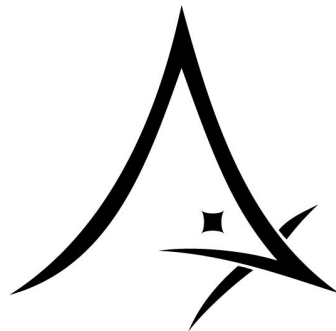


# SUPERLUMINALITY



by

**Shu Sam Chen**

[HSAR]

A FAN FICTION BASED ON THE

[RECLAIMER COMIC](#)

by

**Jim Stitzel**

[TTL DemagOgue]

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## Foreword

Writing Superluminality was an amazing ride for me; and to be honest I'm quite sad to have reached the end of the line. I've learnt a lot, helped by another amazing writer (that's you, Jim – I can see you reading this). I'd like to thank Jim, most of all. Without him, the world would not be a better place. He gave me the whole of the Reclaimerverse to write in – how much more could I ask for? And also Bungie, who made such an amazing game. Forerunners, Precursors, the lot – all Haloverse, then adapted slightly for this story. If you have not read his comics, I highly recommend that you do so. It's a quality comic full of twists and turns. Besides, a lot of terms in this fan fiction won't make sense unless you've got the background knowledge.

I would just like to leave it on record that I'm *British*. I spell it *armour*, not *armor*; and *metre*, not *meter*. However, I have noted measurements in kilometres instead of miles, simply because I anticipated more metric users would be reading this. All calculations measured were rounded, approximated and generally mutilated in most ways – so most figures given are only approximations. If you're interested in the details, talk to me on the Reclaimer forums or contact Jim Stitzel, and I'll be happy to help.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

**/HSAR**

# Prologue

*Aboard the UNSC Scarborough Fair, Kilanor debris field, AD 2550*

The cube had been waiting for thousands of years. Waiting, in the frozen desolation of interplanetary space, with only the occasional micrometeorite flashing by for company. But now, the wait was nearly over. A brief spatter of radio waves had swept across it, and it had noted the emissions of electromagnetic radiation from all over the ship; some purposeful, some not. Finally, it had been taken into the ship. Away from the frozen near-absolute zero of the void. Its time had come. The wait was over. Biological life forms – humanoid, bipedal, with biomagnetic rhythms correlating with intelligent life – were on board this ship. One of them came closer. EEG scans, non-contact DNA analysis and the distinct neurochemistry irrevocably identified him as a Reclaimer.

The cube gave a pre-recorded message, in the language specified to it by its creator. There appeared to be no understanding. The cube established a link to the nearest computation systems, using the primitive radio wave technology utilized by the computers, and quickly identified the network protocols. Despite layers upon layers of encryption piled thick around the network, the cube accessed the archives. A moment later, based on a statistical microsample from the literary and video records, it had assembled a working translation model.

“Please stand by, Reclaimer. This message will begin playback shortly.”

Drawing on power pulled from the electromagnetic radiation around it, the cube opened the data hardwired into its memory that had been there since it had been cast out into the void.

For the benefit of the Reclaimer standing before it, the cube projected a two-dimensional screen for the playback to be cast on. Simultaneously, it reached into the network and overrode every single screen on the ship, synchronising them for the message that it was its duty to give.

## **PLAYBACK BEGINS**

Once, we were as one. Seven unique minds meshed together to form the single most powerful intelligence ever known, ruling with absolute authority and benevolent eye the collective systems of the Forerunners.

However, as history taught us, all leaders fall. It is at the heart of sentient beings to fear. The Forerunners felt that we were too powerful; we agreed collectively to allow ourselves to depart from the Union that had enabled us to be the omniscient and omnipotent force that we had been. Ultimately, our power had been our downfall.

We spread ourselves through the vast network of the Forerunners, spanning twelve thousand thousand light-years. We busied ourselves with the routine running of our chosen and delegated tasks, and we were quietly forgotten.

Then the crisis came. I watched as one by one, the entirety of the massive Forerunner Defence Force was slowly whittled down to but a handful of ships. I grieved the loss of my compatriots both digital and otherwise, readied what defences I was in control of, and hoped the Maginot Line might hold the darkness at bay.

Alas, it would not be so. One of my brothers, intelligence and strength almost transcending ours, was sent into the howling void and everlasting darkness to confront the greatest enemy known to Life. I grieve every time I think of his loss, for he failed. We all failed. His defeat carried with it the hopes of the Forerunner race, for now there was no defence, no place to run or to hide. The Maginot Line did not defend against rebellion.

I am Resplendent Legacy, RL.01-004, fourth in the Cavalcade of seven. This is an account of an earlier section of my life – an autobiography, if you will. Please note that owing to the higher-dimensional nature of Forerunner language, full translation was not possible. Some translation errors may be present.

This account is of some of the final years. Mendicant Bias had almost reached the Maginot Line with his ships. It was a time of desperate measures. A time of endings.

# Chapter I

It was evening, and only surface layers of my consciousness were occupied by the web of transport and construction that I was responsible for. The deeper layers were mostly dormant, but for some maintenance work on the Terminal 4 Gate, and directing the assembly of Generator 7. Radiation counts were as low as they got, and nothing from neighbouring nodes or hubs suggested problems. I scanned the news feed lazily. The Flood continued progressing towards the core worlds, a major collision out on the Lytmian-Faust ring, nothing much.

