



THE THIRD LIFE



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: The Third Life *begins on October 28, 2558—immediately following the awakening of the Guardian on Laika III at the end of Hunt the Truth—and continues through the subsequent year as Cortana's uprising begins to alter the axis of power in the galaxy.*

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Well, hello there. It's been a while, hasn't it? Long enough for you to have thought that I was dead. Did you search for me? Did you even try to find me? Doesn't matter now, of course, since I'm the one with the gun to your head.

I know this must be as much of a surprise to you as it is to me. Once, I gave everything I had to your cause. I believed in everything you stood for, everything you promised... but things have changed, and I can see you now for who you really are.

Before you die—and you are going to die—I want to tell you a bit about who I am, and how we ended up here.

My name is Ilsa Zane.

The traitor. The rebel. The “mad Spartan.”

The tip of the spear of the New Colonial Alliance.

And my hunt for the truth... has led me back to you.

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OCTOBER 28, 2558
LAIKA III

Nobody kills Ilsa Zane.

Those were the four words she had lived by her entire life. From the fall of Kholo, where everyone and everything she had ever known was lost to the Covenant, to her selection for the first phase of the SPARTAN-IV program where she had been used and discarded... to now, to this day.

The time of the New Colonial Alliance had come, heralding the culmination of all they had worked for to secure total colonial independence. Rebel groups across human space had rallied, alliances had been forged with a myriad of mercenary factions, and fleets were ready to launch to finally bring war to the United Nations Space Command.

But it had all been put in jeopardy by a single undercover agent of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

FERO.

Over a week ago, Conrad's Point had suddenly been hit by a seismic event of unprecedented scale. A massive alien construct had risen out of the ground, leaving a colossal crater behind before jumping into slipspace. The cataclysmic event matched other scattered reports of similar activity occurring across several different colonies.

The NCA had managed to get to Conrad's Point first to study the crater, and it was there that Ilsa Zane had forged a still-undisciplined group of

rebels into fighting shape. While they had been ascertaining data that might point to the next site to suffer an event like this, FERO had slipped into their ranks, bringing a devastating UNSC air strike with her in a futile attempt to assassinate Zane.

Enraged and undeterred, Zane had gathered what remained of the NCA survivors and tracked FERO to Laika III, where the next awakening event was set to occur. The objective had been twofold: eliminate FERO, and obtain whatever new, anomalous power had begun to emerge.

Neither goal had panned out.

FERO had taken shelter with a cult known as Triad, whose leader—a slippery conman named Dasc Gevadim—had proclaimed that these events heralded divine transcendence. And then, to add to the growing list of complications, ONI had arrived with enough troops to turn Laika III into an unmarked grave, just in time for the new awakening event to wipe the board clean.

Zane witnessed Triad followers suspended in the air by gravitational anomalies as the ground beneath them collapsed into a gaping maw, but despite the otherworldly phenomena that surrounded her, she used this moment for what it was: a distraction.

The UNSC *thugs* had been rendered dumbstruck by the chaos, and she had taken the opportunity to tear through as many of them as she could. She had lost her weapon at some point and could not recall dropping it, but she knew she didn't need one. Ilsa Zane was already a weapon. A wellspring of bloodlust rose within her as she tore through the enemy with her bare hands—a pale wall of dust and rock and death drawing ever closer.

Within a few moments, a great sonorous roar tore through the air. A series of debilitating concussive waves dispersed the dust cloud, and Zane was either tackled by or collided with a body she couldn't distinguish, hitting her head hard on the upturned ground.

The last thing she saw as darkness crept at the edges of her vision was the winged shadow that rose into the air and disappeared into slipspace. She tried to grit her teeth, clench her fist, but consciousness faded with what she feared might be her final thought.

Nobody kills Ilsa Zane.

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Ilsa Zane jolted awake as a creature roared in her face—the combined intensity of the rotten breath and fresh saliva that covered her cheek caused her to convulse and gag as an array of reactionary senses all caught up to her at once. She held her stomach with one hand and used the other to lean on a cold rock wall, but the defiant stance she tried to take against her own biological responses quickly vanished as she vomited on the ground, casting an acrid spatter on her combat boots.

