

SACRIFICE

343 INDUSTRIES

Three Banished Phantoms launched across the ancient installation's sky in perfect formation, carving a path through dense white clouds that looked so solid Minas felt he might be able to reach out and lay hold of them.

The old Jiralhanae chieftain clung to the open bay door of the lead dropship, wind coursing through his draggled ashen-brown coat, ice crystals forming around his mouth. At their altitude, the air was bitterly cold and the other warriors on board would doubtless have preferred that the doors remain closed for the duration of the trip, but no amount of holodisplays and bulkhead data readouts from the vessel's external sensor systems would suffice.

Minas needed to see their quarry with his own eyes.

A few hundred meters to his right, the second Phantom broke through the cloud line first, its heavily armored form enveloped in the noonday light of this world's artificial sun. Gouges and battle scarring marked the craft's surface plating, its silhouette a series of hard, stern angles at its fore, ending in a trio of dramatically flaring aft canards.

It was a decidedly Banished design, only vaguely similar to those that had come before. To Minas, it represented more than a mere shift in military aesthetics. The Banished design philosophy embodied a complete abandonment of the former Covenant ways. Where once there had been mystical and religious undertones to every fluted

contour, now there was only raw pragmatism, architecture that denoted strength and power.

“We approach the target, Chieftain,” a husky voice sounded over the ship’s internal comms system, just barely discernible above the howling wind.

Choros was captain of his guard, Minas’s veritable right hand on the battlefield. They had served together for years now. Huddled in the craft’s cockpit, the tall, dark-furred Jiralhanae was monitoring the Phantom’s tracking systems, and had been ordered to alert Minas when they arrived.

A few breaths later and the clouds before them dissipated, revealing a vast blue ocean far below, sunlight gleaming off its billowing waves. A hundred kilometers ahead, an enormous sea stack loomed above the water, one of seven basalt columns that formed an arc to a larger peninsula much farther away. Each one was large enough to hold an entire city, and they were linked by cables that at this distance looked like fine thread. Minas knew that these were likely transport conduits, which meant they were at least a dozen meters in width. On the flat peak of each stack were the stark geometric silhouettes of innumerable structures. No doubt this was one of many domains of the ancient Forerunner civilization that had built the entire Ark installation, the immense and enigmatic world they now found themselves on.

This peninsula belonged to the uncontested part of a sector the Banished had dubbed Mahsko. It was one of the locations not yet infiltrated by the pernicious human vessel and its crew that had arrived several months ago. This meant there should be no resistance to the Banished securing their prize.

Each Phantom held a swift-strike combat detachment, assigned to raid an ancient ship and secure the powerful asset kept in its hold. This was the commission Minas had personally received from Atriox, the warmaster of the Banished. Though each detachment had its own leader, Minas would be responsible for their entire endeavor.

It did not take long for Minas to locate the vessel, believed to have

been destroyed seven years ago during the Covenant's final battle with humanity.

And yet, here it was.

To the untrained eye, the docked starship might have appeared to be part of the first sea stack's existing structures. Nestled among the vaulted citadels and spires covering the plateau, it bore a faint limestone color and distinct angularity even at this distance. As the Phantoms closed in, the features that distinguished the ship from the other structures grew clearer.

Over thirteen kilometers tall, its narrow hull soared above its surroundings, just as magnificent and imposing as it had been when Minas first saw it long ago, anchored to the central mooring hub of the Covenant Holy City of High Charity, shrouded in the luminous resplendence of the Fount of Light. The starship rested on its three enormous struts, looking like an arrowhead pointed toward the sky.

Yet Minas knew that, although the majestic vessel lay in complete disuse, abandoned and derelict since the fall of the Covenant, this stunning ship was most certainly not destroyed.

The Phantoms assumed a staggered formation, approaching from completely different angles. It was a necessary precaution. If for some reason the ship's point defense weapons remained active after all this time, the firepower they issued would vaporize one of their dropships before its crew was even aware they had been fired upon. If they remained close together, a single shot from this vessel could terminate the entire expedition.

After the ships had circled on different flight paths for several minutes, Minas felt confident that they could land safely.

"Choros," he spoke through the comms system. "Tell the other Phantoms to ready themselves. This ship may appear dead, but we must be prepared for anything."

He then triggered a vector marker through his armor, sending it to Bomarus, the pilot in the dropship's cockpit. They would land at the ship's primal crux, a platform that wrapped around the central

assembly, where its main fuselage joined to each of the three struts. The platform itself was divided equally into thirds, nested between the struts, but the individual sections were so massive that each could hold at least a hundred Phantoms.

As they came closer, the vessel's enormous scale and the ship's age became apparent. The pristine glory of its former years in High Charity had faded with time, making Minas wonder what exactly its interior might hold. Just because it was derelict did not mean they were out of danger.

Bomarus quickly approached the landing site, leading the other two Phantoms to a stable resting spot near their chosen point of ingress, one of twelve primary access ports that serviced the crux.

As they descended toward the abandoned ship's hull, Minas considered the three combat detachments at his command. Within his own, Choros would lead ten battle-tested Jiralhanae, supported by a handful of choice Kig-Yar and Unggoy. The units in the other two Phantoms were led by the Jiralhanae Zeretus, known as the Scourgemaker by those in his charge, and the Sangheili blademaster Okro 'Vagaduun. Each of the detachments represented the best of their own kind. It was a formidable strike force—perhaps overkill? Minas wondered.

