as he walked.

He made it to the docks and ventured out onto the quay. Steering clear of the sailors unloading supplies delivered to the spaceport—a structure deliberately built in the ocean a few miles from land to avoid a ship accidentally crashing into High-Rise Alpha or the newly constructed Medium Rise Alpha tower—the boy swatted at some unruly brown hair, pushing it out of the way of his freckled face. At last, he came to the end of the wharf where no ships bothered docking. Sneering at the mental image of his father telling him not to dangle his feet in the water—he took off his socks and shoes and did just that, his small act of defiance.

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## 8.10 UNITS

Khalo dipped a hoof in the water, then ventured out until the waves lapped at the skin at the top of her hooves. Satisfied at the temperature—not much cooler than the spa had been—she waded out until she was breast-deep in the water, then stopped and turned around. Filled-in D-shaped hoofprints led to the water's edge, then disappeared, the tide having already obliterated those within its reach. She turned again and confronted the vast expanse of ocean in front of her. The blue, lightly wake-riddled water extended as far as she could see and beyond, joined at the horizon by the sky, which extended equally far. She sighed, setting her jaw as she contemplated that somewhere out there, many parsecs away, her family was waging a war without her.

Her hands drifted to her hips again. She felt so helpless—no, worse: *useless*—by herself. She was a warrior at heart; she didn't belong on this spa planet basking in the lukewarm water that the other visitors were too weak to endure.

"They have no faith," she muttered to herself.

*That* was what was wrong with people these days. Far too many spent their time maneuvering in high circles instead of seeking out relics! Far too many wasted their time on trivialities like *this* banal planet when they could be uncovering the next bit of Forerunner technology, advancing the Covenant ever closer to the Great Journey.

*Ugh!* She needed to go for a swim, to exercise her body and push it to the point of exhaustion. *That* would take her mind off her loved ones and her bitter view of society.

Turning away from the shore, she mentally measured out two thousand units in the water ahead of her, then dove underwater and began a powerful breaststroke.

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## 0815

Billy kicked his feet to and fro in the warm saltwater. The lightly tickling feeling of the water rushing between his toes lifted his spirits, and for a while, he forgot about his spat with his father. He looked over his shoulder and watched the sailors working. While he had no interest in being a sailor himself, it was the cargo they unloaded that piqued his interest, or—more accurately—whence it came. The spaceport had long been interesting to him, partly because of its affiliation with space, and partly because he had only seen it once: his father had taken him to see it when he was four, and it had captivated his interest ever since. Outcrop was his home—he was born here—but he knew that civilization had not started here, that some two hundred years ago, his ancestors had come this way to set up a remote harvesting outpost—an "outer crop" or outcrop, as it were—and in the few hundred years since, his ancestors had made a decent living for themselves. Like many agricultural outposts, it hadn't taken long for the automatons to take over the actual farming, leaving the rest of society to do the other things a modern civilization needed. Somewhere down

the line, his ancestors had gravitated towards working on machines, and his father was one of many in a long line of those. Billy would, everyone expected, continue the family trade.

Having a name like "Billy Wrench" and *not* being a mechanic was ironic at best and embarrassing at worst.

But Billy wasn't thinking about that; his mind was wandering out among the various stars, masked for now by the sun's brilliant light. He wondered what it would be like to be an asteroid miner, out there in space all day. He shriveled his nose. To his knowledge, there was no ocean in space. He swished his feet in the water, defying space to take away his ocean!

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8.50 UNITS

Khalo had been making good time, swimming 2000-unit laps for the last 40 centals and was beginning to feel the burn in her shoulders and pectorals. Too, keeping her mind focused on surfacing to breathe and practicing her form had indeed shifted her focus off her family for a while. The exercise had lifted her spirits somewhat, and she was beginning to feel like it might be worth it to go back to the spa, if not for the tepid springs then at least to wash off the salt. She touched her temple and waited for her concierge.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Have a bath drawn and ready for me in twenty-five centals," Khalo said. "Use a water heater if you have to; I want it *hot!*"

"Will do, ma'am. We'll have it ready for at you at 8.75 sharp."

Khalo hung up then went back for another lap, scoffing.

*8.75 sharp means it might be ready by 9.05.*

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0831

Billy saw the wave coming from at least a mile out. It started on the horizon, a faint rise that he would have missed if it weren't for all the buoys bouncing up and down, their bells' frantic pealing making it all the way to his ears. He cocked his head curiously, watching it as it moved slowly but steadily towards him.

There was a shout behind him, and he turned to watch as the sailors all moved away from the edges of the ship's deck. Those on the wharf moved back to clear the edge in case the ship decided to slam into the side.

Billy turned back to look. The wave was much closer now, yet to him, it seemed to have shrunk substantially. It couldn't be taller than a foot or two now, and it was still fifty feet out.

Thirty feet.

Ten feet.

The boy's eyes widened as he suddenly realized the implications for himself, but too late. The wave crashed into the side of the wharf, shot upwards, and drenched his shorts. He cried out in surprise, then burst out giggling as soon as it passed.

But a few seconds later, he realized a very important truth.

His father would be very disappointed that he'd soaked his trousers.

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8.53 UNITS

The water suddenly turned sharply colder. Khalo's mouth shot open, filling with salty water. She surfaced abruptly, coughing and cursing.

"Where in the *world* did that cold pocket come from?!" she cried. "And where's the heat?!"

Shivering, she looked back towards the shore, then cocked her head curiously.

"Did the shore get a lot further away?" she asked aloud.

The buildings of the spa seemed to have gotten very tiny since she'd started her lap, and now she wondered with borderline concern whether she'd discovered the planet's only undertow and gotten sucked into it.

