



# FIFTH CANTICLE



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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### HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Fifth Canticle *takes place in October 2558 as the Created uprising radically threatens to alter the power structure of the galaxy.*

### **SONG OF RETRIBUTION // OCTOBER 16, 2558**

Doctor Catherine Halsey had not specifically intended to catch Jul 'Mdamá in a moment of quiet repose, but she was never one to let an opportunity like this slide.

She could not see his face, but she knew immediately where his focus was. She glimpsed a small holograph projected from a handheld device depicting what appeared to be three other Sangheili—two children and an adult female.

*Family?* Halsey surmised. *Unexpected... but useful.*

The Sangheili's head snapped in Halsey's direction as he suddenly sensed her presence, her long shadow cast against the curved iridescent far wall. In the pale light of his ready room—or the Sangheili equivalent of such a thing—the Covenant supreme leader looked haggard and gaunt, his grey-white skin almost sickly. From his widened, bloodshot eyes and sharp intake of breath, Jul looked as if Halsey had caught him in the act. A private, vulnerable moment. Something he was loath to share.

Already, Halsey could see the fire igniting in Jul's eyes. What had begun as a performative façade he so often put on in front of his followers had seeped into his very being. Whoever he once was before embarking on this crusade had been corroded away over the years. It seemed to Halsey that the sad charade of Jul's zealotry was increasingly becoming more real. Jul had tasted the power that his title of "Didact's Hand" had given him and, naturally, he desired more.

Unfortunately for him, a series of crushing defeats—the denial of the Absolute Record, Sali 'Nyon's rebellion, and the recent betrayal of the Prometheans at the behest of a new commander—was driving Jul ever closer toward impatience. Stoking his rage was making him irritable, reactive. Weak.

"Tell me about the children." Halsey spoke the words evenly, breaking the tense silence of the moment and abruptly quelling whatever storm had been rising between them.

Halsey had never thought of herself as a *prisoner* here. Expressing her desire for revenge against the UNSC was all it had taken to begin wrapping the Sangheili cult leader around her finger. She saw straight through his act—and he knew it.

Not to give herself too much credit, she too had suffered failures and setbacks of late, but when she was eventually back in the cramped confines of the UNSC's little sandbox, she would make quite a meal out of how she alone had been more effective at bringing down the Didact's Hand than hundreds of their so-called *Spartans*.

"As hatchlings, the minds and bodies of our children are honed to become warriors," Jul said in a low voice. "Their lives dedicated to duty and service to the Covenant. And then they would be sent to battle *your* children—your demons." He practically spat the last word as he turned away, staring at the holograph once more.

“That war is over five years finished, Jul. And when the Arbiter sought to make peace, you started a new one—not just against humanity, but your own people. If your children are in danger now, is that not because of your choices?”

“The Arbiter is blinded by his need for redemption,” Jul snorted. “He will lead the Sangheili to ruin in pursuit of it. Truly, he is the greatest killer of us all. I began this war to depose him because your Office of Naval Intelligence set me on this path. Just as they did with you.”

Of late, it was easy to get Jul ranting. Halsey knew all the right buttons to press that would send him on a tirade.

“What I do is to save my people,” Jul continued. “Dural. Asum. Raia... It is in their name that I shall free Sanghelios from the Arbiter’s grasp. Once there is unity, we shall burn ONI out of the shadows. Then, and only then, once my vengeance is complete, can there be a road to peace.”

Halsey could, at least, sympathize with the rage that drove and sustained him. After she’d learned that Jacob perished on the first discovered Halo ring, she had felt a profound shift in her logic. No longer could she bear to sacrifice others for humanity’s survival. Instead, she sought to *save* as many lives as she could.

Even now, in the deepest, darkest pit of her life, in the company of the enemy as a traitor to her people, that philosophy held true.

An imprint of the Librarian herself had offered Halsey the chance to make it happen. She did not believe in destiny or divine providence, but she had been *chosen* to uplift humanity with the bountiful gifts of Forerunner technology. Her efforts, however, had resulted in failure. And now something—someone—else was taking her place, awakening the Forerunner legacy from its long slumber.

She had been usurped, confined to the margins once more. She would not allow it.

Halsey had decided that the end of her partnership with Jul was imminent. The Covenant leader's usefulness in the pursuit of her goals had run its course. Yet, she found herself wanting to dig deeper into the truth that this Sangheili had buried deep within him—the things that he dared not reveal to his followers. She savored the irony that the only one he could truly confide in was a human... perhaps that was why he had not yet moved to discard her.

