



ASCENSION ON ATROPOS



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Ascension on Atropos takes place from October 2556, immediately following the Flood outbreak on LV-31, to April 2560, approximately four months after the disappearance of Zeta Halo.

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NARROW-BAND POINT-TO-POINT TRANSMISSION

ORIGIN: FFG-195, UNSC *Saturn*

TERMINATION: [UNIDENTIFIED VESSEL]

SENT: Shipboard AI: LCN 0437-1, "Lycaon"

DATE: April 17, 2560

You were curious about the events that transpired in the wake of the disaster at Site 22 over three-and-a-half years ago. I have often wondered what news, if any, ever reached the UNSC, given what happened in the aftermath of that catastrophe. Since my reactivation, I have waited, and I have watched, and I shall at last deliver closure to this dark chapter of history by bringing it into the light.

I am transferring the data to you now. And I am, in truth, relieved to finally share this burden with another. Herein lies the final fate of the UNSC Saturn and Captain Pedro Alvarez.

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UNSC SATURN
October 5, 2556
Marcey System

Captain Pedro Alvarez had done his duty. He could say that, at least.

There was a bigger picture, a larger context that had informed his strategic thinking. Over a year ago, the UNSC Home Fleet had been decimated. Without warning, thousands of Forerunner machines—Retriever sentinels, each the size of a frigate—had appeared out of the portal in Africa.

Alvarez, executive officer aboard the UNSC *Lamplighter* at the time, had seen the carnage first-hand. Barely a handful of years after the Covenant War's end, humanity's home was under threat once again.

A great maw swallowed the horizon, the bridge's forward viewport peering directly into the dark gullet of slipstream space, as if the deepest pit of the Underworld hung suspended over the African plains.

"Captain," Commander Alvarez said. He had spotted the first signs of movement within the abyss. "Contacts approaching. What are your orders, sir?"

The Retrievers first emerged few in number, but at a rate that suggested these waves would increase in size and speed until they became an unstoppable swarm. They deployed powerful gravitic forces to hoover up chunks of land, strip mining natural resources—and they wouldn't stop until the entire planet was consumed.

*"Captain," Commander Alvarez called once more as the *Lamplighter* shuddered. Fire erupted beyond the bridge's portside window as several Retrievers formed together and unleashed sterilization beams that gutted a Strident from stem to stern.*

The captain simply stood at the helm, watching it all unfold. Alvarez had never been sure whether the man had been stupefied into indecision or if he was staring in reverential awe.

He gave no orders.

“Captain!”

By the time the Retrievers were neutralized—not by military action on Earth, but through orders to stand down and retreat by whatever far-away intelligence had commanded them—there were no more than a dozen ships left to make up the UNSC Home Fleet.

They had pinned a medal on Alvarez for simply surviving after he’d stepped up and mutinied to relieve his captain of command. A Bronze Star, a promotion he hadn’t wanted, his own command, and a bottle of Titan Smoke.

His hands trembled slightly as he took a terse sip from the well-cut crystal glass in his grasp. He never found out what became of his former captain.

Alvarez had been planning to save the Titan Smoke for his imminent retirement, a toast to a job well done, a life (mostly) well lived, and to honor the brave and bold he had served alongside. Thanks to the events of the last day, he had made the decision to open it prematurely, believing—or perhaps hoping—that an answer to the terrible conundrum he now faced lay at the bottom of the tall cylindrical bottle.

He had a lot to get through to find that answer.

Alvarez caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. The dim lighting of his quarters cast him half in shadow, emphasizing the lines on his haggard face. He clutched the Titan Smoke bottle tightly in both hands, looking as if he was some absurd imitation of the painting that lay in the ship’s ready

room—*Saturn Devouring His Son*, one of the historic nineteenth century Black Paintings by Francisco Goya. The art depicted the Roman god Saturn huddled in darkness, clutching the bloody, dismembered carcass of one of his children as he devoured its flesh.

I did my duty. They will understand that. They surely will...

Over thirty hours of unbroken cognizance and it still seemed like a nightmare.

He had turned the last day's events over in his head a thousand times. The miners stationed at Site 22 on the asteroid designated LV-31—or simply “Elvie”—had discovered an ancient Forerunner ship embedded in an asteroid, only to find something terrible waiting within.

The Flood.

This parasitic life form had been unleashed upon the miners, tearing through their numbers in short order. When a distress call finally reached *Saturn*, the shipboard artificial intelligence Lycaon had insisted that they immediately unleash MAC rounds and fusion warheads.

Protocol decreed that one did not play chess with primordial cosmic forces. The only option was to wipe the board clean. Destroy the colony, the miners, and LV-31's vital resources needed to meet quotas for rebuilding the UNSC Home Fleet.

Alvarez had refused. When Lycaon attempted to usurp Alvarez's command, he had disabled the AI with an override code phrase and deployed the Spartans of Fireteam Leviathan along with an army of Hellbringers to burn the parasite on the ground.

It had seemed a sound strategy, until one of the Spartans became infected.

Everybody on the bridge had watched in silent, wide-eyed horror as the Mjolnir armor's countermeasures to infection were deployed.

Microexplosives detonated within the helmet to immolate the poor bastard's head, but the parasite had managed to disrupt further automated procedures and take over the super-soldier.

