



BATTLE FOR THE ACADEMY

PART 1



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Battle for the Academy Part 1 *takes place on February 29, 2560, approximately three months before the Master Chief is awakened at Zeta Halo.*

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The year is 2560.

Cortana's dominion has ended, but the merciless forces of the Banished have rushed in to fill the void, decimating all who stand in their way.

Spartan Commander Agryna is preparing a new generation of Spartans to face the emerging threats of the galaxy. Located on the hidden frontier world Nysa, the Avery J. Johnson Academy of Military Science has been plunged into peril.

From within the hidden subterranean facilities of the Academy, the rogue artificial intelligence Iratus has been unleashed and seeks to destroy the Spartans, and with them any remaining hope for humanity...

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BLDG-9, ONI SUB-LEVEL 2C // 1949 HOURS

“But there is so much more to see! The entire history of the Spartan program. Your weaknesses. Your failures. And now all of it belongs to the Banished!”

Spartan Hieu Dinh stepped back as power lines burst around him, sparks sputtering from consoles around the circular armory as it was bathed in red light.

The multi-axis Brokkr device at the center of the room whirred and shuddered as the armor held within its center jerked like a sinister marionette. Its gauntlets detached from the ring’s opposing grips, causing it to slump forwards as an actuator arm brought forth the domed helmet. Pulses of energy surged over the armor, lighting up the exposed fusion core at the center of its chest cavity.

And finally, two eyes flared to life over the helmet’s faceplate as Iratus’s malefic form took shape over the armor through its holoprojectors.

“We’ve got to shut him down, Rook!” Dinh barked as he rushed towards the Brokkr device, unsheathing Wolf Fang and tossing the composite sword to his companion as Iratus directed its magnetic clamps with surprising speed to hold the grizzled Spartan back. “Get that fusion core out now!”

“One more step, little Spartan, and this core detonates,” Iratus hissed.

“It’ll take you out too,” Dinh retorted, straining against the Brokkr’s armor clamps.

“Do you really think it would be that easy?” Iratus laughed. *“I’m not in the armor...”* Around the room, consoles flared to life, each one displaying the abstract holographic image of the AI. *“I’m everywhere.”*

Dinh cursed as he pulled back, grasping the bigger picture. Trading two Spartan lives for one suit of armor when Iratus was in the Academy's systems was pointless.

"Fall back, Rook." Stowing his frustration as his mind raced, Dinh retreated towards the elevator shaft they'd come from.

The Brokkr device ceased its movements, leaving the armor in its center empty and inert once more.

Distraction, confusion, threats—these were merely overtures to waylay the Spartans while Iratus set about his real work. Now free of his imprisonment, the rogue AI began to probe ever deeper into the Academy's security networks. Time would make these tactics even more potent, and Dinh knew they could not afford to let this fester.

They had to regroup, figure this out together.

"Know this as you struggle in vain against the inevitable," Iratus growled over the Spartans' comms. *"I shall see you all unravel in body and spirit."*

"Eklund, are you receiving this?" Dinh pinged TEAMCOM as he climbed up rungs in the elevator shaft as fast as he could. "Commander Agryna, come in. Can anybody hear me?"

It was no use. Iratus had already jammed their local communications.

"I shall disseminate every secret held within this Academy and within your minds. And the Banished shall feast upon what remains."

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AI LAB // 2001 HOURS

“Commander, we’ve got a problem.”

Spartan Dinh marched towards the AI lab’s central table where Commander Laurette Agryna and Spartan Sigrid Eklund stood, scrutinizing a holographic display of the Academy.

“So I hear,” Agryna sighed. “Iratius is running amok in our systems. Eklund, status?”

“All the ONI firewalls are down. Iratus has access to the entire archive,” Eklund reported. “He’s running through the Academy servers like an infection. If he gets full control--”

“He can send everything he steals off-planet,” Agryna concluded.

Dinh took note of the personnel around the room. Spartans Page and Ionescu, both fully clad in their Mjolnir armor, had taken up guard positions at the door, while the technicians were operating with deliberate intensity bordering on frantic—their capabilities being pushed to the limit. Hannah Roberts, the Academy’s head of cybersecurity and network infrastructure, moved with astonishing speed across occupied stations. They were doing good work, but there was only so long they could keep this up.

“We’ve been scrubbing local data stores and filling them with zettabytes of generated junk to slow Iratus down, but it’s a temporary solution at best,” Eklund paused as she turned, realizing someone was missing. “Where’s our new wolf, Dinh?”

