

Tales of the UNSC's Valkyries

By Lojak (Psst! That's my online name)

Preface

This collection of stories is primarily for fun. Any lore inaccuracies or grammatical errors are unintentional. This is not edited to a publishing standard. This is for me but I want to share in the fun I am having.

That being said, if you do wish to read on, this work includes description of graphic violence and child soldiers, and includes the use of lewd humor and uses language rated for PG-13 movies.

A big thank you to my incredible spouse and writing buddy for always being there to catch my your's and you're's (She didn't read this part, so Lord knows how it turned out).

I hope you enjoy Tales of the UNSC's Valkyries.

The First Time Falling

Chapter 1

13:27 14-04-2538

UNSC Cygnus, Okinawa Sector, Interstellar Space

The last thing any Spartan liked to do was take off their armor. It was laborious and smelly, and before long they would be rushing to slap it all back on. Eoin A047 stepped into the men's half of the locker room assigned to his team. The compartment was tight and only grew more claustrophobic as Staff Sergeant Bruce Kingsley followed him in. Two men in full UNSC battle rattle took up as much space as a compact car in an elevator.

A man. Eoin really hadn't thought of himself as a fully-grown man before. His father wouldn't have even been twice Eoin's age when he volunteered to fight

and die on Harvest. Being an adult now would have meant at some point Eoin had been a child. He had memories of being a child all those years ago on Harvest, playing with his Da, Ma, and two sisters. But they weren't his memories, not anymore. Eoin had abandoned those six years ago, given them to someone named Eoin Mackenzie Lojak. He did that as an eleven-year-old boy who was frightened, angry, and packed in the back of a Pelican dropship with two dozen other boys and girls his age.

Onyx, Kurt, Mendez, Carter. That felt like a lifetime ago already.

“You pop my seals first, Chief,” Kingsley said – in what he claimed to be a true London accent, not like the ones you hear in movies about magical nannies. “With your wacky Spartan dress, I figure it will be easier to strip you down like a dinner date without my pressure suit gloves getting in the way.”

Eoin silently agreed. A Japanese puzzle box was easier to crack than his SPI armor. But ONI wanted complete, overlapping, plasma/bullet resistant, chameleon armor made by the lowest bidder. The result is a multimillion dollar, human-shaped puzzle box that could walk right up to a hinge-head, gut it, give it a funeral, and exfil without anyone being the wiser.

Kingsley fished around under his double thick chest plate – the piece of Hell Jumper gear that was as nearly as iconic as their full-face helmets – until he let out a frustrated snarl. “Bloody Martian piece of... Ha!” With a grunt and tug, the quick release popped. Several pieces of armor went slack, a seal under the helmet hissed with depressurization, and Kingsley shivered as fresh, ship-recycled air touched his body for the first time in six hours. The eight member squad had trained hard, and Eoin couldn't have been prouder of their performance during the EVA rescue drill.

Kingsley gave an exaggerated sniff next to a new gap in his pressure suit. “Maybe you should keep your helmet on for a bit more, Chief.” The veteran chuckled.

But his helmet should filter out smell, how... oh, right, this is what passes as a joke, Eoin realized.

Contrary to popular scuttlebutt, Spartans had a sense of humor, especially IIIs. It was just... well, Spartan humor. During basic, Eoin had always gotten a kick out waking up first thing in the morning and learning who Emile or Hazel had managed to hog tie and hang from a flagpole in the middle of the night. At their best, the two managed to suspend half the cook staff from an aircraft hanger door wrapped in Christmas lights. When Commander Kurt asked why – which had only

been after Chief Mendez had smoked the whole of Alpha Company for twelve hours straight – the two had simply replied, “Because it's June 25th.”

Eoin snorted at the memory. One of his memories, Eoin A047's.

“There,” Kingsley said, “I knew I'd find that funny bone of yours, Chief.”

“Right, Staff,” Eoin said, catching up to the moment. He took the marine's helmet and hung it on the recharging rack next to eight others. “I imagine the whole deck level is now wondering who snuck aboard the body of a dead grunt.”

“A grunt? Nah,” Kingsley said as he and Eoin continued to work together to loosen straps, pop buckles, and carefully store the marine's kit. “I give off the wonderful, rosy fragrance of a jackal left out in the sun.”

“And that is how we tell you apart from the rest of the OPRs aboard,” said a new voice. First Sergeant Aaron Taylor stood in the door frame, hands crossed behind his back – one mechanical, the other properly scarred Hell Jumper flesh. “Look sharp. Battalion is being called up to Ops, double-time. Guess we will all just have to put up with your stank.”

“Got a reason why I need to be rushing off through the ship half way down to my skivvies?” Kingsley asked. “Besides you wanting to get a saucy look at me all sweaty and tight shirted.”

“If I wanted to stare in awe at sweaty marines all day, I'd have joined the Army,” Taylor said, a smirk sharp enough to kill stretched across his face.

“Oorah to that,” Kingsley replied with a matching smirk.

Are marines and soldiers really that different? Eoin wondered. *It's not like they are Spartans.*

“But really First Sarge, why the double-time?” Kingsley asked.

“Not sure, but the Valkyrie was walking around with an ONI spook when I got the order to round up C-company's leadership.”

“So, there is something rotten on this ship.” Kingsley said. He secured the rest of his BDU, tucking in his shirt and redoing his belt buckle. The top half of the marine looked like he was ready for a good work out – a standard issue gray, sweat-wicking t-shirt embroidered with his last name, rank, and the OPR Motto – and the rest looked ready for a hard drop behind enemy lines – a peeled down

pressure suit covered in titanium and ceramic plates from thigh to toes. “Alright, lead the way. Let’s go see how many boys and girls ONI got all black and blue today.”

The two marines rushed out of the locker room. Eoin watched them go wandering what type of mission the Office of Naval Intelligence had cooked up and why it needed pararescue troopers.

“Spartan,” Taylor yelled back down the corridor, “company leadership includes you! Stop standing there like a billion-dollar piece of construction equipment.”

Eoin snapped to and rushed after them, every piece of armor still attached and ready for action. The way the Spartan liked it.

Halfway to Ops – which was on the other side of the assault carrier – a message appeared in Eoin’s HUD on the old “Gunslinger-Platoon” channel.

Didn’t think we would be invited to the party.

Only Eoin and one other person still had access to that short-range channel, left over from their time together on Onyx. They now used it as their private channel since it was encrypted to high heaven.

Eoin quickly blinked out a reply as he jogged, “I guess we need to start getting used to being a part of the Bigger Team.” The Bigger Team had been the buzz phrase in Commander Kurt’s video message to the nearly three dozen Spartan III’s who were suddenly separated from Alpha Company.

When Eoin first got the orders that he had one hour to pack up and get on the Pelican, he had assumed he’d underperformed during Operation Iron Greave. His injury hadn’t been that bad, had it? Somehow, he had failed his brothers and sisters and was being sent away so as to not be a weight around their neck. But as he boarded his dropship – one of several spooled up and running hot n’ ready – he saw Carter, Jun and several other top of the class Spartans embarking on various craft across the launch pad. If it hadn’t been poor field performance or the severity of his injury, then why was he being pulled from the company? It had been nearly a year since he boarded that Pelican and Eoin still didn’t know why he and five others had been sent to go train with OPR, or what happened to the rest of the shipped out III’s. Hell, since he stepped onto that dropship he hadn’t received a

single message from Alpha Company besides a few last minute good-bye messages sent over the short-range platoon and company channels.

Maybe the Bigger Team will start warming up to us. A new message blinked on the old Spartan channel.

“Then we best put on our biggest, cuddliest smiles. I’m already wearing mine,” Eoin replied.

So, you still have your helmet on, too.

That drew a snort from the Spartan. Eoin was glad to know he wasn’t the only Spartan reluctant to swap dress immediately after a drill.

“Yep.” Eoin replied. “Thank the ONI gods for reflective gold-lined, transparent-aluminum visors.”

Praise them indeed, because I don’t want to have to look at that patchy red porcupine on your face.

The growth hormones ONI had pumped into him and any other Spartan III’s going into the general service branches – and to the organized crime outfit calling itself ONI, the special operation divisions of orbital shock trooper was “general service” – was by far the worst bit of biological engineering they had done to Eoin’s surgically scarred body. He would have been more okay with another round of slicing and poking if the procedures had continued to enhance his strength, or make his sense of smell as strong as a wolf’s. Even plugging a third infrared eye into his belly button would have been better than what they did - at least that would have given him an edge in night fighting. This last round of chemical therapy was simply to age up Eoin, so he didn’t look like his true seventeen-year-old self. No muscles or enhanced senses, just an uneven beard and more acne. ONI didn’t want the mundane special operators asking questions about why it was a teenage boy that was wearing one of the most expensive pieces of military equipment in UNSC’s armory, and why he could bench press a fully-loaded warthog. So now, Eoin and the other Spartans on Cygnus looked to be in their early to middle twenties.

“Hey, I shaved.” Again, he added in his head. *You would think if ONI could turn me into a living tank, they could at least make it to where I didn’t have to shave every morning.* “But even with my chin hedgehog, I’m still prettier than you.”

Good thing, too. ONI only promotes the good-looking ones. Saves us ugly, lethal types to do all the good grunt work. The message read, then a new message quickly followed. **Smoke you in one.**

“Smoke you in one.” Eoin blinked out the reply and closed the channel.

A minute later, Kingsley, Taylor, and Eoin stepped into the operation conference room. Styled after an old Greek amphitheater, ascending rows of swivel chairs mounted to desks created a two-thirds circle around a glowing altar. The altar was nothing more than a holo-table projecting a slowly revolving UNSC logo. Still, Eoin wondered how the ancient Greek heroes his dad had told him about would react to seeing such a device. An altar of fire that could make the hero Hercules appear and face his twelve trials. That had been Eoin’s favorite heroic tale, and the only way he could fall asleep without crying during the month he and his Da spent on the evacuation ship.

But that was a different person. Eoin shook the memory, gave it back to the frightened boy in the back of the Pelican. *I’m not scared of the Covenant anymore. I don’t need Hercules to come save me. I’m a Spartan.*

Eoin took his place in the conference room - a stretch of wall to stand against. Without even making the conscious choice, he separated from the marines he had followed and walked over to the five other Spartan IIIs assigned to C-company 5th Battalion. Naturally, the Spartan and marines segregated themselves, even though the super soldier assets were spread out across three OPR Teams of the marines and were supposed to integrate. If an onlooker had to guess, they would be in a tough spot to figure out which faction was trying harder to avoid the other; the Spartans or the marines? The correct answer was both, but for different reasons.

As Eoin settled into his spot – his back less than an inch from the wall but not resting on it for support – the only other Spartan still wearing their SPI armor subtly pointed a finger gun at him and dropped their thumb as if it were the hammer of a revolver. Smoked. Eoin replied to the excessive greeting with a subtle nod.

The four remaining Spartans stood at perfect attention, and Eoin was pleased to see the other male Spartans were struggling to master the art of shaving just as much as he was. The unarmored Spartans - naked in Eoin’s mind - wore the uniform of the day, a slight variation of the standard naval fleet uniform – their

mother service branch. They were black, crisp, and utterly devoid of metals, ribbons, or other awarded honors. Just a rank, their first name and Spartan designation, and the simple three letter OPR patch on the left shoulder. The marines on the far side of the room also sported trim black uniforms, though a degree less crisp, and far more cluttered with patches telling the stories of each warrior's battle-hardened life. Under their OPR patches sat the battalion patch, an angel with fiery wings wielding a spear in one hand, while the other reached down from the heavens assumingly to lift a shock trooper out of hell. At the top of the circular patch was embroidered "Burning Valkyries, 5th Battalion," and at the bottom "Drag them out of Hell," the Orbital and Pararescue motto.

When assigned their uniforms, one of the Spartans had asked if they were supposed to be receiving similar battalion patches. The supply sergeant replied, "Yeah, they are just held up in processing. I'm sure you will get them... eventually." The Spartans got the message loud and clear. They might be assigned to this unit as some ONI test program, but they weren't members of the team.

"Commander on deck!" a marine boomed.

Boots clacked against the deck as two dozen marines snapped to attention. The Valkyrie marched into Ops followed by her staff and a man dressed in the plain but well known - and feared - ONI uniform. The Spartan uniforms look like colorful circus costumes compared to the ONI fatigues, void of anything identifiable, unique, or memorable. Well, besides the pin emblazoned with the all-seeing pyramid of ONI on the man's collar.

"At ease," the Valkyrie ordered.

Lt. Colonel Sonia Milenkovic didn't even stand a meter and three quarters tall, but somehow managed to look down her nose at the two meter tall Spartans as her gaze swept across the officers and NCO's gathered in her Ops. But when you had more than eighty drops behind enemy lines, you earned the right to judge the UNSC's fancy new toys.

"I come to you today with a special opportunity," the Valkyrie said, which was met by a chorus of groans from the NCO's and silent eye rolls from the officers. She continued in her thick slavic accent. "That's right, ladies and gentlemen, strap in. Our friends in ONI have called in a special rush order delivery off the surface of Uvranelo."

The room's lights faded out, and the holo-table switched from the UNSC logo to the image of a green planet surrounded by panels of ONI intel. Data pads

bloomed to life around the room mirroring the 3-dimensional display in 2D. Eoin commanded the HUD in his helmet to link up as well, and began to brief himself the way Commander Kurt taught him. *Solid data first, ONI fluff second.*

“Yes, you are reading correctly,” the Valkyrie said to the bulging eyes of the few greener lieutenants in the battalion. “This is a fortified hinge-head planet two sectors beyond the frontline. It’s used as a truck stop along their supply network. Our pals in the black,” she pointed down at the deck of the starship, “recently completed a successful hit and run operation less than a week ago, which managed to disrupt many of the Covenants activities in the region.”

A fleet action report appeared in Eoin’s helmet. He didn’t need to speed read to get the general picture of the battle. The casualty report on the top line filled him in.

Four assault squadrons for two cruisers and a refit station, that is a success? The private Spartan channel popped into view.

“If the goal was to shack up the enemy, it could be worth it.” Eoin blinked out his reply, and what he guessed would be the response from the fleet Brass. However, even he didn’t see the advantage of trading twenty warships just to keep the enemies on their toes.

“Lieutenant Colonel,” a captain with a nearly identical slavic accent piped up. “You said this was a ground op, but all I’m seeing is fleet combat. Do we have escape pods we are tracking down? If so I’m not seeing any successful launches listed either.”

“No escape pods, Captain Voronoff,” the Valkyrie replied, not bothered by the interruption. The room was full of hardened veterans and top tier operators, each had earned the right to be there. Rank was a formality and for parade inspection day in the OPR division of the Marine Corps. The holo-table zoomed to the planet surface and to a 3D image of a smoking wreck. A mostly intact Covenant battle cruiser stood sideways out of the thick jungle foliage like a purple knife blade in the middle of cutting a burning path of destruction. A new data graphic appeared over the wreckage; Operation Black Cat.

“Twelve hours after our fleet punched-out of the system,” the briefing continued, “a new operation was launched. An ODST team and an ONI officer stealth dropped to the planet using the battle debris as cover. They should have hit dirt here.” The digital map displayed an animation of a drop pod landing in the

jungle four clicks from the shipwreck. “Their objective was to search the wreck, then signal for a lift.”

