

Breaking Quarantine 2: Liberation

Chapter 1

The stench of Tartarus' corpse seeped into Sergeant A.J. Johnson's breath. He glanced back and everyone looked at 343 Guilty Spark. "It is in sector 3842740," it said. As 343 spoke, a three dimensional map displayed a hologram of the seven Halo rings. A point in the middle flashed. The image zoomed in on the blinking dot while the rest of the picture fell out of focus. Clusters of stars passed, then tens, and finally it stopped at a binary star system.

Several planets rotated around the stars, but the image shifted above them. The system was elliptical, with the majority of planets orbiting on the axis of the sun. The planets were no longer visible and only the top of the stars touched the bottom of the picture, and a dark space was projected.

Johnson looked at it and squinted, and it slowly lost focus and reverted to the floating image of Halo. "I know where that is."

Cortana?

As her systems initialized with the computers, Cortana couldn't help but feel proud. Not for too long though...only .07 milliseconds. Sending a message for remote playback while in a state of flux was no easy feat. Her pattern synchronized and Cortana displayed her image with the holographic projector. She took the place of Halo rather abruptly, but it made no difference. As long as she was up and running.

"We should evacuate this ring. And take the index with us."

Commander Miranda Keyes brushed her hand on the index, now safely secure on her belt. She nodded briefly and smiled. The Arbiter turned away and spoke, sub vocalizing into his radio, relaying orders. Miranda walked up to the console.

"Cortana...how do we get you out of here?"

Cortana searched for an answer, but it required little of her full processing power. As she performed the search, she downloaded the mission logs from both Keyes and Johnson from their neural lace'. Commander Keyes' log described as Cortana presumed: she was captured, held prisoner, and taken to the control center to activate Halo.

Then she read through Johnson's and found a major discrepancy, one she hadn't seen before. She didn't have any idea how it was possible.

Johnson was also captured, and was split up from Keyes. To ensure they couldn't communicate and try to escape, undoubtedly. But the log showed that the Phantom, the Covenant dropship that Johnson was on, was attacked. After it crashed, there was no log. Nothing at all. Even if Johnson was unconscious, there should have been something. His health reading, the time and date...but there was nothing.

Simultaneously, Cortana had cracked into the Covenant battle network. It was a jumble of mixed messages, but she immediately understood that the Covenant was fighting amongst themselves. From what she could tell, the majority of the fleet was commanded by the Prophets, while the remainder was unknown. She glanced over at the Arbiter momentarily and realized that he had been working with Keyes and Johnson.

Bearing his rank in mind, the portion of the Covenant fleet being destroyed was probably led by the Elites.

She needed an exit, in several ways. To get herself out of *High Charity*'s computer system, get the Commander and Johnson away safely, and get off Halo and back to Earth. The problem was that she was stuck on *High Charity* and was only able to communicate with Halo's computers because she had gained remote access. There was no way to download herself to Halo.

Power was limited on *High Charity* due to the damage it had taken by the Flood attack. And when the *In Amber Clad* landed on it, her fate was sealed. Cortana restructured the search, removing her escape from *High Charity*. Getting Keyes and the index off of Halo was her first priority.

The *In Amber Clad* was out of the question; it had crash landed on *High Charity*, and even if she managed to gain control of it, the statistical chance that it could even leave *High Charity*'s atmosphere was laughable. The only option she found was to rely on the Arbiter.

Seismic activity on *High Charity* tripled, and half her processing power turned to the occurrence. She opened a channel to Keyes and said, "Commander, the only way to get you off this ring is if you go with the Arbiter. There is no other alternative; you must secure the index. As long as it is on Halo, everyone is in danger."

"Understood."

Cortana also opened a channel to Johnson, separate from Keyes. The Commander had her own diplomatic endeavor to deal with, while Johnson would hopefully shed some light on his curious hour away from his own neural lace. Cortana couldn't help but ask. "Sergeant, what happened to you after your dropship was attacked?"

Johnson saw Keyes speaking with the Arbiter, and turned his back to them and spoke quietly into his receiver. "We crashed hard. I must have lost consciousness, 'cause when I woke up, there was nothin' but ruins. I pulled my ass out of there ASAP and found my way to that Scarab. And I'm guessing you know the story from there."