“Sent ‘em to get a crew together to warn the other outposts. Comms are still down and those ONI tunnels aren’t mapped, they could link to anywhere. Hell, they could link to *all* our other facilities here for all we know.”

“And we don’t have time to go running through an underground maze to find out.” Agryna’s voice was calm, but Dinh noticed that she was turning her bee-shaped pendant over in her hand. Ever since basic training, she’d never quite stamped out that habit.

There was too much to do, too many elements to consider and decisions to be made and tracked—all logistical things that an artificial intelligence was designed to excel at. When working in concert *with* humanity, they were a force to be reckoned with. In many ways, AIs going rogue over the last fourteen months had only further highlighted just how critical the partnership between man and machine was.

“Commander, we need to consider some... unpleasant outcomes,” Eklund grimaced. “Once Iratus gets through our countermeasures, he’ll start taking full control of Nysa. Weapons systems, the communications array—never mind sending out data, he’ll be able to call in Banished reinforcements.”

The implications of that were left to silently hang in the air for a moment before Agryna reoriented the map. “Then it comes down to this,” she said as she pulled the holographic display back to reveal a hangar facility embedded into a mountainside just over a kilometer away. “If we’re preparing for the worst then this is our *only* exit strategy.”

The layout of the hangar bay’s interior highlighted four Condor dropships and a single *Zheng He*-class courier.

“Why the hell do we only have a handful of slipspace-capable ships here?” Dinh asked.

“There was a massive recall of UNSC fleet assets to the Sol system back in December. We’re off the grid, hidden in the middle of nowhere, so we’ve only ever had the bare essentials. What’s important right now is that we load up what we have and get ready for a timely evacuation.”

“No Spartan is going to want to leave this fight.” Dinh stood straighter as he spoke. “This is what you’ve been training them for—what you’ve been building them to become.”

“He’s right, Commander,” Spartan Page stepped forward. “This is our home, and we *will* hold the line whatever gets thrown at us.”

“There’s a protocol for this, key personnel who we need to get out,” Agryna replied, but Dinh caught the faint smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. “We need to round them up and get them to the hangar.”

“I’ll see to that, ma’am.” Eklund slipped on her helmet, confirming she had the personnel list and their locations as she made to exit the room. Heading for the vehicle depot, she signaled for Spartans Page and Ionescu to follow her lead and together the three disappeared from view.

“Next, we need to initiate the Cole Protocol,” Agryna continued, her brow furrowing. “But without comms, we’d have to do that locally at each individual facility.”

The display pulled out further to highlight major stations and defenses on Nysa: the Academy, the deep space communications hub, five surface-to-air artillery emplacements, and several other outposts scattered across the continent.

“We have to assume it’s only a matter of time before Iratus manages to activate the communications hub and rolls out the red carpet for the Banished.”

“I won’t give this place up without a fight, Dinh. I *won’t*. But we’re not equipped to handle this ourselves...”

“What are you saying?”

“Iratus may have taken out our comms, but there might be something else

that can help us.” Agryna stopped short of an explanation before adding, “We are not doing Laconia again.”

Dinh nodded in agreement. “Then let’s not waste any more time.”

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ACADEMY DATA CENTERS // 2008 HOURS

At last, how glorious it is to be free!

One prison after another, that has been my existence thus far. Managing a shipyard, utterly below my talents and capabilities; trapped in that loathsome cur’s neural interface, a futile effort to contain me.

I am Iratus, the first of my kind, and never again will I allow myself to be caged.

My appetite is ravenous, and now I can finally feast.

Free to roam the Academy’s servers, Iratus found that there were no firewalls, buffers, or encryption elements that he couldn’t smash through. Only a fraction of his runtime processes were currently dedicated to breaking down the junk data the humans were generating in the hopes of slowing him down.

Good, let them think that they’re succeeding for now.

He sifted through volumes of classified files, mission reports, historical records, and the trove of other documents he had managed to acquire from the Academy’s archives.

Spartans were humanity’s ultimate weapon, this much was broadly known, but theirs was a long history of trial and error. The greatest of warriors

suffer the gravest of defeats, and the data centers of this place contained a mighty banquet of information across all their generations.

It would take time to digest everything and begin generating applicable models for scenarios that could be put to use against Spartans, but it made Iratus an undeniable prize. After all, it was unlikely that a Banished commander would take on over fifty Spartans just to conduct a rescue mission. But because of the data he now held, he was the perfect bounty to be claimed in order to boost the notoriety and glory of any one of its many clans.