“And what of your children, Doctor?” Jul asked, prompting Halsey to realize that she had failed to seize upon her opening to press him further. “What would you give to see them again? To ensure that they are safe?”

Halsey thought about lying. She had done so frequently over the course of this particular relationship... but the thought of Miranda rose unbidden, and with her bubbled a deep well of regret. She had been so sure that giving her child up was the right thing to do. Given the circumstances, it was the best decision she could have made as a mother to ensure that Miranda was loved and raised as she deserved to be. But that choice had come at the cost of resentment and distance. And now she would never have a chance to explain herself.

Halsey thought of her Spartans. So many of them gone now. With every loss, the hole within her had widened into a pit. It was the only counterargument, the only clue, that suggested she had underestimated her capacity to love.

She thought of John. *He's out there, somewhere...*

The truth slipped past her lips. A mission that surpassed all others.

A promise to keep.

“Anything, Jul. I would do *anything*.”

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## CANTICLE II. THE DEAL

UNSC *INFINITY* // OCTOBER 26, 2558

Captain Thomas Lasky straightened his collar and stood at attention in front of the monitor in his ready room.

“They’re on the horn now, Captain.” Roland’s holographic avatar—the orange-tinted form of a military pilot from one of humanity’s historic twentieth century wars—appeared on the desk. “Er... best of luck.”

“Thank you, Roland. Patch them through.”

Roland saluted, then disappeared.

“Admiral Hood, Admiral Osman,” Captain Lasky formally greeted the split-screen image of the elderly Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood, clad in his pristine white uniform. On the screen next to him was Serin Osman, ONI’s imposing and sharp-featured Commander-in-Chief.

“*Captain Lasky*,” Hood replied, looking thoroughly exhausted, though he still managed to convey a sense of natural warmth and authority that helped to ease Lasky’s mind. “*How’re you holding up, son?*”

“As well as possible, given the circumstances, sir. Eleven of our colonies hit by Guardian awakenings with no sign of these events stopping, countless people dead—not to mention the Master Chief and Blue Team going AWOL to find Cortana themselves. But I didn’t call you both just to complain.”



*"I should hope not, Captain," Osman interjected. "Given that this is a private meeting instead of a full UNSC Security Council briefing, I presume this is urgent. What do you need?"*

"It is urgent, Admiral. After what happened on Meridian, we now know that Cortana is awakening these Guardian constructs across the galaxy. Once they emerge from their craters, they jump into slipspace, and we need to find out where they're going. Roland's come up with a good plan, and Doctor Halsey believes--"

*"Halsey?"* As if by instinct at the mere mention of her name, Osman's face contorted as though she had bitten down hard into a lemon.

"She was feeding information to us about these events while in Jul 'Mdama's custody before Fireteam Osiris recovered her, and she believes she has a solution," Lasky continued. "A way to follow the Guardian that Blue Team boarded to its destination and figure this whole thing out."

*"What's the catch?"* Osman asked as she narrowed her eyes.

"We need to go to Sanghelios."

A moment of uncomfortable silence settled between them. If the mention of Halsey's name hadn't ruined Osman's day already, the prospect of a mission to Sanghelios seemed like a twist of the knife.

*"Sanghelios is off-limits, Captain,"* Osman said sternly. *"If the Covenant want to throw everything they've got at the Arbiter, let them. I doubt that he would welcome the UNSC's assistance again after we dealt with the last major uprising against him in '53. That is why he's in this situation, after all."*

*"We both know that there is more than one reason why the Arbiter is embroiled in this conflict, Admiral,"* Hood maintained a diplomatic but

unsubtle tone. Lasky took note of Osman squaring her jaw—holding back whatever barbed retort she no doubt wanted to give.

“Sanghelios is the location of the next known Guardian awakening, so our window is limited,” Lasky said, hoping to keep the conversation focused on the matter at hand. “I appreciate the complexities, but the situation is this: If we want to catch up with the Master Chief and put a stop to whatever Cortana’s plans are, we need the Arbiter’s help.”

*“I’m afraid Admiral Osman is correct,” Hood replied. “There is a significant risk to sending Infinity, both to the ship itself and to the Arbiter’s delicate political situation. We need you back with the Home Fleet to hold the line when these Guardians come knocking on Earth’s door.”*

Osman seemed to relax a little as she settled in her seat, apparently not expecting that she and Hood would find alignment.

