

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 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 he 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.*