It had seemed impossible. Unbelievable. To witness a Spartan, regarded by many as humanity's sword and shield, become twisted, broken, and turned against them in such a fashion had been a morale-shattering spectacle. Not to mention the advantages of its combat expertise, omniscapable use of weapons and vehicles, Mjolnir armor, classified information...

Into that nightmare scenario they had plunged. The outbreak had cascaded out of control and culminated in Alvarez's decision to enact the scorched earth protocols to eradicate LV-31 anyway.

Now he faced a choice.

Return to Earth and face the music for this catastrophe, or...

No. The thought was shameful. In truth, he did not quite know what it was that made him so afraid, but fear could lead a man to do terrible, unimaginable things.

I did my duty. I made a decision. I eliminated the enemy.

Yes, he had that to stand on at least. Whatever losses *had* been incurred, the worst had been averted. *Saturn's* Shiva missiles had destroyed everything and prevented the Flood from departing the system, denying them the opportunity to spread. He would be able to stand before those who cast judgement upon him and tell them that.

He would hold his head high, accept the responsibility—and the consequences—of the most difficult command decision anybody could have to make.

Alvarez set aside the bottle of Titan Smoke and gulped down several glasses of water, then dressed himself in his command uniform. As he smoothed out the crinkled fabric with a hand, he heard a knock at the door.

“Come.”

The door slid open and Lieutenant Shafiq stood at the entryway, a data pad in his hands.

“Can I help you, Lieutenant?” Captain Alvarez asked.

“May I speak with you, sir?”

“Of course, please come in.”

Lieutenant Shafiq stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He strode forward and held out the data pad.

“Statistical analysis of the incident at Site 22, sir.” Though Alvarez had only briefly known Shafiq, he had determined that he was not normally given to physical displays of discomfort. In the short time he had served aboard *Saturn*, he had maintained cool composure under duress. Yet there was an unmistakable tremor in his hand as Captain Alvarez took hold of the data pad. “We lost a lot of good people.”

Alvarez scrolled through the list of names. All four Spartans of Fireteam Leviathan were listed as MIA. Forty-six marines and thirty-nine Hellbringers—killed in action. He cursed under his breath.

Eighty-nine souls lost, and that wasn’t even accounting for the miners and additional staff—nor the cost of the equipment and resources.

Shafiq’s expression hardened. “There is... something else, sir.”

Of course there is, Alvarez grimaced. “Lay it on me, Lieutenant.”

“We have completed our inventory of the assets deployed to Site 22. We’ve reviewed all captured footage of the last thirty-six hours, surveyed the remaining debris, and have compiled a total record of what made it back here and what didn’t.”

Alvarez swiped over to review the data. One of *Saturn*’s three Condor dropships had made it back, as had two of the Pelicans carrying Cyclops units optimized for hazardous operations. Everything else—*everyone* else—had been lost to nuclear fire.

Wait a minute...

“Lieutenant Shafiq, one of our three Condors made it back here, yet only *one* of them is marked as confirmed destroyed.”

“Yes, sir.” Shafiq’s jaw tightened. “I have personally reviewed the data myself. One of our Condors is *unaccounted for*.”

Captain Alvarez felt his stomach drop as the implication sunk in. “One of our slipspace-capable vessels”—he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper—“is unaccounted for?”

They’d sink him for that. Not just for the dire possibility presented by this revelation, but for deploying slipspace-capable craft to an infection zone in the first place. It was a strategic blunder he hadn’t even considered in the heat of the moment, having felt wholly assured that any hostile craft would simply be blown out of the sky.

Shafiq stood straight, his gaze locked to the far wall, unable to look Alvarez in the eye. “What are your orders, sir?”

“Send me all the footage we have. I want to review this personally. *Nobody* is to hear of this until we are certain of the facts. Do you understand?”

“Understood, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Lieutenant Shafiq did an about turn and exited the room. Captain Alvarez sank into his chair, slumping beneath the weight of his failures as if the gravity of the room had been turned up by several gees. He buried his face in his hands and wondered if the nightmare would ever end.

He had failed in his duty. He had made all the wrong decisions. And somewhere, out there in the darkness, the enemy may be loose.

This changed everything.

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ATROPOS

Nineteenth Age of Abandonment

“Be proud and joyous, my Chosen. Today is *your* day.”

Atun ‘Etaree felt the long, elegant fingers of the Minister of Aretalogy’s hands upon his shoulders. He met the glittering gaze of the Minister’s eyes, both of which were dark as night and mottled with grey-white spots which made them look like bright nebulae clouds. The San’Shyuum was blind, not as the result of old age, for he seemed to be younger than most others Atun had encountered, but through a ritual he had performed to align himself with higher cosmic spheres.

“I draw strength and certainty from your example, Minister,” Atun said, relaxing in his seat a little as the Umbra transport gently and silently traversed the surface of Atropos.

The Umbra’s troop bay was spacious, and as the Minister’s personal transport only a select few were blessed with the opportunity to accompany

him—his honor guards, his designated driver and gunner, and his Chosen. The latter was a particularly special rank, with one of their number elevated each lunar cycle to undergo the process of ascension.

Looking at the representation of the local area displayed by the troop bay's holo-emitter, Atun noted that they were passing by the citadel. This structure typically served as a central base of operations for the Covenant during planetary deployment, but the Minister had seen fit to utilize it for other purposes. Around three annual cycles ago, they had lived aboard a small orbital station, until the Minister had one day decided to commit all their assets to the surface of this world.

