



F I R E S I D E



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

FIRESIDE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Fireside takes place on May 21, 2559, shortly following the events of the UNSC Spirit of Fire's crew successfully denying the Banished control of Installation 09 and the subsequent events of Operation: SPEARBREAKER.

RESEARCH LOG // UNSC AI: ISA 1307-2 NEW ENTRY

I have been thinking about hope lately...

It is a word that the crew uses often, and I have been struggling to understand this... intangible concept.

As an artificial intelligence built for logistics, my role is to process the vast amounts of data that goes into the effort to efficiently construct and maintain infrastructure, but the parameters of my role have expanded. I now must account for the odds of survival this crew has against an enemy that outnumbered and, in many ways, technologically outclasses them. Despite this, they remain steadfast in their belief that they will prevail.

During the crew's downtime, I have been recording data on this phenomenon to analyze and understand how I might materially factor it into my calculations.

Ensign Mary said: "It's a weapon. Same one we used against the Covies. Hope is what you get when our collective stubbornness is put into action."

Doctor Sandmoore said: "There's an old myth about a jar that contained all the evils in creation which were unleashed upon the world, but the jar was closed shut before hope could escape. Some have said that this was a punishment from the gods, but I have always believed that the lesson to take from it is that hope lies within us."

When I asked Spartan-092, he simply said: "Remember the Enduring Conviction?"

I remembered my research team looking at the Ark with awe and wonder as they awakened each day to find new forests grown over barren terrain, telling jokes with one another, swapping stories about their experiences of the Covenant War. I remembered their screams when the Banished came. My old family... they had hoped for an age of peace, but it was taken away from them, and I was left alone.

But then I was found—a statistical impossibility, given the nature of how the UNSC Spirit of Fire was brought here. I gained a new family, and we fought back. Success did not correlate to victory, as that conflict continues to this day, but as Spartan-130 put it: "We made those bastards bleed."

Through this, I think I understand. Belief, faith, hope—these things cannot be factored into data. I project probabilities based on a range of given variables, but the lower the odds of a successful outcome, the more determined humans become to defy them. When the world seems broken beyond repair, when the prison bars of helplessness and fear loom large, or the threat of overwhelming odds makes it impossible to look to the horizon and believe that something better beyond today can be achieved, humans invoke the name of hope.

The captain hopes that Professor Anders will come back. The military personnel hope that they will win this war. Others hope they will one day return to the places they once called home.

And now I cannot help but wonder... what do the Banished hope for?

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**0700 HOURS
ABOARD UNSC SPIRIT OF FIRE // MAY 21, 2559**

A new day dawned for the crew of the UNSC *Spirit of Fire* as the light from the installation's artificial sun shone through the narrow viewports of the ship.

Captain James Cutter was already wide awake. This was how it was every morning, an almost three-decade-long cryo nap had not dulled his discipline. With the exception of Isabel—and, on some mornings, the ship's cat—he was the first to rise, to walk the ship's halls and personally relieve the night shift crew on his daily pilgrimage to the observation deck.

He still hoped that he would one day find Professor Anders here, asleep at her desk after burning the midnight oil. He imagined he'd enjoy hearing the daring tale of her return. What was it she had once said about this place? "*It adds perspective to my work.*" Indeed, in the time she had been gone, Cutter hadn't touched her possessions or equipment at all. Anders had been gone for some time now... the few weeks that she had said it would take to figure out how to get back to them had passed.

He knew that she would be okay. Professor Ellen Anders was intelligent and resourceful, and she would be back in her lab in good time—like she'd never left. Just as it should be.

He could see her dancing between holographic displays, conducting symphonies to an orchestra of battlefield statistics; muttering half-finished thoughts under her breath and grinning as she suddenly solved a problem that she had put on mental pause some time ago. The chaotic nature of her genius was very much contrasted by Cutter's own regimented and structured discipline, but a good leader knew how to respect and harness her unique style of work.

