

CONTENTS

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY 6

Synopsis 6

Last Time 7

6.0 8

MERCENARY PLANET 54

POI datafile 54

Synopsis 60

Last Time 61

PERCEPTION & OVERLOAD (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 1) 62

SCARRED ZERUEL 134

character profile 134

changelog 135

Synopsis 140

Last Time 141

THE LOW SEA OF HATE (E/ Δ) 142

THE GARDEN 142

KILLING DISTANCE 149

ACHERON 156

SAGE 160

BLOWING IT 163

SCOUDRA 170

INO'S VEIL 177

PSYCHOGRAMMA 182

character profile 182

Synopsis 184

Last Time 185

PROTOCOL 03.2: SECOND FACE II 186

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT IN! 240

character profile 240

Synopsis 246

Last Time 247

FAILURE 06: PRELIMINARY EXCAVATION 248

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY 316

character profile 316

Synopsis 318

Last Time 319

RECORD VI 320

NOTES 396



SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher McDonell for intimate creatures

to nekosattva for glass silhouettes

to vape escapist for the ghost schemas

to Amara Reyes for lifted wings

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one
who sees this

LVCIG121 2'
 AEF LVCIG121
 TUCN2 LVCIG121
 VCCN122M AEF
 WUECEM12 TUCN2
 A1NEBV VCCN122
 COMMOB WUECEM12
 B12N2 A1NEBV
 EVV12D' COMMOB
 N12N2 B12N2
 S2E EVV12D'
 S2SLEND1 N12N2
 122M S2E
 0N12 S2SLEND1
 V12N2 122M
 WUECEM12 0N12
 D020E V12N2
 EI WUECEM12
 TUCN2 D020E
 W1 N1 EI
 TUCN2 D020E
 LEW20B W1 N1
 E122MOD TUCN2
 2ED D0 LEW20B
 WE E12' E122MOD
 VDI12CI 2ED D0
 122 WE E12'
 COM2EC1E VDI12CI
 VWE1' 122
 211 COM2EC1E
 D020E VWE1'
 122M 211
 T020E D020E
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 T020E



SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY

Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



by: [nekosattva](#)

Last Time

yelena and natalia take sanctuary in a hospital under fire and continue learning the ways of nay-toe

CW: fascist ideology, manosphere ideology, heterosexual pornography, male nudity, sexual Orientalism, homophobia, reproductive sexism, guns, war orphans, mass destruction, ethnic violence, genocide, sexual harassment, identity horror, bullying, sociopathic impulses, murder, involuntary institutionalization, separation

They drove beneath arches of glass that rose like pillars from black craters. They were jagged and coarse, glistening; held within them were remnants of the past, captured in amber. Light shimmered, dancing from one shiny surface to another, 'cross the cracks of marble and wood... the world of glass has won, every single shambling corpse encased and made rigid. Blackened human forms held a singular pose... a permanent selfie, glimmering brilliantly in smooth coffin mountains. The world of glass has won. A violent beat fizzled beneath her, crackling along to every spat lyric. Chiseled figures stood on the horizon, morning dew dripping from their leaden limbs. Yelena rolled down

6.0

the window, and a deep pungent smell quickly conquered the vape stench. "The air here is alive," Groypee groaned. "Alive," Yelena muttered to herself. The air must sap its vitality from everything else, which lies inert and solid. The entire city was crystallized; bus stops and houses shiny, storefronts filled only with glittering stone. They parked the van before a ministry building, on which a gigantic bronze emblem was adorned with stars and an eagle soaring over fields of corn. She could not read the top; the letters were foreign to her. The bottom read: "Ministerctva Kulturj," Ministry of Culture. The trees had turned to pillars of salt, and the soil was porous stone with curious little gems of light green and yellow. A tank had tipped onto its side, encased in glass before it could touch the rubble-littered ground, torn open like tissue; it hung permanently in the air, beneath a stoic wave of rock, as if Nay-toe had suspended the very properties of the Earth itself. Yelena felt her heart flutter; this could only be the holy land.

