



TRIAL OF RECKONING



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

*Trial of Reckoning takes place in February 2560, immediately following the Banished assault on the crashed UNSC *Mortal Reverie* which served as a central command post for UNSC survivors on Zeta Halo..*

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“Awaken, valiant warriors!”

Gunnery Sergeant Elena Bobrov winced as she slowly regained consciousness. Everything had happened so fast since the Banished had descended upon them—the attack on the UNSC *Mortal Reverie* had spanned two harrowing days of almost ceaseless combat. Even though they had known the battle was coming, they’d had only hours to prepare.

The *Reverie* had been downed during the initial Banished naval assault, but the *Mulsanne*-class frigate’s surviving wreckage had become a fortified rally point for the UNSC personnel stranded on this local fragment of Zeta Halo. The installation itself had been violently fractured as a result of the escalating conflict on its surface and the accompanying emergency slipspace jump to who-knows-where. Under an unfamiliar field of stars, the *Reverie* had quickly become the only thing that resembled a “home.”

And in the blink of an eye, the Banished had taken that too.

Bobrov had been in the thick of the fighting when a group of Brute Berserkers were set upon her squad, tearing into them with mindless abandon—driven by a violence-fueled disregard for anything but their next target. She recalled hearing the dire sound of bones snapping, feeling the spray of Ensign Daniels’s blood across her face, and the next thing Bobrov knew she was drifting in and out of consciousness, recalling only fleeting impressions of being dragged across the verdant terrain of Zeta Halo before being loaded onto a skiff and taken to... wherever the hell this place was.

“Hey,” a man’s voice cut through her musings. “Gunny’s waking up, Doc.”

A medical scanner passed over her a moment later, followed by a small shot of fast-acting morphine which quickly and mercifully diminished the throbbing in her head.

“Can’t see.” Blinking rapidly, she tried to quell the rising panic in her chest.

“Be calm, your eyes will quickly adjust,” a deep voice soothed. “I suspect the lights will soon come on.”

Squinting through the darkness, unable to see much further than three meters ahead or so, Bobrov relied on her other senses. Beneath her hands she felt the roughness of dirt-covered ground, but the sound of movement around her echoed in ways more indicative of being inside a large building. A hangar, perhaps? That didn’t make any sense.

But then again, nothing did anymore.

As her vision continued to adjust, Bobrov was able to finally make out the one who had been seeing to her injuries.

Being tended to by a Sangheili was certainly one of the stranger wake-up scenarios she had ever experienced. Clad in simple armor, its saurian face barely seemed to register her as he decided he was satisfied that his patient’s wits and faculties had returned.

“Roll call,” Bobrov said through a strained grimace as she shifted herself into a sitting position. “Who have we got here and what the hell is going on?”

“Lance Corporal Singh,” came the voice that had first announced her awakening. “And we’re, uh, pretty much screwed, ma’am.”

“Spartan Hedge, Fireteam Lancer,” came another, causing Bobrov to swell with a momentary flutter of hope. On any other day, she’d have passed it off as an involuntary reaction, but she knew more directly of Spartan Hedge, as the two of them had fought on Requiem.

Bobrov had served two tours of the Forerunner shield world, having been aboard the UNSC *Infinity* when it was first pulled into the hollow sphere back in ‘57.

Terry Hedge had joined the UNSC *Infinity* crew as a Spartan recruit soon after the New Phoenix incident. Bobrov had read some of the mission debriefs on Fireteam Lancer’s activities, where they had been led by Hedge and taken part in some of the thickest fighting against Promethean and Covenant remnant forces.

“And our medic?” Bobrov asked, turning to the Sangheili. “You’re a warrior, right?”

The Sangheili appraised her and closed his first aid kit with a crisp snap, the case comically small in the alien’s large hands.

“No.”

Firm. Definite.

“No?” Bobrov repeated, her brow furrowing.

“I am a healer of wounds, not a deliverer of them. Not anymore.”

“You got a name?”

“Yes.”

When he did not continue, Singh interjected. “We just call him Doc. He seems alright with that.”

