

Silent Night

a short story by João Barreiros

In the twenty fifth year of this endless war, on the banks of Lake Saimaa, I finally killed my first Santa Claus. It was pure luck... honestly. Murphy's law dictated that my comrades in arms, who were all better trained than me, arrived late, were held up, or stuck in the viscous mire of some tar pit, were assailed by the cold as the heating systems of their suits started to fail. Better still, some were kicked to death by a swarm of reindeer that swooped down from the sky, like silent Furies. The few that survived had an immediate encounter with a group of elves, or were seduced by the terrible and almost irresistible offer of presents packed with our heart's desires. I don't know what happened to them. No corpses were left to tell the tale. After a certain point, the video cameras in their helmets took only pearls of absence and white nothingness. Mastoid implants break down near zones where the ineffable manifests itself. Radio communications drown in a storm of static. No thermal or infra-red detector works properly. Smart bombs, launched by the cruisers anchored in Norwegian territorial water, go off track, because the logic systems in their paranoid mini-brains get stuck in feedback loops. The targets get mixed up in the protein chips and they turn back and smash into the hulls of the vessels from which they were launched.

How then can we be certain that he is there, in precisely that zone, blooming like some sinister, beautiful flower before the inevitable pollination on the twenty fifth of December? All-seeing satellites suddenly see nothing at all. There's always a part of Finland that disappears from the map, gobbled up by this conceptual negation, fifteen to twenty days before the event.

When this happens, when the nodule's location becomes almost certain instead of just probable, they pluck us from the Barents Sea training camp, put a credit balance into our bank accounts, which will only be truly ours if we make it, and stuff us into the belly of a glider towed by an ancient Tupolev. A deadly slow aircraft with not a single Artificial Intelligence support system. Armed with katanas and rifles more than a hundred years old, they drop us in the sky about ten kilometres from the virtual target. Then it's a panic dive into the morning as the sun rises over the Balkans of Capitalist Russia, with the snow packed wind smashing into the glider's hull, while all of us, or at least those of this elite unit of ten commandos, tangled in the shock absorber nets of our seats, chew psychotropic capsules, anti-hypnotics, serotonin and adrenaline stimulators. We bid farewell to the Infonet which has been with us all our lives, ready to plunge into the autistic silence that envelopes all mysteries. The Imagos of family members and loved ones shatter into scattered points of light on our retinas. The synthetic voices of our virtual advisers are suddenly replaced by a menacing carolling which repeats, Silent Night, Holy Night ...

"Shut this shit off will you", shouts Yosef Wu, our salariman lieutenant.
"And block all sound reception. Are you stupid or what? You can't wait to hear what you didn't ought'a. Am I right?"

Big Corporation officers don't bother me. The suit may be an expert

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