

INTERCESSION

by Dawid Tysowski

Images of the apocalypse were at the front of his mind. Though it'd been decades since the first bombs fell from the bloody November skies, the memory of crimson liquid of death scattered on the dirty ground didn't want to leave him alone. Yes, everybody had seen it coming - news of the exponentially rising international tension had usurped the screens for more than a quarter. But the threat always seemed so distant, so unreal. Despite the talking heads' concerns, he used to have courage. And he used to have faith.

In dire need, he would always turn to the Spirit. Requesting counsel or strength, the deity never failed to help him find the answers hidden deep within himself. Be it trivial matters of everyday decisions, or times when much more was at stake, the Spirit was there.

On that day, the Day of Salvation, he prayed. When he was told about the bombings, the fire falling from the skies, he ran out of the church whose pastor he was, got down on his knees and asked for guidance. "This one last time," he said. "Show me the way, or else leave me condemned forever."

Making ultimatums to higher beings was gambling, but there was no choice. Driven by passion and seeing humanity tear itself apart, he knew that was his destiny calling. It wasn't a desirable one, not at all. Still, he felt that he was chosen; the shiver of vocation, often against one's will.

And the Spirit listened. Yet, he never knew which one was bestowed upon him: a blessing, or a curse.

Shortly after the atomic winter spread all over the globe, he set out to fulfil his destiny. Millions died of the explosions, and more were to follow due to famine, years

of military conflicts and long-lasting radiation. He knew there was only one thing to fight the plight. It was through faith. Through the one and only Truth.

And so his crusade began. Yes, *crusade* is the right thing to call it. It was neither a quest, driven by the urge of adventure, nor a peaceful way to redemption. A bloodthirsty war it was, aiming not to turn the infidels round, but to clear the fields of the Earth of that filthy scum.

The signs were clear. His inner voice, the voice of the Spirit, made it all clear. Not as clear as a day, but more as a full-moon night: you can see everything, but it's dark nonetheless.

The four states, in which the world was then divided, turned out to be the Four Riders that brought nothing but death and misery. The earthquakes that devoured cities corrupted by lust, the inevitable degradation of human values as faced with a global threat to survival. Further catastrophes followed and he was sure.

It was *the* Apocalypse.

For seven years he campaigned against those who opposed the Truth, sending them back to where they've come from: to Hell itself. Those were the souls having no chance of joining the new kingdom that was on the rise. A kingdom born out of the Day of Salvation; derived from fire, a divine state of a new world.

By all means, he pursued the light shone upon him, making darkness divide. A firm believer in the cause, a devotee of his own revelation, his path was one of dead bodies and even dead-er souls. But that was the Spirit's will, as he knew full well.

It began with but a few persons, passionate enough to follow him.

Persons turned into people and people turned into armies in another seven years. The scale of destruction multiplied proportionately to the number of souls saved from damnation and sent straight to Hell. Enemies of the Truth were being eliminated, one by one. First, damage was done to the Eastern religions and beliefs, cleaning the landscapes of monuments, erasing any memory of idols of wicked men. Then, the ancestral cults of savages were put to an end, those murderous bastards. Even the original Creed, whose heart was located within the walls of gilded palaces, among frescoes and Latin prayers. It wasn't the Truth, no. It was but a golden calf: sin, concealed under a snow-white robe.

All of them were lies, all of them had to be destroyed. Only a new order, a new city in a new world, could truly be a rescue from them.

There wasn't a shadow of doubt about it in his mind, and the hordes of avid believers that followed the way of the Truth only instilled him in his conviction.

A world of which he was the pope, in the city of New Jerusalem, following the order of the Truth.

For seven years he had ruled the Enlightened.

"Holy Father," he heard somebody calling him. He opened his eyes, slowly. Abruptly torn out from his mindful remembrance, he took a deep breath, followed by a sharp exhale. "It's time."

Pope Evaristus II rose from his grand chair, wearied. Decades of servitude wrung him of vital energy like a sponge. The rumour had it, he was so light he could tread

on fresh snow without leaving footsteps behind. Some said he gleamed, that his wise head glowed. As if he was a saint, or a ghost.

A demon.

"Thank you, Bernard," said he under his breath, or was it a sigh? His Holiness' voice was barely audible by that time. "May the Spirit bestow the Truth upon thee, Brother."

The old man took a step, then another one, and stopped. He looked down at his feet, held tight in his heavy boots, and at his black robe. It was his soul that gave off that mysterious brightness; clarity of the Truth, not cleanness of his clothes.

