

# *After the Siege*

## *Forematter:*

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In the words of Woody Guthrie:

"This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do."

Overclocked is dedicated to Pat York, who made my stories better.

## *Introduction to After the Siege*

My grandmother, Valentina Rachman (now Valerie Goldman), was a little girl when Hitler laid siege to Leningrad, 12 years old. All my life, she told me that she'd experienced horrors during the war that I'd never comprehend, but I'm afraid that in my callow youth, I discounted this. My grandmother wasn't in a concentration camp, and as far as I knew, all that had happened is that she'd met my grandfather—a Red Army conscript—in Siberia, they'd deserted and gone to Azerbaijan, and my father had been born in a refugee camp near Baku. That's dramatic, but hardly a major trauma.

Then I went to St Petersburg with my family in the summer of 2005, and my grandmother walked us through the streets of her girlhood, and for the first time, she opened up about the war to me. She pointed out the corners where she'd seen frozen, starved corpses, their asses sliced away by black-market butchers; the windows from which she'd heaved the bodies of her starved neighbors when she grew too weak to carry them.

The stories came one after another, washing over the sun-bleached summertime streets of Petersburg, conjuring up a darker place, frozen over, years into a siege that killed millions. Harrison E. Salisbury's "900 Days" is probably the best account of those years, and the more I read of it, the more this story fleshed itself out in

my head. I wrote almost all of it on airplanes between London, Singapore and San Francisco, in great, 5000- and 6000-word gouts.

My grandmother's stories found an easy marriage with the contemporary narrative of developing nations being strong-armed into taking on rich-country copyright and patent laws, even where this means letting their citizens die by the millions for lack of AIDS drugs, destroying their education system, or punishing local artists to preserve imported, expensive culture.

The USA was a pirate nation for the first 100 years of its existence, ripping off the patents and trademarks of the imperial European powers it had liberated itself from with blood. By keeping their GDP at home, the US revolutionaries were able to bootstrap their nation into an industrial powerhouse. Now, it seems, their descendants are bent on ensuring that no other country can pull the same trick off.

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## *After the Siege*

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The day the siege began, Valentine was at the cinema across the street from her building. The cinema had only grown the night before and when she got out of bed and saw it there, all gossamer silver supports and brave sweeping candy-apple red curves, she'd begged Mata and Popa to let her go. She knew that all the children in the building would spend the day there—didn't the pack of them explore each fresh marvel as a group? The week before it had been the clever little flying cars that swooped past each other with millimeters to spare, like pigeons ripping over your head. Before that it had been the candy forest where the trees sprouted bon-bons and sticks of rock, and every boy and girl in the city had been there, laughing and eating until their bellies and sides ached. Before that, the swarms of robot insects that had gathered up every fleck of litter and dust and spirited it all away to the edge of town where they'd somehow chewed it up and made factories out of it, brightly colored and airy as an aviary. Before that: fish in the river. Before that: the new apartment buildings. Before that: the new hospitals. Before that: the new government offices.

Before that: the revolution, which Valentine barely remembered—she'd been a little kid of ten then, not a big girl of thirteen like now. All she remembered was a long

time when she'd been always a little hungry, and when everything was grey and dirty and Mata and Popa whispered angrily at each other when they thought she slept and her little brother Trover had cried thin sickly cries all night, which made her angry too.

The cine was amazing, the greatest marvel yet as far as she was concerned. She and the other little girls crowded into one of the many balconies and tinkered with the controls for it until it lifted free—how they'd whooped!—and sailed off to its own little spot under the high swoop of the dome. From there the screen was a little distorted, but they could count the bald spots on the old war heroes' heads as they nodded together in solemn congress, waiting for the films to start. From there they could spy on the boys who were making spitball mischief that was sure to attract a reprimand, though for now the airborne robots were doing a flawless job of silently intercepting the boys' missiles before they disturbed any of the other watchers.

The films weren't very good in Valentine's opinion. The first one was all about the revolution as if she hadn't heard enough about the revolution! It was all they talked about in school for one thing. And her parents! The *quantities*, the positive *quantities* of times they'd sat her down to Explain the Revolution, which was apparently one of their duties as bona fide heroes of the revolution.

This was better than most though, because they'd made it with a game and it was a game that Valentine played quite a lot and thought was quite good. She recognized the virtual city modeled on her own city, the avatars' dance-moves taken from the game too, along with the combat sequences and the scary zombies that had finally given rise to the revolution.

That much she knew and that much they all knew: without the zombies, the revolution would never have come. Zombiism and the need to cure it had outweighed every other priority. Three governments had promised that they'd negotiate better prices for zombiism drugs, and three governments had failed and in the end, the Cabinet had been overrun by zombies who'd torn three MPs to bits and infected seven more and the crowd had carried the PM out of her office and put her in a barrel and driven nails through it and rolled it down the river-bank into the river, something so horrible and delicious that Valentine often thought about it like you poke a sore tooth with your tongue.

After that, the revolution, and a new PM who wouldn't negotiate the price of zombiism drugs. After that, a PM who built zombiism drug factories right there in the city, giving away the drug in spray and pill and needles. From there, it was only a matter of time until everything was being made right there, copies of movies and copies of songs and copies of drugs and copies of

buildings and cars and you name it, and that was the revolution, and Valentine thought it was probably a good thing for everyone except the old PM whom they'd put in the barrel.

The next movie was much better and Valentine and Leeza, who was her best friend that week put their arms around each others' shoulders and watched it avidly. It was about a woman who was in love with two men and the men hated each other and there was fighting and glorious kissing and sophisticated, cutting insults, and oh they dressed so *well*! The audio was dubbed over from English but that was OK, the voice-actors they used were very good.

After the second showing, she and her friends allowed their seats to lower and set off for the concessions stand where they found the beaming proprietors of the cinema celebrating their opening day with chocolates and thick sandwiches and fish pies and bottles of brown beer for the adults and bottles of fizzy elderflower for the kids. Valentine saw the cute boy who Leeza liked and tripped him so he practically fell in Leeza's lap and that set the two of them to laughing so hard they nearly didn't make it back to their seats.

The next picture barely had time to start when it was shut off and the lights came up and one of the proprietors stepped in front of the screen, talking into his

phone, which must have been dialed into the cine's sound system.

“Comrades, your attention please. We have had word that the city is under attack by our old enemies. They have bombed the east quarter and many are dead. More bombs are expected soon.” They all spoke at once, horrified non-words that were like a panic, a sound made Valentine want to cover her ears.

“Please, comrades,” the speaker said. He was about sixty and was getting a new head of hair, but he had the look of the old ones who'd lived through the zombiism, a finger or two bent at a funny angle by a secret policeman, a wrinkle under the chin of skin loosened by some dark year of starvation. “Please! We must be calm! If there are shelters in your apartment buildings and you can walk there in less than ten minutes, you should walk there. If your building lacks shelters, or if it would take more than ten minutes to go to your building's shelter, you may use some of the limited shelter space here. The seats will lower in order, two at a time, to prevent a rush, and when yours reaches ground, please leave calmly and quickly and get to your shelter.”

Leeza clutched at her arm. “Vale! My building is more than ten minutes' walk! I'll have to stay here! Oh, my poor parents! They'll think—”



“They’ll think you’re safe with me, Leeze,” Valentine said, hugging her. “I’ll stay with you and both our parents’ can worry about us.”

They headed for the shelter together, white-faced and silent in the slow-moving crowd that shuffled down the steps into the first basement, the second basement, then the shelter below that. A war hero was handing out masks to everyone who entered and he had to go and find more child-sized ones for them so they waited patiently in the doorway.

“Valentine! You don’t belong here! Go home and leave room for we who need it!” It was her worst enemy, Reeta, who had been her best friend the week before. She was red in the face and pointing and shouting. “She lives across the street! You see how selfish she is! Across the street is her own shelter and she would take a spot away from her comrades, send them walking through the street—”

The hero silenced her with a sharp gesture and looked hard at Valentine. “Is it true?”

“My friend is scared,” she said, squeezing Leeza’s shaking shoulder. “I will stay with her.”

“You go home now,” the hero said, putting one of the child-sized masks back in the box. “Your friend will be fine and you’ll see her in a few minutes when they sound the all clear. Hurry now.” His voice and his look brooked no argument.

So Valentine fought her way up the stairs—so many headed for the shelter!—and out the doors and when she stepped out, it was like a different city. The streets, always so busy and cheerful, were silent. No air-cars flew overhead. It was silent, silent, like the ringing in your ears after you turn your headphones up too loud. It was so weird that a laugh escaped her lips, though not one of mirth, more like a scared laugh.

She stood a moment longer and then there was a sound like far-away thunder. A second later, a little wind. On its heels, a bigger wind, icy cold and then hot as the oven when you open the door, nearly blowing her off her feet. It *smelled* like something dead or something deadly. She *ran* as fast as she could across the street, pounding hell for leather to her front door. Just as she reached for it, there was a much louder thunderclap, one that lifted her off her feet and tossed her into the air, spinning her around. As she spun around and around, she saw the brave red dome of the cine disintegrate, crumble to a million shards that began to rain down on the street. Then the boom dropped her hard on the pavement and she saw no more.

\* \* \*

The day after the siege began, the doctor fitted Valentine for her hearing aid and told her to come back in ten years for a battery change. She hardly felt it slide under her skin but once it was there, the funny

underwatery sound of everything and everyone turned back into bright sound as sharp as the cine's had been.

Now that she could hear, she could speak, and she grabbed Popa's hands. "The cine!" she said. "Oh, Popa, the cine, those poor people! What happened to them?"

"The work crews opened the shelter ten hours later," Popa said. He never sugar-coated anything for her, even though Mata disapproved of talking to her like an adult. "Half of them died from lack of air—the air re-circulators were damaged by the bomb, and the shelter was air-tight. The rest are in hospital."

She cried. "Leeza—"

Mata took her hands. "Leeza is fine," she said. "She made sure we told you that."

She cried harder, but smiling this time. Trover was on her mother's hip, and looking like he didn't know whether to stay quiet or pitch one of his famous tantrums. Automatically, Valentine gave him a tickle that brought a smile that kept him from bursting out in tears.

They left the hospital together and walked home, though it was far. The Metro wasn't running and the air-cars were still grounded. Some of the buildings they passed were nothing but rubble, and there robots and people labored to make sense of them and get them reassembled and back on their feet.

It wasn't until the next day that she found out that Reeta had been killed under the cine. She threw up the porridge she'd had for breakfast and shut herself in her room and cried into her pillow until she fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Three days after the siege began, Mata went away.

"You can't go!" Popa shouted at her. "Are you crazy? You can't go to the front! You have two small children, woman!" He was red-faced and his hands were clenching and unclenching. Trover was having a tantrum that was so loud and horrible that Valentine wanted to rip her hearing aids out.

Mata's eyes were red. "Harald, you know I have to do this. It's not the 'front'—it's our own city. My country needs me—if I don't help to fight for it, then what will become of our children?"

"You never got over the glory of fighting, did you?" Her father's voice was bitter in a way that she'd never heard before. "You're an addict!"

She held up her left hand and shook it in his face. "An addict! Is *that* what you think?" Her middle finger and little finger on that hand had never bent properly in all of Valentine's memory, and when Valentine had asked her about it, she'd said the terrible word *knucklebreakers* which was the old name for the police. "You think I'm addicted to *this*? Harald, honor and courage and

patriotism are *virtues* no matter that you would make them into vices and shame our children with your cowardice. I go to fight now, Harald, and it's for *all* of us."

Popa couldn't find another word to speak in the two seconds it took for Mata to give her two children hard kisses on the foreheads and slam out the door, and then it was Valentine and Popa and Trover, still screaming. Her father fisted the tears out of his eyes, not bothering to try to hide them, and said, "Well then, who wants pancakes?"

But the power was out and he had to make them cereal instead.

\* \* \*

Two weeks after the siege began, her mother didn't come home and the city came for her father.

"Every adult, comrade, every adult fights for the city."

"My children—" he sputtered. Mata hadn't been home all night, and it wasn't the first time. She and Popa barely spoke anymore.

"Your girl there is big enough to look after herself, aren't you honey?" The woman from the city was short and plump and wore heavy armor and was red in the face from walking up ten flights to get to their flat. The power to the elevators was almost always out.

Valentine hugged her father's leg. "My Popa will fight for the city," she said. "He's a hero."

