

Halo's latest episode showed us the best a Spartan could be

When *Halo* season 2 finally covered the fall of the planet Reach – a foundational, emotional moment in *Halo* lore – I figured that I'd write a few words of praise about it. But then I saw the episode after, "Aleria," and that episode, not "Reach," is the one that truly delivers a *Halo* experience worthy of the games yet so wonderfully unlike them.

Spoilers for Halo season 2 to follow

One of the elements missing from *Halo* season 1 was the camaraderie between Spartans. The first half of *Halo's* second season better developed and defined the relationships of Silver Team (Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, Riz-028, Kai-125, and Vannak-134); specifically, Riz-028 (Natasha Culzac) and Vannak-134 (Bentley Kalu), who were all but neglected in season 1, really got moments to shine in season 2. Riz, after suffering a debilitating injury, struggles with keeping up with the physical and emotional demands of being a Spartan. Meanwhile, Vannak, after removing his emotion regulator chip, is cultivating a peaceful life for himself beyond his Mjolnir armor.

It was touching and funny to see Vannak show off as an animal facts guy who likes to feed the local pigeons while Riz suffers a bit of embarrassment realizing the guy she's developed a crush on is in a committed relationship. But *Halo* is also a story of war. And when it comes to the planet Reach, in the form of a devastating surprise attack, Riz, Vannak, and the rest of Team Silver are called into action – and some of

them don't make it.

I expected the deaths of notable characters in the "Reach" episode. It pained me a little bit to see Vannak go because viewers were given such precious little time with him. Captain Keyes' (Danny Sapani) death also surprised me since that character dies elsewhere in the games, and I didn't think the show would kill him off so soon. Ultimately, "Reach" was a decent episode with bits of really good action but lacked the emotional weight an episode based on one of *the* moments in *Halo* lore should have.

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The next episode, "Aleria," picks up right where "Reach" ended, with the remaining Spartans and Dr. Halsey surrounded by Covenant soldiers with no chance of escape. But then, as so often happens in this series, *Halo* delivered hope.

As everyone piled onto the ship, the Covenant kept getting closer. Riz, though injured and without her armor (nobody has any armor because plot) jumped off the ship with naught but pistols, ostensibly to keep the Covenant at bay to give the ship time to take off safely.

I started screaming, incensed that the show was about to kill yet another character I had come to care for.

But then, she came back.

Riz returned carrying Vannak's body, and my indignant screams morphed into equally loud sobs. That wasn't her noble sacrifice suicide run. She just went back for her friend, her comrade, her brother.

In that moment, Riz-028 delivered the best portrayal of a

Spartan seen outside the series' many games, while the show itself subverted my expectations.

I was ready to begrudgingly accept Riz's death as I had Vannak's and Keyes'. After all, she's a Black character, as were Vannak and Keyes, while a previous heroic death in the "Reach" episode featured yet another Black character. In a media climate where characters of color are often sacrificed as a way to raise stakes or heighten emotion without threatening a show's "more valuable" white stars, Riz's death would've fit right in. Furthermore, Riz is a Spartan – so long as she's not John-117, she's expendable.

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dark: [>a: hover]: text-gray-bd dark: [>a: hover]: shadow-underline-gray [>a]: shadow-underline-gray-63 dark: [>a]: text-gray-bd dark: [>a]: shadow-underline-gray">Image: Adrienn Szabo / Paramount Plus

Afterward, as everyone regroups and recovers on the planet Aleria, Riz decides to stay behind as John swears vengeance on the military leaders responsible for abandoning Reach to its fate. John vehemently opposes this, attempting to guilt her by asking what she intends to do about their lost planet and comrades.

"I'm going to live," she says.

For *Halo*, that's profound.

Spartans are always fighting. *Always*. There's an in-universe military directive that mandates Spartans never be declared "KIA" but "missing in action," not only to reinforce their mythos as the invincible soldier but a perpetual one as well – one who's always still out there, still fighting.

When they can't fight, like the Spartans who survived augmentation with permanent disabilities, they still serve in the military in some capacity. Even when there are no more battles to fight, Master Chief himself never puts down his

gun, famously telling Cortana at the end of *Halo 3* to wake him when he's needed again. And when we see Spartans die, it is always in service of the mission.

But TV *Halo*, for the first time in the series, dares to imagine something different for a Spartan: *life*, one beyond fighting, serving, or death. And it was beautiful to see.

<https://www.theverge.com/2024/3/2/24087962/halo-paramount-plus-episode-five-aleria>