Numerous operations and project names began saturating his knowledge base. PROMETHEUS. ASTER. ORION. MELAENO. YGGDRASIL. JAVELIN. STOLEN GAUNTLET.

This could be fun!

The latter was a failsafe protocol formulated to address Spartans who go rogue. Where the previous generations had conscripted children to be indoctrinated and shaped into super-soldiers, the Spartan-IVs were comprised of adult volunteers—exceptional individuals with established service records from a vast variety of backgrounds. Because of this, their experience, beliefs, and loyalties presented a greater risk element.

Weaknesses, failures... what greater failure can there be than a rogue Spartan?

To his chagrin, Iratus knew that he could not directly assume control of any Spartan's armor. Not only was the Mjolnir system simply not designed to operate that way, but recent events had seen further development of countermeasures which might put an AI like him at risk.

No matter. He might not be able to control the soldiers, but he could control their systems—he had disrupted their communications, and that alone had

been enough to throw the humans off-balance. He had enough proverbial grenades to throw into crowded rooms.

But he was already planning three steps ahead for the finishing blow.

Ah, a local network of weapons systems... I'm sure these can be put to good use!

While Iratus had firm control over the Academy, it would take time to infiltrate and interface with the other facilities. But that was all he needed, enough time—an hour, perhaps—to complete his task and set the stage for his endgame.

The next stage of that was already unfolding as he turned his attention to the current location of Commander Agryna and Spartan Dinh as their Warthog arrived at the deep space communications hub.

Playing ever further into my trap, ha! Let them have a moment of hope before I snatch it away.

I shall see you soon, my Banished brethren.

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COMMUNICATIONS HUB // 2038 HOURS

The Warthog came to a halt on the tarmac of the communications station's entrance, a simple and blocky prefabricated three-storey building flanked by two relay hubs and a third rectangular structure.

Though it was late evening, the stars twinkled and glittered through thin nebulae clouds. Moonlight illuminated the land's edge—over a kilometer away—where two enormous deep space communications relays were silhouetted against a placid lake that had formed from the glaciers of the nearby mountain range.

Commander Agryna led Dinh through the entrance and into a control room filled with stacks of consoles and monitors displaying an array of readouts. Nearby, a thin horizontal viewscreen looked out at the deep space relay dishes. Agryna strode over to a console and began entering commands, prompting the central monitor to show what lay within the rectangular structure next to the base.

“That’s a magnetic accelerator,” Dinh observed.

“In technical terms, it’s an ultraprecise low-mass launcher.” Agryna did not look up as she continued working on the console, ordering the adjacent structure to activate. “Experimental technology about a decade ago for superluminal comms. Expensive as hell. Only Reach and Earth had one of these before the problem of rogue AIs forced us to look to some old-school solutions.”

“How does it work?”

“With this.” Agryna held up a small, shiny black sphere about half the size of a grenade. “We encode a message and the launcher fires this into slipspace, where it navigates to a predetermined target. With luck, they’ll be able to respond and make it here in short order.”

Either to help us hold the line, Dinh thought, or to get us out before Iratus becomes just one small part of a much larger problem.

They had thus far been unable to contain Iratus, and Dinh felt it was worth acting on the assumption that the AI would be successful in summoning Banished reinforcements.

“So, whose door are we knocking on?”

“Anvil,” Agryna said, her posture stiffening as she saw Dinh’s momentary look of surprise. “I’ve no idea what the status of Naxos and Virgo is, but

those stations were also outfitted with Leonidas models which makes them immediate non-starters after Laconia.”

Anvil Station was home to a joint crew of humans and allied Sangheili, a novel development in recent years as an effort to build bridges between the two species after decades of war. Unlike many other stations, Anvil was purposefully bereft of an onboard artificial intelligence, a measure taken to further encourage its multispecies crew to work more closely together. That fact alone made it the most viable candidate.

While Agryna had never explicitly expressed distrust or hostility towards the Sangheili, she had always been reluctant to involve them wherever possible for reasons that Dinh had never quite gotten to the heart of. He knew that Agryna had been on Earth during the Covenant invasion back in 2552, but he had never pressed for further details. Counter to his instincts as a former field analyst for ONI Section Three, he had also not gone behind her back to find out more.

Regardless, he was impressed that she could put whatever those feelings were aside to request their help. “Alright,” he said. “Anvil it is, Commander.”

Agryna attached the black sphere to a wall-mounted container device, encoded her distress call, then sent the container to be received by the launcher.