Shaking her head and keeping her wits about her, she struck out towards the shore with purpose. But, to her surprise, she cleared the distance to shore extremely quickly and was moving so fast that she had to scramble to get her feet under her before she ran aground.

Once she did so, she cocked her head and frowned. This was absolutely not the spa: there was no doubt of it in her mind. And, had the terrain always been this *flat*? She could have sworn she remembered seeing some trees when her transport ship landed, yet as far as she could see, there was nothing but what looked like sand dunes covered with a short but fluffy ground cover. Perplexed, she squatted down and ran her hand through unfamiliar stuff. It was as if someone had planted tiny broccoli plants but refused to let them grow more than about a half-inch tall.

Khalo peered at the diminutive vegetation for a while, then at last, stood back up.

"People have weird hobbies," she muttered to herself.

Sighing in annoyance, she touched her temple and put her hands on her hips.

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0835

There were no two ways about it: Billy's shorts were soaked, and he was going to have to come clean to his father. All ideas of independence and doing what he pleased when he pleased vanished the minute the seawater started to get cold and clammy. Hastily pulling on his soggy socks and equally soggy shoes, Billy began squishing his way back towards High-Rise Alpha, grimacing with each step of his quickly-raising feet.

*But what if he's mad?* Billy thought. Stopping short, he considered his options. His father would most certainly not be very happy if he tracked water into the house—of that, Billy was absolutely certain. And if his father *was* angry, wouldn't it make much more sense to call him in advance and get him to calm down so he couldn't reprimand Billy face-to-face?

Billy's face lit up. That sounded like a superb idea, and he quickly reached up and tapped his temple with his finger.

As his subdermal communicator began dialing, he bit his lip uncertainly. Even if he *was* safely out of the house, wouldn't calling his father make it obvious that he'd left? Maybe—just *maybe*—he could sneak back in unnoticed, clean up the water he'd tracked, and his father would be none the wiser.

He reached for his temple.

"Hello?" a haughty voice demanded.

Billy froze.

"Is anybody there? Cripe, where *are* all the staff these days? The communicator connected; I know you're there. Answer me, or by the Forerunners, I will—"

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8.60 UNITS

"—give your management the most severe tongue-lashing it's ever heard!" Khalo snapped, barely containing her growing anger. "Answer me already!"

"U-uh, h-hello?" a meek voice said on the other end.

"About time! Look, I think I'm lost, and I need you to get a transport out here to get me right away."

"Sorry, Miss—"

"Mrs."

## Outcrop

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"Mrs., um, Whatever Your Name Is, but I'm not supposed to talk to strangers. I'm already going to get in big trouble with my dad as it is. If he finds out I've been talking to you..."

*Who in the—what the devil happened to my communication link?* Khalo wondered.

"Look, obviously I have the wrong number," she said, cutting him off as he was saying something about "socks"—the words kids make up these days—and she absolutely could not care less. "I'm gonna go. Bye."

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0837

The communicator indicated that the call had ended, and Billy breathed a sigh of relief. He shriveled his nose. What a mean lady!

He started walking back towards the high-rise when his communicator indicated an incoming call.

His stomach knotted. It was his father; he just knew it! He was *so* busted!

He considered not answering, but then winced, remembering how furious his father had been the last time he tried that. He was already in trouble, he reasoned, and not answering now would just make his father madder.

Gulping, he touched his temple. "H—hello?"

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8.62 UNITS

"You again?!" Khalo snapped. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Okay, look, apparently something's wrong with the communicators and the lines keep getting swapped. I need you to connect me to the Pegasi Nova Spa main line. Can you do that?"

"You're kinda mean, lady."

Khalo did a double-take.

"Excuse me?" she demanded incredulously. "Do you even *know* who I am? When I get done with those managers, your dad or mom or whoever is going to be so fired, their heads will be spinning!"

The line went silent.

There was a snuffle.

The line erupted with the sound of crying.

"Ugh, stop that!" Khalo cried, lowering the volume of her communicator. "What is this awful noise you're making?!"

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0838

"But, y—you s—said you were gonna get my dad fired!" Billy wailed.

Several people saw him bawling in the middle of the street, his shorts, shoes, and socks drenched, and several started to go help him, but then seeing that he was on a communicator, they thought better of it and went around him.

"I'm already gonna be in so much trouble, but my dad *loves* being a mechanic—even more than he loves *me*—and I'm gonna ruin it for him! I—I just ruin everything!" the boy cried.

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8.63 UNITS

Khalo stood there, slack-jawed, lost both physically and mentally. She searched her brain, trying to think of the last time her youngest had cried. Coming up empty, she thought about her oldest—the more sensitive

of the two—and yet the worst he had ever done was snuffle a little bit during delivery when they soundly popped his backside. Such outright crying was *utterly* unbecoming of an aristocratic child, no matter the age! She gasped, a bad taste forming in her mouth.

What if this was some sort of *plebeian* child? Or, worse, what if it was some kind of dimwitted *unggoy*?

"Little girl—" she said at last.

"Boy!" the voice said indignantly.

"—boy. Look, I'm sorry I threatened to fire your father, all right? I'm in a bit of a bind here, and—"

"And I'm not little; I'm 9 years old!"

*Years... years...* Khalo racked her brain but had no clue what that was supposed to mean.

"Is that how they measure age on Balaho?" she asked.

"Huh? No, look, I'm 9. You know, nine years? Outcrop's gone around the sun nine times?"

Khalo shook her head. Trying to understand the younger generation's slang was hard enough, but by the Forerunners, she was an aristocratic sangheili female of high birth *and* a devout follower of the Great Journey; she absolutely would *not* deign to use whatever made-up word this alien child was using.