The dropships touched down without incident and the crews quickly dispersed, forming into three distinct groups. They left behind only the pilots, who would wait on the platform for their return. Once they had finished making final checks on their armor and weapons, each group began to move carefully toward the ship's center and a looming wall where they would be able to access its interior. Per Minas's order, Choros and his Jiralhanae took the lead, forming up around a large, sealed doorway.

"Itka, let us waste no time," Minas said to one of his Kig-Yar, a weaponsmith with a deft talent for hacking Forerunner machines. The Kig-Yar screeched an affirmation; stowing his weapon, he immediately began pecking at an interface by the door's seam. Itka was of little use in combat, but he was indisputably resourceful when it came

to infiltration, and he possessed a remarkable store of intrusion software, likely thieved from every corner of the known galaxy.

As Minas looked up at the ancient ship's bow, stretching impossibly far into the blue sky above, a dark thought passed through his mind, making the fur on the back of his neck stand straight. They were, he suddenly realized, repeating what had been done long ago.

This was not the first time a heavily armed cadre had attempted to break into this ship that the Covenant had piously referred to as the Forerunner Dreadnought. It had happened at least twice before, a Covenant cleric had once confided to him.

The first time was when the San'Shyuum, who had fashioned themselves as Prophets, discovered this vessel on their own world millennia before the Covenant had even formed. Some of their kind wanted to employ the ship's power, while others thought it too sacred to even approach. After much bloodshed in a protracted conflict, the former had barricaded themselves in the vessel's holds, refusing to allow anyone access. Eventually they had managed to launch from their world, abandoning their own people for the stars.

The second attempt was when those very same San'Shyuum, eager to unlock the many secrets of the Forerunners, had found a world rife with prized relics. The only problem was that both the world and the relics belonged to the Sangheili, who viciously contested for them, leading to yet another war. A San'Shyuum victory had appeared to be a foregone conclusion—the Forerunner ship far too powerful for the Sangheili to defend against, much less subdue—until, that is, a strike force of Sangheili managed to infiltrate the vessel in a pivotal battle. During their raid, they had sabotaged many of the ship's key systems, slaughtering thousands of San'Shyuum in the process, before falling to overwhelming opposition. Their actions proved that the San'Shyuum were not invincible and would eventually force a truce—the Writ of Union—which led to the formation of the Covenant.

And now Minas was staring at what might well have been the same access point for both of those historic events. Each had ended in

a horrific bloodbath, costing countless lives. Minas wondered if some fate had cursed this ship long ago and, perhaps, his own raid would fare no better. A sense of foreboding began to well up in his heart, but he quickly denied it. He steeled himself, checking his pulse carbine to ensure its efficient operation.

“Many securities, Chieftain,” Itka said, feverishly typing into the interface’s holographic keys. “Both old and new.”

“*New?*”

“They are familiar enough to Covenant.” Itka’s tone was confident. “I can solve.”

Minas began to process what that could mean, but there was no time.

A deep thrumming sound now came from beyond the door, followed by the groan of unseen power systems that had long lain dormant. The vertical seal at the door’s center began to open. At Minas’s right were Choros and his detachment. Several paces behind them were the two others led by Zeretus and ‘Vagaduun, fixed at angles that could provide supporting fire if needed. All weapons were trained on the parting doors sliding to the left and right.

Minas could see only a dark maw ahead of him. Even the brilliant light of the midday sun fell short of penetrating the ship interior’s deep shadows. Apart from the subtle rush of air now coursing into the vessel’s aperture, there was absolutely no sound. It appeared entirely empty and still, which was precisely what they had expected.

“Proceed, brothers,” Minas said, “but do so with caution.”

The three groups entered the chamber, activating their nocturnal sensors and lighting units before splaying out in a pattern that would provide the best resistance to any unseen threat.

As the detachments pressed deeper into the thickening darkness, they found themselves in a large, empty corridor that continued for over a thousand meters. They traveled through the dense blackness with only their light systems to guide them as the open doorway behind them shrank to a bright square.

“It is abandoned, Minas,” Zeretus said from across the corridor. “Just as the others said it would be.” He held his gravity hammer in both hands, wild eyes fixed ahead. Known for his brutality against humans, the Scourgemaker would often take weapons from his victims and use them against others of their kind. This Jiralhanae thought it more shameful for a human to be killed by an ally’s weapon than by even his own.

“Indeed, just as they said,” whispered Vagaduun, walking by the steady glow of his energy sword, his Sangheili warriors close to his back. “Yet we still have far to go. And this great dreadnought may still hold many secrets. It has already survived so much.”

The blademaster was correct. The ship had been through countless battles and endured many perils in that time. There was no telling what internal systems might lie dormant. The Forerunners were masters of automation and had manufactured innumerable stores of drone-attackers and machine-killers, all of them driven by individual distributed intelligences. If there was any threat still lurking here, it would likely be of that ilk.

“Nevertheless,” Minas responded, spitting out the ship’s stale air, “we must continue to the Adytum. Choros, you know the way. Lead us.”

“Yes, Chieftain,” the towering Jiralhanae replied. He intensified an emitter latched to the barrel of his weapon, a vicious spike-launcher called a skewer.

Choros knew the way, not only because for the last three day cycles he had pored over schematic data recovered from the Ark’s manifest logs, but because he was the only one among them who had actually stepped foot on the structure before, having served directly under the High Prophet of Truth alongside his uncle, the renowned chieftain Tartarus. Toward the end of the Covenant’s war with the humans, and with the blessing of the Prophets, Tartarus had united the Jiralhanae against their Sangheili masters, wresting away control of the Covenant military.

When Tartarus had unexpectedly perished at the hands of a Sangheili vigilante, his nephew Choros began to doubt the promises of the

High Prophets. In the end, he had refused to follow Truth and what remained of the Covenant to the Ark, the journey that was to fulfill all of their prophecies.

