



WINTER CONTENTION



A HALO WAYPOINT CHRONICLE

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Halo: Winter Contention is set in December 2551, approximately seven months before SPARTAN-B312 joins Noble Team and the events leading to the fall of Reach are set into motion.

**Hinterlands region, Concord
Alabaster System
1405 hours, December 12, 2551 (Military Calendar)**

Two distant columns of smoke loomed over the horizon like signal flares of ash and burning plasma. The billowing charcoal plumes cut through an otherwise unbroken sky of white clouds. To anyone who remained to gaze upon this sight, it was a message written in black ink: *You're next.*

The hinterlands of Concord were made up of tough, rugged terrain. During the summer months, the verdant alpine forests that spanned the equatorial landmass of the planet were a manageable, even pleasant, site of congregation for the miners who lived across its three townships—New Ugga, Skathi, and Ploh. But winter was here now, bringing snowstorms that covered much of the planet's surface, and the rolling hills between the three towns had become perilous ice fields.

As the Covenant War continued to drive towards an increasingly dire conclusion, Concord's infrastructure had seen substantial investment from the Unified Earth Government, as scores of refugees from glassed colonies were resettled within its more prominent metropolitan cities. In contrast, the colonists of old—those who had claimed this world as their home for fifty years or more—chose instead to isolate themselves in its wild, untamed terrain.

“How long do we have, Noble Three?” Even on the comm, Carter-A259's voice carried its usual tone of stern resolve.

Scanning the horizon with his SRS99's Oracle scope, Jun-A266 couldn't yet see the full Covenant force that was heading their way. From his elevated position, there was one final hill the alien onslaught had to get over before the true size and makeup of their forces became clear.

“Hard to say, Noble Leader,” Jun replied, eyes fixed on the hilltop, his statuesque stillness disrupted only by the occasional movement to prevent snow and ice buildup from disrupting his visibility. “Assume imminent.”

“Affirmative.”

It was an unusual situation that Noble Team found themselves in. The joint effort of UNSC Army Rangers and Concordian militia had already secured a remarkable victory against the Covenant. Through sheer relentless resolve and selfless fortitude, they'd denied the aliens air superiority—though it hadn't come without loss. At least a dozen S-14 pilots had sacrificed themselves in strafing runs to lead pursuing swarms of Banshees and Vampires into the paths of concealed M9 Wolverine anti-aircraft tanks. They'd largely repelled ground forces from the major cities, and several planet-side mass driver stations had been used as impromptu artillery to harry the enemy's unusually meager orbital presence before a swift strike group of two *Strident*-class frigates and a *Marathon*-class cruiser tore them a proverbial new one.

With their vessels in ruin, the Covenant had no way to evacuate—but that wasn't going to still the blades of those that remained planetside. Ashamed and enraged, the Covenant's local ground forces rallied and weren't going to go down without a fight. But instead of once more throwing themselves at the more fortified cities, they redirected their forces to the far less-protected hinterland towns.

For the Covenant contingent now stranded on the frigid world, it wasn't really a matter of *winning* at this point. The alien bastards just wanted to take as many humans with them as they could before their own end, whether that came from a bullet or the biting cold.

Noble Team's own less-than-ideal situation was looking to parallel the Covenant's more than any of the Spartans liked. After rerouting from the cities, a brutal snowstorm had downed their Pelican in the mountains. The Spartans managed to make their way to the town of Skathi, only to discover its inhabitants cut off from communications and preparing for the Covenant's arrival—something Jun was currently keeping a close eye on. So far, he had been tracking a single Banshee that was obviously on its own scouting run, no doubt searching for where Noble Team's bird had come to rest.

"Noble Two," Carter's voice crackled over the comm again. *"How's that inventory coming along?"*

He gets formal when he's worried, Jun noted of the team leader.

"It's a short list, Commander," Kat-B320 responded. *"Air support? Nada. Evacuation? Hours away. Civvies are still rounding up whatever ammunition they can find with Jorge. As for operational assets, we've got one functional Hog."*

Silence hung in the air for a prolonged moment before Carter spoke again.

"Understood."