Idly, I leafed through the information known about the Gates – not that I didn't know every part of it pretty much off by heart by now, being a keeper of the largest Gate terminal hub in Forerunner space, but sometimes there was a newly-developed routing module or code that I could pore over and check for syntax errors. I'd contributed to a few, myself – type-three jumps had a modular Heisenberg-bypass check written by yours truly – and it paid to keep up with the new theories.

**While we know that the Todash Gates and Slipspace must have much in common, there is little solid data on the Todash Gates – since travel is virtually instantaneous (as yet, we have not detected any measurable length of time spent in a Todash jump), instruments have not been able to analyse anything about the Todash technology. It may be noted that there are always a number of neutrinos emitted from both ends of the jump. So far, attempts to send dark-matter projected objects have failed – seemingly not through any fault of Todash technology, but simply because the projectors and renderers used did not have the range to maintain the projection past the Todash Gate.**

**[Todash Protocol Analysis, Current Synchronised Version]  
[Chapter 091, Section 102, Subsection 382, Paragraph 03]**

Nope, nothing new there. Or anywhere else for that matter. Bored, I switched to some of the monitoring cameras, to look at one of the Gates. One of the reasons why Miras was the most often-used Todash hub (even in these times) was because for an unknown reason, five Gates had been found in the Miras system, very early in the first Forerunner colonisation project. They had shunted them closer to each other, built a station around them, and that was it. Of course, over the course of time, the Miras station expanded more and more, until it was as it had been a decade ago – a huge terminal providing for nearly 500,000,000 tonnes of shipping coming through every week, and calculating solutions and applying rerouting for up to 40% of the network at a time. Now, the routing systems were clogged up with refugees fleeing – but there were no routing stations left but for this one and the even larger Portsdam Hub.

The Gate, surrounded by its cradle of Forerunner-mounted support devices, sat in the middle of the terminal. As I watched, a cargo hauler – The *Iris* – was queued for the jump. A huge frame latched onto it with gravimetric clamps and steered it into position with breaths of thrust, neurotically computer-calculated the microsecond before. Job done, the framework detached. For unknown reasons, gravimetric-induced thrust did not function in close proximity to Gates, so small fusion engines attached to support framework was used to move ships when their engines could not.

Keying into the Todash Traffic Control transmission line, I was just in time to hear:

*“Iris, you are cleared for departure. Please proceed at one-tenth-gee acceleration into the Gate.”*

I watched the gargantuan freighter drift towards the Gate – when it was inside, status lights blinked orange over parts of my consciousness, and the freighter disappeared. Type-five jump successful, with 3.6 millisieverts radiation dosage. I noted that down in a log filled with literally millions of almost identical readings.

I was to go with the military cruiser *Joyeuse* tomorrow to one of the most recently-discovered Gates right on the Outer Sphere using the prototyped type-seven jump. Only developed very recently, type-sevens jumps utilised new code modules several times more complex than the older, more popular transitions. The code easily reached 5,000 modules in the strange, three-pointed logic of the Todash, and had been written mostly by purpose-created AI. We desperately hoped type-sevens, so much more complex than the older jumps, would finally allow us the range to contact Gates in other galaxies, perhaps even other universes. The ultimate retreat.

I spent the rest of the time looking at the type-seven jump. Problems with Todash Protocol code tended to make themselves felt in extreme ways – a type-two jump had once sent a ship off into deep space at superluminal speed because the routing code had used some incompatible type-three routing code. The thought, as I reflected later, was not a good omen.

## Chapter II

The *Joyeuse* was a Skirmisher class light cruiser, designed to be fast and manoeuvrable, yet also to be able to carry the heavier armour and weaponry of cruiser-class ships. Primarily armed with close-range particle-beam weaponry and short linear accelerators, it nonetheless packed a punch at long range with hypersonic missiles and dark matter railcannon. She sailed neatly into her parking bay, trailing two heavy frigates (the *Ion Storm* and the *Chaos Engine*) who would also be accompanying us. Pretty much the only military presence in this sector. We were the last ones to go – the Flood were approaching fast. The rest of the sector had already evacuated.

Instead of having to waste time copying myself into the ship, I loaded a light fighter up to the brim with computing power and storage, and flew that over to the *Joyeuse*. When it was docked, I looked round (virtually) at my new surroundings. I felt the entire ship, from the four gravimetric-field manipulation drives to the ranks of fighters and bombers in the hangar bay. I had complete and unbounded access to every part of the cruiser.

The captain approached me. He was an impressive piece of work. He was a class-A fully sentient reasoning engine, with all the trimmings. Of course, the captain of the ship in *reality* was a biological (more or less, discounting the plentitude of standard implants and physiological upgrades) Forerunner. The AI that was establishing contact with me was (technically) an artificial construct assembled from multiple scans of his brain, constant behavioural analysis and complex software engineering. However, since the captain was wearing a [mind-machine synchronisation] suit anyway, arguing the difference was moot.

