

## Sangheili and Large Cats

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# Sangheili and Large Cats

by [Ultron989](#)

## Summary

“Mhm...” The Oracle hummed gently, floating around him lazily for a moment before bouncing and humming more purposefully. “First, a query, if you do not mind.”

“Never.” He vowed, “My time is yours so long as you value it so.”

“You serve the Forerunners in all things.” It said, “This is true?”

“In all my life and in all my blood.” He nodded, “If they but ask it of me, it is done or I am dead. There can be no other result.”

written by me and my editors twisted fate and Fang Wolfsbane

## Notes

I hope you enjoy also please provide feedback Nd thoughts

written by me and edited by twiisted fate and Fang Wolfsbane

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

It was the early evening and R'tas was doing what he almost always did after training, when he could stomach *moving*. That being awkingout whatever troves nature saw fit to lay in his path as he walked the beach, looking out along the water and shore as his feet sank into wet sand and clay. It was small comfort after a long day of training, but one he found great comfort in nonetheless as he made his way. Watching the sea, he took a deep breath allowing the cool, salty air to fill his lungs before he continued along the beach, eyes scanning the trove the beach had offered up for... Something worthwhile, at least in so far as such trifles could be called worthwhile at all.

Sadly it seemed that today would be a wash in as literal a sense as one could hope for. At least for the first hour. Then, almost inexplicably, and just as he was about to return him, the tide began to recede. In its wake the water left coral, sand and mud, revealing quite a few objects of at least passing interest to R'tas. And among them even one that seemed to shine in the sunlight, glinting in a muted play of silver and bronze that was at once strange but familiar.

Curious, he made his way over to it and knelt, pushing aside sand and mud to get a better look at the object in the sand. Soon, to his displeasure, he grew to recognize the piece. It was a piece of training armor, light but sturdy, to allow warrior young to fight and learn to endure the weight of metal. Feeling the solemnity of the moment, and knowing that for such a piece to be here it meant its wearer was as well, in one form or another, he let out a small prayer for the lost brother.

Standing, he lifted the broken piece of chest plate and reached behind him for a water skin, using it to cleanse the armor. With his thumb he pried set in mud and sand from the grooves, restoring it as best he could before returning it to its rest. And its owner, failure that they doubtless were, else the armor would not rest here, they had given their life for their people and the Covenant.

And *that* was to be lauded, if only quietly so.

What was strange was how far out the water had drained, for a warrior's armor to have been here. Surely he would have drowned, and thus the water that had drained would have been a warrior tall. Or likely even twice that. Quietly, he looked up and around, searching for the

cause of such a drain while his heart began to pump. Instinctive fear course through him as he rose, looking towards the beach.

And then our, towards the sea.

“By the Gods...” He murmured, eyes roving out and up, along the great blue green swell of the wave of a titan, steadily rumbling towards him.

R'tas quickly turned and ran as fast as his legs could carry him, almost leaping and bounding at times in his flight. As he ran he turned a look over his shoulder to see the wall looming ever nearer, over him, casting his world in a dark shade. As fast as he was he could not outpace the gods' own wrath, be it on him or on some fool in the Keep. Whatever the case, the beach was too far and he too slow, and so he braced himself and sought another way.

In the same instant he saw his fate, the wave slammed into him the wave with the force of a titan, slamming him to the muddy ground and threatening to drown him. Wildly, he fought to escape, swimming against the current as best he could, trying to pull himself up. Towards the surface. As fingers found air he saw a glint and turned, a familiar silver and bronze thing hurtling up and into the side of his head, driving the sense from him as the waves tugged him back under.

Blinking back stars, and chest burning for air, he spun, blinking, through the cold water and blood trickling from a wound on his head that burned for the water.

Turning, he watched the helmet dance in the swirling tides yards before him and then suddenly *rocket* down. Following it he saw it vanish through *something* on the sea bed. Something which flickered brightly for the briefest of moments and was far closer than the surface, now. The surface would be safest, he knew, but it was too far. And *something* was below, something that had taken the obtrusive, assaulting armament and vanished it from existence.

On mad, oxygen deprived, fading consciousness driven instinct, he swam down and forward. And, as his vision began to fade, felt himself yanked down, into the dark and towards the sand.

R'tas groaned as consciousness returned, hearing strange noises around him as he slowly returned to the land of the living. Or at least of the *breathing* . Coughing and hacking up water he forced himself to look around through vision that was still blurry. He could see something flying around speaking in a panicked yet cheerful sort of voice, almost... Fussing over him, somehow, as strange as it sounded.

The even stranger part, though, was that it seemed to resemble a... Sphere of some familiar sort.

“Hello, hello,- Oh please tell me you understand me!” The little thing said, buzzing around him like some kind of metal insect as he rolled over, splashing down in mud and sand. “Are you alright? Your head is bleeding- Oh my, that isn’t how heads are meant to operate. Unless your kind has evolved- Nonsense! No, no, that isn’t advantageous *at all* !”

“Hmph...” R'tas blinked his eyes clearing as he let his head loll to the side. And his eyes landed on a small, once more muddied, metal *thing* laying beside him.

Truly, the gods had a sense of humor...

“Oh! Maybe you need a life worker to look at you- Or, or maybe you’re defective?” The Oracle, he could see it clearly now, went on, warbling fretfully as it did. “No, no, that won’t do at all! I needed a working specimen, not a waterlogged cretin like the *last* sample I took!”

“I am neither defective nor a sample, Oracle.” He rumbled, rolling over and pushing himself up on sore limbs, spitting the last of the water in his mouth free. “I am R’Tas of Vadum Keep, a trainee of their warriors. And humbled in your presence, mighty Oracle.”

“Ah so you *are* in working condition!” It chimed excitedly, “Excellent, excellent! I was so worried that my placement of this testing site was... Well, nevermind that. As you are in proper, working condition and do not need repairs, I would greatly appreciate your... Assistance in a matter of great importance to my purpose.”

“Your purpose?” He blinked, rising to a knee and looking around himself.

His surroundings were simple, scarcely more than a cave, but he could see the markings of the gods. Technology most high, forming a shield to keep the tides at bay and lighting the area. And, distantly, a raised platform with a semi-circle of consoles and, against a wall, a small ring of sorts. One big enough for the Oracle and another half of it besides to fit inside of at best, sparking restlessly.

“You mean...” He blinked, heaving a breath and staggering upright, one hand pressing against his sore ribs. “You serve the gods?”

“I serve... Their ends, yes.” It answered, turning to him and looking on him for a moment, its faceplate old and worn but vibrant red, adorned with symbols he didn’t know. It was rather like a Sangheili knelt on the floor, head bowed and arms bound behind them, in a way that brought him little comfort for the recognition considering. “You may call me... Passive Bias, I suppose. A Servant of the Forerunners. *Your* saviors.”

“Truly...” Then his duty was clear enough, he supposed. Head bowed, he planted a fist over his heart meaningfully, if a touch beyond what he ought to be doing, and rumbled, “Then I am at your service, Holy Oracle. What need do you have of me?”

“Mhm...” The Oracle hummed gently, floating around him lazily for a moment before bouncing and humming more purposefully. “First, a query, if you do not mind.”

“Never.” He vowed, “My time is yours so long as you value it so.”

“You serve the Forerunners in all things.” It said, “This is true?”

“In all my life and in all my blood.” He nodded, “If they but ask it of me, it is done or I am dead. There can be no other result.”

“Devoted... Fanatically so, in fact.” Passive Bias remarked as it wandered off, working at the digital constructs of the console as he lumbered anxiously, but curiously, forward. As the little circle on the wall flickered to life it bobbed, “That will do, I suppose. My luck with sample collection for this task has been so wanting... The odds on that are clear, then. I must proceed as I am.”

“Oracle?”

“Hello there!” It cheered, catching the little cylinder that slid forward in an odd sort of bubble and turning to him with it held aloft. “You asked how you could help, yes? Protect this... Creation, I suppose, of your gods.”

“A creation?” He murmured, looking down as the Oracle lowered the little thing for him to see. Inside was a child, of sorts, that looked rather like a small Brute with pink skin and messy, pink hair, curled up in the container.

“Yes. A... Well, her species really doesn’t matter anymore, I suppose.” Passive Bias said, bobbing around him gently and excitedly, “Regardless, she is of my maker’s design. And I have done all I can to protect and prepare her for what is to come. And so I come here, to your little... Well, your world, to have someone finish my work.”

“You... Wish us to raise her?”

“Yes, please!” It bobbed excitedly, zooming around him, “I want her to live, you understand? I want her to know all that is live life to the fullest. Hate, pain, love, pride, fear, excitement- A trove of emotions that I simply am not equipped to impart. I need her fellow organic people to properly convey this to her. I have done all I can, but... Well, it did not go very well, we shall say, and leave it there.”

“I suppose I shall do as you say, then.”

“Wonderful!” It said, buzzing over to the console as the little circle again flared to life, as it passed into its light the machine rambled on, “She needs food four times daily, meat and grain and vegetable preference. Also, she has a lot of energy, so be sure to let her run it off. And lastly do not ever, *ever* let her-”

With a muted *whir*, the portal closed around it, whisking the eccentric Oracle away and leaving him alone in the strange room.

“Never let her *what* ?” He rumbled, “Eat after dark? Sleep in? I feel that was the important bit... Aside from how I get out of here, at least...”

**Written by ultron 989**

**Edited By :**

**Twisted Fate MK2**



## ch 2 prophecy

### Chapter Summary

returning to the keep and seeing what awaits the young warrior

Getting *into* the little cave proved a far easier task, in the end, than getting *out* of it did. The walls around him were curved gently to meet the ceiling, making the hewn space more circular than square, and covered in trickles of water, wet mud, and loose, damp sand, which meant he could not climb them even *if* the shielded hole back out had been in reach of any of the walls. There was nothing he could use to scale the walls around him and so, eventually and with a heart laden with guilt, he hefted a small fist-sized rock and turned a look on the sacred machines that held the waters at bay through the power of divine, arcane generators.

“Gods forgive me.” He murmured forlornly, “But your duty charged unto me carries the need of blasphemy to forestall its failing.”

Hefting the rock in one hand, and tucking the pod against a hip with the other, he turned and hurled it up into the generator’s frame. The machine sparked on the hit, but held firmly, as he ought to have expected. And so he repeated the gesture. Heresies compounded, then, with each of over a dozen grunts and thrown stones. After several minutes of the work, the barrier finally flickered, allowing salinated droplets to sprinkle through and onto him, before it failed utterly and the waters poured in.

All told his head broke the surface, heaving for air, an hour past the coming of the great wave.

Now, at least, it seemed the Great Wave had come and gone on its terrible path. And so, pushing the orb ahead of him like an animal nudging a ball along the surface of the water, he swam to shore. It was exhausting and slow, the wounded Sangheili forced to submerge occasionally to kick up and breach, pushing the hovering container along with one hand.

But, steadily and certainly, he made his way until he finally felt his feet touch down on shifting sand and stood in the water, pushing the orb in front of him. On the beach he

groaned, sinking to his knees and then falling onto his back, staring up as he heaved for breath and prayed for the searing pain written across every inch of his body to fade. It took time to catch his breath and rest his body, but he didn't particularly mind.

He used it to think.

"The oracle was strange..." He murmured, a strange mix of confusion, frustration and even anxiety building up inside his chest. "Not at all like... Like the tales. And this task is strange, too..."

Absently, he felt his eyes drawn to the little orb, floating beside him. Inside, he knew, was the charge he had been given. A strange child, whose age he could not possibly know, placed in *his* care. Under *his* protection. He was not even a warrior yet, though he was close to becoming one, and yet the Oracle had seen fit to emburden *him* with this duty...

Why?

"Surely the Oracle had purpose behind its actions." He sighed, turning his gaze away from the strange, sacred thing. "Surely..."

Whatever the strange, hairless Brute's purpose would be in whatever was to come, he knew his. To protect it. And no matter what would come, he would do so, so long as he had breath in his lungs and blood to shed for it. His Keep may not abide, the mission granted unto him not them, but he would stand regardless.

Whatever came, for the Gods.

Forcing himself up so that he was sitting in the sand, he watched the sun dip down towards the distant horizon and frowned, "The hour grows late... The Kaidon will not be pleased with my delay, sacred burden or no."

And so he forced himself up and onto weary feet, one hand pressed to a still aching side and the other laid on top of the sacred thing to push it along. The great wave that had guided him to the beginning of his had made a mess of the beach, to be sure. But a great mount rose up between the Keep and the village and the great sea itself, and the debris told him it had broken the wave. And though the path had been mostly washed away, along with the trees along the shore line that had once flanked it, he knew the path well enough.

And thankfully, the beautiful forest he so loved had been spared any damage that was *too* severe.

There were few Sangheili in the forest, on the path or otherwise, as he passed through. Most were either surveying the damage or clearing away downed trees and brush obstructing the old stone path. A few were patrolling the way as well, keeping the peace and looking for anyone injured in the wave. But as he passed they all turned to watch him, murmuring curiously as he passed by.

Perhaps wisely, he kept his tongue and simply stayed on his way.

His Keep was an old one, set to the side of the village which supported it with food and goods, with a large tower that dominated the sky nearly rising to the height of the mountain that stretched around its back end. The walls that ringed it were high, walked by armored warriors and dotted by parapets mounted by heavy Shade turrets. In the crenellations he could even see the glint of purple neo-laminate. Generators, he knew, that would produce one-way shields in the case of an attack on the Keep and protect the defenders.

Outside the great iron and neo-laminate gate he could see two guards and two figures besides. One was the Elder of the Village, drenched but dressed in clothes fine enough to show his standing. The other, dressed in ornate silver armor attached to flowing white robes, was the Kaidon of his Keep.

*Both* turned at his approach, eyes looking him over and then turning, curious, to look at the little orb he nudged along.

“My Kaidon.” He grunted wearily, bowing his head when he came to a stop a few feet from them. Turning he offered a similar respect to the second, “My Elder.”

“R’Tas.” The Elder, Ara’Kas, murmured tiredly, ancient amber eyes studying him closely and worriedly, “You disappeared.”

“I was on one of my walks, on the shore.” He explained quietly, “As is my way, in the cooler evenings.”

“He walks along the shoreline often, Kaidon.” Ara’Kas explained to his Kaidon, “It centers him, he has said. And as he shirks none of his duties, his trainers have allowed him the comfort of it. When the rogue wave struck, I thought him the first victim...”

“As you should have. To be on the beach ought to have been a death sentence as sure as a blade in a heart.” Kaidon Ra’Tan rumbled, his dark green eyes roving him up and down quickly before turning on the little orb. “Yet not only do you live, you bear a weight with you.”

“I do.” He nodded, nudging it forward, “I was walking, as I said, and found the waters shallow. So I ventured out, into it. Thus when the wave struck, I nearly succumbed. Would have, in fact, were it not for an Oracle’s cave, carved into the floor of the sea itself.”

“An Oracle?” Ara’Kas murmured, “Here, on Sanghelios? There has never been an Oracle here, that I know of...”

“It came and left, Chief.” He said quietly, “Through a strange device whose nature I am unfamiliar with. It’s home was not Sanghelios, either. It as good as said it came only to visit, and deliver.”

“The orb?” R’Tas nodded and Ra’Tan rumbled a sigh, stepping closer while his guards watched warily. Looking into it the Kaidon gave voice to the same sentiment R’Tas himself had held. “It is like a hairless, pink Brute...”

“I thought as much myself.” He answered, laying a possessive hand on his divine charge, “But I do not believe that is what this is. The Oracle said it... *Made* it. Raised it, as best it

could, before seeking others to complete the task.”

“Why?”

“A creation of the gods, whose purpose it did not reveal.” He answered simply, “That was all the Oracle said when it charged me with the duty.”

“The oracle gave you the duty to protect this creature?” He nodded and the Elder sighed, hand curling on his chest and finger tapping the bare skin above his damp robes. “To charge you with it... The oracle must have intended the Keep itself be pledged to the cause as well. You should have come to us before accepting it.”

“I was not given the chance.” He explained, “It was pressed upon me, and I accepted it under the Oracle’s demand.”

“That was not your-”

“You did well.” The Kaidon cut the Elder off, laying a heavy, armored hand on his shoulder and paying him a respectful nod. The Kaidon, as most were, was a warrior born, bred and then bloodied on numerous campaigns. And so such respect in his wise old eyes gave the young Sangheili heart. “To find an Oracle... And be charged by it? Yours must be a truly worthy bloodline.”

“Thank you, Kaidon...”

“May I?” The Elite asked, gesturing at the orb in his grip. He frowned, and the warrior must have sensed his anxiety for he laughed, “The make of the Gods is a sturdy one, Young One- No, you have earned your name put to voice, R’Tas. But know that it won’t break for my touch, if you allow it.”

“...As you like, Kaidon.”

“Thank you.” The Kaidon murmured as he stepped back, turning the orb lengthwise and letting his eyes and fingers wander its surface reverently. “To hold the work of our lords in my hands... You have much to tell us, R’Tas. Starting with where this relic was, and ending with what, exactly, you believe the Oracle desires of us.”

“The former I will have to show you, and we will need equipment to get to it.” He explained, “The reliquary was flooded in my departure, and to return we will need equipment to reach it.”

“Send word.” The Kaidon grunted, turning to the Elder and ordering, “I want Sangheili ready come the morning. R’Tas will lead them to the reliquary and it will be secured.”