“So we are playing taxi?” Kingsley asked.

“If only,” the Valkyrie said, then gestured to the ONI officer beside her. “Captain Sanchez, fill them in with the latest.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Sanchez seemed to slink up to the holo-table. Up to that point the man had been lurking in the shadow and eyeing the Spartans. The display’s operation clock went from +00:12:45 to +03:12:00. “The team was given a 72 hour window to assess and retrieve, then at the end of the window, pop-smoke to signal for a ride. We had a prowler in system flying *zombie* that would have dropped Pelicans and scooped them up at...” the clock moved forward to +03:21:30, “However, as the prowler passed by on its orbit, we received no green signal from the team. We assumed the team failed and jumped out of the system.”

“Shocker,” Kingsley said under his breath, only loud enough for the sensitive ears of Eoin’s helmet to pick up.

The operation clock advanced to +05:13:13, “Almost two days after they were supposed to check in, a recon satellite on a ten day orbit got a short laser communication burst from our man on the ground.” A garbled data packet blinked into existence. “It appears the team ran into more trouble than we predicted, but were able to complete their portion of the Op. As you can see they have sustained heavy casualties. Due to this, the team is stuck here, ten clicks west from the wreckage. We can assume the team was trying to make it here, a void in the dirt side AA network that was designated as the Zulu exfil point.”

Sanchez folded his arms and stroked his dark goatee as the digital map zoomed back out to a view of the planet. He let the room process the grim intel. The report from the ONI officer on the ground listed three KIA and four more with wounds that would be fatal without treatment. That put the ODST team at half its original strength.

“Damn, they got Lieutenant Cane,” an officer said, noting the KIA status next to the name of the ODST team’s leader. “We were in basic together.”

“I think I dropped with her at the tail end of Harvest.” a sergeant said, scratching the plasma scar on his bald head. “She was born to be a Hell Jumper.

Feel sorry for the alien bastards that tried to stick her. Bet they're in Hell regretting messing with that marine."

A chorus of oorah's went up.

Every enlisted man in that Ops room may have had OPR on their shoulder, but they all brandished the scars that came from years as a shock trooper. The Orbital and Pararescue battalions recruited most of its enlisted operators from the ODST Divisions. A few green marines excited to be something special could manage to go straight into the OPR training pipeline - which included most of the ODST courses - but the majority who were transferring from an ODST unit usually kept the reason to themselves. In the Burning Valkyries, every pararescue member ranked sergeant or up had once been an ODST, C-company officers included.

Except the Spartans of course. ONI's new toy soldiers with all the best gadgets and gizmos. They had armor and weapons that could have kept a lot of ODST names off memorial walls.

"So this is where we come in, my valkyries," Lt. Col. Milenkovic took back the briefing. "We are going to bring our people home."

The operation clock jumped to **+05:22:24** and then ticked forward a minute in real time to **+05:22:25**. Pararescue was now on the clock, which meant every minute, every second counted. Eoin adjusted his HUD to add seconds to the operation clock. **+05:22:25:09**. Somewhere in the room, a marine had the same notion because the clock over the holo-table adjusted. **+05:22:25:10**.

"Uvranelo," said the battalion X.O. as he stepped up and began to manipulate the display, "is a fortified supply depot for the Covenant, and has a network of anti-exoatmospheric and anti-air weapons across the surface. Anything flying in orbit or in the sky that's bigger than a train car will be turned to slag. Luckily, Fleet managed to disable a few platforms in the black as well as dirt side, which created holes in the aliens' defense grid."

The display was updated, showing the new pockets in green safe zones. Eoin could see those green patches but only after he zoomed in a few times.

"Now some of you just got the brilliant idea that we are just going to use one of these windows to take a lazy ride down to the surface on some comfy air conditioned Pelicans," Maj. Ishida Takesuke smirked as much as a man with a scar splitting his lip could. The Executive Officer continued in his grim cheery tone.

“Negative. By the time our tricked-out ambulances land and the ODS Ts are extracted, the aliens will have adjusted their network. Take off again, and you’ll be slagged before a single craft breaks 30,000ft.”

Eoin knew what came next. He had put together the Op the moment he pulled up Uvranelo’s defense grid, which was a second after he first learned the name of the planet was Uvranelo. Eoin peeked over at the data pads of his fellow Spartans, and they had come to the same conclusion as him. Each were nearly complete running numbers, calculating time tables, and gathering a list of gear to requisition.

Think this is enough ammo? The old private channel pinged, along with the message a supply requisition form. The first line of the supply list read **10,000 rounds of High Explosive 14.5x114mm.**

Oh, sorry. The channel pinged again. **That was my Christmas list.** A new mission prep list appeared, which only slightly differed from the one Eoin just finished.

“I’m going to need a justification for the rocket launcher,” Eoin blinked out a reply, and attached the revised equipment list. “This is going to be a stealth op. You know, sneaky shit.”

They are all stealth ops until they aren’t. The message had a revised-revised list attached, which put the rocket launcher and normal combat load of ammo for it back on.

“Fine, but you got to requisition it yourself and you’re carrying it along with your other assigned gear,” Eoin replied. He finalized his proposed requisition list, “officially” removing the M41 SPN Kr. If Eoin knew anything about the Brass over supply, they wouldn’t greenlight such a heavy piece of artillery on what ONI hopes to be a silent evacuation.

Naturally the two Spartans were talking as if their OPR Team was already assigned the mission’s spearhead and not an auxiliary role. After all, there were six OPR Teams represented in the room; not all of them would be participating.

Eoin sent off his mission proposal to his C.O. just as Maj. Takesuke updated the holo-table’s display. The mission brief looked exactly like Eoin’s, and doubtless just like the other Spartans.

“We are going to drop out of slip space, and play around as if we are doing search and rescue,” Maj. Takesuke said. “Once the locals start getting grumpy enough to start shooting, the Cygnus will punch out, but that should be enough time for a Team to deploy into the drifting wreckage. Our fly-boys are going to taxi you in our tricked-out D77’s, then park them in one of these large wrecks. One squad of the Team will ride coffins down through a debris fall, just like our ODST cousins did. You can see our metallic weather report here. After that, the squad will hoof to the downed ODSTs, and drag their sorry asses the last bit of the journey they started. Once everyone is at the Zulu LZ, now the Alpha LZ, the ground element will pop green smoke. This will signal the rest of the Team that things are on schedule and they will perform the pick up at the designated time. I suggest you load up fast, because once those Pelicans turn their lights back on in orbit it’s a ticking clock before the Covenant have their defenses pointed the right way around. The Cygnus will loop back into the system roughly 36 hours after it departs - if the slip space gods are kind. The Team and honored guests will dock up in a haze of plasma bolts and glory, then we flash the split-jaws our ass on the way out.”

The battalion XO’s mission brief data included a Beta and Delta LZ as back ups, which Eoin hadn’t included in his proposal. It wasn’t Spartan arrogance that stopped him including backup exfil locations, but the knowledge that if things went bad dirt side there was no plan B. The OPR squad on the ground would be on a hostile planet under the grid of enough anti-everything power to hold back a whole UNSC fleet. Once they were spotted that was it, game over, scorch marks in the dirt. As usual, it was a suicide mission. The only kind Spartans, ODST, and OPR did. Oorah.

There was another pause in the brief to allow everyone to catch up and make notes. The operation clock read **+05:22:28:53**.

“So who is volunteering to get my man back?” ONI officer Sanchez asked.

Everyone raised their hands without hesitation and with eager enthusiasm, including the Spartans.

“God bless the Marine Corps,” Sanchez said, then added. “Or whoever it is that goes out and finds you crazy son-of-bitches.”

For Eoin and the five people beside him, it had been ONI who found them. And it had been ONI that recruited them as nine to thirteen year old’s offering

them revenge against the alien bastards who killed their families and made them orphans.

So God bless ONI, I guess.

“Well, I’m glad my valkyries are as hungry for action as always,” the head Valkyrie herself said, “But this problem isn’t big enough, nor the enemy scary enough to bring the whole holy might of this battalion on top of them.”

There were mmhm's, and oorah's, and every marine's energy level was rising. This was Eoin and the other Spartans' first real mission brief with the unit, but he could tell this part of the speech was more ritual than intel brief.

“Now some of our battle sisters and brothers have found themselves in the pit of Hell,” the Valkyries voice rose with the energy of the room. “Now from what I remember from my jumping days, Hell is a dangerous place full of ugly bastards, bullets, plasma, and ex-in-laws, so are you sure you want to go there? I ask again, which of my valkyries wants to jump feet first into Hell just to drag out the poor idiots that were dumb enough to join the Corps?”

Every marine raised their hand with an accompanied oorah.

The Spartans looked at each other from the corner of their eyes - gold visors not an obstacle to each other. Kingsley caught Eoin's confused hesitation and gestured for this squad leader to do the same as him. The Spartans raised their hands, and gave the Marine Corps's battle cry of Oorah with varying levels of enthusiasm. The Spartan's action brought a few sideways glances as Eoin suspected it might, but he ignored it- Spartans were technically Navy after all.

“So XO,” the Valkyrie continued with military bravado, “Which of my Teams should be blessed with this holy task?”

Maj. Takesuke joined the theatrics, playing at checking personnel rosters and performance data, while hmm-ing. “I was thinking Ma'am, since this mission appears to be below our usual threshold of urgency, that this might make a great test.”

“A test?” the Valkyrie asked. This part of the brief felt rehearsed too, but for a different reason. Eoin could always smell brass Bravo-Sigma the moment any officers tried to start wiping up bogus orders and regs. It was why he had been picked to lead Gunslinger platoon back on Onyx; the other Spartan cadets loved when their frontline leadership could divine when a shit storm was blowing and

about to blow their way. And right then, Eoin was sensing those brown winds beginning to rise.

“I suggest we send one of your new Augmented Teams,” the XO suggested, mirth filling his scarred smile. “With this mission, I think we will get a good grasp of what these *legendary* Spartans can really do.”

“Hmm,” the Valkyrie feigned pondering the suggestion. “Sounds excellent. I keep hearing rumors about some Spartan *Blue Team* destroying entire alien fleets. Charlie Company, you’ve got the Op.”

And there the storm was, right on top of them already. The Bravo-Sigma cooked up this time was “Hey, lets get rid of those shiny new Spartans.” Lt. Col Milenkovic might play nice with ONI brass and do their bidding with a smile when they rolled into town, but the battalion knew the truth. She was Hell Jumper through and through, which meant she loved her marines and trusted the Office of Naval Intelligence as far as she could throw a Brute. Eoin could tell she wanted this Op to go FUBAR - Fucked Up Beyond All Repair - just to stick it to ONI; make their Spartan toys look dumb, and deny them whatever prize they stole from that wreckage. She was only here for the marines.

“Apologies, ma’am,” Capt. Voronoff interjected - Charlie Company's commanding officer, the company which Eoin and all the Spartans were assigned to. “This is too soon. We’ve only just started running full drills together. Damn it, the Spartans haven’t even got all their proper equipment.”

“Didn’t you just raise your hand and volunteer your company?” the Valkyrie asked, taking a step closer to the seated Capt. Voronoff.

“Yes,” the Capt. sat up straighter, steel entering her expression. “And though I don’t doubt my Team's and the Spartans' capability or eagerness, only one Spartan has fully spec-ed Mjolnir armor for pararescue operations and two haven’t even received their power armor’s primary kit.” She gestured toward Eoin who stood at attention in his lesser SPI kit.

She wasn’t wrong, Eoin and his partner were last on the list to be fitted for the awesome might that is Mjolnir power assist armor. The iconic titanium and ceramic mechanical marvel that brought out the true potential of a Spartan. Even though all Spartan III’s trained nearly solely in the SPI semi-powered stealth armor, they all knew that the true purpose of their existence, their training, their illegal biological enhancements was to fill a Mjolnir suit and be the angels of wrath Dr. Catherine Halsey pitched to ONI and the UNSC brass.

“How is that an issue, Captain?” The Valkyrie folded her arms and cocked her head, her regulation-tight blonde bun barely bobbing. “According to the posters the UNSC PR-team is slapping up everywhere I turn my head, Spartans can do anything. By God, I really don’t even need to send a single Hell Jumper, do I? We are practically useless by comparison.”

Sanchez bristled slightly in his ONI uniform, once again standing in the shadows.

“Commander,” Voronoff nearly shot to her feet, but instead gripped her data pad so tight Eoin thought she might snap it in two. “I don’t think this is the time for your...”

“Captain Voronoff,” Eoin interjected and stepped forward, his voice projecting from his helmet’s speakers. Every head in the room turned to look at him, some so fast they may have given their owners whiplash. When the decision making began, the Spartans had become practically invisible, and it had nothing to do with the SPI’s chameleon technology. Eoin did his best to ignore the pissed off glares coming from several of the marines, including the battalion’s XO Maj. Takesuke. With the new silence, Eoin dialed the helmet volume back a notch, having successfully stopped his company leadership from saying something she would regret. For now.

Eoin continued, “Lieutenant Colonel Milenkovic is correct, Ma’am. This is actually the perfect mission to test our training from the last year, and SPI armor has photoreactive panels, making it ideal for this type of Op as well. Spartans are going to be invisible in that jungle growth.”

Eoin then looked at Lt. Donya Kassab. He might be leading a squad, but his squad belonged to the Lt.’s OPR Team, and she was the only one who had the true authority to speak for that team. The woman had remained silent this whole conversation, her black eyes now looking straight back into Eoin’s own as if his helmet didn’t exist. She studied him for a moment longer, then snapped her attention to her bickering leadership - like a daughter completely overhearing mom and grandma fight.

“Spartan’s correct, ma’ams,” she said, sentence clipped and face as rigid as the stone sphynx her ancestors built.

“There we have it,” the Valkyrie said, body language easing. “And thank you for volunteering Gambit Team, Lieutenant.” The battalion commander smirked with triumph and looked Eoin up and down, sizing him up one last time

before sending him on a suicide mission she dreamed would fail. She went to shut down the holo-table, pleased with her day's work.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Commander,” Lt. Kassab suddenly spoke up again. “And if anyone wants to try and take this mission from me, you are welcome to drop with Gambit, I just can’t guarantee you a pod to ride down in.” The pride and confidence in her voice took the Valkyrie by surprise. This was the correct attitude of a special operation soldier; ready, willing, and daring. She hadn’t a hint of politics or hidden motives in her words.

“Yes,” Lt. Col. Milenkovic said, the mirthful wind suddenly absent in her sails now that she was face to face with the proper Hell Jumper attitude. “Captain Voronoff, mission details are on your drive. Get your lieutenant's team and your other troopers in order. Best of luck. Dismissed.”

Everyone snapped to attention as the deflated Valkyrie exited Ops, followed by her staff. The ONI spook hurried after her as well, probably wanting to question her about her philosophy on the liberal use of Spartan assets. Maj. Takesuke lingered for a moment looking at the mouthy Spartan designated Eoin A047. There were no well wishes in his eyes.

The remaining B-company officers and their OPR Team leaders trickled out as well, the company would now be on standby as its sister company began to plan. A few of their NCO’s fist bumped Kingsley as they passed by. One sergeant - whose neural implant identified him as Bruce Conaly in Eoin’s HUD - held out a fist for Eoin to bump. Eoin looked at it, then bumped it. Staff Sgt. Conaly gave him a nod then left the room.

