

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 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 Shahr 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 ODS'T'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 ODS'T *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.