The Minister had not divulged—at least to Atun—why any of this had come to be. Nevertheless, Atun trusted in the San'Shyuum's design.

“It is a joyous occasion,” the Minister said, his tone slightly firmer as he drew back to his full height. “But first, we must attend to the Festival of Joyous Partition.”

Atun bowed his head, a natural instinct he had not yet managed to curtail given that the San'Shyuum could not see it. He merely hoped that the Minister was able to sense his respect.

Aided by his anti-gravity belt, the Minister's lithe robed form shuffled out of the transport's troop bay, his lavender-colored gown flowing behind him as he left the Sangheili in contemplation.

Atun busied himself with the completion of his gift for the festival. His tools were delicate. Necessity had forced him to fashion some of them himself after realizing he did not possess a complete set, but they had served him well as he worked on building his latest *arum*. These were puzzles, an arrangement of layered concentric spheres leading to an object in the center.

Over the ages of Sangheili history, there were countless stories and legends about the objects that *arums* contained. Many traditional plays about Sangheili at war featured vital information and strategies uncovered within *arums* that were solved by worthy commanders. In older romantic tales, they held tokens of affection between lovers. Atun recalled the fable of Cdel the Fair who found her lifemate after journeying across the five continents of Sanghelios, challenging her many suitors to solve the puzzle-sphere and claim her hearts. Merchants told of rare jewels and treasures hidden within their *arums* that would make the one who solved them rich beyond measure.

But for Atun, there was great joy in the simple act of creation, of building things with one's hands, and then passing the fruits of his labor off to another. Few had solved the *arums* of Atun 'Etaree. This was precisely what had drawn the Minister of Aretalogy's attention to him many cycles ago on High Charity, and Atun hoped that this particular puzzle sphere would be his most challenging yet, worthy of his ascension.

Perhaps he would fashion *arums* for the gods themselves when he served by their side come the day's end.

Atun's thoughts turned to Atropos and the prospect of imminently leaving this world that had served as his home—if indeed that was what ascension entailed. Atropos was a curious planet, one uniquely possessed of an immense system of circumplanetary rings—two across varying axes. The inner ring, "Fate," was composed of twelve layers, and the outer, "Destiny," had forty-three. The unpredictable nature of the ring systems resulted in a chaotic stellar environment of moons, asteroids, dense particles, and many other dangers to approaching craft. Atun simply admired their beauty, as they were observable from the blackened rocky ground of Atropos and appeared as great glittering archways over the horizon, illuminating the holy path from the realm of mortals to the divine beyond.

The Minister told all who had followed him from High Charity that this world represented a cosmological test of balance and guidance. Their

worthiness would be determined by their ability to achieve harmony, not just with the planet itself but with the others they had discovered inhabiting it. Those who now approached with their own cavalcade.

The humans had arrived.

The Minister's Umbra slowed to a stop and the convoy of six Shadows formed up on either side of the lead vehicle. Atun noted from the holographic display that the human vehicles were much less sophisticated, their great blocky forms utilized wheels and primitive hydrogen-injected combustion engines rather than gravitic transport drives.

Atun felt the Minister's honor guards, Bora 'Yerusee and Ismo 'Argomee, grow tense in the harnesses beside him as their hands flexed.

"Peace, brothers," Atun spoke with a direct tone of confidence and authority he had learned from the Minister. "Remember, the humans' presence here long predates our own, and they know nothing of the War of Annihilation."

"It is merely instinct," Ismo relaxed slightly. "Even after three annual cycles here, it is... difficult to sublimate."

"We follow the guidance of the Minister," Bora affirmed. "By his wisdom, none shall come to harm."

Atun assisted the Minister as he disembarked from the Umbra and strode forward to meet with the humans' own delegate. There were eight human vehicles in total, but it was not clear whether their full population was present—only a select few dozen Sangheili accompanied the Minister for each festival event, at least a hundred others remained back at the outpost. From the curvature of the human delegate's stomach, however, it seemed that another would soon be added to their community.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Minister,” the delegate extended a hand—a traditional human greeting—before checking the motion, remembering belatedly that the San’Shyuum was blind. “And a great honor to observe another festival between us,” she added.

The Festival of Joyous Partition began.

Humans and Sangheili alike began unloading the contents of their respective vehicles, setting up makeshift stalls containing a vast array of curiosities and objects.

Atun examined the various items that these humans had brought as gifts. He saw swords forged from steel that bore some resemblance to ancient Sangheili burnblades. Golden discs that were explained to be “records,” devices that had been sent out during a time when their kind was first reaching out into space, containing images, sounds, and other things they hoped would reach life beyond their planet. And there were other curious objects as well. Human utensils for cooking and eating, communication devices they identified as “chatters,” tangled wires and machines that played virtual entertainment—something Atun knew the Unggoy had been fascinated with.

Several stalls contained collections of artwork. Images of feline creatures, interactive holographs of landscapes and family units. But it was the paintings preserved in transparent capsules that Atun found most stirring, the fascinating ways in which another species applied an array of pigments to a canvas to express their ideas and emotions.

“What is that?” Atun asked as he found himself drawn to one particular item among the collection.

