

## Prologue

You never appreciate something until it's gone

Cassandra-075 2525 Spartan-II augmentation

Liquid fire exploded throughout Cassandra-075's veins. It was as if the content of hell's lakes filled her veins, millions of glass bottles shattering inside of her. Not even in her worst nightmares had she expected this, something that she could not have been prepared for. The moment the needles injected their contents with into her neck, the world went fuzzy. The small sterile room and the medical personnel became distant, the sound distorted as if it was underwater, the world shook in time with her heart's irregular beat. She clenched her teeth, felt her body go rigid, and shut her eyes. It felt like someone had a branding iron inside of her, pushing through everything, toying with her. Dr. Halsey had told them this would be the hardest part of becoming a Spartan, she hadn't lied, as much as Cassandra wished she had. She prayed for the sweet release of death within her only safe sanctuary, her mind.

She did something she hadn't done since she entered training, she cried. She hadn't shown any emotion when they had kidnapped her, when Dr. Halsey said that they would never go home, never see their family. Not when

she had been forced to run thirty miles the first day, or after the countless times she had been struck with a baton that flowed with live electricity. She was only vaguely aware of the tears as they traveled across her face and over her clenched mouth. The pain slowly began to dull, she ran through the possibilities in her head, either they had given her something for the pain, unlikely she would have felt something. The process might be ending, which is what she wanted to be true. Her brain was slow, thinking took longer than it should have. When she opened her eyes again, there was a certain darkness playing with the edge of her vision. The blackness slowly but steadily overcame the light. She vaguely heard a man yell, "We're losing her, hypodermic needle, now!" A woman replied, even more distant than the man, "We aren't supposed to interfere, Halsey warned us remember?" The darkness closed around her, releasing her from the pain. The last thing she heard was merely more than a whisper, "To hell with Halsey, this girl is 14 dammit." Cassandra stopped fighting the pull, closed her eyes, and fell into the eternal void. It was like a warm blanket, the inside of a hot baked potato, it spelled safety, freedom from this living hell.

Cassandra opened her eyes, she looked up to the starry sky. The eternal blue heavens reached down to her, it's endless stars stared back, calming her. The relief of pain was so astounding that Cassandra's spirit reached up to soar with the birds, she was back on Reach, where she

had lived and trained for eight long years. She wasn't in a tin-can floating in orbit, she wasn't lying in a small room breathing through a tube. She was home, where the birds flew high and free, her heart radiated with joy. She heard footfalls behind her, she knew it was John. No one else walked with such contained caution.

“What will happen next?” She let out a sigh as she lied down on the soft grass. The world bloomed with life, trees grew and entangled each others long branches, birds flew through the night sky, far off an owl screeched it's farewell. The weather was crisp, with a warm breeze, a night like this was rare.

He didn't reply as laid down next to her. They were both only fourteen but with the bodies of Olympic medal winners and minds brighter than the U.N.S.Cs best militant strategists. His hair was cropped short, maybe only an inch and a half long. His face was thin, and if you were ever lucky enough to catch him smiling, his face radiated pure warmth. His dirty blonde hair was short but his brown eyes were what took your breath away. When they weren't focused on winning, they were tender and promised protection.

Cassandra had the longest hair of all the Spartans, it fell to her shoulders in a delicate manner, it was straight and glossy. It was jet black, and was a bitch to get in a helmet. Her eyes were a deep blue, she was also the best judge of character. Just by looking in your eyes she could

tell a traitor from a friend. It was easy to get lost in her gaze. She was quiet and only opened up to people she trusted. When they had taken her, she had been shaved bald by one of the handlers when she stopped running. They say that maybe she was getting overheated with all of that hair, it was just an excuse to be cruel. She was one of the better looking Spartans.

“ Who knows? With the only trouble being a few organized rebels, maybe we can go home one day. Live life for ourselves, the ups and downs, all of it. Get drunk, have a hangover, just live life.”

The idea of freedom, to live life beyond Reach, it was staggering. She remembered very little of her life before she was kidnapped to be a Spartan. She had lived on Luna, with her mom and dad. Her dad was always gone but when he was there he was proud and taught her respect, when he was gone her mom kept her spirits high, Cheered her up when life was treading on top of her.

“ But that's just it, what will become of us? We've lived the past eight years with less than one hundred people, the same people day after day. What will become of us, when we are free to live.” She put extra emphasis on the word us.

John and her always had a special connection. He was

stronger and faster but she was smarter. While the boys played grav ball or capture the flag, she would be the one on the side, using her data pad or her favorite activity, drawing. Some days she felt as if she would just leave. Perhaps like Daisy and Ralph and Joseph did but not come back, ever. All the Spartans had replaced by a flash clone, which promptly died of natural causes. Her family thought she was dead, that was one of the things that kept her up at night. If she did break free, she would start a new life.

The most important talent of hers though, was the element of compassion. Life had been terrible for all the new Spartans in the first three or four years, they're time alone were what made it bearable. Life was hard on her but her fellow teammates could always come to her for help. Some nights they would just sit and talk, about how life kept getting harder and harder, how they would make it through together.

When John became a squad leader, it was as if there was a split between them. John slowly pushed her away, not on purpose but he had responsibilities. To him, life was all one game, the only way to go, is to win. He spent all of his time training, he blew her off to spar with Fred or Sam. She was just the pile of rubbish, rotting on the side on the court. Always there, but only acknowledged when he wanted her or rather needed her.