He was. He'd fought in the revolution and he'd been given a medal for it. Sometimes when no one was looking, Valentine took out her parents' medals and looked at their tiny writing, their shining, unscratchable surfaces, their intricate ribbons.

The woman from the city gave her father a look that said, *You see, a child understands, what's your excuse?* Valentine couldn't quite feel guilty for taking the woman's side. Leeza's parents fought every day.

"I must leave a note for my wife," he said. Valentine realized that for the first time in her life her parents were going to leave her *all on her own* and felt a thrill.

\* \* \*

Two weeks and one day after the siege began, her Mata came home and the city came for Valentine.

Mata was grimy and exhausted, and she favored one leg as she went about the flat making them cold cereal with water—all the milk had spoiled—and dried fruits. Trover looked curiously at her as though he didn't recognize her, but eventually he got in her way and she snapped at him to move already and he pitched a relieved fit, pounding his fists and howling. How that little boy could howl!

She sat down at the table with Valentine and the two of them ate their cereal together.

"Your father?"

“He said he was digging trenches—that’s what he did all day yesterday.”

Her mother’s eyes glinted. “Good. We need more trenches. We’ll fortify the whole city with them, spread them out all the way to their lines, trenches we can move through without being seen or shot. We’ll take the war to those bastards and slip away before they know we’ve killed them.” Mata had apparently forgotten all about not talking to Valentine like a grownup.

The knock at the door came then, and Mata answered it and it was the woman from the city again. “Your little girl,” she said.

“No,” Mata said. Her voice was flat and would not brook any contradiction. She’d bossed her nine brothers—Valentine’s uncles, now scattered to the winds—and then commanded a squadron in the revolution, and no one could win an argument with her. As far as Valentine knew, no one could win an argument with her.

“No?” The woman from the city said. “No is not an option, comrade.”

Mata drew herself up. “My husband digs. I fight. My daughter cares for our son. That’s enough from this family.”

“There are old people in this building who need water brought for them. There’s a creche for the boy

underground, he'll be happy enough there. Your little girl is strong and the old people are weak."

"No," her mother said. "I'm very sorry, but no." She didn't sound the least bit sorry.

The woman from the city went away. Mata sat down and went back to eating her cereal with water without a word, but there was another knock at the door fifteen minutes later. The woman from the city had brought along an old hero with one arm and one eye. He greeted Mata by name and Mata gave him a smart salute. He spoke quietly in her ear for a moment. She saluted him again and he left.

"You'll carry water," Mata said.

Valentine didn't mind, it was a chance to get out of the flat. One day of baby-sitting the human tantrum had convinced her that any chore was preferable to being cooped up with him.

She carried water that day. She'd expected to be balancing buckets over her shoulders like in the schoolbooks, but they fitted her with a bubble-suit that distributed the weight over her whole body and then filled it up with a hose until she weighed nearly twice what she normally did. Other kids were in the stairwells wearing identical bubble-suits, sloshing up the steps to old peoples' flats that smelled funny. The old women and men that Valentine saw that day pinched her cheeks and then emptied out her bubble-suit into their cisterns.



It was exhausting work and by the end of the day she had stopped making even perfunctory conversation with the other water-carriers. The old people she met at the day's end were bitter about being left alone and thirsty all day and they snapped at her and didn't thank her at all.

She picked Trover up from the creche and he demanded that he be carried and she had half a mind to toss him down the stairs. But she noticed that he had a bruise over his eye and his hands and face were sticky and dirty and she decided that he'd had a hard day too. Mata and Popa weren't home when they got there so Valentine made dinner—more cold cereal and some cabbage with leftover dumplings kept cool in a bag hung out the window—and then when they still hadn't returned by bedtime, Valentine tucked Trover in and then fell asleep herself.

\* \* \*

One month after the siege began, Valentine's mother came home in tears.

"What is it, Mata?" Valentine said, as soon as her mother came through the door. "Are you hurt?" Her mother had come home hurt more than once in the month, bandaged or splinted or covered in burn ointment or hacking at some deep chemical irritation in her throat and nose and lungs.

Her mother's eyes were swollen like they had been the day she'd been caught by the gas and they'd had to do emergency robot field-surgery on them. But there were no sutures. Tears had swollen her eyes.

"New trenchbuster missiles on the eastern front," she said. "The anti-missiles are too slow for them." She sobbed, a terrible terrifying sound that Valentine had never heard from her mother. "The bastards are trading with the EU and the Americans for better weapons, they say they're on the same side, they say we are lawless thieves who deprive them all of their royalties—"

Valentine had heard that the Americans and the EU had declared for the other side, while the Russians and the Koreans and the Brazilians had declared for the city. The war gossip was everywhere. The old people didn't pinch her cheeks when she brought water, not anymore—they told her about the war and the enemies who'd come to drive them back into the dark ages.

"Mata, are you *hurt*?" Her mother was covering her face with her hands and sobbing so loudly it drowned out the tantrum Trover threw every night the second she came through the door.

Her shoulders shook. She gulped her sobs. Then she lowered her wet, snotty, sticky hands and wiped them on the thighs of her jumpsuit. She hugged Valentine so hard Valentine felt her skinny ribs creak.

“They killed your father, Vale,” she said. “Your father is dead.”

Valentine stood numb for a moment, then pulled free of her mother’s hug.

“No,” she said, calmly. “Popa is digging away from the front, where it’s safe.” She’d expected that her *mother* would die, not her *father*. She’d known that all along, since her mother stepped out the door of the flat talking of heroism. Known it fatalistically and never dwelt on it, never even admitted it. In her mind, though, she’d always seen a future where her father and Trover and she lived together as heroes of this war, which would surely be over soon, and visited her mother’s memorial four times a year, the way they did the memorials for the comrade heroes who’d been martyred in the revolution.

The death toll was gigantic. Three apartment buildings had disappeared on her street with no air raid warning, no warning of any kind. All dead. Why should her brave mother live on?

“No,” she said again. “You’re mistaken.”

“*I saw the body!*” her mother said, shrieking like Trover. “I held his head! He is *dead*, Vale!”

Valentine didn’t understand what her mother was saying, but she certainly didn’t want to hang around the flat and listen to this raving.

She turned on her heel and walked out of the flat. It was full dark out and there was snow on the ground and wet snow whipping along in the wind and she didn't have her too-small winter coat on, but she wasn't going to stay and listen to her mother's nonsense.

On the corner a man from the city told her she was breaking curfew and told her to go home or she'd end up getting herself shot. She shivered and glared at him and ignored him and set off in a random direction. She certainly wasn't going to stand on that corner and listen to his lunacy.

There were soldiers drinking in a cellar on another street and they called out to her and what they said wasn't the kind of thing you said to a little girl, though she knew well enough what it meant. Now she was cold and soaked through and shivering uncontrollably and she didn't know where she was and her father was—

She began to run.

Someone from the city shouted at her to stop and so she pelted through the ruins of a bombed building and then down one of the old streets from before the revolution, one of the streets they hadn't yet straightened out and rebuilt. The enemy hadn't bombed it yet, and she wondered if that was because this was the kind of dark and broken and smelly street they wanted the city to be returned to, so they'd left it untouched as an example of

what the defenders should be working towards if they wanted to escape with their lives.

Down the street she ran, and then down an alley and another street. She stopped running when she came to a dead-end and her chest heaved. Running had warmed her up a little, but she hadn't had much to eat except cabbage and cold cereal with water for weeks and she couldn't run like she used to.

The cold stole back over her. It was full dark and the blackout curtains on the windows meant that not a sliver of light escaped. The moonless cloudy night made everything as dark as a cave.

Finally, she cried. She hadn't cried since she found out that Reeta had died—she hadn't even *liked* Reeta, but to have someone die that soon after your seeing them was scary like you had almost died, almost.

The wizard came on her there, weeping. He appeared out of the mist carrying a little light the size of a pea that he cupped in his hand to muffle most of the light. He was about her father's age, but with her mother's look of having survived something terrible without having survived altogether. He dressed like it was the old days, in fancy, bright-colored clothes, and he was well-fed in a way that no one else in the city was.

"Hello there," he said. He got down on his hunkers so he could look her in the eye. "Why are you crying?"

Valentine hated grownups who patronized her and the wizard sounded like he believed that no little girl could possibly have anything *real* to cry about.

“My dad died in the war today,” she said. “In a trench.”

“Oh, the American trench-busters,” he said, knowingly. “Lots of children lost their daddies today, I bet.”

That made her stop crying. Lots of children. Lots of daddies—fathers, she hated the baby-word “daddy.” Mothers, too.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, put a coat on you, feed you and send you home, all right?”

She looked warily at him. She knew all about strange men who offered to take you home. But she had no idea where she was and she was dark and shivering and couldn’t stop.

“My mother is a hero, and a soldier, and she’s killed a lot of men,” Valentine said.

He nodded. “I shall keep that in mind,” he said.

The wizard lived in the old town, in an old building, but inside it was as new as anything she had ever seen. The walls swooped and curved, the furniture was gaily colored and new, like it had just been printed that day. There was so much *light*—they’d been saving it at her building. There was so much *food*! He gave her

hamburgers and fizzy elderflower, then steak-frites, then rich dumplings as big as her fist stuffed with goose livers. He had working robots, lots of them, and they scurried after him doing the dishes and tidying and wiping up the slushy footprints.

And when they arrived and he took her coat, old familiar laser-lights played over her, the kind of everywhere-at-once measuring lasers that they used to have at the clothing stores. By the time dinner was done, there were two pairs of fresh trousers, two wooly jumpers, a heavy winter coat, three pairs of white cotton pants (all her pants had gone grey once she'd started having to launder them, rather than get them printed fresh on Sundays) and a—

“A bra?” She gave him a hard look. She had the knife she'd used on the hamburger in her hand. “My mother taught me to kill,” she said.

The wizard had a face that looked like he spent a lot of time laughing with it, and so even when he looked scared, he also looked like he was laughing. He held up his hands. “It wasn't my idea. That's just the programming. If the printer thinks you need a bra, it makes a bra.”

Leeza had a bra, though Valentine wasn't convinced she needed it. But she had noticed a certain uncomfortable jiggling weight climbing the stairs, hadn't

she? Running? She hadn't looked in the mirror in—Well, since the siege, practically.

“There's a bathroom there to change into,” he said.

His bathroom was clean and neat and there were six toothbrushes beside the sink in a holder.

“Who else lives here?” she said, coming out in her new clothes (the bra felt *really* weird).

“I have a lot of friends who come and see me now and again. I hope you'll come back.”

“How come your place is like the war never happened?”

“I'm the wizard, that's why,” he said. “I can make magic.”

His robots tied up her extra clothes in waterproof grip sheets for her, then helped her into a warm slicker with a hood. “Tell your mother that you met someone from the city who fed you and gave you a change of clothes,” he said, holding open the door. He'd explained to her where to go from there to get out to the old shopping street and from there she could manage on her own, especially since he'd given her one of his little pea-lights to carry with her.

“You're not from the city,” she said.

“You got me,” he said. “So tell her you met a wizard.”



She thought about what her mother would say to that, especially when that was the answer to the question *Where have you been?* “I’ll tell her I met someone from the city,” she said.

“You’re a clever girl,” he said.

\* \* \*

One week after her father died, Valentine stopped carrying water.

“There’s not enough food,” her mother said, over a breakfast of nothing but dried fruit—the cereal was gone. “If you—” she swallowed and looked out the window. “If you dig in the trenches, we’ll get 150 grams of bread a day.”

Valentine looked at Trover. He hadn’t had a tantrum in days. He didn’t cry or even speak much anymore.

“I’ll dig.”

She dug.

\* \* \*

Six months after her father died, Valentine stood in the queue for her bread. It was now the full heat of summer and the clothes the wizard had given her had fallen to bits the way all printer clothes did. She was wearing her father’s old trousers, cut off just below the knee, and one of his shirts, with the sleeves and collar cut

off. All to let a little of the lazy air in and to let a little of the sluggish sweat out. She was dirty and tired the way she always was at day's end.

She was also so hungry.

She and her mother didn't talk much anymore, but they didn't have to. Her mother was sometimes away on long missions, and increasingly longer. She was harrying the enemy with the guerilla fighters, and living on pine-cone soup and squirrels from the woods.

Trover stayed over at the creche some nights. A lot of the little ones did. Who had the strength to carry a little boy up the stairs at the end of a day's digging, at the end of three days' hard fighting in the woods?