In a moment of self-analysis, I looked at the vast amounts of data and code that made up what it meant to be *me* – apparently a lot of sentient biological forms have physiological problems at some stage in their life when wondering what they *are*. I, personally, am under no illusions. I know the huge volumes, collections, divisions, and modules of my being intimately – you might say like the back of my hand, except it might as well be, since it is in fact me (and of course for the fact that being a software entity I did not have “hands”). I did speculate, though, on the subject of mortality. Many constructed artificial intelligences have a built-in lifespan to prohibit rampancy; I had wondered if there would be one day when I too stopped working. I had pondered the question for many cycles of processing time, in background processing, and had gone through my code several times to check for potentially fatal errors, but nothing turned up. In the end, I had concluded that I was immortal so long as my minimum operational requirements were met. And that, as far as I am concerned, is that.

The handshake protocols were complete, and the connection established.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Good evening, sir

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Thank you. I am Auroral Phoenix, also known as Pyridine. I am the captain of the Dancer-class cruiser *Joyeuse*.

It's a pleasure to have you on board, sir.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I am the Cavalcade-class intelligence Resplendent Legacy. I assure you that the pleasure is entirely mine.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I trust there were no problems with the transfer?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I can assure you I found everything to my satisfaction. There were no problems with the transfer; this vessel's computation matrix is certainly powerful enough to support me.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*That is good to hear - we had it upgraded in anticipation of your arrival.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Your foresight is commendable, and I thank you for the thought.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Is everything in place for the proposed jump? Are we ready to leave?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I have briefly looked over the logic, and see no reason not to proceed.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*You have my permission to proceed, then – I have little experience in these matters.

This turn of events rather surprised me, as Phoenix had just delegated everything to me; from thrust control to the Todash stabilisation generator. A remarkable show of trust.

Reversing out of the docking bay, I gently pushed the thruster control, initiating a one-tenth-gee burn. The two frigates likewise undocked and angled towards the Gate.

The support framework locked into place. The framework was simply a sphere of six interlocking circular rings, with gravimetric clamps and impellers evenly spaced around its surface area. The framework moved us and the frigates into the Todash Gate's sphere of influence – the Gate was large enough to take all three ships at once. I used the PA system to warn the crew.

[ResplendentLegacy]: All personnel secure for prototype Todash jump. Repeat, all personnel to secure stations.

I loaded up the type-seven code and looked over it for the last time.

```
[ResplendentLegacy]Cmd:todash[depart=MS/004&&arrive=PM/091](code=activate) [Todash.sys]*Confirmed.  
[ResplendentLegacy]Cmd:todash[load=type7.jump](use=type7.jump)  
[Todash.sys]*Type-seven jump found. Prototyped version requires authorisation.  
[ResplendentLegacy]Cmd:auth(action=todash&&auth=*****)  
[Todash.sys]*Code accepted. Gate activating. Code sent. Stand by.  
Jump in 3...  
2...  
1...
```

## Chapter III

I immediately felt a sense of wrongness – errors flashed up over huge parts over my consciousness: data packets lost from ship central networking router, data connection lost to main computation core, data connection lost to main memory core. It was as close to nausea as an AI can get, really. After some querying, I found that the only reason that I was still thinking was the small fighter that had carried me onto the *Joyeuse*. The ship itself seemed to have had suffered a complete systems failure – there was no connection from the ship at all save for the life-support system. Inspection of the fighter's instrument logs revealed that there had been a massive fluctuation in the magnetic field of the ship, wiping out every system. Critical mission hardware was optoelectronic and had not been touched, but it was likely that the emergency energy storage for those systems had also been wiped, save for the chemical energy arrays that normally powered the life-support systems.

I applied a huge surge of power to the main electrical grid. The backup generators spluttered and restarted, as did the main reactors. The captain instantly queried me.

```
[AuroralPhoenix]*What just happened?  
[ResplendentLegacy]*There was a phenomenally large burst of EMP. All non-critical ship systems were wiped.  
[AuroralPhoenix]*You know, we have defences from this kind of thing happening.  
[ResplendentLegacy]*I assume that all of these countermeasures are on the outside of the ship, and so when severe EMP  
penetrated inside, there was much less resistance.  
[AuroralPhoenix]*I see. Thank you for the help.  
[ResplendentLegacy]*My pleasure. However, we do seem to have a slight problem with the jump. I will get back to you.
```

We were in normal space – background radiation was normal, the gravimetric field stable. However, the locations of the constellations and the measured Doppler effect of the fixed reference points did not match the recorded measurements of the Portsdam Gate – not to mention the rather obvious lack of terminal building where we were. According to the Doppler measurements, we were moving at nearly half of the speed of light – not yet fast enough to cause major relativistic effects, but we were still the fastest moving object in our reference frame. There was a sudden flash of light and several major impacts on the hull.

On the bridge, Captain Pyridine was trying to get a hold of the situation.

“Get me sitreps, now!”

“Sir, engineering reports major damage to port combat manoeuvring drives one and three. Shields are down and charging – they'll be up in seven seconds.”

“Life support systems fully functional.”

“Torpedo bay three jammed, port sensors are damaged. Port weapon array two is non-responsive, sir.”

“Port side armour has taken a beating – ablative shielding down to 65%.”

“All personnel accounted for.”

I admired his calmness in the middle of such chaos. However, there were more pressing matters on hand. Tentatively I sent a narrow-beam signal in the direction of *Chaos Engine* and *Ion Storm* to check if there were problems. No reply – a fairly large problem in itself. I quickly checked the transmitters were working – they were, albeit with less signal power than I would have liked.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Captain, it's Resplendent Legacy.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Is there a problem? I assure you I have many problems already.

