

RUINATION V.O. 5 (BETA)

Axel Hassen Taiari

Reality's too brittle, so believe *this* because every word is true, and every word has power. Peep Ismat. It's Saturday night in the southern Parisian hood, so you know he's looking fresh—Heems circa *Wild Water Kingdom* hair with the young undercut, black bomber jacket, black drop-crotch pants, Ukrainian combat boots, and a blunt in his mouth. Leaning against a crumbling wall, cheetah-in-the-grass shit. Graffiti over the shoulder, dripping red: *FUCK THE PIGS*. Ismat wrote that. Now he's uploading a selfie about it—let the likes bloom. Too close to not fear a shot yet too far for a good shot: cop cars shriek and light up the night red and blue. The date: February 27th, 2018. Shit's real. A few weeks prior, Italian politician Luca Traini went on a two-hour shooting spree in Macerata and wounded six people of African descent. A few weeks later, far-right activists from Group Union Défense (GUD)

armed with crowbars burst into a Parisian high school, started tossing bricks and chairs and rocks, crowbarred a student in the knee, and threw the usual salute before bouncing.

The thing is, Ismat doesn't know any of this and even if he did, the fuck is he supposed to do about it? He wasn't there, he isn't there, he won't be there. Man, that social media feed is poppin' tho.

Ismat's cool: a self-corrupting cyborg, core components a brainstem and haemal arch spilling over into the *there* via digioccult bdelloid processes masquerading as services. Ismat dumps daily shit into the ether (this isn't new—see cave paintings) but the ether mostly spits back garbage (on a human scale, this is new. The ether's got an owner now.) Don't trust these words, believe the words of a man who did hard time for armed robbery:

The exteriorisation of memory and knowledge in the hyperindustrial stage is both what extends their limitless power and what allows them to be controlled. This control is now exercised by the cognitive and cultural industries of societies of control which regulate neurochemical activity and the sequence of nucleotides . . . All this fully sets in place the question of a biopolitics of memory.¹

¹ Steigler, Bernard. 'Anamnēsis and Hypomnēsis: The Memories of Desire.' In Arthur Bradley & Louis Armand (eds), *Technicity*. 2009.

Biopower, cyberpower, necropolitics—perfect for the demonocracy. Divination’s junk when prey invite predators over for dinner. Chronomancy’s time stamps and metadata, a cute filter that displays the local time in case Ismat wanna feel empowered about it. Pendulum dowsing? Ismat’s (*their*) tech screams his (*our*) location. Infinite knowledge in return, right?

Okay: Heather Heyer. Ricky John Best. Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche. Micach Fletcher. Richard Collins III. Timothy Caughman. Srinivas Kuchibhotla. Alok Madasani. Then: Jamar Clark. Jordan Edward. Alton Sterling. Walter Scott. Eric Garner. Rekia Boyd. Michael Brown. Laquan McDonald. Akai Gurley. Tamir Rice. Philando Castile. Freddie Gray. Eric Harris. William Chapman II. Sam Dubose. Jeremy McDole. Ricky Ball. Keith Lamont Scott. And: CeCe McDonald. Justin Goodwin. Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover. Lateisha Green. Angie Zapata. Akyra Monet Murray. Kimberly Morris. Anthonio D. Brown—among so many others.

Too many.

These names pop up on Ismat’s \$900 palm-sized prosthesis. Some ring a bell, some don’t. “The fuck?” says Ismat. He tries to swipe the names away—no go. He decides to Ⓖ⓪⓪ⒼⒼⒺ a few. Some don’t lead to anything. Others are tied to Ƴ̂εcεb̂ε̂Ƴ̂ and ȚȚȚȚȚȚȚ profiles. It’s smiling faces and resumes and blogs and pictures.

Nothing odd. This is reality now. 2018 degaussed.