Instead, Choros had abandoned the Covenant and made for Warial, one of the moons of the Jiralhanae homeworld Doisac. There he gave himself to the repairing of warships in the brimstone-dockyards of Ividar Rux. That was where Minas had found him. And it was also where Minas had learned that Choros had visited the Forerunner Dreadnought several times, escorting scribes and clerics through the ship's interior, where they would record its details for later reflection.

"The Adytum is in the terminus housing structure," Choros said in a hushed tone as they penetrated farther into the darkness, "in a room referred to as drive control, fixed into the core of the ship's bow. That is where the vessel's slipspace drive was interfaced, and where its own crystal was held. It was inaccessible when I served here years ago, but if those shards still exist, that is where we will find them."

Because of its deification of the Forerunners, the Covenant had long regarded the vessel as sacred. While, practically speaking, it had powered all of High Charity for ages, the ship's true capability was rendered moot when the Covenant was first formed, as a sign of peace between the San'Shyuum and the Sangheili. It had been referred to for many ages simply as the Dreadnought, a hallowed relic of the gods before they departed this plane of existence for the Great Journey.

Minas, however, knew the truth. There was no Great Journey and the Forerunners were no gods. They were mortal, material creatures, no different from the Jiralhanae or the Sangheili, or even the humans.

The Covenant's hallowed Dreadnought was not even a warship, but a science vessel the Forerunners had referred to as a keyship, a preservation freighter designed to transport specimens from one world to another, allowing them to reseed civilizations at will. This had been a necessary process after the Forerunners had razed the galaxy of sentient life upon activating the weapon network known as Halo.

But this ship and its former station mattered very little to Atriox

and the Banished. What they desired were the shards Choros had mentioned, the fragmented remains of a slipspace crystal that had once given the Dreadnought and others like it the ability to travel unfathomable distances and even unlock portals capable of granting any vessel such passage.

At last the immense, dark corridor ended at a wall with several doorways, some opened but others closed. Choros chose the fourth from the left, and led the three combat units into a passage significantly smaller than the previous one, but still large by Jiralhanae standards.

After some time navigating the corridors, faintly lit by fixtures running along the wall, they emerged into a large, arena-like chamber, with a series of vaulting walkways connecting to a central lift, holding what appeared to be several hundred transport cylinders that could be launched up into the bow of the ship.

“Follow me,” Choros said, stepping onto the closest walkway. “One of these lifts can take us to the main assemblage.”

“If they work,” Zeretus grumbled. “Will the ship even have enough power to get us there?”

“More than enough,” Choros said with confidence. “The lights show that it is still active. They are only dim because the vessel remains in hibernation. Once we engage the lift, it will awaken the sections we seek.”

“And if there is any threat remaining on this ship,” Minas added, “that is when we will know for certain.”

“How could anything survive in this?” Vagaduun remarked as he and his Sangheili scanned their surroundings, trailing the forward group as they made their way to the lift platform. “It has been years since any living thing set foot in here.”

The transportation cylinders varied in size, but there were several capable of carrying all three combat units together. As they stepped inside the cylinder, a full four meters taller than Minas, its ivory walls chased with faint, enigmatic Forerunner inscriptions, Itka again took to the interface, plugging a discrete access code into its processor. It

was only a short time ago that the Banished had managed to retrieve this specific code from the debris field of High Charity, littered across a remote sector of the Ark.

After the High Prophet of Truth had abandoned the Covenant Holy City in hopes of reaching the Ark, it had quickly been overtaken by a virulent, extragalactic parasite known as the Flood, the very same existential threat that had led the Forerunners to activate the Halo weapon so long ago.

Seeking to prevent Halo's activation by the Covenant, the Flood crashed High Charity into the Ark nearly seven years ago. In response, the installation had wrapped it in a protective shield to prevent the parasite from escaping. The Banished managed to infiltrate what remained of High Charity, scouring the nightmarish plague and pillaging the city's data stores. The keyship's access code was one of many things they had recovered.

"It work," Itka said with a cackle, backing away from the interface.

The lift door slammed shut, and Minas immediately felt the platform move, slowly accelerating until it reached a tremendous speed—so fast that several warriors in the lift had to brace themselves against the surrounding walls just to remain standing.

When the lift finally slowed to a stop, Minas felt his entire sense of balance depart and he nearly fell over. He was not even certain how quickly or in what direction they had moved, but what was clear was that they were far from their initial entry point on the ship.

"The disorientation will pass in time," Choros said, edging carefully to the doorway and raising his weapon. "Be prepared."

They trained their weapons on the door. When it finally opened, Minas found himself staring at something entirely unexpected: an immense, yawning chasm large enough to hold a Banished strike shuttle, partitioned into open vestibules and common spaces, all connected by angular walkways and trellised platforms. Throughout the interior space, if it could be called that, were swaths of dense foliage that seemingly had grown unchecked during the passage of years. It almost

looked as if they were staring into a jungle as natural light poured in from large apertures above and a flock of startled indigenous birds launched from the floor into the space's upper reaches.

"What is this place?" Vagaduun asked.

"A plenary arcade," Choros said. "One of five on this vessel, though it has since overgrown—"

A sudden blast threw Choros to the ground, sending his weapon sliding across the floor. The warriors in all three combat elements responded swiftly, either taking cover or charging deeper into the arcade where the unseen enemy would be forced to hit moving targets. A barrage of firepower broke out all at once, with bright peals of plasma bolts and carbine rounds raining down on the Banished forces from multiple angles.