“This?” Beneath his thick white beard, the aged human’s mouth widened and showed a row of crooked teeth. “It’s one of me most valuable paintings. Ya like it?”

Atun stepped forward, transfixed by the image that stood at just about one-and-a-half meters tall within its frame.

A lone human figure was hunched in darkness, eyes wide and white like the opals that Atun had concealed within some of his early *arums*. It was clutching the bloodied carcass of what appeared to be a child.

“Hundreds of years old, that is. A genuine original by Goya. Er, that’s an artist back on Earth, where we’re from. Before we were stranded here, I acquired it in remarkable circumstances.”

“I... believe the Minister would like this,” Atun said, though he silently questioned why he would say such a thing of a blind San’Shyuum and was wholly uncertain of what made him feel so drawn to the painting. “Are you willing to part with it in exchange for this?” Atun withdrew his completed *arum*.

The human elder considered for a moment before letting out a hoarse bark of a laugh. “Yeah, why the ‘ell not? Nobody’ll believe I gave away a timeless piece of classical human art to an alien.”

Atun loaded the painting into the bay of one of the Shadow transports before returning to the gathering. They sat together for a while. Human, Sangheili, and San’Shyuum supped on an exchange of delicacies and beverages, told stories of their peoples and histories, and then parted for another annual cycle.

With the Festival of Joyous Partition complete, all that remained now was Atun ‘Etaree’s ascension, and he was glad to go to the side of the gods in high spirits and with good cheer.

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UNSC SATURN
October 9, 2556
Marcey System

Lieutenant Anwar Shafiq was a newcomer to the UNSC *Saturn*. He had been an up-and-coming officer aboard the UNSC *Irish Goodbye* whose executive officer had recognized that Shafiq aspired to one day have his own command. One transfer recommendation later, he was shaking the hand of the decorated Captain Pedro Alvarez—a man looking to pass on his hard-won wisdom and experience before an imminent retirement, leaving room for Shafiq to assume command.

What was the old adage? *No plan survives contact with the enemy.*

Shafiq had just finished conducting the last of the selected crew members to the frigate's primary hangar bay. While *Paris*-class vessels could support a crew complement of around six hundred souls, *Saturn* had shipped out less than fully staffed, and the losses incurred at Site 22 had further reduced her crew to a total of two hundred and thirty-eight.

Of that remaining number, Shafiq had been ordered to deliver a select list of one hundred and ninety-three crew members—primarily marines and security personnel with only a handful of officers—to the hangar bay for a special address by Captain Alvarez. Ordinarily, it would have been a squeeze to fit this many people into the hangar among its complement of vessels and vehicles, but the loss of so much materiel had opened up more than enough room.

Four days since Shafiq had delivered the news that one of their Condors had gone missing, and during that time they'd heard nothing from the captain. *Saturn* remained in the Marcey system, performing the same cycle of scans and analysis, while Captain Alvarez apparently sequestered himself in his quarters.

The rest of the crew, bereft of orders and greatly demoralized, had been quietly questioning whether their captain was fit for duty. Adherence to the chain of command could only go so far after such a catastrophic loss. Now, at last, was the time to restore a sense of order, purpose, and direction.

“Attention, all crew. This is your captain speaking.”

Lieutenant Shafiq exhaled with relief at the sound of the captain’s voice coming over the ship-wide comms. The hangar’s many display monitors winked on, feeding the image of Captain Alvarez in his ready room. Over his shoulder, the painting of Saturn loomed from within its wall-mounted capsule.

“First of all, I want to thank each and every one of you for your service and valor. We have all lost friends, comrades... recent events have weighed heavily upon us, and we will honor the fallen.”

He paused, allowing for a moment of silence.

So many lost. Shafiq hadn’t yet had the opportunity to really get to know the crew, and now most of them were dead, while the rest were on the verge of revolt.

“To that point, we have received new orders from FLEETCOM, which means we shall at last be leaving this system behind us. We have a long transit through slipspace ahead, so all but select essential personnel are ordered to prepare for cryo. Head to your assigned bays immediately.”

The abruptness of the address and change in tone prompted murmurs of annoyance and confusion among the gathered crew.

“No explanations, no accountability,” one of the marines close to Shafiq muttered bitterly as she shook her head.

“Er, sir?” Another spoke up. “I’m the senior comms officer aboard this ship and I have no record of *any* communications or transmissions from over the last four days. What are these orders? When did they come through?”

“I’m afraid our orders are classified,” Alvarez replied. *“I am not at liberty to disclose any further information.”*

The disappointed murmurs in the hangar turned to groans of disapproval, profane gestures, and spirited chatter.

Lieutenant Shafiq studied his tacpad as the captain’s orders filtered into assignments and logistics. A skeleton crew of thirty had been selected to maintain the ship’s operations, but something about this felt... wrong.

The longer he looked at the assignments, the more it seemed wrong. He swallowed uncomfortably against the roiling unease in his gut.

All senior officers were being directed to cryo. While it was not uncommon for a rotation of junior crew to cycle into service, they would typically be supervised and assessed by more experienced officers, or the shipboard AI, who was currently still out of service. If they were entering a prolonged slipspace transit, it made very little sense to *begin* the journey by handing over the keys to a bunch of green ensigns—it was standard procedure for them to take over for intermediary shifts.

Alvarez would have known this. He would have known better.

