Chapter Fragment: Gods of War (Halo Fanfiction)

UNSC *Final Effort* (Modified *Leviathan*-class Heavy Cruiser), Portside Maintenance Conduit Gamma-7. The date is irrelevant. The only truth is the screaming metal and the stink of ozone and blood.

The *Final Effort* groaned like a dying leviathan. Flickering emergency strips cast jagged, strobing shadows down the cavernous, corpse-strewn conduit. Exposed cabling spat angry blue sparks onto the deck, illuminating drifting smoke and the scorch marks of plasma burns. Coolant hissed from ruptured pipes, forming greasy, ankle-deep pools reflecting the chaos above. The air thrummed with the basso profundo of distant explosions and the high-pitched shriek of stressed superstructure. This artery of the great ship was becoming its tomb.

And in its heart, two titans clashed.

The Master Chief-117 moved with the terrifying economy of a machine built for annihilation. His MJOLNIR Mark VI armor, matte olive green scarred by countless battles, absorbed the dim light. The angular plates - a layered fortress of titanium alloy, refractive coating, and reactive polymers - flared momentarily with a ripple of shimmering gold as a near-miss plasma bolt detonated against his energy shield. The impact sent a jolt through his frame, a dull ache blooming in his ribs despite the armor's dispersal fields.

He tracked his target through the HUD's crimson haze, the MA5B Assault Rifle bucking in his gauntleted hands. Tungsten-jacketed rounds screamed forth, tracers painting brief, deadly lines of orange fire in the gloom. They sparked and cratered against the far bulkhead, chewing through exposed machinery in showers of molten metal.

His target flowed like liquid shadow. Thel 'Vadamee, the Arbiter, was a whirlwind of lethal grace. His ancient, ornate combat harness, deep burgundy etched with silver sigils denoting his rank and shame, seemed to drink the light. The overlapping energy shielding woven into the thick, articulated plates flared a brilliant, defensive sapphire blue as the Chief's rounds impacted. Each hit was a hammer blow Thel felt resonate in his bones, a sharp sting transmitted through the harness's kinetic dampeners. His primary weapon, the Type-1 Energy Weapon - the Energy Sword, was an extension of his soul. Twin plasma blades erupted from the hilt with a vicious *crack-hiss*, casting an intense, actinic teal light that threw sharp, dancing reflections on the wet deck and sweating pipes. The air around it shimmered with heat.

"Your persistence is as irritating as your stench, *demon*!" Thel snarled, his voice distorted by his helmet's vocalizer. He lunged, the Energy Sword a blinding teal arc aimed to bisect the Spartan.

Chief sidestepped with preternatural speed, the searing plasma singing the air centimeters from his chest plate. The heat washed over him, intense even through the armor's insulation. He retaliated instantly, dropping the MA5B on its mag-lock and driving a powered fist encased in reinforced polymer and ceramic plating into the Arbiter's side. The impact was thunderous.

CRUNCH-THUD!

The Arbiter's shields flared violently sapphire, then flickered, overloading for a critical half-second. The kinetic force, only partially absorbed, slammed through the harness. Thel gasped, tasting copper - cobalt-blue Sangheili blood welling in his mouth. He felt a rib creak, the pain sharp and deep. He staggered, but didn't fall. The ancient armor held, groaning under the stress.

"Die? Didn't get the memo," Chief grunted, his voice a gravelly baritone filtered through his helmet speakers. He drew his M6D Magnum, its heavy frame gleaming dully, and fired three deafening rounds. Massive .50 cal Semi-Armor Piercing High Explosive (SAPHE) slugs erupted, their muzzle flash a blinding white-orange sun in the gloom. They slammed into the Arbiter's chest plate.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Each impact was a localized detonation. The Arbiter's shields flared sapphire once, twice, then collapsed entirely on the third hit with a shower of dying blue sparks. The raw kinetic force, coupled with the explosive fury, lifted the massive Sangheili off his feet. He crashed back onto the deck plating with a metallic clang, cobalt blood now freely flowing from his mandibles and a gash on his temple where his helmet had impacted the deck. His ornate chest plate was cratered and scorched black, the underlying nano-laminate visibly fractured.

Chief advanced, Magnum leveled. "End of the line, Arbiter."