It was an ambush.

Minas ran to Choros, hoisting him to his feet. The Jiralhanae had been directly hit by a plasma bolt, but his armor seemed to have taken the brunt of it. "You're alive, brother," Minas assured him, even while smelling the scorched steel of his chestplate. He drew him to a stone barrier and they hunkered down.

"What in Sonin was *that*, Chieftain?!" Choros shouted over the raucous trade of munitions that now filled the entire arcade. The surrounding threats were all engaging from different positions—but Minas had no clue who or what they actually *were*.

"Something that does not want us here, Choros!" he replied. He peeked above the barrier, then instantly ducked back down.

A plasma bolt struck the stone with a searing crack, followed immediately by several more.

Only one thing was clear about whoever was firing at them from within the dense foliage of the arcade—they were using *Covenant* weapons. That meant they were not machines. They were living beings, and living beings could make mistakes. In fact, they often did.

Predictably, the sound of weapons fire began to trail off as the enemy's targets dispersed throughout the arcade and found concealment.

Minas assumed that some of the attackers were still fixed on his own position, but delaying would not increase his odds of survival. If anything, it would only make them more vulnerable.

“Choros, move with me on my mark,” Minas said, positioning his body to launch forward. Choros nodded and followed suit.

Taking a deep breath, Minas shot out of their cover, his captain close behind, wheeling just to the side to retrieve his fallen weapon.

Enemy fire ignited again around them, but they managed to barrel deeper into the arcade, through a dense tangle of vines leading across a narrow passageway. The structure terminated in a trellised portico with walls tall enough to shield them.

As they moved, Minas had glimpsed the location of the shooters—a trio of figures atop a rafter spanning the arcade twenty meters above. Choros had already begun firing at them by the time Minas raised his pulse carbine to do the same, the combined attack forcing their assailants down behind the cover.

“Impossible!” Zeretus suddenly called out from a distance, followed by the crash of his gravity hammer onto something that was not quite as solid as ground. A gurgling cry from whatever he had struck echoed throughout the arcade.

To Minas, it sounded like a Jiralhanae.

The noise distracted their three attackers long enough for Minas to unleash another torrent of plasma fire on their position, but it was Choros’s skewer that finished them, knocking the enemies off the rafter and sending their perforated, lifeless bodies to the floor.

The two of them wasted no time, bolting through the portico, pressing deeper into the arcade’s foliage as the weapons fire continued to explode from every direction.

A group of shadowy, hulking shapes suddenly appeared at the corner of a doorway ahead, coming into the light while firing their own plasma rifles as they charged.

Minas could not believe his eyes.

He and Choros threw their bodies into the columns bordering

either side of the portico, narrowly evading the tempest of plasma bolts that flooded the passage.

“Did I see what I thought I saw, Chieftain?” Choros said, swiftly reloading his skewer.

As suspected from Zeretus’s earlier attack, they *were* Jiralhanae.

But not Banished—their enemies were clad in the armor of the Covenant.

“Could it be possible?” Minas asked. “After all this time?”

Choros had already reloaded and looked toward Minas with an incredulous frown. Who could have predicted such a thing? Minas grasped his carbine, then nodded, a subtle signal that Choros would recognize from their years together. Synchronously, both swiveled around their sheltering columns and charged back into the passage, where they unleashed their own firestorm.

The Covenant Jiralhanae—if that was what they actually were—frantically attempted to take cover at the end of the portico, but only two made it alive. The rest fell in a thick heap on the floor, their manes seared and ravaged beyond recognition.

Minas continued to charge and fire, drawing their remaining enemy’s attention, as he saw Okro ‘Vagaduun emerge from a dark corner, his energy sword raised behind him. The Sangheili’s attack came without warning, his blade severing one foe’s head while continuing in a single motion directly into the back of the other.

‘Vagaduun deactivated his blade and fixed it back to his thigh. Minas and Choros slowed to a walk, exiting the portico and circling around the pile of dead Jiralhanae.

The weapons fire seemed to have ceased throughout the arcade, and all that remained echoing off the vaulted ceilings were the voices of Banished troops, most of them discussing what exactly had just happened.

‘Vagaduun lifted the severed head of the enemy Jiralhanae, its Covenant helmet still intact, as Minas approached. “One of *your* friends?” the Sangheili asked, perhaps attempting to be humorous.

“Clever, Blademaster,” Minas said. He turned to examine the rest of the arcade before him, the surviving Banished milling about, staring equally dumbfounded at the bodies of those who had ambushed them. “What do you make of all this?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” the Sangheili replied as his own warriors moved in from different points.

“It *is* the Covenant,” Choros said, prying a pauldron off one of the fallen warriors and examining it. “Some of the High Prophet’s own crew must have remained aboard the ship, perhaps to protect it from intruders.”

“Intruders like us,” Vagaduun said, thumping his chest with his fist.

“But that was seven years ago, Choros,” Minas replied. “How have they survived this long?”

“This ship has enough supplies to allow a crew to survive seventy years, Chieftain,” Choros responded, “no less seven.”

Zeretus joined them, gravity hammer resting on his shoulder, its face filled with the grit of armor and flesh. “So . . . do you mean to say that these religious fools remained in this ship for all this time, even after Truth never returned?”

“Perhaps it was for that very reason,” Vagaduun said. “Where else would they go? There was no way back to High Charity. In fact, there was no longer any High Charity at all.”

“None of this matters,” Minas said, growing weary of how this discovery had overtaken their attention. “Only the crystal.” He turned to Choros. “How far is the Adytum?”

“Fifteen minutes on foot,” Choros said. “Through this arcade and the clerestory, then into the drive control center.”

