

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 4

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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.