

The bells of Notre Dame

Run Aero!! Get to the ship!! Run and do not look back!!

The bells of Notre Dame broke through the silence that lied over the barracks in the same buildings. As the first bell rang, fifty men jumped up from the primitive beds lying in row along the walls of the room. One of them was Arin Biotti, a 22-year man and a musketeer of two years. He was thankful that the dream was destroyed by the loud noises that signalled deployment. He has had the nightmares almost every night but he never got used to it.

While he jogged to the armoury he peeked outside and saw the dawn arrive. It was morning. "What do you think it's all about Aero?" Pierre Luna asked. Aero was the nickname given to Arin by his dad and stuck through him all the way until now. Not that he minded, he liked the nickname and it suited his thin light frame.

"I have no idea Pierre, there has not been a drill for long. Maybe they want to keep us in shape?"

"Shit of a pig, they will never use money on that."

"Guess we will find out soon enough."

They entered the locker room where a big bull of a man waited for them. Squad-leader Francois Lacroix was almost 2 meters tall and was basically just a big muscle. He was bald by choice and had a timberman's beard. He was just called Ox, a nickname made from respect.

"Aero, Pierre, you are fucking last, close the door and gather around."

As the sound of a door being shot was closed, 25 men gathered around Ox.

"Listen up. We have reason to believe that personal ship of the Dominions princess, The Queen Voyager, has been lost in transit. We recently got a pigeon with the travel confirmation and it should have been here 7 hours ago,. Scout ship are deployed and we are on standby for securing and extraction. Any questions?"

A hand was raised but was quickly lowered when he meets Ox eyes.

"Good, gear up for extraction, the area is categorized as orange."

Orange meet moderate believes of nocturnal. Not as bad as red, but not as good as yellow or green. Aero went to his locker and opened it. The outfit was black pants, with long black war boots. Green flannel shirt with a black tabard. It was originally blue but field experience showed that the Nocturnal easier spotted the blue than the black. The most important part of the uniform was however the black hook belt. With it the musketeers could attach a rope from an airship and be easily extracted within seconds. As weapons, they were allowed as the only military branch a four-chambered gun. Four bullets without reloading could mean the difference against the nocturnal. Then they had musket rifle and a weaponised axe as their standard arm. At last they had hooked two grenades to the tabard. Fully equipped they were walking killing machines.

Aero had been trained to get dressed within two minutes, this time he did it on 1 minute and 40 seconds. As soon he was done he ran up the spiral stairs to the roof. An airship of the Elmridge class was docked on the platform. Aero stood on line along with the rest of his squad.

"Okay men, line up in two lines in the cargo hold. Lifts up!". Ox commands were instinctively followed and the musketeers entered the airship in line. As Aero as the last in the line entered the cargo hold it was shut closed by the crew and soon the noise of an airship taking off was heard. As the airship coordinated their course towards the forest of Ardennes the sun hit the window into the cargo hold.

Three hours later the musketeers were still standing in the cargo hold. There were places to sit, but not for twenty fully armed men. Neither could they lean against the walls as it would tip the balance of the ship. They could only wait.

As the satchels of water passed by the voice of the Ox suddenly filled the room.

“Attention musketeers. We have a signal from the main search ship. There has been spotted some smoke on the outskirts of the forest north east of here. It fits the usual flight route between Paris and Cologne. We are to investigate, team Blue, you are first ground force. Red, you are support.”

Blue was the team of Aero. He checked the hook belt as learned. The tags were solid and did not seem to be rusted. His support bag had the medical kit, the emergency extraction light and a water satchel. All clear, he tapped the next man in front of him that checked his equipment and did the same to the guy in front of him again. The team-leader then signal a go to Ox who gave the order to open the deployment hatch. Soon the airship stopped and the noise of the stabilisers turning on was heard. He soon saw the team-leader slide down the rope and then the next man. As Aero connected his hook belt on the rope and slide down, the rest of them was already kneeling in attack positions in a circle facing outwards the rope. Aero unhooked the belt and quickly pulled the rope twice. It disappeared back into the airship.

The team-leader, a tall blonde 43-year-old with the name Samuel signalled the team to move towards the smoke that they could see over the hill. It was open ground now and in the middle of the day. Nocturnal did not like the day. So far so good. As soon as the 10-man squadron reached the top, they could clearly see the origins of the smoke. A part of what was once the back hull of an airship. After quickly securing the area they realised that there was no one there, neither live or dead.

“Nothing here!” one of the soldiers confirmed.

“They can’t be far away then.”

“Sir, if they came north and this is the tail of the ship...” Aero stopped his sentence.

