



WHISPERS FROM THE PYRE



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Whispers from the Pyre takes place at the end of May 2560—immediately following the death of War Chief Escharum at the hands of the Master Chief on Zeta Halo.

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“It is our great burden, is it not? To guide the preservation of the galaxy—even to the ends of erasing it.

Weapons of last resort, built by my makers many millennia ago to starve out the great parasite. This ring is but one of seven. Designed to preserve life, designed to destroy it.

One of seven.

But, this ring is... different.

Reforged from the remains of an earlier effort, it possesses abilities not shared by its siblings. This ring has... many secrets, some even worth dying for.

Many in my place would see this charge as a burden. Custodian of one of the galaxy's greatest marvels—and greatest perils. I admit, I often found myself feeling out of place with others like me.

The monitors of the other installations seemed to share similar perspectives and experiences amongst each other, but I've always been an outcast among them—by both design, and by birthright.

A different type of caretaker for a very different type of ring.

While zero-seven's integral place within the Array is most unquestionable, its history and original composition allow for far more... direct applications. Applications invoked in order to uphold the Mantle... or betray it."

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The voice of Despondent Pyre, the elusive monitor of Installation 07, faded.

Studymaster Ciar 'Yaham retracted his semi-circular datapad and clacked his mandibles in satisfaction as he scrutinized the great stone ring artifact that lay before him. Wisps of mist-like blue energy would typically indicate it had clusters of fragmented data to access, wherein ghostly voices from the past would slough off their digital embalmment to offer a fractured testimony. But this particular arcane curio had now fallen dark and silent.

"Though this artifact appears to have been accessed recently, it still bore latent datastreams that we were able to extract." Studymaster 'Yaham turned to Dahk'rah, a Kig-Yar Skirmisher of a group known as the Mind Talon with whom he had found himself partnered in their joint efforts to uncover the many ancient secrets of Zeta Halo.

"More from monitor," Dahk'rah said, running a hand through her plume of red feathers. "Curious mention of Oth Koronn's past. Reforged, unique abilities and applications... Great prestige for us if we find!"

'Yaham nodded in agreement. Installation 07—designated "Oth Koronn" by the Banished and "Zeta Halo" by the Forerunners—had

a fascinating history that they had only just scratched the surface of. *Finding* that history was one matter, but the process of interrogation and interpretation of data was another thing entirely.

The Sangheili studymaster found that he was developing a fondness for Dahk'rah's company of late. He had come to understand that, like many Kig-Yar, she possessed a great drive for profit, but rather than seeking abundance in riches, "profit" for Dahk'rah meant accumulating knowledge. In the days of the Covenant, that had been largely the singular domain of the San'Shyuum, but within the Banished it was just one way of many that anybody could make themselves useful.

The mystery of the stone ring totems was something that they had discovered within a lunar cycle of occupying Oth Koronn, and both Studymaster 'Yaham and Dahk'rah were determined to be the first to discover the truth of these strange artifacts. It had taken little work to convince Battle Officer Zeretus to establish a dedicated research outpost in the local area.

'Yaham's gaze swept across the vast landscape of the ring. From his position, standing near the summit of an alpine mountain which had been split in two by the Tyrant's recent rending of the ring, he and Dahk'rah had an excellent line of sight over many nearby landmarks.

To the north, the ring's vista revealed an ocean of stars. Whenever the studymaster had looked into that abyss, attempting to trace the division between the dark of space and the azure sky, he had been moved to dizziness. At the farthest end of those suspended columns lay the Silent Auditorium—the site of the Tyrant's immolation—which was still slowly reforming.

Immediately north-east was a beacon tower that he had visited several day-cycles ago, where his correspondence with Dahk'rah had enabled him to translate excerpts of Despondent Pyre's data. From there, the

winding roads traveled eastward where rising stacks of hexagonal pillars—the building blocks of the installation’s artificial landscape—lead up to the outpost he had come to call home.

“No response from Annex Ridge,” Dahk’rah squawked, having apparently attempted to contact the outpost through her native link while the studymaster surveyed the horizon.

“That is... concerning,” ‘Yaham said. Indeed, this whole sector felt emptier than it was supposed to be. Despite the supply crates strewn around the vicinity of the ring-shaped artifact, no allied Banished forces had been here to meet them.

“Have done all we can here. Should return to Annex Ridge, see progress on artifacts there.”

