

The patrol blimp *Midnight Dancer* swam through the night in silence, effectively invisible from the ground thanks to a perfect combination of high altitude, cloudy sky, and powerful magic. A mere twenty yards in length, it had not been designed for battle; rather, its slender lines and maneuvering fins gave it speed, agility and discretion. It was a modern craft, perhaps less than a century old, and had been built by low-skilled shipwrights using inexpensive materials. It only looked good; it was flying junk.

The perfect ship for a hopeless mission, and Sergeant Hektor Huxley knew it only too well. That was fine with him. He would welcome death when she came for him. He glanced at the troops crammed on the open deck, ready for the imminent drop. A full platoon, four dozen troopers, half of them with less than three months of field experience. *They* didn't deserve to die. Unlike him, they hadn't lived yet and still thought they had a future. None of that applied to Hektor, yet he had to pretend there was hope.

"It's almost drop time," he said, his booming voice cutting through the night. "Who's ready to party?"

They responded in unison. "We are!" He couldn't see their faces. The red lanterns that dangled around the deck only provided enough illumination to see their shapes, but he knew from their tone they were smiling with confidence.

Hektor stepped up to one of the young female privates in the front row, flashing a grin with humor he didn't feel. Beryl, if he remembered correctly. A mousy girl, still in her late teens, probably one of those penniless orphans who traded service in the army for an education. Arrived just two weeks ago, first in line to volunteer for this.

"What about you, Private Beryl?" Hektor asked her. "First mission, right?"

"Yes, sir," she said, putting emphasis on the 'sir.'

"Enjoying yourself?"

She shrugged. "Don't much like flying, sir."

Hektor crossed his arms and eyed her critically. "And you call yourself an Airman?"

"No, sir," she said, shaking her head. "I call myself... an *Airwoman*." She threw the last word as she lifted her chin and looked away, mimicking the bad acting of cheap actors in public theater. Had she actually *rehearsed* a joke just in case he called on her? How adorable! If only it had been a *new* joke.

Still, laughter erupted around them. Hektor took one step closer and rested his hand on her shoulder, keeping his voice low.

"You gonna be okay?"

Beryl nodded. "Once we start dropping, yeah. It's flying I don't like. Falling, I'm fine with."

Hektor raised an eyebrow. "You messing with me, here?"

"Why, sir, I'd never do that, sir." She managed to keep the smile off her lips, but her eyes were shining with mischief. She kept putting emphasis on the word 'sir,' confirming she was making the error on purpose.

"Is that why you keep calling me sir?" Hektor asked, raising his voice and leaning forward with hands on his hips. "Do these pips spell lieutenant to you? Do I look like a *sir* to you?!"

"Yes, Sergeant! No, Sergeant! I don't know, Sergeant!" She thumped her right fist over her left breast. She was still a rookie, but at least she saluted like a vet.

Hektor wagged his finger at her. "Funny girl. Just for that, you're going last."

"Yes, sir."

She probably thought he was playing along with the joke. Hektor knew better. He liked her; he was buying her a few extra seconds of life. Let's see if he could buy her even more. He leaned toward her, keeping his voice low. "Private, your left boot gem isn't socketed right. A bad gust of wind, or you bump into

someone, and it'll fly off. Then there's no soft landing for you."

Beryl glanced at it. Only three of the four claw-like clips held it in place.

"Shit!" she said, blushing. "Sorry, Sarge."

"See to it."

"Will do, Sarge." She paused for a beat. "Hey, Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"Does that means you like me?"

Hektor gave her a gentle tap on the side of the head.

"Can't let you splatter on the ground down there," he said. "Who else am I going to make fun of next drop?"

Beryl kneeled to adjust her boot gem. "Thank you, Sarge."

Hektor stepped back, straightened his shoulders, and cleared his throat.

"All right, maggots," he said, "final recap. We'll be above Caer Griefheart in a few minutes. I don't need to remind you the Gore Mountains are hard and sharp. No vegetation to break your fall. At this altitude, it'll take about twenty seconds to hit the ground." He held up a hand as if to silence protests before they came. "Now I know some of you idiots can't count that high, so just keep an eye on the soldier just below you. Blake, you got that?"

There was relaxed laughter among the crew. Those next to Blake elbowed him or shoved him mockingly.

"Got that, Sarge," Blake said, his lips curving in a good-natured smile. He was probably the smartest Airman Hektor had ever trained, with guts to match. No dummy, that one.

"Now, you'll want to trigger your soft landing spells at least five seconds before hitting the ground so the magic has time to slow you down. No less than three seconds, or you'll go splat, and don't go above eight, or you'll be fodder for the Rot's arrows."

Hektor stepped to the aft railing and unhooked the safety chain. Everybody knew what that meant—the drop was imminent. The soldiers fell silent.

“It’s dark tonight,” Hektor added, “and the winds are strong. Stay sharp, trust your training and keep an eye out for each other. No heroics. Blake, you got that?”

“Got it, Sarge,” Blake said. He wasn’t smiling anymore. Nobody was.