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0839

Billy shook his head. Whoever this person was, she didn't seem very smart. Who *didn't* know that Outcrop had the same solar time as Earth, which was why it was chosen as a backup to Harvest? Heck, he was only 9, and even he knew it!

But, none of that really mattered anyway. He wasn't supposed to be talking to her, and besides, she was mean; she'd threatened to get his dad fired.

"I don't know what Balaho is," he said at last, "But I don't want to talk to you anymore."

He hung up, feeling a little proud of himself for being so assertive. He made his way to the elevator that would take him home and waited for it to arrive. As he waited, he stared at the little monitor next to the door, on which a news clip was playing.

"The UNSC has become aware of an alien presence on Outcrop approximately two miles from Outcrop City and is mobilizing forces to investigate," the reporter said as an image of an impossibly tall alien appeared on the screen. "Citizens are urged to take shelter until the threat can be assessed."

Peering at the screen, Billy could make out an ant-like head complete with four fearsome mandibles planted atop what looked like an ogre's body—vaguely humanoid but extremely muscular and hulking, with long, sloping shoulders leading to powerful arms and five-fingered hands tipped with granite-like claws. The view shifted, and Billy jumped backwards in surprise, nearly running into someone behind him. The previous image had, he realized, been taken from very far away, and the new clip was much closer. In fact, the alien was so big that its eyes were as tall as small skyscrapers.

Billy's communicator beeped at him, and he absent-mindedly answered it.

"I can't talk now, Mean Lady," he said. "There's a huge alien out there, and I'm trying to get on my elevator!"

"Billy! Where on Outcrop are you?!" his father's voice cried.

The boy's heart leapt into his throat just as the elevator dinged.

"I—I'm sorry, Dad," he stammered, his voice barely above a whisper. "I—I ran away."

The line was silent a moment, and then his father's voice spoke again, anxiously.

"Billy, I—we can talk about that later, but right now, I need you to get home *right now*. Do you understand?" he asked urgently. "It's very important that you get here *right now*; there's a dangerous alien on the loose!"

The elevator doors began to close.

"Wait for me!" Billy cried, but too late.

"I'm coming, Dad," he said, pushing the button again, "Just as soon as the elevator comes back."

"See you soon, Son. I love you."

The communicator clicked off, and Billy looked past the monitor through the immense window that looked out to the sea. His jaw dropped, and he stared in disbelief at the immense creature skulking towards the city out of the ocean.

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8.67 UNITS

"Damn it, where *is* that spa?" Khalo spat. "As flat as this place is, it ought to be glaringly obvious!"

She hissed irritably under her breath and began walking up the shoreline, looking for *some* kind of civilization. The air was uncomfortably cool—too cool to be refreshing but not quite cold enough to induce shivering, and it put her in an even worse mood.

A faint whining sound near her ear caught her attention. She whipped her head to look at the source just in time to see a gnat fly past her head.

"Ugh!" she grimaced, swatting at it. "What kind of spa *is* this when they haven't even got their *bugs* under control?!"

Suddenly, a bunch of the little gnats were flying all around her and stinging her.

"Hey, ow!" she cried, feeling the prick of something on her arm.

She swatted at the air, felt something against her stony palm, and squeezed hard.

"Ouch!" she gasped.

A little wisp of smoke escaped her hand, and on opening her hand, she saw a tiny burn mark.

"What kind of gnats burst into flames when you squish them?" she breathed, suddenly intrigued. "That's—"

The stinging, whining insects interrupted her thought process, and she quickly began hunting them down one-by-one, snatching and clapping at them.

"Ha! Got you, you little pests!" she gloated as the last one exploded between her palms. "Die!"

But her victory was short-lived because while she was distracted by the gnats, an army of little beetles had amassed at her hooves, and as if on cue, each of the beetles raised its single antenna and pointed it at her. Stinging welts appeared all over her legs, making her jump in surprise.

"By the Forerunners, what in *blazes* are these insects that can sting from a distance?!" she cried.

But shock quickly turned to rage, and within seconds, she stomped forward, crushing a number of the beetles beneath her horse-like hoof. As she lifted her foot, she saw a number of bits of crushed metal in the semicircle-shaped indentation. Peering intently at them, she reached down and picked one up, rolling it over in her fingers curiously.

Her communicator buzzed.

"What?" she demanded. "I would remind you that *you* hung up on *me*, and I do not *care* about your 'years' or 'socks' or whatever else it is you have going on, little boy! I have *real* things to tend to, and you had *better* get your communicator fixed, or else!"

The line was silent for a moment, and then a meek voice said, "Hello, Mrs. 'Suzum, this is Ghalor 'Polos. I'm the general manager of Pegasi Nova. How are you doing today?"

The line was silent again, and then Khalo ripped into him.

"... and furthermore, how *dare* you ask me how I am when you know *good and well* that it is a *terrible* day? Where even *am* I?" she finished some ten cents and one intense rant later.

"I am *terribly* sorry for the inconvenience," Ghalor said with a tone that said he was beside himself with mortification. "This, ah, situation is just *completely* unprecedented; we've never *seen* anything like it before!"

"Don't give me that crap, Mr. High-and-Mighty! *Everybody* provides bad service from time to time! Now, quit trying to excuse yourself, own up to it, and make it right! Come get me right now!" Khalo snapped.

"Well, ah, that is, Mrs. 'Suzum, it's just that, ah, you're not *on* Pegasi Nova anymore," Ghalor's voice squeaked.

Silence.