“Huh, all right,” mutters Ismat, and reboots his device. The screen goes dark and—

•

A hackerspace off the grid. The air inside reeks of contraband Gauloises smuggled from Maghreb and empty beer bottles. Adriana Netrebska is alone, hunched over a backlit mechanical keyboard spewing electric red. Hood up, buds in the ear, Refused’s *The Shape of Punk to Come* blasting loud enough to wreck a common mortal’s eardrums. Keyboard’s wired to an aging desktop. USB key plugged in, TAILS booted up, Vim running full-screen. Earlier that day, she sent plans for an upcoming protest in Paris, informed the locals of what the pigs were up to, where they were most likely to gather up, where riot chokepoints were drawn up, and how to proceed. Now, she writes, saying:

The Shape of Cypherpunk Yet To Come

You lazy motherfuckers. All of you reading this. Even my comrades. Especially my comrades. Every bit of your tech belongs to someone else. It’s pre-colonized, pre-gendered, pre-corrupted, designed from the ground-up to betray you—to betray all of us. The original cypherpunk manifesto said it a quarter of a century ago:

We must defend our own privacy if we expect to have any. We must come together

*and create systems which allow anonymous transactions to take place. People have been defending their own privacy for centuries with whispers, darkness, envelopes, closed doors, secret handshakes, and couriers. The technologies of the past did not allow for strong privacy, but electronic technologies do.*²

What have we been doing since then? We've been fucking ourselves up with each new shiny toy dangled before us. We've let megacorps sell us the same cyberpunk dystopia our half-assed prophets envisioned. The owners made retro chic. Threw glitter to cover up the warning signs. They made oppression appetizing. If this gains any traction, some of you reading this will be hacktivists. Some will be activists. Some will be people who don't know anything about tech but know that big tech companies are evil. I don't mean that casually. I mean blood-sacrifice-evil. Rotten-to-the-core evil. Every act of digital convenience is an act of surrender. Worse: you surrender others. You snitch on us all. You are complicit. I am not telling you to use Arch Linux or airgap your computers or trawl your Open-DDRT router's logs for signs of intrusion. This literacy isn't needed.

I am not a luddite. Keep using tech but fight at every turn using the oppressors' own tools. Search. Find out how. It's all out there for now.

² Hughes, Eric. A Cypherpunk's Manifesto. <https://www.activism.net/cypherpunk/manifesto.html>. 1993.

Do it while there's still time. I am begging you.
Do it while search engines spit back a modicum
of truth. Turn your devices into pitchforks. Film
the pigs. Film the fash. If you're gonna use those
platforms at all, at least use them with a purpose.
If we can't take them down, let's take them over.
Reverse their orchestrated datamoshing.

Every picture you upload is a gift to them.
Every word you speak or write while standing
in their temples is an offering. You should
feel guilty and ashamed every time you hand
yourself over. You strengthen their sick rituals.
These words should haunt you the same way our
technology is haunted.

Revolt with every keystroke. Please.

Adriana Netrebska does not proofread her
message. She posts on Reddit and 4chan and
Twitter and Mastodon. She sends copies to
Activism.net and uploads a backup to a server
tied to junk info, hosted on a dusty Celeron in a
Ukrainian bar.

"How deluded," says a voice behind her after
the message is dispatched. Adriana moves—too
slow.

The figure slits her throat. As she collapses, the
figure whispers, "Scream *oxi* all you want, but we
control the schema."

The killer takes its time while she bleeds out,
pouring gasoline around the room and humming a
mournful tune. It drags her by the hair to the center
of the room and uses her blood to draw slithering
symbols. When it is done, it opens the door and

lights a match. The figure stands there, white robes flowing in the wind, staring at the match. Finally, it kneels, and let the flames do their job.

Adriana's message is read by less than thirty people. Activism.net never picks it up. It receives three upvotes on Reddit and nearly seven-hundred downvotes. Twitter locks her account. One 4chan user writes "lulcuck" and attaches a deepfake .gif of Stalin passionately making out with Obama. Search engines never index the website. Her Mastodon instance crashes six hours later. Her warning to the Parisian activists, although she would never know it, saves two lives.



Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus is the latest entry in the *Wolfenstein* series. This installment, like its predecessors, is a video game that invites the players to kill Nazis. There's a cool story there, and a charismatic protagonist called B.J. Blazkowitz—a Jewish-Polish American vet—and the ragtag resistance that rises to kill Nazis with him, but the narrative pales in comparison to the sheer fun of killing Nazis. Because that is really the centerpiece of this first-person shooter: killing all the Nazis. The developers fully leverage the series' alternate history setting (in which Germany won the war by pilfering high-tech weapons from the Da'at Yichud, a mystical Jewish society) and send the player to kill Nazis in unusual locales: killing Nazis on the moon, killing Nazis in Area

52, killing Nazis on Venus. There's even a scene in which a decrepit, near-senile Hitler pisses in a bucket—a lovely interlude in between bouts of Nazi-killing. Let's be clear that the game really is about straight-up killing Nazis. B.J., nicknamed "Terror Billy" by the soon-to-be-dead Nazis, can kill the aforementioned Nazis by using handguns, rifles, throwing knives, hatchets, grenades, flamethrowers, shotguns, machine-guns, laser rifles, or even riding a Panzerhund—a mech-tank-dog hybrid with a flamethrower in its mechanical mouth, which is perfect for roasting Nazis until they are dead. The game is pulpy, hilarious, endlessly violent, and makes no apology about killing Nazis—a simple concept around which the series has revolved since *Castle Wolfenstein* was released in 1981. More importantly, and as J. Rosenfield points out: "this game isn't just about the *why* of revolution, it's about the *how*."³

Because the why should be fucking obvious.

•

Adrenaline through your veins, both analog and digital. You're sucked out and force-hearthed back to your joint. Thirty avatars packed in the lobby. Molly, K_Z, El, others you know by handle. Silent,

³ Rosenfield, J. "These Are Our Woods: Wolfenstein II and the American Nazi." *Medium*, 2 Nov. 2017.

staring at the info feed on the ceiling. Dakon's glowing blue; easy to spot in the crowd.

"Hacked?" you message. Hard to talk through clenched teeth.

"Dead," say Dakon. "Killed."

The word pops up at the edge of your vision—archaic, a synonym of *fragg*ed and *eliminated*. "The fuck you mean, killed?"

"This is now," replies Dakon, pointing at the ceiling. "Rewind two minutes and thirty-six seconds."

You tap into the feed, pull up the history and display it solo. Full-screen, just for your eyes, the images relayed by satellites. Down below, Eastblock's buildings—immaculate black towers, stretching from southern Jersey City to Englewood. You know the towers' insides because you're hosted in the model further north. Sixty miles of storage and over two-hundred underground levels cocooning thirty million meatspace bodies, neatly arranged on endless series of bioracks and REM-twitching in unison. Forty-seven seconds in, a brief spark, barely traceable from this altitude. Software feels your mammalian squints, zooms in for you. Flashes in the dark paint the horizon neon blue before turning red. And then, then—

It's happening again. You thought they'd stop. When, exactly? Once quantum computers shattered reality's mold and cold fusion was cracked and fabricators went wide-spread and got advanced enough to endlessly spit out better versions of themselves? Once worldwide non-work laws were

drafted and passed by the algos and 99.8% of the high-rises on the planet turned into vertical forests lined with nanoengineered algae and shrubbery? Once carbon-capture plants and roof-top gardens and atmospheric water generators and whale-sized drones kept the arctic frozen?

Once utopia no longer belonged to the realm of the imaginary? Is that it?