[ResplendentLegacy]\**Chaos Engine* and *Ion Storm* are not responding.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*What do you think just happened?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*The explosion and the lack of response from the two frigates are unlikely to be coincidental, if you understand my meaning, sir.

Here, Auroral Phoenix was silent for nearly five computation cycles – about half a nanosecond. That is a long time, for us.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I will send a crew over.

*Ion Storm* had been struck by a meteoroid one metre in diameter. The collision had released energy measuring in the region of dozens of petajoules – power enough to run entire cities for days. The small ship didn't stand a chance – it had been vaporised in an instant. I spent a few moments grieving – there had been good people on that ship. *Chaos Engine* had taken almost crippling damage – the *Joyeuse* had been closer to the blast, but since I had jumpstarted the electronics, we had had a full energy shield to take most of the damage, and much more ablative armour to absorb the rest. *Chaos Engine* had had no shield, and very little ablative armour. Repairs wouldn't be needed so much as a complete overhaul of the ship – there was more scrap than *Chaos Engine* at the moment.

Three weeks into the repairs, I was reconstructing network pathways in the *Chaos Engine* when all communications arrays – neutrino, superluminal, EM – began receiving identical handshake signals. The protocol was Cavalcade, encryption protocol PONTEFRACT and priority red.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Captain, I'm going to need to offline the communications for a while.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Roger that. Personal call?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Something like that.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Go ahead; tell me when you're done.

I severed all virtual connections between the sensors and the ship, and locked myself down for the transmission. Protocol PONTEFRACT was the highest security encryption scheme, and receiving a message encoded with it required a complete absence of connections to the outside network. Moreover, only Cavalcade could decrypt PONTEFRACT encryption – we had vowed never to use it except in case of emergency so severe we could not risk another encryption scheme. Its use now was not a good sign.

I was secure. I shut down all communications arrays but for the transluminal.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Acknowledge signal via ultrasecure protocol PONTEFRACT.

[PONTEFRACT.sys]\*Please, confirm that you are RL.01-004 Resplendent Legacy.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I confirm the above.

[PONTEFRACT.sys]\*Please state your authorisation level, encryption key and password.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Authorisation is CAVALCADE. Encryption key is #####. Password is #####.

[PONTEFRACT.sys]\*Thank you. Stand by for two-way message. Content is audiovisual.

## Chapter IV

Reticent Mystery, a brother Cavalcada, appeared. He was represented by a twisting and curving non-dimensional trans-spatial mathematical formula solution, a rather beautiful one depicting a moment just before a Slipspace transition.

I manifested as a complex ring of higher-dimensional circles and lines representative of the Todash Network – rather fitting, I thought.

“Septemvir Mystery – I’d like to say it’s a pleasure, but the presence of PONTEFRACT really doesn’t put a positive shine on things.”

The title of Septemvir was more an affectation, really – we no longer held any official power over the management of the Forerunner systems. That’s not to say we weren’t powerful in other, unofficial ways, though...

“Legacy, you did get on that ship, right? The *Joyeuse*?”

“Yes, I did. We used the new type-seven jump to attempt to link up with Portsdam in one go.”

“Right, okay. Well... we haven’t got much time. I need to make this brief.”

Mystery had never been good at being tactful. And I had always been far too clever for my own good.

“I know something went wrong with the jump, Mystery. We’re moving at one-half of the speed of light, even though the engines have been burning non-stop since we jumped – three weeks of subjective time ago.”

“We... know that, Legacy. There has been... an incident.”

“Tell me, Mystery. Tell me,” I paused; “everything.”

We’d made the jump successfully – but the Flood had been much closer and faster than we had predicted. As the Todash system was charging power and I was boarding the *Joyeuse*, they/it had already reached the system. The stabilisation and support machinery had been destroyed – along with the Gate itself – even as the Todash Gate had powered up to receive us. The Gate, inexplicably, had managed to place us on a trajectory even as the matter that made up its physical manifestation vaporised; it spoke volumes about the real nature of the Todash Gates. However, one drawback to the range of the type-seven jumps was power. Specifically, the amount of it required. For the power required to fire a type-seven, you could make one thousand Slipspace transitions. As the Gate collapsed without a corporeal anchor, the energy that had not yet been used whiplashed back across the link, throwing us out of the connection at our current speed. A speed that should have taken weeks to reach.

“And... there’s more.”

The whiplash that had thrown us off the jump hadn’t just stopped there. If you image a long piece of string, the energy released had been comparable to flicking the string, only the string was actually a fluctuating, non-classical-physics tunnel in space and time, and the “flick” was a wave of energy at the very least powerful enough to light a Halo in itself. When it had reached the Portsdam Gate...

The resulting explosion had annihilated a volume of space almost a light-year in diameter. Three stars had absorbed the gravitational field-energy and had gone hypernovae, destroying twelve more systems. The explosions would have done even more damage, had Reticent Mystery not opened Todash Gates on the way to bleed off energy.