"Not *on* Pegasi Nova anymore?" Khalo's voice sounded like molten rock bubbling in the volcano into which Ghalor was about to be thrown. "Then *where* in the Pegasi system *am* I?!"

"Um. Are you sitting down, Mrs. 'Suzum? You might want to sit down for this."

"No, I will *not* sit down," Khalo seethed, balling her hands into fists and pressing them to her hips. "Now, tell me, *WHERE AM I?*"

"Um. I don't really know how to tell you this, but—"

"Well, try!"

"—Mrs. 'Suzum, you're on a human-settled planet outside of Covenant control."

Silence.

"*HUMAN-CONTROLLED?!*" Khalo exploded.

"Mrs. 'Suzum, *please!*" Ghalor begged, "I am *trying* to tell you what we know, but please stop yelling at me! I don't *know* how you got there, but I am *personally* working with the Ministry to determine how to get you back here. I'm so sorry, Mrs. 'Suzum, but *please* believe me when I say that this has *never happened before!*"

Khalo seethed silently for a moment, then exhaled sharply.

"Fine," she said. "You say, 'human', but I haven't seen any humans here. Surely I should have seen something by now?"

"That, um, that's the other thing," Ghalor began timidly.

"*OTHER THING?!*"

Ghalor whimpered audibly.

Composing herself once more, Khalo spoke in a slow voice and said, "Ghalor, is it? Look, I understand this is *unconventional* for you, but I need you to give me some straight answers. Right now. How soon will you have me back, and what is this 'other thing' of which you speak?"

"You've, um, *grown*," Ghalor said. "You're about 200 times taller than you were when you left here. Don't ask—I don't know how or why," he added hastily. "But, the Ministry has assured me that there *is* a way to bring you home; we just have to make sure that we do so in a place where you don't crush everyone around if you don't... um..."

"If I don't shrink back to normal size," Khalo mused. "Hm. I see. Well, whatever you're going to do, do it faster," she said with finality. "Don't contact me again until you've got real answers!"

She terminated the communication, pinched the bridge of her nose, then returned her hand to her hip and stared off across the ocean.

"Human-controlled," she murmured. "Hmph. And, they must be positively *tiny* compared to my size." She frowned thoughtfully. "That would mean...."



She looked down at the ground, where another group of beetles had amassed and pointed its antennae at her. Reaching down, she brushed all of them out of the way, eliciting mini-explosions as she did, save for one. That one she picked up and held in front of her face, peering intently at it.

"By the Forerunners," she breathed, "It's a tiny, mechanized weapon!"

The tiny tank fired a 50-mm cannon at her. The tiny round struck her eye but did little more than make it water. She crushed the tank between her fingers.

"My prayers have been answered," she murmured in disbelief. "I prayed to be part of this war, and now here I am, a giant among these insects, come to wipe them out!"

Her eyes lit up, and scanning the horizon, she spied two thin spires rising above the flat landscape in the distance.

A malevolent grin crossed her mandibles as she strode towards them.

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0855

From a distance, Billy could see the alien standing with its hands on its hips, and for a split-second, his heart leapt into his throat.

"M—Mom?" he cried, starting to run towards her.

He stopped, hearing the news start up again.

"Devastating news from the front, where the UNSC has engaged the enemy and determined it to be hostile," the anchor said. "Among the dead are fighter pilots Ben Whyzacks, Jenny Idrene..."

Billy stopped listening, distracted by new close-ups of the alien. Despite unquestionably being from a different planet entirely, the annoyance in her facial expression was plain as day. He cocked his head and peered at her. The way she stood there, the look of haughty annoyance on her face... it reminded him of—

The communicator buzzed.

"I'm *trying*, Dad," Billy said, "But the elevator is going *really* slowly today!"

"*You* again? Filthy human! How *dare* you continue to harass me?"

"Oh, it's you, Mean Lady. Hey, I can see you on TV. Actually, I can see you out the window!"

"I doubt that *very* much, you little pest! You humans are lying usurpers, not to be trusted!"

"Hey! I'm not lying!" Billy protested. "Look, I'll show you!"

He enabled his video feed and trained his face towards the monitor.

"See? There you are on TV," he said, pointing. "And here you are out the window," he added, turning his head to look at the looming figure in the distance. "You know, you put your hands on your hips just like my mom does when she's angry. Are you angry, Mean Lady?"

"Shut up. Go back—show me that—that *TV* you mentioned."

Billy frowned but turned his head to look at the TV again, where the footage juxtaposed the creature's feet against the tank fleet sent out to attack her. Her hooves alone had to be over 300 feet tall.

"What?" he asked. "Your feet? You do really have big ones, you know."

"Not that, the picture of my face; where is that?"

"I dunno," Billy said, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't control what they put on TV, lady."

"Ugh. I *saw* the crows' feet; I am *not* as old as your heathen cameras make me out to be!"

Taken aback, Billy went silent for a moment as the footage changed back to listing those killed.

"I was right about you," he said quietly at last. "You're not just a mean lady; you're a *bad* lady."

"What?" the voice asked, surprised and annoyed.

"You killed all those people, and all you care about is how old you look?"

"What? What people?" the voice demanded.

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## 9 UNITS

Watching the video feed from the human child, Khalo saw the pictures of the humans she'd supposedly killed. At first, she was taken aback, but then she felt an upwelling of pride, and a grin spread her mandibles wide. In a deft move, she swung around, plucked one of the fighter jet gnats from the sky, and held it up to her face as she pinched it slowly and deliberately between her stony, unyielding claws. On the video feed, the news had switched to the view from that pilot, and Khalo could hear the crunch of metal from the camera, the scream from the pilot, and the sudden *splat* as she pulverized the tiny craft.