“Bomarus.” Minas spoke into his armor’s native link, which connected him directly to the pilot of his Phantom.

“*Yes, Chieftain,*” he replied after a pause.

“Be wary,” Minas said, nodding for the others to follow Choros. “There are enemies within the ship. Inform the other pilots, as we may have to extract swiftly.”

“Understood,” Bomarus responded. *“What kind of enemies are here?”*

“You would not believe me if I told you, Bomarus. Just be ready for us when we reach you.”

“Very well, Chieftain.”

Choros was guiding the three units through the remainder of the arcade, weaving around enormous plants that had launched out of their habitats, climbing along the ship’s interior walls a full thirty meters above their heads.

They had lost fifteen Banished warriors during the firefight, including most of the Kig-Yar and Unggoy from his own unit. Those who remained were not keen on falling prey to another Covenant attack, and so kept their weapons trained and ready as they all continued to press forward.

At the end of the arcade, they came to a single walkway leading to a platform with three doors. Choros selected the one on the right, just large enough for them to enter two by two. They all filed in, with Choros and Zeretus in front and Minas and the blademaster bringing up the rear—a long parade of Banished forces that made the chieftain uneasy. If the Covenant launched a strike at the far end of this corridor, there would be no cover except for the bodies of the Banished in front of them.

“We killed many of them back there. But you believe we will encounter more?” Vagaduun turned to Minas.

“I do. That cannot be all who dwell in this ship,” Minas said. “If those we met in the arcade survived here for so long, we must anticipate that others have as well.”

As they passed through the corridor, softly lit by emitters high above them, Minas discovered that they were traveling in a narrow transparent channel running through one of the Dreadnought’s great interior spaces, large enough to fit several arcades like the one they had just left. For a brief moment, he wondered if their combined weight might cause the channel to buckle or even shatter like glass, sending them into the depths below. Such a fear, however, was entirely

unfounded; most Forerunner materials were designed to withstand violently traumatic damage and, as they were already familiar with, survive even the eroding passage of great spans of time.

As Minas's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could finally see what lay hundreds of meters below them: a countless supply of receptacles, organized both vertically and horizontally like the old chronicle repositories on High Charity. Except these receptacles did not contain sacred writings or religious texts—these were for living creatures. Specimens captured from dying worlds and held in stasis for millenia, in order to be reseeded elsewhere.

“This is the clerestory,” Choros said to Minas over their armor's native link, seemingly reading his mind. “It is the very reason the Forerunners made these vessels. To transport the populations to safety before igniting the Halo ringworlds.”

The thought was staggering to Minas—millions of living creatures kept within this ship's bowels, simply to prevent their existence from being stamped out by some cataclysmic event. He wondered if there were any survivors of old still here, hundreds of meters below his feet, or if they all had perished thousands of years earlier. There could be the life of an entire world in this hold, simply waiting to be reseeded. It was little wonder that the San'Shyuum and Sangheili had worshiped the Forerunners.

But that religion had long since failed and died, and there was nothing left of it. Nothing apart from whatever remained in this ship. The Banished had long ago cast off the superstitious shackles of Covenant ideology, but it was only in wake of the Covenant's war against the humans that these astonishing revelations about the Forerunners had come to light. Minas still could barely fathom that some vestiges of the original Covenant had made it this long—not one of the frenzied splinter sects that had tried to fill the void after the war, but the actual Covenant of old. The very soldiers who had accompanied the Prophet of Truth to this installation.

“Chieftain, we approach the lift to the ship's drive control,” Choros

said as the channel they were in emptied onto a brightly lit balcony, a curved cleft in the far wall. At the center of the balcony was a single lift platform, and two sealed doorways opposite them.

Itka immediately made his way to a terminal near the rim of the lift while Minas examined their surroundings. From here, they were fully exposed to the vast interior of the clerestory, which felt cold and stale to his senses. The dark expanse continued so far in all directions that he could not see the end.

He examined the lift. It was too small for their entire force. They would have to separate and travel in groups, which would limit their effectiveness.

“We must ascend farther up the bow,” Choros announced, craning his neck up toward a series of pale orbs, lighting the entire place like small moons, hundreds of meters above them. “Within the drive control is the Adytum, and within that, the crystal shards.” He turned and looked at Minas. “This is as far as I have ever been before.”

“If I were planning an ambush in this place,” Zeretus said, following Choros’s eyes upward, “it would be at the top of a lift like this.”

Minas did not disagree.

The single lift likely rose and fell on some manner of antigravity system, like those the Covenant had long ago reverse-engineered for their own purposes. If an attack awaited on the other end of the lift, there would be little the Banished warriors could do.

“We have no choice,” Minas said. “But we will use caution. Choros and I will ascend first with our unit. Then I will send for the remainder. Understood?”

Vagaduun and Zeretus nodded, returning to their own groups to explain the strategy. If there was an ambush, Minas and his entire unit would certainly be slaughtered, but at least the others would be able to adjust their strategy, or in the worst possible case, simply retreat the way they had come—although Minas doubted the wisdom of such a response, as Atriox did not take well to either cowardice or failure.

The perimeter of the lift came alive with light as ancient generators

hummed below the platform, awakening its gravity-modifying systems. Itka turned to Minas, acknowledging success.

The chieftain gripped his pulse carbine tightly and made his way to the lift first as Choros summoned their full unit, though it had now whittled down to a mere handful of warriors after the earlier firefight.