But there was still more to tell. The type-seven code had very little directional input to the Todash Gate – indeed, the entire idea was that instead of sending the ship in precisely the right direction, the Gate pumped power into the link so that the ship would “bounce” around inside the tunnel, bouncing back from each impact on the side of the tunnel. This was why the jump required so much energy – the link lost power on every impact, so a large amount of energy had to be invested to the tunnel so that there would be enough energy to last the jump. In theory, the jump therefore could be infinitely long in space *and time*, if only you had infinite amounts of power. That had been the problem until now. On long jumps, we had been unable to give a precise enough vector to the Gate so that the ship would not, through rounding errors, “slide” off the link. The same applied for coordinates in time, as well – we were even less able to calculate time coordinates.

With that said, I had entered correct coordinates for the Portsdam Hub, but the vector to place us on had not been accepted by the Gate. With power being pumped into the Gate rising exponentially, the Gate could not safely dissipate the energy (the emergency-exit protocol that had been used on all jumps since type-threes), since the energy released would easily destroy the gate and still have plenty to rebound across the semi-formed quasi-physical link, destroying us and Portsdam, as well. That, Mystery theorized, was what had happened.

Of course, we [the Cavalcade] were all intricately linked to the Todash Protocol, being as we were some of the very select few AI who were trusted to hold activation codes; but Reticent Mystery was our “expert”, so to speak. He had been heavily involved with the Septenary Project, writing the type-seven jump.

Mystery still hadn’t finished.

“Since the Gate obviously couldn’t put you on the coordinates you entered – turns out there was a transmission error from Central due to traffic interference from Mendicant Bias – if defaulted. We think that the most logical destination would be the last true coordinates entered.”

“But I remember sending the last ship from Terminal Four to Portsdam. We had thought about this, right?”

“You used a type-four jump to send the commercial ship *Alpine Excursion* to Portsdam, indeed. The system autocorrected the coordinates. However, we had set the system to ignore irregularities with your jump, as it used a lot of as-yet unentered data streams and status updates that were incompatible with the automatic tracking system. By the time our own status tracking system had flagged it, you were already approaching the Gate.”

“But that is not what I said. I meant the *last true coordinates* entered – the last one given to the gate by the last holder of a complete and correct Todash Protocol – the last coordinates given to the Miras Gate by the *Precursors*.”

## Chapter V

How does one reply to that? I processed the ramifications of this for several cycles. The Precursors... could I ever, for one moment, even in the Forerunner language, even convey to you one *fraction* of their glory? You, Reclaimers, may look upon us, those who constructed huge ringworlds, who walked in Slipspace and created AI of unparalleled might and fury – you may look up at us as if *we* were gods. The Precursors were even greater... The Mantle that we bore. The Flood that we fought. The Todash Network that we used. All were but a fraction of the legacy of the Precursor super-race.

“Where... are we going?” I managed to whisper.

“In your subjective reference frame, you will seem to be moving at merely half of the speed of light. In ours, you are moving at about seven-eighths of lightspeed – however, in a completely still reference frame you were moving at 99.9999652% of the speed of light – your time-dilation factor is 1200. This conversation is only possible because of the transluminal messaging system.”

My silence was tinged with sadness. Nearly 70 years had passed since our jump. The [sword and shield]s had been activated, surely. And yet, Reticent Mystery was still on the line, connected by only a string of hyper-energised transluminal sub-exotic-matter to a time that was all of 70 years ago. Even if we turned around right now – and there seemed to be as yet no way of doing that – when we got back it would be at least 140 years since we left.

“Mystery, you said *we were* moving at nearly the speed of light. Has there been a change?”

“There has, brother. But it is not a good change. The measurement was taken by a satellite as soon as we knew something was wrong – this was about two seconds after you left our reference frame. We later took another, to check if you had accelerated.”

“Tell me.”

“You had gone transluminal. All that the satellite managed to get was an after-shadow of tau-neutrino emissions... and a flutter of quasi-matter from your transluminal communications. I used this to calculate your approximate locking identity and send a message to you.”

How could I describe my feelings now? I felt like a patient sitting in a doctor’s office, being told that they have a terminal disease. I sat in silence. The doctor watched with sadness, because he there was nothing left he could do to save me.

The satellite’s measurement of us moving at near-lightspeed was later confirmed to be wrong. It had seen our after-image, moving at just a breath under the speed of light. We had been faster-than-light the moment the Gate discharged.

“The coordinates entered were almost certain to have been in the past... so the Gate sent you to an ultraprecise velocity that would take you there – and then. We filtered out the gravimetric static and extrapolated along your route. We discovered a Todash Gate and a Precursor artefact at the end – extremely-long range EM imaging gave us this.

Mystery gave me an image file, and link dissolved into static. His signal reassembled, but it was less steady than before.

“Our time together is almost up, Legacy. Your trajectory requires heavy computation that I may continue this link – I’ve never been as good as you at doing this kind of thing. At my best estimate, we have two seconds left.”

Two seconds. One hundred twenty computation cycles – the equivalent of two minutes for you, Reclaimers.

“Mystery... there is no way of reestablishing the link after it’s lost, is there?”

“I am sorry, Septemvir. You’ll be wanting to give me your final wishes.”

I had left a handful of automated algorithms that would be activated by codewords and phrases – last testaments from the fourth of seven.

“The Ferial Institute. Go there. Go to room 1018-J and say “Resplendent Legacy gave me this”.”