THE FOURTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« Over time, 'druzhina' began to become curious about the world. They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, what is the meaning of life?' 'Prakh,' he answered. 'To be the dust in

which Nay-toe's dreams are free to roam, unburdened by the inconveniences of flesh.' »

Samuel approached Yelena, his face partially obscured by vapor clouds. "This is the based camp," he pointed towards the ministry building, its interior endowed with apocalypse-proof bunkers and weaponry storage. "We hang out here... chow, work out. You like organ meats, Lena?" Groypee and Paco unloaded their equipment and cleaned their guns, giving special attention to their AR-15s... softly rubbing down the receiver, polishing the barrel, adjusting the sights and zero-ing them in... the warmth of steel beneath their fingertips, burdensome blood drying 'neath the sun... yes, pull on the action and make yourself taut, bloodied and red like a beautiful wasp, riddled with recoil shudders, faces hot with the irradiated glow of the Zone, the taste of metal in your mouth growing louder... a perfect communion between man & steel. "Come on," Samuel stretched his back, studying the horizon with a hand above his eyes. "I'll give you the grand tour." Alec had a grin as he came up behind Yelena, squeezing the upper guard of his shortened AK-74. "I insist, my Queen." She thought of running, to hide in the hills; the hills were glass and concealed no secrets. In Nay-Toe's realm, we see right through each other. The world of glass has won.

In the courtyards, a platoon of boys had taken camp. Some of them slept on stone; others, on discarded plastic. Homes were fashioned out of old personnel carriers and vans, plane fuselages, tank chassis. Various trophies stood on posts made of rusted weaponry; sticky anime figurines, Japanese pornography, hair pilfered from influencers, tattered books. Underneath the canopy of a petrified tree, a few boys lifted weights made of old automobile parts, muscles sharp, veins swelling. Above them, a few boys were stretched on all fours, pointing their testicles to the sun in prostration or offering. "Maximizes T levels," Samuel narrated. "We need to stay fit to survive." In the middle of the encampment laid an altar on pale stone, stained with dried blood. Stuck to the altar were thousands of little pictures of women, some modest and others not, floating in a human sea. Yelena plucked one from the altar, the paper was warped and wrinkled, its edges frayed from being hastily cut. The girl looked like Christine; her thin brows and soft face, a distinct mole beneath her left eye. "Some of the boys enjoy brides of the Orient because they are submissive, but I think that's no fun. A high T male should take pride in the challenges of conquest." Yelena hid her disgust by biting her tongue; even in the holy land, thoughts were merely repetitions of another's fantasy. Are your thoughts not your own? When you close

your eyes, do you only see what you'd been given? If the interconnected world revolved in patterns, in that which is likely and thus predictable, then she too must swallow the patterns; to be repeated is to be defeated. Nay-toe has made even flesh a pattern, fungible and replaceable. These women are merely pieces of a motif, freely interchangeable, of some value on the global pussy market depending on how slut futures go that day. And in that way alone, they cease to be anything more; every feature stripped 'till it's bare and shaven. Yelena tore the picture of the girl in half, into quarters, to free whoever she was from the bondage of utility.

Past the courtyard, the ministry building revealed its secure interior through a crater. The debris had been cleaned away, though pieces of the missile remained embedded into the walls. Bombing the Ministry of Culture seemed to Yelena a cruel joke; raining death was so meaningless to the perpetrators that even those far away from any battlefield who spent their days approving tapestries and censoring poetry collections turned to vapor in a Tochka's glow. Some of the offices had been preserved in glass too; beautiful carpets lined the walls, and a woman covering her eyes laid beneath the desk... her body was blackened, and her skin looked like chalk.