“We will need barrier generators.” R’Tas explained quickly, “And pumps. The barrier will need to be water-sealed but admit passage. Using it, we can drain the water from the cave and call on those entitled to do so to retrieve the holy artefacts.”

“Astute suggestions.” Kaidon Ra’Tan rumbled, sounding every bit impressed and gesturing for Ara’Kas to leave and see to both of their instructions. With a bow, the Elder did so and the Kaidon rumbled, “Blade Master Gel’Ton was right once more, it would seem...”

“My kaidon?”

“The Blade Master told me this morning that he sensed some... Weight upon your fate.” The Kaidon explained, gently nudging the orb back into his stomach so that R’Tas could once more hold it fast. “I did not believe him, as I often do not, and yet here you are. With divine destiny upon your shoulders.”

“Prophecy?” He murmured quietly, fingers rubbing along the surface of the orb contemplatively. Blade Masters and Silent Shadows were known to be mysterious, often thought to be mystics in their own right. But prophecy....

“Leave the thought.” His Kaidon rumbled, turning towards the Keep itself and rumbling, “Come. I will show you to quarters, and place you under guard. Tomorrow I shall convene a council and we shall see to the reliquary, and seek aid in freeing your charge from its sacred shelter.”

“Yes, my Kaidon.” He rumbled, nodding and following the old warrior through the gates. The Kaidon’s guards eyed him warily, as was their nature, but he only paid them kind, respectful nods.

After a moment, they did the same, falling in behind them to protect their rear.

edited by twistedfate

# Sangheili and Large Cats ch 3 let the gods decide

## Chapter Summary

a meeting of elders and a nap interrupted

## Chapter Notes

i hope everyone enjoys please provide feedback if you can it would be greatly needed

*The room he was shown to was simple but fine, with a comfortable cot tucked into one corner and a desk in the other, both resting on a fine, rich red carpet no doubt sewn by one of the women of the nearby village expressly for the purpose. All of which was opposite the heavy, iron-reinforced door, tucked into corners so that he would always have time to react if the need presented itself. And the room itself was interior to the Keep, where he knew they would be the safest. Traditionally, such rooms were for dignitaries, priests and the like, and so to be accorded one reinforced both his resolve and his belief that the kaidon stood with him in truth.*

*Else, so deep in the Keep, he would not have woken up at all, save to feel the knife between his ribs.*

*Rising, he turned his gaze on the little orb, floating quietly by the head of the cot. Inside, as ever, the little creature slept. She was so peaceful and silent, and yet he already knew that the little thing would change everything ...*

*“The Kaidon calls on you, warrior.” A voice spoke through the door, heavy fist pounding twice to announce what had to be a guard’s position. “Bring the creature and come, quickly.”*

*Sighing, he stood and picked up the finer robes he’d been left, shedding his sleeping clothes and tugging them on. They were loose, with wide sleeve ends as tradition dictated for a member of the Keep, and he did not miss the implication of them. These were not, after all,*



*the clothes of a cadet in training, but of a warrior. And as quickly as everything had happened, the Kaidon was no fool and would not have made such a mistake.*

*He intended to earn that, as well as his god-given charge.*

*“R’Tas.” The Guard, a heavyset, massive Elite said as he stepped into the wide hallway. He bowed his head and stepped back, away from the door, to give him space. “Kaidon Ra’Tan and his councilors wish to speak to you regarding your... Quest.”*

*“I suppose that is the best name to give it...” He murmured, bowing his head and tugging the little orb along by a belt he had looped around it. “Very well. Lead the way, if it would please you.”*

*“Mhm.” The Elite nodded, eyes lingering on the orb for a heartbeat before he turned, leading him on through the wide, winding hallways. As they walked, the guard observed, quietly, “The Keep has recalled its patrols, you should know.”*

*“They have?”*

*“Indeed.” The armored guard nodded, “Villages go with the barest of guards, now. Relief forces for the wave, it is said.”*

*“But not believed?”*

*“I would not deign to question the Kaidon.” The guard answered instantly, “I only wished to inform you, so that when you see our forces mustered you do not fear them. That is all.”*

*“As you say, I suppose it must be.” R’Tas answered, fingers tightening around the belt he was using to tug the orb along. He wasn’t quite sure he believed the other warrior, in full, but he had no cause to challenge his word. Instead, he kept his tongue, and worked to memorize the winding halls they passed through.*

*Just in case.*

*They continued in that silence, for a time, passing by guards on patrol, headed to quarters, and standing, well, guard as they went. All eyed them warily and curiously, some murmuring words he could not hear under their breath and others bowing their heads. None spoke to them, though, or slowed their way, which was well enough for him.*

*Finally, they reached a great neo-laminate embedded and no doubt, if needs be, shielding capable door flanked by two heavily armored Sangheili wielding large pikes.*

*“This is where we part ways.” The guard rumbled, turning to leave, “The Council and the Kaidon await. Keep your hands clean and all will be well.”*

*“I will.” He rumbled, turning to the guards again and waiting for one of them to turn and push the door open wide enough to invite him in.*

*Inside, the room was wide and tall, with a domed ceiling supported by thick columns and the enclosing walls besides. On the dome and the surrounding walls were paintings, of warriors past and of the Covenant’s glory and holy mission, spanning from a more faded ceiling down to the floor in a great chronicle of the Keep’s history. Or as much could be detailed with artistry, at the least.*

*On a raised dais opposite the door sat the Kaidon, a brazier behind him smoldering warmly with the scent of wood and incense and spices. A scent he’d been graced with before, on his visits to temple. A sacred one...*

*To one side was Ara’Kas, old and wizened and dressed in now-clean green and brown robes. As soon as R’Tas entered, the elder’s eyes were on him, eyeing him warily. And worriedly. An odd mix, to say the least, and not one that he quite understood. But one he was certain he had seen, before the Elder sighed and turned his gaze back to the Kaidon.*

*“The Bearer arrives, then.” The Elite sighed, “And with the relic in tow, no less. But not under guard?”*

*“He slept under guard and came here under guard.” The Swordsmaster, Gel’Ton, rumbled from the Kaidon’s other side. “Were he any more ‘under guard’ he would be a prisoner, Elder. Not a guest, nor an ally charged with noble cause.”*

*Unlike the other guards, and indeed the Kaidon himself, the Swordsmaster was a lithe warrior dressed in a light battle harness that was little more than a dark beige breastplate and his helmet. The rest was covered in snow white linens that wrapped at the ankles and wrists, cuffed by thick metal cufflinks. At his waist rested a small knife and, just barely visible, the simple grip of a stock energy sword.*

*Anything else, R’Tas supposed, would have been surplus to his needs.*

*“I have faith in the Keep’s guards, noble Councilors.” He rumbled coolly, hoping to prevent the argument he could already see boiling. “I slept well, under their protection, and was ferried here with it. I would require nothing more, and more guards on my person would only have made the Keep itself more vulnerable. Which would have invited only more dangers.”*

*“Words spoken wisely ought be heeded.” The Kaidon rumbled simply, sounding simultaneously pleased and amused. “Yesterday, we were struck by a wave of both rogue design and mysterious origin. While painful and sad it seems now to have been the pain of a lesson, to impart upon us something... Important .”*

*“A gift.” The Swordsmaster rumbled, the barest trace of reverence in his voice. “And a quest.”*

*“A sacred icon.” The Elder nodded on his other side, “Word must be sent to the Hierarchs. If such a great fate is indeed upon us, then surely they will send us aid. Weapons, warriors, perhaps even grants of land- All that we might need to better embark upon this holy journey.”*

*“Or you would invite interlopers who would steal it from us.” The Kaidon rumbled firmly, “No, for now this weight belongs to the Keep. The orb, and the Oracle’s cave as well. Boons*

*granted to us, to be explored by us."*

*"Such greed could be heresy..."*

*"Greed? Heresy?" Gel'Ton rumbled unamusedly, "We seek to prepare for a path laid before us by the mouthpiece of the true gods. Such could not possibly be heretical, Elder. And you should know better than to cast such words before me."*

*"All I meant to say was that this is not our ken." He explained almost fearfully, eyeing the old warrior; "We ought to keep to the Covenant. Allow the Prophets to find the will of the lords, here, rather than our own feeble minds. I would never cast aspersions upon you, Master Gel'Ton."*

*"Not twice you would not." Gel'Ton rumbled finally, "None cast such words upon me more than once."*

*"Enough, Councilors." The Kaidon finally rumbled, turning a look on him and sighing. Finally, after a heartbeat, the Kaidon spoke, "It would seem your evening walks did us all favors, and curses besides I do not doubt it. And the gods do speak to us through strange ways, sometimes... What do you think we ought to do, R'Tas?"*

*"Me?" He blinked, surprised and bowing his head for the question, "I would not presume to--"*

*"It can hardly be presumption if it was prompted purposefully." Gel'Ton cut him off gently, nodding when he straightened and turned to him. "Your mind was asked for. Speak it. To do otherwise would, itself, be presumptive."*

*R'Tas was silent for a long moment, head bowed while he thought on what the best course would be. His instincts immediately turned to the Covenant, and the honor which bound him to it, and told him they ought send for the Prophets. But something stayed his hand. The Elite in him, he supposed, speaking to loyalty to his Keep. His people. People he was similarly bound to uphold, defend and embetter.*

*In either case, he knew his decision in that moment would change music. Hardships, gains, all would come by and for his word.*

*The weight of that was haunting ...*

*But after a few moments, he remembered the words of the Oracle and spoke them, "I survived in the place of another who did not. A warrior who failed the gods' trial. Who was... Unworthy, ultimately of this great task. Perhaps this question, this quest, is a test as well. Of loyalty. To ourselves, the Covenant, or the gods themselves and their designs. The Oracle chose me for this burden, and the gods granted me my life to carry it for them."*

*"Then I am right to trust you to decide our course." The Kaidon rumbled firmly, "So I ask once more. What do you believe we must do?"*

*"We must let the gods decide." He answered simply and soberly, "And carry the burden through it all. It is not to us to call for the Prophets, or to ostracize them. It is to the gods themselves to bring them, or bar them."*

*"Words well said." The Swordmaster said, nodding his head eagerly and turning to his Kaidon. "If you be willing, Kaidon, I will see to it that R'Tas is-"*

*The gentle hiss of gas releasing cut them off and, as one, four Sangheili turned eyes on the little pod. White vapor billowed out around it along with a gentle sort of musical chime, echoing in the quiet of the chamber. Slowly, almost mockingly, the lid lifted up and away, sliding back along the exterior of the pod and around, to the base of it.*

*One pink hand and then another stretched up, above the entrance, before an odd... Squeak echoed quietly around them and the creature sat up, mumbling, "Bias, did we get there? Or are you taking me to another planet... Because I don't want to deal with any more poisonous berries, if you don't... mind..."*

*The creature blinked bright, surprised eyes as she turned, surveying each of them in turn. Slowly, she waved a hand, her arm clad in the same fitted suit that covered the rest of her, and grunted, "Uh, hi? Is the translator, um, working?"*

*"Let the gods decide." Gel'Ton rumbled quietly, low laugh breaking through the words as he stood and bowed, fist on his heart. "Let them decide indeed... And so it is so. Hello, little one, your... Translator, as you say, is indeed working."*

*"Oh, uh... Great!" She said, clambering over the loop of the pod, fumbling, and nearly falling before she could catch herself. Rubbing the back of her neck she stood, "Bias, uh, says they don't break often. But it's always worth checking when it comes to what he says!"*

*"May we ask why?" The Kaidon rumbled quietly, mystified by the creature's sudden awakening.*

*"Oh, he just likes to joke around a lot." She shrugged, smiling widely and pacing the room, looking up at the paintings that stretched out overhead, "Once he let me eat poisoned berries to see what would happen, which was fun. Another time these big lizards were chasing me and he was just like 'Let me average their top speed'. So, you know, you never know."*

*"And the Oracle thought this... Funny?" Gel'Ton rumbled curiously, "To let such misfortune fall on you?"*

*"Hey, he's great, but he doesn't exactly do humor very well." She smiled, "Nice paintings, by the way. They're pretty."*

*"It's... A chronicle." The Elder said quietly, hands trembling in his lap. Still, his voice was calm, which was more than R'Tas probably would have been able to say if he'd been asked. "Of our Keep's history. These are the moments for which we hold the most pride."*

*"Oh, stories?" She smiled suddenly and widely, turning and rushing over to sit in front of the Elder. "I love stories! Bias used to tell me them all the time, back on- Well, uh, back home. Not supposed to say it's name, sorry!"*

*“When it wasn’t... Playing jokes, you mean?” Gel’Ton asked, “It sounded like such happened a lot.”*

*“Sometimes, but when I was younger? Nah.” She shook her head, long pink locks swinging about wildly. “He’s weird but not mean . Anyway! Stories! Could you tell them to me?”*

*“Which ones...?”*

*“Just the ones in the paintings.”*

*“That is hundreds of years of history.” The Elder said quietly, the girl only nodding earnestly at the words like that wasn’t in any sort of way a problem. Sighing, he turned to his fellows who actively avoided his gaze. Then, with a final sigh, he asked, “May we at least know your name first? I am Elder Ara’Kas.”*

*“Kaidon Ra’Tan.” The Kaidon rumbled, gesturing to R’Tas and grunting, “Your Keeper, R’Tas.”*

*“Keeper?”*

*“He was given your... Pod.” Gel’Don answered, touching a hand to his head and adding quietly. “Swordmaster, and former Silent Shadow of the Covenant, Gel’Don. At your service, in the most literal sense.”*

*The girl blinked and was silent, for a moment, seemingly processing their words. Finally, she smiled and asked, “So you’re the new friends that father said he was going to find for me? Awesome!”*

*“I-”*

*“And you have stories, too!” She smiled, bouncing on the spot and grinning toothily,  
“C’mon, story time with new friends is always the best!”*



# Sangheili and Large Cats ch 3 sights to behold

## Chapter Notes

hey yall happy thanks giving i hope you enjoy the chapter and as always provide feedback if you can

It took hours for the young creature to hear all the stories that the Elder could recall well enough to tell her. Eventually they grew hungry, and food, dessert and other refreshments were brought to them, along with more questions about what they were giving her from the girl. So like the child she seemed to be, in her curiosity and unending queries. She didn't turn her nose up at anything, though, always eating what was given to her as soon as she saw them do it first.

Whether that was paranoia or learned skill, he couldn't be sure, but he swiftly took to sampling the food from her plate for her as a matter of course.

It was a strange way to pass the day, not to speak of the duties left undone, to say the least. But not an unpleasant one. Listening to the stories of his Keep had always been his favorite part of festivals and even training. In the younger years of training, lectures on history, tales of great heroes of the keep and the Covenant both, and more were told to mould young warriors into the blades and shields they would become.

And he had always enjoyed them, pushed to his greatest heights by them.

Soon, though, the hours began to draw and the Kaidon spoke, "I fear it is time we adjourn. We have spent much time here, and matters left untended grow pressing."

"Okay." The young alien, Kipo, said with a smile as she turned to the Elder. "Thanks for the stories. They were super interesting!"

“Of course, youngling.” The old warrior nodded, rising to leave with the permission of his Kaidon. He hesitated at the door, though, turning and suggesting, “Perhaps R’Tas ought to show the young one the prestigious Keep, my Kaidon? She has heard so much tell of it, after all, by now.”

“A wise suggestion.” Kaidon Ra’Tan said with a small laugh and a wry shake of his head. Gesturing at him as the weary Elder departed and the heavy door closed in his wake, the old warrior ordered gently, “Show her the Keep, wherever her feet may tread, R’Tas. If this is to be her home, she ought to know it.”

“As you wish, my Kaidon.” He bowed, rising and paying her a look, “Whenever you are ready, child.”

“Yep!” Kipo nodded, bouncing up and onto her feet as if her rear end were made of springs and then turning towards the door.

The Keep itself was rather large, part of it carved into the small mountain that had shielded it from the great wave from before. Nearly a dozen small watch-towers rose over the Keep proper, circling around the greater central spire in line with large parapets that were spaced along the perimeter wall. Each was reinforced by brick and stone, manned by numerous plasma turrets and dominated by heavy Shade emplacements.

At the base of the wall the ground had been cleared for several yards out, so that attackers would have no cover if they came for the Keep. Inside, much of the construction was underground, with winding subterranean halls linking the towers, wall and hall. Some, he’d been told, even ran into the mountain itself, where he’d heard tell that lookouts were placed to watch the ocean and the forest from even higher up than the towers.

And where marksmen would rain down hell on even the Keep itself should it fall.

Of course, limited as he was, he could only show her some of the tunnels and the hall she’d already been in, as well as a few of the towers that lined the wall. Even with the privileges he seemed to have been given, he would not presume to have access to these secure places. Such was just inviting a sword between his ribs.

And so, instead, he took her to his favorite, a tower which overlooked the forest and the ocean both.

“It’s so beautiful.” Kipo smiled when they climbed one of the lesser towers, the most secure place he could take her. “I love the woods... I don’t know why, but I always just feel so right when I’m in ‘em. Or looking at ‘em, even.”

“That is understandable.” He rumbled quietly, thinking of the comfort he himself found on the beach and in the water. Echoing words passed on from his teacher, once upon a time, he said, “Sometimes, we simply feel a kinship to places. Natural or not, it doesn’t matter. Such is just how the spirit works.”

“Yeah.” She nodded, smiling sadly, “Father always said it was just cuz I’m an animal. So, you know, I like the woods. It’s natural.”

“I feel there is more to it than that...”