As the lift gently accelerated upward, Minas wondered if this was his final moment. It should matter little in the end, compared to the prize they sought. The three shards that had powered the keyship's slip-space drives had been able to open the portal gateway—buried, ironically, on the humans' own cradle world, Earth—that led to the Ark. That had been the Covenant's final play in their war against the humans, and the one that had brought the Dreadnought here to this place.

Although the Ark installation existed far outside the boundaries of the galaxy, practically inaccessible through rudimentary drive systems, the Forerunners had hidden powerful portals on various planets, machines that could catapult ships back and forth between the Ark and those worlds, and at astonishing speeds given the great distances.

The crystal they now sought had originally been located on another human world called Reach, and was intended to power that planet's own portal machine. The humans must have realized this, because during the Covenant's invasion of this world, the enemy had stolen the crystal and fled. Tartarus's forces had pursued them to a remote star system, but when the thieving humans became aware that they were trapped, they destroyed the crystal, leaving only three small shards remaining in the aftermath. The very shards Minas now sought. Once they secured these prizes, the Banished would have unfettered access to and from the Ark, just like the Forerunners themselves.

"We do this together, brother," Minas said, placing his hand on Choros's shoulder.

His captain turned around, a gleam of loyalty in his eyes. "Together." Choros nodded, bringing his weapon to bear as the lift swiftly climbed.

Minas and Choros had served the Banished together for years now. It would be an honor if they were to end that service together,

especially in pursuit of such a treasure. Unlike Choros, Minas had not been fighting in the Covenant at the close of the war. Nor had he left years before that, as Zeretus had, when Atriox first defied the Covenant and brought the Banished into existence. Instead, Minas had been on the other side, tasked by the High Council to hunt down and destroy the Banished, and ultimately bring Atriox to justice.

Although the wisdom of this had eluded him from the start, Minas trusted the councilors to see what he could not, and he had led a legion of Covenant faithful in pursuit of the renegade sect. It was during that vicious and protracted chase, as the Banished managed to pillage world after world without any concern for their former lords, that Minas finally came face-to-face with the now-legendary Atriox.

And that was when everything changed.

But there was no time for musing on the past. Minas quickly assessed those who had survived in his unit: seven Jiralhanae in addition to himself and Choros, and a handful of Kig-Yar and Unggoy. All of them remained poised and ready to launch a fusillade of spikes and bolts at whatever awaited them. Even if they were faced with a superior force in some kind of implacable position, they would ensure their adversaries incurred great losses, and soften the enemy for the Banished below.

With a faint hum, the lift finally came to a stop at a balcony similar to the one they had just left. It was entirely deserted. There was no ambush. Nothing apart from a single tightly sealed door on the far wall.

Perhaps what had met them in the arcade was, in fact, all the resistance the Banished would face?

“The drive control lies through that door,” Choros said, and Itka sped to the interface near it. “And inside it, the Adytum.”

After they had all stepped onto the solid platform, the gravity lift descended for the others below, who would be forced to take it one unit at a time.

Minas motioned for his warriors to take position around the sealed door. If there was a Covenant trap to be sprung, now would be the time.

Only seconds had passed before Itka cracked the door's code and the seal parted, revealing a short corridor leading into another room. The group entered tentatively, weapons raised and eyes trained ahead.

Yet even this place was devoid of the Covenant.

The drive control room resembled a hollow sphere, about twenty meters in diameter. Narrow lights beamed down from the ceiling, filling the room with a warm hue. A series of circular platforms, one above another, lined the sphere's walls and divided it into segments, each platform with access to terminals and interface panels along the curved wall.

This location was the main functioning area of the ship's drive systems. The keyship had its own natal crystal, used primarily for local travel and hidden somewhere in this room, but that was quite distinct from the shards they sought—the ones used by the Prophet of Truth to gain access to the Ark's portal.

And in the middle of the room was the Adytum. Minas did not need Choros to point it out.

The bronze monolith hovered ominously at the center, a vaguely oblong shape that was just short of touching both the floor and ceiling of the room. It also appeared to have interfaces at each level, accessible by the circular platforms.

Other than this, the room was completely empty, and it appeared fully enclosed at every level. Choros and Itka wasted no time moving toward the Adytum, while Minas glanced back through the doorway at the lift. He foresaw an effort to trap them in this room—but behind them, there was nothing.

Perhaps the threat has truly passed?

"This should only take a moment," Choros called out from the upper level.

Both he and Itka were already working at a panel on the face of the Adytum. The others had formed a defensive perimeter, guarding the door and scanning the walls, half expecting something to climb out and attack them. This was not mere paranoia—heavily armed Sentinel drones were known to prowl Forerunner sites, deploying

from wall vents and shuttered apertures. There was no reason to think this keyship was an exception.

Only minutes had passed before a surprising sound filled the room, coming from the platform outside, one that Minas had not heard in years—the dull pulsating of a Covenant impulse drive advancing on their position.

He moved toward the doorway and peered outside. Two Phantom dropships were approaching through the darkness of the clerestory. *Covenant* dropships.

He could hardly believe it.

“Minas,” Vagaduun said through his native link. “Are you seeing this?”

“Yes, I can see them,” Minas responded. He moved back down the corridor, signaling his warriors to stay in position and prepare themselves. There would indeed be an ambush today—just not the kind he had anticipated.

“We will be there shortly,” Vagaduun said. No doubt the Sangheili was ascending on the lift with his own unit, and Zeretus intended to follow immediately after.

Minas formed a different plan.

“Zeretus, remain where you are,” he ordered, eyeing the Phantoms that had just reached the platform and begun to unload heavily armed Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar near where the lift would soon rise. “There is not enough space for all of us up here, now that we have guests. Guard our backs and ensure that we have safe passage back to our ships.”