"The bunker is where Alphas live. We keep a tight hierarchy," Samuel yelled between tokes of his vape. The entrance to the bunker was guarded by two young boys, endowed with a sharp jaw and broad shoulders. They were dressed in old military clothes slightly too large for their bodies. They opened the large, scorched door to lead Yelena and her compatriots down a long corridor hot with steaming pipes. The stench of watermelon and nicotine hung on the walls, and there were print-outs of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius above dusty and pock-marked desks that filled many of the alcoves in the bunker. Yelena saw old communications equipment, antiquated computers; first aid kits strewn all over the floor beside rotting cots and trampled military rations. Two portraits were covered in broken glass from their unceremonious descent down the wall. "Were there survivors?" Yelena asked no-one in particular. Alec chewed on dried liver, while stamping his foot on a ration to watch its cold, greasy contents spurt forth. Samuel motioned at Alec, preferring to keep things moving, further down the corridor... Yelena felt her eyes burn; above them, chandeliers beamed brightly onto delicately-carved black and white stone, and long pillars guided the vision up towards blood-red carpets and marble statues. Nay-toe's will suddenly falls back into shape; the Ministry of Culture's bunker had been protecting human

cargo of considerable importance. Did you save them, at the cost of the others? Nay-toe could be so cruel in its wisdom.

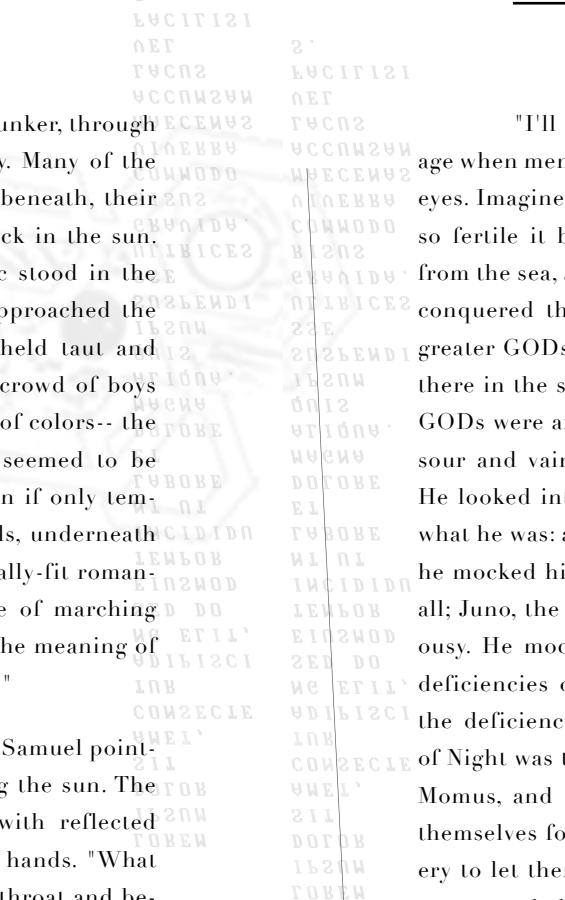
"Follow me, to the bedroom, my Queen;" Samuel pointed to the top of the stairs while sucking on his vape. Alec pressed up behind Yelena, not without some glee. Yelena followed Samuel up to a room decorated entirely with flowers; from the chiseled roses on the ceiling to the tulips and marigolds of the carpets. Beyond the window, where the world should have been, stood instead glossy paper printed with palm trees and ocean-y blues. They deny her the fantasy of another world; those realms lying beneath trees, hidden away from the sun. No; come play in the emerald shade. Run through rivers and fields. Trees are not boundaries, but suggestions of an infinitely green horizon. No; not anymore. In its place, a bed with yearning petals made of cloth & lace, threatening to envelop its prey in dead-still comfort. Above the headboard embossed with carved vines tightly binding flowers, a thought was etched into the wall:

THE FIFTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, what is the role of children?' 'Boodooshee,' he answered. 'Children will cre-

ate the future; by any means necessary. That is why the spirit of Nay-toe lies utmostly with the youth.' »