“Maybe, maybe not. I dunno.” The question seemed to upset her, though, the young creature hopping up onto the wall and swinging her legs over it. Perched with her feet hanging, she looked down on the people dotting the wall and the grassy courtyards below and asked, quietly, “They’re all super curious about me, aren’t they?”

“Probably.” He nodded, leaning against the wall beside her where he could grab her, if she looked about to fall. “Such is natural, though. You are a stranger in their home, after all. And many have been recalled because of your abrupt arrival.”

“I know...” She nodded, giving him a little look, “You think I could meet ‘em?”

“In time.” He answered quietly, “For now, they have duties to see to. You ought not get in the way of that, young Kipo.”

“I guess, yeah.” She nodded, going quiet for a long time until finally saying, “They’re not all worried, though. Some of the people we passed looked... Like they’d seen a ghost, or something. Impressed.”

“I see...” So she’d caught the reverence in the eyes of some, then, even if she hadn’t quite understood it. A perceptive creature, this one was, then. “Maybe you can see them later then, so that you might come to know them. But for now, I have shown you the Keep, and the hour grows late.”

“Really?” She blinked, “Promise?”

“On my honor, Sacred one.” He nodded, “Tomorrow, I will show you the training grounds. Where you can meet the-”

“Kipo.”

“Pardon?”

“Kipo.” She said heavily, turning to prod him in the chest and glaring thinly. “Not ‘sacred one’ or any of that. Kipo is my name. And friends call each other by their names.”

“Friends...?”

“Yeah. And we ,” she prodded his chest again, hard enough to actually push him back a step in spite of her diminutive size, “are friends. So just relax, and call me Kipo, okay?”

“Understood, then, Kipo.” He laughed, shaking his head until he saw her pouting up at him, eyes narrowed. When he cocked his head, confused, she only narrowed her eyes and hunched her head down, as though she was trying to look larger. “Stop that... Whatever that is. What are you even doing, Kipo?”

“Intimidating you.”

“Intimidating me?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, “I remember dad always said that animals intimidated each other for, ya know, reasons. S’how they made friends. Seen it myself, too. Animals that puff up to look all big and strong, out in the woods ‘n stuff. I tried it a few times with some of ‘em, too, now and again, but...”

“But...?”

“Can’t remember!” She smiled, flopping out over the top of the wall and stretching languidly. Flopping out on the wall, she sighed, “Was tryin’ to remember what happened when I did that, but can’t. Father always said that when that happened I oughta just move right on, just ignore it. Somethin’ about how we traveled that made rememberin’ stuff hard, sometimes.”

“Hm.” He wasn’t aware of any such travel, himself, but then again, he was not an Oracle. And so he could not begin to question them. “Perhaps the more divine ways with which the gods’ relics travel is simply... Unfriendly, to those of flesh and blood.”

“Maybe...”

“Have you been to many other worlds?” He asked abruptly when she looked like her mood was souring once more. “You said you had been to some and I confess to some... Curiosity, on the matter.”

“Oh... Well, yeah, lots of ‘em.” The girl said, beaming a bright, energetic smile and rocketing up to sit on the wall. “Some of ‘em were like, balls of ice. I didn’t like those, they were too cold and everything wanted to eat everything else. No fun at all! But others were, like, jungles all chock full of, just, every kind of life you can imagine. It was amazing...”

“Truly?”

“Yeah...” She sighed wistfully, “Nothing compared to home, though. Nothing at all .”

“Home?” And now he was genuinely curious. Where could be ‘home’ to her? Would it be the same as the Oracle’s home?

“Yeah.” She nodded, laying back along the top of the wall with her head on her arms, watching the pinkening sky contemplatively. “There were all kinds of animals and plants... You couldn’t even begin to imagine some of them.”

“Where is your home?” He asked, blinking when her head snapped to him suddenly. Quietly, he explained, “I’m merely curious.”

“Father says not to tell anyone.” She answered simply, shrugging and adding as she hopped to her feet, “Sorry. Now, how about dinner?”

“Are you already hungry again...?”

“Yep!” She smiled, “Always! So, dinner. When and where?”

“Follow me.” He sighed, turning to lead her back down the tower, “Come along, then. Let’s... See to feeding you, then, I suppose.”

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Sorry its so short but happy thanks giving to yall

# Sangheili and Large Cats ch 5 a small display

## Chapter Summary

heres the next chapter i hope you all enjoy

As he had the day before, he was awoken in the chambers he'd been given by a heavy knock on his heavy door. Standing and tugging the fine, padded robes he'd been so kindly gifted by the Kaidon, he shook the dregs of his sleep away as he shuffled towards the door. By the time he pulled it open he was awake and alert, if not entirely ready for the day just yet. A morning meal would see to the last of *that*, though.

Outside the door the same guard as before was waiting, though looking far more haggard, now. His shoulders were sloped and, in places, his armor had been shifted untowardly. The reason why swiftly announced itself as the little gremlin dropped off of his back, standing ramrod straight and pretending to innocence for all she was worth.

"Your *charge*," the Elite grunted, "wished to be brought to you."

"Did she?" He asked, turning a look on the small thing.

"I was hungry." She said by way of answer, "And, um, bored. There wasn't anything to do in my room except climb the walls!"

"Is that a saying, or...?"

"No." The guard answered tiredly, "She climbed the walls, went out a ventilation window, and frightened several patrolling warriors. Then she snuck back in, as though she expected we wouldn't notice the *pink creature* was the culprit."

“Hey, I don’t know if any of you guys are pink.” She defended herself quickly, “It might have worked!”

“I’m sure.” He chuckled, turning to the guard and grunting shortly, “You’re dismissed. Find and send a replacement for us.”

“Someone must guard you at all times.”

“I’m sure we will manage that, somehow.” He rumbled, turning an eye to either side of the hall, and the *dozen* Elites stationed all along its length. Two stood to either door, armed and ready for combat. They were *more* than safe, not to mention those on perimeter duty, and the heavy defenses on the wall.

“As you will it then, Keeper.” The Elite rumbled, turning to march away without more than a second’s pause, as if to see if R’Tas was *sure* .

“Come, Kipo.” He said to the small creature as he turned to head the other way, “Let us take our morning meal. Then I can see to alleviating your boredom.”

“You have something fun we can do?”

“In a matter of speaking, yes.” He nodded, rumbling a small laugh, “But first, food.”

The cantina that most in the Keep frequented was not inside the Keep itself, but rather set *outside* , in the open air. A pit half as deep as a Sangheili stood tall had been dug out, the perimeter made of a wall of stone slabs that held back rock and soil, wherever gaps had not been left for stone steps that lead down. Intermittently the wall was broken up by iron braziers for when the chill set in, sheltered under the gently arched roof that covered the entirety of the sitting area.

Luckily, as they had come after those training were taken off to do that and before the night watch came off duty, they were almost entirely alone. Which let them eat in peace and quiet,



without any onlookers ogling them curiously. The meal itself was simple, baked fruit served alongside bricks of bread and baked fish to eat them both with. But the air was pleasantly warm, a faint breeze wafting in carrying the ocean scent, and he found himself contented for it while he ate.

“The food won’t try to escape, you know.” He commented as he watched the pink female devour her meal, already more than satisfied himself. She gave him a look, one brow raised in what he supposed was confusion, and he added, “I’m fairly certain the fishermen killed the fish already. And *fruit* does not resist very well, I find.”

“You’d be surprised.” Kipo murmured, flicking a look at her food and then back to him and asking, “I’m eating way too fast, aren’t I?”

“Debatably.” He shrugged, “Have you... Encountered fruit that could fight back?”

“Oh, yeah, and run too.” She nodded, eyeing a small citrus fruit warily, as if expecting it to explode on a whim. “One planet had beaches full of these kind of... Citrus nuts. But if you picked them, then the roots would start flailing around, trying to hit you.”

“Sounds... Troublesome.” He nodded, picturing something like the tentacled creatures that sea hunters often slew and came back. Albeit made of wood, and flinging soil everywhere rather than water. “What did you do?”

“I fished.” She shrugged, “And ate the ones that fell off. Sometimes I could toss rocks at ‘em to knock ‘em down, too, and that was fine.”

“Odd.” Maybe the plants, or whatever they were, didn’t consider such things as they evolved and so hadn’t developed a defense against them? Regardless, “At least you survived, though. That is, in the end, all that matters.”

“Other stuff matters, too.” She nodded, “But yeah, I did pretty good at the ‘not dying’ part of all that.”

“When you are done eating, let me know.” He finally said after a long moment, watching the girl reach twice the food *he’d* eaten and look to the server for more. When the older Sangheili hesitated and looked to him for assurances, he gestured for him to serve her and smiled. “You have quite the appetite, don’t you?”

“Mhm!” She nodded around another morsel of fish and bread, “Father said it was a quirk of my design.”

“Your design?” He asked, “Do you mean... How your race was made?”

“Yeah, kinda.” She smiled, “I’m strong and fast and durable, and I can climb and... Other stuff. So Father said my metabolism was faster, to burn calories to let me do all that kinda stuff without keeling over dead.”

“Such would be *rather* disadvantageous, yes.” R’Tas nodded, and then grew curious, asking, “How strong *are* you?”

“You know, I’m not actually sure.” She said after a moment’s confused pause, setting her food down and frowning. “I remember Father doing some tests, weights n’ gravity ‘n stuff, but... It feels like a long time ago, and I don’t remember ‘em all that well for some reason.”

“Hm.” It was strange that she could not remember, but then, perhaps it had happened when she was young. He could scarcely remember anything of his earliest days either. And she looked upset at not being able to recall, almost pained in fact, and he found himself pushing on for it, “We shall do our own tests then, in time.”

“Really?”

“Indeed.” He nodded, “But first, I think I ought show you how a Sangheili warrior is born.”

“You mean in the *literal* sense, or...?”

“In the figurative.” He sighed, rolling his eyes, “Eat and be ready quickly, please. I would like to spend my day doing something else at some point.”

Once the youngling had finally finished her meal, and eaten nearly enough for *two* Sangheili, they finally stood to leave. Outside the sky was cloudy and overcast, with the rumbling threat of coming rains. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, he was sure that the tropical rains would come back. Hopefully it wouldn't bring heat with it, but...

Those were problems for another day.

Outside, at the base of a slight hill, a large, flat area enclosed by metal rods linked by barriers. Inside the great circle dozens of pairs of Sangheili fought with wooden caricatures of ancient weapons. Spears, small wooden shields, and rods long enough to serve in the place of energy blades. As they neared he saw the heavy, armored form of Gel'Ton twisting a young warrior over his shoulder and bringing him down in a painful clatter of limbs and metal.

“Keeper R'Tas!” The old Bladesman called as he straightened, stepping over the groaning warrior as he tried to rise and planting a boot in his side as he went. The young Sangheili toppled, groaning, as the old warrior neared the fence. “You slept well, I take it?”

“Until something small and pink scaled the Keep.” R'Tas nodded, looking past him at the battered trainee, “Instructing them?”

“As a way to pass the day, if nothing else.” The old Shadow nodded, turning to watch them fighting pensively. “These whelps would not survive an hour on a battlefield, and I wished to impress that upon them. Before any over-confidence could become entrenched.”

“Wise enough.” If incredibly painful to say the very least, and he knew that from experience. Only a scant few days ago *he'd* been on the receiving end of such treatment. He knew better than to complain, though, instead nudging the eager Kipo forward and grunting, “Perhaps a new sparring partner would be to your taste, then?”

“Really?” She blinked, bouncing on a heel and looking up at him, “I can try?”

“If he allows it, yes.” R’Tas nodded, turning to the Master, “So, then, *do* you care for the change of pace?”

“Perhaps... But with *her* ?” The Blademaster grunted, blinking his surprise before laughing aloud. Shaking his great head, the Elite turned back to the training melee and said, “No, I think not. I would not wish to hurt the precious creature, after all. I could lose my head.”

“But I wanna fight, too!” The girl nodded and, before either could say anything, crouched. With a plume of dust and a ‘whoop’ she leapt high, over the warrior tall barrier, and into the training arena next to the Shadow. Straightening, she beamed a smile at them and said, “I’m *way* stronger than you guys seem to think.”

“If the Keeper is certain it will be alright...”

“If she is herself certain, then I’m sure it will be fine.” He shrugged, unsure himself of the wisdom of the idea. But he *did* need to know just how strong she was, after her boasting earlier. If she was to be within the Keep, she would need to find a *place* within it, after all. “But perhaps she should test herself against an initiate first?”

“Very well.” The Blademaster nodded, turning and bellowing, “Ava’Rus, come! You are to spar with the creature. Test her mettle.”

Ava’Rus was a young Sanheili with a slender frame and a dark complexion, even in the somewhat bulky training armor all were made to wear so they could learn to bear it. He was also near the same age as R’Tas, and eyed him with envy as he approached. A normal gaze to draw from the young warrior, who so often sought the status that others already held. An ambitious one, he supposed, even if he wasn’t certain where *that* would lead just yet.

“Master.” The Elite nodded, bowing his head to the old Shadow and then turning to R’Tas and doing the same. “Keeper. What do you need from me?”

“Do you have ears, whelp, or are those simply holes in your skull?” Gel’Ton snarled, the young Sangheilin cowering under the words as much as the stare the older Elite levied on him. Sighing, the Shadow again gestured to the eager Kipo and explained quietly, “You are to spar with Kipo, Ara’Vus. Test her mettle, and your own, and fight well.”

“Yes, Master.” The Elite nodded, turning and pacing away, his fingers curling and uncurling his fingers along the wooden length of the rod.

“Do your best, and if you are outmatched, simply yield.” Gel’Ton explained to her, handing her a long wooden rod about as tall as she herself was. Pointing at the colored, padded tip, he added, “Strike with this end, and do not let him touch you with his of the same color. These represent the blades of the weapon, which would be plasma were this real, and thus would cut you.”

“Gotcha!” She nodded, bounding along after the Elite until he came to a stop in a small circle marked out by white stones. Rolling her shoulders, she held the weapon out like a spear and grinned, bouncing on her heels. “Whenever you’re ready!”

“The spar will be to ring out, or until one is struck in what would be a vital area.” Gel’Ton called out, only really informing Kipo of anything given that the rules were standard. When she nodded, he added, “Begin at your will.”

With a roar, Ava’Rus rushed forward, his own polearm held tight and high like the halberd it was meant to stand in for. The tip came up and down, thrusting in for her chest as Kipo lunged in and snapped her hand out, catching the rod just below the purple and turning on a heel, her enemy’s weapon held over her shoulder. Using it for leverage she yanked down, pulling the young warrior over her off shoulder and slamming him down onto the ground. Then her foot snapped out and into his stomach.

Gel’Ton leapt aside as Ava’Rus slammed into the shield where he’d been standing, some twelve feet away, and collapsed in a groaning heap.

“By the Gods...”

“Did I do it right?” The small girl called out from the circle, beaming a wide, happy smile back at them. “I thought about pokin’ him but didn’t want to hurt him.”

And so instead she had kicked him twelve feet into a barrier... Which was just *so* much more reasonable.

“You did!” He called out, kneeling and asking the groaning Elite, “Are you alright, brother?”

“What *is* that blasted thing?” He groaned, forcing himself upright and clutching his no doubt wounded ribs. Leaning on the stick, he limped off, headed towards the tenders waiting nearby to make sure no one died on the training field.

“I changed my mind.” Gel’Ton rumbled quietly as Kipo came bouncing over, “I *don’t* want to spar with her after all.”

“A wise decision indeed, I suspect.” He rumbled quietly, calling out as the girl approached, “An excellent showing! Excellent indeed! Though, perhaps, next time be... *Gentler*?”

“I was being gentle, though!” She whined, “I barely even kicked him!”

Someday, R’Tas decided much more earnestly than he had before, they would *need* to find out just how strong Kipo was. He was *not* going to be the one to test her strength out after seeing that display, tough, to say the least. Perhaps if he asked the Kaidon they could bring something... *Stronger* in for her to test herself against?

He had a *specific* idea what in mind already, if he could convince the Kaidon of it.

## ch 6 a shadow aporches

### Chapter Notes

i hope yall enjoy

The rest of the day, and the next few as well, passed quickly in an odd mix of the old tedium of training and the newer, more amusing excitement of watching Kipo accept challenges from the other initiates. There were many, hot blooded and headstrong, who thought they could stand up to her dominating strength. She was more than happy to accept each challenge as it came, of course, bouncing on her heels and clapping eagerly.

And then easily hurling them bodily from the training rings, leaving them groaning heaps on the training floor.

“She will be an impressive asset for the Keep when she comes of age.” Gel’Ton rumbled as they watched another initiate try desperately to avoid letting her get a grip on him. He flicked a look to the old warrior and he added, quietly, “It would be a waste not to put such strength to the good of the Keep after all, would it not?”

“Perhaps.” He rumbled, “But I imagine such is not why the Oracle sent her to us.”

“Perhaps not. But then I wonder, why gift us such strength if not to use it?” Gel’Ton mused curiously, waving him off when R’Tas turned to argue. “I am merely musing out loud. Ignore me, if you will, Keeper.”

“...Your questions have merit, do not doubt, Master. Rest assured of that.” He said after a moment’s quiet, watching the last challenger limp away while other Elites watched, talking amongst themselves about how best to face her as yet another stepped up warily. “I see training has now become ‘who can survive against the small, pink alien’ now.”

“Let them.” Gel’Ton rumbled a laugh, “Most of these whelps would lose their lives the moment they faced insurrectionary Brutes. Or Hunters. Facing a superior foe like this just might teach them how to hold their own against physically superior foes.”