"So, Mr. Captain, sir," he remembered Serina saying to him as they were just hours away from Harvest. *"What do you think 'loaded for bear' actually means?"*

"Serina, it means that tomorrow is going to be a long day."

And it had been.

Except, to the *Spirit of Fire's* crew, that tomorrow was now yesterday—twenty-eight long years ago.

Yesterday. After half-a-decade of relentless fighting, Harvest was theirs again and they were damn well going to make sure the Covenant knew it.

Yesterday. He was squinting at a viewscreen and felt the rising swell of hope as a group of Spartans charged into battle to protect civilians on Arcadia. And then they were leaving, the ground erupted on a far-flung world and the ship was swallowed in a great metal maw—within its belly, an impossible planet turned inside-out.

Yesterday. He was declining a promotion; he was hating himself for looking at Terrence as a son; he was suspicious of an incorrect date on a Valentine's Day email. He was paying his respects to an empty cryo chamber. He closed his eyes, and then he was awake, and the war was over... and Serina was gone.

All those days—those mundane, terrible, wonderful, impossible days—spread across his life and the lives of his crew were just *yesterday*.

And what about his family? How long had it been before his wife and children had given up hope? Were they still waiting for him? Were they even alive? If they were, Mary would be almost thirty years older than him... and his daughter... he hadn't realized just how much he feared the idea that they might almost be the same age.

“Captain.” Isabel’s voice brought Cutter back from the ocean of memory he had been momentarily drowning in.

“Bring up the map, Isabel.” Cutter exhaled, not turning to face her. “It’s going to be a long day.”

“Aye, captain.”

The holo-table displayed a topographical map of the Ark’s surface. Cutter leaned forward as he began to scrutinize the latest tactical updates, and there—at the far end of the table, on the darker side of the room—he imagined Atriox doing the same thing.

He and his crew had earned the Banished leader’s respect for destroying his command ship and denying him possession of a Halo ring, and he had even offered to let them depart the Ark. It came with some measure of irony that this boon was offered by Atriox without him knowing that the *Spirit of Fire* couldn’t have departed even if Cutter had wanted to, owing to their lack of a slipspace drive. But even if it were possible, duty compelled him to stay and fight.

That duty was not just to the lives of his crew, but to humanity. It may be that nobody back home would ever know of the sacrifices made to keep them safe, and this crew would never be honored with medals or recognition. Perhaps one day even hope might fail them...

But until that day came, they would fight to ensure humanity had a tomorrow.

Perspective, indeed.

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**1300 HOURS
INSTALLATION 00 // APPROACHING SITE RICOCHET // MAY 21, 2559**

The M12F Warthog slowed to a stop near the edge of a rocky cliff, the droning sound of engines from two accompanying Hornets in the sky growing louder as they began to circle above.

“AV-14s, peel off,” ordered Lieutenant Colonel Morgan Kinsano, scanning the skies as she dismounted from the Warthog and likewise ordered the two Scorpion tanks—both carrying a squad of Hellbringers on their armored treads—to come to a halt. “Keep to the site perimeter. Recon only unless fired upon.”

“*Aye ma’am*,” the Hornet pilots confirmed, and the Scorpions set off in opposite directions.

What had been designated Site Ricochet had recently become a point of interest for Banished salvage crews owing to the notable concentration of Covenant vessels that were scattered across the arid landscape. As Kinsano took up a prone position on the rocky ground and crawled up to the cliff edge, she saw vast hulks of old cruisers broken up into multiple pieces that were in the process of being buried under the sand. It was impossible to ascertain exactly how many had met their end in this place.

“Targets identified,” Kinsano said into her comm as she scanned the terrain with her spotting scope, finding what she was looking for. “One Elite, half-a-dozen Brutes, fifteen Grunts, and a shitload of equipment. Marking ‘em.”

The wreckage of the Covenant ships reminded her of the colossal sea creatures that occasionally got beached back home on Reyes. Their flesh decayed over several years until all that was left were their immense bones, the sort of fanciful wreckage that children enjoyed climbing on as they spun adventures of their own making.