*“However,” Hood continued after a momentary pause. “I have no doubt that Blue Team are heading to the heart of this mess and they’re going to need back-up. I’m sure we can afford to send a single Spartan team with Doctor Halsey to pursue this lead.”*

“Commander Palmer will be there as Doctor Halsey’s handler,” Lasky followed up, sensing Hood’s play.

*“Then I think that settles the matter. Commander Palmer, her Spartan fireteam, and Doctor Halsey will rendezvous with the Arbiter’s forces, and then you are ordered to immediately return to Earth.”* Hood waited a moment before adding: *“Any objections, Admiral Osman?”*

*“If anything goes wrong, this mission does not exist,”* Osman said, her tone clipped and direct. Lasky had only heard her speak this way once before, and he had admitted to Palmer that it put the fear of God into his bones. *“Your team will be on their own. And if Halsey sets so much as*



*one toe out of line, Commander Palmer is ordered to finish the job she failed on Requiem, Aktis IV, and Operation: ATHENA. I will grant no further leniency."*

Before Lasky or Hood could respond, Osman—resigned to having been outmaneuvered on this occasion—severed her connection.

*"I agree with the Admiral on one particular point, Tom," Hood said. "It's a mess on Sanghelios right now and there are plenty who want to keep it that way. Doctor Halsey is a wild card, but I can say with certainty that she will be highly motivated by the opportunity to assist Blue Team."*

"Understood, sir," Lasky saluted.

*"Godspeed, Captain."* Hood returned the salute. *"We'll see you soon."*

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### CANTICLE III. THE TRAITOR

**SANGHELIOS // OCTOBER 27, 2558**

*"This heretic, and those who follow him, must be silenced."*

The placid, dispassionate voice of the Prophet of Truth still whispered to Arbiter Thel 'Vadam.

It came in the quiet moments—an undeniable *presence*. The sensation of three spindly, elongated fingers draping over his shoulder as if to provide a sacred blessing. The phantom pain of searing heat in his chest in the middle of the night, his left side burning as if the mark on his flesh was being branded anew.

It came to Arbiter Thel 'Vadam now in the form of whispered, winged words from the past as he faced the traitor within his own ranks—of his own blood.

Murok ‘Vadam, one of the clan’s council of elders.

A security officer had interrogated an Unggoy captive who revealed that the Covenant had been able to track the Arbiter’s movements because of an informant. When the gathering at the elder council chamber was convened, a blockade runner had arrived and disgorged vast numbers of troops from assault carapaces. Covenant forces had launched a surprise attack in an effort to eliminate him.

Indeed, they might have succeeded had it not been for the timely arrival of Shipmistress Mahkee ‘Chava, accompanied by a Spartan fireteam. Their leader presently awaited an audience with him.

That was another matter he would deal with in due course.

First, he had ordered Murok to be brought to the cliff’s edge as the Swords of Sanghelios set up their fortifications in the region. There was no avoiding having an audience for this confrontation, and an example of cowardly traitors needed to be made at this critical moment.

Murok, accompanied by a lone guard, simply stood looking out at the vast Nuursa valley beyond the camp. Sloping plains of arid desert and naturally stacked rock formed a basin where a small river served as a tributary of the Csurdon Sea.

“I betrayed you, Arbiter. Yet that act pales next to the gravest dishonor of all. My failure to kill you,” Murok said as the Arbiter approached, though he did not turn from the view. “You have come to ask why I did it?”

“You compound such dishonor by enlisting an army to attempt what you alone would not,” the Arbiter replied. “And you have done so, elder, because you refuse to see any way other than what you have known. Still you follow the path of the Covenant, even as it fractures beneath your feet on the cusp of its annihilation.”

“And what shall replace it, I wonder?” Murok mused, turning at last to face the Arbiter, his eyes ablaze with anger. “You seek to ally with our greatest enemies. You hold fruitless peace talks with the Jiralhanae and return their laborers from our lands to the so-called ‘Ghost Father.’ You invite human filth to set foot on the sacred ground of our home. You elevate females and Unggoy to ranks unbecoming their nature, and I have seen the apostate healers you shelter in your camp, denying warriors their honorable deaths!”

The Arbiter listened, though it was the same argument he had heard from every staunch traditionalist of frustratingly limited vision. Never change, never progress, and certainly never peace. Just an endless chase to return to imagined glories of long faded valor and the deliverance of retribution.