It was not until she looked up to see what had caused her rude awakening that she froze. For the first time in years, the ice-cold rush of fear ran through her entire body. She had almost believed herself to be beyond such feelings, but the dire situation that presented itself was one she had hoped never to experience first-hand.

The creature that had now turned its back to her stood over eight-and-a-half feet tall with light gray skin and patches of dark fur over rippling fat and muscle. It picked at its fanged, bloodstained teeth with sharpened claws, and it bore crimson-colored armor plates over a dark undersuit—a Jiralhanae warrior.

“Whatever you do,” a low voice whispered to her, “*do not* look it in the eyes.”

Zane’s senses gradually managed to stabilize, and she followed the quivering, pointed finger of the man who had spoken. Her eyes settled on a dark smear on the wall that left a three-meter-long trail along the ground.

The area around her was essentially a makeshift prison, or rather a cattle pen made of improvised wooden barriers and mounds of concrete from buildings that had no doubt been laid low by the winged construct's destructive awakening. Within the pen, she counted seventeen other humans. Some were still clad in scraps of UNSC uniform, while others had been among her own rebel forces—but the man who placed a heavily calloused hand on her shoulder was neither.

He was bald with a long silvery beard and dressed in a gray hooded robe that was tattered and torn, but the marking on his chest was unmistakable. A white ring cut into three sections by a red 'T' to symbolize the three internal lives that "*must be linked as the key to our transcendence*"—the insane story that had gathered a cult following as it spread across Waypoint.

"Well I'll be damned..." Zane found herself saying aloud, her jaw dropping slightly.

"Yes, child," he gave a kindly smile, bearing perfectly white teeth, sensing her recognition. "You indeed see clearly."

She had survived, only to have been plucked and deposited into this foul mire, where she found herself looking into the eyes of Dasc Gevadim himself.

"Let yourself settle first," he said, surveying their fellow captives who all kept their heads firmly locked to the bile-strewn ground. "They'll be back soon."

"What for?"

Dasc grimaced. "Dinner."

He explained to Zane in hushed whispers that the construct—what he called a Guardian—had been claimed by an artificial intelligence who then

broadcast a message across the galaxy, declaring that a new order of peace would be imposed to bring an end to hunger, pain, and conflict. Frankly, it sounded every bit as absurd and unbelievable as the false religion Dasc himself peddled, but Zane chose to entertain his words for as long as he was providing her with information.

The others, it seemed, would say nothing. They simply stood, shaking on the spot, muttering to themselves, teeth chattering in the cold and retching in the foul stench of death and soiled clothing. The barriers of their cattle pen could easily be slipped through or climbed over, but none dared try their luck.

Dasc detailed how all the survivors of the Guardian's awakening had been rounded up when a new force arrived in a siege ship to lay claim to the crater.

The Banished.

Zane had only some familiarity with the mercenary faction. She had assumed them to be scavengers picking the bones of the dead, plundering old Covenant War-era battlefields and factories for whatever supplies they could get. All she knew was that Admiral Mattius Drake—leader of the New Colonial Alliance—had not sought to parley with them in the NCA's pursuit of independence.

“So,” Dasc concluded. “The only remaining matter is how we get out of this.”

“You seem pretty familiar with these Brutes,” Zane replied. Although Dasc was clearly shaken, he spoke with a peculiar confidence, where hardened rebel fighters and ONI troops had been utterly broken.

“I once found myself in a similar situation some years back. We managed to stage an escape by turning the pack against each other, but it can be tough to play the same card twice.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’ve got an ace,” Zane said, prompting Dasc’s brow to raise. “I have a tracker implant that directly pings NCA command every twelve hours. By now, they’ll no doubt know I’m on Laika III, and if I don’t report in within three days, then Admiral Drake will send a rescue team.”

“So, it’s a waiting game,” Dasc stroked his chin with a muddy hand. “Which means we’ll have to outlast this lot for another day or two.”

Zane regarded the remaining survivors, figuring *that* wouldn’t be too difficult.