His long grey hair almost reached his buttocks. They were the tangible evidence of his old-age wisdom. During the times after the Day of Salvation, those twenty-one years of showing the Truth to the people, men of senility were a rarity. Women were also almost entirely gone by then, regardless of their age. Those that did somehow make it through either served the pope, their presence a luxury, subjects of his wealth, or went into hiding years ago. Nobody knew if they were even still alive.

"Bernard," called the pope, Evaristus II, "have you ever questioned your faith in the Truth?"

"I would never even think of it, Holy Shepherd." Replied the bishop-servant, bewitched at the absurdity of the inquiry.

The sage didn't respond. There was no time to respond anyway, his people were waiting, there was no time to think. Step by step, he approached the opened balcony

door, through which dark skies tried to breach into the room. He knew exactly what to say, he had been meditating on that for months.

Before taking a step and making his face shown to the masses gathered at the Main Square, he hesitated. He could well feel the eyes of Bernard scanning his back, waiting. Is the pope's heart going to stop, eventually? Is he going to fall and break his holy skull into pieces? How much longer will he be able to carry that great weight on his feeble shoulders, hidden under cascades of grey hair? And, for the Spirit's sake, what was that strange question all about!?

Evaristus II still hesitated, deep in thought, as usual. Muzzled sounds of chanting crowds reaching his ears, but they were more like memories of voices once heard; cries from a distant world. He wondered what was happening to him: to his body and mind. He'd been through far too many things to narrow it down to old age. Too wise he was, too intelligent, to ignore the corruption that overflowed him.

He looked to his right, where a sweet Sister stood. Pursuing her destiny, at His Holiness' services, she was just standing there naked, waiting for the pope to tilt his finger. A slightest sigh of the sage meant she was needed. Regardless, if it was physical relief she provided, or just being pleasant to the eye. That was the fate of those nobler of females. Others (who didn't manage to escape) were executed a long time ago.

Most of them weren't noble.

He approached the Sister and stretched his hairy arm, putting his wrinkled hand on her soft breast. Under his fingertips, he could feel the creamy smoothness of her skin, the mild warmth of her body, the delicate beats of her heart. A creature of

finesse, a statue of femininity. That's what the Truth brought unto women: perfection. It rid them of any flaws, of physical scars and mental defects.

From all of his achievements, it was the creation of Sisters that Evaristus II was most proud of. It brought the exalted status back to women. They were a scarcity, any man's dream. His personal extravagant delight.

His long and skinny fingers were strangely delicate on her bosom until her nipple was caught between his thumb and forefinger, pinching it, squeezing, and wringing. He could be gentle, but he could also show his cruelty, and any Sister should know it.

Despite the obvious pain, she didn't move an inch.

"How about you," inquired the old man, "have you ever questioned your faith, my dear Sister?"

A Sister wasn't allowed to say a word that wasn't expressing the Truth, one way or another, and he knew that. He made those rules, after all. Or was it the Spirit?

"Oh, sublime father, the Truth shines so brightly in me that no road is any longer dark, or twisted, or wicked. Thus, how can I even imagine stepping off the only honest track, if there is no other way for me, nor for anybody else? How could I possibly see beyond the Truth, where the darkness resides, whilst the Truth is all that I see?"

Only then did he let go of her nipple and proceeded to the balcony to address the crowd. Again, the sage didn't comment. Not even a smile on his face, nothing but the indifference and ignorance.

Once he was out of sight, the Sister didn't cry, not even a teardrop appeared in her eyes. She was full of that very same indifference and ignorance. As a matter of fact, she didn't actually think about it too much. By that time, she didn't think at all. At least that's what everybody thought.

All voices were drowned out. Evaristus II approached the edge of the balcony, a decrepit platform hung high above the Main Square, where people clustered like rodents, as they no longer resembled men. Their wretched souls resembled those of rats.

As soon as the sage got to the balcony, he began to climb up the grandiose throne, the despotic chair of metal and bones, only to sit those few feet higher, closer to the skies, closer to the Truth, in the Spirit's garden. The crowd waited patiently for him to rest before they began to shriek, expressing boundless love and hatred, unimaginable suffering and pleasure.

Looking from below, his image could be likened to a judge, parting the vicious from the virtuous. Under the heavy crown of his grey hair, his perceptive eyes were scanning those who awaited redemption, seeing through them and wisely assessing their souls.

Entire minutes went by. The old man seemed to be gathering energy to let potent words out of his feeble mouth. As excitement and tension grew, the voices of the mob began to silence again. It was a special occasion, they haven't seen their Holy

Father in months, let alone heard him speak. What was the message he had to convey? What had the Spirit revealed upon him? Was the war over, or had it just begun?

