

*"And lest things which should be remembered
perish with time and vanish from the memory of
those who are to come after us, I, seeing so many
evils and the whole world, as it were, placed within
the grasp of the Evil One, being myself as if among
the dead, I, waiting for death, have put into writing
all the things that I have witnessed.
"And, lest the writing should perish with the writer
and the work fail with the laborer, I leave parchment
to continue this work, if perchance any man
survive and any of the race of Adam escape this
pestilence and carry on the work which I have begun..."*

~ Brother John Clyn, 1349AD

[audio journal entry, 19/06/2045AD, 2006 hours]

It's late June in the Italian Alps, but the fine grey particles of dirty snow swirl around us, as it does everywhere these dark days. The D9R precedes us on our way down the narrow mountain highway, clearing away the rocks, debris, and burnt-out vehicles from our path that the trucks' cowcatchers can't handle.

We're a contingent of four tankers filled with diesel fuel, one small tanker filled with petrol, six motorcycle scouts, the monstrous D9R bulldozer, and nine tractor/trailers with payloads. Our final journey began in northern Germany the previous October, meandering through several western European nations, collecting assets and supplies. The mission was to get our payloads to the target on the morning of July 5th, 2045...a date suggested amidst peals of mad laughter by a hairy and old Texan that even Marguerite and Olga often deferred to, for as long as I can remember.

"Crazy Ivan" found inexplicable things extremely funny, but his prophecies were always spot-on. He even predicted the bizarre circumstances of his own death, so bizarre that many of us had doubts that it could've happened. I didn't...I was there. It was enough to shatter my belief in only a Heaven and a Hell, demonstrating the existence of at least three other Hells, all Green. I'm sorry, I promised Cat I wouldn't keep dwelling on it,

but it's quite difficult. I wondered at times if it didn't almost drive me mad.

Our payloads are the salvaged warheads of a dozen nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and one MIRV. The MIRV was an especially valuable find, supplying us with many warheads plus spares without spending excessive time and supplies looking for them.

The appearances of the trucks, trailers, and personnel are dire, as the situation was...we're all dressed in whatever uneaten rags that could be scavenged, and we are all slowly starving. However, the vehicles' mechanicals and the payloads are pristine and pampered by our mechanics and engineers. There is nothing more important in the world than delivering these payloads.

[paper journal entry, 21/06/2045AD]

This morning, we lost Marguerite, 14 personnel, one tanker, and two trucks w/payloads to rockslides. All were swept down to the bottom of the steep-sided alpine valley, and there's no chance of recovery. We were very lucky the slides caught the tail end of the convoy, rather than the middle or front. We could have spent weeks clearing the path again, or doubling back to find another route.

There is a great sense of loss amongst the crews, both practical and emotional. Cat is weeping and raging at Marguerite's death...I fear we may need to tranquilise her, which won't be easy or safe.

Marguerite, in spite of her 98 years, insisted on coming on the mission, and she rode in the sleeper compartment of one of the payload carriers. She always would say, "Better to die a warrior than to be devoured or to die from exposure." I suppose she got that, then.

Marguerite raised me as a mother would...she was strict, but fair, and instilled in me a sense of duty towards what was Right. She made me work, and she made me strong...her sisters taught me to fight, and to win. Cat told me that Marguerite raised her the same way.

Cat taught me to love. Marguerite never approved of Cat and me, but

the only signs of her disapproval were deeply troubled looks. I think that in the past there had been a falling out between them, and I think it had to do with my mother's death, but neither would speak of it when I asked. In spite of this, they shared a deep respect for one another and, I think, a deep sisterly love that transcended any disagreements or moral incongruities.

One brave medic quietly approached Cat from behind and stabbed her with a syringe, and was rewarded by being knocked unconscious by her. Fortunately, whatever he shot her with was fast-acting, and she joined him on the ground before she could disembowel him. We carefully loaded her into the cab of my truck, strapped-in and restrained, with a couple of spare syringes for me to use if necessary. They weren't, but we had to be cautious.