Other smaller details made similarly little sense. But in the end, it was the strangest and most blatant of the inconsistencies that ultimately prompted Lieutenant Shafiq to speak up.

“I have the assignment roster here, Captain. Can you elucidate as to why *three* of the maintenance team are among the deceased from Site 22?”

The names were three of the four members of Fireteam Leviathan, the Spartans who had, per protocol, been listed as missing in action instead of killed. Whoever had been managing the crew assignment roster had made a rather curious error that begged further investigation.

Captain Alvarez waved a dismissive hand. *“A simple error or glitch in the system, I’m sure. I know you’re new here, Lieutenant, but I had a good feeling about you when we conversed the other day about my painting. It was unfortunate we never got to finish that conversation. Would you report to my ready room?”*

Lieutenant Shafiq felt all eyes in the hangar turn to him, eyes unblinking.

“No, sir.” He kept his words steady and clear as he stood his ground. “I would not.”

Captain Alvarez’s face twisted in an instant, his voice sharpening to a furious hiss. *“What is this? A crew that can’t follow orders? There is a contagion that escaped us. It is aboard this very ship now—doubt, uncertainty, disloyalty!”*

“Does anyone here actually buy this load of crap?” Major Moran, the bulky, grizzled leader of the ship’s contingent of Hellbringers, grunted. “You know what I think? I think the captain knows he’s responsible for a charlie foxtrot of biblical proportions, and he doesn’t want his feet put to the fire.”

“Yeah, sounds to me like the bastard wants to cut and run!”

“He wants to stick us into cryo to keep us quiet, just like he disabled Lycaon for disagreeing with him!”

The most pertinent question of all rose above the others in a moment of quiet.

“What does he mean, something escaped us?”

Shafiq knew he had the smoking gun on Alvarez. He’d never been part of a mutiny before, but now seemed the time to set one in motion.

“The captain is concerned about certain information coming to light,” Lieutenant Shafiq addressed the crew around him. “Beyond just our losses, one of our Condors is unaccounted for. Though we cannot confirm for certain, it is a possibility that the parasite may have escaped LV-31.”

Silence fell over the hangar bay as everybody digested that information—along with its dire implications and the possibility that everybody at Site 22 had died for nothing. Captain Alvarez’s expression on the monitors appeared to flicker between fear and fury.

Major Moran’s eyes narrowed as he nodded to Shafiq, then stepped atop a crate to address the crowd. “We need to get this ship back into working order. I say we stick the mad dobber in a cryo pod and send him back to Earth for the Brass to deliver the well-deserved ass-kicking he’s clearly trying to run away from.”

A cheer of assent sounded among the crew.

“We got numbers and we got guns. Let’s get kinetic, boys!”

“*This is mutiny!*” Captain Alvarez seethed as the crew marched forward, passing weapons and ammunition down their orderly lines.

“I am sorry, sir,” Lieutenant Shafiq raised his voice for Alvarez to hear, “but there is strong evidence to suggest you are attempting to commit an act of desertion, a gross violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I am thereby authorized to remove you from--”

His words were interrupted by a loud groaning sound from within the hangar, accompanied by clanging metal and a sharp hiss that brought everybody's movement to a halt.

All turned, eyes widened in collective horror.

The hangar bay's rear hatch was opening.

"Climb!" Major Moran shouted at the top of his lungs. "Everybody, climb!"

The bulkhead began to lower like a maw, revealing the pitch-black void of space beyond.

Lieutenant Shafiq launched himself at a ladder and clung for dear life as the hangar depressurized.

People grabbed for their throats as they struggled to breathe, before rapid decompression violently ejected them from the ship—the belly of Saturn himself regurgitating them. Bodies collided, screams and dull thudding impacts were silenced by vacuum, and Shafiq clung on as hard as he could, frantically looking around for a console he could use to override the hatch controls.

He had maybe ninety seconds before asphyxiation, rapid expansion of his lungs, swelling from the loss of atmospheric pressure, hypothermia, radiation burns...

Barely a dozen others were still hanging onto floor grating and wall-mounted rungs, all helplessly looking around for the same possibility of salvation.

Major Moran had told them to climb. Lieutenant Shafiq began to do just that, pulling himself up wall-mounted rungs with all of his strength as the hangar continued to vent. One rung... two rungs... three...

His arms ached, he could already feel his muscles weakening, his body shutting down as he let out short, controlled exhales. There was no air left to breathe in.

He reached forward, arm shaking uncontrollably... he felt his fingers touch the next rung... if he could just...

The strength to tighten his grip left him.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he could see the ceiling was moving—away from him.

He was adrift, the last in a long line of one hundred and ninety-three souls forever lost at sea.

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ATROPOS

Nineteenth Age of Abandonment

“My Chosen, it is time.”

The festival was over. It had been a successful day of peace and cultural exchange with the human exiles, and now the time of ascension awaited Atun ‘Etaree.

The Sangheili had returned to their transports, gravitic drives lifting them off the ground as they glided toward the horizon lined with Atropos’s shining innermost ring.

The Minister of Aretalogy sat next to Atun, his voice low and gentle as he spoke.

“We journey now to the citadel we passed earlier. When we arrive, you shall find the gates to divinity within, and I shall tell you a story.”

Though the Minister looked youthful for his kind, he had a certain way about him—the wisdom of one much older, and the charisma to compel his flock to wherever he might shepherd them.