“It will be done,” Zeretus said with a grunt. “Though we do not wish to miss the fight.”

Minas looked back down the corridor toward the platform and saw another pair of Phantoms moving in behind the first two, both of which hovered to the side, evidently oblivious to the lift filled with Sangheili below them.

“Captain?” Minas asked, looking up toward Choros. “Time?”

“The Kig-Yar is almost finished, Chieftain,” Choros responded.

“Good,” Minas said. “We have multiple enemy Phantoms inbound.”

Choros looked back, eyes wide, then quickly turned to Itka and scolded the Kig-Yar in his own tongue. The creature worked all the more feverishly, but Minas imagined that the process of extracting three shards of an ancient slipspace crystal from such an extraordinary machine was not something that could be done both swiftly and safely.

The first Covenant soldiers began to make their way along the corridor to the drive control room, the muffled sound of Jiralhanae voices assigning orders. The Kig-Yar would be sent first, probably four of them skulking along, with a column of Jiralhanae behind them, armed with carbines and spike rifles. From their vantage point, the drive control room must have appeared completely vacant.

That would change in only seconds.

When the Kig-Yar entered, it took them a heartbeat to process what exactly they had walked into—a heartbeat during which they were instantly cut down by a barrage of firepower from Minas’s combat element, what remained of their bodies spraying back into the Covenant Jiralhanae’s faces. But the shock from the sudden, violent attack only infuriated the attackers, and they charged into the room.

The first four Jiralhanae fell at once, but Minas’s own force quickly began incurring damage. Three of his Banished Jiralhanae suddenly collapsed, pierced by superheated spikes. More enemies poured through the doorway, marching over their fallen allies and racing without hesitation toward the Banished.

Two furious Covenant Jiralhanae launched toward Minas, far too close for him to use his carbine. Instinctively he swung the weapon’s stock like a club at the first, flattening the entire side of his face and shattering the weapon into useless pieces. The Covenant soldier fell like deadweight to the ground.

The other moved around his companion, only to find Minas’s shoulder lowered and suddenly planting into his midsection. The chieftain felt bones break against the smash of his own pauldron,

lifting the hapless Jiralhanae off the ground. As the Covenant soldier rose into the air, Minas forced the enemy's own spike rifle upward, sending its twin bayonets into the Jiralhanae's throat. With a hard kick, he sent the dead and bloody warrior to the ground.

Minas quickly retrieved one of the plasma rifles from the floor, trying to assess the firefight while sidling toward the corridor. The battle had obscured the room with ballistic smoke and plasma gas. Weapons fire still rang out, but it was slowing as the enemies stopped entering the drive control room.

He turned toward the Adytum, and could not find Choros or Itka. In fact, most in his combat unit had either fallen or were gravely injured. Only two of his Banished Jiralhanae remained—Burekos and Sopruuz—and they were now scavenging weapons among the dead. This had truly been a costly battle, and Minas would find time later to mourn the losses—if he himself survived.

“Choros!” Minas called out, keeping his weapon aimed on the doorway as he searched the room.

The passage through which the Covenant had entered was now a mess of flesh and armor. The enemy would have to climb over a heap of their own dead to enter, which could explain why they had ceased trying.

“Choros!” Minas called again, turning back toward the Adytum. As he edged closer to the center of the room, he could now see that Itka had been struck down. The Kig-Yar's lithe body was pinned to the wall by a series of spikes that had not even cooled yet.

Choros was kneeling beside the Kig-Yar. He was not trying to pry him off the wall, but rather paying homage to a lost companion, possibly even saying some kind of prayer. No wonder he had not responded. Minas was momentarily pleased he would not have to perform a similar ritual for Choros.

The chieftain turned back to the doorway and could see the blade-master and his Sangheili on the platform, currently engaged in a fierce battle against the Phantoms and their combatants. One dropship's left turbine was suddenly struck by a barrage from a ravager one of the

Sangheili used, sending it reeling into the clerestory's murky vastness below.

Choros now came up beside him. "Chieftain, we have the crystal," he said. Choros's hands were holding out an onyx case, but his eyes were elsewhere. He was scanning the bodies all around him.

The case was some Forerunner creation that must have been retrieved from the Adytum. Choros opened it briefly to reveal a trio of shards, all three still emitting an intense blue light, so bright that Minas could not look for long. Even though they were only vestiges of the original crystal from the planet Reach, he had no trouble understanding why the Covenant had referred to this as the Holy Light. Despite its shattered form, it was still stunning.

His captain, however, stayed fixed on the fallen Banished who had been in his charge, scanning one to another, perhaps assessing whether what they sought was actually worth this cost. Burekos and Sopruuz quickly readied their armor and weapons for what waited beyond the doorway.

"Chieftain," Choros said, turning back to Minas, his eyes solemn. "When you first joined the Banished, what was it again that the war-master told you? What were the words that compelled you to leave the Covenant and join with Atriox?"

Minas's breath caught in his throat.

He had told Choros the story long ago, and was startled that he still remembered it after all this time. When hunting down Atriox and the Banished for the High Council, Minas had finally caught up with them, and he had—for a window of mere seconds—an opportunity to strike the fatal blow that could have brought the Banished to an end once and for all.

But he had not done so.

Instead, on that fateful day, Minas had renounced the Covenant and joined the Banished. And the reason for this betrayal was what Atriox had uttered—the very thing Choros asked of him now.