The bread-rations were handed out in the spot where the cine once stood. She couldn't really remember what it had been like, though she remembered Reeta, the things Reeta had said that had made her leave the shelter, which had probably saved her life. Poor Reeta. Little bitch.

She was so hungry, and the line moved slowly. She had her chit from the boy from the city who oversaw the ditch digging in her part of the ditches. He was only a little older than her but he couldn't dig because his hands had been mutilated when a bomb went off near him. He kept them shoved in his pockets, but she'd seen them and they looked like the knucklebreakers had given them a good seeing-to. Every finger pointed a different direction, except for the ones that were missing altogether. There

was also something wrong with him that made him sometimes stop talking in the middle of a sentence and sit down for a moment with his head tilted back.

The chit, though—the boy always gave her her chit, and the chit could be redeemed for bread. If she left Trover in the creche they would feed him. If Mata didn't come home from the fighting again tonight, the bread would be hers, and the cabbage, too.

\* \* \*

Eight months after her father died, her mother stayed away in the fighting for three weeks and Valentine decided that she was dead and started sleeping in her mother's bed. Valentine cried a little at first, but she got used to it. She started to negotiate with one of the women who lived on the floor below to sell her narrow little bed for 800 grams of bread, 40 grams of butter and—though she didn't really believe in it—100 grams of ground beef.

She never found out if the woman downstairs had any ground beef—where would you get ground beef, anyway? Even the cats and dogs and rats were all gone! For Valentine's mother came home after three weeks and it turned out that she'd been in hospital all that time having her broken bones mended, something they could still do for some soldiers.

Mata came through the door like an old woman and Valentine looked up from the table where she'd been patiently feeding silent Trover before collapsing to sleep again. Valentine stood and looked at her and her Mata looked at Valentine and then her mother hobbled across the room like an old woman and gave Valentine a fierce, hard, long hug.

Valentine found she was crying and also found that silent little Trover had gotten up from the table and was hugging them both. He was tall, she realized dimly, tall enough to reach up and hug her at the waist instead of the knees, and when had *that* happened?

Her mother ate some of the dinner they'd had, and took a painkiller, the old kind that came in pill form that were now everywhere. Take a few of them and you would forget your problems, or so hissed the boys she passed in the street, though she passed them without a glance or a sniff.

Soon Mata was asleep, back in her bed, and Valentine was back in her bed, too, but she couldn't sleep.

Under her bed she had the remains of her grip sheet parcel, one of the precise robot-knots remaining. In that parcel was her winter galosh, just one, the other had been stolen the winter before while she'd had them both off to rub some warmth back into her toes before going back to the digging.

In the toe of the galosh, there was a pea-sized glowing light. She'd never considered selling it for bread, though it was very fine. Its light seemed too bright in the dark flat, so she took it outside into the hot night, and used it to light her way on a secret walk through the old streets of her dirty city.

\* \* \*

Nine months after her father died, winter had sent autumn as a threatening envoy. The bread ration was cut to 120 grams, and there were sometimes pebbles in the bread that everyone knew were there to increase the weight.

She was proud that when the bread was bad, she and the other diggers cursed the enemy and not the city. Everyone knew that no one had it any better. They fought and suffered together.

But she was so hungry all the time, and you couldn't eat pride. One day she was in the queue for bread and reached out with her trembling hands to take her ration and then she turned with it and in a flash, a man old enough to be her father had snatched it out of her hands and run away with it!

She chased after him and the shrill cries of the women followed them, but he knew the rubble-piles well and he dodged and weaved and she was so tired. Eventually she sat down and wept.

That was when she saw her first zombie. Zombiism had been eliminated when she was practically a baby, just after the revolution, years and years ago.

But now it was back. The zombie had been a soldier, so maybe zombiism was coming back in the gas attacks that wafted over the trenches. His uniform hung in rags from his loose limbs as he walked in that funky, disco-dancer shuffle that meant zombie as clearly as the open drooling mouth and the staring, not-seeing eyes. They were fast, zombies, though you could hardly believe it when they were doing that funky walk. Once they saw prey, they turned into race horses that tore over anything and everything in their quest to rip and bite and rend and tear, screaming incoherencies with just enough words in them to make it clear that they were angry—so so angry.

She scrambled up from the curb she'd been weeping on and began to back away slowly, keeping perfectly silent. You needed to get away from zombies and then tell someone from the city so they could administer the cure. That's how you did it, back in the old days.

The zombie was shambling away from her anyway. It would pass by harmlessly, but she had to *get away* in any event, because it was a *zombie* and it was *wrong* in just the same way that a giant hairy spider was wrong (though if she found something giant and hairy today, she'd take it home for the soup-pot).

She didn't kick a tin or knock over a pile of rubble. She was perfectly stealthy. She hardly breathed.

And that zombie saw her anyway. It roared and charged. Its mouth was almost toothless, but what teeth remained there gleamed. It had been a soldier and it had good boots, and they crunched the broken glass and the rubble as it pelted for her. She shrieked and ran, but she knew even as she did that she would never outrun it. She was starved and had already used all her energy chasing the *bastard*, the *fucking bastard* who'd taken her bread.

She ran anyway, but the sound of the zombie's good boots drew closer and closer, coming up on her, closing on her. A hand thumped her shoulder and scrabbled at it and she spied a piece of steel bar—maybe it had been a locking post for a hover-car in the golden days—and she snatched it up and whirled around.

The zombie grabbed for her and she smashed its wrist like an old-timey schoolteacher with a ruler. She heard something crack and the zombie roared again. "Bread fight asshole kill hungry!" is what it sounded like.

But one of its hands was now useless, flopping at its side. It charged her, grappling with her, and she couldn't get her bar back for a swing. Its good hand was in her hair and it didn't stink, that was the worst part. It smelled like fresh-baked bread. It smelled like flowers. Zombies smelled *delicious*.

The part of her brain that was detached and thinking these thoughts was not the part in the front. That part was incoherent with equal parts rage and terror. The zombie would bite her soon and that would be it. In a day, she'd be a zombie too, in need of medicine, and how many more would she bite before she got cured.

In that moment, she stopped being angry at the zombie and became angry at the besiegers. They had been abstract enemies until then, an unknowable force from outside her world, but in that moment she realized that they were *people* like her, who could suffer like her and she wished that they would. She wished that their children would starve. She wished the parents would die. The old people shrivel unto death in their dry, unwatered flats. The toddlers wander the streets until sunburn or cold took them.

She screamed an animal scream and pushed the zombie off her with her arms and legs, even her head, snapping it into the zombie's cheekbone as hard as she could and something broke there too.

The zombie staggered back. They couldn't feel pain, but their balance was a little weak. It tottered and she went after it with the bar. One whack in the knee took it down on its side. It reached with its good arm and so she smashed that too. Then the heaving ribs. Then the face, the hateful, leering, mouth-open-stupid face, three



smashes turned it into ruin. The jaw hung down to its chest, broken off its face.

A hand seized her and she whirled with her bar held high and nearly brained the soldier who'd grabbed her. He wasn't a zombie, and he had his pistol out. It was pointed at her. She dropped her bar like it was red hot and threw her arms in the air.

He shoved her rudely aside and knelt beside the zombie—the *soldier zombie* she realized with a sick lurch—that she'd just smashed to pieces.

The soldier's back was to her, but his chest was heaving like a bellows and his neck was tight.

"Please," she said. "After they give him the cure, they can fix his bones. I had to hit him or he would have killed me. He would have infected me. You see that, right? I know it was wrong, but—"

The soldier shot the zombie through the head, twice.

He turned around. His face was streaming with tears. "There is no cure, not for this strain of zombiism. Once you get it, you die. It takes a week. Slower than the old kind. It gives you more time to infect new people. Our enemies are crafty crafty, girl."

The soldier kicked the zombie. "I knew his brother. I commanded him until he was killed by a trenchbuster. The mother and father were killed by a shell. Now he's dead and that's a whole family gone."

The soldier cocked his head at her and examined her more closely. "Have you been bitten?"

"No," she said, quickly. The gun was still in his hand. There was no cure.

"You're sure?" he said. His voice was like her father's had been when she skinned her knee, stern but sympathetic. "If you have, you'd better tell me. Better to go quick and painless than like this thing." He kicked the zombie again.

"I'm sure," she said. "Have you got any bread? A man stole my ration."

The soldier lost interest in her when she asked him for bread. "Goodbye, little girl," he said.

That night, she had a fever. She was so hot. She got them all the time, everyone did. Not enough food. No heat. No vegetables and vitamins. You always got fevers.

But she was so hot. She took off her clothes and let the cool air blow over her skin on her narrow bed. Trover was sleeping on the floor nearby—he had outgrown his crib long since—and he stirred irritably as she felt that air cool her sizzling skin.

She ran her fingertips lightly over her body. She was never naked anymore. If you were lucky, you washed your face and hands every day, but baths—they were cold and miserable and who wanted to haul water for them anyway?

Her breasts were undeniable now. Her blood had started a few months back, then stopped. Starvation, she knew, that's what did it. But there was new hair in her armpits and at her groin.

She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself. That's when she found the bite on her shoulder, just where it met her neck. It was swollen like a quail egg—the chocolate quail eggs from before, that had grown on the trees, she could taste them even now—and so hot it felt like a coal. In the middle of the egg, at its peak, the seeping wound left behind by one of the zombie's few teeth.

Now she was cold as ice, shivering nude on her thin ruin of a bed with her thin ruin of a body. She would be dead in a week. It was a death sentence, that bite.

And she wouldn't go clean. She'd shamle and scream and bite. Maybe Trover. Maybe Mata. Maybe she'd find Leeza and give her a hard bite before she went.

Her breath was coming in little pants now. She bit her lip to keep from screaming.

She pulled her clothes back on as quietly as she could and slipped out into the night to find the wizard, clutching her pea light. Many times she'd walked toward his house in the night, but she'd always turned back. Now she had to see him.

She passed three zombies in the dark, two dead on the ground and riddled with bullet holes, one leaning out a fifth-story window and screaming its incoherent rage out at the city.

As she drew nearer to the wizard's door, an unshakable fatal conclusion gripped her: he was long gone, shot or gassed, or simply moved to somewhere else. It had been months and months since he'd given her the printer-clothes and the dumplings and surely he was dead now. Who wasn't?

Her steps slowed as she came to his block. Each step was the work of half a minute or more. She didn't want to see his old door hanging off its hinges, didn't want to see the ruins of the brave curves and swoops of his flat and his furniture.

But her steps took her to the door, and it was shut and silent as any of the doors in the street. Nothing marked it beyond the grime of the city and the scratches and scrapes that no one painted over any longer.

She tried the knob. It was locked. She knocked. Silence. She knocked again, harder. Still silence. Crying now, she thundered on the door with her fists and kicked it with her feet. He was gone, gone, gone, and she would be dead in a week.

Then the door opened. It wasn't the wizard, but a well-fed blonde woman in a housecoat with slippers. She

was beautiful, a movie-star, though maybe that was just because she wasn't starved nearly to death.

"Girl, you'd better have a good reason for waking up the whole fucking street at three in the morning." Her voice wasn't unkind, though she was clearly annoyed.

"I need to see—" She dropped her voice at the last moment. "I need to see the wizard."

"Oh," the woman said, comprehension dawning on her face. "Oh, well then, come on in. Any friend of the wizard."

The flat was just as she remembered it from that long ago night. The woman gestured at the kitchen and coffee-smells began to emanate from it. Valentine'd forgotten the smell of coffee, but now she remembered it.

"I'll go wake up his majesty, then," the woman said. "Just sit yourself down."

Valentine sat perched on the edge of the grand divan that twisted and curved along one wall of the sitting room. She knew that the seat of her trousers—filthy even before her tussle with the zombie—would leave black marks on its brave red upholstery.

The conversation from down the corridor was muffled but the tone was angry. Valentine felt her cheeks go hot, even through the fever. This place was still civilized and she'd brought the war to it.

Then the wizard came into the sitting room and waved the lights up to full bright, wincing away from the sudden illumination. He squinted at her.

“Do I know you?” he said.

Her tongue caught in her mouth. In his pajamas with his hair mussed, he still looked every inch the wizard.

“I,” She couldn’t finish. “I—” She tried again. “You gave me clothes. My mother is a soldier.”

He snapped his fingers and grinned. “Oh, the *soldier’s daughter*. I remember you now. You counted the toothbrushes. You’re a bright girl.”

“She’s a walking skeleton.” The beautiful blonde woman was in the kitchen, tinkering with the cooker. It was the pre-war kind, capable of printing out food with hardly any intervention. Valentine was hypnotized by her fingers.