“I don't know, but all of this, the eight years of experience, life will be unique for us. Who knows?”

The autumn night flowed on, the meadow bloomed with life, the oaks around them turned orange with a dying glance. This was the first time they had set down and talked, been themselves, for months.

“Wherever the world takes us, I want to be with you John” she let her muscles relax. She looked to the right of her, where John had been lying next to her less than a second ago, he was gone.

She was on fire. That was the only thought in her head as she took in her first gasp for air. The needle was still in her chest as she came back to her living hell. The world around her was dull, blurs frantically worked around her. She felt as if she had stuck her hand on a stove burner, except every inch of her skin burned. It wasn't just her skin, it was inside of her. She felt something being pulled out of her heart, the hypodermic needle pulled out painlessly.

“Doctor, what the hell is wrong with her skin!” the female voice said panicked.

“Some kind of allergic-reaction get Halsey now or we'll lose her. ” the male doctor using his countless years of experience, but even he was confounded at what was

happening to the young girl before him. Cassandra heard footsteps running across the concrete floor. She opened her eyes but there was nothing to see, her optic nerve was fried already, she was blind.

As she tried to get an image of the world around her, she felt two things. The fire consumed every thought in her mind, breathing was difficult. She felt like a time-bomb. She became aware of a wetness around her. She felt it as she attempted to turn over. The wetness was HER, her skin really was burning, like candle wax from a candle.

She screamed, she let every last curse and insult out of her, every swear word she knew flowed through her raspy mouth. She screamed until her lungs gave out, until all she was left with were the sobs from her sightless eyes. The medical staff were doing what they could to help but the truth was, they didn't know what was happening, Cassandra could sense that, while they were trying, they were powerless. One of the squeezed her hand, just to let her know that she wasn't alone, she was appreciative of that. The pain began to drip away but only slightly so. She stopped crying and just listened to the room, to the people. Her eyes no longer worked, she couldn't feel herself, she didn't know if she was dead or not. Whatever it was, it was welcomed.

A slamming door brought her back to reality, but only slightly so, she heard high heels striking the cement, making a steady CLAK CLAK.

Cassandra heard Dr. Halsey's voice, stark and demanding.

"Have you stopped the injections?" she asked the technicians, without seeing, Cassandra knew Halsey wasn't looking at her.

"Ye-yes we lost her, the injections were 70% deposited" The man trembled, it was obvious that he feared Dr. Halsey, and what she would make him do. Dr. Halsey had always taken a liking to Cassandra, always cut her a small amount of slack, it was thanks to her that her hair was allowed over the regulation limit of 13 centimeters.

"Continue the injections, get the paddles ready in case you lose her again." Cassandra's spirits plummeted, the Doctor was her friend, she wouldn't condemn her- she couldn't. She felt tears brimming the edges of her eyes, threatening to burst free once again. She heard the medical personnel coming towards her, they were hesitant as they began getting the injections re-prepared. She did what little she could to brace herself for the pain to return. It was like being hit with a bus, no a train. She once again clinched her teeth and squeezed shut her broken eyes. Her body shook with what energy it had left. She screamed with renewed energy.

"I'm so sorry Cassandra, for all of this" Dr. Halsey managed to choke out. her voice cracked, as if she was holding back tears. Her body slowly began to become even more unresponsive as her cells continued to burn, her nerves stayed alive though because she felt



everything. She felt unconsciousness pulling on her once again.

Dr. Halsey pulled a stray hair out of Cassandra's eye. The girl was pained as she slept, her body was rigid and slightly shaking. She would have given anything to ease Cassandra's suffering, to give her peace, but ONI had given her strict orders to get as many functional Spartans as possible, no matter the moral costs. The Spartan-II project was her idea yet it was ONI who pulled it all out of proportion. It was they who gave her the funding and ordered her to collect the children. It was they who forced these augmentations, knowing the risk that they posed. As much as Dr. Halsey hated what she had done, the universe needed soldiers. One day she hoped to allow the Spartans achieve their inner peace, that is if any survived today. This was spartan augmentation. This is what would make or break the Spartans. Their training, their brains, meant nothing without these.

Dr. Halsey couldn't imagine what Cassandra felt right now, what little skin she had left was crimson red, and it peeled away from the young woman's flesh as she watched, unable to help. It was the molecular structure of her entegementary system, the muscular enhancement that counteracted with the unique molecules in her skin. Her skin was breaking itself apart, melting without cause. Dr. Halsey had checked and

double checked her bio-signs along with dozens of other aspects. The augmentations were working, just with this serious side effect. If she was correct, then she would pull through, and perhaps be healed enough to be a full spartan, if she was wrong, she will have killed an innocent young child.

Halsey stroked her hair with a mothers touch, her nimble fingers untangling matted knots that bound the child fine hair. As she worked through Cassandra's hair her hands soon became covered in coagulated blood and hair. Cassandra had always been one of the better looking Spartans and it was a shame to see her beautiful hair fall out. The young girls hair, raven black and soft as silk, was now being lost to an augmentation process that may also take this child's life.

Dr. Halsey quickly scanned the room, saw a Styrofoam cup with cold coffee. She picked it up and walked briskly away. She drank the bitter drink and as she quickly walked towards the cafeteria. If she stayed with the Spartans any longer, she would have stopped the augmentations just to save her own soul.