

Warrior Princess

Her voice clanged in my earbud: "Get it together!"

My head jerked, glove hitting against the helmet glass and jolting me, eyelids practically shut at this point.

"You're getting close", she warned, to which I blurted: "Shut the fuck up!"

I knew we were close, too. A slo-mo glance over the shoulder: all teammates lining the tunnel walls, only Segovich still standing, standing on his fours, shaking his head like large dog breeds do.

"You go, fucker", – I whispered, perhaps not aloud, my lips and mouth all sealed dry. I made another step towards the sweet and slow nectar of sleep, calling me to prostrate myself. Down, down.

"Why are you sleepy?" – she enunciated like a fucking embossing hammer.

"Mo-ster..." – my tongue rolled way too sloppily for advanced syllables of this sort.

"Exactly!" – the word lodged a scalpel in between my brain hemispheres.

"Sigma is affecting your brainwaves causing a state of drowsiness and sleep. Get your shit together, Andrea!"

"Where did you learn... to order people about... like this... bitch!"

I hear a condescending smirk.

"I was born in the USSR, this is how mothers talk to children there."

"Fucking commies..." – the rasp of my wheeze sucked me in for a moment but the dancing black protuberances at the end of the tunnel unglued me and tugged me forward, so mesmerizing, calling my brain, at this point a puddle of quicksilver collected in the labyrinths of my sinuses and leaking shimmer from my eyes.

"Xena... I can see it...", I said, knowing perfectly well I was asleep.

"Describe her", she said, gendering stuff unnecessarily, as per usual.

"It's...", I closed my eyes to focus on the description and realized immediately how grave of a mistake that was. I marked it down for the future test runs knowing all too well this was no test run, there would be no more runs and no opportunities to apply this learning.

"Don't you dare fall asleep!", she yelled at me.

"Noth... falling..."

"Up!", — an order. How did she know I was on my knees, sinking into the ground? I wasn't able to stand up or to talk back. I was in too deep.

"Andrea, she confided. Did you know? You have always been butchering my name." Well *that* brought me back from my cliff of consciousness. I even managed to unfuse my mouth.

"Wha?"

"You always spell it as X-E-N-A. And it's actually Z-I-N-A."

"Zayna?"

I was shocked. Butchering an ethnical name, how typically white of me.

"Zeeena", she said in a sing-song voice. And then, coldly: "Now stand the fuck up, you privileged cunt!"

My face burst with blood as if there was an actual slap. I clawed my way back up the wall, and on one foot.

"Zina."

"Da.", she said in Russian. I snorted.

"I'll fuck you up."

"You do that."

She didn't say it but I heard clearly she needed me to come back. And that was all I ever needed.

"You must go into the cloud and render her off", she said, using must instead of need to, as per usual. But it was a propos today.

"Zina."

"Da."

"Ne'rmind."

In the fog of the glistening anthracite particles I was only able to navigate blindly, listening to Zina's soft breathing.

The body of the monster, sigma's black core, was smallish, about a doubled breast implant size, and with the same gel-like texture, suspended in air three feet above the floor. I shoved my gloved fingers in its insides and then burst it apart with both my hands. The black fog started to fall down ever so slowly, the prettiest black snow I've ever seen. I shoved the listless sigma body into the specimen tube, secured the lid and

gracelessly half-fell towards the roundness where the wall merged into the tunnel floor, hitting my side and eventually falling on my face.

“Zina.”

“Da, baby.”

“I did it. We made it”, I said and I cried, feeling the sharpest pang of triumph in my life.

“Ty moya khoroshaya”, she exhaled exhaustedly.

“You did good Andrea. You did so good. We are coming for you.”

“You can sleep now.”