Though Alec's demeanor was always blunted, he had a knack for picking up on Yelena's thoughts; E.S.P. gifted mos def, she thot. "You're probably wonderin' who Kali Hichi is," Alec groaned. Samuel shot him a glare and adjusted his pants. "He's a local GOD; turned up after the Big Bang. People saw everything turned to glass and they probably wondered why... so they started talking 'bout NATO this, NATO that." A time before Nay-toe, she thot again. Truly, an age of ignorance. Samuel cleared his throat, then took another drag off his vape. "Slave morality, Lenchka. They look to GODs for aid because they believe themselves to be weak. The thoughts of a crushed people. They'd rather be underneath a GOD's shoes than in them." Yelena could muster no sympathy; it was merely Nay-toe's will, like a wave or a bolt of lightning. "Their men are flabby, feminized. Hounded by bitch-women. They'd rather eat beans than see the red of their enemy's eyes." Yelena wipes away some of the dust from an old portrait; thick eyebrows and long, dark hair. Living in the ruins of another woman's dream.



Samuel took them further up the bunker, through a few hallways that connected to a balcony. Many of the boys had gathered down on the courtyard beneath, their faces bruised, their bodies exposed and slick in the sun. Yelena had not seen a single not-boy; Alec stood in the shade, lost in his own thoughts. Samuel approached the balusters, his arms akimbo and his chin held taut and rigid. He extended his arm in a wave; the crowd of boys cheered, extending their own arms in a sea of colors-- the commandment to strength, to sheer will, seemed to be more important than the color of skin, even if only temporarily. She remembers seeing their socials, underneath shimmering pastel colors; "Seeking: physically-fit romantic men who love combat and are capable of marching twenty miles a day." She now understands the meaning of their name, these are the "Crystal Centaurs."

"What lays before us, in the stars?" Samuel pointed to the crystals on the horizon, occluding the sun. The crowd cheered. The balcony shimmered with reflected light. Samuel hushed the crowd with open hands. "What lays before us in the stars?" He cleared his throat and began to speak.

"I'll begin with a story. I'll take you back to the age when men and GODs walked the same Gaia. Close your eyes. Imagine a sea in bloom; a sea that can bloom, and be so fertile it births a generation of GODs. Yes, they rose from the sea, and stormed Olympus, and through conquest conquered the Titans to take their rightful place as the greater GODs. And so they did... to sit on their throne up there in the sky. And so to become drunk with power; the GODs were arrogant... yes, they grew to be dour, old, ugly, sour and vain. Except for one; the son of Night herself. He looked into the face of Zeus himself and saw him for what he was: a blustering fogey prone to a child's fits. And he mocked him for it. Yes, this son of Night mocked them all; Juno, the wife of Zeus, for her bickering and her jealousy. He mocked their children by showing the obvious deficiencies of their creations, and in doing so revealed the deficiencies of the creators themselves. Yes; the son of Night was the first prankster, and for that he was called Momus, and he shows us that the enemy always reveals themselves for who they are... one merely needs the bravery to let them. And yes my brothers, bravery, for Momus was rewarded for the stupidity of others by being shunned by his peers and expelled from Olympus... truly, very relatable."

"But don't be discouraged, my brothers. I'm merely speaking of those amongst civil society, who sit on their thrones, and judge those beneath them. Yes, these are those jealous of youth, of real human vitality; knowing neither, for they sit atop their mountain boring themselves with women and little games. Jealousy is the reason they send young, beautiful men in droves to die; not for honor, not for the camaraderie of battle, but merely to satisfy their social whims, their lust for property. Yes, jealousy, towards those who are about to die, who know of joys that remain foreign to the catamites and eunuchs atop the mountain. It is us who know glory, the glory of battle, who know the sweetness of peace, who know the pain of losing a fellow commando. This is reality, my brothers; it's the bit you take 'tween your teeth. It's the stench of blood in the night after a heated battle. It's seeing your fellow commando turn to meat and bone at the very instant of contact with an Mk. 153 SMAW."

A few men pushed each other in the front, wanting to start a pit.