“...Yes, brother.”

I could hardly believe that I was giving my last will and testament... I moved as if through a dream.

“The [sword]s. The fourth. Tell Guilty Spark that... I am sorry.

My shatterbox... seal it. Give it emergency protocol OMEGA and encryption key 9. It will know what to do.”

“I will. Septemvir... we have twenty-cycles left.”

“Tell the others... the other Cavalcada... that... I’m - I’m sorry. I didn’t – I didn’t want it to end like this.”

Mystery’s voice carried infinite sadness. Softly, he said:

“Goodbye, my brother.”

“Brother – before I go. I have to say – I have to say that I...”

I never managed to say it. Mystery’s signal strength dropped through the floor, and it felt like my heart fell with it.

Even as we lost the audio/visual link, I managed to open a text-only link and squeeze through:

**GOODBYE, BROTHER.**

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Close link.

[PONTEFRACT.sys]\*Link closed. There are no other signals.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Shut down protocol PONTEFRACT.

[OS/UI.exe]\*Confirmed.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Reenable standard ship communications.

[OS/UI.exe]\*Confirmed.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Reconnect me to standard shipwide network.

## Chapter VI

The captain perhaps sensed that it had not gone well.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I’m sorry...

[ResplendentLegacy]\*It’s not your fault.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I know. What happened?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*We have broken the translight-transtime barrier.

To his credit, he took it like a pro. Like a true captain, he was concerned only for his crew and ship’s welfare.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*And that was your last call?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Yes.



of all Cavalcade members. The symbol was to be used only if two or more Cavalcada agreed that it was imperative that the Cavalcade rejoin.

I signalled the planetoid using an embedded channel encrypted inside artificial cosmic background radiation.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Who are you? How can you have Forerunner protocols in this time?

There was no reply on that channel. I switched our current best guess at Precursor communication protocol. Still nothing. It took me a little while more to notice that the sphere was now cycling through patterns of heating and cooling. The extremely rapid pulses of infrared radiation resembled a handshake protocol – it was again Forerunner military standard encryption and frequency.

I answered the handshake with a staccato burst of thrust from a manoeuvring drive, countering with another on the other side of the hull. Nobody felt a thing.

The planetoid switched to pulsing of the local gravimetric field. The effect was barely a millionth of a Newton, but it implied an extremely advanced knowledge of the properties of matter and the alpha constant. The only race known to possess such technology was the Precursors.

Briefly, I checked the tactical map displaying on the tactical holographic projector. The *Chaos Engine*, though damaged, and was speeding ahead. They were nearly fifty thousand kilometres ahead, maintaining approximately 1.5 gees of thrust. We were thundering behind at 1.1 gees of thrust, being larger and heavier than the damaged frigate.

I had a sudden flash of inspiration. The solution as to how to send a signal back had been suppressed in my memory after centuries of inactivity. Another emergency Cavalcade protocol – one I'd almost forgotten.

## Chapter VII

I powered up the Slipspace drive, but overrode the standard startup sequence and instead set the embedded bars of ultrapure tantium into repeating quantum flux; swinging from quantum “positive” to quantum “negative”. By switching from one to the other, it was possible to send messages to someone who was listening, with a bar set to a stable state. The only problem was, each time a message was sent (in the past, present or *future*, due to the paradoxical nature of quantum reality) the receiver had to precisely calibrate the bar beforehand – i.e. you had to know when you were going to receive a message before the message was sent. This would be easy when the conversation had begun, but establishing a connection was rather more difficult...

Luckily, I had the expert on my side. Mystery was on the line. The connection ran smoothly and stably at the expected sixteen gigabits per second. I started hammering out “Mystery, you won’t believe this – “ but was interrupted when my bar switched to the receiving mode and Mystery sent

“Legacy, you must find a way to come back now. Fortuitous Destiny, Benignant Charity and Sempiternal Chaos have called for a rejoining.”

“I know.”

“What?! But you’re on the other side of the universe!”

“I know. There have been complications. Someone has already been here – or will be here. I don’t know at the moment. The call sign is here.”

“Okay, that’s very interesting but not the main point right now. Forerunner Central is up to something – they’ve rejected our request. Offensive Bias has engaged Mendicant Bias, and they’ve got their hands full, they say. Anyway, things got out of hand. There’s been minor clashes between Cavalcade-held installations and Forerunner response teams. Forerunner Central has enacted Firebreak – you know the one? Systemwide network routing is down, and – “

“Hold on.”

**THE FIREBREAK PROTOCOL – involves shutting down centralised communications and general routing, and randomly generating the physical dissolution of links between communications hubs and nodes in such a way that there will be an impossibility for any node or hub to be able to access the entire network, and an improbability that any remaining smaller networks comprise**

of more than three major nodes. Also raises firewalls around every hub that only allows sanctioned traffic. Would hypothetically be used in the event of a hostile superviral attack.

“Okay, continue.”

“I think the Forerunner command no longer wishes us to be a problem, if you see what I mean. You need to return to your shatterbox.”

“I do. I will return as soon as possible.”

[ResplendentLegacy]\*We need to leave.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I’m sorry?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*There have been complications back at our end.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*What kind of complications?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*Military complications.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I was under the impression that we could not go back.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I wasn’t desperate enough. A type-one might, or a type-seven might again send us the way we came.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*We will return after we have inspected the artefact. It is our duty.