Did you just get a boyfriend? A message appeared on the old Spartan channel.

“Bigger Team, remember” Eoin replied. “We’ve got to play ball for the sake of the Bigger Team.” Then to himself, *Even if that Bigger Team is trying to see us dead before the end of the day.* That part didn’t need to be said out loud - what would be the point in repeating the booming truth still echoing in the quiet room?

The operation clock read **+05:22:34:19.**

Chapter 2

Operation Black Cat, **+06:02:42:05**

UNSC Cygnus, Somewhere in Slipspace

Eoin tapped his data pad, opening the last casualty report in the data-burst sent from the surface of Uvranelo, the mostly jungle world he and seven other pararescue troopers were planning to crash into. Eoin read the report with the serious dedication that Spartan training hammered into his skull.

OPERATION BLACK CAT +04:19:37 Capt. Urepo Witika, ONI

Casualty Report 0007: CPL Karen Maxwell: Wounded: Combat Effective-NEGATIVE

At +02:10:46, CPL Maxwell received injuries from an explosion caused by damage to the Covenant ship's fuel line. Injuries are: loss of left leg below the knee, shrapnel in upper chest, and G-force patch on helmet indicates possible head trauma. Biofoam was used to seal the leg and it appears the helmet's shock foam properly deployed on impact, which is stabilizing Karen's head. An attempt to remove the shrapnel from chest was made, but there is a high probability several pieces are still in her chest. To conserve remaining Biofoam, other field methods were used to close chest wounds; 17 holes in total. Karen has been going in and out of consciousness since treatment, and appears to understand the situation. She has the spirit of a Hell Jumper, that's for sure.

The other casualty reports read the same. Even without the ONI officer's after action report, it was pretty simple to see that Operation Black Cat had gone to shit, and gone to shit fast. That explosion from a ruptured fuel line seemed to be the catalyst for things falling apart. It had killed one ODST, maimed two others along with CPL Maxwell, and most definitely rang the rest of the team's bell.

Karen Maxwell, Eoin read the name to himself one last time, committing it to memory before closing the report. She had been blown up nearly four standard-days ago. If she was still alive, her hourglass only had a few grains of sand left in it. Biofoam worked miracles, but it couldn't fix a scrambled brain or remove chunks of metal from an organ. She needed a surgeon soon.

That's where Eoin and the OPR troopers came in. Orbital and Pararescue special operators. It was their job to lay down their lives and personally escort marines like Cpl. Maxwell out of the waiting line to enter Hell and gently deliver her into the clinically cold embrace of the Cygnus sick bay - and, if God was kind, put a few alien bastards in her place along the way.

The ten minute warning dinged on Eoin's data pad. He decoupled his armor's waste recycle lines and splashed cold water on his freshly shaved chin. *Going to be at least thirty-six hours before I get to do that again*, Eoin complained. Whatever cocktail the ONI scientist cooked up to age him five years worked too well. For him to keep up a clean professional face in line with Navy grooming regulations, he practically had to shave twice a day. And dear God did it itch like fire ants inside his helmet if he let it grow for more than a two or three days.

He checked the mirror to make sure he decimated the last of the enemy stragglers on his jaw, then examined the top of his head. Like most of the Spartan III cadets - both boys and girls - he had been bald through all four years of training. Even after graduation he had kept it that way. Just easier to maintain. But, after listening to the advice of the ONI spook prepping him for life among the "regular" soldiers, Eoin had decided to let his hair grow out. The crop of thick red hair buzzed to a Navy regs crew-cut seemed utterly flamboyant to him, but it did help Eoin stand out less in the galley. Barely.

With a gloved hand, Eoin wiped away the remaining water, and slammed his helmet back on his head. It hissed as it sealed and pressurized in under two seconds. Now in the mirror, Eoin saw what the rest of the galaxy knew as a Spartan. A golden eyed cyclops with a green titanium and ceramic body. For Eoin, the one, big, gold visor eye was more comfortable to look into instead of the blue eyes his mother gifted to him.

When Eoin reached the ship's armory, the rest of his squad was waiting for him, nearly finished assembling their kit. The other squads of Gambit Team were also there checking themselves out, making sure no one had a tear in their pressure suit, and testing the strength of clasps and latches. Gambit Team consisted of twenty special operation high speed marines and two Spartans, broken into four squads. Two other identical teams - Fang and Hoplite - filled out the rest of C-company's combat roster. Every single person on that roster and the company leadership had dropped from orbit into combat at least once.

To say that C-company was a competent military unit would be to undervalue the concept of competency. Every OPR trooper in the armory around Eoin could perform all the tasks of an ER nurse with one hand while simultaneously laying down covering fire with the other. Yet, scrutinizing eyes from the Brass would be watching every move made today. This would be the first real field operation for an OPR Team augmented by Spartans. It would be Eoin's first mission leading one of the battalion's squads.

A marine in full kit with her helmet under her arm approached Eoin. She was the only marine wearing a black hijab that covered her head. Her black eyes met Eoin's, even behind his reflective visor. Lt. Donya Kassab - Gambit Team's leader and Eoin's direct officer - always seemed to be able to do that from the first moment the two met.

"Ma'am," Eoin said, snapping a perfect salute.

Lt. Kassab returned it. "Chief Warrant Officer Eoin, you and your squad squared away?" she asked with a no-frills attitude, craning her neck to look up at him.

"In short order, Ma'am."

"Captain Sanchez insisted you take a few additional pieces of equipment with you to the surface," she said, gesturing to a crate Staff Sergeant Kingsley was currently looking at while scratching his head at the contents.

"ONI explain why we need to carry a heavier load?" Eoin asked.

"What do you think, Chief?" she replied, and hooked an eyebrow.

Eoin nodded that he understood, the answer clear, though frustrating. He reminded himself to exaggerate the expression for the woman who hadn't spent much time with fully armored Spartans. Then he said, "Glad to hear that the Battalion C.O. greenlit your adjustments to the mission."

"I'm not letting any of my men go behind enemy lines without backup of some kind," Lt. Kassab said. "And if that back up includes Spartans, the better."

During the remainder of the briefing where Gambit Team and the rest of C-company hammered out the details of the mission, Lt. Kassab demanded that she be able to join the "Away" elements of the mission. She wanted a reserve force waiting in orbit in case things went bad on the surface. It wasn't uncommon for just a single squad of an OPR team to break off to handle a mission alone, but those ops were usually low risk single evacuations or long term attachments to other special operation groups.

To finish Operation Black Cat, a single squad of Gambit Team was going to sneak down to the planet's surface, pray to God they weren't noticed, then at the very last moment, when they had wounded and other precious ONI cargo in tow, make a lot of noise as Pelicans screamed down from the heavens to whisk them

away to safety. Lt. Kassab demanded the requisition of the two gunships assigned to the 5th Battalion as back-up; that way her squad could be floating around in orbit ready to blast anything that noticed Eoin's squad.

The Valkyrie didn't go for the adjustments until two more of the six Spartans assigned to her OPR battalion volunteered to join the suicide mission. In reality, all six Spartans volunteered, but the C-company commander overseeing the op absolutely forbade it - Capt. Voronoff wasn't going to be the one to lose six Spartans on their first mission under her command. The Valkyrie however, seemed all too pleased with the idea of watching even more Spartans failing.

"I'm glad we are getting the chance to prove ourselves to you," Eoin said after a heartbeat of awkward silence.

"It's not me you need to prove yourself to," Lt. Kassab said, pointing her chin at the rest of Gambit Team. "Every new member of Gambit Team has to earn their place, especially those in shiny, special armor."

"Yes, Ma'am," Eoin said. He understood that notion and would have felt the same way if a new crop of cadets had been dropped off at Onyx to join his Spartan family. "I'll make it a priority to earn their respect."

"Your priority is to bring my people back, Chief," This time Kassab poked him hard in the chest as she spoke. "I don't give a rat's ass if they like you or the other ONI monsters. I volunteered Gambit for this little experimental program because my people are the best and I want them all back home after every single mission. So, if I can get my hands on Spartans to ensure they come home, I'll jump on that opportunity. Gambit Team will be a part of every UNSC operation that matters from now until the stars burn out. And that Team will have all the same members on the roster as it did last week. Am I making myself clear, Chief?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," Eoin said, trying to hide the new edge in his voice. It hadn't even been until yesterday that the Spartans had been officially added to their respective Team's rosters. Eoin bristled, not because Kassab just implied that she expected him to sacrifice himself for her people, but because she implied she wanted his sibling from Onyx to do the same.

Gambit Team belonged to Lt. Kassab, just as C-company belonged to Capt. Voronoff, just as the 5th Battalion belonged to Lt. Col. Sonia "The Valkyrie" Milenkovic. Each leader up the chain of command wanted to protect their people and give them every opportunity to make the Marine Corps proud. Spartans were

just tools to make that happen, or, in the case of the Valkyrie, an obstacle to be removed.

“You’ve got your orders, Chief.” Lt. Kassab said after the two stared at each other another moment. “We drop from slipspace in six, be in your pods in four.”

They saluted each other then marched to their respective squads.

A chorus of *Chief*’s greeted Eoin as joined his squad members. Six marines and two Spartans made up what the Corps newly designated as an Assault-Rescue squad. Eoin’s squad was double the size of a normal OPR Rescue squad, because their job on Gambit Team was to be the tip on the spear, the farthest reaching hand grasping out to bring back even the most forsaken trooper. Why? For one simple reason: Spartans could take a bigger beating. Eoin and the other Spartans didn’t mind, though. This is what they had signed up for. This is what gave the nearly three hundred and fifty angry war orphans purpose.

“Kingsley,” Eoin addressed the sergeant still staring into the mystery crate. “What surprise did ONI leave for us?”

“Chief,” Kingsley replied by turning the crate, then running a confused hand through his black wavy hair, “Why in the hell are we supposed to be carrying hinge-head meds on an ODST medevac op?”

Kingsley wasn’t wrong about the contents. The crate was full of salvaged Covenant medical technology. The UNSC had only theories about how half of this equipment worked. Even in Eoin’s advanced medical training texts written by ONI’s top xenologists, most of the items in front of him had question marks next to their entries.

That sinking feeling of a shit storm that only ONI had the power to brew up started to settle in the pit of Eoin’s stomach.

“I don’t know,” Eoin said honestly, “But I have a feeling we are going to find out.” *And at the worst possible moment*, he added to himself.

“Take all of it?” Kingsley made a disheartened widespread gesture at the full crate.

“No,” Eoin said. Relief instantly washed over the sergeant’s face. Clearly he didn’t want to carry more than he had to, nor did he want to force the rest of the squad to do the same.

Eoin pointed at various purple and silver alien items, “Take all of those and those, and three of those. I actually know what they are and have a guess on how to use them. Take one of everything from the rest of this mess and disperse them among the squad. That should make the spies happy enough.”

“Yes, sir,” Kingsley said. He began to pull the alien gear together. When he went for a large tank the size of a man’s thigh and the heaviest looking object in the crate, Eoin took it from him and added it to his own kit. Kingsley looked at the Spartan square on. “Don’t overdo it, Chief.”

“I can handle three times as much weight,” Eoin said, confused by the sudden flat tone of the sergeant.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Kingsley said, then leaned in close as if Eoin’s sensitive helmet couldn’t pick up even the faintest whisper. “Don’t try to grovel to us, or coddle us. We are all big boys and girls. Be the badass Spartan ONI made you to be. Eventually, everyone will get their heads out their arse and see we are all on the same team. Don’t go easy on us because you want us to like you. We have a job to do first, make sure we do it.”

Kingsley gave Eoin a fist to bump, which he did. Then the sergeant gave a quick “Chief,” and walked away, handing out the Covenant medical gear ONI demanded they take with them. He suddenly became the British-Indian Santa Claus no one was happy to see.

Eoin watched and wondered if he had, in fact, been coddling his squad. During the recent drills, he may have given all the hardest tasks to the squad’s Spartans, but why wouldn’t he? They were bigger, faster, stronger, and better trained. Had Eoin been treating his other squad mates as children to protect, instead of the highly capable Hell Jumpers they were?

Hmm, a thought dawned on Eoin, I see them as fragile kids. Yet, Kingsley is nine years older than me, and has almost twice my service time. But Eoin was in charge of these fragile marines. His Team leader might have just commanded him to bring back his squad safely, but he also had the unwritten command to make his people excel. Just like the Spartan program gave Eoin a purpose, OPR gave these marines purpose, and it was Eoin’s job as squad leader to actualize that.

“Hey! Where are you going with that?” one of Eoin’s squad mates, Sergeant Olivia Hood, yelled at the other Spartan who was walking away with what she thought was her sniper rifle.

“Stand down, Sergeant Hood,” Eoin said through his helmet speakers.
“What’s the issue?”

“The issue’s pretty clear, *Chief*,” Sgt. Hood spat out his rank, then gestured at the silent Spartan locking the sniper rifle into their drop pod, “I’m the squad’s sharpshooter when we are away from the rest of Gambit Team.”

Eoin looked at the drop pod as it sealed up with the Spartan and cargo tightly packed away. He looked back down at Sgt. Hood. The marine had an ODST scar across her freckled button nose, half her bleached blonde hair was up in a ponytail while the rest hung to her chin. A memory of another girl with blonde hair and a button nose flash in front of Eoin. She wore a school uniform and played in a jungle gym as Covenant ships ripped into reality over Harvest.

The Spartan shook away what was supposed to be an abandoned memory, and said “The *Warrant Officer* is the better shot.” He emphasized the other Spartan’s higher rank.

The sergeant looked ready to revolt, but Eoin got ahead of her. “They have better gear for it in their SPI helmet, and their range scores are better. I checked. I made the change on our roster an hour ago. Did you check?”

“The L.T. ...” Hood started.

“Lieutenant Kassab approved the change.” Eoin paused to let the marine make another challenge, but when she didn’t he said, “Grab your MS7 and a Directional-Las Uplink. You are our radio woman on this flight.”

The marine slammed down her helmet - the same full-face visor model that ODSTs dropped in. The visor went opaque hiding her face, then Eoin heard Sgt. Hood’s thick New York City accent transmitted through his own helmet, “Yessah.”

Eoin’s mind’s eye saw a young blonde girl sticking her tongue out at him from inside that helmet. Then a voice from the past whispered, *Spartans can save all the kids.*

But Sergeant Hood isn't a kid, Eoin tried to remind himself. *She is a marine. A capable Hell Jumper at that.*

Simultaneously across the room, faint dings sounded and lights blipped on wrist mounted TACPADS, data pads, and a myriad of other digital displays, including the HUD in Eoin’s helmet.

“Five minutes, everyone!” Lt. Kassab shouted. “Gambit-2, get in your damn pods already. Squads 3 and 4, get to your Pelicans. Jefferson, you can kiss Shahar after you pick him up from the surface. Gambit-1, with me, our ride is spooled up and waiting in Hangar-4. Let’s move with some purpose, people. There are marines dying and we won’t be late.”

Ma’am’s and salutes followed Lt. Kassab and her marines as they rushed from the armory, off to mount up in one of Cygnus four enormous hangar bays. The marines in other squads gave out fist bumps, high fives, and back-thumping hugs before grabbing their guns and med kits. They too exited the armory, but through a door that led to the usual hangar reserved for OPR operations. Through that door, Eoin saw four specialized D77 Pelicans assigned to the battalion, their drives already humming and throwing out plumes of hot exhaust.

