



I never thought I'd be trading my usual antics for an evening of storytelling, but here I stand, entertaining the lovely masses. Now, before we begin, I have to apologize in advance. This upcoming tale may not exactly be suitable for all—although I've omitted the ins & outs of military stratagem for all your sakes. You came here for a story after all, not a reenactment.

Why, I feel it is my personal duty to give you all the Gods' honest truth, nary weave it with threads of exaggeration & outright falsehood. You all look like the iron-willed sort. In that case, sit back, relax, & prepare for a wild ride through a less than ordinary day of my storied career!

I've named this one: Last Night in Zadnor.

Blade Order 12-3 Designate: Veles Protocol. That was the order my regiment, the 329th Esthar, received from the big boys. We were tasked to defend a vital munitions transport. A piece of cake, right? Hah, that's what you always think. A simple expedition can turn into a life-threatening ordeal faster than you can say 'Nophica's tits.'

We were stationed on the Southern Front when the order came in. We'd already led several incursions into Imperial territory with the help of the scant few Gunnhildr's Blades. Their numbers dwindled by the day, but the fierce dedication to their country was unwavering in the face of my otherwise breezy one-&-done shtick. They were all business, no play.

In the aftermath of the Queenie incident, Bozjan Resistance commanders distrusted the Alliance officers assigned to them. About all you could hope for was to develop a tolerable working relationship—to which I had many, many, many tolerable relationships.

My rank as Chief Sergeant of the Maelstrom be damned. I was honest to goodness just some guy to these patriots. Being a stranger in a strange land had its own challenges.

Nevertheless, I had to be doing something right because my regiment always turned to me for answers. Too many times I've wandered into the jaws of death, only to slide by with a smirk & an un-Halonic insult spat its way. 'It's good for morale,' a soldier told me. But little did he know, the only thing that got me through the day were these little chewable coffee candies distributed in our mealkits.

Another night of taking names. Morale was high. We had a cargo hold full of ale & the promise of a juicy reward at the end of all this. We were all having a good laugh, trading tales & grandstanding like a bunch of proud peacocks, when suddenly a young signaller burst into the room, all panicked & flushed. 'Quickly!' she said, 'you all have to come with me, now!'

'What now?' I groaned, rising from my chair with a huff. Poor girl was just doing her job, I realize that now. I could feel my heart beating faster, my gut sick with adrenaline as she urged us to follow her. My comrades quickly fell into line behind me, hustling out of the room & into whatever trouble awaited us.

We filed into the cramped conference tent, where a bearded engineer fussed over a bulky magitek projector. Bajsajen, the Resistance leader, stood to the side with a grave look on his usually tired face. The projector beamed a map of Zadnor for all to see. I should mention we'd all been drinking, & I

wasn't quite as focused as I should have been, so it took me several heartbeats to realize what it was I was seeing on the map.

A gigantic red blip, which could only be an Imperial air dreadnought.

It was the biggest one I'd ever seen. At least twice the size of the average imperial gun ship. Not to mention the smaller cruisers trailing behind it... Imperial dreadnoughts are nothing to scoff at, with weapons of such magnitude that could tear through our fortifications with the ease of a knife through butter. Suddenly, the blithe mood disappeared as if it had never existed.

A wave of fear & disbelief passed through the men as we realized we were all but doomed. 'We should pearl the Warrior of Light,' one Blade suggested. I quickly put up my hand, involuntarily volunteering myself to be the man the regiment needed. 'That won't be necessary,' I said.

'We will do well to handle this ourselves.' I reassured them, trying my best to sound calm. There was a general murmur of protest from the men, but I could see that they were still frightened. I needed to do something to rally them. Let them know that I was on their side. So I did the only thing I could think of...

I took the last bottle of ale from one of the nearby crates, shook it up, then popped the top. It erupted into a spray of foam, which drenched the soldiers in the room. There were a few gasps, some grumbling as the soldiers tried to wipe down their soaking tunics. Then, to their surprise, I raised the bottle over my head & took a deep swig from it.

'Through thick & thin, we've stuck together with nothing but grit,' I bellowed. 'Never in my thirty-five turns of service have I seen finer men & women—so we do not need a god-slayer; we need not even a prayer, for we are godless. Divinity did not drag you out of that trench.' I toasted my bottle to whichever ancestor of mine I just disappointed.

'Garlean fools have their emperors; Eorzeans have their faiths. We have only ourselves: the greatest salvation of all.' I finished. The rest of the regiment started to applaud, & then the whole room was shouting. It was a minor miracle, but I'd managed to raise morale. Bajsajen was so moved by the display, he made me the team leader then & there. But, in all honesty, I think he was testing me.

He went over mission specifics with me, stressing the importance of a strong & competent team, before pointing me in the direction of his right-hand man, Marsak. Standing at the war table, looking over our provisions, the anxiety slowly set in—compelling me to an outright ludicrous idea.

'I'll travel by air alone.' I said all too casually. Everyone in the room looked at me as if I just summoned a sex-pest voidsent. 'We expend our forces on the ground, lure their dropships to the southern plateau & trap them against the cliff's edge. They'll be too focused on their artillery to notice the mouse sneaking in.' An added wink for good measure.

'Daft bastard, what, ye expect to take on that dreadnought by yerself?!' One of the more brazen members of my regiment protested—his name was Shuck & he was a pain in my ass. 'I have to try,' I vowed, playing up their expectations of me while my bowels spasmed. 'All I need is a little time, baby.'

Turns out the engineer on site was hiding an ace up his sleeve for occasions such as this—some kind of camouflage device. We stuck that bad boy to my airship. As I left, I turned to Shuck, a stern look in my eyes. 'Survive,' I simply said. 'You hear me, you ass-end of a zu? You have my orders.' His

insufferable attitude aside, he was still my battle-brother. We looked out for one another. We kept each other safe.

So there I was, braving the storm with nothing but a little damnable luck on my side and a fistful of grenades as I steered the ship to Zadnor. The battle raged on by the time of my arrival, my regiment and Imperial forces evenly tied. I activated the camouflage, propped a sword against the controls to auto-steer the ship directly towards the enemy dreadnought & balanced myself on the bow of my ship.

I was there to personally tip the scales.

My airship careened forward at full speed, & at the last second, I leapt onto the deck of the massive Garlean vessel, the roar of my ship's collision ringing in my ears. Sirens blared, guards were called, everything was in total chaos—I had to act fast. Snaking my way through the dreadnought's metal guts, I stumbled upon the engine room. Vats of highly volatile ceruleum drip-feeding into titanic ironwork pistons.

So I had the great idea of tossing a couple of grenades into the vats.

The explosion gutted the dreadnought from within, tearing apart the steel corridors, ripping through vital systems, sputtering everything worthless & ravaged. I heard a Centurion scream 'STAND & DIE' over the explosions while her men were begging for a retreat. As the vessel slowly sank out of the sky, I pearlyed for a ride home.

My path out of the doomed vessel was far from easy. I found myself engaged in a fierce struggle with several troops, their swords clashing against mine, erstwhile we dipped at a lovely seventy degrees off-kilter. A Resistance airship retrieved me in time, throwing down a rope for me to latch onto.

Back in the safety of our base, I received the news that we had successfully pushed back the Garlean forces and miraculously avoided any casualties that day. Bajsajen personally congratulated me but tacked on a reprimand due to my 'reckless behavior' in fear that the other Blades might try to do what I did on a whim. Which, y'know, is fair.

I was then assigned latrine duty for a month. There are some fates worse than death, baby.