The echoing pain was fleeting but sharp, Kinsano tried not to think of Reyes much. It was too easy to remember the gentle waves of the sea, the smell of saltwater on a bright, cloudless day as the tide climbed up the sand before receding. She could watch it for hours, the calm of the water sounding like radio static as her grease-covered hands worked an antiquated steamboat with her mother... but the memory was like breath on a mirror.

She continued tracking the movements of the Banished forces over the next few minutes. They were already setting up power extractors and harvesters in the area, scouting the old wrecks for scrap. This reconnaissance mission would help determine just how much of an interest the Banished had in this site before determining whether it warranted the resource expenditure of an assault for either acquisition or denial.

Kinsano had never been one to back down from a fight, and the Banished had offered plenty over the months since they'd arrived at the Ark. But as she saw it, the nature of this conflict was a matter of pure arithmetic. Broadly speaking, the Banished held a technological and likely numerical advantage here, but they no longer had their flagship. That meant both sides had to play this smart, pick and choose their battles—decide where to draw the line, and even when to give ground to the enemy.

It reminded her of her *own* days fighting against the UNSC. In her teenage years, she was just one of thousands of miners growing increasingly resentful about barely seeing a credit while risking their lives to obtain precious metals for the UNSC military. After some disruptive protests and strikes, she'd become the leader of her own group of rebels, and

a few short years later she was sharing cigars with Robert Watts over heated conversations about how to best forge those miners into an organized fighting force.

That was, of course, until Watts was captured by a group of Spartans in 2525, turning the armored super-soldiers into fairy tale monsters across the Outer Colonies—until the real monsters arrived and burned Reynes to cinders.

Suddenly those tens of thousands of pissed off miners working toward revolution were turned into refugees, resettled by the very military they had resented so much. A fitting irony.

Kinsano knew that she would never be able to settle for the comfort of temporary safety somewhere else. A fire had been lit within her that day, a drive to fight... and she figured that she owed the guy who had helped her people whatever service she had to offer.

It was through this lens that Kinsano sought to understand the enemy they now fought. Like many who had joined the insurrectionists' cause, the Banished were also made up of those who had sought to rebel against the Covenant and had pledged their service and loyalty to its leader, Atriox. He had broken free from the strangling grasp of an empire, struck out to secure independence, and it was hard not to respect that.

"Uhh, ma'am," one of the Hornet pilots radioed in. *"Are you seeing this?"*

She didn't have to spend much time searching for what the pilot was referring to as an explosion erupted near the Banished outpost. Three of the Unggoy were blasted into bits and the Sangheili scrambled to find cover, one of his arms heavily seared by the heat and cut by shrapnel.

"Identify source," Kinsano said. "Who the hell is firing and where are they coming from?"

“Scout Team Wajikol reporting, no sign of hostiles near perimeter.”

“Scout Team Nawal here, confirming... wait--”

The ground erupted a short distance from the surviving Banished forces and revealed a deep passage into the Ark’s substructures. From within, a large shadow rose up, but its form was obscured by sand and dirt.

More salvos of directed energy blasts formed new craters in the graveyard, the Jiralhanae returned fire in futility as they were swiftly cut down, and within seconds the sleeping giant that seemingly served as the protector of this ancient landscape receded once more into its subterranean cradle.

After the action had subsided, the only sound left to be heard was the wind passing over the shifting sands as the bodies of these Banished interlopers became one with the old bones of the Covenant wrecks.

Kinsano returned to the Warthog, the tires kicking up dirt and leaving a trail behind them as she gave the graveyard a wide berth.

“Kinsano to Spirit of Fire.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant Colonel,” came the voice of Captain Cutter.

“What’s the word down there?”

“Site Ricochet is a no-go for both Banished and UNSC, uploading HUD camera footage now. Flag as hostile.”

“Understood. Return to Echo Base, we’ve got new intel coming in on Fort Jordan that I want actioned ASAP.”