Jun's mind wandered for a moment, thinking about how Skathi was exactly the kind of place Jorge-052 would choose for his retirement—if such a thing were ever truly possible for a Spartan. It was the least built-up of the three towns, barely more than a bunch of wooden houses dotted alongside a tavern, a lumber mill, and a couple of stores focused on general supplies and hunting goods—and the folk that lived here were hardy, rugged workers, sociable only amongst each other.

No doubt this place reminds him of home. He'll fight that much harder to protect it.

Jun's thoughts were interrupted as he caught the first unmistakable gleam of purple on the horizon, his grip on the sniper tightened as his heads-up display matched the outline of the lead vehicle to its internal Covenant database.

"Time's up, Commander," he linked his Oracle scope's view to the team's HUD. "Draugr inbound."

"Copy that."

The Draugr was a mobile fortress that had seldom been directly encountered throughout the Covenant War...

This gargantuan siege platform was approximately one-hundred and seventy meters long, another hundred wide, and just under sixty meters tall—seemingly half the size of the town itself. Its front section was broad, looking much like an upscaled Wraith that featured large anti-gravity pods on its wings, and its face sloped upwards to a pair of outward facing "horns" that were equipped with four powerful focus cannons.

From there, an extended troop bay connected to the rear of the vehicle, which also possessed dual-anti-gravity pods holding up a rear "tower" that boasted an anti-aircraft gun. Whatever this thing lacked in maneuverability and speed was *more* than made up for in firepower.

Contending with this was one thing, but—as he magnified his scope further—Jun highlighted half-a-dozen Ghosts and two Wraith tanks flanking it. And though he could not see them, the unmistakable wail of Banshees concealed by cloud cover echoed through the open air.

Jun waited as the picture of what they were facing sunk in for the rest of Noble Team. He waited for the conversation to happen that would result in Carter saying the four words that would turn the tide.

He didn't have to wait long.

“Kat’s got a plan.”

No air support, no reinforcements, no evacuation. Just a single M862 Warthog. With a mind like Kat's, that's all a Spartan needed to win the day, no matter how much of an absurd longshot it seemed.

“Only three of us can go,” Kat said. *“The rest will remain here as a rear guard for the town. Noble Four, Noble Six—you’re with me.”*

“We were hoping you’d say that,” came the distinct, surly drawl of Rosenda-A344. *“Isn’t that right, Thom?”*

“Three of us against a thousand of them?” The sound of Thom-A293 loading his CQS48 Bulldog clacked over the comm. *“I’ll take those odds.”*

“Boys in the back.” Rosenda gave Thom a light shove to redirect her fellow Spartan-III towards the rear of the vehicle.

“I thought *I* had shotgun.” Thom protested.

“Yup. And that pup in your arms will fill that requirement plenty fine.”

Rosenda nodded towards his primary weapon as she lifted the gullwing canopy door and swung a Mjolnir-armored leg deftly over the sill and into the cabin.

The M862 was a specialized variant of the venerable Warthog platform, built for traversing terrain just like this. To keep its occupants comfortable and relatively free of frostbite, the M862's primary cabin was enclosed, and in place of the standard M12's carbon nanotube tires was a versatile 4X track array that turned the all-terrain vehicle into equal parts light tank and snowmobile.

“If you two are done, let's sync our ingress markers.” Kat was not without her own sense of humor, but it was never a mystery when she was ready to turn attentions towards the task at hand.

Thom settled into the rear bed and set the appropriate software processes in motion within his Mark V[B] helmet's HUD before taking final stock of the various grenade and counter-measure options he had on-hand, knowing every one of them was bound to find a use at some point.

Rosenda pulled up her own armor's telemetry. “Time to intercept?”

“Not long.” Kat responded. “It will reconfigure a few times as we update the onboard terrain maps in real-time, but we'll be in targeting range within three minutes.”

The winter-liveried Warthog moved at an impressive clip over the thick Concordian snow, kicking up a trail behind it as it headed towards the Covenant force. To the surprise of no one, Kat's timing assessment turned out to be spot on.

They really are smug bastards, Thom thought to himself. Barreling across the tundra in bright-ass colors, completely confident in their ability to wipe out any enemy—no matter how far away you can see 'em coming from...