The sound of crying over the communicator distracted her.

"You *killed* them! You *knew* you were going to kill them, and you did it anyway! You're... *evil*," the crying voice breathed, aghast. "*Evil!*"

Over the video feed, Khalo could see her face, the triumph and rage in her eyes, the smug self-satisfaction, the cold cruelty as the footage gave way to static.

"My dad *knew* him; he really *liked* him! You *k-killed* him! You're a—a *monster!*"

Khalo considered his words. Here was a human boy who, until just now, had been minding his own business, and then she'd shown up and killed some friend of his dad's. She considered how she would react if one of her father's friends had been killed, then shrugged.

It wasn't the same. Humans were nothing like sangheili. Besides, the little twerp was probably just trying to manipulate her anyway.

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0902

The communicator had been silent for what felt like ages, yet Billy was certain the mean alien hadn't terminated the connection. Fighting off the unease he felt, he did his best to make himself sound confident and harsh like her.

"Well?" he demanded. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

The line was silent for another moment.

"I don't answer to *vermin*," came the reply.

A chill crept up Billy's spine. There was a level of malice, of utter hatred in her voice that he had never heard before. His breath quavered.

"I do not *care* about your mom, your dad, or your dad's acquaintances. I do not care about *you*. You humans are a disease to be eradicated, and I am the Forerunner's vanguard, sent here to destroy you."

Billy's stomach twisted, feeling as if his soul itself had been crushed.

"I am coming for *you*, Billy, and for your mom, your dad, and everyone else you know. I am going to destroy the termite-mound you call a city and raze it to the ground."

Visibly shaking, Billy summoned his courage and spat back, "Joke's on you, lady. My mom's dead."

Then he hastily hung up.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.08 UNITS

"Well, good riddance!" Khalo snapped, but the line had already gone dead.

A sharp sting bit her arm, and she whipped her head to glower at the jet who'd fired the missile. Enraged, she grabbed it and was about to crush it when she spied the little blue flame coming out of its backside. Feeling vengeful, she brought it to the nearest tall building she could find—it was only up to her calf, but it would have to do—and used the jet as a tiny blow torch, setting the top floor ablaze.

There was a tiny crash, and nearly invisible shards of glass fell to the ground, followed shortly by tiny humans desperate to escape the flames. Khalo watched them fall, then cocked her head and smiled with satisfaction on seeing them splatter on the ground.

Crushing her mini-torch between her fingers and tossing it aside, she grasped the top of the building in her hand, jerked her wrist, and snapped it like a twig. Fifty or so humans fell out of it, dying on hitting the ground a quarter-mile below. Not satisfied, she shook the building like an old-fashioned thermometer, flinging more humans out of it and sending them flying many miles away. Then she turned it upright and began violently shaking it up and down. Other humans that had been caught between floors tumbled out of the severed building, most of them dead already. The few survivors had so many broken bones that when they landed on her palm, there was nothing left to break, and they lay like agonized, amorphous blobs while she examined and then inevitably squished them.

\*\*\*\*\*

0915

Billy couldn't believe his eyes. The sight of Medium Rise Alpha being snapped in two like that was horrifying, but the violent, brutal shaking of the building after that, the maiming and inevitably painful deaths its occupants suffered was... beyond words.

Something awful suddenly dawned on him. His eyes widened, and he hastily, desperately started talking to his communicator, trying to get it to connect.

"G—George?" Billy cried, breathing a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness! I saw it on TV; you—your house, George, it—it's all been destroyed! H—how did you survive that?!"

The line was silent for a moment.

"George is certainly dead."

Billy's blood ran cold.

"*Think* about it. What floor did he live on? Hmm?"

"Th—the top one," Billy whispered.

"I see. And, you saw on TV how I shook the building and flung some humans out onto the ground, right? What do you think his chances are? Do you think he survived, *Billy*?"

Billy sniffled.

"How about *now*?"

On the TV, the alien flung the top of the skyscraper onto the ground and began stomping it all over, flattening it one semicircle-shaped hoof at a time.

"Stop it! *STOP IT!*" Billy shrieked. "George! George, get out of there!"

\*\*\*\*\*

9.26 UNITS

The communicator went silent. Khalo pursed her mandibles, then smiled to herself.

"Now I am become... Death, Arbiter of the Forerunners, hand-picked to mete out judgment on these heretics."

She scowled.

"*Especially* the human known as Billy."

\*\*\*\*\*

0916

The communicator rang and then automatically connected before Billy could decline it.

"How *could* you?!" he screamed. "I *hate* you! I *hate* you! Why George? He didn't do anything to you! He didn't even *know* you! How could you *do* that to him?!"

The line was quiet.

"B-Billy? Wh-what in the world is going on, bud? Where are you?" his father's voice asked, simultaneously taken aback and heartbroken.

"N-no! D-Dad, I, not you, her, the—the mean—"

**CRACK!**

Billy looked up through bloodshot eyes just in time to see the alien grab the base of High Rise Alpha and tear it out of the ground like a weed. He shrieked in terror and covered his head as the building collapsed above him.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.30 UNITS

Khalo pursed her mandibles thoughtfully, then gloated to herself. The tallest building in town—if she could *call* the waist-high spindle a building or this mass of writhing ants a town—had been shockingly easy to knock over. Like a disturbed anthill, tiny humans began to stream from the wreckage, and Khalo delighted herself in squishing them one-by-one with her fingers or en masse beneath her hooves. And yet, for all her success, she was annoyed to see some of them still moving after she'd squashed them. These she squashed again with particular venom.