"He told me, Choros, that everyone must die for *something*. No

one is free from that cost. All must pay it one day. The Covenant, the Banished, even the Forerunners. The question is not *if* one must give his life. It is, what will you give your life *for*? And will you believe it? Will it be noble? Would you be willing to die for it, if you knew that was the price? *That* is what Atriox told me. And that was the reason I joined the Banished—I could no longer suffer the hypocrisy and deceptions of the Prophets, which had served only their purposes and not those of the Covenant. I made a choice: I would not die for them. I would die on my own terms.”

Choros did not respond with words, only with his eyes. The loss of lives in their charge was a heavy tax for every commander. As strong and as wise as Choros was, he was not immune to this.

“We must hurry,” Minas said, hoping to break the warrior’s daze. He closed the crystal shard case and pressed it to Choros’s chest for safekeeping. “The Sangheili’s warriors cannot hold the lift for so long.”

“No. You take this, brother,” Choros said, handing the case back to Minas. “Atriox required it of your hand. I will protect you as we leave.” Choros checked the magazine on his skewer.

Minas looked at the case for a moment, then swallowed hard and took it. This was Choros—always willing to refuse the glory and spoil of battle. “Very well,” he said, tucking the case under one arm with his plasma rifle in the other.

The two of them entered the corridor, with the remaining Jiralhanae close behind. They began to pick their way over the remains of their enemies, watching their allies ahead, still trading fire with the Covenant on the lift platform. There were almost as many dead bodies on it as there were inside the corridor.

Only two Phantoms now remained in the air, and both dropships opened up their autocannons, white fire raining down on Okro ‘Vagaduun’s forces. Many of his warriors had already fallen, but the survivors continued to attack the vessels. ‘Vagaduun himself stood defiantly in the open, letting loose a torrent of plasma from each hand with enemy rifles.

“Blademaster!” Minas spoke through his armor’s native link. “We have the crystal and are coming to you!”

“If you take too long, there will be none left for you!” the Sangheili responded, ever confident.

Minas could see that would certainly not be the case. Six more Phantoms now approached in the hazy distance.

How is this even possible?

Minas would not have believed it if someone had told him. But the fact remained—organized Covenant forces had somehow survived aboard this vessel for the last seven years. And all that remained of their old religion was being brought to bear in order to stop the Banished from taking this crystal.

He looked down at the case once more.

Such a small thing. And so great a cost for it.

Choros pulled ahead, clambering over the dead with a vicious ferocity that revealed he had done this before. He was the first to emerge on the platform and join ‘Vagaduun, launching his skewer’s immense spikes at an attacking Phantom’s closed cockpit. One must have struck true, because the ship suddenly canted, slamming into the platform and then falling into darkness.

Minas emerged, followed by Burekos and Sopruuz. The firefight had ceased, but the six Phantoms still came at them from a distance, possibly intending to observe before issuing any attack. No doubt, after long years of silence, this day had been a surprise for the Covenant. There were few protocols in place that answered a Banished raid, and even fewer that could have predicted one such as this.

“The lift,” Minas said, then saw that Choros was already working on it. Minas moved toward him, but a sound from behind drew his attention.

He turned to find a hulking Covenant Jiralhanae, well over three meters tall, hefting an immense gravity hammer with blood-pale spikes. The enemy must have been hiding among the dead, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Before Minas could warn the others, the giant had already side-swung his hammer, and it connected with Burekos and Sopruuz at once, instantly pulverizing their bodies and sending what remained clear off the platform.

Minas fired his plasma rifle into the Jiralhanae's mass, but it seemed to do nothing. As he spun and raced toward the lift, the Sangheili in the blademaster's charge ran to meet the creature, their energy swords igniting in a flurry of light. Three of them lunged at once. 'Vagaduun grabbed Minas's shoulder and pulled him to the lift as Choros stepped away from the terminal and brought his weapon to bear.

"Come with us, Captain." 'Vagaduun motioned to Choros. "They will take the enemy down, or die trying."

Choros looked off toward the Phantoms, then back to Minas. The Covenant dropships were closing in on firing range. Time was running out. If the Phantoms reached them before they engaged the lift, they would never make it down, through the arcade, and back to their waiting ships. The Covenant would either track them through their descent or kill them right here where they stood.

"Choros, let us depart!" Minas said, waving his captain onto the ramp.

"You will need more protection than they can provide, brother," Choros said. "I must stay."

No, Minas mouthed, raising his hand to stop him—but he was too late.

Choros had already slammed his fist on the lift release, and the platform around them seemed to launch upward with a speed that would have broken Minas's neck had he tried to follow it. It was, in fact, the lift that was moving, now shuttling downward as rapidly as Choros could send it without the gravitic strain jettisoning either Minas or 'Vagaduun. The two braced themselves as the lift's speed began to verge on terminal velocity.

Above them, as the platform shrank in the distance, Minas could see the six Phantoms barrel through the air, weapons blazing plasma

fire onto the platform at whoever had survived the battle. To his surprise, he saw fire being returned from the platform, dancing off the Phantoms' hulls and forcing them to slow their approach. Then the platform and the Phantoms vanished from sight range, and the lift suddenly began to slow its descent.

When it finally stopped, they were surrounded by Zeretus and his combat unit, weapons at the ready, all of them straining to see the faint signs of battle far above, merely lights flashing from this vantage point.

"Only two of you?" Zeretus asked, staring at them in disbelief. "Did you get the crystal, then?"

Minas gripped the onyx case in his hand, staring at it intently. Then he looked back up at the platform where Choros was, giving his own life for them to have a window of escape.

It was not a price he would ever have wanted to pay, but he would not waste a moment of it. He would honor this selfless act. Everyone must die for something.

"Let us go, quickly," Minas said, an ache in his voice, "so that their sacrifice might not be in vain."