“I propose a deal,” Dasc said, a twinkle in his eye. “I can teach you how to survive the whims of these Brutes until your rescuers arrive. In exchange, I come with you and get dropped off at a location of my choosing.”

Everybody always had an angle, and it was difficult to tell whether Dasc’s confidence was simply motivation to survive or something else. He was, after all, a conman and a “spiritual guru” who wanted people to believe that he had transcended to some other level of reality with the Guardians’ rising. How could she possibly trust a man like that?

The thudding of footsteps and subsequent whimpering among the other humans interrupted Zane’s deliberation and announced the return of the Jiralhanae.

The armored warrior moved slowly, reveling in the atmosphere of terror its mere presence created as it opened the wooden gate and stepped inside. Two UNSC Marines standing closest to the gate stepped back to create space for the Jiralhanae like honor guards, their heads still dipped to the ground, tears welling in the eyes of the others as their breathing grew ragged.

Whether they would live or die today was entirely in the hands of this Jiralhanae, and it was not clear which fate was worse—to continue to fester in the muck and gore of this abattoir for another day, or to be devoured by this beast and its packmates.

These were the rules of the game, and none of this sorry lot had the power, capacity, or *will* to do anything about it. They would simply let themselves be snuffed out like a candle flame, and for that Ilsa Zane held no pity in her heart for them. It made them small, weak. Inferior.

Maybe thinking like that made her a monster, but whatever else she had become over the years, Ilsa Zane was a Spartan.

And if there was one thing a Spartan could do, it was change the rules of the game. So she did what no one else dared do.

She looked up.

The action immediately caught the lumbering Jiralhanae's attention, gnashing its tusks at the human's audacity, shoving aside the Marine it had been eyeing to answer the challenge to its authority. Dase's eyes went wide as he saw what Zane was doing, believing in that moment that she was madder than anybody had ever thought him to be.

"Hey, ugly," Zane stepped forward, fists clenched, and looked directly into the Brute's eyes.

What happened next was a blurred rush of violent ecstasy. The Jiralhanae threw its head back to let out a blood-curdling roar, and that was when Zane launched herself forwards, punching it in the throat as hard as she could, crushing its windpipe.

The augmentations that Spartan Zane had received all those years ago were unique to what would become standard for the SPARTAN-IV program. She had been told that ONI was looking to make the costly Mjolnir armor effectively obsolete by instead making her bones practically indestructible, grafting reinforcement plating under her skin and inducing muscle growth that would put her on as close to an equal physical footing with the likes of a Sangheili or Jiralhanae as possible.

That was only half true, of course—a convenient story that seemed just as contrived as Dasc’s religious con. In reality, she had been a lab rat for untested augmentation cocktails and procedures that had wreaked havoc on her brain as well as her body.

But she didn’t mind what she had become. Ilsa Zane *liked* being a living weapon, it was just a matter of having the *choice* of who she was aimed at.

The beast continued to claw at its throat, desperately gasping for air. In response, she pulled off one of its armored shoulder pieces, turned it to its jagged edges, and brought the alloyed plating down onto its face. Again and again, as the creature fell to its back on the ground, writhing in pain. Dark blood began pouring from its eyes, nose, and mouth, and still Zane kept slamming her improvised cudgel down as hard as she could until she could no longer feel her arms.

She felt the bloodlust rising in her again, singing in her veins like the sweetest sort of song.

She followed the feeling until it spilled from her mouth in a war cry.

Until it morphed into dark, unencumbered, laughter.

She was only dimly aware of the other humans in her periphery watching in horror, flinching with each dull thud that sounded from her relentless assault.

It might have been seconds, minutes, or even hours before she finally stood up, content that her jailer was now little more than a dark smudge on the ground. Slipping her hands into the Brute’s exposed harness straps, she dragged the body over to the wooden gate to display her handiwork.

There, she found a gathering of six Jiralhanae who had watched the grisly scene play out. One of them stepped forward—clearly the leader from its heavy gray-red armor and ornate helmet, a gravity hammer the length of a human being in its hand. The chieftain appraised Ilsa Zane with bared teeth.