With nothing left to avail them in this location, the studymaster and Skirmisher began their descent of the mountain. Further to the north, the towering form of an inactive reformation spire loomed over another fractured “island” where three Gorespike anti-air platforms lay in ruin. What exactly had happened to them, neither he nor the Skirmisher knew, but it seemed that the remnants of the UNSC were suddenly growing bolder in their retaliatory strikes.

‘Yaham pushed the feeling of concern to the back of his mind. For what also hung in the sky above were several dreadnoughts, including *Ghost of Malkadyr*, which sat directly above their current position. Under the leadership of War Chief Escharum, the Banished *owned* this area of Oth Koronn.

As the dirt track road delivered them to the bottom of the mountain, they were met by the welcome sight of half-a-dozen Jiralhanae warriors accompanying a half-laden war-skiff.

“Brothers,” ‘Yaham called out, unable to deny a feeling of relief at seeing them. “Greetings to you all. I am Studymaster Ciar ‘Yaham of Annex Ridge, and this is my fellow researcher Dahk’rah of the Mind Talons.”

“Well met, Studymaster,” one of the Jiralhanae stepped forwards. “I am Evocus. Have you been ordered to redeploy with us too?”

“We... have not,” the Sangheili fumbled a response to the unexpected query. “Forgive me, Dahk’rah and I have been out of contact for several day-cycles now. What news is there?”

The Jiralhanae shifted uncomfortably. “You have not heard?”

‘Yaham and Dahk’rah exchanged puzzled looks.

“The House of Reckoning has fallen. War Chief Escharum is dead, killed by the Demon.”

The studymaster splayed his mandibles, unable to comprehend the enormity of what he had just heard and its vast implications.

It was said that Atriox had perished to eliminate the Tyrant, the human artificial intelligence who had sought to rule the galaxy and destroyed Doisac to make an example of Atriox’s defiance. In his place, it was Escharum who continued to serve the warmaster’s will and carry his legacy.

Both of them? *Gone?*

There would be consequences for the Banished. Of that, he had no doubt.

“The loss of the war chief is felt by us all,” ‘Yaham placed a hand on Evocus’s shoulder. “He was *daskalo* to us all.”

“It is said that he died well,” Evocus spoke with greater resolve. “For a Jiralhanae, that is all that matters.”

“Our people have that much in common.” ‘Yaham bowed his head. “We were about to return to Annex Ridge. The secrets we have been excavating from the ring may prove vital to our continued dominion over this installation.”

“Beware, Studymaster. UNSC forces have retaken many of their nearby operating bases, and Riven Gate is no longer under our firm control. I do not know what has become of Annex Ridge, but our enemies will undoubtedly seek to claim your bounty of knowledge. Do not be surprised if the Demon has laid waste to that as well.”

“Join us,” Dahk’rah spoke up. “Annex Ridge must hold.”

“Our orders come from Horatius himself. We are to redeploy to the Silent Auditorium immediately.” As Evocus spoke, the unmistakable blare of a Phantom’s horn sounded over the hills. “We cannot come with you, but we can give you an opportunity to get back to Annex Ridge with speed.”

Evocus gestured to the war-skiff. They would no longer need it.

“Glory and spoils to your clan,” Dahk’rah beat a fist to her armored chest.

“May we meet again in victory,” ‘Yaham concluded, but as he met Evocus’s gaze it was clear that they both recognized the platitude. Where these Jiralhanae were going, they would most certainly not meet again—not in this life.

Studymaster ‘Yaham took up the driver’s seat of the war-skiff and Dahk’rah entered the front-facing plasma cannon. The transport’s suspension tracks lifted off the ground and the vehicle sped forwards, following the dirt track road.

Neither he nor his companion looked back as the Jiralhanae boarded their Phantom and were ferried away.

“Strange to see,” Dahk’rah broke the contemplative silence between them. “Sangheili and Jiralhanae getting along.”

She was quite right. During their time in the Covenant, the Jiralhanae had quickly become rivals to the Sangheili. Many of their kind—even Atriox himself—had been used on the front line as mountainous walls of flesh and muscle thrown at the humans’ defensive garrisons, often on the orders of their Sangheili commanders. Spurred by their newfound zealotry, having been lifted from the ashes of endless civil war on their homeworld Doisac, many gladly went to their deaths with the promise of divine transcendence through their service to the Great Journey.

Seeking to better understand his strange allies, the studymaster had pored over records aboard many Banished dreadnoughts, which had themselves become not just engines of war but also cultural and historical preserves. His findings had been illuminating. Younger generations had eagerly embraced the Covenant and its faith, disenfranchised by clan conflicts and weary of misuse by their pack leaders in their fights over territory already spoiled by older wars.