Someone fainted, someone else shouted. In the western corner of the square a fight broke out, maybe it would spread into a free-for-all, as it had happened before. Many a man had his teeth knocked out, even a few lives were lost during these public events.

"Brother," said pope Evaristus II, "let the Spirit endow the Truth upon thee."

His words were like thunder, breaking through the horde of bodies. They began to scream again, crazy in their contradictory feelings, driven by madness, by thoughtless devotion. Whenever he would address the masses he would always use his speech precisely, so that it touched the souls of his men, so that each one of them felt spoken to. In their unity, they could also experience the faintest shadow of individuality, and they loved it.

The noise was up in the air for minutes until they began to shush one another. Like a child who wants a new toy so desperately it falls on the ground and begins to weep loudly, kicking, but then remembers that such behaviour will most likely be punished. Disobedience leads to pain. Everybody knew that, or at least that's what they thought to be true.

"The Spirit is joyful when he seeth thee, the Enlightened, gathered here today, ready to greet thy Holy Shephard," continued Evaristus II as gasps of excitement spread all over the Square again, this time more reserved, disciplined. The powerful voice coming down from the skull-and-metal throne emanated with emotion and

inspiration. "I, thy Holy Father, was succumbed in the pit of bethought in the lasteth days. Thoughts of the benevolence of the Spirit, thoughts of the Truth, thoughts of thee, the Enlightened, and thoughts of our pure New Jerusalem. To those who hast ever doubted the authenticity of our mission, those who hast questioned the honesty of our way, those who hast tried to cross; to thee, I sayeth - behold 'round thyself! Over two decades passed since the historic Day of Salvation, when the depraved systems of the olden days and the corrupt souls of sinful scums collapsed. Over two decades of our holy crusade, of eradicating vice and wickedness, of laying the foundation for a new world, a new order, New Jerusalem! Behold 'round thyself and bid me what thou seeth!"

Insecure murmurs flew through the dirty mob, trembling shoulders squeezed between other living flesh, unable to move. None of the men crowded on the Main Square dared to do that, to look around. What terrible profanity would that be! To question the Truth, to have doubts - that was unfathomable to them. Unimaginable for rats.

"I shalt bid thee what thou wouldst seeth! Thou wouldst seeth perfection. Thou wouldst seeth magnificence. Thou wouldst seeth purity. Thou wouldst seeth New Jerusalem!"

A tsunami broke loose. A deafening wave of roaring, howling, and growling. Whether these sounds came out of the men, blinded by furious adoration, or from the fiery depths of Hell itself, it was hard to tell.

"But our fight is not over yet, Brothers," proceeded the pope, without waiting for the mob to become quiet. The horrible screams silenced at once anyway. "Our fight is not over just yet," he repeated with his teeth clenched, the last two words coming out

of his mouth as hateful spits of saliva. "There is but one lasteth sacrifice the Spirit has demanded of thee." He stopped as the crowd was waiting impatiently. Was it another war? Another purge, or a Sister-hunt?

"For years, thou hast killed the infidels, showing them the way to the Truth. Thou hast eradicated false idols, whose lies perverted souls of men. Thou hast rid the fruitful Earth of those infected by radioactive rays, a product of human cruelty and greed, cleansing the surface of our planet from all filth. Thou hast built perfection, magnificence, and purity. Thou hast built New Jerusalem!"

His words were not followed by an uproar this time, rather a stiffness of pride and concern. The mutual effect of ambiguous feeling, its pressure crushing down on his people. His voice echoed around the square and stayed there for a moment, frozen in space.

"The time hast cometh for thee to becometh a part of that perfection, magnificence, and purity. The time hast cometh for thee to becometh one with the Truth and join the Spirit in its magnanimity. Aye, thou hast built New Jerusalem, and aye, thou hast built a foundation for thyself, the Enlightened, to seeketh further enlightenment!"

Despite the distance, he could clearly see the sparks of arousal in his men's eyes. His words resonated, moved their souls and touched upon the innermost parts of his people. That was power, he knew it. The capacity not to kill, or imprison, or destroy. It was the capacity to inspire: to let live, set free, and create. That was the mystical force behind the actions of every revolution and movement in human history. What Evaristus II's high ground of past tyrants was, was the lack of competition.

Through year-long wars and purges, he got rid of anyone stupid enough to oppose him. Hence, the people, the rats, who were gathered at the Main Square weren't even capable of having thoughts of betrayal whatsoever.

None of them had ever questioned their faith.

