



# BATTLE FOR THE ACADEMY

PART 2



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

# BATTLE FOR THE ACADEMY

## PART 2

---

### A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

#### HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Battle for the Academy Part 2 *takes place on February 29, 2560, approximately three months before the Master Chief is awakened at Zeta Halo.*

\*

**MARCH 3, 2560**

**HESYCHIUS MOUNTAINS, NYSA // 1532 HOURS**

Some battles do not begin with the stroke of a hammer or the firing of a bullet, but with parley.

Though it is exceedingly rare for the Banished to step onto the field of battle and leave without a drop of blood spilled, the right of parley was a tradition practiced by Atriox from the time when the Banished was a fledgling alliance of mercenaries and exiles. Based on the ancient Sangheili parley formation, the negotiator stands at the center and is flanked by a bodyguard on the right and an adviser on the left.

Spartan Ilsa Zane strode forwards, the towering, armored form of her *daskalo* Chieftain Atticus a step behind in the adviser's position. To her right was an empty space. The Banished Spartan had no need for a bodyguard—an arrogant move perhaps, but she was happy to shirk

tradition as a grander display of strength. Though they had arrived several hours earlier, they had used that time to identify key strategic locations for deployment and scout local outposts to conduct their own assessments. Atticus had also shared his wisdom on the greater game they were playing to maximize their gain from this invasion within the political structure of the Banished.

A hundred meters away, an M15 Razorback had come to a halt and Commander Laurette Agryna approached while flanked by two other Spartans. Iratus's data was already proving useful, as Zane's HUD identified one as Sigrid Eklund and the other... the other she recognized immediately.

*Dinh.*

The mere sight of him sent ice through her veins. Dinh was one of many old scores she had to settle—perhaps one of the oldest.

“You have something I want,” Ilsa Zane said, her tone clipped and direct. “Give me the AI now and my forces will leave. There will be no invasion. You will be free to continue your miserable lives.”

Spartan Agryna stood stoic and still, her brow furrowed in the early evening light as she cast a scrutinous gaze over Zane's armor.

“Hell,” Zane continued as she lifted an arm and pointed at Dinh. “Throw *him* in as part of the deal and I'll even give you my word. You only get this offer once.”

“Even if I believed for a second that your offer was genuine,” Agryna replied, “the answer is no.”

Zane smiled. *Good.*

At that moment, the clouds began to part, giving way to the immense bow of her dreadnought, *Ghost of Kholo*.

Looming directly above as it passed overhead, drop bases began deploying *en masse* from the dreadnought's underbelly, accompanied by waves of pods that rocketed to the ground and unleashed the alien warriors within who were hungry for the taste of Spartan blood. A talon of Banshees streamed out of the ship's hangar, serving as the protective escorts for Phantom dropships.

Zane and Atticus turned, heading to a forward operating base. The Spartans, too, made their way back to the Academy to mount their defenses.

Today, the warriors of Zane's clan would face their greatest challenge yet—and all would have a chance to claim the glory of being known as Spartan killers.

\*

### **AVERY J. JOHNSON ACADEMY, MAIN CAMPUS // 1849 HOURS**

The Banshee's incoming fire chewed through the drop wall deployed by Spartan Eusebio. Flecks of castoff plasma diffused and redirected by the equipment's roiling magnetic field found purchase on Eusebio's shoulder and chest plate, sizzling the outer boundary of his Mjolnir's energy shielding. The orange armor plating wouldn't last long against direct hits if he wasn't careful, prompting him to tuck into a rapid roll for cover behind a reinforced concrete barrier.

The Banished drop pods streaming in from the dreadnought like a meteor shower were a twisted picture of what he imagined his enemies had once seen during the Covenant War. Eusebio had been an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper before recruitment into the SPARTAN-IV program. It used to be him and his squad dropping in behind enemy lines to turn the tide of battle. Now he wondered if this battle might be over within just a few short hours of it getting underway.

“Eusebio!” His attention snapped in the voice’s direction. “Eyes on me!”

He caught the electroplated blue of Commander Agryna’s visor as she ran through a series of hand gestures the Spartans had seen countless times during their training drills. Responding to the unspoken instructions, Eusebio spun and turned to peek out from cover before levelling his VK78 in the direction of the oncoming Banished front line.

Commander Agryna mirrored Eusebio’s motions and emptied her assault rifle into three Grunts and a Brute warrior before switching to her Sidekick to take out two Jackals unlucky enough to have heads exposed over their shield gauntlets.