At that moment, the lights lining the ceiling above flickered on and the truth of their situation was laid acutely bare.

They were indeed inside a room as large as a hangar bay, but there were no vessels docked here. Instead, the area was akin to a UNSC field base—a flat prefabricated structure covered in sand and dirt, a couple of large rocks on the outer edges where groupings of sandbags were haphazardly laid out.

A small building nearby housed a handful of ammunition and weapons crates, prompting Bobrov to grab an assault rifle, sidekick pistol, and a couple of grenades. As she had been the last to awaken, the choices were slim, but the familiar weight of the rifle in her hand returned some semblance of comfort to her.

Beyond the base structure, a series of doors covered the boundaries of the room—two at each edge. They at least knew where their enemy would come from... but with only three fighters among them, and limited ammunition and cover, things certainly weren't looking good.

“Ah, there you are.”

The booming, sonorous voice that had originally awakened her now returned, this time accompanied by a hologram at the far edge of the room, resolving into the blood-red image of an aged Jiralhanae. His right eye was milky and clouded, but the other—even in holographic form—glinted with malice as his mouth curled into a sharp-toothed smile. A grey beard covered his chin, and his forehead was branded with a symbol of his kind.

“I am Escharum, War Chief of the Banished. I welcome you to the House of Reckoning.”

“Ugly bastard,” Singh spat on the ground, tightening his grip on his battle rifle to mask a fearful tremor.

“Within these iron halls, through the Trials of Atriox, all shall know what it is to be Banished—our living history, how we once served the Covenant. All shall know what it is to be meat.”

Wasting no time, Spartan Hedge sprang into action, signaling Doc to assist in fortifying their position with sandbags and anything else they could grab with what little time and resources they had at their disposal. It wasn’t going to be much protection, but under the circumstances it was the best they could get.

“The trial is King of the Hill. One side holds the advantage of territory and must hold it while forty Banished brothers are sent to stake their claim. Survive, and you shall be granted a boon. You have played your little war games long enough. Now, you will play mine.”

With a final sinister grin, Escharum crossed his arms over his chest and the hologram faded.

Spartan Hedge motioned for Bobrov and the others to join him. “No retreat, no surrender, and no quarter. That’s what’s on the menu for us today, and it’s our job to damn well make sure it’s the same for them.”

“Four of us against forty of them,” Singh interjected and made an exaggerated show of counting on his fingers. “We’re outnumbered *ten-to-one*, man.”

Bobrov considered what she had read on military maneuvers back in basic training. As the ancient military strategist Sun Tzu had roughly put it:

when surrounding an enemy, leave a way of escape. A retreating enemy is one that *isn't* putting everything they've got into retaliation, but an enemy that knows they've been forced into a position to make a final stand is going to fight with every ounce of strength they have to the bitter end.

Either Escharum hadn't figured that out, or—more likely—the Banished war chief was perfectly aware and that was exactly what he *wanted* from his captives.

“Let's be real,” Bobrov interjected. “It's entirely likely that *none* of us are making it through this. So you'd better make peace with the prospect of an unceremonious death right now, because if you freeze up and fail to make your shot count, you might as well be on their damn side.”

Doc fidgeted with his medical vambraces, his mandibles tightly formed together, giving way to a sigh. “I shall ensure that you are each stocked with ammunition, and provide you with the enemy's weaponry when yours runs out. There is no honor in allowing one's allies to perish for the sake of vanity.”

Bobrov couldn't help but wonder what this guy's story was. She could read the subtext as well as anyone and it seemed that even now, even when facing such crushing odds, the good doctor was firmly set against doing harm.

In her experience, the Sangheili held martial prowess and their concept of “honor” as a matter of life and death. Decades of fighting against them had taught her that. Her more recent years, doing training drills with some of the Swords of Sanghelios personnel, had just confirmed that knowledge. Perhaps Doc had been amongst that cohort aboard the UNSC *Infinity*? Bobrov drew a sharp breath at the thought.

Infinity.

The name alone conjured an unexpected stab of nostalgia.