Upon learning this, seeing the pattern of how history had so quickly been repeated, the studymaster understood precisely why such animosity towards the Sangheili had come to be.

But then, there were elders like Escharum, who were skeptical of the Prophets’ promises, and laid the foundation for all that the Banished represented today. From the spark of Atriox’s rebellion against the Covenant, a fragile coalition of scavengers and mercenaries had been consolidated into a true confederacy. The Banished inspired loyalty in all who sought to break their chains, and Atriox held neither grudge nor prejudice against any who pledged service—even if that absolution wasn’t always reflected within the ranks.

“Indeed,” ‘Yaham agreed, realizing his mind was wandering again. “But our peoples have much in common. That, at least, is what the Banished has helped us to see, now that our days of servitude to the Covenant at last lie behind us.”

The studymaster turned the war-skiff to the right as they reached a fork in the road marked by a communications pylon. These devices were known to relay inane messages from an Unggoy known as Glibnub, and it was with some unspoken relief that ‘Yaham saw the humans had evidently laid waste to it.

A stack of Forerunner foundation material lay ahead, atop which sat a UNSC forward operating base.

Evocus had warned them that UNSC forces may occupy this area, but as the war-skiff cruised past the base it appeared to be empty. This made sense to the studymaster as, tactically, it was poorly placed for any kind of assault. If the humans were to strike, it would undoubtedly be from their base which lay on higher ground, closer to Annex Ridge—though, they would have to get past the fearsome Mgalekgolo of the Hordeworms of Svir to do so.

Turning the war-skiff to the left, ‘Yaham continued on for a handful of centals before parking the vehicle on an exposed cluster of Forerunner stacks. As they disembarked, they found the gates to Annex Ridge’s elevator open and its lower structures appeared to be vacant.

The pair immediately boarded the ground floor elevator and instructed it to ascend. Its movement was slower than ‘Yaham would have liked, but he took the moment to keep his mind focused.

As they reached the top, they were immediately struck by the scene of devastation that awaited them.

Banished corpses of all species were strewn across the upper level, pools of blood had dried into dark stains upon the mud. Perhaps the most macabre element was that some of the bodies appeared to be partially submerged into the ground, as if the Halo's environmental systems were already spurring the soil to grow over them—reclaiming the bodies, making them part of the ring itself.

At the far end of the outpost, a siege-hauler transport holding two stone ring artifacts lay in ruin next to a ruptured fuel silo that still burned with crackling fire.

“If what Evocus said is true,” Studymaster ‘Yaham exhaled as he and the Skirmisher ran towards the craft on its landing pad, “then this was perpetrated by *one* Spartan...”

“All it takes.” Dahk’rah concluded for him matter-of-factly.

“Then it seems Evocus was correct and we must be swift,” ‘Yaham said, resolve and purpose filling his voice. “We do not know how much time we have before they turn their attentions back to this location—its secrets are no doubt just as valuable to their kind as they are to us.”

They finally turned their attention to the lower pit of the outpost, where they were relieved to see that one of the circular stone fragments they had recovered appeared to be intact and was still held in place by anchor cables.

Even better, it appeared to be active.

Within its circumference, pale blue light seemed to vibrate, emanating a soft singing sound—clusters of data ready to spill forth and coalesce into... something.

“Perhaps the presence of the Demon activated the artifact,” ‘Yaham speculated. “These totems are known to respond in more peculiar ways to their kind.”

“Siphon data now,” Dahk’rah spoke with urgency. “No time to waste.”

They jumped into the pit arena and marched up to the machinery that had been connected to the ring totem. Clamps were attached to the lower sides of the ring, which ran under metal grated floors with many wires and cables connected to a computer console which displayed a holograph of the artifact.

The Banished had grown quite adept at exploiting exotic alien technology, extracting power as feedstock to fuel their own devices. This, however, was a different matter altogether. These data clusters were far more esoteric, yet they had been imbued into many structures and constructs on Oth Koronn.

“I am rerouting all remaining power from the outpost to the artifact dock,” ‘Yaham input a series of commands on the console, temporarily shutting down everything from nearby lights to the kinetic launcher and interior base machinery.

Annex Ridge went dark, leaving the studymaster and the Skirmisher to simply await the power transfer’s completion.

Night began to fall as the nearest sun passed beneath Oth Koronn’s fractured horizon. The blue veil of the sky rolled back as the abyss of stars below painted a dark canvas, illuminated by a yellowish glow that lined the farthest edges of the installation’s shattered landscape.