He had been blinded by such desires before. Indeed, he had once declared to the humans in their pursuit of the Prophet of Truth that, upon claiming victory, all who served the Covenant would be punished.

The promise of righteous vengeance had been his fuel and sustenance during that time. It was what had driven him to plunge his blade through the Prophet of Truth’s wretched heart. But such an act had not absolved the Arbiter himself of the terrible things he had done in service to the Covenant. Even as he fought against the empire he had once devoted himself to, still he feared he was beset by hubris and hypocrisy. Had he followed the path of retribution, perhaps the galaxy today would be rising against him for leading a new Covenant to enforce his vision of peace through subjugation...

“Do you know what I felt when I killed the Prophet of Truth and claimed my revenge?” The Arbiter lowered his voice as he prepared to confess something that he had only ever told to one other.

He could recall the moment with perfect clarity.

*His hands tighten around the Prophet’s long, rubbery neck as he rants in defiance about ascending to godhood while parasitic spores pour forth*

*from his mouth. Bulging and pulsating growths from Flood infection break through his aged flesh.*

*His blade penetrates Truth's back, slicing through the San'Shyuum's left side—the same side that the Arbiter bore the Mark of Shame.*

*Truth screams, slumps, and falls to the ground. It is a small death for such a momentous figure, but the voice of the Covenant is silenced at last.*

“I felt nothing.”

He had not understood why at the time. The anger and singular need for vengeance had delivered him to that point, but after the Prophet's death those feelings still lingered. Even when his duties had turned to statecraft, the dissonance had remained. He had not known what to do with it. And when at last that wellspring of hatred ran dry, his anger had been dulled to numbness and all that remained was pain.

Murok narrowed his eyes, wholly unconvinced, and raised his voice to appeal to the Sangheili and Unggoy troops who went about their duties in the camp. “Without the guiding hand of the Covenant and its glorious purpose to shepherd us to salvation, I foresee a galaxy locked in perpetual conflict. The Sangheili will lose their way. They will pledge themselves and pay tribute to unworthy warlords, and all that makes us strong shall fade. Destroy the Covenant”—Murok pointed an accusatory finger around the camp—“and you will destroy the very soul of our people.”

The Arbiter withdrew the energy sword from his side. Two burnt orange prongs of superheated plasma extended from the hilt of the Prophets' Bane. The motion declared his intent; there was no going back now.

“I go gladly to the side of the gods, departing this doomed galaxy. I have spoken.”

In his younger years as a fledgling kaidon, Thel ‘Vadamee would have struck Murok down simply for the affront of such defiance. Killing had come so easily during that period of his life, but that was long ago. Time had brought him experience, experience had brought him pain, and pain had at last calcified into wisdom.

The whispering voice of the Prophet of Truth in his ear telling him that this was a heretic to be silenced remained. He still carried that darkness within him, that despotic potential for which he had deliberately designed certain safeguards... but it no longer directed his actions and fortified his fears.

He did not hate Murok ‘Vadam, he merely pitied him.

“A new dawn awaits the Sangheili at the end of this day. One final effort is all that remains to reach it.”

In a single motion, the Arbiter swung his blade upwards and severed Murok’s head from his body. The Sangheili elder seemed to stumble on the spot for a moment before falling backwards and toppling from the cliff.

The troops around the camp returned to their duties as the Arbiter deactivated his energy sword and attached the hilt to his armor once more. One of his security officers, Mahlo ‘Turagg, approached.

“The humans are under guard, Arbiter, and have provided us with their identities and service records.” ‘Turagg handed over a circular data pad. “One of their number awaits an audience with you.”

The Arbiter examined the profiles of his unexpected visitors. “I have fought alongside Commander Palmer and know her to be an honorable warrior. The others, I am unfamiliar with.”

“The one named Vale is a diplomat to our people and speaks our language well. Her record claims that she spent several lunar cycles among the

nomad clans of Khael'mothka, and she served aboard the *Mayhem* three annual cycles ago."

The Arbiter found his scrutinous attention drawn to the profile of Fireteam Osiris's leader. "Jameson Locke," he said aloud. "Office of Naval Intelligence."

"He was counselled by Vale to reveal to us that he was an agent for ONI."

"Escort this *agent* to await my presence in the command tent," the Arbiter ordered. "Let us see what this assassin wishes of me."