"I'll tell you another story. After the fall of the age when men and GODs walked the same Gaia, and man aspired to surmount Olympus and become a GOD himself,

Gaia descended into violence and war. Gone were the days of playing games and indulging in little thought experiments; now came the time for glory, now came the time for Sparta," a few cheers from a group of white boys; "yes, and none had the pleasure of glory more than General Brasidas; the original G.O.A.T. Look at their children today; obese, addicted to alcohol, ingesting G.M.O. garbage by the truck-load. No... if the kind General Brasidas was here today, he'd personally execute every single one of his progeny. No... let's remember the great General himself. After the ending of the truce between the Spartans and the feminized Athenians, the Spartans took it upon themselves to thrust forward for the attack. Brasidas, as the distinguished general, recognized an opportunity to defeat the superior force. You see, as a Spartan, Brasidas didn't believe in cunning or tricks; no, he had no need for the witty sayings of a certain Sun Tzu. His strategy was to be bold, to be aggressive; it was to earn his glory in blood. Yes, he led the charge himself, thrusting his body into the very eye of the Athenian army's left wing. It was a bloody battle; it was a bloody success, my brothers. Rather than sacrificing one of his men, or even one of his lesser allies, he took the very first hit himself. He died right there on the battlefield, surrounded by his men-- who would carry his corpse home and sing of their great victory, and their

heroic general who gave his life for the glory of that victory."

A few men raised themselves on the shoulders of others, arms stretched out in cheers & cries, trying to climb the ruins of the Ministry to reach the balcony.

"Yes, and surely the Athenian aristocracy spurned Brasidas; they laughed, and called him a fool for wasting his life on glory-- a life that should have been wasted on acquiring property and molesting boys instead. My brothers, know that a spirit tied to the dead-air of politics and property is not a free spirit. No, the free spirit, the searching spirit isn't found amongst the orators, the preachers, the politician who takes it upon himself to represent 'the masses,' 'the proletariat,' the people;' no, it is the fool. The searching spirit is found amongst the masturbators of the marketplace, who seek for an honest man with a lantern and find none, who dines amongst the dogs. It is the fool, scorned by those atop the mountain, who holds close his open heart and makes use of his open mind. They must use this searching spirit to incite, to use the wilderness, the perverse; they must wear the disguise of the madman to bring shock and scandal amongst the masses-- and inspire true radical thought amongst the few. Yes; it is you

and I, my brothers-- the very few who know the meaning of the provocations, the 'memes,' the banter, the vulgar commentary, and the truths they conceal from all those lacking the searching spirit. Yes; it is you and I, fools in arms, the very few, who are sensitive to the speaking of the heart... only a searching spirit has the sensitivity necessary to understand such things that those atop the mountains merely find amusing-- pity their disability of deafness! They are content in their world of plastic, in which lines are rigid and all contradictions resolved. No; we must be their negation: free, but disciplined. Spontaneously calculated. Inspired, and erudite. We defeat dogma, but with authority; we reject the choking hands of the external, and sharpen our own strict fists."

Many of the men raised their fists, in emulation of their heroes; anyone who displayed strength, regardless of the banner they marched under.

"But let me return to the original question: what lays before us, in the stars? Night had two children my brothers; Momus, the god of mockery, and Nemesis, the goddess of retribution for arrogance. Our enemy believes himself to be superior, believes himself to be superior to everything, even nature and its bright stars. So what lays

before us? I already see the stars burning within you, gentlemen, burning so strong you worry that you might disintegrate yourself in its heat. But don't be scared; what burns within you is a great thing. Something that no money could buy, and no medical science could understand. It's a glimmer of a return; the return of a dormant force that today may only exist in the margins of the world. Yes, it's there. In the blood-soaked streets of a crime-riddled street. In the pirate ships of the African seas. In the warrior bands of the bush. In the brotherhood of men, who share only a fellow heart for romance. The enemies of beauty are watching us, shifting in the grass; they feel the heat of Nemesis just as we do. So what lays before us?"

The crowd suddenly fell into hushes and whispers.

"I'll tell you brothers. I'll tell you of the time beneath the stars, when Leviathan crumbles. Watch its pieces hurtle into the waters, in awe of how brittle its once impenetrable walls seem. They will free themselves from all cages; linguistic, biological. They will put down the chains. But freedom will not come, brothers. The Nations will flee like sheep, and tend to their flock. They will protect themselves with rockets and bloodless machinery; drones and

computers. Fattened on their own excess and decadence, they will seek out others to fight for them."