The data clusters began to “pour” forth from the ring totem and settled as a thin mist on the ground.

First, a form took shape in the center of the stone ring—the installation’s monitor, Despondent Pyre. Then, she spoke.

“As much as this ring is a weapon, it is also a refuge. So many species have come to call this place home. Delightful forms of life that would

have otherwise perished and remained forgotten after the firing of the Array. Many such lives have looked upon these horizons—and in times much more harrowing than these.

These ancient totems have made appropriate canvases on which to record some of this somber history. The Tudejsa fashioned them long ago in reverence—or perhaps remorse—of the unknowable structure that they themselves called home.

But their peoples' story is only one echo among many.

These relics and the frail memories which accompany them are nearly all that remain of their kind.”

The studymaster extended a long finger on his zygodactyl hand and pressed a button on the console. Instantly, the monitor's hologram froze in place, hanging motionless amidst the swirling eddies of scattered particles.

“It seems this place has been home to many. They speak of creatures I do not recognize,” ‘Yaham’s voice was low and filled with both wonder and trepidation, his mandibles moved uncertainly as he mouthed the unfamiliar word *Tudejsa*. “I cannot help but wonder what became of them all.”

“Long-dead... or long buried,” Dahk’rah offered in response. “Many doors still shut. Still hiding their secrets.”

“And no way of knowing which doors offer riches or ruin,” the studymaster pondered the Kig-Yar’s words, simultaneously wearied and invigorated by the danger of the unknown. He sighed before reactivating the artifact, prompting Despondent Pyre’s voice to resume.

“A shining beacon. A whitewashed tomb. A hushed casket. A palace of pain. This ring is a monument to so many of my makers’ sins.

Like all empires, great care has always been taken to obfuscate the whole truth. Records partitioned, testimonies curated, victories accentuated.

The greatest fear of the Forerunners was neither progeny nor plague—it was powerlessness. And it could not be tolerated.”

The playback froze again and ‘Yaham’s focus snapped toward his companion.

“What do you see?” the Sangheili asked. He knew the Skirmisher well enough that she would not interrupt the gathering of knowledge such as this without reason.

“These words hold great weight—great value. But hurry we must,” Dahk’rah spoke in a rushed tone and pointed into the distance, “or no chance will we have to claim them.”

It took a moment for the studymaster to catch what she was pointing at, reminding him of the old adage that Sangheili vision would always be second-rate to even a blind Kig-Yar.

‘Yaham climbed out of the pit and extracted a *vyspar* from his armor, a small monocular device that allowed him to see what had caught Dahk’rah’s attention. The UNSC forces had regrouped at a forward operating base that sat on higher ground, located closer to Annex Ridge. Perhaps a dozen human soldiers were stationed there, escorting a Warthog with both a passenger and gunner, and they appeared to be moving in the outpost’s direction.

Searching below for any sign of Myriad and their forces, the studymaster’s *vyspar* caught only empty terrain. It appeared that the Demon truly had swept through and annihilated the defenses and infrastructure of the Banished in short order—a clear warning to whoever would succeed War Chief Escharum that there was a hidden

cost to victory; the risk that it would breed complacency and sloth in the ranks.

“It appears our time has run out then,” ‘Yaham’s voice was bathed in bitterness, that they should come so close to so much, only to have their curiosity curtailed at the threshold of understanding. “I will pull down what little data we can with the time we have left. Let us find a new place to take refuge and reckon with what we have heard.”

The Kig-Yar set immediately to the task at hand, decoupling data sieves and transcription harnesses as the studymaster secured what they could salvage from the artifact.

As the pair quickly made their exit from Annex Ridge, the studymaster pondered what the ancient words truly meant. This talk of grave sins, of fear, of progeny and powerlessness... all recorded by unmarked tombstones standing in silence—an admission to past transgressions, but no confession as to what they were.

The notion of *truth* seemed to be changing more with every waking moment, and he was grateful for the glimpse into the galaxy’s perilous past. By dipping into the deep wells of its history, what wisdom might help light the way to secure their future?

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“Of what service is guilt? To whom are we inevitably accountable? Is one sin greater than another? Is a lie of omission softer than outright perversion of the truth?”

*Are my crimes greater than Mendicant Bias, or the Master Builder?
What of the Didact himself?*

Is there a difference between orders given, or orders followed?

My burden is impossible to understand.

The harm. The history. The weight this ring carries. The gravity of its deeds.

They were made silent. Should I make myself the same to atone?

Am I a watchtower? Or a warden?"