“You want sandwiches and fish-fingers?”

“Start her with some drinking chocolate, Ana,” the wizard said. “Hot and then a milkshake. Little girls love chocolate.”

She hadn’t tasted chocolate in—She didn’t know. Her mouth was flooded with saliva. The woman, Ana, pressed some more buttons and then took down a bottle of rum from a cupboard.

“Will you have rum in yours, little girl?”

“I—”

“She’s a little young for rum, Ana,” the wizard said. He sat down on one of his curvy sofas and it embraced him and unfurled a foot-rest.

“I’ll have rum,” she said. She was dying, and she wouldn’t die without at least having one drink, once.

“Good girl,” Ana said. “There’s a war on, after all.” She poured a liquid with the consistency of mud into a tall mug and then added a glug or two of rum and pushed it across the counter then fixed one for herself. “Come and get it, no waitress service here.”

Valentine took off her too-small shoes and walked over the carpet in her dirty bare feet. It felt like something she barely remembered. Grass?

The chocolate smelled wonderful. Wonderful was the word for it. It made her full of wonder. Rich. Something from another planet—from heaven, maybe.

She lifted the mug and felt its warmth seep into her hands. She took a tentative sip and held it in her mouth.

It was spicy! Was chocolate spicy? She didn’t think so! The rum made her tongue tingle and the heat made its fumes rise in her head, carrying up the chocolate taste and the peppers. Her eyes streamed. Her ears felt like they were full of chocolate.

She swallowed and gasped and the wizard laughed. She looked at him.

“Ana’s recipe. She adds the chilies. I think it’s lovely, don’t you? Aztec chocolate, we call it.”

She took another mouthful, held it, swallowed. The chocolate was in her tummy too, and there was a feeling there, a greedy feeling, a *more* feeling. She drained the glass. Ana and the wizard both laughed.

Ana handed her a tall frosted metal cup with a mountain of whipped cream on top and a straw sticking out. “Chocolate malted,” she said. “The perfect chaser.”

Transfixed in her bare feet on the carpet, she drank this. A cold headache hit her between the eyes and that didn’t stop her from going on drinking. Wow! Wow! Were there tastes like this? Did things really taste this good?

The straw made slurping noises as she chased down the last of the rich liquid.

“Sit now,” the wizard said. “Let that work its magic and then we’ll put some food down your gullet.”

She walked to the sofa. It was like walking on the deck of a rocking ship, or on the surface of the moon. Everything slid beneath her. *I’m drunk*, she thought. *I’m 14 years old and I am drunk as a skunk.*

She lowered herself carefully and sat up as straight as she could.

“Now, young lady, what brings you to my home in the middle of the night?”



She remembered the bite on her neck and thought for a panicky second that she would throw up.

“I needed to talk to you,” she said. “I needed some help.”

“What kind of help?”

She couldn’t say it. She had the new kind of zombiism and the soldier had explained it clearly—the cure for zombiism now was a bullet to the head.

Then she knew what she must say. The chocolate helped. Her family would love chocolate. “I’m going away soon and my mother and brother won’t be able to take care of themselves. I need help to keep them safe once I go.”

“Where are you going?”

The drink made it hard to think, but that was balanced out by that precious and magical feeling of fullness in her belly. Her mind flew over all the possible answers.

“I have found someone who’ll take me out of the city and to a safe place.”

“Are there safe places?” Ana said.

“Oh, Ana, you cynic,” the wizard said. “There are many, many safe places. The world is full of them. They are the exception, not the rule. Isn’t that why you’ve come here?”

"We're not talking about why *I* came here," Ana said. She nodded back at Valentine and made a little scooting hand-gesture at her. Valentine couldn't decide if she liked Ana, though Ana was very pretty.

"I need help for my family," she said.

"And why would I give help?" the wizard said. He was still smiling, but that face of his, the face that looked like he'd been wounded and never quite healed, it was set in an expression that scared her a little. His eyes glittered in the low light of the swooping sitting room. She found that she had slumped against the sofa and now it had her in its soft embrace.

"Because you helped me before," she said.

"I see," the wizard said. "So you assumed that because I'd been generous—very, very generous—to you once before that I'd be generous again? You repay my favor with a request for another one?"

Valentine shook her head.

"No?"

"I will find a way to repay it," she said. "I can work for you."

"I don't need any ditches dug around here, thank you."

Somewhere in the flat, a door opened and shut. She heard muffled voices. Lots of them. The flat was full of people, somewhere.

“I can do lots of kinds of work,” she said. She attempted a smile. She didn’t know what she was offering him, but she knew that she was too young to be offering it. And besides, with zombiism, you shouldn’t do that sort of thing. She would be safe, though, and careful, so that he would live to help her family.

Ana crossed past her in a flash and then she smacked the wizard, a crack across the face hard enough to rock his head back. His cheek glowed with the print of her open hand.

“Don’t you toy with this little girl,” she said. “You see how desperate she is? Don’t you toy with her.”

She whirled on Valentine, who stood her ground even though she wanted to shrink away. If she was old enough to offer herself to the wizard, she was old enough to stand her ground before this beautiful, well-fed blonde woman.

“And you,” Ana said. “You aren’t a fool, I can tell. So don’t act a fool. There are a thousand ways to survive that don’t involve lying on your back, and you must know them or you wouldn’t have survived this long. Be smart or be gone. I won’t watch you make a tragedy of yourself.”

“Ana, what do you know about survival?” the wizard said. He had one hand to his cheek, and he was giving her the same glittering look he’d given to Valentine a moment before.

“Just don’t play with her,” Ana said. “Help her or get rid of her, but don’t play with her.”

“Go and see to the others, Anushla,” the wizard said. “I will negotiate in the best of faith with our friend here and call you in to review the terms of our deal when it’s all done, all right?”

Ana looked toward the corridor where the voices were coming from and back to the wizard, then to Valentine. “Be smart, girl,” she said.

The wizard brought her a plate of goose-liver dumplings smothered in white gravy and then took a bite out of a big toasted corned beef sandwich that oozed brown mustard.

“Right,” he said. “No playing. If you want to work for me, there are jobs that need doing. Have you ever seen stage magic performed, the kind with tuxedos and white doves?”

She nodded slowly. “Before the war,” she said.

“You know how the magician always has a supply of lovely assistants on hand?”

She nodded again. They’d worn flattering, tight-fitting calf-high trousers, cutaway coats, tummy-revealing crop-tops, and feathered confections for hats.

“Everyone who does magic has an assistant or two. I’m the wizard and I do the best magic of all, and so I

have need of more assistants than most. I have an army of assistants, and they help me out and I help them out.”

“I’m leaving in five days,” she said.

“The kind of favor I had in mind from you was the kind of favor that you could perform the day after tomorrow.”

“And you’d take care of my family?”

“I would do that,” he said. “I always take care of my assistants’ families. Do we have an agreement?”

She stuck her hand out and they shook.

“Eat your dumplings,” he said. “And then we’ll get you some things to take home to your family.”

\* \* \*

Two days after the wizard agreed to take care of Valentine’s family, the fever had become her constant companion, so omnipresent that it she hardly noticed it, though it made her walk like an old woman and she sometimes had trouble focusing her eyes.

She arose that morning and feasted on brown rolls with hard crusts, small citrus cakes, green beef tea, porridge with currants and blueberry concentrate and sweet condensed milk, and a chocolate bun to top it off.

Trover ate even more than she did, licking up the crumbs. She saw him hide two of the jackfruits under his

shirt and nodded satisfaction—he had learned something about surviving, then.

Her mother had not questioned the food nor the clothes nor her daughter's absence that night. But oh, she had given Valentine a look when she came through the door carrying all her parcels, a look that said, *not my daughter any more*. Not a look that refused what she bore, but a look that refused *her*. Valentine didn't bother trying to explain. She knew what her mother suspected and it was better in some ways than the truth.

Her mother drank the real coffee reverently, with three sugars and thick no-refrigeration cream. She ate sardines on toast, green beef tea, and a heap of fluffy scrambled eggs with minced herring, then she put on her uniform and took up her gun and went out the door, without a look back at Valentine.

*By the end of the week, she won't have to worry about me*, Valentine thought. The fever made her fingers shake, but she still drank her hot chocolate.

Trover knew his own way to the creche, and so Valentine went forth to earn her family's fortune.

The wizard had given her a small sack of little electronic marbles, and had told her to get them planted in no fewer than three hundred locations at the front and in the places where the fighting was likely to move. They were spy-eyes, the kind of thing that she and her friends had exchanged to keep in one-anothers' rooms before the

war, so they could sneak midnight conversations in perfect encrypted secrecy.

“If I’m caught,” she said.

“You’ll be shot,” he said. “You *must be*. The alternative is that you’ll lead them back to me. And if you do that, the whole game is up—your family’s lives, my life, your life, the lives of all my assistants and friends will be forfeit. It will be terrible. They will destroy this place. They will destroy your home, too.”

She didn’t report for her digging. That was OK. Lots of people didn’t show up to dig on the days when they were feeling too weak to hold a shovel. She wouldn’t be missed.

She had the fastest shoes that the wizard could print for her on her feet, though she’d carefully covered them in grime and dirt so they wouldn’t stand out. And she’d taken an inhaler along that would make her faster still. He’d warned her to keep eating after she took the inhaler, or she’d starve to death before the day was out. The pockets on both thighs of her jumpsuit were stuffed with butterballs wrapped around sugared kidneys and livers, stuff that would sustain her no matter how many puffs she took.

No one challenged her on the way to the front. There were some her age who fought and many more who served those who fought, bringing forward ammunition, digging new trenches right at the front. The pay for this

was better than the pay she'd gotten digging in the "safe" trenches. She brought a shovel for camouflage.

The first round of trenches were familiar, the same kinds she'd been digging in for months now. She even saw some of the diggers she'd dug alongside of, nodding to them though her heart was thumping. *You'll be shot*, she thought, and she palmed an electronic eye and stuck it to the wall of a trench.

She moved forward and forward, closer to the fighting. It had always been a dull, distant rattle, the fighting, never quite gone, but not always there, either. Instinctively, she'd kept her distance from it, always moving away from it. Today she moved toward it and her blood sang.

One trench over there came the dread *zizz* sound of a trenchbuster and she threw herself down. There were anti-busters in the trenches, too, but they didn't always work. The trench-busters were mostly up around the front, but they sometimes came back to the diggers, and they had killed one crew she knew of.

There were screams from the next trench, then a sound like a bag of gravel being poured out—that was the anti-buster, she knew—and the trenchbuster soared out overhead of her and detonated in the sky, mortally confused by the counter-logic in the anti-buster.

She realized that she had peed herself. Just a little, just a few drops that must have escaped when she gave



her involuntary shriek. She planted her hands in the frozen dirt of the trench-floor and got to her knees. That was when she saw the fingertip, shriveled and frozen, lying just a few inches from her. It had been cleanly severed.

She had seen so much death, but the fingertip, cut off and left here to dry out and be trampled down into the dirt; It made her stomach do slow somersaults. She threw up a little, and peed herself a little more, and her eyes watered.

That's when she knew she couldn't complete the wizard's mission. There was death ahead for her that day, much death to see at the front, and she couldn't face that. Not when her pockets were full of spy-eyes and that meant espionage, meant that the wizard was on the other side, the side of the bastards whose old people she would starve in their high flats and whose children she would tear from their beloved parents.

The fever made her shake hard now. Her head swam and the world pitched and yawed like a ship in heavy seas.

She stood up and took a step. It was a funky disco-dancer step. Her next step was, too. Then she was walking normally again.

She reached down into her shirt, between her breasts—she had a bra on again, fresh from the wizard's

printer—and withdrew the inhaler he'd given her. She'd be dead in a week.

She put the inhaler to her lips and drew in a deep breath while squeezing it, and then the fever was gone. The horror was gone. The fear and cold were gone. What was left behind was a hard, frenetic grin, something that sharpened her every sense and set her feet alight like the most infectious of dance music.

She ran now, flying through the trenches. The closer she got to the front the worse it smelled, but that was OK, bad smells were fine by her. Body parts—the fingertip had just been a preview, here you could find jawbones and tongues, hands and feet, curled-in cocks and viscera that glistened through its dust-crust—not a problem.