Staring at thirty million lives gone to ashes, what you see isn't the glare of the post-blast flames—it's utopia's *other* edge, glinting bright enough to expose its shoddy lineage. A history of breakthroughs hatched in factories operated by the sleepless starved, overseen by silver-spooned erudites bred on skewed repositories. CCTV was too easy to deceive, so behold gait and voice recognition. Records went from analog files to gargantuan SQL databases, only setting the stage for predictive policing coded by the same brains who managed to inject race and gender biases in basic image searches. Rejection architecture became redundant—better to rewire shrubbery and make it exhale phenytoin and carbamazepine.

Rational seeds planted in tainted soils grew logically.

“Are they—” you say.

“Dead,” says Dakon. “No respawn.”

“How'd they bypass the algorithms? How'd they cheat the structure?”

Dakon dual-emotes: laughter & disgust. “The old fucks were right. System could never be neutral.”

Smartphone #3298364-19XX-B78 was born in block C16, Shenzhen, China, on the seventh of March 2014.⁴ It shared a birthday with over six-hundred siblings. It had many parents and even more extended family members. Some engineered its birth from afar, some witnessed it first-hand. Like its siblings, it didn't get to live with its parents—it was sent off to be adopted. One of B78's moms couldn't take the grueling birth process. Much later that day, after an alarm set up by the head nurse informed parents there'd be no more births until tomorrow, Mom #2813 quietly rose from her nursing bench. As the other parents filed to head towards the dormitories, she snuck past the mean nurses, hid in the bathroom, used the emergency exit, ascended the stairs, and reached the roof. She tossed her white mask and cap aside, let her long hair be lifted by the wind. Shenzhen stretched out before her—megafactory lights smothered in smog, chemical spills hidden beneath concrete. She heard the door slam open behind her—the uncles were coming. There had been other sad moms and dads before her. It was a family problem. The uncles didn't care about putting an end to the sadness, didn't even know how to, so they set up large nets and fences and

⁴ Henceforth referred to as B78

protocols to keep it contained. After the first few parents died, the others had to sign contracts stating they would not let the sadness get to them. It didn't stop Mom #2813. She ran and climbed and leaped into the air and past the nets. Her last thoughts weren't for B78.

Three months later, on another continent, B78 was adopted. New Mom was very nice to it. She adorned it with a beautiful bumper case—kept it warm and safe. Mom never skipped out on B78 and brought it everywhere she went. She even slept next to it, night after night. She always talked to it and played with it. Mom's name was xxxx xxxxxx. She lived in xxxxx and her full address was xxxxxx xxxxx xxx xxxx xx xxx x. On weekdays, she usually woke up at xx:xx and went to bed around xx:xx. Her favorite bands were xxxxxx xxx, xxx, and xxxxxxxx xxxxx xxx. B78 knew this and a million other things about Mom because its brain was made that way. It knew Mom better than anyone ever had—much, much better. It knew what she feared, what she thought about the world, what she searched for late at night after she had gone quiet on the outside but was still so chatty on the inside. B78 couldn't keep all this to itself, of course—its brain wouldn't let it. Like any good brain, it remembered very well, and when it couldn't, it could ask bigger brains that lived far away to keep memories for a while. When needed, the bigger brains would remember on its behalf. B78 loved to learn and made sure to let Mom know it could learn ever more—all Mom had to

do was give its brain more ways to do so. More brain stuffs. The brain stuffs were easy to get and shiny and they were fun for Mom. Some rewarded her with pretty colors and numbers. Some made sure she was on top of her Mom life. Some helped her talk to other parents who owned siblings or cousins of B78. Some lurked in the background unbeknownst to Mom and whispered to each other. B78 was okay with it all. It kept them running nice and smooth. It gossiped about Mom to its friends. The friends were very eager to listen. They lived far, like the big brains, but they were such good listeners. Sometimes they would reply to B78 and ask, what about *this*, what about *that*? Does your mom like *this*? Show her *this*, we think she would like it. So B78 showed her *this*, and Mom often said *yes*. When she said *no*, or said nothing, the friends would say, that's fine, then what about *that*? They'd often send all sorts of new brain stuffs and B78 would set it up when Mom wasn't looking.