The last pararescue trooper rushed out and the bulkhead slammed shut, the auto-seals engaging with a sharp hiss.

A sober stillness took the room. The OPR troopers about to hurl themselves from space onto a hostile planet stood for heartbeat. SSgt. Bruce Kingsley, Cpl. Sundus “Sunny” Baker, LCpl. Evie Olson, Sgt. Olivia Hood, Cpl. Tokko Sung-su, and LCpl. Eliot Shahar all collectively, silently prayed to their god of choice in that heartbeat. Eoin gave them that moment. He didn’t have a god to pray to, so he just sent out a message to the cosmos that Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez wouldn’t hear about any of his coming screw ups and force him to run thirty miles, either in this life or the one after.

The next heartbeat eventually came.

“You heard her, Gambit 2,” Eoin ordered. “Get in your pods and seal up, we drop in four.”

“Move it you wankers!” Kingsley bellowed as marines bursted to life. “Buckets on! Safeties off! Gear locked!”

Sgt. Hood called to her two marines, “Sung-Su, Shahar,” she then thumped her helmet twice with the side of her fist. They responded in kind.

Other prejump rituals and last minute jeering quickly and loudly filled the armory, as everyone dove into their drop pods. Hisses and whooshes came next as six pods sealed. Eoin called for final checks, while he efficiently examined each of his squad’s pods for any trouble. No matter how veteran a soldier was, they could still forget to prime the crash-bags.

When he reached the last pod, a golden eyed cyclops looked back at him through the glass hatch. A message appeared in Eoin's helmet on the old Spartan channel.

All green. Race you to the aliens.

"I don't think we are supposed to see any aliens on this trip," Eoin said, using a direct laser line to transmit his voice into the other Spartan's helmet.

A faint tilt of the helmet to the side was all the response needed to tell Eoin that was a load of crap neither of them believed. Bullets and plasma were bound to fly before either of them set foot on Cygnus again.

Eoin knocked on the side of this helmet then flashed a thumbs up. The Spartan in the pod did the same. Even the emotionally blunted super soldiers had their own little rituals.

Confident his squad would launch safely, Eoin leapt into his own drop pod. The vehicle was no bigger than a compact sedan, and the inside was even tighter, quite literally standing room only. A locked-n-loaded M7S submachine gun rested in a rack to Eoin's right, and to his left a fully stuffed backpack practically bursting with enough medical equipment to supply a field hospital. He punched in commands on the pod's controls causing the half-glass, half-metal hatch to swing down and seal him in. Hell Jumpers affectionately called drop pods Coffins. Eoin found the nickname agreeable.

"Visual check on pod-1," Eoin called out to the ship's AI.

The entity that saw all and heard all on the spaceship spoke into Eoin's helmet. "All's in order, A-047," said a voice that could only be described as the quintessential uppercrust butler.

"Pods one through eight are primed and clear," Eoin said over the Gambit Team and C-company channels, while simultaneously switching the status of the drop pods to the yellow prepared status. Then he ordered the AI, "Seal and move one through eight to stand-by position."

With a thunderous clang, heavy metal bulkheads slammed down in front of the drop pods, separating the squad from the armory. Great mechanisms ground and clicked as the pods moved to the launch chutes. One by one, eight yellow indicators switched to green on Eoin's HUD. Gambit-2 was ready to drop.

Did you remember to empty your suit's waste? The message appeared on the Spartan Channel

One damn time, Eoin growled to himself as he remembered a very long, very smelly combat drop drill.

Less than a minute later, Lt. Kassab's voice crackled through the helmet speakers. "Gambit Team, launch check-in call."

"This is Gambit-4, we got our seatbelts on and Toby is already asleep," Sgt. Strait said with his exaggerated Texas drawl - which he swore to the beaver god Buckee was real.

Lance Corporal Toby gave a perfect cartoonish snore over the open channel.

"Gambit-3 is hot, ready, and looking for some sweet alien lovin'," Sgt. Su said in her best impression of a cheap phone sex operator.

Her squad joined the check-in with lewd noises.

Then silence filled the airwaves and anticipation built before Eoin finally said, "Gambit-2, green."

A disappointed groan from Kingsley informed Eoin he had failed this crucial part of the mission.

Blew it. The Spartan channel read.

"Reaper Warden," Lt. Kassab used Capt. Voronoff's call-sign, "This is Gambit-Actual, my team is green and reporting for duty. We are also reporting that ONI can indeed make super soldiers; however they can't make super funny soldiers."

"Good to hear Gambit-Actual, I'll tell the ONI mad scientists to flip Gambit-2-1's humor switch back on when you get back." Capt. Voronoff said over the channel, which was being monitored by dozens if not hundreds of other marines and sailors, "Okay Gambit Team, all status lights are green. The Go/No-Go call will hit you the second we drop from slipspace. Which is in...20."

Capt. Voronoff took after the combat captains of old. She was a hands-on, lead-from-the-front kind of officer. She would have a role in every combat mission C-company performed, even if that role was just to give the count down.

Eoin was starting to notice a trend in the type of leadership OPR liked to promote. And he agreed with the philosophy.

“10...” Capt. Voronoff said. “5... 4... 3... Dropping out, now!”

A lurch in Eoin’s stomach confirmed the captain’s announcement. Cygnus dropped out of slipspace and would now start deploying a myriad of sensors to confirm its place and time in space.

The first sweep of sensory data came back, and the operation clock suddenly and cruelly jumped from **+06:02:13:24** to **+06:03:04:53**. The slipspace gods had not been kind, dumping the Cygnus fifty minutes later than desired into real space. Cpl Maxwell was just forced to wait another agonizing hour, and, to Eoin’s frustration, he could do nothing about it.

At that moment, Eoin could only sit and wait in his dark, solitary drop pod as the ship’s AI and other tech wizards finished their work. Each second of silence dragged. A Spartan was supposed to keep their cool during all phases of an operation, but Eoin was more keyed up than a blood-frenzied shark. Not to fight, but with a sudden need to prove himself. Spartans were made to succeed, but with that time jump, he had already taken a brutal blow.

Another second clicked by. Eoin wanted to snap at the mission controllers to give them the green light already. Relief came as the mission channel finally crackled to life, followed by an unexpectedly urgent Capt. Voronoff “Mission is go! Chilly launch! God bless, Gambit Team. Go drag our people out of Hell.”

Oh shit! thought the surface layer of Eoin’s mind - the rest already deep into decision making trees. A chilly launch didn’t mean cold. It meant chili as in chili pepper. *Well, I guess my first OPR drop is going to be spicy. Time to earn my place.*

Chapter 3

Operation Black Cat, +06:03:05:04

In Orbit Above Uvranelo

Half of Eoin’s mind analyzed the data pouring into his HUD and on the drop pod’s own displays. The other half of his mind told his fingers to punch commands

into the keypad next to the pod's acceleration control stick. The stick twitched back and forth as the autopilot maneuvered the pod to its new intercept location.

"Pod-8 is away and clear, Captain Sinclair," *Cygnus*'s stuffy AI Archibald reported to the ship's captain over the airwaves. "Ninety seconds to enemy contact."

"Gambit-Actual, this is Captain Sinclair," announced the crazy Scot at the helm of the UNSC *Cygnus*. "We are going to make a little noise to let you lads find some cover in the debris field, but we won't be..."

"Ultraviolet burst detected, Captain," Archibald cut in. "Six plasma torpedoes confirmed and are tracking."

"Bloody..." Capt. Sinclair said, then swore in a language Eoin's helmet couldn't translate. However, he vaguely recognized one of the words as a crude description for female genitals.

Did creepy old gramps ever use that word? Eoin's surface level mind tried to remember.

"As I was saying before I got interrupted," Capt. Sinclair continued, "We don't have time to launch and recover the other birds. There will be no dummy search and rescue party to fool any onlookers. Archibald, countermeasures!"

A series of blinding red flares rocketed away from the hull of *Cygnus*, several passing within meters of Eoin's glass hatch. His visor reactively polarized to save his million dollar eyeballs. Simultaneously, his helmet tracked *Cygnus*'s blazing decoys as they twisted, jinked, and rolled, attempting to bait enemy ordinance. All over his HUD were icons, timers, measurements, and ID tags, all of which were dancing around in a frantic waltz.

"Cinder," Eoin transmitted to the Pelican now flying directly in front of him, burning hard. "Pods one, two, and three are vector-aligned with you."

"Confirmed, Gambit-2-1," The co-pilot of the Pelican said. "Matching velocity... Control override complete... Maneuvering for clamping procedures... Okay, no one break wind and go spinning off course."

When Capt. Voronoff said that Eoin's squad would launch from the assault-carrier ship in drop pods, she actually meant they'd be gently pushed out the door. The original plan had been for Eoin's squad - Gambit-2 - to be released from the

drop pod chutes and propelled forward on nothing but a few puffs from cold gas thrusters. Once the eight pods were far enough away from the ship for safe maneuvering, they would be picked up by three of OPR's tricked-out D77-ME Medivac Pelicans, called Meteors (ask any marine that's ridden one down to dirt-side why they are called that). Once hooked up, the Pelicans and the two AC-220 gunships - the ones politely requisitioned by Lt. Kassab - would have meandered around like the rest of the other rescue boats out patrolling for survivors in the debris field. Then, when no one was looking, the five crafts would magnetically clamp onto a predetermined hunk of space junk, turn off everything including life support, and wait for the next phase of the mission.

A bright blue flash caused Eoin's visor to polarize again, as a torpedo blessedly took the bait of a decoy flare. A reminder that things were already not going as originally planned.

But this was life in the military: nothing goes according to plan, and that's okay. When eleven-year-old Eoin accepted the offer to be a super soldier, he imagined his time would be full of blasting aliens until he saw their guts go flying. Turns out high-speed-special-operation-super-soldiers spend most of their time doing low-speed planning and lots of math and report writing. This mission might only have one exit strategy, but Lt. Kassab, Eoin, and several other officers and NCOs spent the hours in slipspace planning and counter-planning the infiltration phase. They had four likely scenarios foreseen, and each of those had multiple contingencies scripted out.

The current situation may have been the least ideal scenario, but it was the first thought of and prepared for; popping out of slipspace right on top of an enemy patrol.

Which is why Eoin's first thought had been *Oh shit!* when Capt. Voronoff had made the Chilly call. A natural involuntary reaction not even Spartan training could eliminate.

So instead of lackadaisically attaching their pods to their taxis, Gambit-2 were hurled out of their launch chutes on a blistering intercept course with Pelicans burning hard for the safety of the debris field. This was meant to be the safest step of the mission, but had now turned into the second deadliest. (Crashing into a planet would always claim the top spot on the deadliness list of a Hell Jumper. Sorry, Covenant bastards.)

“Pod-3 secure, Gambit-2-1,” the co-pilot reported back to Eoin. “That’s all our passengers aboard. Hold on tight.”

G-forces squished Eoin to one side of his drop pod as the ship pivoted hard to point its nose in a new direction. Nonplussed, the Spartan pulled up the rest of his squad status indicators. Green pips flashed next to everyone’s ID except for Lance Corporal Evie Olson, whose pip still flashed yellow.

“Sit-rep, Gambit-2-7” Eoin ordered.

“Damn thruster keeps spazzing, Chief,” LCPL Olson said through gritted teeth. “It’s like I’m stuck on grandma’s rocking chair.”

“Princess?” Eoin called to his marines' designated Pelican in the formation.

“Don’t worry Spartan, we’ve got her,” the pilot smoothly replied. Then with a smile in her voice they said, “Gambit-2-7... Brace! Brace! Brace!”

“Wah?” is all the lance corporal got out before Eoin heard an "oof" and the clang of metal on metal over the squad channel. LCPL Olson pip turned green as her Pelican reported a solid magnetic clamp.

“Spartan,” Princess said, “Not a pretty grab, but all passengers are aboard.”

“What the hell was... Agh!” LCPL Olson snarled, “I think you broke my nose, you...”

“Thank you, Princess,” Eoin and Lt. Kassab said at the same time, cutting off the coming insult. The Lt. followed with, “And thank you for breaking her nose. That can only make the Lance prettier.”

“Yeah, maybe we can finally hook her up with Sunny’s sister,” Kingsley jumped in.

“My sister is married, Staff,” Corporal Sundus “Sunny” Baker replied.

“But to a Mormon,” Kingsley said.

“What?!” Sunny barked. “That’s not how... Not all Mormons are... L.T., permission to leave the Staff Sergeant's ass behind on the hinge-head jungle world?”

“Denied, Corporal,” Kassab replied dryly, then added. “But accidents happen, and the Staff’s file does indicate he is due for a remedial land nav course.”

“Really, Staff?” the usually quite Corporal Tokko Sung-Su chimed in.

“In my defense the last time I took the course I was very, very hung over,” Kingsley said.

“My ass you were hung over! You was still drunk as a skunk,” Sergeant Robert “Bobby” Strait shared, followed by a Texas-sized chuckle. “I got stuck in his squad, and I swear to Jesus in Heaven, the Staff was trying to steer us to the nearest bar.”

“And I got us there!” Kingsley declared.

“Lock it down, Gambit,” Kassab ordered before more bickering could erupt. “Remember, I have big scary Spartans to bop you naughty children with now.”

“They don’t look that scary to me, Ma’am,” SGT Hood said. “I think I could kick his green ass.”

“What was the Lieutenant's order, sergeant?” the more senior NCO Kingsley snapped.

Crap, Eoin thought, should I have handled that? Staff Sergeant Kingsley was the ranking non-commissioned officer of the squad and Eoin’s right hand. However, he couldn’t help but think he should have been the one to discipline Hood for being disrespectful. The problem was Eoin didn’t care about some marine mouthing off at him. Why would he? Eoin was a Spartan, and knew exactly what he was capable of. *But I’ve got to learn to care about these things*, he chided himself. *They are my squad now, not Kingsley’s.*

“Gambit-2,” Eoin addressed his whole squad using his best impression of Chief Mendez, “Comms chatter is narrowed to essential messages until further notice. That clear, Sergeant Hood?”

In reply, Hood muted her mic, thus complying to the order, but with symbolic arms folded across her chest.

Again, a vivid image of a school girl with blonde braids sticking her tongue out at him assaulted his thoughts. Whoever that girl was must have been from his childhood; the image in his mind was just too clear to be fictitious. *We clearly*

weren't friends, he thought. *What was her name?* Eoin teetered on the notion of diving deeper in his psyche, the siren song of curiosity calling to him.

No, he refocused his mind again, *Not my memories anymore. They belong to someone weaker*. Eoin closed his eyes and envisioned himself once again leaping from the back of the Pelican, leaving behind his old self.

Three detonations sent tremors through Eoin's pod. Blazing blue plasma shimmered then dissipated to wisps way too close to the bow of *Cygnus* for anyone's comfort. Checking his HUD, Eoin saw that the two Covenant light cruisers whose patrol they'd rudely interrupted were twenty-two seconds away. In moments they would bring their full weapons packages to bear on the lonely, smaller *Cygnus*. Eoin needed only to look around at the floating, derelict hulks to see what a plasma cannon broadside could do.