“Or at least how to roll with a fall.” R’Tas grumbled as the new challenger’s legs were swept out from under him and Kipo spun, snapping a foot into his stomach that launched him away from her. “That’s... Useful to know, at least. Isn’t it?”

“It is.” Gel’Ton rumbled, raising his voice and bellowing, “All of you, endurance training for the next hour! Formation and run the perimeter!”

“Me, too?” Kippo called out as the Elites marched to the far end of the training arena, forming ranks and rubbing away bruises ahead of the coming exercise.

“Stand at the back, and keep the pace.” Gel’Ton called back after paying him a questioning look, to which he nodded quietly. “Do not pass the others training, and do not fall behind. Keep in formation.”

“Oki doke!”

“We will need to work on her discipline, I fear.” He sighed, ordering the lot of them to start their run with a single bark of, “Begin, Initiates!”

As one, the Elites began their run, jogging in nigh perfect formation while a pair of formation minders. Each were older, drawn from the ranks of the Initiates themselves, kept the pace even and bellowed marching orders. It was the aim, he knew from his own recent time doing the same, to give them at least some experience commanding their fellows before they fully graduated to become warriors able to lead Unggo and Kig-Yar into combat.

“You should join them.” Gel’Ton rumbled as he watched them, sharp eyes looking out for any failing that he could call out. “Soon, the Kaidon plans to make you a Warrior, and grant you your name. You will be busy, then, and perhaps will miss simply... Running with your kin.”

“Perhaps...” He rumbled quietly, watching as the Elites closed on him and shrugging off his finer out-robes, leaving him in the thin linens he wore underneath. As they rounded a bend towards him, he met a formation minder’s eye to signal his joining and added, in a farewell to the old Shadow, “I shall see you when my run is finished then.”

“Indeed, Brother.” Gel’Ton rumbled, huffing as the formation began to pass him but R’Tas flinched, turning to him in surprise. Waving a hand at the passing Elites, the Blademaster ordered crisply, “Get going, then, before you miss your chance and must wait for another pass.”

Wordlessly, he fell into the formation’s rear, joining his brothers in their conditioning even if he lacked the training armor.

An hour passed, before the old Shadow called an end to the run and the Elites, sweating and nursing their bruises, came to a stop. Freed from the constraints of formation, they spread out, some collapsing totally on the old and beaten ground while others paced around, their hands clasped behind their heads. Even without the heavy training armor, his chest heaved, and sweat poured down his back.

And yet, he did not stop, continuing around the circle once, twice, thrice and then a fourth time before finally coming to a heaving end amongst the staring Sangheili.

“R’tas.” The Shadow called out as he waded through the parting Elites. He looked up to the old warrior, sucking in breaths, as he came to stop before him. With every warrior watching, Gel’Ton rumbled, “I called end to the run, and yet you continued. Why? Did you seek to shame your brothers?”

“Never.” He answered, conscious of every eye on him, including a small pair of bright eyes. “They circled twice, that I counted, before I joined with them. And in their armor. I lack it,



and started behind them, and so completed two more than them to make up for my unfair advantage.”

“An honorable thing, then.” The old warrior rumbled, turning eyes on each of the Sangheili nearest him and explaining, as the lesson, “You are brothers, Initiates, and must never forget it. Advantages unearned ought not be lorded over your fellow Elites. Instead, do as R’Tas has done, and honor those kin you are advantaged over.”

The words were well-chosen indeed, borne from years and years of training the initiates in the ways which Elites waged war. He felt the anger drain from his fellows for it, some of them huffing dismissively while others nodded approvingly. All the while, Kipo watched, wide eyed and taking everything in quietly. Worried for it, he turned a look on the smaller creature.

Who, even after hours of fighting, an hour’s run, and everything in between, didn’t seem to have broken more than a light sweat. The sheer fortitude was astounding...

“I’m sure you all are hungry, after a day like yours.” Gel’Ton called as he once more pushed through the mass of sweating Sangheili. Motioning for them to follow, he called, “Let us take food and water, then, to recover our strength from the day’s rigors.”

“Can we?!” Kipo asked, bouncing on her heels beside him eagerly.

“Are you hungry already, Kipo?” He asked, though he supposed that whether she’d worked up a sweat or not, she had been active throughout the day. She nodded and he sighed, “Well, so am I, now, after everything. Very well then, let us take food and water.”

Following him as before, the young, pink thing bounced along back towards the depressed cantina. Unlike before, the tables now were thronged by the exhausted initiates, Keep guards coming off duty, the workers of the Keep coming out to rest after their own day at work, and the cooks and servers flitting between them all. Meats of a variety of kinds, alongside stiff bread and vegetables, were served on demand while the warriors and workmen took their seats. Each separated according to their kind, sorted out by their seats and fed based upon it. Without thinking, he made his way towards the Initiates at the corner closest to the exit that led to the training arena.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him, though.

“The Kaidon wishes to break bread with the two of you.” A guard, this one still on duty judging from the halberd he carried, reported quietly. Turning without waiting for his response, he grunted, “Follow.”

“But I’m hungry...”

“Come.” He grunted with a chuckle, grabbing a piece of bread and a slice of fish and handing it to her as they went.

As before, they followed the heavily armored guard through the winding halls of the Keep. Unlike before, though, now the halls were thronged by workmen and artisans, and guards

watching over them warily. They worked every wall, every floor, repairing and refining the stonework, carving flowing patterns and sigils into the very stone of the fortress. Even the guards had seen changes, their armor made heavier and weapons more finer, with long and flowing red cloaks hanging off their shoulders.

Soon enough he was at the Council Room door once more, the workmen busy polishing and coloring the already ornate door stepping aside to clear a path.

Inside, they finally found a room empty of workers, though seemingly only because they had already done their work. The old pictures, tales of the Keep's long history, had been restored and recolored. Now, they stood out proudly, in bright color and stylization. And held a recent addition.

"Oh!" Kipo bounced forward to the drawing of her stepping out of the little pod while he and the others watched and pointing at it, "It me!"

"Indeed it is, young, blessed one." The Kaidon answered, sitting in the center of the room and watching them amusedly. A wide platter of food had been set out in front of him, along with a few extra spots to sit, and he gestured to them politely, "Please, sit and eat with me. I wished to speak to the both of you."

"Of course, my Kaidon." R'Tas rumbled quickly and quietly, taking the seat opposite the older warrior, and thus out of his reach, and waving for Kipo to sit next to him. As a show of faith, he wasted no time in taking a steaming slice of meat and eating it. Only once he was done, and as Kipo began to dig in eagerly, did he ask, "Why did you call us here, if I may be so impertinent to ask?"

"You may." He answered breezily, "I wished to see how the young one was, and am happy to see she is well."

"Mhm!" Kipo nodded brightly, smiling around a slab of fish and bread, "I got to fight a bunch o' people, too! It was so much fun! Oh, oh! And then I got to run with 'em, too!"

"Master Gel'Ton invited her to train with the other Initiates." He explained candidly when the wizened Sangheili turned to him, the question clear on his face. "She sparred with many, and proved her sheer strength is unmatched in the Keep. Then she ran with us, as well, to end the day."

"Good." He nodded, taking some of the bread and using it to sandwich a slice of thick, juicy meat. Ripping a part of it off and sighing contentedly he said, "Continue thusly, Kipo. You ought become comfortable with the Keep's ways if she is to remain here."

"I will!" She promised brightly, copying the Kaidon's sandwich and adding the thin leaves of a vegetable to it while she talked, "I like it here. Everyone is so polite, and nice, and the food is so yummy. I'm havin' a blast here."

"Kipo, it is proper to refer to the Kaidon as 'my Kaidon' at the end of your sentences." He advised her gently, "Not doing so can be seen as an insult."

“Really?”

“Yes.” The Kaidon answered for him, spreading honey over his sandwich and returning to it. Taking a drink after he explained, “I would take no insult from it, as you cannot know better after being here such a short time, but others might. And such insults, perceived or not, can spark sharp reprisal from the Kaidons of some Keeps.”

“Oh.” She blinked, seeming to absorb the information and then nodding her head in a weak mime of how she’d seen him do. “Then, um, I’m sorry, my Kaidon.”

“As I said, I take no insult from it. Particularly from you.” The Kaidon rumbled an amused laugh, skating his great head and waving the matter off with an ornately armored hand. “That is not why I asked either of you here, though. Tell me, did you see the work being done on your way?”

“We did.” R’Tas answered presumably, looking to Kipo for silent confirmation from her and nodding when she did. Turning back to the older warrior, R’Tas rumbled, “The stonework is being repaired and reinforced. And having artisans’ hands taken to it as well, beautifying it beyond need. Even the guards have been altered, their armor made more ornate.”

“And more protective.” He nodded, “New shielding units, and more liberal applications of them. Along with plasma-edged halberds and caches of defensive weaponry, updated to the modern standard.”

“Truly?” He had not noticed that for obvious reasons, since the caches would be hidden and secured. The Kaidon nodded grimly and, grimacing, he asked, “Is there purpose to this, or is this all... Simply work that needed to be done?”

“There is purpose.” He answered simply, setting aside his food and folding his hands in his lap. Sensing the change in the room’s proverbial temperature, R’Tas did the same, though Kipo kept on eating happily while she watched them both. “A Prophet of the Council has made contact with us, and stated that he will come to see our relics within the week.”

“A Prophet...” But they had not sent word yet, or so he’d assumed. “Did you send word, my Kaidon?”

“I did not, nor did I permit it be done yet. I wished to see too restorations and integration of our young friend first, so that all would be ready when they came.” He answered, “Someone of the Keep has betrayed us, sent word without my consent. Karum Keep has also been seen to be rearming themselves as well, and fortifying their outposts along our border to them.”

“That is as good as stating their intentions.” He murmured, “Karum Keep has long eyed our position with avarice, my Kaidon.”

“Karum Keep doesn’t like us?”

“They do not, no.” The Kaidon answered calmly, seemingly more than happy to educate the young creature. “They are a Keep mostly situated amongst the mountain range that adjoins our territory and runs inland, into the continent. The mountains bring great mineral wealth,

but much of that must be traded away for food and lumber. Long have they eyed their neighbors on the coast, who can take of the sea as they need.”

“Have you guys fought before...?”

“Many times.” He nodded gravely, drumming armored fingers against his palms. “The Kaidon before me was slain by one of their assassins, or so it is believed.”

“Then perhaps we have a spy in our midst.” R’Tas suggest warily, “The workmen, perhaps?”

“Doubtful. Almost none of them were even on the Keep’s grounds when she was revealed to us, and of those that were, all were working on the outer wall.” The Kaidon dismissed easily, “Further, all are old and loyal, with long ties of blood to the Keep. And all were under guard as well. If they found some way to spy on us, I would rather forgive and emplace them than kill them, to bring their deific talents into our Keep.”

At the mention of killing the spy, he saw Kipo still, if only for a moment, before she went back to eating quietly.

“Then who may it be?”

“It is impossible to say, and long has been such for the spies sent by the Karum.” The Kaidon answered quietly, picking up a slice of toasted bread and tearing it into pieces idly. “For now, I have the Keep’s guards being verified as members of our blood, and loyal as well. I am hoping to mask the effort under the guise of the upgrades and alterations being made.”

“Clever.” R’Tas nodded quietly, “But then, why do you trust me so openly?”

“The Oracle trusted you.” He answered plainly, “And thus, so do I. An instrument of the gods would not make such a mistake as to do so were you a dishonorable cur. Instead, the great wave would have taken your life.”

“I suppose that is right, yes...” Perhaps that was what had happened to the fallen Sangheili he had found in the coastal waters. To die such was a pity, but for a spy, it was perhaps fitting. Pushing aside those thoughts he asked instead, “What is it you wish of us then, mighty one? I presume you called on us for a cause, after all.”

“I did, yes.” He nodded quietly, “I wish for you to head into the village with her. Show it to her, appraise her of some of our customs, and find proper clothes for her.”

“Clothes?” She pinched the bodysuit she was wearing and looked back up, confused, “What’s wrong with this? I’ve always worn this kinda stuff. Father says it’s more protective than most of your armors, too.”

“It is divine indeed, I do not doubt it.” The Kaidon rumbled simply, bowing his head as if in apology for even seeming to dare insult the Oracle’s work. “But your clothes aren’t... Proper for a member of a Keep, young one. Not for our needs, at the least. When the prophet comes, I would have you look the part of guest.”

“Alrighty then.” She shrugged, returning to her food without much more to say about the matter. “I guess tryin’ on something new isn’t a bad idea, or anything. Oh! Do you have anything in purple?”

“I am sure that the market will have something.” The Kaidon rumbled as he rose, paying them both a final nod. “At that, I bid you a good night, my friends. R’Tas, see her to the village come the morning, and return as soon as you are done.”

“As you say, my Kaidon.” He nodded, making to rise and follow until the Sangheili waved him off. “Eat, first. I simply have something to see.”

With a nod, he settled back down, content to enjoy the good food with his new friend for the time being. As she began plying him with questions, though, he started to wish they’d simply eaten outside with the others. Somehow, he suspected it would have been quieter...

## ch 7 a day at the market

The next morning came and went with the same motions as the one before it. They woke up, got dressed, and met in the hallway under an exhausted guard's guidance and, well, guard. Then they went down to the cantina to eat with the few that were still there, between the Initiates all being taken off to do their work and the workmen and guards changing their shifts to do the same. After, he let Kipo spar with a couple more Sangheili before they left for the village, since she enjoyed it so much.

And to be fair, it was rather humorous...

"How far away is it?"

"About half an hour's walk through the forest. We're taking the path that leads inland because, though more circuitous, it is less damaged after the wave that swept through the forest." He answered as they walked the wide, paved road from Keep to village. R'Tas watched some of the laborers the debris brought on by the wave ran as they passed some of them and added, under his breath, "I wish that you had seen it before the wave came, though...."

"Was it nice?"

"Very." He nodded, "Many of the trees bear nuts and fruits, but even those standing aren't yielding much after the wave."

It was a nice path, well-made from light colored stone and repaired already after the wave came through, even if the forest itself was still covered in fallen limbs and trees. The forest had come out mostly intact nearer to the Keep, thanks to the mountain, and even further out the trees themselves had broken the wave well enough. Still, debris had been thrown further than the waters had gone, and the water had washed out enough to cause trees to fall.

Still, the work was going well, and he could already see much of the forest returning in force.

"It's quiet." Kipo complained after a while, "Where are all the animals? Birds?"

"First of all, I believe that birds are animals." He joked, smiling when the smaller creature rounded on him with raised brows, which he took to mean she was surprised, "And I believe most of them fled ahead of the wave, or perished. It will likely return to normal in the coming weeks, as the workmen clear from the woods and they recover."

"Fair..." She murmured dejectedly as they climbed one of the greater foothills that stretched around the mountain the Keep had been built into, the like of which stretched out from it along the coast and towards the other, greater mountains further into the continent. Quietly, she asked, "How much longer? We've been walkin' for almost an hour."

"Actually," he smiled, "we are in sight of it."

At the top of the hill, they were greeted to a grand view of the rest of the coastline, and a gentle harbor that was half natural, made by a long, curving peninsula capped by rolling, slight hills and forests. A lighthouse rose up from the greatest of the wooded hills, towering high and surrounded by scattered, small homes littered throughout the woody stretch of land. Piers stretched out from the inside of the land, swamped by a variety of narrow-keeled ships.

Further along the landmass, wood and steel had been used to expand the natural bay further out and around, like a dam. More docks spanned its interior, just as swamped by ships as the ones adjoined to the land had been. Tall, violet spires shot into the air all along both the natural land and the unnatural, created structure. The wave had damaged all of it, of course, and even from here the work to repair it was clear.

But the spires had done their job, it was evident, and protected the barrier, village and the harbor alike behind powerful shields.

The village itself was moderately large, surrounded by fields that were themselves ringed by lines of trees that marked out pathways between them. Scattered along the coast itself were homes, artisan shops, smithies and all else that made a settlement. And all of them clutched along the edge of the coast like it was a life raft, and the lot of it was at sea. Smoke rose over dark wood and narrow paths, as well as wider avenues, and he smiled at the familiarity of it.

“Wow...” The alien murmured, smiling widely and looking at it all, “It’s so big!”

“Welcome, Kipo.” He rumbled, “To Vadum Village.”

She almost, almost, took off away from him to head down the hill and into the village. From afar, even just the hundred or so yards from the hilltop to the edge of the village, the settlement was quiet and idyllic. The very picture of peace, quiet, and contented living out in the silence of the country. But as one neared the village itself, the sounds began to reach them. Metal beating metal, hundreds of voices talking, tools working their trade, all the sounds of life that he had grown with.

As they passed into the village, Kipo’s eyes snapped in every direction, searching out the source of the loudest sounds as they passed by building after building.

“So the village name and Keep name are the same?”

“In a manner.” He nodded explaining quietly, “Strictly speaking, the village’s proper name is Pillar of Light, for the great lighthouse. That is the one which you would see on most maps and the like. But commonly, it is called by the Keep to which it owes its blood and allegiance, like many such villages who are so closely tied with Keeps.”

“Okay!” The girl nodded, humming an odd melody for a moment before asking her next question, “What’s a ‘Prophet’?”

“You recall the story of the Hierarchs and their gifts to the Sangheili people? Of their elevation into the stars, and the formation of the Covenant?” Kipo nodded, turning to look up at him curiously, “The Hierarchs are the highest of the Prophets, which are the people with whom the great Covenant was first accorded.”