Yelena saw the twinkling in their eyes; enraptured, and what did they imagine for themselves?

"And those brothers in arms? Those who have heard the call, who yearn to rise to one great occasion? We will find ourselves, and leave this world together. We will form fortresses on new frontiers, where civilizations slender fingers do not reach, and we will inhale the scent of primordial water. We will loot, plunder-- live like pirates on digital seas. We will hone our eyes, and sharpen our muscles... we will fashion ourselves into a sharp object with which to jab into Cathedral's eye. The Nations will come to us, bearing gifts in exchange for our service or our demagogues. And these men will watch atop their eagles' nests, their eyes trained to infinitely expanding horizons. They will cultivate arts and sciences, having no need for comfort or entertainment. Our fortresses will have a grand painting in every atrium, and a perfect dream-weapon in every vestibulum with which to hold the fearful Nations beneath our heal."

The crowds raised themselves, erect.

"Ah; the fear. Well, I sit here in my tiny room, surrounded by my weights and my childish games, smothered in the feminine grip of the Motherworld. When I die, they will pour me into a wooden box and leave it in the cold and lifeless soil. And through the many million ages, 'till the end of this planet's violent existence, I will never breathe, nor laugh, nor cry again."

They erupt into cheering; an excess of noise so loud it hurt Yelena's hearing.

"So come out and play with me in the milky night, and hold my hand as we paint our skies red. The universe has spared us this moment, and it's ours and only ours to take."

Strange.

With Alec behind her, his hand on his Kalashnikov, two boys came and placed a thick woolen frock over Yelena's shoulders. It was frayed; red edges of yarn, and the hem fell past her knees. She felt Samuel's cool breath on her neck, and he placed a crown made of leaves and flowers on her head. It felt itchy on her chafing forehead, and heavy from the weight. The two boys took her on their backs and lowered her down towards the crowd of boys,

who watched her with open mouths and twitchy eyes. Yelena felt the piercing looks penetrate deep into her body; feeling exposed, it was as if her blood was draining from her veins. Samuel took a hit from his vape, and stood beside her.

"Behold, my brothers. Our new Mahimata... the mother of the new race."

The crowd raised their fists, and with smiles pledged their allegiance to Yelena; how quickly they put aside their suspicions for her. A few men removed their shirts and begun posing; their fresh muscles bulging, perched like cranes. She could now see their faces more intimately; some damaged from the sun, some hot and blue. Some were marked with scars, others were fresh and soft. Some still could not grow anything beyond a layer of fine bristles. This was truly a brotherhood of man; united by nothing but a shared conviction in undomesticated youth. None of them seemed old enough for credit cards, bills, loans; any of the mundane indignities that slowly rob men of their volatility. I knew you, Mason. I knew you, Vic, with the purple eggplant emojis. I knew you, once, I know nothing now; your empty stares at your phone, waiting in your car. You are stained with the stench of locker

rooms. I knew you, Joey, and Jesse, and Eric. You walk in a daze from one vape cloud to another. Your mouths agape for a procession of screens. You are bare-chested, standing shoulder-to-shoulder; you are a waiting room. You are empty cans of Monster and cardboard boxes filled with grease. You are long nights spent swearing at strangers. You are bottles thrown at the windows of an after-hours Walmart. You are pitch-black nights without stars. Stubble, itching forearms at the cash register. You are wet clay, fashioned out of dried mud and shit. She saw Groypee and Paco; unencumbered by their gear, smiling genuinely. A few of the boys held portraits clutched snugly in their arms; of other women they'd never meet. They were mere icons... an empty canvas onto which one could project his desires; truly, woman was Nay-toe's vessel. Little King Samuel ascended on a stone platform beside a decimated statue.

"Behold, Mahimata Yelena. She will give birth to this new race, the native, indigenous race of the Zone. This new race of men will overcome the primitive apes of the non-Zone; this new race of man will conquer them and destroy their ideologies. He will take the women of the non-Zone, and show them a life in enlightenment, not ignorance. He will show her that in the openness of the

Zone, the only rule is the rule of commerce; they live not as domestic cattle, but freely in the open space of his desires. Are you with me, my brothers?"