Hektor pulled two grenades from the ammo strap that crossed his chest and lifted them up for all to see.

“Get your grenades ready. Illumination in the left hand, explosive healing in the right. Don’t hesitate to use them. We have plenty more back at camp. Y’all do this right, this is gonna be a cakewalk.”

While the soldiers followed his instructions, Hektor saw Lieutenant Morwood step out of the forecabin and head his way. His brows were furrowed with concern.

“Everybody line up!” Hektor shouted, his eyes still on the lieutenant. “We’re dropping in a minute.”

Morwood leaned into Hektor’s ear. “Sergeant, a word.”

“Yes, sir.”

They stepped away to stand next to the port-side railing, out of ear shot from the soldiers.

“A message just came in,” Morwood whispered. “Orders are confirmed, the mission is a go. I’m sorry.”

Hektor’s shoulders sagged a little. He caught himself and straightened up.

“Sir, this is a suicide drop.”

“I know,” Morwood said. “We’ve talked about this.”

“We’re *not* going to rescue those mages or medics. We’re just going to get slaughtered, that’s it.”

"I *know*," Morwood repeated.

Hektor repressed a sneer of disgust. The lieutenant may be just a boy, but he was still his commanding officer.

"What about you, sir? You okay with making this drop anyway?"

Morwood shifted with obvious discomfort, looking for his words. It only took a moment for Hektor to realize the cause of his hesitation. The hot ball of anger he had been suppressing flared up.

"Aw shit, sir, are you serious?"

"There was a message about that too," Morwood admitted.

"Sir, if *you're* not dropping, that's the message right there." Hektor was finding it hard to contain his indignation.

"It's not my call, Sergeant."

"Sir—" Hektor started. Morwood cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"Sergeant, it's *not* my call."

Hektor held the lieutenant's gaze for several seconds, searching for cowardice or callousness. He found neither.

"Troops, thirty seconds, get ready!" He shouted the words, his eyes still on Morwood.

"I'm sorry," the lieutenant said. There was no duplicity in his eyes.

"You could always disobey orders," Hektor said.

"I know you're angry..."

"Damn *right* I'm angry!" Hektor growled. "This is stupid. The stupidest thing."

Morwood nodded "I don't disagree."

"Who's the officer in charge, then?"

"You are."

Hektor shook his head. "The *commissioned* officer, sir. I'm a sergeant."

Morwood shook his head. "They trust you. You're their best shot. Even if I dropped with you, I'd be useless. We both know that."

The lieutenant was right, though Hektor found the whole notion ludicrous. Would anyone still trust him if they knew what he'd done? Morwood surprised him, however. Despite his age, he displayed surprising courage and humility. Not that it mattered. Hektor was still furious at him. Who else was there to hate?

"You'll go far, sir," he said.

Morwood closed his eyes and nodded. "May the Source guide you."

Hektor turned from him and headed for the aft railing, where all the soldiers were lined up and ready to jump.

"Yeah," Hektor muttered to himself. "No one else will."

He reached into his pocket and squeezed the sacred medallion he always carried with him. He couldn't feel the details through his thick gloves, but it still brought him closer to the Source. He hadn't been very religious back in his days, but here, on the edge of the world, his faith was the only thing that brought him solace and comfort.

As he came to the head of the line, he suppressed his anger and slipped into the role everyone expected of him. He turned into the guy who had done this a hundred times and had no care in the world. He faced the soldiers with a grin, turned around, and spat his contempt in the empty space behind him.

"All right!" he bellowed, "let's get this party started. You've trained for this, you've got the best gear in the world, and those prisoners down there, they're counting on you."

He looked at all the young faces in front of him. Yeah, they were with him now. They'd follow.

"Are you ready to dance?" he shouted.

They cheered and hooted in response. Hektor nodded and held up the

grenades still clutched in his fists.

“Let’s go!” he said. “And Beryl?”

“Yeah?” she answered.

Hektor grinned. “Don’t forget, you’re last!”

He fell backward into the void, shouting. “For Aethernia!”

They all rushed after him, howling and hollering. Hektor looked up at them as he plummeted, their voices drowned by the wailing wind rushing past his ears. It was a dark night and he lost sight of them within moments. He turned around, counting the seconds in his head, aware that as the lead Airman, he had the most dangerous job. He had to throw an illumination grenade to show them where the ground was. That would help them trigger their soft landing spells in time. No one was there to do the same for him. If he failed, they’d almost certainly crash into the ground. At least those who couldn’t count right.

For a moment, Hektor thought about just letting it all go. Just stop counting, and it’d be all over. No more despair, no more responsibility, no more nightmares. But that happened with every drop and he knew he wouldn’t do it. Not while people depended on him.

“Qo’tath,” he whispered in sacred Qeleti, the elven language of magic and prayer. The gems in his boots exploded in a burst of magenta light and glowing runes, and his fall quickly slowed down to the speed of a falling leaf. He positioned himself to land on his feet, and not a moment too soon. He had miscounted and the ground was much closer than he thought. The ground and—he saw at a glance—hundreds of Deathwalkers converging on his position.