“Yes Aero?” Samuel wanted the rest.

“That means that it must have landed somewhere in that direction.”

Aero pointed to the dense forest that started just a stone throw away from them. Both Aero, Samuel and the rest of the squad said some words inside their head.

The most part of the two-year training to become musketeers was to fight the Nocturnals. Aero could remember the day when he first saw the dead body of one. The voice of the instructor could be heard in his head.

Remember, that you are always on advantage against one of them. You are better equipped, faster and smarter. However, they are stronger, angrier and most important, they are many more than us. They fight in flock and have no concept of honour. If you are to meet them in conflict, make sure that you decide the place. If possible always choose the open field where airships and out sharpshooters can provide support. Do not go into a forest without it being last resort.

For the same reason, they trained in the forest north of the city, within the walls. Trained to be aware and not to be surprised by attacks. Aero remembered that one of the assignments to the walliers is to salt the ground around the walls. As the trees surrounded them and the lights from the open field got more distant, they got more on the edge. It was still day but it was also enemy territory, as it had been the last 500 years. They walked in a spearhead formation, with the flanks and the back protected by two of the squad members. They did not walk for long before Samuel

signalled a stop raising a fistful hand. They knelt. Samuel was pointing at an opening in the forest where something had broken the roof of blades and wood. He pointed to Aero with a clear message, check it out!

Aero, as the newest member of the squad was used to this being his job. If it was a trap, it was the soldier with least experience that was on risk. He took the gun up, in this range it was more useful than the musket. He saw the object right away. It was the bottom plank of a hull, meaning it has scrapped the tree and fallen off. What again meant that the rest of the ship must have landed not long from here. They continued walking into the dense forest.

It took another 30 minutes of walking before they saw the second place of interest. This time impossible to not notice, it was the whole bridge of the ship. Aero did not like this. Such a crash must have been noticed. Aero searched the wreck. Inside it looked like a what a wreck usually looked as. Loose objects thrown around, bodies mixed into it. If they were lucky they died instantly by head trauma without any damage to the body, nice enough to have a decent open casket burial. However, most people were not that lucky.

They got their intestine ripped out by a flying plate or shard. Their head and body bruised by the massive force hitting and throwing them like they were ragdolls. The best thing then would to confirm their deaths and let them go naturally back to the nature. By all observations and theories, Nocturnals had respect for the dead and did not move a dead body, another strange paradox of the nature of them. Aero saw three men lying in that state around the deck. It was the crew of the airship. The captain of the ship was killed by head trauma. The bloodstain on the captain's table and the navigation maps and the open crack in the front of his head was more than enough proof. One of the lanterns was still working and lighted up the corridor behind the bridge. Aero followed the corridor. It was broken off halfway but the lower deck was still there. The wooden stairs had been broken off so Aero needed to jump down. The princess private quarter was empty. A quick search among the rumble confirmed it. No blood, no remains and no sign of struggle. The princess was not in her private quarters when the ship crashed. Another soldier confirmed negative result in the rest of the wreck.

No one in the squad was happy by that result. They had reached midday and now it would only be darker. "I know what you are thinking, but we are musketeer, there must be more wreck towards the north, we still have time." Samuel gave order to march northwards.

Now the time was against them. It would be a great risk to be in these woods when the light disappeared. They had maximum of two-three hours before they needed to head back and use another two hours to get out of the forest. They squad increased their pace, now security was replaced with efficiency. The scouts were placed more closely to the main group and the two behind was only a quarter of a click away. It took them another hour to find the next part of the wreck, the shadows now halfway up the trees. This time it was the cargo hold that had found its eternal resting place. It had broken off right at the corridor between the cargo deck and the lower deck. The squad created a perimeter around it while Aero and Pierre did the search.

At first glance it looked like this was also a negative search. The only thing inside was luggage and pallets that had been forced open by the crash. Some clothes, silverware and weapons was lying on the ground. Aero grabbed a nice silver laced spoon and saw the anagram of an eagle spreading its wings over a crown. The symbol of the royal family. This would have been worth something on the black market. Aero glanced at Pierre that was busy looking at something else. He slowly put the spoon in the satchel and put five other objects of silverware in the same place.

"Aero, look here" Pierre shouted while pointing on the floor. It was bloodstains, and they created a path out of the fuselage. It went into the forest.

"We follow it, double speed!" Samuel ordered after being quickly briefed. The formation had now been broken and then half-ran forward following the trail of blood. The person that created it could not travel fast, but however it was, they had almost a day head start.