"Gambit-Actual," Capt. Sinclair broadcasted, "*Cygnus* will be punching out sooner than we like. Godspeed."

"Thank you, Captain," Kassab replied to the ship captain sign-off. "Archibald, while I still have you, plot us a course to the closest hunk of debris that meets our mission criteria."

"Stand-by, Gambit-Actual," Archibald replied with the air of someone checking in with the cook staff regarding the soup of the day.

"Explain yourself," the Valkyrie herself barged in. "That location was predetermined after careful deliberation by myself and your company commander. Why the sudden change?"

"We don't have time to reach the chosen destination before we lose the cover of *Cygnus*'s scramblers, *Ma'am*," Kassab said in a tone that said *Duh* instead of *Ma'am*.

"Excuse me, *Lieutenant*, but I..." the Valkyrie started.

"Yeah, boo-hoo," Kassab cut her off. "I'm the acting field commander, so shh. Archibald?"

"No suitable candidates in range, *Ma'am*," Archibald replied. "Also, stand by one."

A plasma torpedo twisted past the last layer of point defense weapons and slammed into the *Cygnus*'s portside. A flash of blue light cast stark, eerie shadows

in Eoin's drop pod, and a burst of static rang from his helmet speakers. Eoin watched from one of the Pelican's cameras as reinforced titanium armor plates bubbled and boiled around the edge of a gruesome hole. On another camera display, dozens of violet points of light began to bloom and grow brighter along the bodies of the sleek Covenant warships.

"The next best thing?" Kassab asked, tension rising in her voice.

"Already uploaded into your flights' navigation systems, Ma'am." The ever proper Archibald even sounded stressed now. "*Cygnus* leaving system, best of luck Gambit Team."

There was no sign-off or well wishes from the Valkyrie or Capt. Voronoff - who was undoubtedly getting her ass chewed for her lieutenant's attitude.

The engines of the UNSC carrier flared to life, thrusting it forward to the appropriate speed to punch into another dimension. Scraps of burnt hull-plating trailed from the ship's new wound. Subsequent plumes of vented gasses and gnarly arcs of electricity cascaded along the entire port side of the ship. Eoin didn't know starship systems like he knew close quarters fighting techniques, but he could tell that just one torpedo had nearly disabled the whole ship.

A dark thought of what may not be waiting for him when his squad tried to extract themselves from the planet made his heart sink in the weightless vacuum of space.

"Brace for slip-wash!" Cinder called out.

Or a ship detonating, Eoin worried.

This was going to be close. No one spoke over the air waves, and Eoin knew that, just like him, everyone was watching to see if their lifeline out of the hostile system was going to vanish in a burst of cosmic rays or a cloud of twisted metal.

Plasma cannons twinkled, ripple firing off their destructive barrage. His HUD tracked forty plasma bolts careening toward the carrier. No countermeasures would divert them from their deadly mission.

A white roiling cloud lit from within sprang into existence off the bow of *Cygnus*. When the nose of the ship touched the abomination of physical law a second later, the ship and all her crew vanished into slipspace.

Relief washed over Eoin even as gravitational waves and a slew of other cosmic forces rolled over the line of dropships, threatening to throw them off course. The carcasses of other UNSC frigates and cruisers stirred as the slip-wash passed through the debris field, as if a necromancer was attempting to wake them from their lifeless orbit around Uvranelo. The plasma bolts ripped through the spot in space where *Cygnus* had been moments ago then they all detonated right where her heart should have been.

The swirling hot gasses bouncing off the echoes of tidal forces made for a beautiful destructive sight. Eoin asked himself some fundamental questions about God as he watched them swirl and glow.

Renowned rapid chatter between the pilots informed Eoin that Gambit Team had entered the debris field and were beginning the process of squirreling the ships away in their newly selected hideout. Less than a minute later, a series of clunks shook his drop pod, and the hum of the Pelican's drives went silent as the drop ship went *zombie*. Only a few status lights remained on in the pod, as well as the laser-point comm systems which kept the Team and pilots connected. The stillness of the black void of space became deafening.

Eoin floated in his "coffin." There was nothing for him to do other than wait for the next phase. He closed his eyes and settled into the unnerving nothingness until it became comfortable.

"Good news, Eoin A-047," Archibald's stuffy voice broke the silence and snapped Eoin from his meditation. "It appears the *Cygnus* was capable of creating enough electronic and visual noise that the Covenant believe your crafts were just additional decoy countermeasures."

Smart AI were not humans by any stretch of the imagination. Which blessedly meant that their minds were not bound to one single location. After a mountain of coaxing a few hours ago, Archibald had split a piece of himself off and joined Gambit Team on the mission. A diminished version of the AI now lived inside the computer hardware of one of the Pelicans. A place he described as needing a thorough dusting.

"However, there is bad news, sir," Archibald said. The AI had a habit of holding several private conversations simultaneously, instead of a more efficient conference call.

Eoin's pod suddenly buzzed like a plucked guitar string.

“Show me,” Eoin ordered, assuming others would be asking the same.

His HUD switched to a feed coming from a stealth satellite previously dropped by *Cygnus*. The video data showed the Covenant cruisers changing course to do a more detailed patrol of the debris field. As Eoin watched, a plasma cannon belched out a bolt of blue light. A moment later the alien ordinance vaporized the remains of a halcyon-class cruiser, causing another vibration to wash over Eoin’s hidden pod.

I would like to point out for the audience that that was our original hiding spot that just got turned to atoms, read a new message on the old Spartan channel.

His fellow Spartan wasn’t wrong. If Gambit Team had followed the Battalion commander’s last order, Eoin and his squad would now be nothing but hot gas quickly cooling into hydrogen particles.

Maybe Eoin had been too kind to the Lieutenant Colonel. Maybe she was taking a much more active role in trying to get the Spartans killed? But that was a problem for when *Cygnus* came back. Right then, Eoin needed to deal with something more tedious.

“Comms are limited to essential messages only right now, Spartan,” Eoin reprimanded. Regardless of the fact that they were fellow warrant officers and Spartan siblings, Eoin was the other Spartan's squad leader. *I can't show favoritism*, he reaffirmed to himself. *The rest of the squad and Team already see us as outsiders.*

Dutifully, the only other green pip besides Eoin’s in the old channel switched to red.

Another vibration shook Eoin, and much stronger this time. The alien’s target selections were getting closer.

“Archibald, you said the enemy registered us as dispensed decoys,” Eoin said. “So why are they pointing their cannons in our direction and blasting away?”

“Unsure, A-047,” Archibald replied. “I am analyzing their behavior as we speak. Give me some time. As I previously brought to your and others' attention, a D77-ME is not the proper work posting for someone of my station. Hmm. Preliminary analysis suggests that the Covenant are only targeting the larger remains of the 27th Assault Fleet. Specifically, sections of hulls that would have

likely contained life rafts. My guess, A-047, is that they are ensuring there are no survivors for the UNSC to rescue. Cold blooded bastards. Apologies for the off-color commentary, sir.

“No need, Archibald. Gambit-Actual,” Eoin reached out to Lt. Kassab. “We should consider our options.”

“I am aware of our situation, Chief,” Kassab replied. “And when we’ve come to a decision, I’ll inform you. Until then, stand by.” She closed the connection before he could say *Yes, Ma’am*.

Right, Eoin rolled his eyes. *How could a Spartan possibly be helpful in this situation?*

How would you handle all this mess, Carter? The Spartan sighed as another plasma bolt rocked the debris field. Unlike Eoin, Carter was a natural leader, and the only reason Eoin and several others made it through those early days on Onyx.

Personal dynamics hadn’t been anywhere near this complicated in Alpha Company. By the time the nearly 300 Spartan cadets had graduated from the four year long, non-stop, high-intensity, fast-tracked, special operations training, they had all already worked out their personal shit. Some Spartans didn’t get along, even hated each other, but they left all of that crap in the mess hall. What family didn’t have a little drama around the dinner table? However, once a mission started, everyone knew the way of things and their role in completing the objective. Never had a personal complication gotten in the way of success on the battlefield. People - child soldiers - who couldn’t manage that were the first washouts in the Spartan III program.

Another vibration, one that rattled Eoin’s teeth.

“There is more troubling news to consider, A-047,” Archibald continued in Eoin’s helmet.

“Inform the Lieutenant,” Eoin said. “Apparently this is all above my head.”

“I would, but Lieutenant Kassab is currently in a rather heated argument with call-sign Princess and is ignoring me.” Archibald actually sounded rather ruffled at the idea of being ignored. “You are the next in line for command of this mission.”

“Okay, Archibald, hit me,” Eoin said. What else was there for him to do?

A graphic of the debris field appeared on his HUD.

“The reason we chose the remains of the *UNSC Cataphract’s Ballad* as the original *pigeon hole* - as Staff Sergeant Kingsley referred to it - was because it was on a rapidly decaying orbit,” Archibald began his dry briefing. “The additional mass and forces of five craft landing on it would have sent large chunks of it plummeting to the planet within minutes. Thus providing cover for Gambit-2’s atmospheric entry.”

“I am aware of this, Archibald,” Eoin said, tuning out the quake of another plasma cannon discharge. “Please skip to your troubling news.”

“I was nearly there, sir,” Archibald said, a glare in his voice. “Our current *pigeon hole* is not in the same situation. None of *UNSC Foy at Twilight’s* remains will fall out of orbit for thirty-seven years, even after our rather blunderous landing. No offense to Marine Corps’s finest yoke-jockeys.”

Well crap. Now we have no cover for planet fall, Eoin realized. *So even if we don’t get blasted by accident now we will get blasted the second we are out in the open.* Even if they waited for the cruisers to be on the other side of the system, they would still be seen on planetary sensors, then chased down by defense forces. On top of all that, the longer they waited, the longer the ODSs on the surface continued to bleed out. *Well crap,* Eoin doubled down on his growing frustration.

“I take it we are too close to those cruisers for our Pelicans to give us a burst of force from their thrusters?” Eoin asked the AI.

“Correct. Any power up sequence from a dropship would look like gleaming sun on their sensors at this range,” Archibald explained dryly. “And before you think to suggest the drop pods, that is also ill advised. If you aren’t spotted on sensors, you would use up too much of your limited fuel supplies pushing on the frigates hull. You know, the fuel that will be necessary for surviving the drop.”

Eoin hadn’t planned to ask about the pods because he had known the answer. The pods’s limited fuel had been why they needed taxis to bring them in close enough in the first place.

So we need a way to push some big chunks of metal out of orbit, Eoin started problem solving. *That’s going to take a lot of force. Now what can produce that kind of force that doesn’t require spooling up a ship drive?*

He already had that answer, too. The real question he needed to ask himself is if he would go behind Lt. Kassab's back to save the mission. There wasn't time to debate.

In the corner of Eoin's helmet HUD a panel read **Operation Black Cat**, +06:03:09:11. He watched it tick forward one second, then another.

No, Eoin wouldn't go behind his field officer's back to save a mission. He would however go behind her back to save lives. To save CPL Karen Maxwell's life.

Eoin opened a private channel to two individuals patiently waiting in one of the gunships.

"Either of you still obeying Chief Mendez's 11th order?" Eoin asked.

"About never leaving the barracks without a scorch-knife?" the Spartan borrowed from Hoplite Team said. "First thing I packed when we left Onyx."

"I was just using mine to carve my initials into this bird's deck. Why do you ask, Eoin?" the other Spartan from Fang Team asked.

Eoin briefed them on his plan.

"There is an issue with this scheme, A-047," Archibald said the moment Eoin finished. "If the Spartans go through with this, then Lieutenant Kassab, her squad, and the gunships will be pushed to a wider orbit, thus unable to render aid on the surface of the very hostile planet below."

"A pair of gunships swooping down to save us from a planet full of angry aliens was going to have the same effect as a baby blanket in a tornado," Eoin said, simultaneously giving a green signal to the spare Spartans. "Comforting, but utterly useless."

"You are correct, sir." Archibald said, a touch more sober than usual. "I'll make sure the other Spartans cut in the right places."

"Thank you, Archibald," Eoin said.

"You know," Archibald said, "Captain Sinclair calls me Arty. Says it's because we are best mates."

“Would you like me to call you Arty?” Eoin asked, thrown by the sudden vulnerability from the ever unflappable AI.

“Oh, heavens no!” Archibald balked. “I’m telling you this so you can repay me when you get back onboard the *Cygnus*. Use your Spartan intimidation and make sure he never calls me that ridiculous nickname again!”

“Deal.” Eoin grinned as he returned to his reentry calculations.

A voice full of fury blistered into everyone’s ears. “Does someone want to tell me why I’m watching two dumbass super soldiers exiting the back of the gunship next to me?” Lt. Kassab boomed over the mission channel.

“My call, Ma'am,” Eoin said. He called up a camera from one of the drop ships and watched the Spartans ignite welding torches.

“Explain,” Kassab said through gritted teeth.

“Gambit-2 needs to get dirt-side,” Eoin said, then explained the issue Archibald had brought to his attention. After that, he started briefing the lieutenant on what was going to happen next. “With a little cutting, and a well timed push, we are going to generate some debris to give us cover. That should save us a good three decades of waiting.”

“And the warships doing target practice?” Kassab asked, and on cue a rumble shook Gambit Team.

“Are working in our favor, Ma'am,” Eoin said. “We will push the soon-to-be freed space junk after a plasma discharge. Make it look like a knock on effect. However, this will push you and the AC-220’s out of effective support range. But let's be honest, you’re a baby blanket...”

“Change that to now-freed space junk,” a Spartan cut in to report. “We are in position and ready. On your mark, Eoin.”

“Good copy,” Eoin said. He punched the override command to the Pelican’s mag-clamps, releasing his drop pod. “Gambit-2 release and align to the new vector.”

“Chief Warrant Officer Eoin,” Lt. Kassab growled.

“Ma'am,” Eoin cut her off, “regardless of what you are about to say, I’m going down to get to those marines.”

In response, another drop pod released itself and drifted to Eoin's indicated position.

What a drama queen, a message on the old Spartan channel. **Smoke you in one.**

Silence fell over the air waves of the mission channel. Eoin waited to be reprimanded further then ordered to stand down while Kassab and her confidants came up with their own scheme.

"Chief Warrant Officer Eoin," Lt. Kassab repeated, voice as flat and cold as a granite chopping block. "Go drag them out of Hell."

Eoin unclenched jaw and thanked the universe that the lieutenant didn't continue the argument.

"Look alive people! There are marines in trouble," Lt. Kassab barked out orders. "Gambit-2, release and position yourself according to the new vector calculation. Spartans, you better not freaking miss!"

"They won't, Lieutenant," Eoin reassured. "I promise to bring this squad back to you."

"Don't make a girl a promise you can't..." Kassab started, then said, "Oh who am I kidding, what could a tin can like you know about girls? Bring my people back. That's an order, Chief."

Eoin almost replied, *I actually had two sisters*, but a painfully sharp phantasm stabbed his heart. Even before he could recall their faces and names, they were plunged back into the dark vault of his mind. A chill ran up Eoin's spine, threatening the Spartan's mental equilibrium, but a slow practiced breath defeated it.