The rockslides were troubling, not just because of the loss of assets and personnel. The ground everywhere is unstable, given the utter lack of any remaining vegetation to stabilise the hillsides. But were the rockslides intentional and, if so, who were our attackers? Certainly not the Adversary, or else we'd all be dead already. I couldn't imagine any survivors mustering the will and strength to be so ambitious. However, I remain suspicious of the timing of the rockslides. Perhaps I'm becoming paranoid.

I wave my arm out the window of our truck to signal the other carriers to start down the road again, knowing that the only way to honor the old woman was to complete the mission.

[audio journal entry, 27/06/2045AD, 1920 hours]

We left the southern foothills of the Alps today, and the going should hopefully go much smoother and quicker now. Our supplies sustained us, barely...rusty cans of anything edible, ancient MREs scavenged from hardened military bunkers. Some had suggested that we eat our dead in order to ensure completion of the mission, but Cat quickly silenced such talk.

One thing we never skimped on was water filtration...there was literally no telling what was in the water we'd find. Even then, our filters probably only got a fraction of the toxins and biologicals dissolved in the ashen snow, filthy puddles and muddy streams. Fortunately, this wouldn't be an issue for much longer.

Our organization of scientists, soldiers, aesthetes, and devotees of all religions once numbered in the tens of thousands...the final estimates I'd heard placed our roster at under eight hundred survivors, probably far less now, given the unrelenting attrition. As long as the mission was completed, that's all that mattered at this point. Survival of the species, of Life itself, was now moot...our mission hoped to achieve something more pure and simple.

A rare break in the dark clouds and snow let the midday sun shine on us for the first time in months. The clear blue sky sent us scrambling to hide, in case a reflection from one of the vehicles gave away our position. We fled to hiding places at least a kilometre away from the convoy for about two hours, until we were sure it was safe to return. Our gun crews scanned the skies for the rest of the day, nevertheless.

Such was our panic that we almost missed a valuable find; a cache of about fifty MREs that a previous scouting mission had left behind under a cairn. We ate reasonably well tonight, and in good spirits.

[paper journal entry, 29/06/2045AD]

During our midday meal, one of the engineers from the payload crews went billy, ranting at the top of her lungs like an asthmatic Viking, singing a mad song about prion disease. Everyone was deeply troubled by this, since the crews were picked especially for their mental and emotional stability, in addition to their technical prowess. It was whispered that she was possessed; not a mad notion, since it actually was possible in this broken world of ours. There are still a few old memories of the dead world that lay dormant in the sterile dirt underfoot, I believe, that will desperately seize hold of the first life that happens by.

Cat managed to quiet the woman down before she could compromise us, and gently led her down into the adjacent ravine where she broke her

neck and buried her under some stones. Pointless to bury her, really, but it was one of the few things that still kept us "civilised". Cat, in spite of her nature, remains our most steadfast and moderating influence.

[audio journal entry, 01/07/2045AD, 2105 hours]

We've made good time, coming down the west coast of the Italian peninsula, especially once we'd abandoned the D9R. The coastal roads were narrow but lightly-used, and our cowcatchers could cope with any obstacles short of big trucks or very large boulders. We emptied another tanker today, abandoned it, and reassigned the crew. Our last diesel tanker is only a quarter full, and the petrol tanker is almost empty, which means we'll need to abandon most of the motorcycles before too long. Tomorrow, I think, we'll fill our jerry cans with the petrol and load a couple of the motorcycles onto one of the trucks, to reserve them for Rome.

One of the scouts found a dead cherub on the ground, not yet frozen. There was no visible damage to indicate what had killed it; perhaps it had simply worn out and fallen out of the air. Our terror was renewed by this sign of just how close we were.

We're huddled together at night for warmth, and we don't dare light fires or drive at night. A faint, beautiful golden glow from the south shone on the clouds, a little real color in an utterly grey world, and it filled us with primitive dread. We knew the light to be coming from Vatican City.

Out in the night, somewhere, we hoped were the other convoys; three from the north, including ours, carrying payloads scavenged from England, France, and US airbases; one from the south, carrying what armaments they could from an American missile sub allegedly beached in Tunisia, and another from the east. With any luck, the Ukrainian contingent would be faster and better equipped than our other convoys combined, as long as they could safely cross the water.