“What’s that shade of Shade officially called, d’you think?”

Rosenda rolled her eyes. “Here we go.”

“Military magenta?”

“Please stop.”

“Violent violet?”

“How about this?” Kat interjected. “When we’re done gutting every last one of these monsters, you can name the color whatever you want.”

Taking Thom’s silence as success, Kat returned her attention towards the oncoming onslaught and began to imagine how ridiculous this engagement must appear from their enemy’s perspective.

What was it Carter always said? *“Wouldn’t be a Noble mission if it were easy!”*

The Ghosts were the first to break formation and begin initial flanking maneuvers. Rosenda flung open her gullwing door and immediately opened fire with her assault rifle—each small, sustained burst found its mark and separated the first three attack bikes from their Unggoy pilots. For the fourth, she aimed a well-placed volley at the vehicle’s glowing blue-grey fuel cell situated behind its left wing, causing it to erupt with a plasma-based explosion that instantaneously cooked its driver.

“Two more Grunts coming up on the rear,” Thom announced. “Seven o’clock.”

Kat gave the Hog a slight Scandinavian flick to pitch the vehicle into a controlled drift, bringing the Ghosts more directly into Thom’s view.

Immediately he tossed two primed M9 frag grenades into the snow just ahead of the first Ghost. A split second later, the soft white ground burst into the bottom of the Covenant craft, sending both ride and rider into an unscheduled ejection.

The second Ghost swerved to avoid the flaming wreckage immediately in front of it, causing the Unggoy at the controls to take his eyes off the real danger. Thom leapt from the Warthog towards the Ghost—still mid-air, he put two firm Bulldog rounds into the facemask and methane tank of the driver, who was quickly ousted from the pilot seat and replaced by the Spartan.

Kat's voice came over the comm amidst the sound of mortar fire landing too close for comfort. *"We're going to have to take this fight closer, or that thing will end this mission way sooner than we'd like."*

"And then we'll never know what to call that color." Rosenda interjected, equal parts proud and ashamed of her own retort.

"Noble Six, you see this outcropping?" Kat marked a waypoint that pinged Thom's HUD, highlighting a large flat rock formation arranged at a slightly elevated angle from the ground.

"Affirmative."

"I want to get there, but you're going to need to draw the Draugr's fire towards you by another twelve degrees." Kat was constantly doing the math. More importantly, she was consistently right on the money.

Thom peeled off to engage one of the Wraiths head-on, hoping to harass the tank enough to warrant further attention from the main event. It worked. Thom's energy shields absorbed just enough hits from the Wraith's front plasma turrets that he was able to take out the gunner with the Ghost's own formidable armament.

With the Wraith suddenly in a more compromised position, the Draugr began to rotate, its focus cannons primed and bearing down on Thom's location. He jammed down on the attack bike's boost drive just in time, avoiding the Draugr's opening salvo which eviscerated his previous position.

Meanwhile, Kat and Rosenda had successfully made it around to the rear of the siege engine.

"I know exactly what you're panning." Rosenda said. "And I gotta say... I kinda love you for it."

Kat remained silent—her mind working as fast as the Hog had been driving, totally focused to account for any sudden changes.

Hope this works. Rosenda gritted her teeth. *Thom will never let us live this down if it doesn't.*

Aimed squarely at the rock outcropping, Kat smashed the throttle.

The Warthog sped up the angled slab and launched into the air. They were separated from solid ground for only seconds, but it was moments like this where the Spartans' augmented reaction time was critical. Rosenda braced in her seat as she felt bolts of plasma sizzling in the air as they passed her, some slamming into the vehicle's polycarbonate armor—thermoplastic polymers hissing in protest as they dissipated the heat across the hood's surface area.

The M862's treads hit first on the massive, curved rear-quarter of the Draugr's outer shell, but it didn't stop there as the inertia carried them over it and directly into the doors of the lower troop bay.

Rosenda exited the Hog and introduced her combat knife to the Kig-Yar

welcoming party that were immediately upon them. A split second later, Kat's door flung open.

“Inside, now.”

After a successful initial skirmish in the troop bay, Kat and Rosenda made their way towards one of the nearby control panels.