Six more pods twitched then drifted away from the dovetail aft sections of their Pelican dropships. Small puffs of gas pushed them all together in a tight bundle against the newly freed bulkhead. Just above them, two Spartans in new, shiny, full Mjolnir armor crouched, bracing themselves between two enormous pieces of titanium. Gambit Team and their borrowed Spartans stood ready, waiting on Eoin's command.

A plasma cannon discharged and Eoin watched from the spy satellite as its detonation sent a shock wave propagating through the debris field.

“And...” Eoin said, waiting for the wave to reach them. “Mark.”

As the vibration washed over them, the two Spartans standing in the vacuum of space heaved with the might of bleeding edge technology and hard-earned muscle. The tattered remains of the UNSC frigate *Foy at Twilight* split into three carefully cut pieces. One piece - hiding three Pelican ambulances - remained stationary as the two others quickly moved away from each other. Not only had the Spartans’ push been strong enough to throw a whole warship engine nacelle out of orbit, but it had also been perfectly angled. Of course, the aid of a stuffy Smart AI goes a long way when calculating orbital mechanics.

The new falling debris didn’t fall alone. Along with the nestled drop pods, the push started a snowball effect, generating a dangerous cloud of metal pinballing all around Eoin and Gambit-2.

Within a minute, blue streaks of plasma streamed past Eoin’s glass hatch, and this time the lethal hot gas wasn’t Covenant made. The horizon of the planet came into view as the whole debris cloud began to burn and break apart in brilliant flashes. The drop pod rattled like the tail of a snake, growing more and more violent, causing everything to go blurry from vibration.

With a bumpy voice, Eoin shouted over the cacophony, “Gambit-2... Start entry burn profile on my mark... Mark!”

Eight thrusters roared to life and eight blazing streaks separated themselves from burning debris-fall. The drop pods hurled the pararescue troopers toward the surface of Uvranelo and Eoin felt himself beginning to fall. A sensation as if he had thrown himself from the back of a soaring Pelican. Inside the concealment of his helmet, Eoin closed his eyes and he smiled wide.

Chapter 4

20:32 27-12-2531

Over the Forests of Onyx

The jet soaring through the dead of night transporting Eoin, fifteen other kids, and two soldiers was called a Pelican - a fact the obnoxious blonde girl kept reciting to anyone that would listen, even if they already knew this fact, which

Eoin did. He had learned all about Pelicans when his Da enlisted in the Army. What he hadn't known was that there is apparently a very important difference between *soldiers* and *marines*. This distinction was vigorously explained to Eoin when he called one of the two soldiers on the Pelican a *soldier* instead of *marine*.

He shouldn't have yelled at me like that! Eoin continued to fume in his jumpseat, which was not a bench - a new distinction he'd also been introduced to. *It's all the same thing. Marines suck!* He figured that's why his Da joined the Army instead.

The past four days were a whirlwind that broke all of Eoin's expectations. All of a sudden, ordinary things had new names. There were a zillion rules about how to talk to Officers versus N-C-Os versus Junior Enlisted. The food had been rough going down and rough going out. Sleep evaded Eoin at every turn, leaving him with no more than a few hours of rest on the worn out, smelly mattresses.

Years ago, after the Covenant first glassed Harvest, Eoin and his dad spent weeks on a UNSC refugee ship. The soldiers aboard had been nice to him, even when they were being firm about ship safety rules. They gave him a Ranger patch to wear on his jacket and even called him Private Lojak. Now, he knew that was them being kind to a boy who had just lost his whole freaking world.

Later, when he lived on Panther Base while Da was deployed, no one yelled at him unless he tried to play soccer on the Sergeant Major's grass - Eoin eventually figured out she owned all the grass besides the sparse brown patches dying on the playground. Then, after the leader of Da's Battalion gave Eoin a folded flag and a medal, all the spouses on the base promised him that he would always have a family in the Army.

So naturally, when the ONI recruiter gave Eoin the chance to join the fight and kill the aliens that wiped out his entire family, he figured he knew what he was getting into. He was practically a soldier already, wasn't he?

Day one on the transport ship to Onyx, a marine ripped the Ranger patch off his jacket and called him an unworthy maggot. Instantly, Eoin feared he had made a terrible mistake. Da had told him boot camp had been hard and that he did lots of pushups - which Eoin could do tons of - but he never mentioned all the name-calling and high expectation to not fall behind. And the real boot camp hadn't even started yet.

Eoin didn't want all this *marine* stuff. He just wanted to be a superhero that saved other kids from being killed by asshole aliens. *Can't they just show me how to fight without all the yelling?* he wondered.

A boy his own age pushed through the mass of kids towards Eoin. Most of them were chatting about where they were going. No one knew, yet they all seemed to have an answer, with the most sure of themselves being the annoying blonde girl.

"Eoin, right?" the boy asked.

Eoin nodded his head. "Carson?"

"It's Carter, actually," he corrected, then sat in the jumpseat next to Eoin. "What number did you get assigned? I'm trying to find who got number one."

"No luck, sorry. I got forty-seven," Eoin said. "What is the highest number you've heard?"

"Hazel is three-hundred and two," Carter pointed at the blonde girl, who was currently explaining to another girl how Pelicans can hover in place. "But she told me she met a boy with the number four-hundred and eighty-three. Do you know what that means?"

Eoin shook his head.

"It means humans are going to have like five hundred Spartans!" He pumped a fist. "That's the name I keep hearing the marines refer to us as. Spartan candidates. So yeah, there are going to be five hundred super Spartans out there kicking alien ass."

"As long as we aren't marines," Eoin said under his breath.

"What's wrong with marines?" Carter asked, a touch defensive.

"They suck. Soldiers are better," Eoin replied.

Carter thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Marines get to be ODSTs. My cousin is an ODST. They are super cool. They get to jump down to planets from outer space right into a battlefield!"

"Your cousin is still alive?" Eoin asked. Up till this point, every kid Eoin met had been a complete orphan. No family, no planet.

Carter's mood shifted, and he looked at the marine watching over them. "No," he eventually said. "He died along with the rest of my family five years ago. Everyone volunteered to defend our world, Biko, from the Covenant."

"Didn't work, did it?" Eoin said. He didn't remember all the details of how Harvest fell the first time - too young. Years later though, he could recall all the news reports talking about the vast array of tactics the UNSC - including his Da - was using to reclaim it. They all failed of course. "The Covenant are unbeatable. The Army got wiped out on my world. Harvest."

"What are you talking about, man?" Carter looked genuinely shocked. "Didn't you hear? The UNSC won. Harvest is ours again."

Eoin couldn't breathe.

When all he kept hearing over and over again was just how many soldiers were dying, Eoin stopped listening to the news. It was all hopeless. But... "Are you serious?" he finally asked. "We took back Harvest?"

"Yeah!" Carter held out a fist to bump.

Eoin smiled and fist bumped Carter.

"Ha! I knew I could make you smile," Carter grinned. "Jun bet me that I couldn't."

Eoin's heart froze back over. It had been a lie. Carter was bullying him.

"Whoa," Carter put up his hands, registering Eoin's cascade of furious emotion. "It was just a bet."

"You lied!" Eoin leapt from his jumpseat.

"No I didn't," Carter stood too, face red under furrowed brows. "I haven't lied to you, idiot."

"You lied to win a bet." Eoin balled his fists. He had fought bullies before and was ready to do it again. "You said we took Harvest back. That's messed up, man! My Da died trying to take my home back. He died!"

Carter didn't back down, but his face changed from offended to understanding. "Eoin, I was serious about Harvest. Humans won it back. Your dad didn't die for nothing."

“He’s right, candidate,” one of the escort marines loomed over Eoin.
“Humanity won back Harvest.”

Eoin looked up into her hard face. It was the first time any of their armed babysitters had looked at him with a semblance of kindness.

“Your dad won, candidate,” she repeated.

“No, he didn’t,” Eoin found himself snarling. “He died. Got blown up. They couldn’t even find enough parts to send back to be buried.”

The marine’s armor plated hand cracked across Eoin’s face. He let out a yelp as he went crashing to the deck of the Pelican, hard. Eoin looked up at her, eyes wide and full of tears.

She spat next to his face, then snarled back, “That’s how you speak about your dad’s sacrifice? How did an ungrateful little brat like you get chosen? We truly are desperate.” Then with a disapproving shake of her head, she walked back to her post by the bay door. She muttered under her breath as she went, “Like always, ONI’s going to screw us and waste all our money doing it.”

The Pelican’s bay grew silent. Everyone looked at Eoin. He could feel them waiting, watching him to see what he would do next. All Eoin could bring himself to do was stare back at them and ask himself why he was even there?

“Hey,” Carter said, kneeling down next to him. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Eoin brushed away an outstretched hand. “You won your bet, now leave me alone, already.”

He crawled back into his jumpseat and faced away from everyone.

“That marine was wrong,” a girl said, walking up next to Carter - who hadn’t moved an inch. “You were picked to be here for a reason. You’re special.”

Eoin raised an eyebrow at first then glared at the twig of a girl clutching a paper notepad under her arm - he could read notes about how a Pelican can hover in place.

“I’m special, too,” she continued, ignoring Eoin’s sour mood. “We are all special. The ONI... woman who recruited me, said as much.”

Eoin wanted to ask why she suddenly picked her words so carefully, but decided that would be giving into her and Carter's intrusion. The new girl knew something Eoin didn't, he could feel it in stomach. His school teachers at Panther Base called him a Bravo Sigma detector - like he didn't know what B.S. meant. Eoin always knew when the school's staff tried to pull a fast one. Like when they decided to play a very intense game of hide and seek right in the middle of a math lesson. They kept swearing to him it had nothing to do with the alert pings on their datapads, but he got his vindication later that day when base news reported that random space debris tripped the Invasion Early Warning System.

"My recruiter didn't say much. What else did yours tell you?" Carter asked the girl. "Oh, I'm Carter, B-T-W. My number is two-hundred and fifty-nine."

"I'm Tara," she replied, then flipped through her honest-to-God paper notepad until she found the appropriate entry. "I'm A-1-0-6."

"Damn," a disappointed Carter swore under his breath.

Tara ignored him and continued, "My recruiter told me that we were all selected because we have special DNA, top marks in school, the correct..." she checked an entry, "psychological profile, and *a damn good reason to blow an alien's head off*. That last part is a direct quote."

"I never took a psych-test," Carter declared.

A clipped chuckle slipped through Eoin's broody defenses. Carter gave him a questioning look, so Eoin said, "Yeah, you did."

Carter folded his arms, unconvinced.

"You were taking one while being interviewed," Eoin explained. It seemed so obvious to him. "All those lame questions about leadership, problem solving, and *what would you do if...*, those were part of the test. I knew they were asking for a reason, I just didn't know it was a psychological test until now."

"You're welcome," Tara said, even though Eoin never said thank you.

"Well how did you answer?" Carter asked him.

"To which one?" Eoin replied. "I got asked hundreds of questions."

“Weird. I only got asked fifty-eight questions,” Tara said, again checking her physical freaking paper notepad - Eoin didn’t even know where you could buy one of those.

This time, Carter ignored her interjection. His eyes locked with Eoin, making him suddenly feel like he was the only person Carter cared to hear from. Like Eoin was important, and whatever he might say would be truly heard. Carter then asked the same question the ONI recruiter asked right before Eoin was removed from the orphanage. “Why do you want to do this, Eoin?”

In his mind’s eye, Eoin saw great flashes of blinding blue light. A building vanished in that light and a jungle gym was flung high over his head. His skin began to bead with sweat as phantom waves of intense heat rolled over him. Eoin became deaf to the chatter in the Pelican bay, his ears full of screams, thunder, and boots running over rubble. An overwhelming impulse to wash his hands nearly threw him in a frenzy. He glanced down, checking to see what that warm slick sticky substance was, but his hands were clean.

A panic attack. Eoin remembered the doctor naming this feeling. They had also given him a trick to beat it. Eoin took a slow breath through his nose until his lungs were full, counted three heartbeats, then let out the breath. The Pelican bay came back into focus.

“I want to keep all the other kids safe,” Eoin said. He hoped Carter and Tara didn’t hear how shaky his voice was. “I want to be a hero and save lives. If that means killing aliens, all the better.”

Carter smiled and held out a fist to bump. “Hell yeah!” he said as Eoin tapped the other boy’s fist with his own. “I’m here because I want my home back, and I’ll give my everything just to give humans a chance at that. Hey, we got back Harvest, right?”

Eoin nodded his head, saying, “Right.”

His heart still pounded and the urge to wash his hands lingered. Carter didn’t seem to notice, thank God. He slapped Eoin on the shoulder, flashed a big confident smile, and walked back to the other kids. Tara watched him for a second, wrote down a note on real, lined notebook paper - Eoin still couldn’t believe this random girl had the stuff - then she too returned to the other kids. Hazel pounced on her with more trivia, excited to have her wisdom recorded for the ages.

Alone again and sure no one was watching, Eoin let his body release the pent-up shiver he had been holding back. A spasm of anxiety raced through his body like a lightning strike. Just as he started another exercise the doctor gave him for fighting panic attacks - an exercise he'd never had to use until now - all the lights in the bay flicked to red.

The marines started shouting.

"To your jump seats, candidates," the marine who had slapped him yelled. She allowed for no hesitation, and practically threw Jun into his seat. With fast hands she started pulling levers above each jump seat causing a backpack to fall on each kid's lap.

"This is a parachute," the other marine started barking out. He acted as if the gasps of alarm from a dozen nine to thirteen year olds were nothing but the sound of auto-pressure seals activating. "You will put this on immediately. Blue buckles across your chest. Green buckles across your waist. Yellow buckles around your thighs. Well, don't just stare at my pretty face, double-time, candidates!"

The second the parachute fell into Eoin's lap, he tried to snatch it. The female marine grabbed it first and acted like she was inspecting it. "Hmm," she said. "Yep, I packed this one, and if I'm being honest, I never passed my chute packing certification course." With a thrust that slammed Eoin hard into his seat, the marine returned his parachute.

Eoin tried to ignore the implication. His gut told him she was lying, but he couldn't hear his gut at the moment. The sudden urgency for emergency equipment reminded Eoin of his and his Da's sprint toward the evacuation shuttles. The first ship they were scheduled for had been vaporized only a hundred meters from where his Da stood, holding young Eoin to his chest.

"All strapped in?" the male marine asked. "Let's find out. On your feet, candidates!"

Everyone stood in front of the jump seat, two boys still desperately trying to figure out the thigh buckles.

"You, A-2-6-6," the male marine pointed at Jun. "Go check to make sure everyone is geared up properly."

Jun nodded and started checking the girl next to him, Hazel. A sharp verbal encouragement was thrown at Jun for taking too long, so he hurried through the rest. Eoin wasn't sure if the other boy even looked at his waist buckle.

"All ready, sir!" Jun said with a salute.

The marine slapped Jun's salute off his forehead, grunting about being an enlisted man, then asked loud enough for everyone to hear, "You sure, candidate A-2-6-6? If you were sloppy, they are about to die, and it will be your fault."

All the color drained from Jun's face and when the Pelican's rear bay doors started to open his eyes grew as large watermelons. Jun rushed to start double checking his work, but it was too late. The marines started barking new orders, calling the kids to line up, and prepare to jump. They made sure Jun stayed in his place in line. Eoin heard him start to cry.