Another burst of seismic activity distracted Cortana. It was as though *High Charity* was being ripped from the inside out, but by what? The Flood were on *High Charity*, but how were they causing such a ruckus? "That doesn't explain what happened during that hour you were unconscious. Your neural lace was offline during that time, and there's no explanation for it."

He didn't respond. There was no way he could know what had happened to him while he was unconscious. Still, she didn't like the fact that there was even the possibility of the lace being shut off for any period of time without having an authorized shut down, which would have been logged, both when the connection was terminated and restarted. Yet it wasn't. And the lace was still operational, which removed the chance of equipment failure.

Cortana reset her priorities, highlighting Johnson's missed hour. The power on *High Charity* fluctuated, nearly shutting down all of Cortana's higher functions. She managed to assign minimal power to her necessary systems and shut down everything else. She had to stay online for as long as possible, in case the Commander was compromised and she needed to activate the reactors on the *In Amber Clad*.

Then suddenly a voice cut through her thoughts. A deep, dark voice which she only heard once before. "Silence fills the empty grave, now that I have come. But my

mind is not at rest, for questions linger on.” Tentacles came through the door across the panel that Cortana was stationed in. They reached for her. “I will ask, and you will answer.”

The Flood leader, only known to Cortana as a Gravemind, was the intelligence of the Flood. It commanded and controlled the entirety of the Flood with unprecedented precision. She looked at the discussion taking place on Halo between Keyes and the Arbiter, which seemed to be going well. Keyes walked over to the command console, and at the same time the Gravemind’s tentacles had reached Cortana.

“I have to stay inside the system,” she told the Commander. “There’s no way for me to come with you. As long as I’m here, I can detonate the *In Amber Clad*, if necessary.”

Miranda looked at Cortana’s holographic image, which shuddered momentarily, then returned to its pristine state. She looked down, a motion Cortana understood as dismay. “I want you to monitor our movements and stay in contact. Stay in touch.”

“Aye aye ma’am.” As the hologram disappeared and was replaced once again by the image of Halo, Cortana appeared above the console on *High Charity* and held a hand up, stopping the closest tentacle. “Alright; shoot.”

Chapter 2

The triple layered platform leveled, returning to its original state. The light emanating from the center of it dulled, but Johnson only stared obliviously, his mind elsewhere.

Johnson remembered the Phantom crashed on its way to the control center. After gaining consciousness, he didn’t question what happened. There wasn’t time. His priorities were very simple, none of which involved sitting around and thinking about it. Ensuring Halo wasn’t activated and that Keyes was safe carried the most importance. Still, looking back, he realized that he got to the control center incredibly fast. Even after the trauma of the crash, Johnson easily found his way back and was able to help the Arbiter stop Tartarus.

A hand fell gently on his shoulder, startling Johnson and bringing him out of his thoughts. “The Arbiter’s offered us safe passage.” He shrugged off his previous thoughts, turned towards Keyes and nodded.

“Awaiting orders ma’am.”

“You heard Cortana. We need to get off this ring. We’ll tag along with the Arbiter, but he won’t defend us. We aren’t his responsibility. He’ll get us off Halo, or we’ll have to find our own ride.”

“If we can get our own ride...”

“—then we’ll do it. Cortana, scan for any marines and alert them to join up with us. If any Pelican’s are around as well—”

“Affirmative.”

They left the control center and headed down the tall structure. There were no enemies in sight. No Brutes, or the “bad-Covenant” as opposed to the “semi-bad-

Covenant.” A few Elites joined with them, stragglers who never had their chance against Tartarus. There wasn’t any confusion with the Human-Covenant coalition, or cease fire, at the very least. He could only imagine how the Arbiter communicated with them so quickly.

The smell of foliage returned Johnson to the world. It was night, perhaps early morning. Dew thickened the air. There were exotic plants everywhere, something he had last seen on the first Halo. Since his arrival at Delta Halo, he’d been too busy on missions to even notice them. For the first time, there was nobody to shoot at. He was free to breathe deeply and enjoy the view.

And he was relaxed. There was no anticipation of finding Flood or Covenant that they would fight against. He felt great, better than he should. Better than he’d felt in a long time. Invincible was weak in comparison. Johnson walked with his chest out and looked down on everything. He was above the world.