Yelena saw the men had raised their fists even higher, faces wet with the tears spilling from their eyes. Whatever it was, they truly believed in it; they truly believed a radical spirit was superior to anything lesser, and dared always to take more. To them, the Sun was not a horizon but a window into a world of infinite energy, a world of chaotic energy vital enough to light up the sky, to force the hand of mere chance. Beyond the Zone, there were no alternatives, no choices; blood coursing through her vein was its own delirious intoxicant. She felt drunk; Yelena ascended onto the balusters, a sea of chattering faces beneath her agape with glee and envy and rapture. The wood groaned beneath her sneakers, and she spread her arms as if the sea of boys may swallow her whole. Swallow her whole; in the arms of the crowd, she's mere flesh, shedding the terrible baggage of history and names. To become anonymous, like these boys, is to truly feel one's heartbeat, to truly feel the sensual joy of ripping apart something with your bare hands. Words melt, becoming merely the lubricant of sheer action, the gasoline that helps set flame to the past. This is how Yelena liberates herself;

Feeling upstaged, Little King Samuel came up behind Yelena and forced her onto his shoulders, eliciting a grunt as her body weighed down on him. He extended his arm; "save yourselves for the grand ceremony, my brothers. There will be displays, organ meats, feats of strength." Samuel walked away with Yelena on his shoulders, hiding her from the glow of the sun. "She should know her place," he thot... "icons lose their power when they begin to speak." He understood the Mahimata's raw power; merely to exist is to take control. "Take Lena to Based Camp's best bunker. The 'long house.' You know what I mean." Yelena felt Samuel's demeanor shift, his accommodating smile replaced by a stern, utilitarian gaze. His face disappeared in a haze of heavy vape smoke. She felt the crown itch at her skin, and she turned her back away from the crowd, which devolved into boorish chanting: "Yeah-len-ah! Yeah-len-ah!"

Alec held onto his Kalashnikov as he walked behind Yelena, guiding her in the shadows safely away from the intense heat of the crystals. In these streets, she saw the instances that were captured; a bicycle still stood upright, and a few cars were stuck solid in the rock like fragments of an amber beach. A food stand had tipped onto the ground; cheburek, shashlik, and a few packages

of ice cream were frozen in the glass. A few suitcases sat strewn around an empty balcony. Some of the buildings were bleached, with shadows of figments playing on the walls. This place was like nothing else in the Zone-- most of the Zone had been repurposed, new life springing from the broken soil of ruins. Here in Glass City however, everything remained in a zombie state of permanent half-life. Nothing could rot away, thus nothing new could be born. The words stayed petrified and meaningless-- apteka, magazin, portnoy, remont. Yelena brushed away the crystalline dust off the glass windows and peaked into the shop, which was a cellular store filled with blackened statues covering their eyes. On the racks, she spied a few chargers with the appropriate connector and called to Alec. "Alec, come bust this open." Once Alec had broken apart the door with a few Kalashnikov jabs, a sudden rush of wind swept through the store, causing the blackened statues to collapse into dust and fill the store with silvery-black smoke. A terrible burning filled Yelena's lungs; she ran back out onto the street and coughed 'til she threw up what little had been in her stomach. Alec laughed, then took a drag off his vape, and his face was bloody red.

They followed the railway tracks down towards the center of the city, which was congested with sandbag