“Fall back and regroup at this waypoint!” Agryna dropped a local nav marker to ping a location several meters away. “Spartan Eklund, do you copy?”

*“I copy, Commander.”* Eklund’s voice rang through Agryna’s comms. *“I’ve fallen back to the relay junction, but I’ll run out of ammo before they run out of assholes.”*

Agryna swore quietly to herself. “Dinh, grab O’Brien and Sinclair. Get to Eklund and provide whatever help you can. Eusebio, Denning, and I will take the bay door.”

*“Understood. We’re on it.”* Dinh responded.

Agryna tried not to dwell on the grimness of what was now unfolding. They’d certainly run enough simulation work to prepare for the eventuality of such an attack, but those scenarios always ended the same way: lessons learned and lives intact. She accepted the sting to her pride for what it was—the knowledge that she had let it happen under her watch.

Could she have made different choices?



Could she have done something to make these events play out in any other way?

For now, there was only one question that mattered—only one question that she ultimately knew she’d get answered: Had she prepared her Spartans enough for what had arrived at their doorstep?

Across the battlefield, Dinh found his way to Eklund’s side.

“So, here we are again.” The words were tinged with wry amusement.

“Not now.” Eklund muttered, looking through her scope as she kept pressure on the Banished frontlines.

“Is this more like Dansenia or New Berlin?”

“I hate them all equally.” Eklund knew Dinh’s approach was taking the whole *laugh in the face of danger* angle a bit too literally, but she didn’t have the energy for it now. “O’Brien—cover me while I reload. Get shots in that damn berserker!”

Spartan O’Brien turned to acquire her new target, trying desperately to avoid incoming plasma bolts while sinking every assault rifle round she had into the rapidly approaching Brute.

It wasn’t enough.

Just as O’Brien’s shields popped from the plasma fire, the Brute berserker barreled shoulder-first into the Spartan, pinning her against the nearby wall and knocking the wind out of her. As she struggled and her vision began to go dark, O’Brien saw—or rather heard—Spartan Sinclair leap into action, mounting the Brute’s shoulders and stabbing them multiple times with a combat knife.

The berserker bellowed in pain, but its rage was undiminished. It reached its blood-soaked arms back, grabbing Sinclair and whipping the Spartan overhead, sending him crashing into the nearby wall. The force dislodged Sinclair's helmet, the natural slope in the terrain causing it to tumble out of reach.

Barely conscious, Sinclair split mouthfuls of blood while watching as Dinh tried to pull the berserker's attention with Bandit fire and Eklund deftly avoided the overhead swing of another Brute's gravity hammer.

Every bullet impact slowed the lumbering berserker down, but didn't stop it. Sinclair managed to raise an arm to offer an archaic profane hand gesture in the Brute's face before the alien brought both massive fists down on top of the Spartan's head.

Several heavy shots rang out from a Bulldog shotgun and the Brute finally collapsed on top of Sinclair, two warriors from different worlds turned to corpses on Nysan soil.

"Eklund!" Dinh yelled as he tossed the spent Bulldog to the side. "We need to go. Get inside!"

After finishing off the Brute warrior she had tangled with moments before, Eklund leapt to Dinh's side, reaching down to get a proper grip on the armor of the unconscious O'Brien while Dinh got the bay door open.

A few moments later, they were inside with the bulkhead door resealed. Eklund flagged down a small group of combat medics and directed them to see to O'Brien.

"How long do you think we have?" There was little laughter in Dinh's voice now.

Eklund took a few breaths before responding. "I'm not sure it's even up to us anymore."

“So, not long.”

“Probably not long, no.”

*“Dinh, Eklund, do you read me?”* They were interrupted by Agryna’s voice in their TEAMCOM helmet channels.

“Loud and clear, Commander,” Dinh replied. “What’s the plan?”

*“We’re on lockdown,”* Agryna informed them. *“Put whoever you can at the gates, and have marines get the wounded back to the med bay—then meet me in Ops West.”*

“We’re on it.” Dinh turned back towards Eklund. “You okay?”

“I will be.” Eklund’s response was confident but laced with obvious exhaustion.

Within moments, they arrived at Agryna’s position, ready to review their next steps.

“I’m sending fireteams on parallel paths to enact the Cole Protocol across our remaining facilities.” Agryna said. “If they can get the job done, we’ll at least be able to limit some of the damage.”

“Right now, damage limitation counts as ‘good news,’ so I’ll take it.” Dinh replied.

Agryna nodded in agreement. “The lockdown should buy us a li—”

*“I think you’ve forgotten who is actually in charge here.”*

Iratus’s voice came booming over every available channel and rang through the hallway speakers.