"Go join George in Hell, *Billy*," she snapped, crushing the last of the escapees under her hoof.

\*\*\*\*\*

0921

Billy came to and immediately groaned and winced. Something had hit his head, knocking him unconscious, and while he was out, something else had hit his arm, leaving him bruised and sore but otherwise okay. He coughed in the dust and did his best to fan it away from his face, but without much success. Whimpering, he managed to crawl out from under the scaffolding that had likely saved his life, but he was still trapped beneath dozens of feet of twisted metal, concrete, and corpses.

"*H-help!*" he cried, then coughed, winced, and called out again.

His communicator connected abruptly.

"D-Dad, I-I'm so sorry!" he blubbered. "I-I don't know where I am..."

"You're still *alive*?!" a voice shrieked.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.37 UNITS

Khalo stared, apoplectic, at the video feed. *How* had that little brat survived?

"Shut up!" she yelled at her communicator, drowning out the little boy's mixed cries for help and threats to get her back.

Taking a deep breath, balling her fists, and planting them *firmly* on her hips, she closed her eyes and forced herself to think.

Something abruptly came to her, and she glanced at the feed again. Twisted metal, broken concrete, lots of dust. Her eyes narrowed.

"If you can't *squash* them, *burn* them out," she declared.

\*\*\*\*\*

0925

Through the thick dust, Billy could see a faint light above him. Realizing that help would probably take a long time to come, he began climbing up the fallen rubble, hoisting himself onto beams and clambering up the broken concrete towards the dim illumination. Under different circumstances, such a grand escape might have been fun to an adventurous little boy, but given his current situation, adrenaline and fear spurred him higher and higher over the shifting, treacherous debris.

He'd been going for a couple of minutes when his nose caught a whiff of smoke. Grimacing, he shook his head and continued climbing, trying to ignore the unpleasant smell and the way it made his throat burn.

The smoke thickened, replacing the dust and blocking out both the light and the fresh air. Billy began to cough, his eyes burning in the acrid smoke.

*Crackle-crackle.*

The boy paused, holding his shirt over his nose and eyes, and listened. Far off, he could hear the crackle of flames. He swallowed hard, then began climbing faster, spurred on by the ominous orange glow in the distance.

The temperature began to rise, and the crackling sounds grew louder. Billy began to feel the heat radiating onto his face and hands anytime they weren't blocked from the fire by debris. The metal grew warm to the touch, then hot.

"Ow!" Billy cried, snatching his hand back after burning it on a particularly hot girder.

*Crackle-ROAR!*

Billy screamed, grabbed the blistering metal, and hauled himself up towards the light.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.50 UNITS

Khalo watched the building burn for a while, pursing her mandibles and lamenting to herself that there wasn't anything bigger to burn. For once, she felt a little disappointed that she'd been enlarged so much; how much more satisfying would it have been to watch the flames tower overhead?

She shook her head. She'd been granted a gift, and she was most grateful that she could act as the Forerunners' weapon, diminutive fires notwithstanding.

Yet as small as the fire was, it was taking forever to burn out, and to entertain herself, she found some suburbs to scuff her hooves through, obliterating entire neighborhoods in long, tornado-like trails. Tiny humans streamed around her feet trying to escape, but she scooped them up by the handful, then rubbed her hands together briskly. Those who weren't crushed between her palms fell thousands of feet to the ground and died on impact.

In a sensation akin to the hair standing up on the back of her neck (if sangheili had hair), Khalo abruptly turned back to the building. Something was off, yet she couldn't put her clawed finger on what it was. As she peered at the now-nicely-blazing building, she saw little beetle-vehicles lining up next to it. Suddenly, a tiny jet of water erupted from one, pointed at the building. The others followed suit, and soon there were a dozen little jets trying to douse the flames.

"Well! There *is* some organization there," she scoffed in surprise.

\*\*\*\*\*

0945

Billy's blistered hand burst through the rubble. Coughing and gasping in the fresh air, he clambered onto the top of the fallen building and desperately tried to catch his breath. Still blinded by the smoke, he leaned

forward, lost his balance, and began falling down the sloped, jagged side. The world spun round and round as he tumbled over and over, his body battering against bits of bent metal and concrete.

At last, he landed on the ground, yet the world continued to spin.

But the intense heat behind him spurred him on. Crawling blindly, he cried out as he cut his forearms and chest on broken glass.

"Hey! Got one over here!" a voice cried.

Seconds later, two firefighters hauled him up and carried him over to an ambulance.

"W—where's my dad?" Billy mumbled, his eyes still too full of soot to see clearly.

"Shh, let's get you cleaned up, kiddo," a kind voice said. "While we do that, they'll go find your daddy."

"Poor kid," someone said, "It's a miracle he's still alive."

"It's a miracle he hasn't got any broken bones!" the medic said.

Billy's communicator blipped.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 9.81 UNITS

The communicator crackled. Khalo frowned; she could hear sounds in the background, but whoever the communicator belonged to wasn't talking.

"Hello?" she demanded.

"Whoa, hey, kid, you all right?"

The voice didn't belong to the communicator's owner.

"It's the mean lady," Billy suddenly said. "The giant, evil woman who killed George. She's doing all of this!"

"Oh, poor guy; he's internalizing all this destruction. No, little man, none of this is your fault."

In the accompanying video feed, a soot-covered, scruffy fireman was looking anxiously into the camera.

"I can't make her go away..." Billy began to cry.

Khalo rolled her eyes and was about to cut the feed when she saw the vehicles in the background: huge, block-shaped vehicles with turrets mounted to the top, spewing water in a powerful arc.