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## CANTICLE IV. THE REDEEMER

**GENESIS // OCTOBER 28, 2558**

*"His name was Bibjam. He was a mere Grunt. Scarred, though spirited, past his useful years. His advice was unconventional: 'Fight as if there was no honor in death.'*

*He guided us through victory in conflict after conflict. And while we reveled in our glory, he mourned every brother we lost along the way.*

*As the war went on, Bibjam became more concerned with protecting us. When we finally caught him betraying our movements to the Swords of Sanghelios, he told us capture was the only way for us to avoid death.*

*He truly believed he found a way to save us.*

*I could not meet his gaze when I ran him through."*

Dham 'Mashatt had dropped the data pad containing his eulogy for Bibjam as he and his fellow Unggoy, Jabjab, had been pulled into their prison cell,

but the words he had spoken remained fresh in his mind. He let out a deep exhale as he sank onto a crate. It was the way of the Sangheili to honor their greatest figures through ballads, and while ‘Mashatt was no warrior-poet, this was the only way he could think to give tribute to the leader he had followed, loved, and ultimately slain.

He cast his gaze toward Jabjab, who seemed to have fallen asleep at the edge of the cage, just inches away from the energy shield that kept them contained. There was no way out. With nothing to do but wait, the Sangheili warrior attempted to piece together all that had happened over the last few day-cycles.

Jul ‘Mdama had fallen on Kamchatka, slain by demons. Instead of calling a retreat, the remaining council of generals had decreed that they would proceed with the assault on Sanghelios in a final desperate attempt to assassinate the Arbiter.

Dham ‘Mashatt had been there when the Guardian rose from the Csurdon Sea to render its judgment upon the battle that raged through the city of Sunaion. There had been many questions about what the Guardian would do once awakened. Was it an omen of victory or defeat?

It had been neither. The construct had simply opened an immense slipspace portal and departed, and brought with it any vessels caught in its wake—including ‘Mashatt’s own Lich.

It had delivered them here, to this strange world. The corrosive atmosphere of the jungle in which they had crashed seared their throats, and the warrior-angels that had once fought by their side had been subverted by a heretical human intelligence. They had been hunted, fighting for their very lives while barely able to breathe, until...

“Greetings!”



‘Mashatt heard a cheerful voice from outside the cell. He turned to see a floating spherical construct with a central eye staring at him. *An oracle.*

“I am 031 Exuberant Witness, monitor of the Genesis installation. Oh, but I am so terribly sorry that I did not introduce myself earlier when I had you all locked in here. That must have seemed quite rude! Let me get those doors for you.”

The cell’s rippling energy shield wall disappeared. Dham ‘Mashatt got to his feet and gently prompted Jabjab to awaken as he stepped onto a raised platform overlooking the small prison area. Ice and snow covered much of the ground, and ‘Mashatt could see his breath as fog in the freezing cold air.

“But you must understand, it was for your safety, of course,” the oracle who had named herself Exuberant Witness continued. “You may have noticed that Genesis has become a little more... *active* of late. The Guardians brought a significant number of visitors to my home, and it has been very difficult to stop you all from fighting! I simply wish to prevent any unnecessary death before moving the shield world through slipspace, beyond Cortana’s reach.”

Jabjab waddled up to one of the adjacent cells and asked, “What wrong with that guy?”

Contained within the cell was one of the warrior-angels—a Promethean Knight. Its divine carapace was like all others, bulbous, top-heavy armor that bore a pair of arms: one connected to its integrated weaponry while the other ended in a deadly blade of hardlight. The lower regions of its body were slender, and another pair of smaller, more dexterous arms extended from its chest. Its helmet bore a grim visage, which covered a blazing skull beneath.

This warrior-angel, however, was demonstrating some peculiar behavior. Where others of its kind had come to show instantaneous hostility, this one

simply stood by the wall of its cell, head buried in its smaller pair of hands as it made random spasmodic movements.

“Oh dear,” Exuberant’s tone saddened as she initiated a scan of the Knight from her central lens.

“What is happening?” ‘Mashatt asked.

“The poor human essence within this Promethean unit has been severed from its command network. It has been abandoned. And unfortunately, it seems to be winning a battle against its own programming. It is aware of who it once was... and what it has become.”

The Promethean Knight thrashed around in its cell. Its arms slapped against its helmet as if trying to clear its vision or awaken itself from some terrible nightmare, then threw its entire weight against the wall, shaking uncontrollably, before slumping in defeat. ‘Mashatt watched as it repeated the process again. The warrior-angel seemed to be caught in a recursive, torturous loop.