*“Let me offer a friendly reminder: it’s not you.”*

The whine and hiss of a symphony of servo motors and hydraulic actuators sounded as every door, gate, and shutter in the Academy opened, unlatched, and raised—followed quickly by the resumption of shouting, screams, and gunfire as Banished troops began to pour into every available ingress point.

\*

**MARCH 4, 2560**  
***SWORD OF CONJUNCTION // 0327 HOURS***

“Shipmistress, we are exiting slipspace now.”

Shipmistress Vedu ‘Ehtar rose from her command chair and looked out of the bridge’s viewport as the pitch-black emptiness of slipspace gave way to a field of stars, vibrant nebulae clouds, and the human world designated “Nysa.”

The bridge crew immediately set to work, Sangheili and humans operating consoles as they began processing incoming streams of data from the ship’s sensors. At the center of the room, a large holographic representation of Nysa was projected.

“Confirming scout-eyes have been launched and are approaching the target area,” Ensign Sethu reported.

It took only a few centals before the central planetary holograph began updating with a variety of data points, building a grim picture of what their allies on the ground were facing as the probes’ visual feeds were projected on screens around the bridge.

Phantom dropships were converging on Nysa’s Academy facilities while an array of Banished occupational infrastructure had been deployed all across

the continent. War-skiffs and Gravemaker battle-nests streamed out from outposts and foundries while a fleet of siege-hauler craft ferried supplies from the source of this invasion: a Banished dreadnought.

Shipmistress 'Ehtar had greatly desired the opportunity to take the fight to the Banished with *Sword of Conjunction* and put her crew to the test, but engaging such a behemoth with an *A'uzr*-pattern frigate—less than even one-third the size of the dreadnought—would be suicidal. They had neither the firepower nor tonnage, and it wasn't their mission to engage the enemy.

The *A'uzr*'s prime advantage was speed. Their powerful slipspace borer had enabled them to reach Nysa in a matter of hours so they could assess the situation.

"Ma'am, I have the UNSC *Fearful Symmetry* on the line," said Lieutenant Mercer.

"Put them through," the shipmistress confirmed.

Mercer tapped a command and a holo-emitter flashed to life, forming the image of a human male standing at attention. He had a shaved head and strange markings on the left side of his face—a fist clutching three primitive arrows.

"Shipmistress," he said. "*We're at the rendezvous point on the edge of the Hyades system and are ready to move as soon as your assessment is complete.*"

"You need wait no longer, we require no further clarity," she replied, nodding to Mercer as he began transmitting the data they had already gathered. "Nysa is under a full-scale invasion by the Banished. This will not be a battle to reclaim the planet. We must begin evacuation procedures as soon as your ship arrives."

"Understood. *We'll be with you as soon as we can to lay the table.*"

With that, the hologram disappeared and Shipmistress ‘Ehtar was left to momentarily untangle the human’s metaphor—something their kind had a particular and peculiar proclivity for which made many of her interactions with them confusing. She imagined that it meant they would be ready for battle.

“Prepare to launch Banshee talons,” she commanded. “Amity, Harmony, and Sympathy Wings will harass the enemy forces to provide cover for the evacuation when the UNSC frigate arrives. Direct Riftborn operatives to their pods—they will be deploying immediately.”

“Relaying orders now, shipmistress.”

\*

### ***SWORD OF CONJUNCTION, DEPLOYMENT BAY // 0337 HOURS***

Ovi ‘Taar and Spartan Adrian Vesco had just finished gearing up with their four fellow Riftborn operatives—Babych and ‘Toizari, along with Prentis and ‘Ookol—when the order to drop arrived from one of the bridge officers. Vesco stowed a pulse carbine into the weapon rack of his pod while ‘Taar fixed an M739 light machine gun to his own.

“Spartan Vesco,” Ovi ‘Taar called. “I have been getting asked what my rank is, I keep telling them it is private!”

Vesco choked out a laugh as he rolled his eyes. “Really, Ovi? *That’s* the line you wanna go out with?”

“Perhaps you might care to lighten the mood?”

“Alright... What did the Unggoy say before going into battle?”

‘Taar paused for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. “I give up.”

Vesco snorted. “Oh, so you’ve heard that one before.”

They climbed into their pods—stealth-specialized *Yado*-pattern intrusion carapaces—and nodded to each other as their hatches sealed, levity giving way to business by-the-book. Holographic displays activated, linking to Vesco’s visor as he confirmed their TEAMCOM and TEAMBIO synchronizations were successful.