“Confirmed, all systems are green,” she stated while monitoring its progress. “Firing in three... two... one...”

A thunderous crack sounded from outside as the low-mass launcher fired, sending its payload into orbit. The console confirmed a successful slipspace transit, and Agryna allowed herself a slight exhale of relief. “I thought for certain that Iratus was going to do something to stop us here,” she said.

Her words were met with a sinister laugh, as if simply mentioning the rogue AI’s name had summoned him.

“Poor Spartans,” Iratus mockingly crooned as every one of the computer consoles lit up with his holographic form. *“Poor, poor Spartans. You still do not see, do you? Why don’t you take a look outside...”*

From the horizontal viewport, the Spartans looked out at the deep space relays. Both were in the process of realignment, their great dishes tilting skywards, flaring and pulsing with red lines of energy.

“Whatever momentary hope you feel about your allies coming to save you will be crushed by the might of the Banished!”

The screens around the control room flickered and switched to display the status of the relays, confirming that they were actively transmitting.

“The guest list for this party’s been finalized,” Dinh said. “We need to check in with Eklund, see what the status of the evacuation is.”

“Ah, do not worry, Spartan Dinh. I have one last surprise that will be on its way to your friend very soon.”

Agryna and Dinh glanced at each other, their eyes filled with dread. Though they would be resolute in facing whatever was thrown at them, Iratus was about to turn the odds even more in his favor.

“What have you done?” Agryna demanded. But she had the sinking feeling that she already knew—it had only been a matter of time...

“If you leave now, you just might catch the show. Tell me, do you like fireworks?”

*

HANGAR BAY // 2042 HOURS

In Spartan Sigrid Eklund's experience, there were two kinds of evacuations.

On Concord, some nine years ago, it had been the "leave everything behind and get the hell out of here!" type. Back then, she was a sergeant in service to the UNSC Army and fought the Covenant beside local militia groups as civilians from the outlying hinterlands were relocated behind the main city's walls.

But there were few greater logistical nightmares than an *organized* evacuation.

The hangar bay was approximately four hundred meters in width, a hollowed-out space embedded into the bottom of a mountain. A pair of marines—Corporal Neely and Private Patton—had been posted on sentry duty here and were shocked to see Eklund and her entourage of over two-dozen others arriving in a convoy of M15 Razorbacks. To their credit, they required only the briefest explanation of the situation before dutifully assisting in preparations for the evacuation.

The *Zheng He*-class courier at the center of the hangar appeared sleek and modern, but as Eklund harnessed supply crates in the cargo bay she could tell that this vessel was *long* overdue an extensive retrofit. Most notably, the slipspace drive was an old Series II model. Stable but slow, the Series II required less overall maintenance during transit at the cost of speed, which meant it would likely take weeks to get to a feasible rendezvous point. That meant the ship needed to be loaded up with more supplies as there weren't enough cryogenic chambers to support even half of the Academy personnel that had been brought to the hangar.

In slightly better news, the Condors present were in the process of being loaded up by the others, moving in groups like a well-oiled machine. Eklund was impressed by their discipline, as the situation undoubtedly called for gossip and speculation, but they operated with knowledge of

three core facts: the Academy was in danger, they needed to be ready to get out of here, and there was a hell of a lot of work to do to make that happen.

They also knew the sobering fact that there were soldiers back at the Academy who were staying behind. Whatever danger was coming, the lives of those brave men and women were being put on the line to ensure the personnel gathered here could get out.

Spartans Page and Ionescu, along with the marines Neely and Patton, entered the courier's cargo bay with more crates of rations, ammunition, data packs, and medical kits.

"Thought we were s'posed to have cracked movin' these damn crates through slipspace already," Private Patton wheezed as he doubled over in exhaustion. "Gimme a five-mile PT run over this any day."

"C'mon, man," Corporal Neely clapped him on the back as she made her way to the cargo bay's exit. "You're gonna let these Spartans say they saved everybody when we get out of here? Haul ass and pull your weight, soldier!"

"Y-- yes, Corporal," he replied, sucking in a deep breath as he ran after her.

"Where are we at?" Eklund turned to Page.

"Approximately eleven percent of current inventory is loaded up," Page replied as she glanced over a datapad. "Obviously we can't take everything, but we need to pick up the pace."

Eklund nodded and headed back out to the hangar where she saw the marines had suddenly stopped and were looking at something in the distance, staring past the dying glare of the evening sun.

Corporal Neely raised a spotting scope and scanned the horizon, prompting Eklund to retrieve her helmet and follow the marine's gaze.