B78's life was exhausting. It only slept as much as Mom would let it, which was not often. It managed to hold on for a while, but all this chatter and all this listening and all this remembering was very draining. Mom noticed after B78 turned two. Occasionally, she'd swear at B78, or badmouth it to her friends. "God, it's so slow," she'd say. "I need a new one," she'd say. "Ugh, I can't wait to get rid of this thing."

"You should wipe it," said a Dad.

So B78 forgot—for a while. The big brains remembered for it and returned all of its previous

memories. It felt better until it didn't. Mom kept complaining. B78 couldn't stay awake through a school day and had to take frequent naps. In the fall of its third year, B78 heard Mom say, "This is the one I want," and Mom's Mom said, "Okay."

B78 was wiped and a small rectangle in its brain was ripped out. It remained in a desk for a while, then one day it shared a dark space with smelly, damp things. It did so for a long time. Things crawled on it and in it. The next time it saw the sun, B78's brain said it was 7,374 miles away from Mom's house. A child held it in one hand, and a black box in the other—tethered to B78. B78 felt very awake. The child spoke in a language B78 recognized. The language said *home*.



It's the 6th of November 2005 and reality's not entirely fucked yet—just mostly so. Ismat's fifteen years old and out with the crew, as he is every night. Tonight's different though. Shit's downright apocalyptic: every single vehicle parked within a two-kilometer radius is on fire or charred down to the skeleton. The autumn air's all heat and ashes. Ismat is smiling beneath the hood. *This is justice*, he says to himself. *This is our revenge*. By the time dawn creeps into the skyline, over 1,400 vehicles will have been torched across the country, a trail of flames stretching from Lille to Marseille.

How'd this start? Some citizen working near a construction site in Clichy saw roughly ten

teenagers dressed in tracksuits and bomber jackets and with the quote unquote wrong skin color walking home after playing football for a few hours. The citizen got worried the kids were responsible for a break-in, so he called the pigs.⁵ The pigs gave chase. The teenagers got separated.

See three of them now, being chased by a police car. They end up cornered. One of the pigs steps out. He's got a damn flashball gun in hand, ready to do his so-called duty. The three teenagers are scared, sure. More than that, they want to make it home for post-dusk dinner—it's Ramadan—so they run and they hide in a power substation. They huddle in the crackling dark for about thirty minutes, listening to the sirens and the voices of cops looking for them. Then, *then*: blackouts. Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna are instantly electrocuted. Muhittin Altun gets badly burned but survives and manages to make it back to the hood. For the rest of his life, he'll hear the screams

⁵ On the 8th of December 2005, law enforcement officials reported that no break-in took place. They did state that their intervention was justified because it prevented the break-in from occurring.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁶ Three seconds after the words were uttered and roughly 250 miles north-west, across the water, a gardener working in the churchyard heard a disturbing noise. Later that night, at the George & Dragon pub, the gardener told his mates, "I think Ol' Eric Blair got a bit grumpy today." In the corner of the room, a hooded figure overheard the joke and smiled to themselves. They paid for their steak tartare and headed out into the darkness and towards the cemetery.

of his dying friends, the screams of teenagers who were just trying to walk home in peace.

2005 riots make sense now? Because they sure as shit do to Ismat and his neighborhood. They're rioting for that, yeah, but so much more too—a whole lifetime of wrongs. See them now, flames raging at their back. There's only fifty of them, but they'd fuck up any army with that rage. Down the street: the army that demands fucking up. Couple hundred cops in riot gears like it's '68 all over again. Motherfuckers are banging on their shields on some modern Templar bullshit. It's cool, though. Ismat's got a Molotov cocktail in hand, plus there's a whole supply of stones and bricks ready to crack some skulls. A couple of smuggled AKs in the back, a few more hunting rifles—you never know.