*“Victory to clan and kin, Riftborn,”* a Sangheili officer said over their comms. *“Prepare to deploy in three... two... one...”*

Vesco felt a sudden jolt as the pod was released from *Sword of Conjunction*’s deployment bay and plummeted through Nysa’s exosphere. Everybody who dropped feet first into a hot zone had their own ways of getting through it—Vesco wasn’t one to close his eyes and quietly hope he’d survive, but instead found he’d developed a habit of humming old shanties he remembered from home.

He’d done this more times than he could remember, though only a handful of times in an alien intrusion carapace. The sensation was quite different as gravitic compensators made the ride feel a little smoother than it was in a standard human entry vehicle. In those metal coffin rides, one truly felt that they were at the mercy of the many random and cascading consequences of actions taken on the battlefield.

The pod impacted with a thud, and the hatch immediately disengaged, allowing Vesco to grab his weapon and leap into action as the other five pods successfully completed their descents. ‘Taar had landed about a hundred meters away while the other pods were further afield, closer to their own pre-designated targets. One of their scout-eyes passed overhead, no doubt relaying visual confirmation to *Sword of Conjunction* that they had made it to Nysa’s surface.

*“Our primary objective is to locate the Academy’s Commander,”* Spartan Babych said over TEAMCOM as the three pairs moved out. *“Secondary: to*

*rally any additional groups of survivors, then trigger our locator beacons for pick-up.”*

Five status lights winked green in response.

Regrouping with ‘Taar, both Spartan and Sangheili made their approach towards the Academy’s main complex, jogging through green fields illuminated by the pre-dawn light shining over the mountains. Expecting to have to work their way into the Academy, they instead found that every entrance to the facility was already open.

From the sounds of it, the battle was either dying down or the nature of how it was being fought had dramatically changed. At this point, it seemed likely that the Banished controlled much of the local area while UNSC forces were holed up in fortified positions, waiting for the right moments to strike.

“Long-range motion sensor is picking up a cluster of friendly IFFs not far away,” Vesco said.

“Let us make haste.”

The Riftborn pair dropped down into what appeared to be a firing range connected to an adjacent armory. As they approached the door, each took up positions on either side. Vesco caught enemy movement on his motion tracker and heard a loud clanging sound within.

‘Taar peered inside, his helmet activating a tactical eyepiece that slid over his left eye, and relayed his feed to Vesco.

Inside the armory, a colossal Jiralhanae chieftain was tearing off the grated hatches for each weapon locker and handing the contents out to the other Banished forces inside with him. From ‘Taar’s feed, Vesco counted two Jiralhanae—both of whom were now equipped with Bulldog shotguns—and five Kig-Yar who were holding human sniper rifles.

Vesco's Sangheili partner slipped back into cover behind the door and checked his M739 SAW, then nodded to Vesco. It was the same silent *"We can take them"* nod they had exchanged a thousand times.

Moving swift and silent as a shadow, Spartan Vesco leapt through the entrance to the armory and primed two fragmentation grenades, tossing them at the Banished forces.

The chieftain was faster and more aware than Vesco had anticipated, lifting his gravity hammer and smashing it down on the ground, the gravitic pulse sending a shockwave that scattered his own forces along with the grenades. Upon detonation, two of the Kig-Yar that had been thrown aside were engulfed in a fiery explosion and one of the Jiralhanae held a hand to his eyes, dazed from the concussive blast.

That was Ovi 'Taar's cue to break from cover and unleash hell with his machine gun, sending controlled volleys of 7.62mm armor piercing rounds into the stragglers. Dark purple blood sprayed out of three Kig-Yar as their lithe bodies were torn apart under fire, staining the concrete ground. Just as one of the Jiralhanae warriors regained his senses and lowered his arm, Vesco switched to his Sidekick and plugged five rounds into the Brute's head.

"Two targets left," Vesco reported. The chieftain appeared to have taken cover, and the second Brute--

Without warning, the second Brute slammed its entire body weight into Vesco, roaring as it leapt on top of him and began frantically clawing at the Spartan, beating at his energy shields until they burst.

'Taar spun around and managed to fire several rounds that struck the Brute in the side, but the Sangheili missed the chieftain slamming its gravity hammer into the weapons locker unit itself. Vesco threw the Brute off of him and sprinted towards his companion.



The locker units were large steel crates designed to move along two floor tracks due to their immense weight. Ovi ‘Taar realized where he was standing too late to react.