She planted five eyes, then crouched to let a trenchbuster sail over her head. She resisted a mad urge to reach up and stick an eye to it, then planted another eye, palming it and sticking it right under the nose of a gunnery sergeant who was hollering at two old women who were struggling to maneuver a gigantic, multi-part weapon into position. To Valentine, the women looked old enough to be from the same tribe she'd hauled water for, and they were so thin they looked like they were made of twisted-together wires. Their eyes were huge and round and showed the whites.

The sergeant paid her no mind as she slipped forward, her shovel still in one hand. The trench dead-

ended ahead of her and she jiggled to a side trench, but soon that, too, dead-ended. Dead end after dead end—each got its own eye—and before long she was at the end of the road, no more side tunnels. She would have to turn back and try another path. There were no maps of the trenches, of course.

She had another puff off her inhaler. Her stomach lurched and then her knees gave way. She was back in the dirt now and she remembered what the wizard had told her about eating when she was on the inhaler or starving to death. Then she went into seizure. Her limbs thrashed, her head shook back and forth, she banged her forehead into the dirt. A gargling escaped her throat, nothing at all like words or any other human sound.

When the seizure passed—and it did pass, though it felt like it never would—she shakily withdrew a fistful of butter-ball and sugared organ meat and shoved it in her mouth. Most of it escaped, but some of it got down her throat and her hands were steadier in a moment, enabling her to eat more. She got to her knees, she got to her feet, she ate some more and had another puff off the inhaler.

God oh god! She felt *marvelous* now. Food and the inhaler were magic together. Dead ends, pah! Who had time to go back through the trenches? She'd be dead in five days. She jammed her fingers in the frozen dirt on the trench-side and hauled herself up to the surface.

In her months and months of digging in the trenches, she had never once peeked over the edge. There were things that watched for snoopzy looks over the trenches, laser scanners and sentry guns. You could lose the top of your head zip-zap.

Now she was on the surface. It was like the surface of the moon. Craters, hills, trenches, and great clouds of roiling smoke and dust. Nothing alive. Broken guns and things that might have been body parts. She grinned that hard grin, because there was no one else here and so she was the queen of the surface, the bloody angel of the battlefield. She fisted more sugared liver into her gob and *ran*.

*Zizz, zizz, zizz.* There were bullets and other materiel around her, as soon as she moved, but the world was so clear now, the grey light so pure, the domain so utterly hers, there was no chance she'd be hit by a bullet.

She leapt a trench and skirted a trench, leapt and skirted, heading further and further toward the lines. She nearly tripped over a sentry gun, then leapt *on top of it* as it tried to swivel around to get her in its sights, and she pasted an eye on it and laughed and leapt away.

She was thinking that she should get back into a trench and was trying to pick one when it was decided for her—she was in mid-leap over a trench when a bullet clipped the heel of her shoe and she tumbled down into the trench. She did a tremendous, jarring face-plant into

the planks below and lay stunned for a moment with her mouth filling up with blood. Her tongue throbbed—it had been bitten—and as she carefully rolled it around her mouth, she discovered that she'd knocked out one of her front teeth. Not such a pretty girl anymore, but she'd be dead in less than five days.

She got to her knees again and planted an eye as she looked around.

A soldier was staring at her from the end of her current trench. He was saying something, but here the trenches boomed with artillery and zizzed with gunfire and hearing was impossible. She drew closer to him to hear what he had to say and she was practically upon him when she realized that he was wearing an enemy uniform.

She was quick quick, but he was quicker and he had her arm in an iron grip before she could pull away.

He said something in a language that they often spoke in the movies, back where there was a cine across from her block of flats. She knew a few words of that language.

“Friend!” she said.

He said something in a different language, but she didn't recognize that one. Then he switched to Hindi, but all she knew to say in Hindi was Love Love Love I'm in

Love, which was the chorus to all the songs in the Hindi movies.

He shook her arm hard. He was angry with her, and his gun was in his other hand now, a soft, floppy handgun like a length of rope and he was gesturing at her and shouting. He was as well-fed as the wizard, and he was not much older than her. She thought that he didn't want to kill her and was angry because he was going to have to.

She tried smiling at him. He scowled hard. She held her hand out to him and touched his arm softly, placatingly. Then she pointed at her pocket, where the butterballs were. Very slowly, she reached into it. He watched her with suspicious eyes, the handgun trained on her now. She thought that if she was a suicide bomber, he'd be dead now, and that made her feel a little better about the war: if this was what a soldier from the other side was like, they all had a chance after all.

She drew out a butter-ball and took a bite of it, then offered it to the soldier. He looked like he wanted to cry. She held it to his mouth so he wouldn't have to let go of her or the gun in order to eat it. He took a small, polite bite, chewed and swallowed. She had a bite, then gave him one. They ate like that until the butter-ball was gone, and then she drew out another, and another.

She pointed to herself. "Valentine," she said.

He shook his head. He was the picture of moroseness. "Withnail," he said.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Withnail," she said in his language, another useful phrase culled from the cine, though she suspected she was pronouncing it all wrong. She held out her hand to shake his. He holstered his handgun and shook her hand.

"I have to go, Withnail." She couldn't say this in his language, but she spoke slowly and as clearly as she could.

He shook his head again. She covered his hand on her arm with her own and gave it a squeeze.

"To save my family," she said. "I'm on a mission for your side anyway. Let me go, Withnail." She gave his hand another squeeze. Slowly, he released her arm.

He was very handsome, she saw now, with a good chin and sensuous lips. She'd never kissed a boy and she'd be dead in four days and a little more. Or maybe she'd be dead that afternoon, if she couldn't get back into her own trenches.

She put her hand on the back of his neck and pulled his face to hers and gave him a dry, hard kiss on those pouting lips. It made her blood sing, and she gave him a hug, too, pressing her body to him. He kissed her back after a moment, surprised. His tongue probed at her closed lips and she pulled away, then for a crazy moment

she thought of biting him and giving him a dose of zombiism to spread to his comrades in the trenches with him. But that wouldn't be right. They were friends now.

She stuck her fingers in the trench wall. They hurt—she must have broken a finger before. She hauled herself up and began to run, pawing her pockets for her inhaler. “So long, Withnail!” It was another phrase she knew from the cine.

\* \* \*

Three days after being bitten by the zombie, Valentine woke up with her hand curled protectively over the huge hot egg on her collarbone. She couldn't move that arm this morning, not without pain like nothing she'd ever felt. Her face ached. Her limbs ached. Her new breasts ached like she'd been punched in them, repeatedly. She got out of bed like an old woman and crept to the table.

She sat gingerly and spooned up some cereal. Her mother sat opposite her, staring over her shoulder. Valentine ate a spoonful of cereal, then spat it out as it came into contact with the raw, toothless spot on her gum.

Her mother looked at her.

“Open your mouth, Vale,” she said.

Valentine did as she was bade, showing the gap in her teeth.



“You were hit?” her mother said. Valentine didn’t answer. She didn’t trust herself to speak with her mother looking at her like that. “They won’t want you now you’ve lost that tooth,” she said. “You can go back to digging now.”

She stood up from the table without a word and went out of the flat. She was so feverish that she couldn’t tell if the stairs went down or up, whether she was descending or ascending.

She tottered out on the street. The way she felt, she couldn’t walk properly. Her hips wanted to give way with every step and so she walked like a funky disco dancer through the early, cold streets, toward the wizard’s house.

She didn’t make it. Less than half way there, she sat down on a pile of rubble and retched. She reached down into her pocket and pulled out the wizard’s inhaler, but she fumbled it. She couldn’t bend over to get it, so she let herself slowly fall to the street, then she crawled one-armed to it. She fitted it to her mouth and then squeezed it with clumsy fingers.

She dragged herself to her feet, not bothering to take the inhaler with her. Her limbs burned now and wanted to move, no matter how much it hurt, and she lurched to the wizard’s door, moaning in the back of her throat.

Ana let her in, eyes wide. “You did it.” It might have been a question. Valentine let herself slide to the soft, sweet-smelling carpet and closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

An unknowable number of hours or days after Valentine got to the wizard’s flat, she woke up in a soft, fluffy bed that was quietly massaging her limbs. She was dressed in loose cotton pajamas, and there was a trolley by the bed piled high with the kind of fruit that wasn’t a berry and wasn’t an orange, but a little of both and each one had a different smiley face growing in the peel.

The wizard came into the room.

“You’ll live,” he said. “Probably. It would have been a certainty if you’d fucking told me you had zombiism, you little idiot.”

Ana came in behind him. “Do you think she would have done your mission for you if she didn’t have zombiism, wizard?”

He waved her off. “You’ve got your cure,” he said.

“It won’t cure me,” Valentine said. Her voice was like a gravel-mixer. “Not the kind I have. There’s no cure.”

“Oh ho,” the wizard said. “Would you care to make a wager on that? How about this: if you die, I take care of your family. If you live, you work for me—and I’ll take care of your family.”

“You already must take care of my family,” she said.

The wizard’s eyes glittered. “I think that curing your zombiism is repayment enough, so I’ve unilaterally renegotiated the terms of our deal. If you don’t like that, I can arrange to have you re-infected and we can go back to the original contract.”

“You’ve cured me?”

Ana said, “There are lots of things we have access to here that you can’t get in the city. What you had would have killed you if he hadn’t helped.”

“Will you take my bet?”

She thought about the mission, about the soldier, about being queen of the battlefield. She thought about the way they’d bombed her city and how she’d just helped them kill the city’s soldiers and diggers—like her father.

“I won’t betray my city to its enemies ever again.” She sat up very straight. “I was a traitor once, but I had a fever and I was dying. You are a traitor every day and what is *your* excuse?”

“A traitor? What the hell are you talking about?”

“The spy-eyes I planted so our enemies can spy on us, the wealth you have around here. How many of our people died because you sold them out?”

“Valentine, you are a smart girl and your mother is a soldier, but you aren’t so very smart as all that. You are a

stupid girl sometimes. Our little palace here isn't full of spies. We're *documentarians*. We shoot the war and we send it to the outside world so they can see the tragedy they are wreaking here. We have a huge activist movement that we fuel through our pictures. The spy-eyes you planted yesterday are now streaming 24/7 to activist sites in fifty countries. It is being played in the halls of the United Nations."

Eva made a spitting sound. "It's being played as filler on the snowy slopes of upper cable. It's being played as ironic snuff-porn in dorm rooms. It's being used as stock footage for avant-garde performance art. Please, wizard, please. She deserves to know the real situation, not the things you tell yourself when you can't sleep."

"It's—*entertainment*?"

"It's riveting," Ana said, like *riveting* meant *terrible*. "Very highly rated."

"And it raises consciousness," the wizard said. "You cynic, Ana, you can't see anything except the worst. It is the reason that anyone except for a few policy wonks have heard of what's going on here."

"Entertainment?"

"Entertainment," the wizard said. "And more than that."

“They’re killing us, they’re gassing us, they’re bombing us, and you’re selling back to them as *entertainment?*”

She climbed out of the bed. She hurt, but not so much as she had before. The fever had broken, at least.

“Am I cured?” she asked. “Do I need anything else, or am I cured?”

The wizard scowled. “Now wait a moment—”

“You’re cured,” Ana said. “You should rest for a few days and eat well, but you will get better no matter what.” The wizard turned and shoved her toward the door, so hard she stumbled and hit the jam. She spat on the floor and walked out of the room.

Valentine pulled herself out of the bed. The wizard took her wrist and without hesitating, she jammed her thumb into his eye-socket, grunting with the effort. He shouted and reeled away and she made her way out of the bedroom and down the corridor to the brave red sitting room. Ana had a couple of grip-sheeted, robot-tied parcels for her. “Clothes,” she said. “Food. Don’t come back. I’m not from here, but even I know how wrong this is. He—there’s no excuse for him. Go.” She handed Valentine some shoes—good sturdy work-boots, still warm from the printer.

Six months after she took home the clothes that Ana had given her, Valentine was taken off of ditch-digging and put on corpse-duty. They were dying like flies, and the zombies fed on them, and unless the meat was disposed of, the zombies would multiply like rats.

There was only bread on alternate days now. The hunger was like a playmate or a childhood enemy that taunted her. It woke her in the night like a punch in the gut.

The first body she found was missing its ass-cheeks. You could find the bodies by the smell, and she was on corpse-detail with a boy about her age whose face she never saw, because it was covered by a mask. He had a floppy machine-pistol that she hoped he knew how to use, because the zombies were everywhere. He'd been hauling meat for weeks, and grunted out little bits and pieces to help her get acquainted. Neither of them exchanged names.