“But what do they do?”

“They speak for the gods, and create the doctrines which guide us on the path.” The answer was simple, rote and familiar, from almost two decades of training. “The Council of the Covenant offers them all the information, and the Prophets guide us to the right answers. Such is the way of the Covenant.”

“Is the Covenant really big...?”

“It is.” He nodded, grateful that those they passed were far too busy with their own worlds to hear their conversation. “This is but one of hundreds of worlds, spanning near as many stars, which form the Covenant’s great empire.”

“Oooh, like Father’s creators.” His eyes snapped to her as soon as he had a moment to consider what she’d said and she smiled, “Father told me a bit about ‘em, now and again. They had a big ole’ empire, too! Is the Covenant as big as that?”

“I... Do not believe so, no.” He murmured as they reached the wide, open central market that dominated the village.

The market was wide and open, thronged by Sangheili merchants from the surrounding Keeps and villages and their aides. Fine cloth and armor from the inner continent swamped several of the stalls, guarded by a handful of black-armored Sangheili guards that watched over the merchant, himself swaddled in fine cloth. Elsewhere were fish merchants, most of them local and plying the wares of their work in the open air near farmers and hunters that did much the same with their own. Those lacked the heavily armed guards of the foreign merchants, but then, they also lacked the expensive wares that would warrant them.

And, on seeing them, Kipo finally lost her cool and shot off to explore.

Sighing, he set off after her as fast as he dared.

Luckily, she was easy to spot, ever so slightly smaller than most of the Sangheili but larger than the rare Jackals or less rare Grunts that were working under their master’s orders. She flitted quickly from stall to stall, looking at food with wide and typically hungry eyes, and then at weapons and tools with excited and curious ones. The aliens serving at the stalls watched her with narrow, confused stares or, in the cases of those who had already gone to the Keep and heard word of her, awe.

None opposed her, though, which was for the best. She’d have likely put them through a stall in her excitement if they had tried...

He finally caught up to her at a smaller thing that he supposed was meant to be a stall, set back and away from the rest of the market grounds. It was built off of a small alleyway that wound between a couple smaller buildings, one of them a woodshop and the other a metal-working foundry. Which explained the various trinkets the Unggoy manning it was selling, made up of admittedly fairly well shaped and designed wood and metal decorations and accessories. Rings, necklaces, armbands- the excited little cretin had a wide variety of items made mostly of the wood and metal that he had likely salvaged from the shops.



The stall itself was just as salvaged looking, made of slats and slabs of mismatched wood and metal stacked and nailed awkwardly together. At the back was a door and a wall made the same way, hanging off of the wall between the two buildings awkwardly. Tubes ran out from under it, hooked up to several spare tanks like the one that the alien was wearing. Methane then, he supposed, probably being refilled from a larger tank in the alleyway.

None of which could possibly be safe...

“Hello!” The Grunt bounced eagerly, the action shaking the counter in front of it. “Name Yapyap the Trinket Maker!”

“And what are you doing here?”

“Yapyap make trinkets!” The Grunt laughed, cocking its deranged little head confusedly, “You no listen good? Need Yapyap be louder?”

“No, tat won’t be-”

“YAPYAP MAKE TRINKETS FOR YOU!” The Unggoy yelled suddenly, cupping his little hands in front of his mouth like that would make it louder through his methane mask. He frowned and growled, and the Grunt flinched, looking to Kipo and chuckling, “Your friend make angry noises. Why he do that? He still no hear me?”

“You insufferable little-”

“He’s just tired after walking down here.” Kipo waved the Grunt off, turning and smile on him and waiting until he rolled his eyes tiredly and waved for her to go on. Turning back to the Grunt she waved a hand at all the odd little knick knacks and ornaments he’d laid out and asked, “You made all these?”

“Yep yep!” The Grunt bounced, “Yapyap make pretty trinkets! Use trash from where he work at. It not Yapyap’s, but it get thrown away anyway, so who care?”

“Theft is still theft.” R’Tas rumbled warningly, pointing at the building that the Grunt had erected and adding with a growl, “And who permitted you to build this? Surely not the Elder. Or those who own these buildings either.”

“W-Well...” The Grunt rubbed the back of his neck anxiously for a moment and then shrugged, “No. But space there, so why it matter if Yapyap use it? No one else do. So Yapyap do too.”

“It matters because you were not permitted to-”

“R’Tas, leave him alone, please. He’s not hurtin’ anybody.” He sighed at the raised eyebrows he met when he rounded on her and, yet again, waved for her to go on about her business. He could just notify a guard later and allow it to be dealt with by someone else... Smiling brightly, the pink creature turned back to the Grunt and asked, “What do you want for these, then? They’re all so pretty I just have to have one.”

“Kipo, that could be troublesome...” If she were to wear the cretin’s creations, that would only embolden him, after all. And emboldening a Grunt that was breaking every rule possible was a poor idea, indeed. Turning, he waved a hand at a Sangheili trinket maker across the market and suggested, “If you wish for an ornament like this, then perhaps a Sangheili craftsmen would be better to look at? Even if he has nothing you want, he can fashion it for you, and besides, an Elite will have far more skill. Skill enough to craft something worth wearing.”

“I want one of these.” She said simply, turning back to the Grunt and asking, “What do you want for them?”

“You nice, so you can have one for free.” Yapyap smiled, picking up a little bracer made of silver neo-laminate and a thin slab of wood burnt with an admittedly impressive pattern of trees and fields. It was almost like a picture of the nearby fields themselves. “This one is Yapyap's favorite one! Me give to you!”

“Oh, it’s so pretty!” She smiled, bouncing on her heels and taking it from the creature’s tiny little fingers, pulling it onto her forearm and closing the little clasp on it. Raising her arm, she showed it to him and asked, “R’Tas, look! Isn’t it pretty?”

“Hmph.” It hung a little loosely on her, but it was a good fit for her arm. And the artistry was... Well, admittedly rather good. Sighing, he nodded and grumbled, “We will need to fit the chain to you properly, but that is easily done. And I am certain we can find you fine enough robes to match as well.”

“Awesome!” She smiled, bouncing up to him and turning to wave, “Bye, Yapyap! Thanks for the new armlet!”

“Bye weird pink thingy!”

“My name is Kipo!”

“Bye Kipo!”

“You should not be so lenient with an Unggoy.” He counseled her as they walked away, towards the finer of the robe makers that had stalls set up today. She hummed confusedly at him and he explained quietly, “The cretins are numerous and ill-disciplined. If you encourage their ill discipline then only harm will come. To them and to those around them.”

“I dunno about any of that.” She shrugged, “And I don’t care, either. He was nice, and he wasn’t hurtin’ anyone. That’s all that matters to me.”

“But Kipo, he’s-”

“I don’t care ‘bout his species.” She suddenly growled, cutting him off and making him come to a stop and turn to her. She only smiled, though, looking up at him and explaining, “Judge him for what he does, not what he is. That’s the only way to do things.”

“The Prophets would disagree...”

“And my Father would disagree with them.” She said quietly, adding, “Maybe you oughta think about that a bit, hm? Anyway, where do we get these new clothes? I’m gettin’ kinda hungry now so I wanna get goin’ back to the Keep for dinner.”

“Very well.” He rumbled unsurely, turning to head back on their path, “Ka’Nara makes some of the better robes in the Keep... I am sure he will have something for you. And if not, then he will make something. There is about a week until the chosen Prophet comes for us, so it shan’t be that hard.”

“Okay.” She nodded, “So let’s do some shoppin’!”

Nodding, he let her bounce ahead to appraise the robes laid out at the Elite’s stall. The craftsman paid him an odd, confused look, but he simply nodded his head and gestured for the man to get on with it. And so, with a nod of his own, the Elite sat about doing just that.

## ch 8 Fortitudes first lie

### Chapter Summary

hope yall enjoy and merry chirstmas

as always would love yalls feedback on this

The next few days passed in more of the same peaceful training, eating and mundanity, as the Keep grew to know and accept the little alien gifted to them. And she, in turn, adapted to their ways and customs. Even if she so often didn't understand them, it still warmed him to see the amount of effort she was willing to put into *learning* them still warmed his heart. The first thing she learned thoroughly was their food, for the obvious reason of her nigh overwhelming appetite. After she grew either satisfied or bored with *that*, she began to ask more and more about the Keep's history.

Knowledge and food weren't *terrible* things for someone to fixate upon, he supposed, compared to other, lesser pursuits.

"And this one?" She asked as they walked along the Keep's now gloriously restored halls, painted in rich blacks and lined with tapestries and art of their storied history.

"That is a chronicle of our place among the warriors who stood against the Heretics who wished to fight against the founding of our Covenant." The Guardsman, who had taken up the cause of answering her questions when he tried unsurely and failed. Kipo's vibrant, pink eyes narrowed confusedly at the words and the guard explained, "When our sacred Covenant was founded, the Prophets enlightened our forebears to the glory of the Gods and their makings. Some, though, doubted and fought against the creation of our great union."

"And so we fought them, and faith prevailed." R'Tas rumbled, more than familiar with the old tale. "The best end of many possibilities, if tragic for the loss of so many wayward souls."

"You didn't try talking...?" Kipo asked quietly, looking at the bright iconography of warriors standing over the scorched earth of their fallen kin proudly with a deep, dark frown.

“We did.” The Guard answered, stepping up beside her and sighing wearily, if proudly, “And many heard our father’s words. Some, even lacking the true faith, bent the knee for the sake of peace and the future. Others, though... Others refused peace, and so we were forced to come to blows.”

“They tried, though.” R’Tas promised her, nodding when those vibrant, curious eyes turned to him hopefully, “Every effort that could be made was. Kin would not so easily strike kin down, after all, Kipo.”

“Yeah.” She nodded quietly, looking at the bright new tapestry with an expression he couldn’t read beyond some form of... Fear, perhaps? There was no way for him to tell for sure, and she moved on before he could ask. “I guess they wouldn’t, would they?”

“Of course.” He nodded curtly, suddenly... Less than comfortable, for Kipo’s questions. Why *that was* he wasn’t certain, but there it was. “They were forced to battle by the heretics. What else could be the case?”

“Yeah...” She smiled and waved him off, chuckling, “I believe you, R’Tas, promise. I was just asking ‘bout it was all. Not arguing.”

“Hmph...” He rumbled, flicking a look to her and then shrugging the matter off. It was more than merely possible that she was a messenger of the Gods themselves, or would be one soon enough, given where she had come from. But neither he or the old guardsman were anything *approaching* who she would be speaking to then. “Very well, Kipo. Would you like to continue our walk now, then?”

“Yep!” She smiled, “Gotta kill time, right?”

“Not for much longer we do not.” He warned her quietly, following behind her as she bounced along, looking at the new art crawling across the walls of the Keep. “The Prophet will be here inside the hour, after all.”

“I know, don’t worry!” She assured him, “Just not worryin’ about him until he’s here.”

“No?”

“Nope!” She smiled, stopping to look at a fine, marble statue of a Sangheili warrior of the Keep’s storied past. “Won’t do any good even if I do. And heck, might do *bad* since it would stress me out. And I do *not* do good with meetin’ people when I’m stressed out.”

He didn’t contest her on that, for the obvious reason that *she* would know herself better than he ever really could. Instead, he gestured to the bust and rumbled, “A venerable Blade Master of several generations back, who took part in the Grunt Rebellion. He defended the Keep when it came under siege by the minute creatures. By his sword arm and command, our line continued on to today.”

“The Grunt Rebellion?”

“The cowardly, jealous Kig-Yar sabotaged their food and drink, sterilizing and murdering them en mass.” The guard explained quietly, a trace of... Sympathy for their plight coloring his voice. “In the wake of so much death and betrayal, the Unggoy rose up with a fury that one would not believe them capable of.”

“No matter what was done, they persisted in their war of vengeance. A war that ravaged every sector of Covenant space where their race was allowed. Which was, to be *quite* clear, almost every single planet and sector.” R’Tas rumbled on quietly, more than a little of his own respect filtering into his words. “They cared not how many fell in battle, or what was sent against them. They simply fought on, as though possessed.”

“Then what happened?” Kipo asked, those eyes of hers once again flat and sharp, and boring into his own. “How did the uprisings end, if they were fighting *that* hard?”

“Only the partial glassing of their homeworld could end the war.” R’Tas answered after a short moment’s hesitation, “Seeing it burning, and knowing it would not end so long as they fought, the will of the Grunts was at last broken. But their ferocity and fearlessness impressed the people of the Covenant, and so they were allowed to fight and granted better conditions.”

“And the Jackal fools that had started the war were found and punished as well.” The guard rumbled quietly, “The Snagheili know well the power and will of our smaller brethren. And we respect it even now.”

“That’s not what it looks like...” She argued quietly, “It doesn’t look like you even *like* them all that much, really.”

“They are still a young, lesser race, if one that has shown its will to be indomitable when pushed beyond their limits.” He rushed to explain, before the nameless guard could do so himself. “The hope is that in time, they will show themselves again. Until then, we must protect and guide them. For the betterment of the Covenant and their own species besides.”

“I guess...” She sighed, “I just dunno.”

“Leave it be now, Kipo.” He finally grunted firmly, laying a hand on her shoulder and meeting her eyes meaningfully. “Even if you are right, it is neither my nor your place to speak on such things. In time, perhaps you may earn the ear of a Prophet. But until then...”

“Keep my head down?”

“Rhetorically, at least.” He nodded, turning a grave look on his kinsman beside him and asking, quietly, “And you?”

“We all doubt our path for a short time when we are young, Brother. She is not so young, but she is new enough for it to be the same.” He shrugged unflinchingly and, most importantly for the moment, *un-caringly*. “She will prove her loyalty in some direction. And questions, when so freshly told all we are told over the years, do not speak to me of worthy *proof*. Especially given her uniqueness. Of nature, and origin.”

“A fancy way of saying you will keep your breath.”

“A fancy way of saying this isn’t my concern, more like.” The warrior rumbled a low laugh and shook his head, “The Gods created her. I would not bring her to harm if she said direct that she wanted to supplant the Covenant. Her words are more likely to be true than any other’s, after all, are they not?”

“I suppose...” He rumbled, thinking of the Grunt from the Market again... Finally, he sighed and asked, “Shall we head to the meeting room, then? I believe time runs short to when we are due to be awaiting the Prophet.”

“It does indeed, though there is still some time. Unless you *wish* to have time to gather your thoughts...” He nodded and the guard answered in kind, turning and grunting over a shoulder, “Follow me, then. I shall show you to the council room from here, if you will but follow me.”

He and Kipo of course *more* than knew the way to the Council room by now, having been guided to it more times than he could count by now. But he also knew very well that he was not of rank to simply *walk* to the Council chambers. The Keep guard would be honor bound to stop him or, failing that, *kill him*. And so, he allowed the guard to guide him there as always, trundling along quietly while the guards and workmen of the Keep did their work around him.

All normal, until they reached the Council room itself.

Instead of the normal guards that stood watch over the Council room’s great doors, a quartet of Honor Guard were waiting, split two to each side. Their armor was as resplendent as he’d always been told it would be, with rich hues of violet and black so dark that he was sure the void itself must have been jealous. Their hallmark halberds stood at their sides, edges honed to a lethal, warning edge. A dangerous razor’s edge that seemed almost as close as the sharp eyes of the Honor Guards themselves, roving over all three of them warily as the guard stepped forward.

“R’Tas Vadum’ee, Guardian of the Relic’s Gift.” It was a difficult thing, not to flinch at the honorary, rank giving ‘ee on the end of his name when the Keep guard waved to him. But he managed it, and in his silence the old guard turned to Kipo, “And the Gift herself, Kipo Vadum.”

“You claim her as part of your Keep?”



“My Kaidon does.” R’Tas answered quietly, when the guard rounded on the Honor Guard, his shoulders set firmly. An argument would not go well, here, and so he rushed to reason, “She was given to our Keep, after all. And so her acceptance is the Kaidon’s will and, thus, the will of all within this Keep.”

“Hmph.” The old Honor Guardsman, presumably the leader for speaking for them all and his clear age, merely nodded towards the Council door. “The Minister of Fortitude awaits within, R’Tas of Vadum Keep. May you speak as well to his high eminence as you have done to me.”

“Indeed...” He sighed, nodding in turn as two Honor Guards turned to pull the door open.

As always, the Kaidon was in his seat, directly across from the door into the vaunted and rightly venerated room. Beside him, dressed in his lightly armored robes, stood the every wary Shadow, Gel’Ton. On the Kaidon’s left sat an empty, if ornate, wooden seat that he knew by way of the workmen who had emplaced it was meant for the Village Elder to sit. His right side, where the aged Gel’Ton *would* sit in future, sat empty of any furniture or decoration and was flanked by a pair of Honor Guards.

And, sat on an ornate, silvered chair fitted with advanced gravity generators that kept it aloft, sat the withered form of the Minister of Fortitude. Like so many of his kind, the holy creature was weak looking, his body weighed down and marred by the wisdom of the gods on high. His leathery, pinkish skin was spotted by wrinkles and odd scars that surely hadn’t come from any blade or claw, and he had sharp brown eyes that bored into R’Tas’ own as surely as a drill did unto rock.

Kneeling with a fist to his breast, R’Tas rumbled, “Your Eminence.”

“So you’re the ‘Guardian’ I’ve been hearing about.” The Prophet murmured as R’Tas rose and nodded. The Prophet hummed, leaning back in his gravity chair and drumming his fingers on the arms of it. “Hm... I find myself distinctly *un* impressed. I’d expected so much more from you, given everything, you must understand.”