Thel rolled, agony lancing through his chest, and snatched his discarded Type-25 Directed Energy Rifle (Plasma Rifle) from the deck. Its bulbous, organic-looking form glowed menacingly as he squeezed the trigger. A torrent of superheated magenta plasma bolts, each the size of a fist, screamed towards the Spartan. The air sizzled, superheating the damp atmosphere into steam.

Chief’s shields flared gold again, then failed under the sustained barrage. A bolt impacted his left shoulder pauldron. White-hot agony seared through him as the plasma burned through the outer ablative layer, then the refractive coating, finally scorching the underlying titanium and searing the bodysuit beneath. The smell of burnt ceramic and ozone mixed with the coppery tang of his own crimson human blood welling from the cauterized wound. He gritted his teeth, a guttural growl escaping his lips, and returned fire with the Magnum.

The Arbiter, moving with desperate speed fueled by pain and fury, dodged behind a massive coolant manifold. The heavy pistol rounds punched steaming holes through the thick metal, spraying superheated coolant in geysers of acrid vapor. The teal light of the Energy Sword flickered back to life from behind the cover.

"Your tenacity is... worthy," Thel rasped, his voice thick with blood and grudging admiration. He peered around the manifold, his amber eyes burning with fierce resolve. "But this ship is your grave, Spartan!"

Before Chief could respond, a new sound cut through the din of their duel and the groaning ship - a wet, guttural, multi-throated shriek. It echoed down the conduit, chilling and alien. Then came the scrabbling, the slithering, the sound of countless bodies moving with unnatural speed.

Around a bend in the conduit, spilling like a putrid tide, came the Flood. Infection Forms skittered across the ceiling and deck, glowing a sickly jaundiced yellow. Combat Forms, grotesque amalgamations of fallen UNSC Marines and Covenant Elites, lurched forward, limbs distended, weapons fused to rotting flesh, their forms dripping viscous slime that glowed a faint, putrid green. The stench of decay and methane rolled over them, thick and choking.

Both warriors froze, centuries of ingrained hatred momentarily eclipsed by primal, mutual horror. They locked eyes - Spartan visor to Sangheili helmet - across the sparking, corpse-littered deck. The unspoken understanding was instantaneous: this changed everything.

"Looks like the party's just getting started," Chief stated flatly, already pivoting his Magnum towards the new, overwhelming threat. The pain in his shoulder was a dull throb beneath the adrenaline.

The Arbiter hissed, gripping his Energy Sword tighter, its teal light reflecting in the multiple eyes of the approaching Flood. "A greater abomination demands our attention... *Spartan*." The title held no warmth, but the venom was gone, replaced by a grim acknowledgement. He glanced towards a jagged tear in the hull plating further down the

conduit, revealing the swirling violet and orange slipspace rift outside and the menacing silhouette of a Covenant assault carrier - *Seeker of Truth* - holding position dangerously close.

With a final, inscrutable look at the Chief, already laying down suppressing fire with his Magnum into the advancing Flood horde (the explosive rounds detonating Combat Forms in showers of green ichor and shattered bone), the Arbiter turned. Ignoring the agony in his chest, he summoned his reserves. He charged *towards* the hull breach, a desperate gambit.

Chief saw the move, understood it. He laid down a withering hail of fire, not at the fleeing Arbiter, but at the Flood surging to cut him off. Tungsten rounds and explosive slugs tore into rotting flesh, creating a brief, bloody corridor. "Run, Elite! This isn't over!"

The Arbiter didn't look back. He reached the breach, the howling vacuum tearing at his harness. With a mighty leap fueled by desperation and strength, he launched himself across the void. For a heart-stopping second, he was silhouetted against the swirling chaos of slipspace, a lone figure clad in battered, bloodied burgundy armor. Then, he vanished into the open hangar bay of the *Seeker of Truth*.

The Chief watched him go, the Magnum still hot in his hand, the stench of Flood and cordite thick in his nostrils, the ache of his wounds a constant reminder. The conduit was now solely his battlefield, the Flood's chittering mass closing in, the *Final Effort* screaming its death throes around him.

The Arbiter had escaped. But the Spartan's war, against an enemy far older and more horrifying than any Sangheili, had just entered a new, darker chapter. The mutual respect forged in the crucible of their brutal duel hung unspoken in the toxic air - a respect born not from friendship, but from the raw, terrifying understanding of what it took to be a God of War. He raised his weapon again.

The fight wasn't over. It never was.