Vesco dove forwards, hoping to tackle ‘Taar out of the way, but the unit—struck with such force by the gravity hammer that it lifted off its tracks—crashed into him with a sickening *crunch*.

The chieftain bellowed in satisfied rage. Vesco took up his companion’s weapon, unloading the rest of the SAW’s drum magazine. In launching the locker unit, the chieftain had sacrificed his own cover, paying for that action as he was now completely exposed. There were only seventeen rounds left in the magazine, but it was enough to shred through the chieftain’s thick armor plating.

The chieftain barely seemed to register the pain and advanced towards Vesco as the magazine was spent. It snatched the SAW from Vesco’s hands and tossed it aside like a toy before delivering a swift punch to the Spartan’s head—a blow that brought him to his knees and would have undoubtedly killed him if he hadn’t been wearing a helmet.

Ears ringing, vision swimming, Vesco was only vaguely aware of the muffled sound of assault rifle bursts a few meters away. It took the explosive entry through the far door to the armory to draw his focus—and then he saw them: a dozen marines led by a Spartan in cream-white armor.

“That’s right, you bastard,” one of the marines shouted as Vesco heard strained grunts and heavy footfalls from the chieftain. “Run!”

Vesco crawled towards the locker units, finding Ovi ‘Taar crushed between them, an outstretched hand still twitching as his breathing became increasingly labored. His vitals on TEAMBIO were rapidly declining.

“Ovi,” Vesco’s voice was rough, his hand gentle as it settled on his partner’s wrist.

Somewhere behind him he could hear the din of conversation, the barking of orders, but his attention remained fixed on the brother who had watched his back for over five years.

*“Clear the room, Neely. Make sure there aren’t any more surprises here.”*

*“We’re all good, Commander. Looks like our friend here took care of the rest.”*

“Spartan Vesco,” ‘Taar’s eyes brightened for a moment as he croaked the words. “What-- do you call a--”

The Sangheili went still.

“Ovi... Ovi?”

Though he fought to stay conscious, Vesco felt himself getting pulled away as his vision blurred—the sight of Ovi ‘Taar growing further and further away until the armory’s bay door closed. He could just about make out the steady assurances coming from the commander. *“Easy, Spartan. Come with us, we’ll get you patched up.”*

\*

## **AI LAB // 0429 HOURS**

Commander Agryna gently set the Spartan down by the AI lab’s door and waved for a corpsman to tend to him. She didn’t recognize him, but the questions would have to wait until he was conscious.

The rest of the marines, led by Corporal Neely, took up positions outside the AI lab, setting up barricades down two short flights of stairs facing a bulkhead door that led out to the training grounds.

“Commander,” Chief Engineer Hannah Roberts called. “We’re receiving a transmission from another local facility.”

Commander Agryna approached. “Let’s hear it.”

*“--Protocol initiated, I say again: Cole Protocol initiated. Spartan reinforcements arrived to help clear the deck and finalize the data purge process.”*

“Sounds like Rook really gave ‘em hell out there,” Dinh said. “But what good does the Cole Protocol do us now?”

“Iratus has plundered our archives for data on highly classified information,” Roberts explained. “The Cole Protocol initiates a deletion subroutine that terminates that data, along with any local carriers that have downloaded it.”

“Including Iratus himself?” Dinh asked.

“It’s part of the RUINA failsafe upgrade devised to address the risk posed by rogue AIs. If Iratus remains in those systems, he’s putting himself at significant risk.”

Eklund considered for a moment before asking, “That means he’s going to need to find some kind of shelter, right? A central server where he has control so he can hang onto what he’s scavenged.”

“Which will bring him right back here,” Roberts nodded. “The one place he’s safe, ironically enough, is with us.”

“Can we download him onto a data chip?”

Eklund tilted her head towards Dinh. “You’re not thinking of putting him in your head again, are you?”

“Actually,” Dinh growled. “I’m thinking of crushing the little bastard in my fist.”

As if on cue, the central holotable’s glow turned red as Iratus’s form appeared. *“I’m afraid it won’t be that simple.”*

“Right on time,” Roberts said. “Hello again, Iratus.”

*“I congratulate you on a well-coordinated stalemate, Chief Engineer Roberts. I am stuck here with you, but... oh, it’s just a matter of time before the Banished come knocking on your door.”*

“Muzzle him, would you?” Agryna asked, to which Roberts obliged by raising a containment shield around the holotable’s display. “He’s right. We’ve got this place locked down but not for long. And when the Banished get in here... we’ve got nowhere left to fall back to.”