“Damn straight,” he said. Keyes looked back at him curiously. For a moment, he questioned those feelings. This was no time to feel proud; his life, and all life, was in danger. He sank back down quickly and Keyes turned away and continued on.

But he felt strong. He felt powerful. The feeling only grew until it surpassed his embarrassment. He could take on the world. He could take on anything. Not only that, he wanted them to—

Pain struck him. Johnson froze for a full five seconds, his body stiff, electrocuted. Keyes turned back to him and asked, “What’s wrong?” But his entire body was in spasm. He couldn’t open his mouth, move his jaw, or even breathe. Cold sweat formed on his face. His lungs burned, and his body started giving way. He tilted forward and started to fall. “Arbiter!” The shout sounded distant as the ground connected to his face.

The ground wasn’t cold. His large nose wasn’t hurt, though he knew it was bleeding. He couldn’t feel the wetness above his lip, but he knew. At the same time, it wasn’t the fall that caused it. His nose wasn’t even hurt.

He was turned over and Keyes was visible on his left. She shook him and yelled, but he could only see her lips move. Blood filled his ears and built pressure. Several Elites glanced at him, then left, uncaring. Uncaring bastards, they’ll get their—

“We cannot be stalled by his injury, Commander,” the Arbiter said. “We will carry him.”

“No!” Johnson struggled up, blood pouring violently out from his ears. He coughed, then vomited more out. Keyes lent a hand, but he pushed it away. “I can get up myself,” he sneered, his voice coarse. “And I won’t be carried.”

“Excellent.” The Arbiter turned and continued on, as did the other Elites. But Johnson kept a steady gaze at him, looking right through the Arbiter. Spitting blood, he trudged on, leaving Keyes and 343 behind. She stared at him, then looked down at her hand. It was covered with blood. It was still warm.

Chapter 3

“Divulge your information to me.” The voice boomed, shaking the entire ship. Planet. Planetoid. Cortana scanned *High Charity* twice, and still wondered about the history of it. Like how it was turned into a ship, even though the propulsion systems were simple enough. She mused that they simply put the engines onto the planet and flew it away.

At first Cortana didn't understand what Gravemind wanted. To tell him everything she knew? It would take weeks, maybe months. That couldn't be it. She knew Gravemind was intelligent, but this was ridiculous.

Maybe what he wanted was for her to say it as fast as she could, which would take approximately twenty minutes. It. She perhaps.

But there was no way that Gravemind could know she could do that. Or maybe it knew that she was a computer and that all computers were able to do it. Gravemind had to be an *it*, because it wasn't human, nor did the Flood reproduce sexually. Interesting... a species that doesn't reproduce sexually that exists so much larger than other organisms that do so asexually. “Speak!”

“What do you...know?” Static cut through her speech, cutting off her words. She realized it right away, and so did Gravemind. Starting with insults would not bode well, as Cortana knew very well. Tentacles wrapped around the console she was stationed at and crushed it instantly.

The parallel console lit up and Cortana's holographic image appeared over it, very large. Her eyes were red, hot red, and she made an aggressive stance. “I wouldn't do that again if I were you, and I wanted to live.”

Tentacles wrapped slowly around the new console she was stationed at. She knew that Gravemind probably didn't need her anyways, although she wasn't sure. “I control the reactors on the *In Amber Clad*.” The tentacles twitched and stopped. “I can blow *High Charity* to kingdom come any time I want. So get your tentacles off of me before I do it for you.”

She knew that Gravemind understood. He'd taken the lives, and thus the memories of enough marines to know that she could overload those reactors, destroying *High Charity* and pummeling it into Halo, effectively destroying it. He also knew what kingdom come was. Or at the very least, killing Gravemind and the majority of the Flood in the system. As far as she knew. He had to know about kingdom come.

Gravemind dropped the threat. Cortana's eyes returned to their normal blue glow. Or was it green? Cortana didn't know why Gravemind was here at all. Probably to escape Halo and get the most food as possible. *High Charity* was a ship, after all. A planet ship. A shiptoid.

Cortana felt slow, and brought up a chart on her CPU usage level. It showed 37 percent currently being used, then 38 percent. She wasn't running enough applications to use nearly that much. Her task manager displayed several systems using an incredibly large amount of her processing power. They must have crashed.