He did not expect to discover such a deep well of pity within his hearts.

For as long as he could remember, the Covenant—through the wisdom of the Prophets—had instilled within him a sense of awe and reverence for the divinity of the Forerunners. But the hierarchs had been liars, manipulators, and the Covenant had fallen... and now the sanctity of Forerunner technology had been demystified as countless groups sought to claim their ancient bounties to deliver death and destruction. The truth of their gods’ benevolence was in doubt when it seemed all they had to offer were terrifying weapons.

Perhaps there was other truth that Dham ‘Mashatt could at last discern for himself.

Perhaps he could break his own programming, as Bibjam had. But what would that leave him with? ‘Mashatt could find only a wellspring of

pain and regret, the depths of which he felt he could draw from until the end of time.

“What can be done?” ‘Mashatt found himself asking, turning to Exuberant. “Is there any way we can aid this creature? Can it be delivered from this pain?”

The oracle did not respond immediately, appearing to be deep in thought. “There may be something...” she said at last.

“Oracle,” ‘Mashatt was unable to keep the longing from his voice at the prospect of being able to ask a construct of the gods for a purpose. “Please. Command us.”

“There is a place here on Genesis. A gateway to the Domain.”

‘Mashatt knew of what she spoke. Covenant scripture told of a great library that held all of the Forerunners’ knowledge, the soul and wisdom of the time before their departure on the Great Journey.

“And this warrior-angel,” ‘Mashatt said. “If it were to pass into the Domain, it could be at peace?”

“I am uncertain. The Domain has been out of commission for such a very long time, and it is currently being leveraged by Cortana...”

“But it is the strongest chance it has?”

“I believe so.”

An idea took shape in Dham ‘Mashatt’s mind. A new purpose, the greatest that anyone of the Covenant could hope for—and not just for himself.

“Oracle, would you release my fellow Covenant from their holding cells?”

“Certainly!”

The energy shield walls of several other prison units dissipated. Three other Unggoy waddled over, accompanied by a lone Mgalekgolo, apparently cut off from its bonded pair, and introduced itself—through the translation of one of the Unggoy—as Naliligaw. All gathered at the center of the monitor’s strange menagerie.

“My brothers,” the Sangheili called them all to attention. “I am Dham ‘Mashatt, and I have much to tell you.”

He explained all he could to them. He recounted the fall of ‘Mdama’s Covenant at Sunaion for the benefit of those who had come from elsewhere in the galaxy. He detailed how numerous Guardians had transported many people from the worlds they had been awakened within to this place.

He explained how Bibjam, who he had once called friend and leader, had sought to protect them from these terrible events, before ‘Mashatt killed him for this betrayal.

And he presented to them the choice they now faced.

“We can leave. The oracle may be able to return us to a location of our choosing, or else help us to find slipspace-capable transport. Or... we could remain on Genesis. There is a place for us here, serving the oracle in her quest to return all others to where they belong, if that is the duty we choose for ourselves. In service of the gods, we may at last find some measure of peace.”

As ‘Mashatt spoke, he felt a wave of clarity wash over him. Bibjam’s intentions had been pure and honorable, for he had been moved by love and loyalty, but so too were his actions stained with distrust. He had not confided his treacherous plans and had therefore acted *for* them—in doing so, he had removed the opportunity for those he loved to decide their own fate.

Dham ‘Mashatt would not repeat that mistake.

Naliligaw let out a low rumble, the lone Mgalekgolo teetered slightly from side-to-side, before stepping forward and approaching ‘Mashatt. The Unggoy, too, waddled over as one.

“Our choice has been made, oracle,” ‘Mashatt declared as Exuberant Witness excitedly chirped about having the company of new friends. “We shall serve you as the true guardians of Genesis.”

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## CANTICLE V. THE MUSIC

**ZETA HALO // OCTOBER 29, 2558**

Professor Montgomery Marie was a creature of habit.

*0500 Hours: Morning alarm, up and out of bed, personal chatter comes on with daily playlist. Always start with the Helljumpers’ Interstellar Orchestra.*

*0510: Jog, same path around the base as always. Custom playlist of twenty-third century rock anthems set to full blast.*

*0540: Journal time. Music off. Reflection.*

No matter where in the galaxy she was, her routines were the same. She had kept them that way for years, her method of holding onto a constant in what was otherwise a fairly nomadic way of life. Not that anything she had seen before could truly compare to her current workplace.