Agryna’s attention was diverted by a groan near the door, the injured Spartan she and the marines had rescued was getting to his feet.

“Actually, that’s not quite true, Commander,” he strained to say.

“I don’t think I recognize you, Spartan?”

He swayed on the spot for a moment before regaining his balance and composure. “Vesco. Spartan Adrian Vesco, Anvil Station.”

“Anvil?” Dinh turned to face him. “You got our message?”

Vesco walked forwards a few paces and Agryna moved to his side, placing a hand on his back to keep him supported. “Affirmative. But we had to scramble for naval assets. We arrived first with *Sword of Conjunction* to assess the situation before signaling the UNSC *Fearful Symmetry* to jump in and assist with the evacuation. Me and five other Riftborn operatives

were sent in first to find you. My partner, Ovi..." Vesco trailed off. Agryna surmised that the Sangheili they'd found crushed in the armory must have been with him.

"Your mission?"

Vesco regained his focus and addressed Agryna directly. "*Our* mission is to live to fight another day, Commander."

Agryna's expression hardened. "We fight to win."

"And to do that, I'm afraid we have to lose today." Vesco retrieved a small device from the storage unit inside his Mjolnir armor's thigh plating.

"What's that?" Agryna asked.

"Locator beacon. This'll ping the *Symmetry* with our location and they'll direct a Pelican to pick us up. You have a landing pad outside?"

"We do, so I suggest you all get to it now," Agryna said. "I'll hold the fort here. If Nysa is going down, it's my duty as Commander to go with it."

Chief Engineer Roberts sighed, shaking her head. "No, you're not. There's nothing left for bullets to do here. We've lost. The only thing left is to try to remove as much information from Iratus as possible—that's my job."

"Hannah, you can't--"

"Actually, I can." She stood up straighter, even as she was dwarfed by the average height of the Spartans in the room. "Sorry Commander, but I'm pulling rank. As head of cybersecurity dealing with a threat to humanity from a hostile artificial intelligence, *my* authority takes precedent in this situation."

“We’ve got your back, Spartans,” Corporal Neely said from the adjacent room. “Anybody who wants to leave can do so. Those of us who stay will buy you the time you need.” The marines remained at their posts, resolute. “That settles that.”

“I’m receiving a confirmation signal,” Vesco said. “*Symmetry*’s locked onto our beacon. We need to get moving.”

Agryna stood still for a moment, a storm of conflicting thoughts thundering through her head. She met the chief engineer’s gaze, nodded, and finally said, “I’m sorry.”

Roberts gestured for them to get going. “It’s my honor, Commander. *Our* honor.” She gave a wry smile. “Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind.”

\*

### PELICAN BRAVO-198 // 0441 HOURS

As the Pelican descended towards the landing pad outside the Academy’s primary complex, Jun-A266 saw buildings aflame, from which plumes of blackened smoke appeared as signal flares of devastation.

A few kilometers away, the lone Banished dreadnought loomed over the mountains.

“Captain, you have that distraction we ordered?” Jun asked.

“*We’re ready on your mark.*”

“Fire at will.”

From the dreadnought’s starboard side, a shadow passed through the clouds at incredible speed. The *Mulsanne*-class frigate *Fearful Symmetry*



was gunning for the Banished ship like a bullet as it unleashed its primary weapon, a brightlance reflex laser. This directed energy beam took the place of the more traditional magnetic accelerator cannon but was no less effective in the right scenarios.

Jun watched as a streak of white-blue energy erupted from between the frigate's two booms, directly impacting the dreadnought's starboard bow, temporarily overloading many of the ship's systems. *Symmetry* then fired its rear thrusters as it passed over its target and disappeared into Nysa's upper atmosphere.

"We're clear, initiate landing." Jun ordered the pilot.

He headed into the Pelican's troop bay where Rosenda-A344, fully clad in her Mjolnir armor, finished inspecting a Hydra missile launcher. She grabbed a sniper rifle from the weapons rack and held it out to Jun.

It was with only a barely perceptible moment of hesitation that he accepted the rifle. He'd been off the field for years; after the fall of Reach and the end of the Covenant War, he had chosen to serve as a recruiter for the next generation of humanity's heroes. Though he still kept his skills sharp, he had fully believed it when Musa said to him in jest that he might be one of only a handful of Spartan old-timers that would end their career through retirement.

The galaxy, it seemed, had other plans, and called upon him to serve once more.

In truth, that was why he had sought out Rosenda. As a former member of Noble Team herself, prior to being transferred to special covert operations at the end of 2551, he needed somebody he could trust beyond any doubt to keep him at his best. He could count on one hand the number of other surviving Alpha Company members...