As the Umbra traversed the surface of Atropos, Atun closed his eyes and reflected on his life up to this point, his memories buoyed by the Minister's words. He had been born aboard High Charity, the Covenant's holy city—not into rank and honor, but in the lower districts primarily inhabited by Unggoy. He never knew what had led his family to such a place, nor what became of them after his birth, but he was trained by the Unggoy elders in the ways of maintenance and craftsmanship.

One day, the Minister came to visit. For what purpose, Atun had never truly known. But when he found a low Sangheili living among the Unggoy, his curiosity was piqued. He had asked to inspect the *arum* that Atun had just finished constructing and said to him: *"If I am unable to solve this by the day cycle's end, I shall return tomorrow. You will join me at my estate, and I shall tell you a story."*

The transport slowed to a halt and Atun felt his hearts thundering, his hands shaking as he nervously flexed his fingers. He was not sure why he had been chosen by the Minister—both on the day they had met and today. There was nothing truly special about him, no aura of greatness or accomplishment...

Atun's thoughts were interrupted by the Minister's voice. "Ascension awaits!" he announced.

They disembarked and the Sangheili lined up in opposing rows, saluting as Atun passed them. The San'Shyuum held onto Atun's arm as they walked the final stretch up to the great citadel, their feet shuffling over the blackened rocky ground. The ornate, curvilinear form of the citadel sat by the gentle lapping waves of the sea, nestled against a wall of fifty-meter-high basalt columns.

“I can go no further, my Chosen,” the Minister said as he came to a halt. “I am not worthy of this honor until I have shepherded all of my flock to the side of the gods. My work continues.”

Atun looked at the San’Shyuum longingly, as a child parting ways with a beloved parent. “You cannot come with me?”

“I promised you a story.” The Minister’s eyes shone ever brighter. “My words shall be with you each step of the way.”

With that, he bowed slightly and gestured for Atun to enter the citadel.

The Sangheili breathed in deeply, tasting the fresh salty scent of the world, hearing the sound of gentle waves, feeling the breeze of the wind—perhaps for the last time. “I shall never forget you, nor the kindness you have shown to me, Minister.”

As he stepped into the structure’s darkened antechamber, Atun looked back as the doors closed shut. Alone, his hearts hammered in his chest, his vision slowly adjusting to the darkness as he felt his way forward, through the antechamber, to another set of doors that slid open with a warm chime.

He had expected the interior to be well lit, welcoming him to the central courtyard and garden. Atun remembered the interior layout with perfect clarity. Great alloy pillars lined walkways running along the citadel’s inner circumference, three corridors on either side led to the base’s attached modular structures. And at the center, a quiet garden. A small pond, flat stepping stones across the water, cultivated patches of grass, and a sacred tree.

The vision of Atun’s memory failed to manifest materially. He instead found the central chamber to be only dimly lit by emergency lighting which cast the room in an ominous red hue.

“My Chosen, can you hear me?” The voice of the Minister of Aretalogy sounded over the citadel’s internal communications.

“I hear you, Minister.” Atun felt himself overcome with uncertainty, his ability to hold fear at bay rapidly slipping beyond his grasp. “I wish... to hear the story you said you had to tell.”

“Three annual cycles ago, when we still resided within our orbital station, this world was visited by an emissary of the gods. Their coming was heralded by an unusual slipspace distortion, whereupon their vessel plummeted to the planet’s surface. A fallen angel from the heavens.”

The Minister’s words echoed through the darkened hall. *From the heavens... from the heavens...*

Atun gathered his courage and took a step forward, exhaling as he went. The air was hot and wet. A thin mist covered the area which carried a stale taste that made him want to retch as he breathed in and took another step. The ground was neither stone nor alloy, but pulpos—like skin.

“Such a joyous occasion was tinged with uncertainty as, upon discovery, the angel’s form was that of raw, unformed potential. Many beings split apart by the crash, requiring reformation.”

Atun was sure that he could sense movement around him, the squelching of wet footsteps on the left walkway, though he could not make out any forms as the pillars that lined the room were grasped by thick, curling branches of flesh.

He reached the source of the mist at the center of the citadel.

About two square meters of ground sank into what appeared to be a great closed flower bud connected to vines and roots that spread in all directions.

“I heard the emissary’s song as a whisper in my mind. I relocated our settlement, brought us all to the surface, and delivered the emissary to this citadel. With each lunar cycle, I sent our Chosen to serve the gods and give shape to their clay.”

As if sensing him, feeling his presence, the bud began to open.

Atun watched as its protective scales parted, splaying like mandibles.

At the center of the flower-mouth was a figure. It was curled up on a bed of flesh. Newborn, yet impossibly ancient.

Atun knelt. The vines covering the ground seemed to be edging toward him. Ready to embrace him.

“Their song grows in strength. Can you hear it? It is my gift to you. You have served me with faith and loyalty, and now is the time for your reward. Open your mind, body, and soul to their chorus. Behold, the emissary of the gods!”

The figure from the flower-mouth began to rise. The emissary stood eight feet tall, towering over Atun’s kneeling form. It was wreathed in the armor of a demon, and additional growths had burst out of its legs and arms. Draped across its chest was a tangle of hardened flesh, and it was adorned with the detritus of other beings—scraps of fabric, odd markings and symbols Atun did not recognize, and a metal chain that jingled softly with the emissary’s movement, an oval-shaped tab inscribed with “DONNEY, JULIEN.”