“What are you looking for?” Rosenda asked as she reloaded her assault rifle and prepared for further engagement, keeping Kat covered.

“The forward loading ramp controls.” Kat quickly scanned localized symbols and archived schematics on her HUD, her quick recall allowing her to match them to the control panel almost instantly. “Found you.”

After a brief series of inputs, Kat opened her TEAMCOM channel. “Thom, when this thing opens its mouth, you should feed it something Spartan-shaped.”

It took longer to hear a response than she anticipated. *“I would say I don't want to know, but we both know that's a lie.”*

“Ramp should be down now. See you soon.”

Underneath the Draugr, a prominent ramp lowered from the massive underfloor. Thom had to admit it *did* look like a giant mouth.

Eager to stop dodging Wraith mortars and focus cannon fire, the splash damage from which was tearing apart the Ghost's armor even without any direct hits, Thom sped head-on towards the Draugr, with ever so slightly vacillating strafes to avoid the last incoming plasma blasts. He passed under the front lip of the massive siege engine and up the ramp, disappearing into its maw.

A few moments later, the local half of Noble Team met up together on the second level of the Draugr's interior.

"Nice moves, Kat." Thom greeted his teammate. "You're a natural wheelman."

"And you're a natural distraction. We all have our strengths." Kat quickly shifted focus. "Rosenda, cover me while I take that control pod. Thom, on the far door, we'll be getting visitors."

"You're taking *this* thing for a joyride now?"

"It's not my speed." Kat answered. "I am, however, going to use it to take out the rest of its friends."

Kat's fingers flitted across the glowing glyphs on the control panel. Outside, the rest of the Covenant forces were just starting to grasp the reality of their situation as the Draugr's focus cannons turned on them.

"Banshees have moved ahead to the town," Kat noted, pulling up a holograph of the local area which displayed their vehicles' positions.

"Guess the others get to have a bit of fun after all." Rosenda pictured the alien aircraft getting blasted apart in the sky by Jorge's chaingun, Jun landing a series of impossible shots to neutralize the pilots. He'd sworn to her that the cockpit possessed a tiny, exposed area where a well-placed shot could inflict a lethal ricochet. Rosenda assumed at the time that he had just made that up, but her time on Noble Team—especially on days like today—had shown just how many impossible odds Spartans could overcome...

Thom, meanwhile, lamented the lack of "feedback" that Covenant vehicles had when it came to blowing stuff up. The holograph's display of Wraith and Ghost positions gradually winked out, the once-formidable contingent

of vehicles and infantry alike lay in ruins—obliterated by direct hits of the Draugr’s primary focus cannons.

“What now?” Rosenda queried.

“Any infantry still alive is going to do anything to get back inside and reclaim this vehicle.” Kat responded. “And we’re going to let them.”

Thom nodded in appreciation of the plan that was quickly becoming clear and checked the drum of his CQS48. “Rosenda did say that I’d get to let the dog off the leash today.”

Kat input a command on the console to open the Draugr’s door once more, then she and Rosenda ducked into cover behind opposite pillars to provide covering fire as Thom took point in the center. They could already hear the frantic footsteps of the Covenant survivors crunching on ice and snow.

“Let’s give ‘em hell, Noble Six.”

A pair of Pelican dropships arrived on the outskirts of Skathi at 2100 hours, deploying their landing gear as Carter stood ahead of the team next to a green smoke flare. Once firmly on the ground, UNSC Army Rangers began to emerge, with Kat, Jun, and Thom stepping in to assist with the unloading of supply crates filled with tools, munitions, and rations.

Around them, some of the townspeople were already busying themselves with various maintenance tasks within the village, while others gathered in the tavern and were singing loudly in a language Rosenda didn’t understand.

“Gonna need more than two Pelicans to get *that* sent back for analysis,” Rosenda glanced at the dormant Draugr they’d brought to the landing site.

“Odds on them asking you to carry it back yourself, big man?”

Jorge let out a hearty, appreciative laugh as he threw down the last of the Banshee debris he’d removed from the center of town. “Probably a damn sight higher than the chances we seemed to have a few hours ago.”