“Your Eminence...?” He murmured, confused, “I am... Afraid I don’t understand.”

“But of course not. Why should I have expected you to understand what we Prophets expect or look for?” The Minister of Fortitude sighed, like he was tired, though his brown eyes remained sharp and calculating. Sighing, finally, he poked magnanimously, “Very well, I’ll explain it for you then. Such *is* my purpose, after all. I don’t see anything that would give an Oracle reason to mark *you* for greatness.”

“I fear I have little to offer in explanation, Minister...”

“Did the Oracle explain his choice, perhaps?” The Kaidon asked quietly, “Anything at all?”

“Only that I was the only one to reach him and survive.” He answered quietly, speaking to the Kaidon though he kept his gaze on the Minister. Younger he may have been, but R’Tas knew the venerable Elite’s aim in what he’d asked. “It seemed a test of some kind, to be able to reach the cave. What it was testing beyond *luck*, though, I cannot begin to guess.”

“Luck hardly seems something the gods would put stock in.” The Minister huffed wearily, waving a hand to dismiss the notion entirely, “Strength, speed, wits- These are the sorts of things the god’s messengers value.”

“Actually, um... Father always said that luck was just as important as anything else.” Kipo cut in suddenly, voice just a bit quieter than normal. She met his eyes when he turned to her and he nodded, which seemed to nudge her along well enough. “He used to say that it ‘doesn’t matter how fast, or strong, someone is if their luck is so bad they’ll get themselves eaten right out of the gate’ when he talked about it. So he... Might have wanted someone strong enough to get there, but *lucky enough* to survive it.”

“I... Suppose so.” The Minister murmured after a long moment of pause, before he steeped his fingers under his chin. “I shall send your words along to the Council, I suppose, as you would know more than even we do of at least that Oracle’s understanding of things. Your name is Kipo, is it not?”

“Mhm.” She nodded, “Father sent me here.”

“Do you know why?”

“Nope!” She shrugged, her energy returning as her confidence built up while she talked, “But he had to have some kind of reason. Father doesn’t do *anything* without a reason to do it. If he wants me here, then there’s something goin’ on.”

“I see.” The Minister murmured, drumming his fingers against each other slowly, “Do you know why I am here then, Kipo?”

“Kind of?” She answered unsurely, explaining when he waved for her to, “You’re here to make sure that the Keep is... Following the rules, right?”

“Yes, among other things, that’s why I’m here.” The Prophet answered with a toothy smile and a cold look he turned on the Kaidon. Still smiling, he said, “Sadly, it seems the Kaidon of Vadum Keep elected *not* to immediately inform the Council of his findings. A very blatant violation of the Covenant, that.”

“We merely-”

“It was my idea.” Kipo suddenly said before the Kaidon could speak. “I wanted to get to know everyone before they did anything, so I asked ‘em to wait for a couple days. And since I’m... What I am, they agreed, as long as I didn’t make them wait too long.”

“Oh?” The Prophet murmured, turning to the Kaidon and asking almost coyly, “Is that the truth, Kaidon? Did you only neglect your duty for what at least would have *looked*, to your ignorant eyes, like a higher calling?”

“...Yes, it is as you have said.” He murmured, going along with the lie after barely a moment’s consideration. “Per her request, we acted as we did. We would never have done so without it, I assure you, most noble Minister.”

“Hmm... “ The Prophet eyed the Kaidon for a long time, tapping his fingers against each other while he seemed to think. To *consider* . Finally, he sighed, pulling a strange little machine out of his robes and waving the matter off. “Well, your reasoning is solid. So such a trifling concern can remain between us, I suppose. So long as it does *not* happen again, and you remember to report such things to me, that is. I may elect to honor her requests myself, but such is not your decision to make. Understood?”

“You’ve my word.” The Kaidon rumbled, bowing his armored head, “From now on, we shall defer to you on such things.”

“Hmph. As you should have always *been* doing.” The Prophet sighed, waving a hand towards Kipo and offering the little device to his Honor Guard. “Now, we’ve but a formality to end this meeting of ours. A scan, to log your race in the Covenant’s registries. Simply stand still, and I will see it dealt with later.”

“Oki doke.” The scan itself only took a moment, the light dancing along her fine robes and fair skin. Then, with a little chime, it was done and the armored Elite turned to offer the machine back to the waiting Prophet who looked at it for a long, silent moment. Long enough Kipo asked, quietly, “Is, uh, something wrong?”

“...No, I don’t think so, after all.” The Minister answered quietly, after a time, before he turned to the Kaidon and said simply, “I will be visiting, from time to time. To... Test this gift in a variety of ways. I’ll handle sending reports on her to the Council, though, don’t you concern yourself with it.”

“Very well.” The Kaidon rumbled, “Is that... All, then?”

“It is.” The Minister nodded, his chair listing forward slowly at his command. As he left, he waved a hand dismissively over his shoulder and added, quietly, “And see her trained! I, and the Covenant, will have need of her one day... And probably soon, too.”

And like that, the Prophet was gone, leaving them confused as much as comforted. Inside the hour, his guards had left the Keep and, in their wake, R’Tas could think of little to do. Besides, of course, training as the Prophet had demanded of them.

# a needle in a hay stack

## Chapter Notes

heyo i hope you enjoy have a nice day

The training began quickly and intensely on the heels of the noble Prophet's quiet departure. Needless to say, though, actually training something that could readily hurl its peers dozens of feet through the air presented... Certain challenges. Swiftly, they moved to multi-person drills, pitting her against two, and three, and finally four Initiates at the same time. Soon after, though, they moved to doing the same with the Keep's guards. But, short of bringing in war machines, nothing they put against the strange little pink thing that was Kipo could survive in the training arena for more than a heartbeat.

And so, amusing as it was to watch the bouts, they soon gave up entirely on combat training.

Instead, they moved to martial masteries. The sword and glaive came naturally to her, of course, even if she more overpowered her enemies than beat them. There was danger to her proclivity to simply crush her opponents through sheer power, but she didn't seem to relish it. Nor did she seem to try and hurt anyone purposefully, for that matter, so neither he nor the instructors feared her falling into the dark hole of pure, raw power over all else.

Next, then, was weapons training at the firing field outside the Keep's walls.

The firing field was, more or less, simply everything between the treeline at the base of the incline the Keep had been built upon and the Keep's walls themselves. Targets were set up in front of the wall, made of durable neo-laminate panels fitted to the front of treated wood. But the targets never made it feel like he wasn't shooting at the Keep's own walls. Which, even if a Plasma round like their munitions fired or a Carbine were never going to damage the walls, always felt instinctively...

Well, wrong, in a small word.

But, it was how things were done, and he was no one who could challenge how things were done. With her monstrous strength, teaching her to fight hand to hand was out of the question. But they could still teach her how to shoot, which was as important to a warrior as prowess in the ring was, often enough. Even if personally R'Tas far preferred the feeling of a blade grip in his hand.

"This is a Plasma Repeater, of the standard variety." The weapons instructor, a lithe, younger Elite in Minor armor, explained quietly as he held the gently humming weapon out to her. Kipo took it awkwardly, unsurely, and the instructor yanked R'Tas in front of her to use him to show her how to hold it. Tucking the stock into his bicep, the instructor spoke quietly,

“There isn’t much recoil, so place the butt of the weapon here or on your shoulder. This will keep it under control.”

“Okay.” She murmured, mimicking R’Tas’ instructed grip with her own weapon.

“Grip here with your off hand, to level it.” The Minor said, pointing to where R’Tas was holding the base of the barrel-enclosure. She did and the Minor nodded, pleased, and stepped back, “Good work, Sacred One. Now, simply point the weapon at the target at the base of the wall and squeeze the hand-grip gently.”

“Alright...”

“Only for a moment, though.” The instructor cautioned gently, “The weapon is automatic, and so will fire until you release or the weapon overheats and burns your hand.”

“Alright then.” She nodded, raising the weapon and taking her best approximation of a firing stance, legs half-bent and the weapon tucked against her shoulder.

It was awkward looking, clearly based on how the Sangheili six feet to either side were firing their own Plasma Repeaters and likely wrong for it. But she was trying her best, and this was the first. Time she had tried something like this. Such was evident by the wild, undisciplined spray of plasma that hosed the wall around the target at the end of the range.

“Not terrible.” R’Tas rumbled while she looked at the smoldering pits scored along the wall’s surface. She turned to him in surprise, brows raised, and he chuckled, “When I first came out here, I very nearly shot myself.”

“Only nearly?” The Minor huffed a laugh, taking the Repeater from her and inspecting it for any damages. “I have a car on my thigh from when I first fired a weapon, it overheated, and I dropped it on my legs.”

“Really?!” Kipo asked, surprised and before she choked on a laugh as the blocky Repeater was shoved into her chest. She didn’t stagger, though, more than strong enough to resist the larger Elite’s shove. “Oi! Rude!”

“Yes, it was rude, and yes, I did burn myself.” The Minor grunted shortly, sounding... Affronted and amused at the same time, somehow. Waving a hand at the target he grunted, “I want you to land at least one plasma round on the target.”

“But...” She sighed, chewing on her lip for a moment, thinking, before finally saying, “I’ve never even used one of these before. Father let me use particle lasers, but those felt-”

“Particle lasers?” The Minor asked quietly, voice quiet and filled with a familiar sense of... Awe and curiosity. “You mean... Like the Maintainers wield, on the Relics?”

“Maintainers- Oh, you mean the Sentinel drones!” She blinked, smiling and nodding, “Yeah, they use particle beams for weapons and, you know, tools. I like ‘em, their really accurate and clean, and they don’t have any recoil.”

“You prefer... Non-automatic weapons, then?” R’Tas asked, waving his weapon at her own meaningfully. “Rather than these automatic ones, I mean. You would prefer something more precise and controlled?”

“I guess so, yeah.” She shrugged, “Why, do you have something like that?”

“I do.” He nodded, turning to the Minor and asking, quietly, “Would you mind retrieving a Type-31 from the armory? I believe such would be more to her tastes.”

“It will be done.” And, in spite of rank and procedure, the Minor bowed his head, pounding a fist into the metal over his heart.

R’Tas wanted to correct him, and opened his mouth to do so, but before he could the Minor was gone. And so he was left in silence with the smaller woman who looked up at him with a single raised brow.

Quietly, he grunted, “Try another shot with the Repeater while we wait. I know you may not use it, but I would prefer you try in case one day you have no choice.”

“But this gun sucks, R’Tas.” She complained tiredly, glaring at it like it was cancerous or toxic. “The recoil makes it impossible to aim with. I don’t understand how this can be any good for anything except, like, keeping people in cover.”

Sighing, he raised his weapon and sent two long, four shot bursts down-range into the same spot on the wall. Then, he lowered the weapon and raised it again, resetting his aim and sending another pair of bursts into the spot. Finally, silently, he turned a look on her and cocked his head to the side.

An obvious challenge.

“I guess...” She sighed and scowled as she raised the weapon, sending another inaccurate burst scoring along the wall above the target.

Then, at his quiet urging, she tried again. It was the fifth burst where she finally managed to hit the target, winging its edge with the first plasma bolt before the other two rocked off to the side. She cheered excitedly, bouncing on her heels as the Minor finally returned, carrying the Needle Rifle he’d asked for in one hand, barrel leaning against his shoulder. In his other were several small canisters that could be slotted into the side of the weapon and, somehow, refilled it.

Not that he knew how that worked to save his life.

“This is a basic Type-31 Needle Rifle.” The Minor explained quietly as he traded it over, powering the Plasma Repeater down and attaching it to a mag-plate on his back. “It is semi-automatic, one round to trigger pull. Simply sight and fire.”

“And beware the super-combine.”

“What’s that?” She asked, looking between R’Tas and the Minor before going back to looking at the rifle. Pointing a finger at the needles she asked, quietly, “

“If you can and three of the needles within around four inches of each other and they will detonate rather violently.” The Minor explained quietly, pointing his long, armored fingers at the same shards of crystal that Kipo herself was. “These are what you fire, and they vanish as they go. I will show you how to reload later.”

“Okay then...” She gestured at the target with her rifle and asked, excited, “Can I shoot it now?”

“Of course.” the Minor answered, waving a hand around them and huffing, “Why else are we here?”

A long moment passed before Kipo fired, first slowly and then faster as she adjusted to the weapon. The first two rounds went wide, impacting the scorched wall, but she only hummed and adjusted her stance, sinking to one knee and taking a breath. The next three rounds sailed truer, slamming into just to the side of the target’s center. The cluster was close enough that the crystals glowed and then, after a moment, detonated in a vibrant hue of violent violet.

Kipo practically leapt to her feet, whooping excitedly and pointing, “See that? I’m a good shot, that Repeater

“So.” R’Tas rumbled over a laugh, “It would appear that we have found your weapon of natural choice, then.”

“Right?” She beamed, “I’m so excited! No more crummy plasma guns for meeee~!”

“Well... I would not say that, I’m afraid.” The Minor rumbled quietly, offering the Repeater back to her and nodding at another target. “All warriors must at least be passable with all weapons they are likely to need to use. This includes you.”

The young female only groaned but, with only a little prodding, she took the weapon and got ready to continue her training. The next couple bursts of Repeater fire were scarcely more accurate than her earlier ones but they had plenty of time. And, once she was proficient with it, she’d be able to begin studying the standard Plasma Rifle. Then the Carbine, Beam Rifle, which he suspected she’d enjoy too, and so much more.

XxX~~~XxX

As two summers and winters passed, Kipo trained and integrated into Vadum Keep, as the Oracle had seemingly willed it to be. She and the Keep grew in strength as the time passed and warriors came, to test the Keep’s rising strength. And to see the rising symbol of the Oracle that Kipo was steadily becoming, in the eyes of the Covenant. With them came trade as well, swelling the wealth and prestige of the Keep even further. The jealous eyes that drew, it seemed, did not dare to strike at them with Kipo there.

On this day, though, Kipo was watching rather than training with the newer trainees.

Standing next to the larger Gel’Ton and with him on her other side, she leaned against one of the shield pylons around the arena’s edge while the three of them watched the unfolding



training. Or rather, the old Shadow dressing down one of the younger Initiates who had failed to keep up with the others in the morning run.

“Thoughts?”

“I do not know about these young ones, Kipo.” R’Tas sighed as he watched the old Elite scold the group. “They seem... I don’t know. Different to my own cadre of Initiates.”

“I dunno.” She chuckled quietly, “I think they’re doin’ pretty well. Less of ‘em have spent time gawking at me, at least.”

“Hm...” He wasn’t too certain such wasn’t the case, but he could still see more than enough glances paid their way. He saw challenge in them, directed to her and to him alike, though the former was far more common. “Perhaps you should step in, then? Hurl a few around like so many bags of grain?”

“Hah!” She laughed, “Maybe in a bit. Gel doesn’t want me to hurt their feelings too much.”

“Or their bodies, Sacred One.” The old warrior rumbled and turned, waving a hand at the already chastened looking young Initiates. Older ones bore more anger, he could see, directed at the youngers that had caused their gathering. “They ought be grateful that neither pride nor flesh will have to fear your wrath much longer, I dare say.”

“Heay, I have time in the day.” She laughed, rolling her shoulders and grinning playfully. “Today’s a pretty good day, too. Wouldn’t mind a bit of a brawl. Get the blood pumping. It’s warm enough for it.”

“True.” R’Tas rumbled, enjoying the pleasant feeling of the warm sun on him and the cool breeze. “It is a good day.”

“Indeed, my kin. It is a perfect day for a run, I would say. One that ought to begin now, that is.” Gel’Ton murmured, clasping his hands behind his waist and watching as the Initiates turned to begin another long run around the arena. “Some of them will graduate tonight. I suspect they are none too happy to be facing punishments from their youngers on such a vaunted day.”

“Wait, wait, wait, hol’ up a minute.” Kipo said, pushing off the pylon while a smile spread over R’Tas’ face. “Graduation is today?”

“I don’t know.” R’Tas laughed, paying the older warrior a look and asking, playfully, “Is it, Gel’Ton? Surely I would know about such a thing.”

“I do not know, I fear. Perhaps I should send word through the Guards, ask about it?” The old Shadow laughed when Kipo rounded on him, glaring at him fearlessly. Waving her off, he raised his voice as the other Sangheili approached their bend in the circle, closest to where they were standing. “Fine, fine, yes, you are right. Today is the day that many Sangheili become warriors of the Keep, finally!”

R'Tas could see the pride and excitement on the faces of those old enough to feel it, but they did not pay the words too much heed. Instead they kept to their formation, running as they ought to. Which was good, as faltering now would only look bad on them going into such an event.

“And us as well.” R'Tas nodded somberly, turning his gaze skyward to watch the drifting clouds. “After today we will, the both of us, be able to leave Sanghelios to serve the interests of our Keep. And the Covenant besides, of course.”

“The latter may be more likely than the former, I fear, my young friend.” Gel'Ton murmured quietly as the other Sangheili rounded the bend yet again. Feeling their gazes on him, and the question in them, he explained quietly, “Once Kipo is Named, there are orders to leave with the rising sun. The same Minister who once came to see you, and who governs our sector, has called on your services with a... Sensitive matter.”

“I see.” So soon? He knew that he was very likely not the reason why, and paid Kipo a look. Well, we shall do our best, and bring honor to Vadum Keep, I am certain.”