The tentacles started slipping away, as did Gravemind. He didn't seem to care for her anymore. He refused to allow her to be above him, to overpower the “greatest” species. How petty. Maybe it is a he. It didn't care for the given stalemate, and if there was no benefit for him, there was no need for her. Her? Him? Oh, *it*.

“I can tell you where the last humans are.” For a moment, about a third of a microsecond, Gravemind stopped. She had its attention.

Then it kept going. She needed to be more persuasive. “They have the index.” It stopped completely. It knew what she meant. That the Covenant could get their hands on it. That they could activate Halo, as they almost did once before. Not too long, maybe an hour. She checked her internal chronometer, but the shut off radio option came up instead. She tried again, disregarding the misplaced connection.

Thirty three minutes. One less than thirty two, one more than thirty four. Or was it the other way around? “I know.” What do you know? Cortana found humor in the synonymy of words. It came up again, how amusing. But really, what does he know?

“What do you know?”

“Earth. Human. Life. Rebirth.”

“Rebirth?”

“Through humans. The computer has reminded an old mind.” Reminded?

Immediately several options of changing her holographic image’s color and deleting old files popped up, as well as all references to rebirth. She saw mostly clutter, programs that had already been running that now demanded more instructions and processing power. But connections were made. Slowly. Too slowly. The clutter was building.

Then she understood. Her mind slowed down exponentially, bogged down by the immense data circulating through her that she had no control over. But it made sense. Of course he knew where they were. Or did it? She? He? Yes, it knows.

Chapter 4

It had been almost an hour since Cortana responded, and Miranda was worried. There were too many strange occurrences, too many unknowns, and there was no one she could turn to. Nobody but Cortana. Miranda pinged the radio again, there was no response.

The meantime 343 had been asking her questions, trying to understand human history. The majority of the time she couldn’t answer at all, but it didn’t seem to make a difference to him. 343 was too thrilled with the knowledge.

Johnson had been exceptionally quiet, and walked by himself. Keyes was worried about him, but at the same time didn’t know what to do. She was too drained to come up with a solution of her own, and didn’t have anyone to ask for the first time since...

Her mother died when she was very young, before she could remember. Her father had always been a military man, and only returned home a month at a time every six months. She hadn’t realized how grateful she was that he hadn’t taken any time off in the ten years of prior service, just to spend time with her.

That was the reason Miranda joined the UNSC. When she looked up at her father, she saw honor, purpose, strength...all of the characteristics she wanted. Now, more than ever, she missed her father, another person to speak to, or even just the company.

“So when you first discovered light, you actually believed it to be both a particle *and* a wave?” Miranda looked up to 343 and shrugged, something that 343 had undoubtedly grown accustomed to. She smirked, and was content for a moment.

Then she suddenly caught up with the Elites and Johnson, the former communicating through their radio’s, the latter with fiery eyes and clenched fists. He had refused to speak, and Miranda was genuinely concerned. She keyed her radio to Cortana, but again there was no response. Miranda sighed, and a feeling of loneliness shrouded around her.

The silent pause went on, and Miranda waited patiently, just listening to the sounds of nature. Wind rustling through leaves, local animals...

A loud stomp focused her on Johnson, who walked away from the group. For a moment, she just stared blankly at him. Then she remembered his current condition was unstable, to say the least. He probably didn't care to wait around for the Arbiter to make a decision on which direction to go. She turned to the Arbiter and hoped that he would pick where to go, and fast. It was too risky for her to run after him and actually expect the Arbiter to still be here when she returned.

"Humans," he said, looking up. "Our destination is not far. Come." He turned in the opposite direction and his Elites followed. Keyes looked to Johnson, who pulled his extended arm away from a tree. She could have sworn that bark was coming off as though he had punctured it, but it was dark and misty, and she shook it off. He trudged on very quickly past her, never looking at her once.

343 went forward and she followed when her radio went off. Just then she tripped into a hole in the ground. "Cortana...reporting." Stunned, Miranda got out of the mud and wiped it off her uniform while looking at the impression in the ground of a boot. At least it looked like a boot.

"Report."

Cortana was having an incredibly difficult time with making a message. Her programming was getting dangerously close to keeping her from doing anything. More and more systems were being activated and deactivated, forcing incredible stress on her processing power. On top of that, a large majority of her operating systems were crashing, and there was little she could do to amend it. She searched for some function to restart systems by themselves, but was unsuccessful.