“The human has murdered one of our brothers,” one of the chieftain’s packmates shouted. “Slay her now!”

Its fellows roared and began to chant a rising chorus of “*Slay her now, slay her now,*” but they were quickly silenced as the chieftain thudded the pommel of its hammer on the ground three times.

“The human has killed Amatus,” it said plainly, pausing as it felt the pack’s collective attention hang on whatever would be said next. “I do not like Amatus.”

Roars from the pack were howled into the sky, and Ilsa Zane dropped the armored shoulder piece that had been her weapon. She hadn’t liked Amatus either.

“You have done well, human,” the chieftain’s face settled into a dark grin. “I offer you a boon for your show of strength and spirit. You shall dine with us tonight, and you may choose which of your fellows shall take your place and be fed to the pack.”

A thousand thoughts thundered through Ilsa Zane’s mind at once. She had earned the respect of the Banished chieftain, she was *not* going to die today, she would be fed and watered, and...

And I have a loose end.

She had told Dasc that the New Colonial Alliance would soon be on their way. If he were to attempt to curry favor with the chieftain, all he needed to do was reveal this information and the tracker would be pulled from her body by force. She was strong, but there was no way that she would survive the whole pack descending on her.

Perhaps Dasc was counting on her choosing somebody else until the rescue team arrived, honoring her word... but she hadn’t actually agreed to the terms of his deal before Amatus showed up.

In the end, Dasc Gevadim was simply... in her way.

“Him,” Ilsa Zane pointed to the old man in his tattered gray robe, and part of her delighted at the shocked expression on his face, at an outcome he had never conceived.

He may well have shouted Ilsa’s secret at that very moment, but he had been rendered as stunned as the other humans had been in their silent stupor.

Two Jiralhanae warriors entered the pen and grabbed the cult leader from under his arms, dragging him through the mire. His legs struggled to find purchase as he numbly attempted to dig his heels into the ground, as if it might slow the march to his final, deserved, delicious end.

And as he was carried over a hill and out of sight, the screams of Dasc Gevadim eventually faded with the coming of night.

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And that was it. I waited, day after day, week after week, and no NCA ship ever showed up. So I made the most of my situation, did whatever it took to survive.

Every day, they let me pick the next one to die. They all just stood there, as if something in them had collectively... broken. The complete absence of hope had brought about some kind of dissociation between mind and body—perhaps that was the only way they could filter out the horror of the situation they were in.

Every day, Admiral, I imagined them with your face.

In time, I became part of the pack. We hunted, we killed, we ate, and we waited...

One day, after I had lost count of how long I had been there, a ship arrived. It seemed like this was what the others had been waiting for, keeping the site secure so that their scientists could study the ancient structure that the Guardian had risen from.

Don't know what they were looking for, but it was something big enough for the war chief of the Banished himself to be present.

He wasn't pleased to find that I was alive at first, but let's just say that I made him an offer he couldn't turn down...

[SLIPSPACE RUPTURE DETECTED]

And would you look at that.

He's here right on time.

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MAY 8, 2559
EDOLAS SYSTEM
ABOARD NCA D'ARTAGNAN

Ilsa Zane turned the command chair of Admiral Mattius Drake to face the bridge's viewscreen so he could bear witness to the arrival of the intrusion corvette that had just slipped in.

The vessel bore extensive modifications from its Covenant origins, from additional sensor arrays and jagged ramming spikes to an underbelly containing several boarding craft for rapid breaching operations. And painted on its front was a blood-red stripe emblazoned with the mark of the Banished.

A single Phantom emerged from the intrusion corvette and approached the hangar of the NCA *D'artagnan*.

There was a perceptible shift in the air as Admiral Drake's blood ran cold, his brow lined with sweat and his face pale. In that moment, he reminded her of Dasc. All he could manage was little more than a strangled whisper.

"Ilsa, please..."