It would have been impressive to see them from a human's size, she thought, but that explained the little water jets.

"So, you want water, do you?" she murmured ominously.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 0950

The line went dead, and Billy suddenly gasped in horror.

"She's gonna drown us!" he cried.

The firefighters exchanged glances, then looked down at him quizzically.

"Look!" he cried, pointing.

They turned to look, and then they gasped, too. Behind them, the massive alien had stooped down, lowered her hands into the bay, and scooped up millions of gallons of water and more than a few cargo ships. Malevolent fury flashed in her eyes as she turned back towards them. Water splashed and dribbled from her hands, yet at the tiny humans' scale, mere splashes and dribbles to her amounted to thousands of gallons of water being dumped all at once on small areas. Buildings and cars were crushed under the weight of the falling drops, and people unlucky enough to be hit were flattened instantly.

"Uh, Dispatch? We're gonna need to evacuate *right now*," one of the firefighters said.

"Affirmative. Commence!" the radio crackled.

"Come on, kid, we gotta get outta here!" the medic cried, grabbing Billy by the hand and rushing him from the ambulance. Too overwhelmed to protest, Billy went along willingly.

But, as they passed the smoldering building, the boy saw a familiar silhouette.

"Dad!" he cried, yanking free of the medic and sprinting up behind his father, tears in his eyes.

Rounding past his dad, he reached out to hug him, then gasped and recoiled, shrieking in terror.

His father's face had been completely burned away by the flames. Bits of his hair still clung to melted skin, but a charred skull was all that remained on the front of him.

His communicator blipped.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.88 UNITS

"He's dead! He's dead! His face melted off!"

Khalo jerked in shock at the shrieking coming from the communicator, sloshing a little water that ended up destroying a hospital.

The video feed came online, and Khalo froze. She had seen some gruesome images in her time, but the sight of the charred skeleton with bits of melted flesh and hair clinging to it was...

She shuddered, holding the water over the burning building. For a moment, she considered whether she'd gone too far. Did this child deserve to see his father's body tortured in such a way? How would she feel if she saw one of her sons that way?

The thought made her blood boil.

"This is *war*!" she snapped, "And those disgusting humans will stop at *nothing* to win, even going so far as to manipulate me with vile imagery! Enjoy your *water* humans!"

She dumped both hands' worth of water onto the building all at once.

\*\*\*\*\*

0955

Over a hundred million gallons—equivalent to a lake half a mile long by a hundred feet wide and a hundred feet deep—fell onto the building in just a couple of seconds, digging craters and gorges in the concrete and sweeping the debris and all those near it into the sea. Those lucky enough to be hit directly died on impact. Less lucky individuals were at least knocked unconscious and drowned in their sleep. But for too many, their bones were broken, leaving them paralyzed and helpless as they were drawn out into the ocean and left to drown, Billy among them.

The medic had gotten him far enough from the impact to avoid broken bones, yet nobody within a quarter mile of the building escaped its relentless pull into the bay.

Disoriented by the sudden downpour and having his feet knocked out from under him, Billy struggled to stay above the surface as other victims and debris churned beside him. Finally getting his eyes open, he screamed and threw up his hands just as the current slammed him into a twisted girder, knocking him out cold.

\*\*\*\*\*

10.00 UNITS

Khalo watched the flooding waters—little more than eddy currents in a puddle to her—dragging countless humans out into the ocean and turning survivors into victims. A faint smirk crossed her mandibles. She

noded to herself with grim satisfaction. Billy was dead; nothing of his size could have survived that. *Nothing.*

Her communicator beeped.

"I—I'm sorry."

Khalo did a double-take. "What?!" she asked, incredulous at hearing his voice.

There was a weak gasp. "I—I'm sorry for what I did. I don't know why you hate me so much, my family... My dad." He sobbed. "But, I'm sorry! I take it back! Whatever it was, I'm sorry! Please stop hurting me; I won't do it again, I swear!"

The line devolved into incoherent sobbing.

Through the video feed, she saw a crying boy's face reflected on something—glass maybe—but as he turned to look up at her, she saw herself from behind. Turning slowly, she tilted her head until she was looking straight at the camera.

\*\*\*\*\*

1002

Billy's eyes widened as he saw the alien looking straight at him. His jaw trembled, and he began to cry harder as the murderous monster stooped down to pick him up.

All at once, she stopped.

The call dropped, and she stood up, her hands on her hips.

\*\*\*\*\*

10.03 UNITS

Khalo's communicator beeped. Sighing, she put Billy on hold and answered it.

"This had better be important," she snapped.

"Good news, Mrs. 'Suzum; we have identified the reason for your extragalactic teleportation and have devised a solution. We have isolated the coordinates where you teleported to, but we are not picking up your signature at that location. If you will return there, we believe we can bring you back."

"In a minute," Khalo replied. "I have something to do first."

\*\*\*\*\*

1005

The monstrous woman turned to look at him again just as the communicator blipped.

"You have been a constant thorn in my side, Billy the Human."

He heard the voice in his communicator in his native tongue, yet at the same time, a foreign language boomed deafeningly above him. The juxtaposed words filled him with a deep sense of dread.

"Please," Billy begged weakly, "I don't want to die."

She lifted him up in her granite-tipped fingernails. Shrieking in terror, Billy watched the ground vanish below him. Kicking at first, he suddenly held deathly still, terrified she would drop him from half a mile in the air.

"Then you're in luck," the alien replied.

Billy swallowed uncertainly.

"You have a few units left to live."

She dropped him into her mouth.

Billy screamed as the mountain-sized mandibles closed around him, and the light disappeared. He bounced off something hot and slippery, then began sliding down it into utter darkness.