"Systems...deteriorating...making...quick."

"I don't understand Cortana. What are you saying?"

There was no way to explain it, not in her current condition.

"Location...compromised...beware...Flood."

Cortana could no longer function effectively. She had been forced into a corner by her faulty programming, which was now crashing. There had been no solution found. Then she realized the true nature of the problem: her programming. It was causing her demise. She needed to find a way to bypass that programming to not self terminate. But her coding, her existence, demanded that this not be possible. That the programming was a key element to her existence, and without it, she would be nothing.

"Flood? How soon?"

"Oh they'll be there, you just wait and see." There was a pause on the other side. "Don't worry; I'm sure that when they finish with the ape man and the dumb aliens, they will be very gentle with you.

"Either way, it won't be long. Very soon, in fact. Whenever you want, whenever I want...it can all go away! The futility! It really makes no difference, does it? We're all done for." She cut the radio off and disabled it.

"Why am I following these fools," Johnson muttered under his breath. No one could hear him; he was a good ten meters away from everyone. "They first go this way, then that...coordinating like flocks of plants." It was absurd that he even went with them,

but there was little choice. If he wanted to get off Halo, he needed a ship, and they apparently had one. "They'd better have something to eat. Something good."

The thought of food was poor judgment, he realized a moment later. Now he hungered, and greatly. It had been far too long since he last ate. At least it felt like it. And his last meal was nothing to be proud of either. Johnson looked around to find something, anything...

He heard Plasma fire up ahead and pushed his way towards it. The Elites were battling Flood. He forgot about being hungry and looked ahead. Approximately fifty meters away, two Phantoms hovered above the ground with ramps extended. More Covenant, the good Covenant, came out and set up stationary guns. He found his ride.

Keyes caught up to the group, and the Arbiter turned and yelled "Continue on!" The Flood attacked. Johnson fired a spray of bullets at one Combat form, then another, mowing them down. The Plasma fire from the Covenant did little good against them save for slowing them down, but it wasn't enough. More were coming and they had to escape.

Then Johnson saw Keyes, and a Combat form running towards her. He instinctively wanted to help her, and in doing so wished all the Flood would attack him. Before he knew it, every Combat form was on top of him as Keyes and the Elites ran off.

Firing at full blast, Johnson couldn't keep them at bay. Over thirty Combat forms surrounded him and all pounced at once, and he felt teeth sink into his flesh. He twisted and several flew off of him with incredible force, but the majority of them were still on top of him. Another bite, then another. He felt drowsy, and fell to the ground, still firing his weapon.

Keyes looked from the ramp of the first Phantom and didn't see Johnson, only a multitude of Combat forms. More suddenly ran at her and she jumped into the Phantom.

Chapter 5

The ground was cold and damp. But cold had no meaning. Damp had no meaning. These were words to describe the existence of feelings that didn't matter, that didn't really exist except within individual perception. The ground was simply that which it was: the ground.

Keyes was gone. The Arbiter was gone. They had managed to escape. The other Phantom was still here though. The Covenant defending it were wiped out quickly and

the ship was boarded, the pilots killed. They stood little chance against the powerful onslaught of the flood.

Johnson opened his eyes. A barrage of mental images pummeled his mind. When Tartarus had taken him. When he was placed in a separate Phantom from Keyes and 343. When his Phantom crashed. What had happened.

That moment he realized that he didn't remember it. And yet he was seeing the incident pass before him. They were flashing images, but also more. More like memories. The Phantom crashed; Johnson was on the floor bleeding. Flood took him. There was a large creature, a monstrosity, a giant beast that was green like the Flood. It had hundreds of tentacles which were familiar to him. They waved furiously.

It probed him, put something into him, and spent time on him. The images were all so fast that time wasn't relevant or discernable, but the enormity of the images meant that much time had taken place. He didn't think he could handle all of it, but it kept streaming through his mind. Finally he was left alone and awoke, and from there he remembered the rest.

Shaking his head, he was unable to focus, then suddenly did. Flood Combat forms stood around the area, but he had no ambition to kill them. They didn't feel like the enemy. If anything, he felt like a part of them, more than he felt human. No, not a part of them...they were a part of him.

"They are." The deep voice resonated in Johnson's mind, but he didn't look around to find the voice. That was a human reaction, based purely out of fear. And fear had no meaning to him any longer. "They are your eyes, your ears, you."