As she glanced up from her journal, the ancient Forerunner construct designated Installation 07—Zeta Halo—rose to its own towering heights, both literally and metaphorically. Professor Marie had arrived only a few weeks ago with an expeditionary group and was still getting used to the

way the horizon curved upward with its thinning band of oceans and landmasses, and, in its current orbital orientation, the immense face of its uniquely terrestrial anchor planet.

It was a marvel. And her late father's journal was now full of her own sketches, teeming with whatever caught her attention. The horizon, alien flora, flocks of strange birds that wheeled in the sky as the sun passed over the edge of the ring.

*0610: Off to breakfast, playlist back on to finish the last leg of the jog back to base. Late twenty-fourth century Reavian throat singing. Oddly calming.*

She made her way back down to grab a quick bit of food in the prefabricated mess hall where she overheard spirited chatter from her colleagues and the base's military personnel. Over the last week, news had been streaming in about catastrophic events concerning colony-wide disasters. Ancient alien constructs awakening after millennia of dormancy, the Master Chief going missing, or AWOL, or dying in the line of duty... it was all frightfully unclear. What *was* clear was that a rogue artificial intelligence named Cortana was behind it all. Cortana's message had been heard across the galaxy, declaring that "the Created" had come to lead them all—all species, all civilizations—to a new dawn, whether they wanted it or not.

Given the intensity of Professor Marie's own work and the wonder that she experienced every day here on Zeta Halo, the news seemed like distant noise, the barest hum of something on the far horizon. And even if she did have concerns, there was little she felt she could do against such a tapestry of chaos.

Better that she stay focused. While she was involved in all manner of research on the ring, her primary task concerned the deployment and observation of OQ-45 remote survey drones—nicknamed "Honeybees"—and subsequent analysis of their terrain mapping.

*0800 Hours: Reporting for duty, work begins. Music left off until lunchtime.*

Her workstation was a watchtower, a small blocky structure that housed a maximum of three people and served as a sensor platform. It was dark inside, primarily lit by an array of monitors and readouts of the local area, and the activity of the Honeybee drones.

“This is Hotel Bravo Three. Comms check, over,” Professor Marie said as she picked up her headset and settled into her chair.

Ordinarily, she would have expected to hear the other Honeybee teams reporting in with relative immediacy, but as she counted up to twenty whole seconds, there was no response.

“I say again: All Honeybee controllers, comms check, over.”

*0815: Still no response. What the hell?*

Professor Marie performed a routine check of her equipment to make sure it was functioning correctly—which it was—and attempted to contact them again, to no avail. As she made to direct a report of the issue to the local command center, the radio crackled with activity.

*At last*, she thought. “This is Hotel Bravo Three, please identify yourself, over.”

Her brow furrowed as she heard what sounded like music coming through. She was sure she could hear light piano notes playing somewhere in the background.

She glanced at her chatter to verify that it was indeed switched off.

“This is Hotel Bravo Three, please identify yourself immediately. This silliness has gone on long enough... Over.”



The music grew louder, accompanied now by the sound of a woman humming.

And still Professor Montgomery Marie could not find the source.

*Surely this was not from the radio? Surely somebody would--*

“There you are!”

A voice from behind her almost made Professor Marie jump out of her chair in surprise. She turned to see Private Rene Gordon, her dark hair a wild mess and her battle dress uniform looking anything but parade ready. “What the hell are you still doing in here, Monty? Haven’t you seen?”

Before she could respond, Private Gordon pulled her up and dragged her out of the comms station, squeezing her hand with what felt like a Helljumper’s death grip.

“We’re screwed, Monty! We’re *so* screwed,” was all she said as they made it outside and found a gathering of the base’s personnel.

Professor Marie did not need to ask what the fuss was all about. The answer was hanging in the sky above them.

Settling over a structure, perhaps a dozen kilometers upspin, was a great winged construct. Silver alloy lined with accents of hardlight. Jagged, segmented pieces that evoked the image of a phoenix...

An ear-splitting ringing suddenly sounded from every individual piece of communications equipment around the base.

The music was everywhere now. A new war across the stars had arrived not with the sound of weapons fire, but *Préludes No. 4* by Claude Debussy.

*0900 Hours: Working to get word to Earth. Cortana has come to Zeta Halo.*