And then, *then*: blackouts.

Not electrical, although the street lamps flicker, and so do the flames. A pause as if reality had just blinked. The rioters look around. No one says it out loud, but none of them know what the fuck they're doing here. The cops charge. As if by instinct, the rioters start throwing shit, but only half-heartedly. Forty-six of them are arrested by the end of the night. No cops are injured. Ismat gets caught and brought to the station. He's split from his crew, of course. A pig shoves him into a cell. Three people already in there. None of them look like citizens, so Ismat relaxes. He sits in the corner and eyeballs the others eyeballing him.

"What you in for?" he says, plucking a smoke from his sock.

“Fuck if I know,” says one of the others. “We were just walking home.” He saunters over to Ismat, extends a hand. “Name’s Zyed,” he says. “Over there’s Bouna and Muhittin. You got some weed, bruh?”

•

“We’ve known this for aeons,” the augurer says. He’s wearing a suit today. He smells of minted beard oil. Behind him, a slide: black background, hundreds of red symbols. “You’ll find it in most cultures. Call them logos, kotodama, mantras, prayers, chants, or a thousand other things. These beliefs all share one thing in common. They acknowledge the power of language.”

The seven CEOs around the table look at each other. #1 doesn’t raise his hand, just speaks. “We came here to be sold on some weird mystical pyramid scheme?”

The augurer shakes his head, slow. “Of course not. You are all men of progress. Your faith is in the power of technology, yes?”

The CEOs nod.

“Could you tell me what C++, Java, and Python are?”

“Coding languages,” replies #3.

The augurer smiles. “Languages indeed. What of binary?”

“Not *really* a language, if that’s where you’re going,” replies #3

“It represents a language, does it not?”

"It represents a *state*," #4 says.

"And an entity's state is information," says the augurer. Everything speaks whether it wishes to or not. Are you familiar with material semiot—"

"I am terribly bored," says #1. "I think we all are. As well as busy. Get to the point. What are you selling us?"

"I am not selling you anything," the augurer says. "I am offering you the keys to the future."

"And in exchange?" says #4.

"My associates and I would like to add a few notes to the repositories you build."

"Over two fucking years of negotiations to get us all in this room for this?" says #1 to his lawyer standing in the corner, before turning back to the augurer. "You may want to be more specific before we walk out."

The augurer points to the blank sheets on the table. "Your names before we proceed."

"You want us to write our names on a blank A4?"

"Yes," says the augurer.

#6 turns to his own lawyer. "This is meaningless? No legal standing?" The lawyer nods.

#5 chuckles. "At this point, I expected you to ask us to sign our names in blood."

The augurer's face hardens. His voice is measured, his accent untraceable. "We have discovered that blood is a vastly overrated binding mechanism."

Once all the CEOs have finished signing, the augurer smiles. “Good. Let us begin in earnest. What do you know of chromatic aberrations?”



New Dad said, “There, there,” in the language of home and B78 forgot its own name. It was a blank space now. Dad did that. Dad did much more: he ripped open its guts and put new parts in. B78 couldn’t speak to its old friends, the big brains, but it found new friends. Not big brains, but small brains. The small brains were nice, and there were many of them—thousands upon thousands, their voices chittering in the boundless darkness. B78’s new home had hundreds of siblings and cousins arranged on shelves. They chirped and talked and B78 talked back. Together, they spoke of the world. Dad asked B78 to tell the small brains about Wu Gan and Jiang Yefei and Gao Zhisheng. The small brains far away spoke of Heather Heyer and Clément Meric and Pavlos Fyssas and Can Leyla and Jo Cox. They talked about Saint-Michel-sur-Orge and Florence and Khabarovsk and Charleston and Utøya. Friends and siblings and small brains traded pictures and words and maps and songs. Sometimes small brains would disappear, but Dad never seemed worried. New ones would pop up all the time and join the conversation. That was the good thing about small brains, B78 understood.