“What d’you think they’ll do now?” Rosenda wondered. *We never really get to see that part.*

“What they do best,” Jorge said quietly. “Survive.”

“Think they’ll stay out here?”

“It’s all they’ve fought for. They’ll catch their breath here and then return to the other towns to rebuild.”

If we should be so lucky, Rosenda thought. They’d won this battle—hell, it had been a rare strategic victory without strings attached, outside of the obvious possibility of the Covenant eventually returning to Concord someday with a more powerful force. But in the back of her mind, Rosenda wondered just how much longer the UNSC could keep this up.

Hope was a very fine thread holding the counterweight to the ruthless calculus of extinction.

Carter blinked an orange status light on their HUDs, indicating for them to come over and join him for a situation update. As they approached, Rosenda noted that he had removed his helmet—something she had rarely seen, even off the battlefield.

“What’s the situation, sir?”

“Just spoke with Holland. With OFFSET EYE complete, we’re being redeployed—effective immediately. Said having six Spartans anywhere

that isn't under imminent threat isn't exactly an ideal allocation of resources. Paraphrasing.”

Carter paused for a moment, as if considering how to deliver whatever he had to say.

“Where to next?” Rosenda asked.

“Still being worked out, we've got rumblings of Covenant activity starting up in the Volanus system, Holland thinks they might be looking to hit Fumirole soon...”

“Not if we hit them first.”

“That looks like the plan.” Carter's eyes locked with Rosenda's through her visor. “But you won't be coming with us.”

Spartans weren't ones for emotional or prolonged goodbyes. This was their reality—the next battle, the next directive, the next change in operational priority. Squad mates died and had to be replaced. Certain skillsets called for redeployment, whether as a fine scalpel or a blunt instrument.

“Glad to be going out on a high note, Commander.”

Jorge bumped Rosenda on the back with a great hand. “Make sure to send us a postcard, Spartan.”

“Don't go missing me too much,” she removed her own helmet to say her farewells, revealing a thick crop of hair that had grown a little further beyond what was considered regulation. “I'm sure whoever they get to replace me will enjoy your company just as much as I have.”

The rest of Noble returned from delivering supplies to the town. Each of the Spartans approached their dropship, the five of them naturally lined up

in order, but left an extra space between Jun and Jorge as Rosenda stood facing them.

“It’s been an honor, Noble Four,” Carter saluted, and the others followed the motion.

With that, Rosenda boarded her Pelican, and the five remaining members of Noble Team filed into the troop bay of their own.

“Good hunting out there,” Thom pinged her over the comm. *“Be seein’ you on the other side.”*

Rosenda’s TEAMCOM icon blinked in acknowledgment. *“Next time I see you, I expect to know what shade of purple these jerks are using.”*

The nacelles of the Pelicans’ thrusters turned to a roar as they lifted the two dropships above the tree line into the night sky, then into a dull rumble as the troop bay door closed. Rosenda looked down at Skathi through the door’s small windowpane as the craft climbed higher, the lights of the town below shrinking to tiny orange dots haphazardly scattered across the landscape.

It felt good to know that the battlefield they were leaving behind wasn’t one that had been forever scarred by plasma bombardment. Even the two smoke columns on the horizon had dissipated at last.

Rosenda-A344 watched as the team’s Pelican split from their joint formation, parting in opposite directions. In the silence that followed, she wondered if she’d ever see them again.

>>>INCOMING TRANSMISSION
>>>PRIORITY CLEARANCE
>>>ACCESS PROMPT: [FAMED PATH]
>>>ATTN: [COSSPAR]
>>>ACCEPT RECIEPT Y/N
>>>
>>>
>>>RECIEPT CONFIRMED
>>>
>>>SIGNAL LOCKED
>>>
>>>
>>>
>>>RETRIEVAL COMPLETE
>>>OPEN FILE
>>>
>>>FILE DISPLAY:

Two-Six-Six, as I live and breathe. I'd ask you how long you've been keeping tabs on me, but then again overwatch always was kinda your thing, wasn't it?

It's been too long, and yes, there is indeed much to catch up on. Will be interesting to see what stories you've been told. Consider your invitation accepted. There better be cake.

*See you soon.
-Rose*