Hektor reacted without hesitation. Right before landing, he threw down both his grenades. One exploded in a burst of bright daylight; the other released a wave of blue healing energy that burst outward, clearing the immediate landing area. The tremendous life energy would only stun him for a second, but it would

hurt—perhaps even disintegrate—the incoming Rot.

He looked up, shouting. “AMBUSH! Rot everywhere! Carpet-heal the area, NOW!”

Everything happened fast after that. Hektor had a few moments to survey the area as illumination grenades provided more visibility around him. The jagged terrain was crawling with Rot of all types—Grays, Great Whites, Dreadknockers, Gaunts, Shades, and he thought he saw the outline of an Arcanovore over there! Then the healing grenades dropped and exploded in rapid succession around him. One grenade would just daze him, but dozens of them? That would knock down an rhino.

Hektor dropped to his knees as repeated shockwaves of pure life force struck him from all directions. He shook his head. More grenades exploded. His vision turned blurry and he fell face first onto the sharp rocks, cutting a deep gash into his forehead. In a haze, he thought that it wouldn't matter, the next grenade would heal that right up.

Hurray.

Then everything faded into silence and darkness.

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The next thing Hektor knew, a vigorous hand was shaking him. There was noise around him, a lot of it, but it was muffled and echoed in his brain. Voices shouting, explosions, inhuman screeching, footsteps, and more screaming. The air was thick with the stench of melted rot, mortal blood, and guts.

"Sarge! Sarge, wake up!" He thought he recognized the voice. Private Beryl?

He opened his eyes and at once the world came into sharp focus. Beryl stood above him, her warjacket and face splashed with blood. Hektor glanced around, fighting a wave of nausea, assessing the situation. To his left, a dozen soldiers were throwing grenades and slicing through a tide of deathwalkers with glowing

longswords. They wouldn't last another minute.

"How long was I out?" Hektor asked.

"A minute," Beryl said, "maybe two. Looked for LT Morwood, can't find him anywhere. Just you."

Hektor shook his head and raised himself to his knees. The dizziness would soon pass, but he didn't have that kind of time now. The dwindling light of a few illumination grenades would soon be gone, and if they couldn't see where they were, that was it. He fished for a scroll case inside his warjacket.

"Never mind him," he said. "You've had academy training, you can read spells, right?"

Beryl nodded. "Yes, Sarge."

Hektor popped the case open and shook the scroll out of it.

"I got a Sunburst spell right here," he said, handing it to her. "Leap up, cast it, and maybe we can see a way out of here."

She stared at it, then at him, and swallowed with difficulty. She was terrified. She could do the math too. They faced overwhelming odds on an unfamiliar terrain, and at night to boot. A sunburst spell would create a dome of pure sunlight, much brighter than an illumination grenade, but it had to be cast from a certain altitude to be effective. A hundred yards was optimal.

Beryl knew what that meant. She clenched her jaw and nodded.

"I got this, Sarge. Won't let you down."

She crouched, then leaped up. She shouted "Qi'niel!" and her boot gems crackled with energy. Glowing discs appeared right beneath her feet, and she bounced on them repeatedly like magical trampolines. She opened the scroll on her way up and at about a hundred yards high, she spoke the trigger words. Hektor couldn't hear her voice over the noise of battle, but she was quick about it, and within moments, a dome of daylight spread from her position and

covered a large dome in all directions.

High above Hektor, Beryl gave him a thumbs up. She was just about to come down when a giant tentacle-tongue lashed at her from beyond the light, grabbed her, and pulled her away into darkness. Her shriek was brief, interrupted by... Hektor didn't want to think about it. Arcanovores had swallowed too many of his friends.

Hektor looked around. Only half a dozen soldiers were left. In the opposite direction, he spotted a crack in a stone wall, just at the edge of the light dome. Wide enough to fit through, barely. It would be hard for more than one Rot at a time to follow them there, and if it wasn't a dead end, they might live another minute or two.

He rushed over to the line of soldiers, still fighting off the remaining wisps of dizziness from the healing grenades. Blake was among them. Too smart to die, too dumb to die *first*.

"Everyone, fall back!" Hektor shouted. He pulled his sword and hacked at the fiend closest to him, a Great White. His sword flared brightly as it cleaved the giant skeleton from head to groin.

"Where to?" Blake asked.

Hektor pointed toward the crack. "There! Now!"

The remaining soldiers pulled back and ran. Hektor swung twice more, felling as many Deathwalkers, then raced his men. The undead gave chase, converging on them, but the soldiers were faster runners. One by one, they disappeared into the crack until Hektor was left alone in front of the wall. He gave one last look at the incoming tide of Deathwalkers. He dug into his left pocket and clutched his circular medallion.

"May the Source guide us," he whispered.

He squeezed through the crack, praying it was too narrow for the undead to

follow.

He was, of course, dead wrong.

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