The doors finished opening, half receding into the dovetail shaped rear end of the Pelican and the other lowering like a ramp into darkness. The Pelican didn't hover in place but continued cruising along its path. Wind and thrusters roared, requiring the two marines to yell their instructions. Eoin couldn't make out much, and hoped the "auto release" was a reference to his parachute.

Eoin looked back at his jump seat as every impulse in his body told him to get back in it and cling for dear life. He was about to jump out of a flying jet. He was about to go to boot camp. Eoin was going to be a soldier in battles where things blew up and aliens tried to kill him.

What the hell am I doing here? he screamed in his head.

A light above the gaping maw into the darkness of night switched from red to yellow.

"Candidates, if you don't leave this bird from that door," the female marine shouted over his head, pointing into the darkness, "you will never be a Spartan! One chance, no do-overs, understood?"

The marine tapped Eoin's shoulder and leaned in close. She still needed to shout to be heard even inches away from Eoin's wide eyes. "You look scared, maggot. Don't worry, I'll keep your jump seat nice and warm for you so you can have a cozy ride back to daddy. Oh wait, he's died for your pathetic crybaby ass."

Someone plowed into the marine, almost toppling her over. "Hey!"

“Oh, sorry, ma’am,” Carter waved and apologized as he rushed toward the front of the line. “I’m too eager, so I’m going to the front. What? Can’t hear you over the wind. Mhm! Thanks for your permission, ma’am.”

The marine sputtered and tried to grab Carter when another boy behind Eoin grabbed her belt and told her he really needed to pee. By the time she turned back around, Carter was standing in the front of the line chatting with the door marine pointing back at the other. Before his story could be verified, the yellow light over the door started flashing. By the way the two babysitters responded, Eoin guessed they had seconds before the jumping would start.

“Stand ready!” the marine at the door yelled.

Eoin watched the yellow light blink. His heart beat synchronized with it, filling his whole chest so he couldn’t breath. This was all a huge mistake.

Jun let out a sob, and yelled out he was sorry.

The boy behind Eoin tapped his foot against the metal deck, but abruptly stopped when the tapping turned to splashing.

All sixteen pairs of eyes watched the yellow light waiting for the color to change, but it just kept blinking and blinking.

Eoin again looked at his jumpseat, his ride back to safety. *This is stupid*, he decided. *I’m going back to the orphanage. They can all go off and be dumb marines. I’ll join the Army after I go to school.*

“Green!” The marines yelled together. Eoin had missed the change. “Go! Go! Go!”

The line didn’t move. Carter stepped to the side, away from the marine trying to grab him and throw him out the back of the Pelican. “That’s it maggot, you’re out! Sit your ass down!”

Carter didn’t move. Instead he turned to Hazel, checked her buckles, flashed her a thumbs up, and helped her take that first jump into the night. Her scream faded and she vanished into the unknown skies over Onyx.

The next kid stepped forward and Carter repeated his check. This time, the marine shouted instructions at Carter. “Red means dead, candidate. You see any red?”

Carter gave a thumbs up and the next kid jumped - with a bit of an extra push from Carter.

Jun stepped up to Carter and tried to hug him, but the door marine kept them on task. Carter gave him a big back thump and a reassuring head-nod before leading him out. Jun jumped, head turned back with eyes locked on Carter's, tears still flowing.

The line marched forward. The boy behind Eoin pushed him toward the door. He stepped in two more puddles before he reached Carter and the marine.

Carter nodded at Eoin, then checked him over. A corrective *click* generated terrifying visions of what might have just been, sending Eoin over the edge. He would have died! These marines were going to push him out of a plane without checking his parachute and let him splat against the ground.

Carter grabbed Eoin's forearm as he tried to bolt and shouted over the roar, "You can do this!"

Eoin looked back at Carter, and the boy stepped closer. He continued to speak to Eoin, ignoring the marine screaming at them to freaking jump already. "Help me save lives, Eoin! We can save the other kids together! We can win if we aren't scared!"

If we aren't scared, Eoin repeated in his head, *we can win*. Those had been his Da's words when Eoin begged him not to join the Army, to not go fight the aliens.

"If I let the aliens scare me so much I run and hide, then they have already won, O'. As long as I'm brave, as long as we are brave then we will never be too weak to be heroes. Like the ones in your games. Bravery is what makes the heroes strong, O'. Let's be strong and fearless together. It's what your Ma and sisters would want."

Eoin looked back at his jump seat. Would his Da have taken the ride back? No. What would his Da have done?

Eoin yanked his arm free of Carter and took a step away from the door.

"That's it. You're done!" The door Marine yelled.

Eoin took another step back, knocking over the next kid in line. He glanced over his shoulder. Tara looked back at him, barely holding up the kid he knocked

over. Her gaze studied him as if he were a map to read. Behind her, the female marine marched forward, grinning victoriously, arm stretched out to snatch him.

Eoin faced forward, the door marine was pissed, and Carter's eyes repeated his last words, "*We can save them, if we aren't scared.*"

Eoin clenched his jaw, nodded at Carter, and sprinted toward the darkness. He turned back and yelled "Marines suck!" then leapt, screaming the only battle cry he knew, "Rangers lead the way!"

Bewildered face watched him, and the door marine mouthed W-T-F.

Gravity took over, hurling Eoin toward Onyx, his face pointed skyward. Another face peaked out over the lowered ramp. It was a red headed boy with freckled cheeks covered in tears. Eoin recognized the face; it belonged to a boy who went by the name Eoin Mackenzie Lojak. His father had joined the UNSC Army after the Covenant glassed Eoin's world, killing all his family and friends. That boy then lost his father. Lost his new home. He became an orphan. The boy was smart, quick, and fairly strong for his age, but he had a big secret. Eoin Mackenzie Lojak was scared. Scared to be alone. Scared of being blown up by aliens from space. But if he was going to become a hero, he couldn't be scared, he couldn't be weak. So Eoin did the logical thing and left his fear in that Pelican soaring through the dark night over Onyx. Eoin A047 jumped out of the Pelican and left behind Eoin Mackenzie Lojak to keep his weakness far away.

Eoin A047 closed his eyes and fell. *No more weakness. No more fear*, he promised himself. The sensation of gravity pulling him down into the free fall filled his chest. He focused on weightlessness and the feeling of releasing control to the laws of physics. Eoin let it replace his anxiety, leaning into fall. Once he became nothing but an object falling through the sky, he took a breath and smiled.

By instinct, he rolled over to face the ground, which was both his very real near future and also his metaphorical one. A few questions popped in his head, the most pressing of them being, what the hell was he supposed to do after he landed? Where did he need to go next?

Well, he figured, as long as I have people like Carter and Tara around, I guess we can figure it out together.

Chapter 5

Operation Black Cat, +06:03:13:26

Uvranelo

The drop pod rattled so violently Eoin barely made out the data displayed in his HUD. A velocity readout on his left screen updated every fourth of a second, a snail's pace to Eoin's enhanced eyes.

V- 4470.4m/s

V- 4246.9m/s

V- 4023.4m/s

V- 3799.8m/s

The drag of the atmosphere scrubbed off huge amounts of energy from the comet-shaped pod. In just a few minutes, Eoin would go from the blistering orbital speed of 8,493 meters per second to the cruising speed of 178 meters per second. A meteor turned into a passenger airliner all because of a little air. Who didn't love physics?

A glance to his right gave him a quick shot of relief. All seven other pods still flashed green pips. Gambit-2 was on course and accounted for. AIs in the drop pods furiously calculated terabytes of data flooding in from small cameras and other sensors dotting the exteriors of the man-made meteorite. These computers were galaxies apart from the likes of Archibald, but they had one task and they did it well - most times.

The drop pod's computer kicked out a map showing its preferred landing site as well as where the other pods wanted to land. Eoin hit **Confirm** and drag chute to deploy in response, bleeding off more speed with an abrupt, teeth-clacking jerk. It gnawed at the squad leader that he couldn't make the choice for all his people. But, if a pod knew it had an alive and awake passenger aboard, it put the onus of confirming a landing site on them. Probably something to do with *always being responsible for one's own fate* or some other military dogma. At the end of the day, however, these marines' lives were in Eoin's hands - on paper and in reality.

Through the glass panel at Eoin's shin, the jungle canopy rushed up to greet him. In a few seconds, the powerful landing thrusters would kick in for the final stage of descent.

On the landing map, seven dots with attached ID's blinked green. A single hollow yellow dot bounced back-and-forth between half a dozen coordinates. The ID next to the spastic icon read **Gambit-2-4/Sgt. Hood**. Her pod's computer was clearly unable to make up its mind on a safe place to land.

Damn, Eoin swore to himself. He scrambled to override her pod's nav computer with his own, but it was fruitless. Her pod's computer wasn't failing, but its faulty thruster from before. The blasted thing kept firing, constantly changing her course. The poor computer couldn't keep up. Eoin mentally ran through safety procedures from the M8900 SOEIV manual. *Do I have time to verbally walk her through a manual landing?*

Before he could even broadcast a message, the yellow dot and her ID vanished completely. Her drop pod no longer communicated with the rest of the squad's.

A cold fist seemed to clinch Eoin's heart. He quickly checked SGT Hood's vital signs which should be broadcasting straight from the neural implant woven into the base of her skull. The status pip was green. *But it showed the last update was four minutes ago*, Eoin realized in dismay.

"Sergeant Hood," he shouted over comms, doing his best to be heard over the violent descent through the sky, "Sit-rep?"

If she responded, he didn't hear. The landing thruster burst to life with a sudden roar and crushing G-force. Eoin's biomedically engineered super body tried to squeeze its entire mass into his million dollar boots. That highly trained body also acted on instinct and loosened the appropriate muscles to soften the coming landing.

The instructional material for drop pods called what happened next a "Landing". Which was a lazy attempt by the Brass to get soldiers to ignore the reality that they were crashing into solid ground at a whopping 22 meters per freaking second - or 50mph as the stubborn Texan SGT Strait would always remark.

Four heart beats later, the tops of trees shot up passed Eoin's head. Then the metal beneath his feet crunched. Over the next few milliseconds, shock absorbers went to work as the half-meter of crumble zone at the base of the pod simultaneously collapsed in on itself and burrowed into the soft ground. The jolt threw Eoin against his straps. Painful, but they kept his helmet from colliding into the glass panel in front of him. Even for a Spartan, the impact was jarring, and would leave his knees sore for an hour or so.

Dirt and vegetation erupted into the air. Clumps of steaming mud fell back to the ground, a brown hailstorm that gently thudded after the deafening crash of metal thunder.

Eoin didn't waste a second catching his breath. Even before the pod settled into its new crater, he pulled the manual lever to trigger the explosive screws. *Bang!* The pod's hatch rocketed off into a tree four meters in front of him, shattering and wrapping around its sturdy trunk. His boots were out of the pod just as fast, landing on spongy ground. The cataclysmically upturned soil was brown, rich, and wet from the humid climate of the planet. If he had been wearing Mjolnir armor, Eoin would have sunk down to his ankles in the silty earth.

By involuntary muscle memory, Eoin grasped his weapon, a suppressed M7 submachine gun, and swept it right to left across the treeline ahead of him. The drilled-in habits continued to pilot him. He scanned for hostiles even while whipping his head around, his true focus on the sky behind him. Eight trails of white vapor cut across the blue, left by the blisteringly hot drop pods. Eight trails of vapor streaked toward the jungle, not seven and a plume of black smoke mid-air. A good omen by Hell Jumper standards.

Immediately to his right and less than a stone's toss away, SSGT Kingsley leapt from his steaming pod. Its front hatch had also blasted off and laid crumpled in the trees. The trooper checked the sky and counted vapor trails just like Eoin.

Eoin pinged his comms receiver. Six green ID tags appeared in his HUD and were in motion. After a process of elimination: only one vapor trail didn't have an ID tag moving underneath it. That trail also slanted at an extremely shallow entry vector. SGT Hood must have been out of range and out of sight. *Or worse...*

"I'll get her, Chief," Kingsley transmitted, still catching his breath.

"Negative," Eoin ordered, "Link up with the rest of Gambit-2."

Through Kingsley's clear visor, Eoin read a face concerned with his judgment.

"Move, Staff," Eoin reaffirmed his order.

Thin invisible laser pointed carried their transmission. Standard radio waves went in all directions and could be picked up by anyone. Not great on a hinge head planet. For the remainder of the mission, the only way the squad could electronically communicate was through direct line of sight or with the aid of Bouncer drones.

Eoin already had his field surgery kit attached to his back, and was thirty meters away from his pod by the time Kingsley got in motion. He pulled from a pouch three thumb sized drones then tossed them in the air like very expensive confetti. The tiny mechanical bugs began to buzz and maneuvered themselves to pass along laser comms as Eoin plunged into the dense jungle. Kingsley would deploy Bouncers as well to increase the effective range of the chain.

"Sir," Kingsley said. "I don't see Gambit-2-2 on my display. Surely they survived the jump?"

"They have their SPI armor's camo activated," Eoin responded, even-toned despite being at a full sprint. "Adjust your Spec-Track to look for the scrambled signature."

"Right," Kingsley said. Then a moment later, "Got 'em. I'll drop a Rad-Spike at our rally point. See you soon, Chief."

Eoin pinged back a green affirmative, then really poured on the speed.

Kingsley worried that Eoin volunteered to go find Hood because he wanted to win points as their squad leader. Maybe at a subconscious level that was true. But the reality was that Eoin was a Spartan and could reach his trooper in a quarter of the time Kingsley could.

With an eye-blink command, Eoin's visor produced an infrared overlay. Above him, a streak of hot air rapidly cooled and diffused with the rest of the atmosphere. At a time like this, Eoin really wished he did have the more powerful Mjolnir armor, despite the difficulties it might have with the soft terrain. That weapon system - and it truly was a weapon as well as armor - was designed to allow a Smart AI to be plugged directly into a Spartan's neural weave. A splinter of Archibald could be riding shotgun in his brain and calculate the likely crash site

of SGT Hood's pod, saving precious time. Not just for Hood, but for the ODST crippled somewhere in the jungle.

But that wasn't the reality on the ground. And wishful thinking wasn't how Spartans were trained to deal with problems.

Roughly a klick away from the designated landing zone, Eoin's visor outlined a streak of flash-roasted dirt. Then, shortly after a course adjustment, his visor picked up a super hot blob in the shape of a drop pod. By the shape of the blob and the long streak leading up to it, Eoin guessed Hood had come sliding in on her side. Definitely not the way drop pods were meant to land. Hood wouldn't have been cushioned from the impact the same way Eoin had.

The Spartan swore again as he jumped into the trench the pod had furrowed out of the jungle. He raced along the scorched path laid before him, steam still rising in the air in thin wisps. With a blink, the visor returned to its default setting, removing the giant red amoeba taking up most of Eoin's vision. There, at the end of the trench: a metal pod. Thankfully it was intact, which should have eased Eoin worries. Instead, the Spartan now wondered if he raced to a military vehicle or a coffin.

As he approached, his helmet sensors picked up the faint radiation signature emitted by Hood's implant. Her ID tag appeared, and Eoin checked her vital status.

Gambit-2-4/ Sgt. Hood. Alive.

The clever little implant in her skull adjusted the spectrum of its nonlethal radiation and pulse of the particles it admitted to communicate Hood's heart rate, blood oxygen content, and brain activity. The first two stats looked good to Eoin, and the third suggested the trooper was unconscious.