“Yeah.” She nodded and smiled, easy confidence coming back as she shrugged, “We'll kick ass, take names and make sure everyone knows which Keep is the biggest and the best. You can bet on that.”

“Indeed.” The Old Shadow rumbled, raising his voice and calling out, “All who are of age, it is time for your Naming. Bathe and then be inside and ready. Your duties shall be assigned to you after the Naming is done.”

Quietly, the older Elites parted from the running pack to take their leave. And with a parting nod, he and Kipo moved to follow behind them. As they went, he felt the disquiet from his young charge. She was anxious, it seemed, and he was smart enough not to suspect that it was from the Naming.

“We will be fine.” He assured her quietly, “The Prophets are wiser than to levy tasks unto us which we cannot face. And besides, your strength is more than most can even hope to boast to having. You needn't fear the coming duties.”

“I know.” She nodded, “Just anxious, no worries.”

“But-”

“Just relax.” She waved him off more firmly, “We have stuff to focus on.”

“True enough.” He shrugged, dropping the matter as she's asked him to. They did have other things to focus on just now, after all...

## Ch 10 word with fortitude

### Chapter Summary

A chance to prove yourself

This time, the noble Minister did not deign to come down to meet them in their great Keep. That he had decided to do so the first time was itself more than merely a kindness, though, R'Tas knew. Coming into their home and demanding they host him had been a test of loyalty, to see that they would submit to the Covenant and obey him as they were sworn to. That they had done so without hesitation had, he hoped, silenced some of the murmurs of sedition and heresy that hounded their name.

Young he might have been, but he was no fool.

However with that matter at least set aside, the Minister had no cause to test them. And so instead of coming down to them, he demanded *they* come to *him*. And so, once the brief naming ceremony was concluded and R'Tas was officially named Vadum'ee and granted the worn but nonetheless sturdy armor of a Minor, while Kipo was left in her divinely smithed body glove, they were herded out towards a waiting Phantom. A trio of Honor Guard were waiting aboard it, and were silent as the grave as the craft lifted up and away.

"Oh!" Kipo gasped excitedly as they rose and turned, presenting their open side to the sea as the sun glinted off it. Smiling, she murmured, "Beautiful..."

"Leave the sea-side windows open." One of the Guard murmured into his communicator, low enough that had he not been next to him R'Tas doubted he'd have heard the warrior's words. "For a time, at least."

"Thank you." R'tas murmured just as quietly, "She has not seen a sight such as this, I do not think."

“Hmph.” The Guard grunted, “Then it is good to let her see it. Perhaps the gods will bless our journey for it, hm?”

“Perhaps indeed.” He nodded, “Perhaps.”

Soon, the air began to thin and chill, and the pilot was forced to seal the compartment in preparation for atmospheric exit. As they broke free, he felt the ship begin to *tremble* in the disconcerting way he’d been trained to expect. His stomach didn’t seem to have gotten the lesson, though, spinning and tumbling as the craft shook around him. One of the older, more amused Honor Guards told him to kneel and close his eyes against it, and he did so.

It helped, marginally, and none of them mocked him for it.

None save for Kipo, who prodded his back and chuckled, “Lightweight~!”

“Silence.” He growled warningly, “Or I will hide everything sweet I can find where you shall never find it.”

Fortunately, the tremors ended swiftly as the craft punched free of the gravity well of his homeworld. With the trembling gone, his stomach swiftly eased and he stood finally, more than a little glad at the absence of mockery he saw from the Sangheili around him. Foolish it might have been, but his pride stung for being forced to grovel merely for some shaking.

But it was over, now, and he had greater matters to attend to.

“Stay with us.” The eldest of the Honor Guard grunted shortly, flicking his gaze between the two of them meaningfully. “The Minister has made time for the two of you, but not so that you may wander about.”

“Of course.” He rumbled and Kipo nodded. “Lead the way, if you please.”

Without another word, the armored Sangheili did so, the side door of the Phantom hissing open quietly as he stepped out. R'Tas and Kipo followed him closely, while the other Honor Guards stayed to keep vigil over their Phantom. Why that was, he hadn't the faintest idea, but he didn't question their decisions as he was led through the spacious hangar of the cruiser's belly.

It quite simply was not his place.

"Oh!" Kipo smiled as they walked through the long hangar of the cruiser, pointing a long, gloved finger at the dozens of sleek fighters moored in the ship. "Those are Seraphs, right?"

"Indeed." Their guide rumbled his answer, "An older design, at least for those fielded by this vessel, but an excellent superiority craft nonetheless. You know of it, Sacred One?"

"Kipo." She corrected automatically, rushing on before anyone could comment. "And yeah. Some of the Elites back at the Keep were big fans of it. Used to overhear all kinds of stories 'bout 'em while we were eatin' and stuff."

"They are a bit more popular than the type twenty-seven exo-atmospheric Banshee, to be fair." The guide nodded contemplatively, "I suppose it's for their armor and shield, but personally, I favor the type twenty sevens."

"Speed to evade rather than armor to withstand." R'Tas summarised easily, "The master instructor of arms at my Keep favored the same approach."

"Hm." The old warrior rumbled, armor shifting as he turned to regard him. "And you?"

"I favor a bit of both." He answered instantly, his opinion born from hundreds of similar conversations as he'd grown. "At least insofar as I can favor anything, right now. Enough armor and shields to survive what cannot be avoided, but not so much as to slow me. This, I feel, would be the best of all possible offerings."

“A fair enough answer, and offered with the kind of tentativeness that most your age should offer all such answers with. Alas that they ydo not.” The guard rumbled lowly, humming his satisfaction, “And one I shall keep in mind, young one.”

*That* was more than a little foreboding, but he didn’t ask for an explanation. Speaking frankly, the Honor Guard ought not have spoken to them at all, so he’d suspected something more to their talk all the while. What it was, though, he’d simply have to wait and find out. Even if his instincts *were* screaming at him to be on guard.

But then, what was he supposed to do in any event even if he wished to?

Nothing, obviously, save for his duties.

Eventually, finally, they were led to a wide set of large, doubled doors covered in the sigil of the Minister of Fortitude. A pair of Honor Guards flanked the wide doors and watched their approach warily, hands tight on the hafts of their long polearms. They didn’t move, though, only paying their guide polite nods in greeting as he stepped forward to open the door and then stood to the side and gestured for them to enter.

“We will be outside, as the Minister has requested.” He rumbled warningly, “His Eminence has the means of his self defense, though, and should we be called we will rush to his attendance. And you *will not* prevail against us. Am I understood?”

“Yep!”

“You are.” He nodded, “Rest assured, I would not dare to harm his holiness.”

“Hmph.” The old warrior rumbled, stepping away and gesturing with a jerk of his head to the open door. “Enter then, young ones, and know that his words carry with them a charge of holy duty and honor. Accept them with the proper reverence and humility.”

“Of course.” He nodded, turning to his smaller companion and nodding. “Let’s go, Kipo.”

Inside, the room was a bit more spacious than what lessons told him ought to be the norm for a cruiser of this size and type. The middle of the room was taken up by a large holo-display he'd seen hundreds of, scattered throughout the Keep to enable communications all across the territories controlled by the Vadum. Consoles of a hundred varieties he couldn't discern lined the back from one side to another, worked by a handful of squat, mostly silent Unggoy. A couple of the small creatures turned to regard them as they entered and Kipo waved, earning a few awkward gestures in return as they went back to whatever their work was.

As the door closed, the display flared to life brightly, showing a heavily armored Sangheili warrior with the wide, smooth front plate of the Special Operations branch. He was frozen for a moment, but at the press of a button courtesy of one of the working Grunts, the figure began to move and speak.

"The Prophets speak lies and self-aggrandizing legends, all to enable their own power and control!" The Sangheili ranted, pacing from side to side in an odd way, given the holo-display didn't actually move him. Instead, it was like he was walking in place in a strange sort of... Dance of some kind. "They send us to *explore*, to *search*, but neither know nor care what we might find! And what we do, they turn to their own ends, or none at all! But what of the Sangheili? What of the Unggoy? The Kig-Yar?"

"Nothing!" The obvious heretic snarled, "Nothing but a life of servitude and death! And now they seek our death because we have found something which tells us the truth of-"

The display flickered there, and then died in a flash of dark blue light. Kipo stepped forward as it failed, murmuring confusedly, "Why'd it cut out there? What was he going to say?"

"The transmission was intercepted, and corrupted there for it, I'm afraid." A tired, almost slimy, though he would never voice the words, voice answered from behind them. As they turned, the Minister floated away from the table set against the back wall and waved a hand at the display. "I don't think whatever was going to be said was worthy of hearing regardless, though, so perhaps the gods sought to spare our ears."

"I guess..." Kipo shrugged and crossed her arms, clearly put off by something, though he wasn't sure what. "Do we know what he was talking about then?"

“Unfortunately, no.” The Minister frowned, hovering in a slow circle around the holo-display. With a wave of his hand, a Grunt pressed a button and brought up a still image taken from the transmission, and he began to speak. “This is Arkun Raman’ee, and he *was* the lead of one of our exploratory flotillas, pursuing data points recovered from the sacred archives of mostly holy High Charity itself.”

“A sacred duty.” R’Tas rumbled, more for Kipo’s sake than any other. “To be tasked to follow in the footsteps of the gods themselves... How does one chosen for such a task fall to what seems to me to be heresy?”

“We don’t know, unfortunately.” The Minister sighed, waving a hand at the hologram. “We sent speakers in the hopes of finding out, and perhaps bringing this to a peaceful close if the poor fool simply misunderstood something he found. But he butchered the speakers we sent, and the scouts we sent after to try and find out what happened more... Independently.”

“Butchered...?”

“Yes, Sacred One.” Fortitude frowned distraughtly, “All that was recovered were their heads. Including the head of another Minister similar to myself. The Minister of Discovery.”

“To murder a Prophet...” His blood boiled at the mere prospect and he growled under his breath. Quietly, he said, “You were kind to offer this heretic a chance at explanation and perhaps redemption. A shame that it was spurned so brutally. Is this why you summoned us then?”

“It is.” He nodded, waving a hand at them, now, and explaining coolly, “The Council and the Hierarchs have... Taken notice of your coming of age. Both of you. And they want to make a grand show of bringing you into the Covenant proper, as the holy warriors you ought to be. It is their opinion that, with proper support and equipment of course, expunging this *filth* should be a proper show of power and an introduction all in the Covenant can respect.”

“You... Want us to kill a bunch of people so we look good?” Kipo asked, face twisting nastily at the idea.



“No, no, they need to be silenced regardless. And wagging chins need to be stilled, regarding the strangeness of your joining us, Sacred One.” The Minister smiled as warmly as he seemed able to manage, seeming to catch on to how she felt fairly easily and indulging her. “Not all believe you to be a friend to the Covenant, unfortunately. Not like I do. And this has caused some tension among the Council as a result.”

“Tension?”

“Questions of an... Uncomfortable bend, Elite.” The Minister nodded, waving to Kipo at his side and explaining quietly, “And allegations as well, unfounded and thus unpursued though they may have been.”

“Such as?” He asked, “What manner of allegations could the Councilors have regarding the two of us.”

“*And* your Keep.” The Minister pointed out purposefully, “And they were rather what one would have expected. Why Vadum Keep? Did they lie about what they found? When they found it? What could they be planning? Why are they building up their Keep and forces so quickly?”

“We only wished to be worthy protectors...” He answered quietly, mandibles pinching shut as he considered his words. The Kaidon might not have told him if the truth were otherwise, of course, but, “I know of no evidence that could give cause to these concerns, your eminence.”

“Oh I’m sure.” He waved the matter off with a low laugh, “Neither did those posing them. Which is why nothing ever came of the questions. Still, it’s for the best to silence these troublesome little murmurings. Is it not?”

“It is.” R’Tas agreed, quickly putting the idea together with the broadcast they’d been shown. “That’s why you want us to see to these heretics then, isn’t it?”

“Hmm?” The Prophet’s brow rose even as he smiled, “Please, do explain what you mean for me.”

“A convenient solution to two problems.” He summarised briefly, “We prove our loyalty by silence the same manner of traitor that these wagging chins and wandering whisperers fear we are, and the heretics themselves are silenced.”

“Yes, that was my plan.” The Minister smiled, steepling his fingers and reclining in his chair. Gesturing to him with both hands he smiled, “My, my, but you are an astute one. I would be surprised, were it not for the fact that the Oracle chose you. Clearly, its divine wisdom did not fail in that.”

“I should hope not.” For more than just his own sake, too. His Keep and Kipo’s life rested on the Oracle’s judgement being accurate. If he should fail... No, he couldn’t afford to even consider the matter. Instead, he asked, “When do we depart, then?”

“When do you...” The prophet laughed, then, the harsh sound echoing around them until one of the Grunts joined him, cackling madly. A short glare ended that, another Grunt chittering at his friend’s pitiful whine. Shaking his head, the Prophet turned back to them and smiled, “My friends, you already *have* departed. The ship was underway as soon as you boarded.”

“Ah...”

“Proper plans will be made to handle this rather unfortunate matter when we arrive in a week or so.” The Minister said, turning away from them as he seemed to decide the conversation had reached its end. “One of my guards will see you to quarters, and tomorrow you may pursue the equipment stores for something more befitting your station and task.”

“Just like that?” Kipo asked quietly, looking... Confused, as the Minister turned back to her. “You just snatch us away from home, and run us off to do stuff without even telling us about it beforehand?”

“Well... Yes.” The Minister answered, cocking his head to the side curiously. “That is how things are done within the Covenant. I took you two into my service, for now at the least, and so am taking you to your task.”

“But how is that-”

“Kipo.” He rumbled, laying a hand on her shoulder to calm her. “It is fine. To be in service of such a high office so soon is an honor.”

“I guess...”

“For now, I believe it’s time we rest.” He nodded for the amused Prophet’s benefit. “In the morning, we will... See about equipment, as you said, to prepare for our coming mission. If you would grant us leave, we will go.”

“By all means.” The Prophet smiled, waving a hand for the door, “And prepare well. I suspect that the fight to end this heresy will not be an easy one.”

Nodding and with Kipo on his heels, he turned for the door. One of the guards already knew what to do when they came out, stepping forward and gesturing for them to follow before turning and marching off. Silent, the two of them did as they were told.

## **Sangheili and Large Cats ch11 a engineers touch**

As soon as they stepped out of the Prophet's room and into the hall, a small Unggoy in the remarkable jet black of the Special Operations branch of the Covenant military approached them. It looked R'tas up and down quickly first and then turned to Kipo and nodded, turning and waving for them to follow.

"Your new guide." One of the Honor Guard explained in brief when R'Tas hesitated to follow. "Follow."

Dutifully, he did exactly that, following along behind the shuffling little creature while it muttered irritably to itself. He felt safe to guess that it was because of his hesitation over following it, but didn't truly care terribly. So long as the little cretin kept its unwanted opinions to itself, at least.

More importantly, Kipo was being very quiet. Enough to worry him into asking, "Are you alright, Kipo?"

"Mhm." She nodded and shrugged, turning a curious look on a trio of armored Sangheili as they passed them by, "Just... Thinking. That's all."

"A dangerous game for you..." She shot him a glare and he rumbled a laugh, waving her off, "I jest, of course, Kipo."

"Uh huh." She elbowed his forearm as they walked and grunted, quietly, "Jerk."

"You can always talk to me if you have concerns." He told her, raising his voice meaningfully and adding. "Presuming, of course, that we have time to spend on such concerns?"

"Special Operations several decks away." The Grunt answered quietly, turning to talk to them and shuffling to the side while he did, rather like one of the small crustaceans he'd seen on the beaches on occasion. "Have time. Can take longer way if want more."

“That will not be necessary.” He nodded his thanks and the squat creature turned back the way they were headed. To Kipo he said, “See? We have time to talk, if you need it.”

“I just...” She shrugged, “I don’t like being sent off to hurt people so we *look good*, you know?”

“That isn’t why we are being-”

“No, that isn’t why *someone* isn’t being sent. *Someone* is being sent because they’re hurting people, we don’t know what they’re going to do, and they need to be stopped.” Kipo cut in to say, gesturing between the two of them with a hand. “*We* are being sent to hurt them so that *we* look good.”

“I suppose you’re right.” He admitted after a quiet moment, “But such is the way of the world we live in, I fear.”

“I know, and I don’t like that.” She sighed and shrugged again, “But it’s nothing we can do anything about. So I’m aggravated, but just... Gotta deal, ya know?”

“I understand.” He nodded and let the topic die there. More than a few times, he had disliked his lot, or the things happening around him. But, as she said, sometimes you just had to force yourself to accept things the way they were and move along. Instead of letting the silence linger, though, he asked, “Have you considered what kind of equipment you wish to take yet?”

“I’m... Thinking about it.” She answered coyly, rubbing the back of her head when he gave her a look and explaining quietly, “I mean, you know, I have a couple ideas. But I don’t think people will be *happy* about my picks.”

“They aren’t the ones using the equipment.” He pointed out simply, “They get no say, unless they are your superior. Even then, your Lance ought to have been built with an understanding of your chosen weapons.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I am.” He nodded simply, “Just be sure of your choice.”

“Alright.” She nodded in kind, smiling a bit more warmly, “I-I’ll do as you say, then.”

“Good.” He nodded, “So long as you perform your duties well I am sure few will question your decisions.”

“Yeah, I guess-”

“We here now.” The little Unggoy grunted suddenly as they reached a wide set of dark violet double doors flanked by a pair of Unggoy guards who watched them sharply. The Unggoy waved a hand at the door and added, sharply, “Armory. You go in. Get your stuff. I wait.”