"Sam, we are at point of no return. If we do not turn around now, we will not make it before dark." It was the second in command Nero, that told the truth without losing his breath. They had run for maybe half an hour, still following a trail of colliquated blood. As the rest of the team hoped that he would order a turn, one of scouts broke the tension.

"Sir, building forward, a click away. A three-floor cottage."

"Describe it."

"Pre-war. Stonewalls with wooden roof. No windows. Small wooden-fence around it. The trees and branches is cleared above the roof."

"Great. We are establishing that place as a base of operations. We create a search radius around it and call for a ship to extract us from the roof. If that goes to hell the cottage is barricaded enough to maybe keep us safe for the night. That gives us a couple hours' extra search time. Pierre, Aero, Alain and Gill, you take point and secure the building. The rest secure the immediate perimeter within a tenth of a click. Double move!"

The cottage was a typical pre-war housing. Aero guessed that it was a timberman family that lived here before and made his living by trading at the village of Ardennes. However, the many years afterwards had made the nature reclaim it. The rotten wooden fence was broken down many places but once went around the whole house. The door was half-collapsed but still attached to the hinges. With the gun in attack mode Aero slowly opened the door with the three others right behind him with weapons drawn. It was dark as night inside. No light source and stone walls made sure of that. The only light came from a tiny crack on the left side of the wall. Aero dragged up a stick from his satchel. It was called a light stick, although Aero liked the word glow stick more. It was a modern invention, only a couple years old and the result of solving the mysteries of the will-o'-the-wisp. A glass cylinder containing two smaller cylinders. In one of them was phosphine and the second one nitrogen. If you shake it hard on the weak spot on the middle, the small glass separating the two would break and mix them together. It would then create a reaction that made a yellow light. However, since it was sealed in glass it had to be carefully put down and not thrown forward. He put the light stick on the floor and it lighted up the small area around. As soon as he died he heard a faint voice in the darkness. "Please help me." Aero rushed to the direction of the voice, and on the base of stairs he saw a young woman. She was bleeding through her velvet shirt and breathed heavily as she tried to hold her and on an open wound that bleed. Beside her was a chest that was one meter wide, one meter long and one meter tall.

"Princess Karine, is that you?"

She slightly nodded.

"I am musketeer Arin of the Royal Forces of Orleans. I am here to bring to you home."

"Can we still make it?" asked Samuel.

"No, her wounds are to severe and it's too late. It would take the whole day to escort her out, and she barely has the energy to talk." Nero had bandaged the wounds of the princess and she was in deep sleep lying on an improvised bed and stretcher made of two thick branches of tree and the rest of the bandages holding it together. The angel's tears had dulled her pains enough.

"Then we need to extract her through the roof."

"Sending the flare will alert every nocturnal being in mile radius, and the airships can be miles away

from here.”

“No matter, they will see the signal, meaning that we need to hold out until they come. Barricade the front with everything you can find. We put four men on the second floor, two on each side, the rest provides covering fire from the roof. When all is set, we fire the flare.” Nero acknowledged the order and starting to command further down the chain.

The door was barricaded with rotten barrels and shelves found in the basement. The stairs could not be destroyed as they were made of hard rock stone, but could be barricaded. As the soldiers retreated to the to the second floor, a question was asked.

“Where is Gil?”

A quick headcount revealed ten people, including the sleeping princess.

“Who saw him last?” Samuel asked?

“ I saw 20 minutes ago, when we gathered the ard in the shard to use as barricade, he was behind me.”

A second of silence was followed by the orders of Samuel, made by a voice that could not hide the stress. “Aero, send the sardings flare up! Rest, take your position! Pierre, get her majesty up on the roof.” The entrance up to the roof was a rotten ladder, it could break at any time. However, the steps felt solid enough when Aero climbed them. As soon as his feet touched the roof he grabbed the extraction flare. A tube of gunpowder that shoot up a light into the sky. Could be seen from a mile.

As soon as it was shoot up the forest became alive with millions of primal noises. Lying down, minimalizing the risk of getting hit by an arrow he peeked into the darkness that surrounded the forest. Thousands of red eyes looked back at him. From the hatch, Pierre arrived with the empress carried like potato sack on his shoulder. It took strong man to do such a task but Pierre was up for it. He put her down gently on the roof. Then covered the southern side of the floor. Nero then came up and took the northern side with Alain completing covering the directions. Soon the first salve from the rifles was heard from the floor under, followed by noises of pain. The nocturnal answered with a shower of arrows, none of them did any damage. The sweat from the forehead distracted Aero for a moment, but then from the scope of the rifle he saw a dark silhouette coming out of in the open. He pulled the trigger and compensated for the recoil. He could see a mist created at the back of its head before it fell.