emplacements and artillery. Yelena understood the strata- gem-- a few BM-21 Grad in the peripheries, 152mm how- itzers along key strategic positions; make the cost of as- sault too great and thereby force a diplomatic solution. An armored personnel carrier parked beneath a bridge was encased in glass; she imagined its occupants nervous but optimistic, mute like sleeping turtles. Past the pillboxes and military emplacements, a few bunkers sat built into the metro stations and shopping complexes. Nay-toe's will was total, absolute; the dream of commerce unrestrained by flesh & blood gave way to the nightmare of defending commerce with flesh & blood. "So?" Alec felt bored by Yelena's narration. She pointed up towards the tower that loomed over the railways, aching with red stars; above and below the broken arms of the clock, it read: dlya tex klo bestrashnije lyubov budet krovju-- "to the fearless, love becomes blood." Up the stairs between two railway tracks sat another bunker, this one decorated with pink roses and crystallized animals. A few young boys stood at the front entrance of the bunker, their H&K G3s looking like over- sized toys in their delicate grasps. They stood at attention as Alec and Yelena passed, whispering about what precisely the frock and crown on Yelena's head could possibly represent. Yelena saw a few of them arguing over a check- ered board, on which bullets were set like game pic-

es. One of them saluted Yelena, his voice squeaking and seeming too large for his compact throat-- "privjet, gospo- za." He goose-stepped down into the corridors, which still bore the blue, red, yellow arrows of a once-vast network of trains. An escalator still operating on battery power took them down into the deep dark chasm of forgotten Earth, boring itself deeper and deeper for twenty minutes. Alec suddenly seemed nervous; he sucked on his vape as he watched the light of the outside world grow dim.

The interior of the bunker was filled with delicate furniture, rescued from the homes that did not become encased in amber. Wooden chairs with fine lace, bright colorful carpets on the walls, little figurines and statues of animals, children; in the center of the bunker stood a decrepit statue of a woman carrying a hammer and a sickle, defaced with lipstick and rouge. The only light came from sporadic lamps hanging from the walls, 'round which little insects jittered. Each hallway seemed to lead down into another bigger bunker, which itself led to a thousand more bunkers, and a thousand more deeper within the crust of the Earth, such that the whole of Earth's innards was one massive defensive complex, each one of them carefully and diligently guarded by interlopers. The boy saluted once more, and motioned towards one of the hallways. Yelena

followed the motion, with Alec twitching behind her. A few women were peering from the doorways; the sight of Yelena, adorned by the crown, struck them pale and they retired in a rush, slamming the doors behind them. A few slams deeper within the bunker rattled and resonated through the pipes, like a nervous system contracting in pain. Yelena walked down the corridor, unsure of what she sought; "somebody oughta talk, 'bout something," Alec murmured.

Yelena heard a door open behind them. From a gap in the door, a woman with deep, dark eyebrows and a sharp face studied Yelena. "Privjet," the woman with deep, dark eyebrows said. Alec could not understand, but surmised its meaning: "what's up." Yelena answered back in Russian. The woman asked if Yelena understood Russian and Yelena answered in affirmative. The woman smiled, shut the door to undo the chains and open it wide, and said her name was Tahmineh, and embraced Yelena with a surprising warmth before taking off the crown from Yelena's head. Tahmineh said that most of the "brothers" did not understand Russian, so they could speak privately. Yelena asked about the young boy, who stood on guard

by the door. Tahmineh approached the young boy and tousled his hair; she added that the young boys were orphans, left behind by previous Nay-toe forces. "These must be Nay-toe's children," Yelena thought to herself. Tahmineh's warm smile turned to concern; why was Yelena here? She told Tahmineh that she was looking for her friend Christine, who had left for the Zone and went radio silent. Tahmineh's concern turned to tightly-wound irritation; it was Christine's fault for thinking a civil war was an opportunity for making stupid videos. Yelena lowered her head; she sheepishly asked what had happened to the city, to deflect her rage. Tahmineh cursed Yelena for knowing nothing about the Zone and deciding to come anyway. Tahmineh told Yelena that the city was the capital and the largest city, and functioned as the stronghold for the largest faction in the civil war. Nay-toe intervened to stop the violence, evacuating most of the civilians to camps around the Zone, but the faction would not acquiesce and continued its raids and military campaigns against the other factions. The city, Tahmineh explained, was the center of life before the civil war, but the most powerful tribe took control during the mass upheaval and violence and got most of the materiel and factories. Most people fled if they could, or perished in the ethnic cleansing. Eventually the city became a gigantic military base, the leadership took control of the So-