

# 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 3

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

#### In Orbit Above Uvranelo

Half of Eoin's mind analyzed the data pouring into his HUD and on the drop pod's own displays. The other half of his mind told his fingers to punch commands into the keypad next to the pod's acceleration control stick. The stick twitched back and forth as the autopilot maneuvered the pod to its new intercept location.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Capt. Voronoff said that Eoin’s squad would launch from the assault-carrier ship in drop pods, she actually meant they’d be gently pushed out the door. The original plan had been for Eoin’s squad - Gambit-2 - to be released from the drop pod chutes and propelled forward on nothing but a few puffs from cold gas thrusters. Once the eight pods were far enough away from the ship for safe maneuvering, they would be picked up by three of OPR’s tricked-out D77-ME Medivac Pelicans, called Meteors (ask any marine that's ridden one down to dirt-side why they are called that). Once hooked up, the Pelicans and the two AC-220 gunships - the ones politely requisitioned by Lt. Kassab - would have meandered around like the rest of the other rescue boats out patrolling for survivors in the

debris field. Then, when no one was looking, the five crafts would magnetically clamp onto a predetermined hunk of space junk, turn off everything including life support, and wait for the next phase of the mission.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sit-rep, Gambit-2-7" Eoin ordered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But to a Mormon,” Kingsley said.

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

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

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

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

“My ass you were hung over! You was still drunk as a skunk,” Sergeant Robert “Bobby” Strait shared, followed by a Texas-sized chuckle. “I got stuck in

his squad, and I swear to Jesus in Heaven, the Staff was trying to steer us to the nearest bar.”

“And I got us there!” Kingsley declared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again, a vivid image of a school girl with blonde braids sticking her tongue out at him assaulted his thoughts. Whoever that girl was must have been from his childhood; the image in his mind was just too clear to be fictitious. *We clearly weren’t friends*, he thought. *What was her name?* Eoin teetered on the notion of diving deeper in his psyche, the siren song of curiosity calling to him.

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

Three detonations sent tremors through Eoin’s pod. Blazing blue plasma shimmered then dissipated to wisps way too close to the bow of *Cygnus* for anyone’s comfort. Checking his HUD, Eoin saw that the two Covenant light

cruisers whose patrol they'd rudely interrupted were twenty-two seconds away. In moments they would bring their full weapons packages to bear on the lonely, smaller *Cygnus*. Eoin needed only to look around at the floating, derelict hulks to see what a plasma cannon broadside could do.

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

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

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

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

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

“Excuse me, *Lieutenant*, but I...” the Valkyrie started.

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

“No suitable candidates in range, *Ma’am*,” Archibald replied. “Also, stand by one.”

A plasma torpedo twisted past the last layer of point defense weapons and slammed into the *Cygnus*’s portside. A flash of blue light cast stark, eerie shadows in Eoin’s drop pod, and a burst of static rang from his helmet speakers. Eoin watched from one of the Pelican’s cameras as reinforced titanium armor plates bubbled and boiled around the edge of a gruesome hole. On another camera display, dozens of violet points of light began to bloom and grow brighter along the bodies of the sleek Covenant warships.

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

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

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

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

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

“Brace for slip-wash!” Cinder called out.

*Or a ship detonating*, Eoin worried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Unsure, A-047," Archibald replied. "I am analyzing their behavior as we speak. Give me some time. As I previously brought to your and others' attention, a D77-ME is not the proper work posting for someone of my station. Hmm. Preliminary analysis suggests that the Covenant are only targeting the larger remains of the 27th Assault Fleet. Specifically, sections of hulls that would have likely contained life rafts. My guess, A-047, is that they are ensuring there are no survivors for the UNSC to rescue. Cold blooded bastards. Apologies for the off-color commentary, sir.

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

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

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

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

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

Another vibration, one that rattled Eoin’s teeth.

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

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

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

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

A graphic of the debris field appeared on his HUD.

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

plummeting to the planet within minutes. Thus providing cover for Gambit-2's atmospheric entry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eoin briefed them on his plan.

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

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

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

"Thank you, Archibald," Eoin said.

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

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

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

"Deal." Eoin grinned as he returned to his reentry calculations.

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

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

"Explain," Kassab said through gritted teeth.

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

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

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

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

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

"Chief Warrant Officer Eoin," Lt. Kassab growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They won’t, Lieutenant,” Eoin reassured. “I promise to bring this squad back to you.”

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

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

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

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

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

As the vibration washed over them, the two Spartans standing in the vacuum of space heaved with the might of bleeding edge technology and hard-earned muscle. The tattered remains of the UNSC frigate *Foy at Twilight* split into three carefully cut pieces. One piece - hiding three Pelican ambulances - remained stationary as the two others quickly moved away from each other. Not only had the Spartans’ push been strong enough to throw a whole warship engine nacelle out of

orbit, but it had also been perfectly angled. Of course, the aid of a stuffy Smart AI goes a long way when calculating orbital mechanics.

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

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

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

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