

# 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 25<sup>th</sup>.”

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, 5<sup>th</sup> 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 ODSF 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 ODSF courses - but the majority who were transferring from an ODSF unit usually kept the reason to themselves. In the Burning Valkyries, every pararescue member ranked sergeant or up had once been an ODSF, 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 ODSF 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 ODSFs 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 SPNKR. 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.