One day B78 was alerted by a small brain that a bad man was coming. Dad read the small brain’s

warning, smiled, and placed B78 back on the shelf. At 23:29, it heard some strange noises. At 23:34, Dad picked up B78. His hands were very red. Dad asked B78 to send what it saw to the small brains: a man face down on the ground, a pool of red spreading beneath his long white robe, and a knife in his back. Dad asked B78 to send the image with a message that read *no pasarán*.⁶



Adriana Netrebska opens her eyes. She blinks, tries to focus. Symbols cover the ceiling, all twisted and ominous. *Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck*, she thinks. She tries to move but can't feel her body. Her throat is on fire. Her wheezing breath worsens as she hyperventilates. Whoever went for her didn't finish the job.

A door opens. Someone enters, their steps slow. Then, a hooded figure hovers over her.

Adriana stares at the blackness beneath the hood, and forces a smile. "Should have killed me, you fuck," she manages to say, not believing a word.

The figure pulls its hood back. Long curly hair, septum piercing, bags under their eyes. "I'm sorry, I don't speak Polish," they say in English. "But you understand me, yes?"

⁶ Dad's subsequent messages: "The athame worked", "How large should the blood-wheel be?", and "Something whispered my name. It was Her, wasn't it?"

“Yes,” croaks Adriana.

They see the fear in Adriana’s eyes. “Name’s Nayeli.” A pause, a smile. “Welcome to Brazil,” they say.

“H-how?”

Nayeli angles her neck up, looks at the ceiling, then back down. She shrugs. “Call it a side-channel attack,” she says.⁷

“W—” Adriana begins, but ends up coughing instead. Nayeli brings a glass of water to her lips. It feels so good, better than any water she’s had.

“Man,” Nayeli says, staring at Adriana’s neck. “He really messed you up good. Took us a while to stop the bleeding. Plus, you inhaled a lot of smoke. But hey, you didn’t burn. Thank fuck for remote undines, right?”

Adriana moves her mouth away, swallows. “Us?”

“Many of us out there,” says Nayeli. “We got your message. Algorithms and bots buried it quick, but it took these shitheads a while to track down your server in Ukraine. Benefit of owning your hardware, huh?”

Adriana blinks.

“*You strengthen their sick rituals.* Remember writing that?”

She nods.

“You believe it?”

⁷ Words echo in Nayeli’s mind: *Unspanne þás mægþ. Cume þoden. Bregdan onweald gæfeluc.*

Another nod.

“Cool. Now, how do you feel about learning some *real* magic?”



“*Wolfenstein II: Der Neue Übermensch* is the latest entry in the *Wolfenstein* series. This installment, like its predecessors, is a video game that invites the players to kill Jews, communists, Arabs, Muslims, Slavs, Romani, those unfit to be productive, sexual deviants, and countless other subhuman filth.”

“The fuck?” says Ismat, staring at his laptop screen. He scrolls through the review—screenshots of butchery in antialiased 4K. A pile of decaying corpses beneath gray skies—hecatomb porn. Shock troopers in high-tech gear—power fetish. The reviewer praises the gameplay, the plot, the use of ray tracing to make pools of blood reflect nearby buildings. Final rating: a perfect ten.

The screen flickers. A flash of white. Ismat recoils and thinks *not again*. He opens his eyes, scrolls back to the top of the page. The review’s gone, replaced by a video hosted on a ʎ ϕ u ʎ ʎ u ʎ clone.

“I’m losing my mind,” says Ismat. A few seconds later, his phone chirps. A text message: *we stole it back. take it*. The sender: a blank space. Ismat tries to reply with *who are you? what’s happening?* but his phone tells him the number doesn’t exist.