"Gambit-2-4," Eoin broadcasted to her pod. "Are you awake? Sergeant Hood, sit-rep."

No reply.

She likely has a head injury after that crash, he speculated. She is lucky to have a head at all. Eoin thought back to the casualty report of CPL Karen Maxwell and her debilitating head injury. His jaw clenched, and he rushed the last meter to the pod.

As Eoin closed distance, an electronic crackle broke his silent running. A groggy voice spoke into his helmet, "Gambit-2, ugh... Gambit-2-4 down. Pod won't open. Anyone copy?"

"Heard, Hood," Eoin throat shouted, while his body sighed with relief. "I've got you, Sergeant."

"Chief," Hood's voice grew stronger with every breath. "Pod's hatch seems jammed, won't lift. Activating the manual release in five. Stand back."

"Negative! Negative!" Eoin shouted.

What Eoin saw - and Hood's groggy brain hadn't realized yet - was the orientation of the pod. The comet shaped vehicle must have spiraled as it slid across the jungle floor, then came to rest with the hatch and Hell Jumper face down. If Hood pulled the lever to activate the explosive screws, the force of the controlled blast would be bounced right back up from the ground. Instead of the door and pod separating, an already banged up pararescue trooper would be slammed back into her pod. If she didn't have a cracked skull yet, that would do the trick

Unsure if Hood comprehended his command, Eoin made a split second decision. Instead of leaping back from what could be a potentially chaotic event of metal, marine and thermodynamics, Eoin grabbed the pod by its still orange glowing main thruster and heaved. His gloves held back the inferno for a second, but soon the titanium kevlar weave on his palms began to smoke. Eoin forced his hands to not give into the instinct of avoiding hot things, and twisted the pod around along its long axis. In one great Spartan and powersuit-fueled heave, the pod rotated. The hatch door now safely pointed halfway up the nearest tree trunk.

Eoin turned his head away in a small attempt to keep it from getting blasted by any errant debris. But the hatch didn't go rocketing off. Instead, Eoin heard the thud of a marine being tumbled around in a can, then a broadcast from Hood.

"What the hell, Chief?" Hood sounded like she had a wicked hangover.

"Apologies, Sergeant," Eoin replied, "Didn't want you blowing that hatch while facing the dirt. You are clear now."

"I heard you, sir," Hood said, clearly annoyed at what she thought was unnecessary roughness. "I'm gonna try the civil way, first. Stand back for hatch opening. All clear?"

Eoin stepped back, “All clear.”

The hatch swung up with the speed of a boxer’s uppercut. Eoin rounded it, and held out a hand for the sergeant. She stared at it for a moment, the equation of pride versus pain playing out over her bloodied face. Her nose was definitely broken, and would need to be reset. With a grunt, she grabbed Eoin’s hand, which stung like a nasty sunburn. They got the pararescue trooper on her feet, then with his knuckles gave the forehead of her helmet a light double tap. The kinesthetic command to her suit to kick out a more detailed health report to the knocker.

“I’m fine, Chief.” Hood brushed off Eoin’s still hovering fist.

Her suit reluctantly agreed with the stubborn trooper’s self evaluation. Instead of pumping out a bunch of numbers, the thing could have saved itself the hassle and simply said, “*She’s a marine. Does she have one eye open and something that can pull a trigger? Yes? Okay, then she is going to keep fighting, so why are we talking?*”

The marine popped her helmet off and held it between her thighs - technically against Navy Regs in a combat zone, but who was watching. Her face was a mess. Blood covered the lower half of her head and the tips of her blonde hair. Eoin produced a gauze pad from a thigh pouch and held it out to his trooper. Hood simply used the soft part of her armor in the crook of elbow and whipped it across her face, as if she had just let out a big wet sneeze. Then added, “Save it for the shock troopers.”

Eoin stowed the gauze then pointed at her crooked nose, and asked “Want me to set that?”

“Like hell,” she scoffed. Then without hesitation or fanfare she grabbed the bridge of her nose and cranked it back into position. It sounded like a bundle of chalk sticks snapping.

Ouch, Eoin thought, remembering the several times he reset his own broken nose.

Hood growled in her hurt and her eyes watered, doing her best to hide from the Spartan how much pain she was really in.

Eoin acted like he hadn’t noticed the tears flowing through the streaks of smear blood on her cheeks - a big gold mirror visor assisting him. He detached a pouch from his chest, and handed it over in a business-as-usual fashion. “Looks

like some of your field meds got trashed in the landing. You can carry some of my spares.”

Hood opened the pouch to take its inventory. Inside were several small injection vials of a low grade pain killer. When Hood snapped up, face burning and ready to say something full of marine bravado, Eoin spoke first, “For the shock troopers, of course. Now, finish mounting up. We are about two clicks from the rest of Gambit-2.”

“Yes, Chief,” Hood clipped on the pouch of painkillers, and grabbed the rest of her kit from the downed pod. She gave the large pack that was the squad’s only high powered communication hardware a quick but thorough examination. Seeming to have passed her inspection, Hood slung it over her shoulder. Without that gear, Gambit-2 would have to get creative in how it communicated with the rest of Gambit Team floating silently in orbit above them.

“Lucky landing,” Eoin said, looking the crash site over again.

“Lucky?” Hood looked offended as she slammed her helmet back on. Her voice then transmitted into Eoin’s helmet. “I flew this bitch in myself.”

Eoin chose to remain silent instead of voicing his disbelief. To his dismay she took the silence as a challenge and started explaining herself.

“Damn attitude thruster kept firing, so I turned off the main computer. Was nice to finally not be knocked around like a piñata for a second. You know what a piñata is, right? Do cyborgs have birthdays, or do you go by the date ONI rolled you off the assembly line?”

“Stand by, Sergeant,” Eoin came to an abrupt halt, fist held up.

“Can’t take a joke, Chief?” Hood asked, catching up to the faster Spartan.

With a blink command by Eoin, Hood’s pod self-destructed with a chest thumping *whomp!* Hood flinched, but was unbothered by the sudden detonation. After all, it was evidence that OPR was running around dirt-side.

“You were saying?” Eoin said with ease as he started running again. He knew he shouldn’t be making the banged up marine run just yet, but his soldier’s gut told him to do it anyway.

“Since the drag chute wouldn’t pop,” Hood started again through gasps. “I needed to scrub off some more energy before firing the landing thrusters. Figured,

ya know, these trees looked soft enough. So, I used the basic flight controls to level out. Smash through a bunch of branches. Then punched the landing thruster right before I hit dirt. Like hittin' the brakes on one of those old school dragsters my gramps used to race.”

Eoin held back the urge to scold her, berate her for leaning on blind luck, but that would be unfair. True, Hood was lucky that these unknown tree species weren't super dense. She could be speared through on a branch right now. However, what saved her life was experience and practiced skill. She knew her equipment, made a choice, and executed. An admirable quality to him. Hood had done all that while Eoin was still on the step of deciding the best way to save her life.

Eventually, I'll realize these people are Hell Jumpers. But in that moment of panic, watching Hood's pod blink out on his display, all Eoin could think of was a child screaming while the world came crashing down on her in fire and metal.

“Good work,” Eoin said, then thought of a compliment to add, “When we get back up in the Black, I'd like you to write an after action report on that crash. Detail out the steps you took and your discussion matrix. I think we could all learn a few tricks that maneuver.”

“Seriously, Chief?” Hood screeched. “Ugh. Yessah.”

Not the response he was expecting. Eoin intended to honor her. During Spartan training, being singled out for inventiveness and asked to teach your siblings meant more than getting some medal to add to a dusty box.

Should I tell her she can name the maneuver the Hood Landing or something? Eoin tried to think of a way to salvage the moment, but opted to remain silent as they ran the rest of the way to their original landing zone.

The trace radiation from the Rad-Spike appeared on Eoin's HUD, guiding him and Hood to the far side of Gambit-2's LZ. It was a large clearing in the jungle that probably turned into a popular watering hole in the rainy seasons. As they got closer, six ID tags populated the display marking where each member of his squad lay hiding in wait. The Bouncer drones - six in total with Hood's added in - suddenly swarmed out from their loose holding pattern. Once they snapped into a new line which linked with the other Bouncers in the area, green comm pips replaced red ones by everyone's ID icon.

“Well, based on how far behind the Sergeant is, I’m guessing you aren’t carrying her corpus, Chief,” CPL Sung-Su said in his accented english.

“Sorry, Corporal,” Hood broadcast back, “You will have to wait a bit longer to get my job.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to carry that comms gear,” LCPL Shahar said, his accent surprisingly American despite his Hebrew origins.

“Shalom to you too, Lance,” Hood greeted. “Chief, my back is suddenly hurting. You mind if I store some of my spare grenades up my fire team's ass?”

Eoin snorted, glad to see everyone in good spirits. “Negative, Sergeant,” he said. Then he unfortunately needed to switch to a private line with her to add, “Also it isn’t your fire team anymore. You understand that, correct? You will follow the Warrant Officers orders.”

In the shuffle to create these new Spartan enhanced medical evacuation units, SGT Hood had gone from squad leader over Sung-Su, Shahar, and LCPL Baker - the latter now lost to Hoplite Team - to a grunt. A Marine grunt, under a Navy Warrant Officer. Not the best way to start a professional relationship.

Hood’s light-hearted tone evaporated, her usual sour tone when speaking to the Spartans in her squad returning. “Understood, Chief,” she said in clipped words. “Slip of the tongue.”

Most of Gambit-2 emerged from their hiding place and rallied around their two returning members. A few fist bumped Hood and patted her down in a mock medical examination. Eoin trotted past the reunion, which was noise in the helmets, but silent to the outside world besides the *clunking* of metal against ceramic armor plates.

You could have gone a little slower, a message appeared on the old Spartan channel. **I was really enjoying my nap.**

A tall bush made of several leaves the size of a Spartan's oversized boot warped, then shifted like sinking sand. The blur seemed to move through the verdant vegetation like an air bubble trapped under a bed sheet. In the middle of the approaching blur, Eoin’s HUD displayed a green box with **Gambit 2-2**. The approaching Spartan turned off their chameleon armor revealing a green titanium cyclops with a golden eye. They stalked forward lightly, a hunting jaguar

completely comfortable in the jungle. In their arms, they carried the meter and half long SRS99-AM sniper rifle, the whole barrel shrouded in a suppressor system. And, good to their word, a rocket launcher rose over their shoulder, spare ammo also attached to their back harness.

“Why am I not shocked you smuggled that thing down here?” Eoin typed back.

You said I could. the Spartan replied

“I was trying to discourage you with paperwork.”

You really think there is a paper trail for this pretty lady? They thumbed at the M41 SPNKER over their shoulder.

“Fair enough,” Eoin rolled his eyes even as he blinked out the message, “Just don’t tell me what you traded to get that bang-tube. That’s an order.”

I’m sure Hood won’t miss it. the next message read.

“What?” Eoin said aloud over the squad channel.

The rest of Gambit-2 stopped talking and turned to him, body language confused by the sudden outburst. Then just as quickly they shifted from caution to preparing for imminent danger. What else would shock their squad leader besides their inevitable screwing?

The other Spartan chuckled inside their helmet. Shoulders rising and falling being the only clue they were laughing their ass off at their gullible sibling.

Relax, Eoin. a new message read. **I promise I didn’t mess up your chance of hooking up with Hood. But YOU might want to start filling out requisition forms for lost personal items due to “Unexpected Combat Events”.**

“Good.” Eoin replied in text form. Then quickly adding, “And gross. The sergeant is eight years older than me.”

Eoin turned from the Spartan as they once more vanished into a blur, the rest of his squad still looked back at him in confused expectation.

“At ease,” Eoin said. “The Warrant was just volunteering to get off their lazy ass and scout ahead.”

Everyone relaxed. Fingers drifted back away from trigger guards and shoulders slumped. They had a moment of relative peace. Eoin let them settle in for a few heart beats, let their minds catch up from the jarring drop. When he spied Shahar absentmindedly rolling his chronically achy right shoulder, Eoin knew it was time to get the high speed operators engaged.

“Okay G-2,” he barked out, “Equipment check. Get yourself squared and focus up.”

Eoin commanded that everyone’s visor display a map of the region. Highlighted in green was their landing site, the ODSST’s original landing site, and the location where God’s gun-wielding valkyries planned to pick them all up in thirty-six hours. The map also displayed the nearest Covenant outpost, which consisted of a main structure no larger than a log cabin next to a vehicle bay. A yellow blob marked a section of jungle where the ODSST *should* be hunkered down.

The operation clock read **+06:03:21:05**. Those shock troopers had been on mission for six days. Nearly a week straight spent bruised and bandaged in fox holes. Their meds would be running out soon, if not already depleted.

Eoin highlighted their path over the rolling terrain. From where Gambit-2 stood to the edge of the yellow search area was a twenty kilometer hike through thick hostile jungle. A five hour trek for Eoin - if he was being extra cautious - but for his marines...

“We will reach the search area in twelve hours,” Eoin began to brief. “Warrant will lead the way in their chameleon armor. I’ll cover our trail doing the same. Move in a standard spread formation where we can. I want to leave as little of a footprint as possible. The foliage is thick, so if you all haven’t yet, deploy a set of Bouncers so we can stay connected. Clear?”

“To hell with that,” CPL Baker said. The usually breezy Somali woman sounded genuinely pissed. “We will get there in eight hours. Big Green, I’ve got your six. Let’s go light the way for these other slow pokes.”

The Spartan sized blur subtly shifted, a head now turned waiting to see Eoin's reaction. The rest of the surrounding, opaque, shock trooper helmets did the same.

Damn, Eoin groaned. Again, he had managed to offend his people. Now Baker wanted to prove their capability by trying to keep up with a Spartan. If he let her go, she might burn herself out, or worse make a mistake and put the whole squad at risk.

No! Eoin chided himself. *They are all qualified, proven operators, otherwise they wouldn't be here. Hood manually flew in a bunk drop pod, for God sake. And clearly she wasn't going to blow that hatch into the ground and kill herself. I just saw her as incapable. As not a Spartan. I've got to start trusting my people.*

With a subtle dip of his chin, Eoin told the other Spartan he approved of Baker's demand. The other Spartan gave no protest and pinged a green approval.

"You two set the pace," Eoin said. "I'd say take your time and be cautious, but..." He glanced at the advancing operation clock. Each second that ticked away was one more second their lost marines lay in agony and marched closer to Hell's gate. Eoin said, channeling Carter A259 as best he could, "Clock is ticking. Miss Sunny Baker says we can reach those shock troopers in eight hours. Let's prove her right. Move out."

The blur and Baker vanished into the jungle growth, while everyone else picked themselves up, ready to rush across unknown hostile terrain.

"I'll trigger the self-destruct on our pods once you've cleared the blast radius," Kingsley said. "It's my favorite part of the mission, after all."

Eoin nodded in agreement.

It was time to move out. As he pointed a perfectly executed drill sergeant knife hand, ushering the squad onward into the jungle, the great leaves overhead began to vibrate. Then the air around them started going *wom, wom, wom*.

Gambit-2 lept under whichever bush, giant root, or decaying log was nearest. Eoin clenched his teeth, watching the belly of a sleek purple ship drift over the treetops.