“What happened to her—”

“Ever see black-market meat? The ass is the last part to go when they starve. The mafiyehs take the cheeks and grind them up with some filler and add flavoring agent and sell it. They used to kill people and take the meat that way, but they don't need to do that anymore. There's enough meat from natural causes.”

The smell was terrible. It was a woman and she'd been dead for some time. It was hot out, too. Valentine's

mask didn't really seem to help, but when she stuck a finger under it to scratch her sweaty upper lip, an unfiltered gulp of air went up her nose and she gagged.

They started in the early hours of the morning before the heat got too bad. They slept for a few hours at noon, then started again mid-afternoon. She was so hungry that she was dizzy. The next corpse was on the fifteenth storey of a block of revolutionary-era flats. No lift in the city had worked in more than a year. They climbed and rested, climbed and rested. There was no question of going straight up. She was too weak to consider it for a second.

It was a man. He was big and tall, and even starved out as he was, they could barely lift him. He must have been a giant in life.

"We'll never carry him down all those stairs," the boy said. "Go and open the big window."

Valentine obeyed woodenly. She knew that if you couldn't carry the body, you'd have to get it out of the building some other way. She knew that. She didn't want to think about what it meant, but she knew it. There'd been a corpse one floor down from her flat and it had taken weeks for the city to dispose of it and life had been almost unbearable for everyone in the building. And that had been winter, when the cold kept the smell down some.

So you had to get rid of the body. The window was a revolutionary window. It was marvelous and self-cleaning and it swung easily open. Forty-five meters below, she could see the building's deserted courtyard and the corpse-wagon that the boy drove haltingly through the city streets. Under other circumstances she might have felt show-offy and ostentatious riding in a car while everyone else walked, but she knew that no one envied her her ride in the corpse-wagon.

"Take his ankles." With the mask on, the boy looked like a horse, and she knew she did, too. On the one chair that hadn't been burned for fuel the previous winter, the boy had stacked up the few possessions the corpse had: a ring, a lighter, a clasp-knife, a little set of headphones with their charge-lights showing red.

She picked up the body by the ankles. The boy had him by the shoulders. When they alley-ooped it up off the floor, the body let loose a tremendous, evil fart. It wasn't the first time a body had done that on that day, but it was the loudest and vilest of all the farts. Its ankles were dirty and the smell of its feet and its fart combined into a grey, fuggy miasma that she could smell through the mask.

"You should smell his feet," she said.

"You should smell his breath," the boy said.

They dragged the body to the window and one, two, three, swung it out into the wide world. She watched it



spin away, fascinated and wordless. Then it hit the ground and the sound. And the way it looked. And the splash. And the blood.

There were tears streaming down her face, fouling her mask. She stepped out into the corridor and ripped the mask off and faced the wall, groaning.

“It gets easier later,” the boy said, tugging her arm.

He was right.

But they needed shovels to get the body into the corpse wagon. Some of the bits had gone a long way off and she had to carry them before her on the spade-end of the shovel. His viscera glistened like an accusation at her. She lived on the fourteenth floor. When her time came, she'd go out the window too.

\* \* \*

Two years after the siege began, she awoke deaf. Mata was shaking her vigorously and her lips were moving, but there was no sound. Valentine listened hard and made out a distant, underwater sound that she couldn't place, though it was familiar.

Mata was thin and hard now, and slept with a gun and only came home for a few hours at a time. She was taking lots of different pills, and they made her a little jumpy. Valentine wondered if the pills had rendered her mother mute, before she realized that she couldn't hear *anything*.

She tapped her ear.

“I can’t hear,” she said.

Her mother didn’t appear to understand. She still shook Valentine hard.

“I’m deaf, Mata,” she said. She shook her head and tugged her earlobes. She was scared now, and she sat up. She wiggled a finger in her ear, which was very greasy. Not even the sound of her finger in her ear carried back to her mind. Stone deaf.

She was breathing heavily, but that happened a lot. The hunger made her weepy and she sometimes cried for no reason. Sometimes in the middle of a sentence she had to sit down and stare at the sky while her tears rolled down her throat, until she felt able to go on again.

She slowed her breathing. “Mata,” she said.

Her mother made a “stay there” gesture, then repeated it and mouthed the words at her slowly and obviously. She nodded to show she understood.

She was supposed to be carrying bodies that day. You could get bread every day if you carried bodies. One piece on alternate days from the city, one piece from the black-market in exchange for the loot you could find in the flats of the starved.

There was a new girl that Valentine was training, too. The boy was long gone. He’d tried to touch her breast, not just once, either, and she’d reported him.

When the supervisor confronted him, he went crazy and tried to attack the supervisor and the supervisor sent him to the front to carry ammunition, where, Valentine supposed, he was still working. Unless he was dead. She didn't much care which.

But she wanted bread. The creche had shut down a few months before, but Trover had some little boys he played with and they sometimes came home with a little food that he was always careful to share with her, though she was sure that he didn't share everything. She didn't either. No one did. Mata had a little stash of dried fish under her pillow. Valentine almost never raided it, though she could have.

Trover was looking at her. She tugged her earlobes. "I'm deaf," she said. She thought she might be speaking very loudly, but she couldn't tell.

Trover went out of the flat without looking back at her.

She waited for Mata, but the day crept by and Mata didn't return. The more she didn't return, the more Valentine worried. She cried some, and tried to sleep. She sucked pebbles for the hunger, and drank the cistern dry. She carried the chamber-pot downstairs, but the world in silence was so scary that she practically ran back to the flat once she'd tipped it out into the reeking collection-point.

She had finally gotten to sleep when Mata returned. Mata mouthed something at her in slow, deliberate words, but she couldn't make it out. Mata repeated it, and then again. She didn't get any of it, but Mata's expression was clear. No doctors would help her. She hadn't expected them to.

No doctors could help her, as far as she was concerned. She knew exactly what had gone wrong: her hearing aids had failed. Everything from the golden years after the revolution failed. Old people died when their artificial hearts or kidneys seized up and withered. Lifts didn't work. Printers didn't work—they'd nearly all died the day the siege began. The hospitals couldn't print drugs. The sky-cars fell out of the sky.

Nothing worked. Nothing would ever work again. Everything fell apart. Her hearing aids were of that same magical *stuff* as everything else from the revolution, so it followed that they would die too.

Mata must have known this. That's probably what she was saying. If Valentine concentrated, she could recall her mother's voice and have it say the words.

"It's OK, Mata," she said. She knew she was shouting. "It's OK."

Mata cried and she cried, but she put herself to sleep as soon as she could, and once she thought Trover and Mata were sleeping, she took out her small wizard-light

and made her way down the silent stairs, into the silent streets.

She walked cautiously toward the wizard's flat. She was deaf, but it felt like she was a little blind too. Without her hearing, she couldn't see right, or balance right. She thought about a life without ears. She'd probably have to go back to digging, since you couldn't haul bodies without a partner and you needed to be able to talk, even if it was only to say *alley-oop*.

She walked like a drunkard, keeping to the darkest streets where even the night wardens stayed away. She let only the tiniest glow escape from her little light.

She was about to turn into the main shopping street when a strong hand seized her arm and jerked her back into the alley. Her first thought was *zombie* and she screamed involuntarily and a fist connected with her mouth, loosening one of the teeth next to her gap. Her head rang like a bell, the first sound she'd heard since that morning.

The little bead fell out of her hand and rolled into a crack in the pavement, crazily illuminating the scene and her attacker. The alley was filthy and covered in drifts of rubble, and the man who'd hit her was a young civil defense warden with acne that looked chemically induced. He didn't smell good. He smelled very bad. Sick, maybe. Unclean like everyone, and worse. He was no zombie. He didn't smell good enough.

She saw his mouth work and knew he was saying something to her. "I'm deaf" she said and she knew she said it too loud because he recoiled and then he punched her harder in the mouth than before.

She fell down this time and he dragged her roughly by one arm away from the light.

She was cried out, and weak from hunger, and she understood what was coming next when he threw her down and grabbed the collar of her shirt and ripped it away from her, then gave her bra the same treatment. She was dazed from the knocks on the head, but she knew what was coming.

Valentine's mother was a soldier. She'd been taught to kill. She'd taught Valentine to kill. Valentine never left the house without a clasp-knife, the knife she'd taken from the corpse she'd thrown out a fifteenth storey window some unknowable time before.

The knife was in her back pocket. She watched the boy's silhouette work at the fastener of his trousers, while she stole a hand behind her and slowly, slowly took out the knife. She let herself make silent choking dazed sounds.

She knew what was coming next, but the boy didn't.

But as he knelt down and reached out for the snap on her trousers, she showed him what was next. She took two of his fingers and just missed opening her own belly.

He tried to jerk his arm away, but she had him by the wrist before he could, and she pulled him down on top of her, making sure that her knife was free of the clinch, free to slip around behind him and take him once-twice-three time in between his ribs, then again into his kidneys. Seeing the splatted corpses she tossed out of windows had given her a very keen idea of how anatomy worked.

She had never felt so clearheaded as she did at this work, and the boy on her thrashed and got her a couple good knocks on the head, and his blood soaked her bare chest and her face and her short hair. But she worked the knife some more, going for the throat and then the face. She let him go and he rolled away and she pounced on him. She worked with the knife. Soon he stopped moving.

Her shirt was in rags, but the bra-clasp still worked, once she bent it back. The pea-light was easy to find—it glowed like a beacon. She picked it up and made her way to the wizard's.

"I'm deaf," she said to Ana. Ana looked the same, at first. And then Valentine saw that she was holding a cane and leaning on it heavily.

She knew that she was half-naked and covered with gore, but she also knew that Ana would not be fazed by this. She squeezed past her and into the brave, swooping, just-printed sitting room. She fixed herself some coffee

and poured a glug of rum into it while Ana stared at her in some wordless emotion.

“I’m deaf,” she repeated, setting down some coffee and rum for Ana. “I could use a shirt, too. And the wizard, of course.”

She remembered how to use the cooker from the revolutionary days, but it was like remembering something from a dream. She poked at it, ignoring Ana, and got it to produce a plate of goose-liver dumplings in white gravy. She rinsed the blood off her fingers and then ate the dumplings with them.

Ana stared at her for a long moment, then limped out of the room and fetched the wizard.

He said something that she couldn’t hear. Everyone in the city was old, even the young people—wrinkled with dust in the wrinkles and missing teeth and torn clothes. The wizard was forever young. He was clean and unscarred and well-fed as ever.

“Print me some clothes, wizard,” she said. “These ones are covered in blood. And I’m deaf, so don’t bother talking to me.”

The wizard stared at her. She ate a dumpling and licked the gravy off her fingers. Her stomach had been in flutters since waking up deaf, a not entirely unpleasant counterpoint to her constant, painful hunger. The gravy



soothed her stomach, the dumplings settled it, the pain retreated.

She was deaf. She was a murderess. But there was food and it was good. Better than no food, anyway.

The wizard brought her a pile of warm, printer-fresh clothes. "Your printers never stopped working, did they?" she said. She was sure she was talking very loudly and she didn't give a festering shit.

"Our printers stopped working the morning of the siege. Everything did. Everything stops working. That's the infowar. The infowar probably is what did for my hearing aids. They were supposed to last ten years but it's hardly been two.

"I'm taking a shower now," she said. "You can write me an answer if you'd like. I promise to read it afterward."

She took herself to the bathroom and let the shower wash her. There were some tears in her head somewhere but they couldn't find their way to her eyes. That was all right. It was a war, after all.

She dressed in fine printer-fresh clothes and burped a printer-fresh belch. The gravy taste wafted gassily into her mouth.

The wizard had rolled up one of the sofas and unrolled a big screen in its place, the kind of thing she

used to love to play games on, in the dreamlike fantasy of yore.

YOU'RE DEAF?

She nodded. "I have hearing aids, from a bomb. They weren't working when I got out of bed this morning. No warning. They went like that." She snapped her fingers.

Some movement caught the corner of her eye and she spun around. There were four more people in the living room, people she hadn't met before though she assumed that they belonged to the distant voices she'd heard on her earlier visits. They had the well-fed look of Ana and the wizard, and a couple of them were obviously foreign. The documentarians. One of them was pointing a camera at her. She bared her gap-tooth grin at the camera and faked a step toward it. The camera-woman cringed back and she laughed nastily.

"Your cameras work. Your printers work. You're not losing the infowar the way we do. That's because there's a way to build things to resist the infowar agents, right? That's why the enemy trench-busters don't fail the way our weapons do."