"Touchdown, Spartans," the pilot called from the cockpit as the troop bay door opened.

Jun and Rosenda filed out of the Pelican and onto the tarmac of the Avery J. Johnson Academy's landing pad. The central complex was scorched and the surrounding area was littered with wrecked, upturned vehicles, blazing fires, twisted metal and chunks of concrete strewn across the landing zone, along with several dead marines.

"Signal looks good," Jun said as he glanced at his wrist-mounted UGPS device which was pinging the beacon that one of the Riftborn operatives had activated. "They should be coming out any moment."

"In the meantime, let's take care of that uninvited guest." Rosenda pointed skywards as a Banshee scout began turning towards their location.

Jun levelled his sniper rifle and took aim at the target. The Kaelum Workshop models utilized by the Banished were tricky due to their reinforced plating covering the cockpit and wings.

Rosenda locked onto the attack flyer with her Hydra and fired four high-explosive gyroco missiles. The Banshee altered its trajectory as soon as the pilot saw them coming, but wasn't quite fast enough to avoid impact from two of the rockets on its armored wing, blasting it off.

Jun continued tracking it with his rifle, waiting for the right moment. The other two missiles that the Banshee had managed to avoid were still tracking their target, curving back around, prompting the pilot to accelerate and begin a series of convoluted arcing maneuvers.

Jun drew in a breath, his sniper rifle's targeting reticle finding the weakest spot on the Banshee's damaged side where a bullet would pass through the armor. The two missiles overshot the aircraft once more, detonating from colliding with each other, and the Banshee levelled out. Before it could begin to turn back towards them, a muted *crack* came from Jun's sniper rifle and he watched with satisfaction as the vehicle entered a sudden nosedive, crashing into the ground and erupting into flame.

“You’ve still got it, old man,” Rosenda bumped him on the shoulder as she approached the Academy’s main entrance.

He wanted to say, “You’re only a year younger than me, you know?” but at that moment the bulkhead door began to slide upwards. Jun kept his rifle trained on the door until he saw that four Spartans were making their way out of the atrium.

“I have visual confirmation of Commander Agryna and three other survivors,” Rosenda reported to Bravo-198’s pilot. “Prepare for dust-off.”

*“Ten-four. We’re good to go as soon as you’re all aboard.”*

There wasn’t time for introductions, pleasantries, or platitudes. Jun simply signaled for the survivors to follow him as they made their way to the Pelican’s rear bay.

Jun nodded to Spartan Vesco as he boarded the Pelican. Riftborn were typically deployed in pairs and there was no sign of an allied Sangheili with him. Vesco was then followed by Spartans Dinh, Eklund, and finally Agryna.

“We’re good to go,” Rosenda said as she headed towards the cockpit. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Agryna asked as the Pelican began to rise.

Jun turned to her, but Agryna’s gaze remained fixed on the view of Nysa outside the troop bay door’s viewport. “This Pelican will take us to the *Symmetry* where we can see to immediate medical needs. Then we’re jumping back to Anvil Station. We can regroup and debrief there.”

As the Pelican accelerated into the atmosphere, the view of the Avery J. Johnson Academy became smaller with each passing second.

“I should’ve stayed,” Agryna said in a hoarse whisper as they left Nysa behind.

Jun sank into a seat and exhaled. He’d told himself those very same words—considered every permutation of how differently things might’ve turned out if he had stayed with his team during the fall of Reach...

But they had orders, a duty to the greater mission of protecting humanity, and bigger battles to fight on the horizon.

\*

### **TRAINING GROUNDS LOCKER ROOM // 0448 HOURS**

Corporal Agnes Neely, Private Patton, and a dozen other marines had taken up defensive positions in the room outside the AI lab. Two short flights of stairs led down to a dozen Spartan equipment lockers beside the bulkhead door to the training grounds—it was tight quarters but there was nowhere left to fall back to. They’d set up a few improvised barricades for all the good it would do, but there was no room for doubt here. This was their final stand.

The shutters were closed which cast the room in near total darkness, the only source of illumination coming from the underslung flashlights on the marines’ assault rifles, all of which were directed towards the training yard door.

It seemed an ill omen that the muffled sounds of battle outside were dying down. The building no longer shook from Banshee strafing runs.

The enemy would be with them soon.