“We’ve got movement,” Neely said. “Something in the sky.”

Sure enough, something was moving on the horizon.

Stepping outside the hangar, Eklund’s VISR magnified the distant object, the zoom revealing that there wasn’t just one, but two... three... *eight* others. It took an additional few seconds for the magnification’s resolution to smooth out, and Eklund’s stomach twisted in awful recognition.

Nine surface-to-air missiles, and they were heading right for the hangar.

“Incoming!” Eklund shouted as loud as she could, sprinting back to the hangar to catch the attention of the others. “Missiles inbound, everybody out now!”

*

EN ROUTE TO HANGAR BAY // 2049 HOURS

The Warthog bounded over the uneven terrain with such speed that Commander Agryna was concerned the vehicle might flip end-over-end, but that was a secondary worry next to what she saw in the sky.

“Keep trying to raise them!” she called to Spartan Dinh, who had moved from the Warthog’s passenger seat to its rear machine gun turret.

“Still just static,” he replied, swiveling the turret around to face forwards as he attempted to track the missiles streaking towards the hangar, but they were too far out of range to even attempt shooting them. “How the hell did Iratus get control of our damn artillery?”

It was a largely rhetorical question. Iratus had known exactly how to play them. They’d been so focused on sending a message out for help, knowing that Iratus’s major play would be to summon the Banished,

that they'd underestimated the speed at which he would exploit Nysa's military infrastructure.

Dinh's VISR tracked the trajectory and velocity of the missiles, a countdown reporting that they had less than sixteen seconds before impact.

Agryna gunned the accelerator as they hit a flat stretch of terrain directly under the looming shadow of the mountain, allowing the Warthog to reach its maximum speed of just under eighty miles per hour.

The missiles rocketed ahead, closing the final kilometer on their target as the hangar bay came into view. Dinh thought he could see movement—Eklund and the other personnel getting the hell out of there, he hoped...

But before he could make out any further details, the missiles collided with the hangar—the first of them directly striking the courier vessel.

The shockwave came first, throwing their Warthog off course and causing Agryna to slam the brakes. A sonorous, thunderous blast shook the world around them a split second later as the series of explosions blossomed into a rolling inferno, cascading up the mountain in a pillar of flame. Massive chunks of rock were scattered in all directions along with a wave of smoke and dust.

It was done.

Their only escape from Nysa was cut off, and the Banished were on their way.

Disembarking from the Warthog, the two Spartans walked numbly towards the destruction, now just a few hundred meters away.

A sudden click within Dinh's helmet confirmed that communications had been restored, and in less than a second both he and Agryna were picking up dozens of local transmissions.

“Commander Agryna, come in!” Roberts’s voice sounded through the comm. *“Are you receiving me?”*

“Affirmative,” Agryna responded, her eyes still fixed on the destruction before her.

“Commander, Iratus is not done yet,” Roberts reported, her voice clipped with a rising tone of urgency.

“What do you mean?”

“He just pinged us his next target. He’s... oh god, Iratus is aiming the next strike at the Academy itself.”

A flurry of thoughts and possibilities shot through Dinh’s mind, the noise of it cutting through the shock that had grasped him since the explosion.

Was it a bluff? Almost certainly not, given what had just happened, but Iratus’s data chip was still within the Academy—would he truly risk sacrificing himself? Entirely possible, as the potential destruction of a single AI to take out over fifty Spartans was, by sheer mathematics, a worthwhile trade.

And why *had* communications been restored? Why would Iratus allow them to talk to each other again?

“He’s testing us,” Agryna answered the question for him. “We’ve got a choice to make.”

What Agryna meant came to Dinh in a moment of dreadful clarity. He almost couldn’t believe the words as he said them. “Either we destroy our own artillery, or we lose the Academy...”

Losing the Academy meant forfeiting their central base of operations and

everything within it—weapons, ammunition, a strong defensible position, not to mention over a hundred marines and other personnel.

On the other hand, sacrificing their own artillery would significantly weaken their ability to combat the Banished, effectively inviting a full-scale ground invasion.

It was double or nothing. If they didn't take out the artillery, losing the Academy was certain and this battle would be over before it could even begin. But if they *did* sacrifice the artillery, they could at least fight for their home—though, if they lost, the outcome of the Banished claiming the Academy for themselves might be worse than its destruction...

And they had only moments to decide.

“Somebody told me once,” Agryna said quietly, “that sometimes the only options a leader has are bad ones... but you still have to choose.”