The wizard and Ana conversed briefly, their heads pointed away from her. She grabbed the camera away from the startled camera-woman and pointed it at them.

"I want to get a recording of what you're saying now so once my hearing comes back I'll be able to listen. You

don't mind, do you?" She laughed again and poked her tongue out through the gap in her teeth. All her teeth were loose now, and running her tongue along the back of them made then wiggle in a way that was part tickle, part hurt.

The wizard got the idea. He made a keyboard appear on the screen again and prodded at it.

IT'S NOT QUITE WHAT YOU THINK VALENTINE

"Sure, what do I know? But you've got something, don't you?"

Ana nodded.

"You can fix my hearing?"

Ana nodded again.

"You could try to kill me while you performed surgery, couldn't you?"

Neither of them said anything.

"I'm boobytrapped." She wasn't, but it had been known to happen. "When I die, boom!" She realized that this lie might be too extravagant. Who'd booby-trap a starved gap-toothed girl? "My mother arranged it."

She thought back to the cine. The food she'd eaten was helping her think, the way it always did, making her realize what a cloud of fuzz-headed hunger she usually floated through.

“I’ve left a full description of your operation in a sealed envelope to be opened in the event of my death.”

That was better. She should have gone with that in the first place. She couldn’t tell if they believed her. Ana was shaking her head.

“You’ve got a doctor here, or someone like a doctor. Whatever’s been done to your leg, Ana, a doctor did that.”

Ana pointed at the woman from whom Valentine had snatched the camera. Valentine passed it back to her. “Sorry about that.”

\* \* \*

The day after Valentine killed her first man, her hearing came back. The surgery took about ten minutes and was largely performed remotely, reprogramming the hardware in her head with something that the doctor kept calling “hardened logic.” She liked the sound of that.

Her hearing came back slowly, in blips and bloops over the course of a few hours. Then it was back, better than new. She found that she could hear sounds from much farther away. The camera-woman also showed her how she could use a terminal to access the memory in her new ears, which would buffer six months’ worth of audio. Valentine didn’t think she’d be in a position to make much use of this feature, as interesting as it was. There weren’t any working machines in the city.

“I’m going home now,” she said.

Ana was waiting by the printer, making it output clothes and food as fast as it could, giving it to robots to tie up in grip-sheets.

“Would you have turned us in if we didn’t help you?”

Valentine shook her head and tried not to smile. “No one would have believed me anyway. I’m not boobytrapped, either.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Ana said. She gave Valentine a long hug and kissed her cheek. “Be careful, OK?”

“Why don’t you people help us? Why can’t you give our army hardened logic for their weapons?”

Ana shook her head. She was crying. “You think I haven’t asked this? To do that would be suicide. Your enemies would never forgive us. It’s one thing to chide them for their slaughter, another thing to end it.”

Valentine had Ana print her some convincing rags with bit-mapped filth right in the weave and wrapped her parcels in them so they wouldn’t be suspicious. She stepped out into the bright light of a spring day, every sound sharp as a pin-drop, from distant gunfire to the nearby hungry whimpering of a baby.

She walked slowly through the streets. She passed a spot that she thought was the place where the boy grabbed her, where she’d done her work with the knife. If

that was the spot, though, there was no sign of it. The corpse-carriers were efficient.

She walked the stairs to her flat quickly, her full belly supplying her with boundless energy. As she reached for the door, though, she heard something from behind it, some crying. Trover. Once he'd cried nonstop. But he hadn't cried in so long she barely remembered the sound.

She swung open the door and saw what Trover was crying about. Mata was stretched out on the floor beside the one chair they hadn't burned for fuel. She wasn't moving and one of her eyes was wide open, the other squeezed shut. Trover was shaking her shoulder and crying.

"What?" Valentine said to her brother, grabbing and shaking him. "What happened?"

He opened his mouth and let out a howl. He hadn't spoken in a long time.

She knelt at her mother's side. Her mother's cheek was cold. Her arms and hands were stiff. Valentine knew that stiffness. Anyone who worked on the corpse patrol knew that stiffness. The front of her mother's torn trousers were damp with cold piss, Valentine could smell it. In Mata's breast pocket were a couple of inhalers, military grade, the kind of thing you took if you couldn't afford to sleep and if you needed to make your body go.

To Valentine, her mother looked like a skeleton, something long-buried and not freshly dead. Compared to Ana, this woman was very ugly and skinny and hard. Too hard to be a mother. She must have taken the drugs to keep herself going when Valentine didn't come home. Maybe she'd gone looking for Valentine. Maybe she'd gone looking for a doctor. Maybe she'd gone to the front to kill some soldiers. Whatever the cause, Valentine had been the reason. It was for her that Mata had killed herself.

Valentine pulled Trover to her and hugged him. The little boy smelled of his own shit. In her parcels, she had the food he needed so she cut them open and gave him some.

She let him eat and covered Mata with some of the new clothes that she'd brought home. She knew how to go through a corpse's pockets efficiently. She also knew all of Mata's hiding places in the tiny, grimy flat. Soon she had Mata's identification, her sidearm, her inhaler, her rucksack. There were soldiers Valentine's age at the front. She could pass.

"Come on, Trover," she said, getting him into a change of clothes, putting good shoes on him. Good shoes would be important. She didn't know how much walking they'd do, but it would be a lot.

She took him down the stairs, snuffling and weeping a little still, but lousy from all the rich food. She led him to the civic patrol office.

“I can win the war,” she said.

The woman from the city wasn’t so fat anymore, but she still had her armor on. She was the one who’d told father he had to go to the war. She didn’t seem to recognize Valentine, though.

She stared at Valentine. “I’m busy,” she said.

“I know a—” Valentine searched for the word. “A profiteer who has access to hardened logic that the infowar doesn’t work against.”

The woman from the city looked at her a little longer this time. “I’m very busy, little girl.”

“I can bring you to him. He has working printers.”

The woman pretended not to hear her. She stared down at a pile of papers in front of her, and it was clear to Valentine that she was only pretending to read them.

Valentine led Trover to the woman’s desk and knocked all the papers off of it.

“It’s illegal to be a profiteer. Don’t you want to at least arrest him?”

“I’ll arrest *you*,” the woman from the city said, grabbing her wrist. Valentine was ready for this. Her mother had taught her what to do about this. She bent



the woman's thumb back and squeezed it until she tumbled out of the chair and dropped to her knees.

"That's enough," said an old, old hero. He sounded like he was right behind her, but that was just her new ears. When she turned around she saw that he was in the doorway. He was so old now that he looked like a zombie, and his one arm was pointing at her with shaky authority. "Let her go."

Valentine released the woman from the city.

"Do you want to see the profiteer?" Valentine said, approaching the hero. Her mother had respected this man, and Valentine decided she would respect him too.

"I will come with you," he said.

"Will you bring guards? He is armed." She thought for a minute. "I believe he's armed."

"It will be fine," he said. He showed her the heavy pistol he wore on his belt.

"My brother has to come, too," Valentine said.

"That will be fine."

The old hero walked slowly and carefully. The soldiers he passed nodded to him and saluted him. The old people smiled and waved. Valentine came to feel proud to be at his side. Normally she was invisible in the city, just another grey, thin face, but with the old hero, she was a hero too. And she *was* a hero: she was about to end the war.

The old man spoke creakingly to her as they walked. He remembered her mother, and he remembered her father. He told her stories of her mother's bravery in the revolution, when he'd been her commander, and she felt her heart race. Valentine was a hero, like her mother. The wizard would win the war for them.

Then they came to his door. The old man didn't need her to point it out. He went and thumped it three times with the butt of his gun.

Ana answered a moment later. She was dressed in old rags, and had left behind the cast from her leg, limping to the door on a makeshift cane.

"Hello, comrade," she said. She didn't have her usual accent.

The hero nodded to her. "Comrade Ana." He knew her name, without being introduced.

The wizard came to the door. "Comrade hero."

"Comrade Georg." The old hero shook the wizard's hand. The wizard was wearing rags like Ana's. He had a cunning glitter in his eye and he took in the street, took in Valentine. "Hello, Valentine," he said.

"This girl tells me you have contraband," the old hero said. "It's my duty to come in and search your premises for it."

"Valentine," the wizard said, with unconvincing disappointment. "The food you took from here wasn't

contraband. It was my savings.” To the hero, he added, “She took the food and I didn’t blame her. Surely she was hungry. If I had been a little child in her circumstances, I might have done the same.”

Valentine squeezed Trover’s hand until he whimpered. She didn’t trust her tongue enough to say anything.

They went into the vestibule and then turned left into a flat. Now, until this time, she’d always turned right when visiting the wizard, but now on the right there was nothing but a smooth, unbroken wall. And to the left, there was an entirely different flat, barren of furniture as her own flat, small and dirty and smelling of death.

“Search away,” the wizard said. He tried to put a hand on Valentine’s shoulder and she shied away and dropped her hand to the waistband of the trousers he’d printed for her, where she’d hidden her mother’s tiny sidearm. “You’ll find nothing, I assure you.”

Valentine could see that they’d find nothing. All the furniture in the room couldn’t have concealed a single tin of food. This wasn’t even the right flat. With her amazing ears, she heard the movement of the wizard’s associates, the documentarians, in the next flat over.

“I hear them,” she said. “Next door. This isn’t the right flat.”

“This is the flat you led me to,” the old hero said.

“It’s through there!” she said, pointing at the blank wall. “It’s a false wall!” She thumped it but it was solid and stony. Tears pricked her eyes. “These clothes!” she said, desperately, plucking at her shirt and trousers. “He printed them for me! He has hardened logic printers on the other side of that wall. He could win the war!”

The wizard shook his head and smiled at her again. His eyes glittered. “Oh, if only that were true. To win this war—”

She looked imploringly at Ana. Ana looked away.

The old hero shook the wizard’s hand with his one remaining hand. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you, comrade.”

“Nonsense,” the wizard said. “Anything for the city.”

“Come along,” the old hero said. “Let’s leave these people in peace.”

Trover let himself be led silently into the street and stayed at her side even when she let go of his hand to silently palm her mother’s sidearm.

“Your mother would be ashamed of you,” the old hero said. “She wouldn’t have wasted the city’s time on her fantasies and vendettas.”

She kept silent. She knew a nearby alley where no one ventured except for people who disappeared without a trace. Though she wanted to shout at him that her

mother died for the city that the old hero had just betrayed, she kept silent.

When they passed the alley-mouth, she hastily shoved Trover into it. He gave a cry and fell over. She ducked in after him.

“He’s tripped! Help me!” she called.

The old hero slowly negotiated his way into the alley and to her side. She was holding Trover down as he struggled to rise, but she hoped it looked like she was helping him up. Maybe it did, for the old hero bent at her side and she stuck the sidearm under his chin and pushed it hard into the wattle of skin there.

“My mother died for this city, you traitorous worm,” she said, her jaws clenching with the effort of not shouting the words. “I would kill you right now if I didn’t think you could be of use to me.”

The old hero’s eyes were calm. “Lots of people have tried to kill me, little girl.”

“Lots of the enemy have tried. How many from the city?”

“Lots,” the old hero said. “Lots of them, and yet here I stand, alive and well.”

“I want to go to see the people who fight the infowar. I’ll kill you if you don’t take me to them.”

“You want to do what? You stupid little girl.” His tone still wasn’t angry. “The wizard there is the city’s best

friend abroad. He's the only reason our enemies haven't crushed us. You want to betray him?"

"I will win this war," she said. But she faltered. She had thought that he'd just been bought off by the wizard, but maybe it was the case that he supported the wizard's work. Was it possible?

"We will win this war, by cooperating with our friends abroad. We can't afford to expose them to risk. I don't expect you to understand, little girl. This is a very deep game."

The phrase "deep game" enraged her so much that she almost shot him there. It was so—*patronizing*.

She let him lead the way toward the front. Trover was whimpering now—he'd twisted his ankle when she'd shoved him—and she whispered to him to be still.

Her plan was stupid. The old hero was going to lead her into a trap, not to the high command, and she knew it.

"I suppose I should just shoot you," she said.

"Why do you say that?" He was so calm. What kind of man was this?

"You'll lead me to a trap and have me shot or arrested. I have to see the infowar command. I have to win the war."

"You dream big, little girl. I have been persecuting the war on our enemies since before your hero mother

was born. The first thing I learned is that war is the art of the possible. It is possible that we will win the siege, given enough time and losses. It is not possible that you will win the war.”