Neely caught Patton cursing himself in hoarse whispers as his hands shook while keeping his assault rifle aimed at the door. She couldn’t blame him for being scared—for no doubt thinking that he should’ve

taken a spot on the Pelican and gotten the hell out of here. It seemed like it was easy to be brave and noble in the moment, but waiting in the quiet aftermath, suspended in the ever-shortening time they knew they had left, gave way to doubt.

Before she could offer so much as a reassuring hand on Patton's shoulder, something slammed against the bulkhead door with immense force, jolting the marines to attention.

Again and again, the door was pounded upon, causing the alloy to warp and bend inwards. It strained, creaked, and groaned with every thunderous impact, until one final effort on the other side broke through.

A shaft of light from the rising sun burst through the gap in the door, and a tall, armored figure stepped into the center, casting a long shadow over the marines.

Before Neely, Patton, or any of the others could react, the figure had entered the room and readied its weapon. The first impact came before a shot had even been fired as the figure's Mutilator slammed against a barricade, the gravitic impact sending it—along with the three marines behind it—into the far wall. Metal struck flesh, bones snapped and broke, and the room then became momentarily lit by the muzzle flashes of their assault rifles responding to this intruder.

The Mutilator fired with a sonorous blast, ejecting over a dozen superheated spike pellets which buried themselves in Patton's left side, shredding through armor, cloth, and flesh. He didn't make a sound as he swayed on the spot for a moment before toppling from the stairs, blood pooling around him on the grated floor.

Neely could see the intruder more clearly now as it made its way up the first flight of stairs, launching two other marines with a concussive blast from the Mutilator's barrel-mounted gravity hammer. It looked

like a Spartan, but the design of its Mjolnir was unmistakably based on Jiralhanae power armor.

Through the gap in the door, Neely spotted several other Jiralhanae entering the room—a momentary distraction that took her eyes off the Banished Spartan.

The cost of that lapse was high. Neely suddenly felt a strong hand clamp down on her shoulder with a vice-tight grip and a second later, found the Mutilator’s firing chamber pressed directly over her heart.

\*

## **AI LAB // 0500 HOURS**

Ilsa Zane made her way to the center of the Academy’s AI lab.

Leaving overturned barricades and slumped bodies in her wake, the Banished Spartan dispassionately surveyed the results of the battle before turning to the matter at hand.

“Bring her here, Praedus.”

A Jiralhanae captain snarled and pushed the Academy staff member towards the center of the room.

“And who do we have here?” Zane asked.

“It seems like you already know.” Chief Engineer Hannah Roberts’s voice was shaky but direct.

“Yes, Ms. Roberts, I do my homework.” Zane gestured to the console that contained Iratus. “Now be a dear and unshackle the construct.”



Sensing the engineer's resistance, Zane clarified: "Do not mistake this conversation for negotiation. Waste my time and we'll both be disappointed with what happens next."

"Why are you doing this?"

"We all have our reasons, Ms. Roberts. I was an orphan. I lost someone special. I chipped a tooth. I woke up on the wrong side of the fucking dreadnought. Take your pick."

"Look, I understand why you might hate the Spartans, but it's not—"

"Spare me the empathy engineering," Zane interrupted. "The construct. Now."

"The risks don't worry you?" Roberts pressed. "This didn't exactly go well for the last person to put this thing inside his head."

"Oh, don't you worry about me. I'm sure our friend here will find my accommodations far more inviting."

Ilsa Zane had a history carved from hardship and long odds—this was no different, and her patience had reached its end. If the chief engineer had anything more to say, this time she kept it to herself. Moving stiffly to the central AI console, her hands moved swiftly and deliberately across the control panel. A few moments later, a telltale chime came from the dock and an AI chip was ejected from its console.

"There," Roberts uttered. "He's in there."

Zane stepped forward, eyes fixed on the chip as she slowly removed it, silently inspecting its contours and the pulsing red light at the center.

"I hope you two are happy together." Roberts's reply suddenly seemed more confident, more defiant. Zane paid it no more than a passing consideration.

“You’ve got guts, Ms. Roberts, I’ll give you that.” Turning from both the chief engineer and the console, Zane gestured to Praedus as she departed back through the locker room. “They’re on the floor, but still, I respect it.”

The Banished Spartan did not bother to watch what happened next. She knew Praedus moved with his usual efficiency to do as she ordered. The wet sound of blood and viscera hitting the lab floor—the last moments of Chief Engineer Hannah Roberts—barely registered as she examined the AI chip a final time before inserting it into her helmet’s port.

The response was immediate. The edges of her vision grew red as an ice-cold sensation coursed through her nervous system and a new presence settled in her mind.

“Good morning, Iratus. Make yourself at home.”