[audio journal entry, 04/07/2045AD, 1725 hours]

We're now 20 kilometres out from the target, the night before the attack. We don't dare approach closer, until we were ready. We quietly consumed the last of our supplies. Regardless of the outcome tomorrow, we wouldn't be needing them anymore. After we ate, we went over tomorrow's schedule once more, and discussed what the other convoys would hopefully bring to the party. We tried to remain optimistic that at least two other convoys would make it, since the other northern convoys were notably

absent...we figured we would have merged with at least one of them.

We empty the contents of the last tanker into the fuel tanks of the payload carriers, unload and fuel the motorcycles, and line everyone up so that we can move out at dawn. Personal sidearms are checked and loaded, in case of the need for preemptive suicide. Hoooo-rah.

[paper journal entry, 04/07/2045AD]

As we lay together under the heavy blankets in the waning light, I look into Cat's yellow eyes, clouded with cataracts, her face and body emaciated from malnutrition like all the rest of us, but still more beautiful to me than a sunrise. I briefly debate whether we could abort the mission, and just flee to some quiet corner of the world to live out what time we had left together. I know, though, that this is a false hope, the sort of thing the Adversary would want us to do, to make it easier to find and murder us.

Cat kisses me deeply, and we lose ourselves to one another, one last time.

[audio journal entry, 05/07/2045AD, 0503 hours]

These will, obviously, be my last journal entries. I won't be able to cache this final journal anywhere, but I feel the need to keep documenting the conclusion of our mission, even if the journal won't survive it. It's the "civilised" thing to do.

We awoke at 0400, performed our final checks, and were slowly underway by the meager first light at 0445. We'll stop at 3 kilometres out, and wait for 0700. The tension of everyone in the convoy is as high as it could be...there is truly nothing more important or terrifying than what we're doing this morning.

[audio journal entry, 05/07/2045AD, 0702 hours]

We reached the 3-klick perimeter at 0652, and at 0700 broke radio silence to confirm placement of the other convoys. I announce our 19 payloads, and wait. We grin to hear Olga had been waiting for us to arrive for a couple of days, with a total of 34 payloads to bring to bear. A voice I didn't know announced the southern convoy's 12 payloads; male, clipped, precise, Moroccan or Algerian, probably military. It doesn't matter...if he'd gotten only one payload here, he'd still be among the best of the best.

Our radio transmissions immediately bring forth a luminous blue

fog from the golden glow within the walls of the Vatican, which all of us knew to be swarms of cherubim beyond number; savage, ravenous, murderous locusts with the faces of babies, the same that had scoured the earth clean of most life. Larger, brighter flecks of blue flashed and swooped through the swarm, impossibly fast...the seraphim.

As we synchronise clocks between convoys and crews before the final assault, I stare at a faded, tattered photo of a smiling young woman with wide eyes and a bad haircut, hand in hand with the instrument of Life's destruction, the monstrous and beautiful Gabrielle. Claire was killed as soon as I was born, having outlived her usefulness by only moments, doubtlessly blinking in disbelief at the smiling blue monster standing over her with my mother's heart in her hand. Nobody expected such betrayal.

Everyone was so concerned with the Second Coming, that they never stopped to consider what would happen afterwards. Hell might be Green, but the end of the world came in Blue.

I take a deep breath. Mother, I do this for you.

I bark out orders to the trigger crews to arm their atomic payloads and set detonation for 0708, the agreed-upon time. The finality of what we're doing sinks in, and I regretfully pee a little.

Cat, however, is in a fine mood. "It's time for the soundtrack!" she cries, and rummages around in the glovebox until she finds an ancient cassette tape, and pushes it into the player with a grin that shows her fangs. I gun the truck's engine and slam it into gear...our hearts sing as one, as our convoys lurch forward through the ruins of Rome towards Vatican City to the strains of "Sympathy For the Devil", pulling the Devil's own vengeance behind us.

[end of record]

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