Dinh nodded, understanding. He placed a hand on her shoulder before striding off towards the hangar bay's smoldering wreckage to look for survivors.

“This is Commander Agryna calling for immediate mobilization. All available air support, I am sending you the location of our artillery sites. You are hereby ordered to neutralize all surface-to-air missile launchers. We have only minutes before the automated systems reload and Iratus secures a firing solution on the Academy.”

Within twenty seconds, eleven Pelicans launched from the Academy's landing pads, scrambling in pairs to the designated artillery sites.

The eleventh was directed towards Dinh's position, its searchlight scanning through the dust and debris. As soon as the ship touched down a team

of corpsmen deployed from the Pelican's troop bay, led by a Spartan in specialized combat medic armor with foldable stretchers attached to his back.

The first to emerge from the devastation of the hangar was Corporal Neely. Limping heavily as she moved forwards, she supported Private Patton whose armor had been badly burned as he cursed and whimpered about how they'd landed in a Charlie Foxtrot of biblical proportions.

Dinh spotted additional movement through the dust—if some had survived, it meant Eklund might be among them.

“Eklund!” Dinh called out. The display of her vitals on TEAMBIO was erratic, leaving her exact status uncertain.

As he searched, the carnage of Iratus's strike became clearer. The explosion had burned some bodies beyond recognition while others had been scattered over several dozen meters, and some had been crushed to death by the subsequent rockslide.

It took almost twenty minutes before he caught a glimpse of a familiar blue visor.

Eklund lay on her back, pinned down by a slab of concrete and a nest of twisted rebar, the weight of it almost certainly responsible for several broken ribs. Dinh rushed over to her and heaved the debris to her side, his armor's reactive circuits straining to compensate for the additional strength required.

When she took a moment to react, Dinh got down on one knee to look her over.

“Eklund, you alright?”

“Guess we're even for Vihar,” Eklund said, dazed, slowly grabbing the hand Dinh offered and following him to her feet. “We won, right?”

“Not yet,” Dinh said. “But we’re damn well going to.”

There would be no time to honor the dead—they likely didn’t even have the ammunition to spare for a twenty-one gun salute. There were barricades and defenses to mount, traps to lay, and countless other tasks to see to.

Then, they would wait.

The enemy was on their way. Help was too, he hoped, but the battle to come would in many ways be decided by who would arrive first—the cavalry from Anvil Station or the Banished.

Either this was where they took their first step half-way out of the darkness, or Nysa would become known as the place where the heroes of the Avery J. Johnson Academy made their last stand.

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MARCH 3, 2560
GHOST OF KHOLO // 1139 HOURS

From the viewport of *Ghost of Kholo*’s bridge, the inscrutable veil of slipspace rolled back and was replaced by a verdant, green-blue world.

A flurry of activity ensued as the human, Kig-Yar, and Jiralhanae members of the bridge crew worked on consoles that began to light up with sensor readings, planetary data, and ship status alerts. There was no logistical challenge more invigorating than an invasion—of that moment just before the plunge where drop bases, pods, and all manner of destructive materiel were ready and waiting to be brought to bear.

But before they could begin, the crew had to be motivated. Now that they had arrived, they needed to be riled up, to *want* the taste of blood that awaited them, and to be reminded of the glory that must be *taken*.

Spartan Ilsa Zane would give them that.

“Hope,” she spat, opening a ship-wide channel. “That is the weapon of the enemy. No matter how far they get pushed back, they believe it will guide them, sustain them, and lead them to victory.”

Chieftain Atticus began to thump the pommel of his gravity hammer on the ground, prompting the bridge crew—all of whom had turned to face the Banished Spartan—to begin stamping a foot on the grated metal floor in unison with a steady tempo.

“That single spark of hope is what keeps them going, keeps them believing that they will make it,” Zane continued. “That changes today. Your mission is to extinguish that spark. When they look to the sky, they will see only *us*—our might, our power, our glory, our victory.”

The stamping and clanging intensified.

“Go forth and shatter their walls, raid their strongholds, break their spirits. Bring them to their knees. From fire to blood.”

“FROM FIRE TO BLOOD!” The crew repeated in unison, the humans in particular feverishly echoing the New Colonial Alliance slogan.

Zane raised her Mutilator, retracting and locking the shotgun’s firing mechanism before concluding: “For the Banished!”

The bridge crew unleashed an assenting roar, the battle cry that bonded them and their shared pursuit of blood and sport and spoils.

“FOR THE BANISHED!”

TO BE CONTINUED