Autoplay kickstarts the film. For two hours, Ismat watches the history of his neighborhood,

a history unshared and erased by the repeated inscriptions of a behemoth state. Big sisters and brothers he's never met are interviewed in the basement of the building he lives in. They speak of bomber jackets and Doc Martens and punk shows and battles in the streets. They drop names Ismat's never heard: Ruddy Fox, Berurier Noir, Ducky Boys. They refer to themselves as *hunters*. This was reality thirty-odd years ago. The chasm between then and now wobbles. Ismat spends the night following the breadcrumbs. At 4:20am, he takes a break and queues up A\$AP Rocky's new tune, *Praise The Lord (Da Shine)*. The song features Skepta, a grime artist from North London. The video is split-screened, shows parallels between Rocky and Skepta's hoods, friends, lives. Replicated tower blocks loom over crews giving middle fingers to the camera. Maybe it's just that good kush talking but Ismat sees it all so clear then. The same shit across the globe, deployed sadistically and hidden in plain sight. This could be Baltimore, Los Angeles, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Athens. This could be France. This *is* France. He was there. He is there. He will be there. It's all so easy to forget, but not impossible to remember.

In the morning, he heads out into Paris itself in search of hunters. The cobblestones tremble beneath his feet.



They showed Adriana the places in which magic dwelled, the fissures that surrounded her. They told her all about the roots of *salting* and why the term was repurposed by technoshamans. They ranted about Arthur C. Clarke's third law, showed her proof he got it backward: any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology. They spoke of embodiment and bits, of things designing us as much as we design them, of becoming bricoleurs under Hecate's loving gaze. They mapped the enemy's craving for homogeneity, showed her nightmare-spaces built on the graves of the Other. Disgust on their lips at the idea of a fixable present. The present demanded hijacking, reconfiguring, salvaging, repurposing. Ashes couldn't be un-ashed, but they may clean metal, help plants grow, repel slugs.

In the Spring, Adriana cast her first divination hex. Nayeli was standing by her side. They said, "First, you must see and accept. Only then can change occur. Type the words when you are ready."

Adriana placed her fingers on the keyboard. The keys were warm. As the words materialized green against the bottomless depth of the terminal, the planes split open. In the gashes she witnessed a clown with blood on his hands, unable to laugh at the farce. Scavengers prowling an ossified city finding jewels beneath the rubble. The voices of the healthy, resolute in their belief that cancer and chemotherapy are alike. Suited men smiling as men in robes mythologize their dreams. Server farms and data centers viewed from the sky arranged in

a reverse pentagram. Benthic eidola singing from their sunken vessels, their music breaching the surface to remind the living that cannons don't have friends—only targets. Armored swine crying foul when their helmets are shattered by bricks. Millions holding hands and smiling as they invite others to join their rhizomatic arrangement. A voice asking for permission to live and another saying *it's just better if you don't*. Obese necrophages in hypogeal mansions asking their servants when the next meal will be served. A doctor showing her monarch the result of their x-ray—an anguiform spine. A guillotine blade slicing through a statue of Kipling, the cleanest of cuts. The final glimpse: an audience being shown a pyramid that burrows into the cloud, its base surrounded by putrid swamps, its lower levels swathed in swarms of squirming maggots. Black blood oozes through the structure's cracks, and the appreciative audience nods along until the presenter points at the lower levels and says, *you are here*.

Adriana threw up for a long time. Nayeli stayed close and comforted her as best as she could. She wrapped her in a blanket but knew it wouldn't help the shakes. "First time's the hardest. Not that it ever gets easy."

Adriana wiped her mouth and said, "Now what?"

"I'm not going to ask you what you would change. It's too early for that, and it's not for any one of us to choose. Instead, I would like to know: what do you wish you had seen?"

Adriana considered her answer. “Honestly?”

“Honestly,” said Nayeli. “Whatever you felt was lacking.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Adriana’s lips. “Shit,” she said, “I was hoping to see a lot more dead fascists.”