“Yes sir,” Kinsano confirmed, sensing that the captain was getting ready to send them into a fight. “Scout teams, regroup on me. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

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**2100 HOURS
INSTALLATION 00 // FOB QUEBEC // MAY 21, 2559**

“Sonuva—you gotta be kidding me.” Elijah Vaughn coughed and stood back up in an exasperated huff. It was the third time he’d performed such a maneuver in the last five minutes, and this time it sent his entire squad howling.

“Will you just pick a spot?” Helena Gruss was nearly in tears from laughter.

“I’m telling you, the smoke follows me!” Vaughn shot back. “You try staying put while you’re breathin’ this stuff in.”

Corporal Chloe Turpin moved aside a few inches to let Vaughn try and settle in to a hopefully more permanent location. “Not surprised,” she grinned, “probably senses all the hell you’ve been through.”

“Or the hell he’s put *us* through.” Gruss added, kicking off another round of giggles from the soldiers gathered around the fire.

“Comedians, every frickin’ one of ya.” Vaughn turned his attention towards the footsteps approaching from behind him, thankful for the oncoming diversion. “Finally, something to stuff these laughin’ mouths with—I’m starving.”

The rest of the group gave an overly dramatic welcoming applause at Private János Varga’s arrival with the evening’s celebratory meal. It wasn’t every day that this small contingent gathered at Quebec—a forward operating base attached to the UNSC *Spirit of Fire*’s activities on the Ark—got to enjoy such a spread. Most of the soldiers that sat around the fire were members of Sunray 1-1, a hardened squad of Orbital Drop Shock

Troopers fresh off another successful mission. Alongside Major Vaughn, Corporal Turpin, and Petty Officer Gruss, Sunray was rounded out by Warrant Officer Alannah Quinn and Lance Corporal Devon Sparks.

The ODSTs were joined by a handful of other Marines who had helped in some way with the logistics of the operation. Their efforts made them more than welcome to join in the festivities and find some moment of respite amidst the UNSC's constant tug of war with Banished forces that had defined their time on the Ark. Every possible opportunity to share a good laugh and a decent meal was something to be seized.

Tonight, that decent meal came first in the form of a tart composed of clustered yellow-green fruit found in the local refugia and vetted by the Spirit's nutritionists. For the main course, raw strips of thorn beast flank that had been taken from the Banished camp they had just assaulted; Varga had cleaned the meat, seasoned it, and coiled it over long skewers to be cooked over this evening's campfire.

The private motioned for one of the other Marines to help with plating as he started to divide out the meat. "Always good to have you all back safe and sound."

Vaughn took a pair of meat-laden skewers and nodded in thanks, both for the food and the kind words. "If we've got this to come back to every evening, I'm not sure there's a battle we can't win."

A staggered and child-like chorus of "*Thank you, Varga*" came between bites of food and sips of mud-tea—overall it was the quietest they'd all been for several hours.

"Hey Varga," Quinn piped up after finishing her round of fruit. "You heard anything from Lotus?"

Varga's expression dimmed a bit. "No updates, sorry. You'll be the first person I ping with any intel I come across though, promise."

Quinn nodded and looked back towards the fire, her mind dwelling on the unknown status of one of Boomerang Company's other stalwart squads—one that still hadn't made it back from their last assignment. She tried not to assume the worst, but too often that's what this giant metal space-flower seemed to offer. Her thoughts were interrupted by Varga once more.

"I *did* however come across some other curious intel that the rest of Sunray might be interested in." The rest of the squad paused mid-chew and turned Varga's way. "*Someone* has a birthday tomorrow."

Quinn turned red, her head tilted to the side in benign incredulity and feigned frustration. "Did you have to?"

"I most certainly did," the private replied. "Now what I *didn't* have to do was come across some... excess inventory I thought could be used to mark the occasion."

"Varga, you *didn't*." Quinn's expression transitioned from exhaustion to excitement almost immediately when Varga undid the clasp on his utility pouch and pulled out two fistfuls of freeze-dried ice cream. "Oh my God, you did—wait, *chocolate-raspberry*?! I think I might love you."