“Very well...”

“Thank you.” Kipo cut in when he took a step forward. R’Tas hesitated for it, and then sighed and turned to see the female kneeling, gently patting the Unggoy’s head and smiling warmly. “I appreciate you bringing us all the way down here! What’s your name?”

“Um...” It hesitated for a moment, but leaned into the affection and answered quietly, “Kipkip.”

“Well, thank you again, Kipkip.” She smiled, standing and waving the creature off as it shuffled away unsurely. When she turned to him she met his confused gaze with a pout and crossed her arms. “What? I’m just bein’ nice.”

“Indeed.” He rumbled a laugh and waved her off, “Did I say anything?”

“No, but you thought it...”

“You can read minds now?”

“Only yours.” She smirked and shrugged, “You kind of have an obvious face, ya know?”

“I do?” He blinked, fingers drifting up to touch the side of his head curiously. “No one has ever said that to me...”

“Yeah, well, it’s true.” She chuckled, waving at the curious guard Grunts with a hand and a smile. “Your mandibles always purse differently depending on how you’re feeling, for one. And you get this glint in your eye when you’re joking, too.”

“Interesting...”

“I guess.” She shrugged again, waving a hand at the door, now, and asking, “Shouldn’t we get going, though? Kinda wasting time out here, aren’t cha, chatterbox?”

“I despise you sometimes...”

Back on Sanghelios, Vadum Keep’s armory was an ancient construction that had since been refurbished and modernized a hundred and one times. And it showed, in old, cracked stone reinforced my metal and crossed by wires concealed by large display panels and maintenance tables. The Minister’s ship, though, was far more modern and their armory showed. And for obvious reasons, too.

Their armory was larger, spread over two floors bridged by a pair of circling stairs in the corners to the side of the door. The floor he was on was ringed by recessed shelves and gravity fields that held every weapon and ordinance piece he knew of. The second, he figured, would be where the armor was kept, since he didn’t see any armor here. And the

center of the room was taken up by disposal bins and work-benches manned by quietly working Elites and a single floating Engineer that plucked seemingly random pieces from its exasperated masters to work on before returning them.

That none complained, and some even seemed *impressed* with the weapons and tools afterward told him why it was tolerated.

“Speak, Minor.” He turned and nearly flinched at the sudden proximity of an Elite that came up only to Kipo’s head, and thus his shoulder, who was standing directly beside him. His armor was sleek and violet colored, with the all encompassing assault helmet of a more experienced operative.

And he chuckled when he noticed R’Tas’ surprise.

“You will adjust to our silent steps in time, Minor.” He spoke, flicking a look to Kipo when she stepped around R’Tas wider frame. Nodding, the warrior said, “Ah, you are the Sacred One’s chosen guardian. We were told of you.”

“Indeed, we are-”

“Kipo!” She cut in, leaning over and grinning widely. “Appreciate if you call me that, too.”

“...here to be properly equipped, according to the Minister’s orders.” R’Tas sighed wearily, shaking his head and adding, “And forgive her, she is... Not one to stand on ceremony, quite ironically.”

“It’s *my* ceremony, though?”

“It’s important.” R’Tas sighed, “And a sign of respect and dignity besides. I do not understand your dislike of this, even now...”



“Just feels weird.” She shrugged, “So I don’t like it.”

“We will call the Sacred- *Kipo* ,” the Elite corrected meaningfully with a bow of his helmed head, “as she wishes to be called. What is the harm, after all? She is unlike any other creature the Covenant knows of, so anonymity is irrelevant. And going against her wishes would be an insult without need, unless one of the Hierarchs’ orders otherwise.”

“I suppose...”

“Regardless, you *both* need your armor.” The Spec-Ops officer grunted shortly, turning and walking away without the faintest hint of a sound. “Follow.”

The armory upstairs was the same layout as below, lined by armor rather than weapons. Unlike below, though, only a single Sangheili was working up here, while *three* of the floating Engineers were busy in a corner. Working on what, R’Tas could not see past their bulbous forms, but they seemed entirely devoted to the task. And his superior paid them no mind, walking over to one of the hanging sets of armor and prompting him to follow.

“This,” the older Elite said, nodding at the Spec-Ops Minor armor, which was admittedly essentially a mirror to his own, albeit painted black, “will be your armor. It is fitted with limited stealth capabilities, as well as a more advanced communications device to work in tandem with your brothers. Its shields are somewhat limited, though. The power and internal systems normally diverted to shields are used in the stealth systems instead.”

“It will do.” R’Tas rumbled quietly, “And thank you.”

“You may thank me by doing your duty.” The other Elite answered simply, offering a pair of weapons as he turned to him. “A simple plasma rifle and an equally simple energy sword. The starting essentials.”

“So I have heard.” Many schools of Sangheili service armed their warriors thusly, after all. “Shall I get into my armor then?”

“Do so.” The Elite nodded, “I will oversee your charge’s arming as well while you do.”

He nodded and set to his task. Thankfully, the armor’s fastenings and strappings were more or less exactly the same as the Minor armor he’d come in wearing, so the task wasn’t exactly a difficult one. When he turned, though, it was to find the Spec-Ops warrior watching while the Engineers swarmed Kipo, whose arms were just visible above the writhing mess.

“What is happening...?”

“Your companion shed her robes and the Engineers lost their collective minds over her body glove.” The Elite explained simply, “Now, on my orders, they are putting her armor on *while* they inspect the divine apparel.”

“I see.”

“R’Tas, I think they’re eating me!” The girl squealed, having no doubt heard his voice while he spoke to the officer beside him.

“Nonsense!” He called back through a chuckle, “They’d only be eating you if they were using their tentacles!”

“Uuum!”

After a few more moments, the Engineers seemed satisfied and relented, nearly dropping the woman entirely as they floated back and away.

Her armor was of a lighter bent than his own, and consisted mainly of a pair of gauntlets and greaves that covered her limbs in layered, plated metal. Each was painted a dark blue, and covered in a dull gold spiraling pattern. A pair of light pauldrons were fitted to her shoulders too, dark scales stretching down from them to cover her back and link to a heavy, armored belt that hung around her waist.

“It is light armor, to be sure.” The Spec-Ops Elite murmured, “But it ensures you have a shielding system that we can predict. Important knowledge for your brothers in the Lance. They will use that knowledge to know when, and how, to support you in combat.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” The young warrior nodded, looking at the little hood in her hands and chewing her lip. Quietly, she asked, “Do I have to wear this, though? I hate hats and stuff like this...”

“It is to prevent you suffocating or being poisoned.” R’Tas answered her, paying his fellow a look for confirmation. When the Elite nodded quietly, he went on, “So yes, please wear it. For my own peace of mind if nothing else.”

“If you really want me to...” He nodded, and she sighed, “Fine, I guess I have to.”

The hood was matte-black and fit snugly to the shape of her head. It wrapped tightly around her throat, too, and ran down to latch onto the pauldrons and the thin strip or scales like the ones on her back. The front was a wide visor that encompassed her entire face and was tinted a dull silver edged in the same dul gold that patterned her gauntlets and greaves, which spiraled around the hood as well.

“So, uh...” She spread her arms and flicked a look between the two Elites in front of her. “How do I look?”

“Lethal.” The Spec-Ops veteran answered, “And ready for battle.”

“Like a sea-shell with legs.” R’Tas answered with a rumbling laugh that earned him a visored glare. Waving her off, he answered more honestly, “You look fine enough, Kipo. Where are her weapons?”

“Here.” He answered simply, producing the long, sleek form of a Carbine from his back and offering it alongside the same type of energy sword he’d been given. She took the weapons awkwardly, hooking the sword to her belt before looking over the Carbine curiously. “I was

told you preferred more precise weapons to automatic ones, and while we don't usually offer such to Minors, I felt an exception could be made."

"Um, thanks." She nodded, and then flicked a look to R'Tas anxiously. When he only nodded to his older companion, she sighed and asked, "But, um... Can I ask for one more exception?"

"I suppose there's no harm in it..."

"I, uh, I want a shield gauntlet." She said, rushing to add, before he could respond, "I just... I'm so strong, I figured I could use one to get in close. Surprise people and overpower 'em. And, you know, keep my team safer."

"I see the logic there... You *are* far stronger than what most would expect on seeing you, by the reports I was given at the least." Humming, the Elite nodded and shrugged, "Very well then. I will send for a shield gauntlet for you. Normally I would not, but... I will make the exception for your status."

"T-Thanks..." She murmured, caught between feeling put out for the preferentialism going on but feeling happy to get what she wanted, at least judging from her face. She shook it off, though, and asked, "So, um... The mission?"

"A simple affair." The Elite answered simply, "You two will join my Lance in assaulting the installation the Heretics are using. Lance Two and Lance Three will assault elsewhere and cover our flanks while we perform a breaching maneuver, right through to the heretic leader himself. Once we fell him, we withdraw and leave Two and Three to mop up the facility."

"We aren't gonna stay and help?"

"No, we do not." He answered, "We have the hardest job, so we're expecting more expended resources and casualties. So, we pull out first, and leave the other two elements to handle the disorganized, panicked remainders."

“He who reaps the fields does not mill the grains.” R’Tas offered simply, “Those who do the hardest, most dangerous parts of a task are spared the tedium and toil of the rest.”

“Alright, then...” She nodded, “Anything, um, else?”

“No.” The veteran answered, turning to leave and adding a parting. “Rest and prepare as best you can. Tomorrow, we will drill together. But for now, you may enjoy your day as you wish to.”

## Ch 12 first strike

“When the Elites joined the Holy Covenant, so long ago, our venerated ancestors gave their word.” The veteran said at the head of their silent shuttle, his Elites rowed inside their drop craft as it made its way towards the facility. As their veteran leader stalked the line, he met R’Tas’ eyes and paid him a nod, bellowing, “According to our station, all without exception! On the blood of our fathers, of our sons, we swore to uphold the Covenant!”

“Even to our dying breath!” The Lance around them murmured, voices low but accumulating to a dull roar.

“Those that break this oath, that betray our lines, are Heretics.” The veteran went on, pacing up and down the Phantom on long, silent strides. “Mercy, pity, kindness... These heretics are worthy of neither, and offer neither! Strike them down. Death is the only kindness we can offer, unto them and the victims they would leave, cold in their wake, as they butcher our kin!”

“We shall grind them into dust!” The Elites murmured, and R’Tas found himself joining them.

Their Lance leader was, it seemed, a good orator.

“And with their cruelty and vanity purged from our ranks, we can continue our march to glory!” The veteran roared, finally raising his voice beyond a base tone. Raising his Plasma Rifle, he bellowed, “For the Covenant!”

“For the blood of our fathers!” The Elites met him, “And the blood of our sons!”

“And the mothers.” Kipo murmured at his side, fiddling anxiously with the shield-gauntlet on her arm. “No one seems to talk about those...”

“Mothers do not fight, Kipo.” He chuckled, watching her work at it curiously. The gauntlet itself was essentially unchanged, albeit fitted to a wider wrist-brace for her to use it. “And this is an old mantra, oft-tweaked and repeated as it was here.”

“Mhm- Oh!” She squeaked as the gauntlet’s shield flared to life, forcing an Elite in the row next to them to the side and into the next row. He paid her a look but said nothing, but Kipo still flushed and stammered as the shield died, “S-Sorry, just adjusting it a bit. Hit the button on accident.”

“Nerves.” The other Elite rumbled, “They’re normal, vaunted one. If you would take the advice of an old warrior...”

“Happily.”

“Count.” He said simply, “Your weapons, the plates of your armor, the Elites in the Lance, it matters not. Simply put your mind to the task, breathe, and count. It eased my tension, in my

youth. Perhaps it will do the same for yours.”

“Right...” She nodded, “I’ll, uh, try that.”

“Thank you, Brother.” R’Tas rumbled as the young female started to count, eyes closed as she tapped her armored foot along with the numbers. The older warrior only nodded as he fell into line, head canted to the side so they could speak. “She is nervous, as you said. And I confess to the same, though I’ve a bit more discipline to counter it.”

“I heard that.” She hissed, “Jerk.”

“Is it not true?” She didn’t answer and he rumbled a laugh as he spoke to his older Brother once more. “Thank you again, as I said.”

“She is my Sister, now.” He answered with a nod, “And you my Brother. A Lance leans on those within itself. Feel no shame.”

He nodded to show his understanding as the Phantom shuddered.

“Enemy space-fighters.” their Leader called out as the shuddering stopped, “Our own vaunted superiority fighters outnumber and out-skill them. They are no threat. Ready yourselves for battle!”

Around them, he heard PLasma Rifles hum and hiss as they were manually vented to check their systems. Carbines and Needlers clicked and clunked as well as their marksmen checked them over. And one Elite at the front, with a wider, black headpiece, silhouetted by thin, cruel violet lights, that smoothed to the front of his helmet to mark him as some form of Zealot that R’Tas didn’t recognize drew his energy blade. The nameless, unIntroduced Elite looked along the blade’s elegant length and then silenced it and flicked him a look.

R’Tas flinched, but he only nodded and turned back to the front of the craft.

“Are you ready, Kipo?” He asked lowly, turning to watch the young female tuck her Carbine against her chest.

“If I say no, do we go home...?”

“I fear not.” He sighed, “Duty waits for no one.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, “Figured that’s what you’d say... I dunno, I just feel kinda funny right now.”

“If it helps, think not of those you’re facing.” the old Elite from before started quietly, “Think only of those you protect, instead. Be a shield, not a blade. A guardian, rather than a slayer.”

That seemed to mollify her and, with a terse and tense little nod, she straightened and rolled her shoulders. Grinning stiffly, she asked, “So, uh, how much longer until this ride gets where it’s goin’, then?”

“Now.” The veteran from earlier said, suddenly standing behind R’Tas who flinched and jump as the ship shuddered violently. “We have just docked. Prepare yourselves for glory!”

The words had barely left his covered mouth before the Phantom’s doors slid open and the grav-lift whirred to life. He could hear the heavy Phantom cannon firing from the nose of the craft, and a pair of Elites on low-mounted Plasma Turrets twisted and turned to fire back while plasma in a variety of colors and sharp Needler shards flew around them. The Elites had already been standing in three lines and they separated accordingly, one to each of the doors and the other to the grav-lift. Several Brothers of the Lance fell as they leapt, bodies bucking and snapping back as plasma and crystal overloaded their defenses and cut them down.

But so many more made it out safely, and he was in the rear, where it was safest.

His boots slammed into the neo-laminate, industrial grating with a heavy clang and a lance of pain up his calves.

It centered him, focused him, and let him look out over the field and take it all into himself in the same moment. The landing bay was industrial and drab, all dark violets and dirty greys, but wide enough for a Phantom to land and long enough for it do so with space enough around it to work, either on it or on whatever it carried with it. Two steep ramps ran up on either side of the bay, straight to the platform at the rear, and the exit.

Crates and half-disassembled or damaged vehicles were scattered on the bay, some of which rested on grav-trolleys that hovered silently while his Brothers pushed their high stacks along for cover. But otherwise, there was none, aside from the veritable battlements the defenders had slapped together, formed up of the same sorts of crates. A silver-armored Sangheili leaned out from behind it with a Fuel Rod Cannon, and three of its rounds slammed home before half a dozen plasma rounds slammed into his chest and head and threw him back.

To his surprise, his own rifle was among those who had silenced him.

Kipo landed next to him as he lowered it and he turned to her, “Kipo, we-”

He froze as he turned to her and she turned to him silently, her Shield Gauntlet snapping up to ward off plasma fire from the defenders. Her eyes were... Sparkling, almost, as if they were backlit. A vibrant purple hue unlike anything he’d ever seen. She paid him a nod and rose, and then shot off like a rocket, plasma and crystal glancing off to either side of her Gauntlet as she rushed towards the base of the high platform the defenders fought from.

Once she’d reached it she crouched.

And then she leapt, easily twenty feet into the air and over the slapped together battlements the heretics fought from behind. She landed where he couldn’t see her, but he and their brothers could see the plasma and crystals flying. Then, they saw a Sangheili fly high and slam into the ceiling and then fall, limp, to the floor so far below. Then a second, who crashed through the crates and slammed end over end along the sleek hull of the Phantom before he collapsed in a heap not far from R’Tas himself.



He groaned and tried to rise, but a burst of plasma ended him before he could.

“Hey, guys!” They all turned at Kipo’s sharp voice in the otherwise too-quiet room. She stood at the center of the high platform, one foot propped up on one of the crates while she reloaded her Carbine mechanically. “Let’s get this over with, eh?”

“Such monstrous power...” A warrior nearby murmured, voice incredibly loud in the sudden silence that had taken the place of the firefight from before. R’Tas turned to look for it, but he couldn’t tell who had spoken in the wide room.

The face enclosing masks probably did not help, though...

“I believe you mean divine power, R’Anta.” Their leader chided loudly, standing halfway up the ramp. His chest armor was smoking and burnt, and had a furrow carved through it as though a plasma round had only just missed him, but he raised his fist regardless. “We have the gods on our side, see it for true, brothers!”

The surviving stealth warriors raised their own fists but kept their silence for discipline.

Finally, the veteran ordered, “Ara’Tas, N’Kas, stay with the wounded and keep the Phantom secured! The rest of you, onward!”

thanks to my editor and new cowriter FangWolfsbane

## End Notes

I hope you enjoy also please provide feedback Nd thoughts

written by me and edited by twiisted fate and Fang Wolfsbane

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