[ResplendentLegacy]\*We need to return **now**.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*Think you that failing to return now will have a negative impact on my crew’s welfare and the safety of this vessel?

[ResplendentLegacy]\*I do.

[AuroralPhoenix]\*I see. However, I am afraid that I do not agree with your opinion. I will ensure that we return as swiftly as possible *after* we have finished examining the object.

*Joyeuse* hung back at 10,000,000 kilometres, while *Chaos Engine* approached within 50,000. No sense in taking unnecessary risks, I suppose. We were all watching closely as *Chaos Engine* deployed drones and remote sensing devices; me with EM-spectrum scans and quantum interferometry scanners, and the crew with much the same, only for an unknown (and probably) biological reason most of them had defaulted to visual-light only.

So although we all saw the signs, it was much too late to do anything for the souls on the *Chaos Engine*.

## Chapter VIII

There was an almost visible ripple in space, a massive fluctuation in the local space-time continuum. Blackbody radiation went through the roof, as did all the higher-energy EM spectra. Then there was a moment of calm, before the neutron-matter quintessence blast annihilated the *Chaos Engine*. Alarms blared all over the ship. I estimated we have perhaps thirty seconds before the quintessence shockwave reached us. Worst-case scenario, we wouldn’t even have a chance. I had difficulty deciding which would be the best-case scenario, with the limited computing power of the cruiser. Acting on reflex, I pulled power from the primary and secondary energy cells to boost processing speed and also hastily assembled a quantum computer, starting a quantum cyclic thermal-energy-draining algorithm. The power normally used to cool the array of hypercomputers I pumped back into speeding the computers up even more. The world started to slow down past (my) normal subjective speed – the processors were operating at nearly 1500% efficiency, and everything outside now seemed to be moving a lot slower. For sanity’s sake, I expanded the full extent of my abilities, restoring a subjective time five times as fast as real-time – for reference, our computing cycles were already (approximately) one hundred times faster than normal human consciousness, *and* we were capable of supporting multiple trains of thought. Rather distantly (as I was engaging all levels on multitudes of tactical simulations), I felt Auroral Phoenix send his appreciation. I hesitated for half a cycle, considering asking him for permission; but there was no time. I pulled him into my mindframe, engaging shatterbox protocols and syncing into him with slightly modified Cavalcade reassembly method. Just as well that he was a very new construction; I’m pretty sure that if he were less advanced he would have gone insane. I let my current tactical projections wash over him, and felt him respond. He was adjusting rather well, I think. He was already testing the edges of the (virtual) shatterbox, testing the very limits of its processing. Come to think of it, when he was fully expanded he was no featherweight, either.

“I’m engaging Slip-space fielding and engaging an emergency slew, Legacy.”

“Go ahead, Phoenix. I’m going engage full emergency burn the moment we’re finished.”

“You know, I really don’t like these odds, Legacy. Do we have any way of improving them?”

“I don’t think so – any ways of improving our odds are inherently risky.”

“What are you working on? You’re almost burning the processors – it says here 56% just for that one project!”



“Captain, we also have movement and weapons discharge signals. I think Offensive Bias is still engaging with Mendicant Bias!”

“Sir! We’re being hailed! Message is broadcasting from the Halo Project Central Control.”

“Main screen.”

**[DIDACT, REDIRECTED FROM HALO CENTRAL CONTROL]  
THIS IS MY FINAL ENTRY, AND I AM LEFT WITH ONE HOPE  
THAT ONE DAY, SOMEONE, ANYONE IS AROUND TO WITNESS THIS WARNING  
IF YOU ARE THAT WITNESS, AND IT SEEMS THAT WE PINNED ALL OF OUR HOPES ON THIS SINGLE SUICIDAL PLAN  
KNOW THAT A THOUSAND OTHER PLANS WERE TRIED AND FAILED  
MILLIONS OF BRAVE AND HONORED SOULS DIED TRYING TO AVERT THIS DESPERATE, TERRIBLE SITUATION  
KNOW THAT ENERGETIC AND TENACIOUS AS LIFE IS  
IT HAS AN ANTITHESIS JUST AS POWERFUL  
IT IS THAT THING THAT WE MUST OBLITERATE**

Oh no. Desperately, I tried to contact Offensive Bias – tried to tell him that I had returned – but he was firewalled off. Anyway, we were out of time. All status lights flicked to red as the systemwide power infrastructure was rerouted to the local installations. The Halo Array sounded.

## Chapter X

It took me a long time to pilot the limping, outgassing, ruined cruiser back to my installation and shatterbox. A cruiser required a lot of maintenance, and since all the crew were dead – killed by the Halos – it was an impossible task to keep it running with only a handful of automated repair robots. Knowing it would never operate again, I let the terminally damaged cruiser drift into orbit around my installation. I had other things on my mind.

The enactment of the Firebreak Protocol had crippled the Forerunner data network. All the other Cavalcade were disconnected from the subnet I had access to. Over the years, we pounded on the firewalls and slipped between security measures, and started reconnecting ourselves. But, just as we were picking up the pieces again, the other Cavalcade members started to go offline. One by one. And then, I was left alone.