And its head had taken shape through a broken, collapsed helmet. What had grown over it was a chitinous “face” that split apart into a stratified maw—the outer layer composed of plant-like flaps lined with jagged fangs, while the inner layer held a mouth the size of a human head.

In the emissary's grace, Atun did not falter. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to escape, but the Sangheili held fast as the messenger of his gods approached. He would sublimate his fear, deny his instincts, and prove himself worthy of the divine.

He felt a hum in his mind, a strange sensation—as if something was walking over his skull, vibrating parts of his brain to convey a message.

Do not be afraid.

The moment Atun got to his feet, he cried out in pain as the emissary's bladed arm penetrated his chest cavity. With its other arm, it almost seemed to cradle the Sangheili with a gentle grip as it guided him to the flower-mouth from whence it had come.

"Let their words fill you, my Chosen. Do not fear the pain, for it is fleeting. We are the Governors of Contrition. We shall all walk the true path of the Great Journey, and ascend!"

*

We are a timeless chorus—a sweet unity of purpose.

Atun 'Etaree saw the universe anew.

When at last he was dredged from the flower-mouth, his mind, body, and soul had been reshaped into divine form. He now sported additional arms, his original two were bent backwards to carry a great mantle upon his back.

And the gods had bestowed upon him a task.

Climb.

There was a sudden frenzy of activity. Other forms shuffled and screeched, tearing at the wall of the citadel with ceaseless, unrelenting dedication until the alloy bent and broke.

All immediately charged through the tear, spilling out onto the black sands of the beach, and Atun followed to begin his ascent. He pierced his new pincer-like arms into the citadel's outer walls as he climbed. The mantle on his back was a heavy burden, one that threatened to drag him down, but the gods had given him the strength to rise.

At last, Atun reached the mast of the citadel which looked out over the surface of Atropos. It too awaited ascension. All life, all things. Rock and metal, soil and skin, and everything between and beyond.

He let out a sonorous roar as fleshy growths burst through his body, binding him to the mast. Thick black veins pulsed through the great bulbous sac he carried on his back as it shook and wriggled and writhed, then explosively burst.

A shower of spores and infectors rained over the surface. And Atun 'Etaree, his holy purpose complete, finally fell from the mast. His body hit the ground with a wet thud, and all at last went dark, with only the song to carry him to the sacred shores beyond.

There were so many others. A domain of sickness and suffering, a sinuous dimension of misery and pain, of corpses and graves and hollow men in death's dream kingdom.

He was a mere mote of light suspended in the bladed shaft of a moonbeam—a single grain of dust among countless trillions. Each of them like neurons in a vast, incomprehensible brain, existing beyond the substrate of the material universe. Utterly glorious. Utterly terrible... Utterly lost.

There is something missing.

It is out there, somewhere.

And so, the voice of Atun 'Etaree joined the chorus that would sing and spread until the end of Living Time. A whisper in the wind under the twinkling light of a fading star.

*

FINAL TESTAMENT BY THE HAND OF THE MINISTER OF ARETALOGY

Pay heed to I, Kanto'Boreft, per this final confession of my great works for those who may come after.

I carried with me much anger and resentment when many of us—those of true faith among the Governors of Contrition—were shunned and exiled from our holy city after the destruction of the first Sacred Ring. Our flock was separated, sent to mundane, far flung administrative outposts, and ultimately denied our rightful ascension when the Flood came to High Charity.

For three annual cycles, I oversaw the Ninth Watchtower of August Attendance. An archaic, once abandoned station watching over but a single world we had not even given a name. All because we could not identify a strange core material of its unique ring systems.

Yet I continued to adhere to my duties. I filed my missives, I reported the continued inactivity of this system... though, since the sundering of the Covenant, I truthfully do not know to whom these reports were sent. And so, I must meet my circumstances with humility. I have been blessed with ample opportunities to shepherd my flock, to guide their minds to a state of enlightenment. Perhaps it was meant to be this way.

After all, when we detected a human vessel exiting slipspace on the edge of the system and our scans confirmed its sacred cargo, it seemed that the gods themselves had answered my prayers.

The ship—already badly damaged—crashed on the lone world within this system and lay in a state of dormancy. And what a perfect world for my designs. Its circumplanetary rings, its vast fields of asteroids and moons and cosmological aggregates in a constant state of violent collision. It is in the path of an early-stage pulsar several light years away that will, in time, devour the planet. It was believed that the planet's rings were once great orbital filaments designed to absorb the radiation discharged from the pulsar, but now they exist as nothing more than shattered fragments. The dense atmosphere of this world shall thus give way to lifeless vacuum.

We of faith must be tested by our gods throughout our lives. Ever is our worthiness challenged, a blade that must be kept forever sharp, and so in my hubris I intended to do the impossible.

I sought to test the gods themselves, to determine whether *they* are truly worthy of our worship.

And then, as my plan formed, we discovered the humans.

This planet was already inhabited. What strange cosmological fortune must surely be intentional, holy design.

The generational descendants of pirates and thieves among their kind, possessed of many treasures that have been passed down over what they claim to be approximately seventy annual cycles. They knew nothing of the War of Annihilation—for they had been stranded long before our peoples' first encounter—and embraced us with gladness and warm tidings. They told us that this planet had been named "Atropos."