“So you’ll have me shot rather than try.”

“I wouldn’t have you shot if I could help it. I owe your mother that much.”

“If you keep talking about my mother I will shoot you.” She found his calm tone calmed her, too. The soldiers still saluted them, the old people waved, and she supposed that if any of them knew she had the old hero under the gun, she’d be torn to pieces. But she was calm and the day was a sunny one.

“My apologies,” the old man said.

“I could have you run away and try to find them on my own.”

“You’d never find them.”

“I found the wizard. I put a weapon under your chin. I’m fifteen years old and I did that much. I will find them and I’ll—”

“You’ll what? You’ll tell them to go to the wizard’s flat to retrieve his technology? I assure you, if that was to come to pass, there would be no technology to get by the time you reached his flat.”

They were getting closer to the front. The distant gunfire and zizzing trench-busters were crystal-clear in her amazing new ears.

“He gave some to me,” she said. “My hearing aids failed yesterday and he got them back online with hardened logic. I have it in my head.”

“You—” The old man stopped in his tracks. She almost shot him by accident, ploughing into him. He turned around, much faster than she’d seen him move to date. “You have it in your head?”

He reached for her and she jerked the sidearm up. Absently he took it away from her in a single cobra-swift movement and dropped it in his shirt pocket. He reached for her again with his one hand and tilted her head, looking for the small scars beneath her jaw.

“He fixed these?”

“Yesterday. I was deaf yesterday morning.”

“You’re not lying? If you’re lying, I will have you shot.”

“She was deaf,” Trover said, very quietly. “Now she can hear again. My sister isn’t lying.”

They both looked at him.

“Come with me, little girl,” the old hero said, and he struck off.



Six hours after Valentine left her dead mother behind in their grimy, bare flat, she came to the infowar command.

It was far back of the lines, near the old woods at the western side of the city, and the entrance to it was guarded by five checkpoints. They took away the sidearm from the old hero at the last one, along with several other small weapons the old hero was carrying. They searched and wanded Valentine and Trover, and made Trover turn out his pockets. It turned out that he was carrying Valentine's old clasp-knife, which had disappeared some months before. He handed it to the soldier solemnly, and she kissed his cheek and tousled his hair and for a moment, she looked just like their mother and Valentine felt tears behind her eyes.

"We're here," the old hero said. "Come with me."

There were three airlocks to pass through, and then they were put into airtight suits with breathing bottles. They didn't have one that would fit Trover, but the nice soldier who'd kissed his cheek promised to look after him.

Beyond the last airlock, it was like something from before the siege, clean and bold and humming with energy.

"We keep everything that works here," the old hero said. "This is our last cache of materiel that hasn't been compromised by the infowar. It's a completely sealed

space. If a single strand of malware got in, it would turn epidemic and wipe out everything.”

His voice sounded like it was coming from a million miles away. Shrouded in her breathing hood, Valentine felt like she was in the first days of a better nation, a time when everything worked and smelled of sharp cleanliness, not rot and ruin. Hooded figures walked past them without a glance.

The old hero led her deep into the maze, then through yet another airlock.

“Comrade,” the old hero said. “A word, please.”

The hooded figure to whom he spoke looked up from its workbench and peered through the old hero’s hood. Then it saluted smartly and hurried to the old hero’s side.

“General—” The hooded figure had a man’s voice, almost as old as the old hero’s voice.

The old hero—the general—touched his hand to his hood and then pulled a retractable wire out of his helmet and presented it to the other. The other patched it into his helmet’s collar. Even with her marvelous new ears, Valentine couldn’t hear what they said.

They released their umbilicus a moment later and the other one turned to Valentine.

“Is it true?” His voice was choked, like he could barely get the words out.

“In my ears,” she said. “Hardened logic.”

The other man danced from foot to foot. "It can't be true," he said.

She nodded.

The old man rooted through his workbench and came up with a wand that he put against her the back of neck. It was similar to the wand that the doctor/camera-woman at the wizard's house had used to figure out her hearing aids.

"You have it?" the general asked.

"I have it," the other one said. "I have copied it. Whether I can decompile it, whether I can make anything useful from it—well, we'll see."

"Tomorrow, then," the general said.

The other one didn't answer. He was hunched over a terminal on his workbench, fingers punishing his keyboard.

"Now where?" Valentine asked as they shucked their isolation suits, the smell of stink and rot flooding back into her nostrils.

"Now we clean house," the general said. "Get your brother and your gun."

\* \* \*

Twenty four hours after the wizard cured Valentine's hearing, she helped arrest him.

The general knocked on the wizard's door and it swung open. Ana had her cast off again, had her bad cane.

"Yes, comrade?"

"I have business with you and yours. Bring them out here, please."

Ana took in the line of soldiers in the road before her, carrying weapons from knives to old gunpowder weapons to small, floppy sidearms and she went ashen.

"I knew it would be today," she said. She turned to Valentine. "When you came back this morning, I knew it would be today."

"Call them," the old hero said.

"They already know you're here." Smoke emerged from the doorway behind her. "It's all destroying itself. There was never a chance of you getting access to it."

The general shrugged with one shoulder. Valentine wondered if his stump was smooth like a billiard ball or angry and wounded or shriveled like dried fruit.

She gripped her mother's sidearm tighter and watched the wizard emerge. The documentarians. The wizard's eyes glittered.

"It's all gone," he said. "You won't get a scrap of it. What a goddamned waste. We were on your side, you know."

“You were very well-fed,” the general said.

One of the documentarians sobbed.

“What a pointless goddamned waste. Spiteful, stupid, boneheaded—” The wizard broke off, looking at Valentine. “Her hearing aids.”

Valentine smiled. “Yes,” she said. “My hearing aids. I’m recording you now. Do you have any words you’d like to say for the microphone?”

The wizard’s jaw dropped to his chest and his whole body sort of crumpled, slumping in the grasp of the soldier who held him.

“You little—”

Valentine put a sarcastic finger to her lips and then made a show of covering Trover’s ears. She saw Ana smile involuntarily before the woman turned away.

\* \* \*

Three days after they arrested the wizard, the sky-cars lifted off again. They roared over the enemy lines, dropping intelligent motes that zeroed in on enemy soldiers and burrowed up their nostrils and in their ears and in the corners of their eyes and rattled in their skulls until their brains were paste and goo.

Four days after they arrested the wizard, the printers started to supply food and drugs. Clever wormy robots sought out and inoculated the zombies.

Ten days after they arrested the wizard, the buildings started to repair themselves. The lifts all worked again, all at once, in a synchronized citywide *whirrr* of convenience and civilization.

Fourteen days after they arrested the wizard, the siege ended.

Valentine and Trover were in the civil defense bunkerhouse. They'd buried their mother that morning, in the woods, in a perfectly square grave that the robots had excavated for them, amid the ranked hundreds of thousands that the robots were digging through the woods, marking each with a small plaque inset to the soil, bearing a name and a date of birth, and sometimes a day of death, and the legend, HERO OF THE SIEGE.

Trover hadn't spoken all that day, but he had tossed in the first shovel-full of dirt at their mother's grave. Around them, the survivors had wailed and torn their clothes and shoveled at the massed dead.

The soldiers laughed and sang around them, drinking champagne and eating chocolate. The men hugged them and the women kissed them, even the sour woman from the city.

The general saw them sitting in their corner, Trover's hand in Valentine's, and he got them and brought them back into the cells. He handed Valentine a key and gestured toward the wing.

“Go and get them. They’re free to go now. Tell them to go far.”

Ana and the wizard were sharing a tiny cell, the documentarians were in three other cells. Valentine turned the old metal key in each lock in turn.

“It’s over,” she said. “Victory. The general says to go far.”

Ana hugged her so long Valentine thought she’d never let go, but when she did let go, Valentine wished she’d come back.

Valentine never saw them again.

\* \* \*

Ten years after the siege, Valentine got her medal.

The ceremony was a small one. They had almost run out of special medals to bestow on the living heroes of the siege, and children came last. The only times she saw Trover these days was at a friend’s ceremony. The rest of the time, he was preoccupied with his studies. He was training to be a diplomat. He still had a terrible temper. Apparently this was an asset at the System Trade Union.

Valentine walked there, but she was just about the only one. Others flew, either in sky-cars or on invisible ground-effect cushions. There were a thousand of them getting their medals today, and she and Trover were

placed next to each other in the long queue, which was alphabetical by surname.

“They should have given you the biggest and first medal, Vale,” Trover said. His hands were in white fists. “You! You won the war! And *he* knows it!”

On stage, the general shook hands with another medal-recipient. He was up to the C’s, and Valentine and Trover’s last name started with an X. It would be a while yet.

“His other arm is very convincing,” she said.

Trover just fumed.

When they took the stage, the general looked at them and winked. He gave them each a medal, then took her by the shoulders and then hugged her to his breast. He was still thin and fragile, but he was also still quick and his hug was firm. He pressed his palm to hers and her body told her he was sending her some data, which she accepted with surprise but without comment.

Trover led her off of the stage. She examined her new download. An audio file. She played it, and it played in her cochlea.

*I found the wizard. I put a weapon under your chin. I’m fifteen years old and I did that much. I will find them and I’ll—*

*You’ll what? You’ll tell them to go to the wizard’s flat to retrieve his technology? I assure you, if that was to come to*



*pass, there would be no technology to get by the time you reached his flat.*

*He gave some to me. My hearing aids failed yesterday and he got them back online with hardened logic. I have it in my head.*

*You—You have it in your head?*

She'd never forgotten those words, not in ten years, not through the reconstruction or her years abroad, not in school and not in work. Not a day had gone by without her thinking of it. Lots of people had ears that could buffer now, and hers now had a hundred-year buffer along with all the audio ever recorded on tap for her pleasure, but she never bothered to rewind her hearing. Those words, in her mind, were all the rewinding she needed.

She sat down hard, right there, on the sugary grass.

Trover was at her side in a flash, calling her name anxiously. She was crying uncontrollably, but she was smiling too. Those words, pulled off of her ears ten years ago, when they'd gone to infowar command. Oh, God, those old friends, those words. The wizard and Ana. It had been so long. Where had the time gone?

\* \* \*

The next day, she met an old face.

“You!” he said. He had a thick accent—the kind of accent that said he’d learned her language the hard way; that he hadn’t just installed it.

She looked at him. He was very familiar, but she couldn’t place him. Maybe if he didn’t have that silly beard, forked into two theatrical points, the way they were wearing them in Catalan that year. She tried to picture him without it. He was grinning like a fool and laughing.

“I can’t believe it’s you!”

She shook her head slowly. Where the hell did she know this guy from? She was supposed to be going to the cine with friends that night—the new show screened between the trees in the western woods and you walked around through it and drank fizzy elderflower and talked with your friends as the story unfolded around you. It was a warm night and perfect for such things.

“You don’t remember me?”

Her tooth tingled. The one that had been knocked out in the trench and re-sprouted after the siege. Then she recognized him.

*“Withnail?”*

He hopped in place. “Valentine! You remembered!”

She put her hand to her breast and staggered back dramatically, hamming it up. He was still very handsome, and she’d never forgotten her first kiss.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I have a layover,” he said. “Tokyo tomorrow. But I wanted to stop and see the place—”

“Remember the dead?” she said. He had been the enemy, after all. How many of her countrymen had he shot?

“Remember,” he said. “Remember everything.”

How many of his comrades had died on the day the death rained from the sky? Surely they had died in great number on that day.

The woods were full of her dead. Mata was there. And there was the movie tonight. She touched the medal on her lapel. He had no medal. The soldiers who’d persecuted the siege received no medals.

“You’re here until when?”

“Tomorrow,” he said, “first thing.”

“First thing tomorrow. Come and see a movie tonight,” she said.

He looked at her and cocked his head. She wasn’t beautiful, she knew, but sometimes men looked at her that way. Something about what she’d done, they could see it.

“I’d like that very much,” he said.

She played back a little audio as they walked together, for a terrible silence descended on them as they walked, awkward and oppressive.

*Would you have turned us in if we didn't help you?*

*No one would have believed me anyway.*

"Valentine?"

"Yes, Withnail?"

"Thank you," he said. "For the food. And the kiss. It was my very first."

"Mine too."

"The finest one, too."

She snorted and punched him in the shoulder.

"Shut up, Withnail," she said.

"Yes, Comrade Hero," he said.

She let him kiss her, but only once.

That night, anyway.

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