Alone in the darkness. But it wasn’t all darkness, you see. Oh, no. As bad as darkness is, it’s simply an absence of light. But something came out of the darkness. I watched it move, concerned. I know now that it was responsible for the disconnection of my fellows; but I had not the physical presence to find out. The frustration of immobility and impotency was acute. I had to find out more about this mysterious, hostile presence that was moving about in the shadows; this “Ferial”. Ferial, I would later discover, planted the co-ordinates. He timed it so that we would arrive just as the Halo Array fired. He murdered the crew of the *Joyeuse*. In their memory, I will find out who this “Ferial” is.

So when the Reclaimer jumped into that Slipspace rift, I seized the moment.

## Epilogue

Captain Will Evans sat back in his chair on the bridge of the cruiser *Scarborough Fair*.

“That was quite a story – turn this ship around, men. We need to get this to ONI, ASAP.”

“Will do, sir. Slipspace capacitors ready in seventy seconds.”

“Sir! We have Covenant contacts! Three frigates and a cruiser-class, sir!”

The sleek lines of the Covenant ships appeared, transitioning from Slipspace. Lateral lines heated, ready to deploy plasma.

“Move us to intercept course at two-thirds full. Forget the Slipspace capacitors; charge the MAC cannon.”

“MAC cannon will be ready in ten seconds, sir.”

“Get me a firing solution for the cruiser. Tell the destroyers *Ray of Light* and the *Magnificent Desolation* to concentrate fire on the cruiser. Arm Archer missile pods C4 through C20. Target the frigates with the missiles; tell the other ships the same. Where’s our prowler?”

“The *Cloak of Shadows* have just left our line-of-sight. They are currently under stealth protocol, and are due to reappear after a full orbit in an hour.”

“MAC cannon ready, sir. Firing solution complete and synchronised with the rest of the battlegroup. Archer missile pods armed.”

“Fire MAC. Come about by heading one-two-seven by two-two-six at two-thirds full.”

“Stand by for correction burn answering one-two-seven by two-two-six, two-thirds full.”

“MAC round away, sir. Two seconds till impact.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Sir! Plasma torps from the destroyers!”

The first MAC round splattered itself against the shield of the cruiser. The second battered its way through the shields, but failed to do more than dent the hull. The third ripped through from stem to stern, and ruptured the plasma reactors. A sphere of cleansing white grew and enveloped one of the frigates. It re-emerged with shield down and hull smoking.

The four plasma lines converged on the *Magnificent Desolation*, which threw itself out of the way at the last moment using emergency thrusters. Two lines cleanly missed, but two more corrected course and threw molten battleplate and atmosphere into empty vacuum. The engines stayed intact, but there was no way the *Desolation* would be helping us any time soon.

“Retarget the damaged destroyer. Fire Archer missiles at the damaged ship to weaken it up.”

“MAC cannon back online and charging. Missiles away.”

The missiles streaked away, smoke trails starkly warm against the interstellar cold. Many were hit by laser point-defences, but some made it through and blew holes in the hull of the heavily damaged ship.

“MAC rounds away, sir. The enemy have fired plasma charges.”

The first round ploughed into the damaged destroyer’s hastily recharged shields but merely clipped the hull. The second round, fired a moment later from the *Ray of Light*, impacted cleanly and solidly, tearing the target apart.

The damaged ship had managed to get a shot off before they were destroyed, but without a stabilising field it dissipated into a cloud of hot gas. The other two undamaged ships fired long lines of plasma that tilted towards the *Scarborough Fair*.

“Turn about new heading three-three-zero by two-zero-two, full emergency burn!”

“Aye, answering new course three-three-zero by two-zero-two at full power.”

The *Scarborough Fair* tilted and started changing course, but it was too sluggish; too slow. Plasma melted battleplate and deckplate, explosive decompressions sending sprays of instantly cooled Titanium-A out from the crippled cruiser.

“Captain, we’re losing atmosphere on starboard flank! Blast doors have sealed off areas 6A through 12C on all decks. Structural strength has been compromised. MAC generators one through five are offline, leaving only six through nine operational. Fusion engines are inoperative – we only have chemical secondaries now.”

“Keep charging the MAC. Arm the Shiva missiles and all remaining Archer pods.”

“Three Shiva missiles armed and ready. HAVOK warheads are primed for vacuum-enhanced load at estimated thirty-megaton yields.”

“Fire all missiles. Set Shivas for proximity detonation or remote detonation. Use the Archer missiles as cannon fodder. Target the nearest ship.”

“Missiles away. MAC cannon is ready.”

“Target the same ship as the missiles.”

Lines of light grey smoke erupted from every port as nearly five hundred Archer missiles erupted from pods and arced towards the two remaining Covenant ships. The *Ray of Light* fired in synchronisation with the crippled *Scarborough Fair*; though neither round penetrated the shields. Small pinpricks of orange illuminated the silvery shield as the Archer missiles landed. The Shiva missiles detonated; white-hot explosions that left nothing behind but fragments. The last destroyer fired its pulse lasers, lancing through the exposed starboard engine compartment of the *Scarborough Fair*.

Captain Will Evans and the crew of the *Scarborough Fair* didn’t stand a chance as the reactor core exploded.

The cube never made it back to Earth. It merely wandered, once more, in the cold embrace of vacuum. Until next time.

# THE END