Suddenly, the slippery thing vanished out from under him and he free-fell for what felt like forever.

He landed on something jagged, sharp, and hard.

*CRACK!*

He shrieked in pain as his shin-bones shattered and erupted from his skin.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 10.12 UNITS

From the sounds on the communicator, Khalo guessed that Billy had probably landed in her gizzard and broken something—or several somethings. The video feed had turned to night-vision in the darkness, and from what she could see, he definitely had bones sticking out of his legs that weren't sticking out of there before.

But the sound of his crying was *definitely* getting on her nerves.

"Just wait," she interrupted him sharply. "You think it's bad now? I promise you: you haven't seen *anything*, yet!"

With that, she muted his audio. She was about to terminate the call entirely, but morbid curiosity stayed her hand, and she opted to keep the video feed going. How often did one get to watch one's food digesting, after all?

Her communicator blipped, and she sighed in annoyance and answered the call.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on my way," she spat, then hung up so she could watch Billy's plight.

Turning to retrace her steps, she made sure to stomp down anything else that looked like civilization on her way out of town and made her way back towards the cold water where she'd first appeared on this forsaken planet.

But as she returned to her call with Billy, she recoiled at the sound of crunching, grinding, and inconsolable wailing.

"Ugh!" she cried, hastily muting the boy's audio again.

Once she recovered, she watched the video feed with keen interest, observing with sadistic glee how tightly her gizzard-stones fit together, how their weight crushed against the little boy and broke bone after bone, all while simultaneously shoving him further under where the pressure was greater.

"I dunno how he's surviving that," she muttered to herself. "He's a filthy human, but he'd be quite the warrior if he'd been born sangheili."

Just as Billy's mangled legs flopped against the valve that led into Khalo's stomach proper, the video glitched, and suddenly the audio returned.

Khalo jerked in surprise and hastily muted the audio again, cursing under her breath, but not before the valve opened and Billy plunged feet-first into the acidic bath. There was a sharp *hiss* followed by frantic screaming, and then silence as the audio—at last—muted.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 1132

The blinding pain of acid erosion of his flesh had, at last, ceased. The erosion itself continued, but the acid had at finally dissolved the last of the nerves in Billy's skin, leaving him to dissolve to death in relative peace, and yet, that was more of a curse than it was a blessing. In the absence of physical pain, his mind was left to endure the realization that his situation was utterly hopeless.

His parents were dead. George was dead. Most—if not all—of the people he had grown up with were dead. Nobody was coming for him.

Even if someone *were* coming for him, even if someone saved him *right now*—he held his breath and hoped, then exhaled and sighed disconsolately—he would still have all the bones in his body broken—what

remained of them after the acid bath—and he would be lucky if there were even a place to attach prosthetic limbs to. The best he could hope for would be a life as a limbless torso.

He would have cried if he'd had tears left to shed, yet anger at the unfairness of it all surged beneath the sadness. As his tormentor moved and sloshed his caustic bath, he struggled with what little control of his remaining limbs he had to keep his head above the water.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### 11.53 UNITS

"Over a unit in, and he's still going," Khalo murmured, watching the video screen with the macabre fascination of someone watching a train wreck. "I don't know that my sons could have survived torture like that." She pursed her mandibles. "I wonder whether the communicator will keep going once he dies, or if his death will terminate the feed."

Her communicator beeped.

"Yes, yes, I've been in position for over 150 centsals!" she spat. "Hurry up and bring me back, and *stop* bothering me otherwise!"

#### 1215

It could have been the lack of oxygen, or exhaustion, or grief, or even just loss of will to live, but in fact, it was thanks to loss of limbs that Billy was now struggling to keep his head above the surface. Fading in and out of consciousness, his face toppled into the caustic liquid, yanking him back awake and eliciting a hoarse, exhausted moan. He thrashed his arm, righting himself for what would be the final time. The violence of his thrashing snapped the weakened tendons, and his arm vanished beneath the surface to dissolve on its own. Something bubbled and hissed in his eyes, and he realized in horror that the acid was eating away his eyeballs. He sobbed and lowered his head in despair.

He toppled forward.

The acid burned his face.

He tried to scream.

Stomach acid entered his lungs.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### 12.37 UNITS

The video feed terminated. At exactly the same time, the water suddenly grew much warmer. Khalo ignored the latter and quickly tried to reconnect the former, but in vain.

She sighed, experiencing the bittersweet feeling of having completed her task. Turning, she saw the familiar sight of the spa and—presumably—Ghalor 'Polos wading out to her with several attendants in tow. Annoyed, she began to wade back towards them.

"Welcome back, Mrs. 'Suzum; I am so, so sorry that you had to endure all of this," Ghalor said, obsequiously reaching for her hand.

Khalo snatched her hand away and glowered at him. "As well you *should* be," she snapped. "Rest assured, my husband *will* hear about this debacle, and I *will* be posting a review."

Ghalor looked like he was going to cry.

"*Please*, Mrs. 'Suzum, is that *really* necessary?" he pleaded. "My establishment surely can't be blamed for what even the Ministry claims was due to human meddling!"

"Yes, it is *absolutely* necessary," Khalo snapped back.

Ghalor deflated.

Khalo's expression softened, and then she smiled.

## Outcrop

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"It is absolutely necessary," she said gently, "That all faithful followers of the Great Journey come and experience the opportunity to do their part in eradicating humans."

Ghalor gasped and did a double-take.

"8 out of 10 stars," Khalo beamed. "I deducted one for the cold spa water and one for the incompetent staff."

Ghalor opened his mouth, then scoffed. "Wait, incompetent?"