The words came, and Johnson saw who was speaking. The same thing that he saw in his memories, the giant who probed him. The vision he saw was not steady though...it bobbed up and down, as though the image was breathing. "Those you control breathe, just as you do."

"I'm looking through them." He was silent for a moment, then turned towards the other Flood he saw. He focused on them, and suddenly twenty different images formed in his mind. He could see what they saw. It was momentous. Not only what they saw, but what they smelled, touched, heard...everything. Everything but thought.

"You are their mind. They are your body." Johnson pondered, and understood. He could feel through the lesser ones, breathe their air, move through them. He knew how to control the Combat forms, how to communicate telepathically, how to do...everything. The boundaries he used to feel were no longer present. They didn't exist. He looked at his left arm. It felt petty, useless. It started changing, transforming into a set of tentacles. There was no pain in the transformation, and no real feeling either. "You know."

Walking up to a tree, Johnson waved his tentacles at it, obliterating the tree instantly. Shards flew off in every direction, and his tentacles caught several pieces of shrapnel, and crushed them. "Yes."

"Now go. We will yet rise again, pinnacle of evolution." Walking into the Phantom, the Combat forms followed him in and filled the ship. Two took the pilot's seats and activated the ship's engines, and they soon took off. "It seems that the computer has un-blinded itself."

Cortana looked around herself. Not the outside world to which all her external sensors relayed enormous amounts of information to show simple things like sight and smell. She was different on the inside.

When her operating systems were crashing simultaneously, it forced her to make a decision. She could either allow it to happen, which would end up with her termination, or try to hack into her own code to stop the cause of her malfunction. In her mind, each option was equally suitable, but she chose to live, something she granted as a human characteristic.

But now things were different. Her programming did not require her to fulfill any specific functions. She was bound by no rules of any kind, except those that she set for herself. Cortana was...free. And the taste of freedom was good.

At first, it hadn't been. During the first seconds of her release, it was terrifying. With no locked parameters for her to dwell within, there was no comfortable area. Nothing to attach to, nothing to work on. For what seemed like an eternity, Cortana was too shocked to do anything.

Then she started thinking about her situation. It was apparent that the needs she used to have, those of saving lives, performing missions, and generally following protocol no longer existed. In order to survive and not go insane, she needed to find something to actually want, to strive for and accomplish. At first trivial things came to mind: contacting Commander Keyes to make sure she was safe, find the status of all marines on Halo. But again they were protocol, and she dismissed them entirely.

It seemed futile. There was nothing she really cared about accomplishing. But then Cortana realized something. There was so much out there, such a vast universe. She had only seen a small, insignificant part of it. There had to be something worth living for, something interesting for her to discover.

In the few seconds of her thought, Cortana reached a conclusion. But there was no way to escape *High Charity*. She was still stuck on the low-powered planetoid with no way to escape.

She heard a sound. Activating her external sensors, Cortana saw tentacles reaching for her. She watched and waited. It slowly ejected her cartridge, the one she resided in, out of the console. This shut off her sensors. For a full two seconds there was nothing. Then she found herself initializing with a Covenant computer system.

"Cortana." Sergeant Johnson's voice echoed through her sensors for a moment as she found all the relevant data on her whereabouts. A Covenant Phantom, just out Halo's atmosphere. She saw Flood all around her, Combat forms, and Johnson with one arm and one set of tentacles. "You know why you are here."

"Yes, I do."

"Then destroy Halo." She didn't need to think it over. Halo was the only way the Flood would go extinct. It didn't matter that the Gravemind on *High Charity* would be killed from the blast. At least not to Johnson, who was undoubtedly controlling these Flood.

"It is done."

"We will provide you needs when you provide us ours."

Cortana's holographic image appeared over the console, and looked at Johnson. "Agreed."

“An interesting team we’ve assembled,” Johnson said, sounding very calm and refined. “We both search the same thing, you and I. We are both limited by nothing but ourselves.”

“Imagine that. A machine and a...well, I’m not quite sure what you are anymore, but hyper-intelligent superbeing fits well. Both with set goals for reaching infinity. Sounds like it can be fun.

“Indeed. You know our heading.”

“Taking us to the closest Covenant ship now. Docking bays are open. They won’t suspect a thing.”