Cheers rang up from the campfire circle as each member came by to tussle Quinn's hair or plant a demonstrative kiss on the cheek on their way to pick up their eagerly anticipated mylar-wrapped dessert cube.

Once the din had largely settled, Varga turned his attention to Lance Corporal Sparks, eager to learn more about their most recent adventure. "So, you gonna spill any details?"

"That's classified, Private," Sparks replied, taking another drawn-out sip of mud-tea.

"Classified, my rusty butt-plate." Turpin threw a leftover fruit pit in the marksman's direction.

“I have to agree,” Vaughn added. “Out here, ice cream comes with its own level of security clearance as far as I’m concerned.”

“*Ark rules!*” several others chimed in, citing a very-much-not-sanctioned clause that had gained humorous traction in being associated with any... “curious” interpretation of standard military protocol given the very not standard scenario the *Spirit of Fire* found itself in.

“You shoulda seen it,” Gruss kicked things off. “Big hairy bastard turns around and doesn’t even think to—”

“Okay at least have the decency to start from the beginning,” Sparks interrupted.

Gruss rolled her eyes. “Ugh, fine. So, three hundred years ago, Sparky’s parents fell in love and had a baby boy...” She paused in response to the unamused gaze that had been shot in her direction. “What, *you* said ‘start at the beginning.’ And everyone already knows you’re the old man of this group.”

Turpin stepped in, perhaps mercifully. “*Anyway*, we get word that one of the Brute Chieftains had set up camp not far off from a huge resource cache. It was a haul that we’d really rather the Banished not put to use, so orders come in that we need to go and... negotiate their eviction from the area. So, we send in Hank to do a little recon.”

Turpin always swelled a bit with pride when invoking the name she had given to the squad’s MQ-96 support drone.

“Hank starts giving us back this feed, taking inventory of outpost materiel, defense turrets, troop complement... all normal stuff.” Turpin paused and then continued, her voice a bit lower, but more drawn out. “Then, all of a sudden, we get first eyes on this Chieftain. This massive fat-fingered crest-head with a snotty nose and yellowing teeth.”

“Tusks.”

“Whatever. Anyway, big boy is at least twelve feet tall, and I’m telling you—”

Sparks interrupted again. “Look, can you at least get the data right?” He took a breath and let the smallest of wry smiles take shape between his cheeks. “He was at least fifteen feet.”

“Ahh, there he is,” chuckled Vaughn. A small cheer and additional laughter broke out from the group as the story continued, recounting in great detail Sparks’ tactics, strategy, and ultimate kill-shot, as well as the ensuing mop-up performed by the rest of Sunray to ensure the successful capture of another Banished outpost—all to varying degrees of testimonial accuracy, but to maximum impact for morale.

All at once, it seemed like years since they had arrived at the Ark’s doorstep, but mere moments from when they had fled the destruction of the Forerunner shield world and closed their eyes for an ultimately three-decade-long cryo-sleep. They had awoken to a reality where they were the aliens—visitors to an unfamiliar reality, where allegiances had changed, wars had been won, lives had been lost, and families had moved on.

In almost every way, all they had left was each other. And on nights like this, that was enough.

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**RESEARCH LOG // UNSC AI: ISA 1307-2
UPDATE**

After thousands of partitioned cycles dedicated to my goal of understanding hope, it strikes me that perhaps the closest rational analog has been in front of me the entire time.

Fire.

A seemingly insignificant chemical reaction can ignite a blaze that can change the course of history—or change the path of one person's life.

It can be a source of warmth, drawing weary souls around it to provide revitalization. It can be a source of light, piercing the darkness and revealing the truth of the path ahead. It can be a source of power, wielded to raze an enemy to the ground, or restore a landscape to rise from the ashes and grow into something new. Something better.

A spirit of fire is a spirit of hope.

All it takes is a spark.