Neither have Evaristus II. It was just that he no longer *had* it. He felt vain, empty, devoid. Maybe just old? Whatever he had become, he couldn't let his Brothers go on and live their lives. They wouldn't manage without him, without Him, without their purpose. No, he had to finish his mission before he died - that was beyond question. As the Spirit has demanded at the beginning of his crusade, he would be the sword that was to bring an end to all suffering; an end to all life.

"Take hold of thy weapons, Brothers," ordered the Holy Father, the Shepherd of his sheep. Everybody was armed, at least with a handgun, he knew that. It was by his own order. "Put thy guns to thy heads, Brothers, and be not afraid. Soon, thou shalt all leaveth these dark fields of gore and joineth the Spirit." His heart was pounding and... it can't be - was he trembling? "Soon thou shalt be one with Truth."

"Be not abrupt and be not violent. Remember, Brothers, it's the Spirit who pulls the trigger. Thy fingers but intercede. May the Spirit bestow the Truth upon thee, Brothers. May thee be Enlightened."

Seconds passed in what seemed to be hours, days even. Silence, nearly absolute silence. The tension rising in the air, seizing the souls of the men, of the rats. A murmur, a hum. No more echoes this time, just the uncomfortable tightness, the frantic running of eyes, from one corner to the other.

Stress, trembling, fear. What is the truest virtue of all? Is it bravery, the courage of a man to do what has to be done and to sacrifice oneself for what is greater than oneself, what is beyond measure? Or is it wisdom, so as not to fall victim of the cruelty of tyrants?

Inhale a breath full of contagion and stench. The odour of saliva, blood, and decay. The dirt on the ground and the smell of sweat all around.

Inhale a breath full of hope and devotion. The thought of enlightenment, purity, and cleanness. The holy fields somewhere there, above.

A shot.

Followed not by tension, but by absolute liberation. That was the stimulus everybody awaited. A shot, followed by another one, and another one, and then a cascade of thuds. Split seconds, and the Main Square turned into an opera, orchestra of death. The music of Enlightenment.

Pope Evaristus II was sitting at his throne, watching as bodies were collapsing. He looked at the mob, frantic.

Was that it? Was that the inevitable end? If so, was it worth it? Bodies over bodies, floating on blood.

He heard a shot beyond his back, a blunt thump, and that got him out of the strange trance. In the Square, bodies were still falling and the heavens were screaming, stunned. He stood up, got down from his throne and entered the back room.

On the ground, there was a dead corpse, twisted in an unnatural position, perverted in a deadly spasm. His face was barely recognizable, most of it torn off, with fragments of skull and brain pulp scattered all over the floor. The pope knew it was Bernard nonetheless.

With his black fine shoe he rotated the body on its back, so that lay with its limbs stretched outwards. Blood was still spilling from the obnoxious hole that used to be a face; where a smile used to reside and where tears would once flow.

Evaristus II scanned the body with his perceptive eyes. The dusty robe covered with stains of shiny blood, just as black as the gown. The cold feet that would never walk again, the purple hand that would never touch or feel again.

He heard something click behind him. Yes, he realized, Bernard's gun was nowhere near his body. He slowly looked around.

Standing tall, naked, a gun in her hand, the Sister was pointing the barrel at her Holy Shepherd. With such high ground, she was invincible. Life or death, it was up to her. She had control. She was God.

Only a few steps between her bare body, her outstretched arm, and the old man - that was the entire universe then. Nothing mattered but that little space in New Jerusalem. Maybe that's how it was always supposed to end; how it was supposed to begin. Evaristus II was smiling.

"Sister," he made a tiny step forward. "May the Spirit bestow the Truth-"

A shot. One thud that discerned itself from the ambience of noisy discharges.

There were no last words, no Enlightenment, no resurrection. The walking and living saint was neither walking nor living anymore. For all these years, decades of pain, seas of tears and waves of blood; one bullet was enough to put an end to tyranny and madness.

She didn't look at the pathetic scum, she didn't spit at his dead corpse. That didn't matter anymore. What was dead was dead.

She got to the open balcony door and covered her eyes from the sun rays that peeked down on the slaughterhouse through dense clouds. It'd been a while since she last saw the light of day. Dim and blurred, but light nevertheless.

She looked down at the Main Square. Shots could still be heard from a distance, from the city. As far as she could see, though, nothing moved.

Having put the bloody gun to her temple, she pulled the trigger. This time, however, there was no intercession, and there was no Enlightenment. The weapon clicked, but nothing apart from that. No loud explosions, no thuds.

The gun fell out of her hand and fell next to her foot, almost hurting her delicate toes. They might have taken her humanness away, but they couldn't take her softness.

A single tear ran down her cheek as the warm beams of light shone on her face.