Another salve and another wave of crying pain was heard, but they could not stop the horde. Already they were furiously hitting the door, breaking down the barricade. Three more shoots and three more kills. It was easy not to miss with so many targets. He then took a grenade from his belt and throw it straight down. The walls would not be weakened by the blast, but the horde near it would be shredded.

Boom!

The smoke rose and cries was heard before it was drowned in the war cries and bloodlust. The battle went on. For how long was uncertain because time becomes perspective in the heat of the battle, but the grenades was used, the extra potch of bullets was used and the pistols was used to hold them away. The barricades fell and the nocturnal was now inside the cottage with their destination the stairs. Another surprised waited them there. A grenade, connected to a wire on the edge of the stairs was placed by Samuel. A second after the first nocturnal tripped the wire it exploded. It rocked the whole house, and killed at least seven enemies. However, this was the second to last defence. Now it was only the improvised barricade that was keeping them away.

Two of the musketeers threw themselves on it, creating extra weight of the barricade. On the roof,

Aero was still pinned down by the arrow barrage. From the angle, it would be difficult to hit them, but much easier if they standing. They had maybe five-ten minutes now Aero calculated in his head while doublechecking the bullets in the pistol. As soon as he finished that thought he heard the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. The sound of an airship.

It was *Burgundy*, an airship of the Rhine-class. It hovered over the cottage for second before it fired two cannons. It hit the outskirts of the forest with an explosion that lighted up the sky. Several of the nocturnal was thrown away from the force and the trees nearest the explosion fell on the ground burning. Then *Burgundy* fired another one. Same results, and some nocturnals retreated for a moment instinctively. *Burgundy* then descended until it was only half a meter above the roof.

"Pierre, the princess!" Nero shouted.

He reacted instinctively, grabbed her and almost threw into the open-air door where the crew received her. At the same moment, another shower of arrows hit the airship. It wavered to the side slightly.

"We need to ascend to safe height, extract through the jump hooks!" the crew member shouted while the *Burgundy* gained height fast.

"We are skylifting!" Nero shouted down the hatch.

Samuel shouted it back to the two soldiers lying on the barricade. He had already lost two men to the arrows and would not lose anymore.

"We will not have long if we move!" one of them protested!

"We will have long enough!"

The soldier quickly jumped on their feet and climbed the ladder.

On the roof the chain was deployed. When they descended they always used a rope, but when extracted it was a chain that was used. It was easier to hook the belt and it support more weight, two people at a time could then be extracted.

"Alain, Pierre, you two first!" Nero commanded. In a quick movement, they hooked on got dragged up, it took a minute each time. As they disappeared into the airship the chain was thrown down again.

"Micha..." The orders were cut short, an arrow had hit Nero on the side of his neck and all the way through. He coughed some blood and fell down from the crouching position. Aero crawled quickly towards him and concluded that he was dead. As Samuel was still on the floor below there was no command.

"Get on the hook!" Aero screamed to the remaining two musketeers that did not hesitate. As soon as they were hooked the chain started rewinding. It was only him and Samuel left. He crawled to the hatch and saw Samuel standing right down below. The ladder had collapsed.

"I will get the chain dropped down the hatch!" Aero screamed.

"Do not, it will risk us all. It is okay. This will give you some extra seconds."

"Samuel, jump up from the window, it's a short jump!"

"I will be hit 100 arrows. Go now!"

At the same second the barricade at the stairs collapsed. Samuel took a deep breath and grabbed something from his satchel. Aero turned around and ran for the chain. The arrows passed by him so close he could feel the wind.

Boom!

From the hatch a black smoke came up but Aero did not turn around. He fell right in front of the chain and with shaking hands attached himself to it. It started rewinding and dragged Aero forward and up. He closed his eyes. It was nothing to do now if he got hit by an arrow. After some gruesome seconds, he opened them. He was dragged up the hatch by one of the crew members.

"This is all" he said silently.

The crew member walked to tell the captain that they could leave now. In the cargo hold the five surviving members started to realise the reality. Aero noticed the left foot of Pierre was bandaged. An arrow at the extraction. If serious, he would never fight again. Aero did not mention it. He looked at the cottage that started to disappear in the distance, the black smoke still rising from the hatch.

The princess that was lying on the bench in the cargo hold suddenly spoke.

"Where is the chest? Did you take with you the chest?" she almost screamed.

Aero did not answer her, that chest was the last of their priorities and was probably used to help the barricade.

She saw his look and responded with her own horrified reaction.

"Then it was all for nothing!" she whispered as the angel tears took her back into sleep.