How she missed that ship.

UNSC vessels of all kinds throughout the Covenant War had been hell to live on—strictly utilitarian in design to serve as cold metal coffins ferrying troops from one battlefield to the next, never knowing how far you were going to make it. But the quiet hum of the *Infinity*'s engines, the beauty of the atrium park while cruising through vibrant nebulae in deep space that formed the “night sky” through the transparent observation dome, the chili cook-off that she and Lieutenant Gomez had attained a respectable fourth place in...

That had been the first ship she had ever been able to call home.

She thought back to the first hard touchdown on Requiem. The Covenant faction they'd fought there had thrown themselves at defensive lines they had no tactical chance of overcoming, driven by a zealous fervor that came from the belief that they were *literally* serving one of their gods in the flesh. She'd been the designated driver for the six-wheeled death machine that was an M510 Mammoth, which had been deployed to destroy a network of particle cannons, ferrying the then-Commander Lasky and the Master Chief himself towards a gravity well that was keeping them grounded.

It had seemed like a lifetime ago... and nobody knew what had happened to either of them. As far as Bobrov knew, no word from Captain Lasky had reached the *Mortal Reverie*, and the Chief had been missing-in-action since the ambush on *Infinity*.

All she could do—all she knew how to do—was keep fighting. Whatever hopes there had been for an age of peace after the fall of the Covenant had been shattered, and between remnant factions and rebel groups, ancient Forerunner constructs, renegade artificial intelligences, and now the Banished... “king of the hill” seemed a remarkably apt summary for the state of things, jockeying for power over the biggest and baddest guns in the galaxy. And to what end?

“Hey, ugly,” Lance Corporal Singh called out into the emptiness, knowing Escharum was still watching. “You said we get a boon if we win.”

Escharum did not reappear, but his voice snaked its way across the walls of the House of Reckoning—lowered, as if to confide a secret. *“It is the same prize that Atriox received for surviving the countless battles that claimed his brothers.”*

“And what’s that?”

“A new day shall dawn over the House of Reckoning. You shall be fed and watered, and tomorrow... you will fight again.”

“You bastard.”

“Take heart, human. With every moment you stand and fight, you shall know Atriox. You shall know the Banished. You shall know the Jiralhanae way of immolation.”

As the war chief’s words faded, the doors around the edges of the room slid open.

Bobrov tensed, fearing that they were about to get instantaneously swarmed from all sides... but the passages remained clear.

Then they heard it.

Like the thunderous start of an engine in the depths of an ancient machine—a dreadful, clanking heartbeat from what must have been a dozen or more gravity hammer pommels striking the ground in unison.

They began slowly, Bobrov counted the seconds between beats...

One, two, three, four—clang!

One, two, three, four—clang!

The sound filled the air around them, rolled through the space with the insistence of a rising tide.

Powerful. Unstoppable.

It was not long before four seconds became three.

One, two, three – clang!

One, two, three – clang!

Bobrov felt the tension twist in her gut, felt the hair on the back of her neck stand-up as the three beside her shifted, bracing for the inevitable.

Three seconds became two.

One, two – clang!

One, two – clang!

Their enemy would be upon them soon.

She knew it.

And yet, in this whisper of time, Bobrov found reality crystallized with a sudden serene clarity, even as she knew this invocation was soon to culminate in a furious release of barbarism. As a Marine who had fought through the Covenant War and had known only a fleeting glimpse of peace before she had been called upon to serve once more, she greeted this moment as a friend.

The choice was simple. The priorities were clear.

Adapt. Survive. And...

She exhaled, glanced at her fireteam, and saw her own grim resolve mirrored in their expressions.

Accept whatever may come.

The pounding reached fever pitch, the hammers clanging repeatedly as the sound drew closer, grew louder, reaching its crescendo.

One second.

One. Final. Exhale.

Then came the stampeding feet. Bloodthirsty roars. The sudden sharp crack of firepower as Bobrov and her team made their stand.

Escharum's voice echoed above it all.

"Fight hard. Die well."