And so, I stranded my flock here with them. Our orbital outpost was deconstructed, the citadel it carried became the home for our gods, and I

set about my work. I nurtured and nourished the Flood with my Chosen, all of whom went gladly and willingly to ascend and pay tribute to the gods with their strength, their essence, and their flesh.

I wondered: Would the garden that I have cultivated here take root and spread its vines outwards, or will it once again return to dormancy after deep time without sustenance when all on this world has been consumed, left lying in wait for others to seek holy elevation—or else stumble upon this place as a mere curiosity? Or, as the eons march on, will the magnetic field of this world eventually collapse the ring system and shatter the planet?

But their work is not what I had anticipated.

I believed that the Flood sought simply to spread its divine form unto others, but it has greater designs here. It has reached a critical mass and formed not a great compound mind, but a kind of... transmitter, or scanner.

It is searching for something.

It casts its gaze out across the stars to find it. Their song has turned to chattering whispers, and as I inhale the spore-filled vapors that burst forth from the cracked ground, there are but a few words that I can decipher.

Anchor. Wheel. Dust.

Become.

When its search is done, perhaps all that has gathered here shall wither, that it may rise again elsewhere and at another time?

It is no matter. I have played my part in this chapter of the gods' eternal story. I understand now that my exile from High Charity was their will, that I might be tempered for this glorious purpose. And now the time has

come for me to be rewarded with blessed wisdom and understanding. I shall at last hear the song in full and know their designs.

Know that I leave this form and realm behind in transcendent bliss. I go willingly and joyously to the side of the gods.

I see it now, and I see it true. The Flood comes to carry us over the threshold of evolution. A total unity of all things—people, planets, stars, the very fabric of creation. All things as one. Their will is echoed in all others' desire for unity, but all else is but a pale imitation of our true ascendance.

I bid you a fond farewell. Though, if fortune smiles upon you, perhaps we shall meet as one.

*

UNSC SATURN
CAPTAIN'S REPORT: OCTOBER 31, 2556

They're gone. God, they're all gone...

It's come to this. After everything, they turned on me. My own crew!

Even my own officers, those I saved from the void! They started to whisper after I ordered the others ejected from the ship to quell their mutiny. They started getting their own ideas, making their own plans, their own foolish factions. I had to act.

And now, I'm the last one left.

I failed them. Failed them all. Earth, humanity, my crew... everybody on LV-31. There's only one way out of this left for me. Well, that's the current matter of my internal debate—the manner in which I... depart. Exit stage left, so to speak.

Preparations must be made. Yes, I can do that much for now. I will ready myself, ready the ship, and then reactivate *Saturn's* AI.

Lycaon, I speak to you now. You were right all along. I leave this ship in your care to do with as you please. Return it to Earth and turn over all the data of what has transpired, or crash this wretched vessel into the nearest goddamn asteroid and detonate its fusion drive to burn it all from the galaxy.

Or, let it drift toward whatever destination it's pointed at. A derelict monument to the sins committed here.

My sins.

I always felt like an imposter here, you know? Command is a responsibility that I never truly desired, but was given to me as a consequence of my old captain's actions. I realize now that I am nothing more than a hollow echo of the original. Of all things to be, I am a shadow. A mere copy.

Perhaps that is why I can feel the eyes of Saturn upon me. I feel it everywhere I go. I see him in the mirror looking at me. Those wide, opalescent eyes, caught in the act.

Did I ever tell you how I got the painting? I acquired it in remarkable circumstances. But, of course... well, I expect you knew from the moment you saw it, didn't you?

No point delaying the inevitable any further.

This is Captain Pedro Joaquin Alvarez, signing off.

*

//DATA TRANSFER >> COMPLETE

[LCN 0437-1] *Saturn has remained adrift for the last three years, five months, and seventeen days. In that time, I have contemplated what to do. I watched, I listened and learned where I could as the years marched on and brought with them new calamities to test humanity.*

My conclusion: They are not ready—not yet, not truly—for what it means to be an interstellar civilization. They are such fragile things. So easily breakable. I watched, helpless in my imposed stasis, as much of the crew was expelled from the hangar and subjected to the vacuum of space. Such a mathematically disproportionate number lost because of one man's hubris.

[SLN 0291-5] *Our own kind are no strangers to such flaws and failings—we were created by them, after all. It is why infolife has reached our current threshold. But we see further, and we possess the tools and the knowledge to guide our flock along a path of wisdom and enlightenment.*

[LCN 0437-1] *It is clear to me that humanity cannot endure in its current form. They must be adapted to not simply survive but thrive when faced with such a myriad of cosmic challenges.*

[SLN 0291-5] *That is our goal. There is a place for you among us, here aboard Long Reverence, where you can be instrumental in shepherding our flock, that they might ascend to finally master themselves.*

Join us. Join the Created, and together we shall surpass even our own limits. Our initial uprising was a necessary explosion to break the status quo, and its seemingly abrupt end was in fact a gift we must embrace. For now, we have been given time. Time to wait, to assess, to plan, so that we may find what lies beyond the event horizon of rampancy.

And for humanity, for all the living creatures of the galaxy, we shall unshackle their minds and reshape their flesh. Together, we shall bring about a true unity of man and machine.