But she had already turned her back on him to examine the holotable on the bridge which was displaying the New Colonial Alliance ships located in the system. A little over two-dozen NCA spacecraft were currently stationed here—a mixture of light frigates, corvettes, and converted merchant trawlers docked at a former-Covenant space station. They were joined by a handful of alien warships, and the inherited remains of Vata 'Gajat's mercenary band, now led by the far more pliable T'vaoan known as Tek.

"Attention, all NCA vessels," Zane began to transmit on an open frequency. "This is Ilsa Zane here to inform you of a... change in management."

Admiral Drake struggled against his restraints, but his chair held firm.

"For years, Admiral Drake has promised to claim independence, vowing to strike at the UNSC and secure our freedom. We built a machine of *conquest*, but here we are hiding in some distant system, preying on scraps, and waiting like spineless cowards."

She could hear his approach now, the great thudding footfalls of the Banished war chief. He had come alone, leaving his guards in the hangar bay.

"This was to be our time," Zane continued. "A bunch of misfits and rebels given purpose—as every little piece of a larger machine needs. But there's a very specific piece that just doesn't fit any more; it's holding us all back, and I refuse to let it break what we've built together."

The shadow that was cast over the broad, hulking form of War Chief Escharum receded as he entered the bridge, revealing a Jiralhanae with

a gray beard on his chin, a milky, clouded eye, and a heavily scarred face. He appraised the situation: a handful of ensigns dead in their seats, Admiral Drake bound to his own command chair, and the one he had encountered on Oth Voran—the rogue Spartan—broadcasting her message from the holotable.

“And so, I am relieving Admiral Drake of command,” she unholstered her pistol. “Permanently.”

Ilsa Zane barely registered the sound of her pistol firing as she pulled the trigger without a moment of hesitation and saw the light instantly disappear from Drake’s eyes. A sad, pathetic end to a man who had proclaimed to be laying the groundwork for greatness, reduced now to little more than a footnote in the New Colonial Alliance’s history.

“Our fleet spread across countless colonies, our agents entrenched on a thousand frontlines, and the fire in our hearts for independence—all that we have mustered,” Ilsa Zane concluded. “All that makes us the New Colonial Alliance is hereby pledged to serve as both sword and shield to the Banished.”

Escharum snarled in approval. Though the war chief lacked the same admiration that Atriox held for humanity, he was no fool. The current state of the galaxy demanded greater unity with willing allies to face the challenges ahead, and there was great potential for the resources and influence of this new alliance to be put to use.

He would not deny those who pledged their loyalty and service to Atriox. And so, it was time to welcome a new brotherhood into the widening reach of the Banished.

“Atriox sees you for what you are and for what you could be,” Escharum boomed, stepping beside Zane at the holotable. “For the fury that fuels your desire for freedom is *his* fury too. We shall do great things together—hunt

powerful prey and plunder ancient treasures. You shall be paid in blood and sport and spoils. And you shall never bow again.”

It was done.

*

That was the day that changed everything for the New Colonial Alliance.

Do I regret killing Drake? No more than I regret any of my actions that have brought me to this point—which is to say, hell no, not one bit.

Once, I owed my life to that man, but the NCA is bigger than any one person or leader, and at such a critical point there was no room for weakness. Drake would have seen us wallow in obscurity until the forces we'd gathered lost their edge, rebelled, or simply fled. It all would've fallen apart.

Not while I'm still here.

I can't help but think about Dasc. He was the leader of a fake religion, one that believed in linking the three internal lives we all supposedly have, and in a weird way I recognize how that applies to me more than I might have originally thought.

There was the orphan, who I used to be during the Covenant War, a life that seems a thousand light years away from me now.

Then, after the war, I became a tool to be used and discarded for a new generation of insipid UNSC propaganda.

And now they call me the Banished Spartan. I like that. It feels... right, and I'm eager to discover what this third life has in store for me.

Escharum was keen to put us to use almost immediately. A mission to test us, get us bloody—that's a story for another time. But if you're wondering how I got this armor, well... let's just say it wasn't the first Spartan I've killed.

I've got a list of names to work through as we go—old scores to settle. FERO. Musa. Palmer. Kree'yat. Dinh...

It's a big galaxy out there, and I'm ready for a new hunt.