

Vicarious  
By Shawn Carter

Persephone stood behind the shuttle door and took in the filtered air as she closed her eyes. The relative silence allowed her to clear her mind and focus. The metal walls did a decent job of nullifying the screams and pleas of the unfortunate survivors of her latest conquest. Though the armies of Begawa did put a valiant effort, Persephone's inexhaustible forces proved better. It helped that her infiltrators had caused chaos and disrupted their chain of command. Also, the demoralizing effect of facing their former friends and loved ones helped too. The survivors only drew breath because she desired them to. Persephone wanted both the living and the undead to see her victory.

Persephone could hear two sets of soft thuds behind her as her power-armored honor guard joined her. Both women stood on both sides of her, it was unnecessary, but a welcome nonetheless. "It's time my lady," one said to Persephone with a monotone voice because of her helmet. On cue, the ramp descended onto the ground. Persephone raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sudden brightness. Her honor guard stood there, unmoved by the sudden sun rays. The pleas and screams amplified as they overtook the silence of the ship. With a loud thud, the ramp hit the ground.

"Shall we?" Persephone asked as she stepped forward. With a curt nod, her bodyguard locked stepped with her. It was the first time Persephone had set eyes on Begawa and had little clue as to what it had looked like before. The skies of Begawa were a beautiful red with spots of black littering it with the bombed-out skyscrapers in the foreground. That wasn't what took Persephone's smile. On both sides of the well-paved concrete path were the survivors. Some still wore their uniforms, albeit they were torn and bloodied. Others just had makeshift clothes on. No doubt they were civilians of Begawa. All of them were kneeling on the ashen ground and looking up at her. Sirens stood behind them with their guns trained at their backs. They no longer wept or pleaded for their miserable lives. Instead, the prisoners looked at Persephone and her entourage with utter contempt and acceptance of their fate.

As she walked the carriers had begun to outnumber the living. With each step, Persephone could feel their empty eyes on her as she walked by. She had no doubt they followed her every move as drool dripped from their slacked jawed mouths. Persephone could feel the virus's desire to spread in them. Their thirst to touch the survivor's warm bodies and taste their hot blood on their hands and mouth as they ripped them apart. Their whole primal urge fascinated Persephone. Apart of her wanted to sick them on the survivors. Their simple minds were easy for her reign to control over. It was just an afterthought for Persephone, a simple flick of her wrist.

Next up was Persephone's Sirens who lined their toes right up to the tip of the path. All of them stood at attention with their rifles resting on their shoulders. All of them

were women. Some had their helmets on, others let their hair flow in the wind. Of Persephone forces, The Sirens were the most organized and put together. They didn't desire the flesh of their victims and had the most self-control. What they desired was a thought-provoking fight and to test their mettle against a worthy opponent. A lot of the women had been prisoners, survivors of terrible events, and independent. Persephone had noticed the virus often sought out those attributes as if to mold their wish for power to its advantage. She could sense their disgust with the weakness of the survivors. It took everything in their being not to shoot them to pieces. It was beneath her sirens to lay a hand on them.

Persephone and her entourage made their way up the steps. At the top sat Persephone's throne and as requested, it was in the center of the area. It had purple cushions and gold trim that shined due to the sunset behind it. The chair itself wasn't special, just the finest wood and stone that could be found. Her conquering generals stood on both sides of it.

Zegana leaned on the side of the throne as she twirled a pen in the air. She had taken the form of a young blonde that wouldn't be out of place on a cover of one of those magazines. As always she had her hair parted in a way that hid the right side of her face. Even with the ability to blend in at will, Zegana always had her insecurities on full display. Those insecurities made it easier for Persephone to manipulate and control her little shapeshifter. She sowed chaos and opened old wounds amongst the leadership. Because of that, they were unable to coordinate, and the world fell within days.

On the other side stood Cyberina. A bio-organic robot stood as her proxy since she would never grace herself with reality. No doubt she was paying as much attention she deemed necessary and focused on some obscure project. Persephone cared not what her cybersleuth was doing as long as she came when beckoned. The planet wouldn't have fallen as fast if it wasn't for her hacking of the defense systems.

Taking a seat on her throne, Persephone took in her surroundings and let out a sigh. The cheering had died down and everyone's gaze fell upon her now. Persephone rested her head on her palm as she leaned on the throne's armrest. "Where are my prisoners? I ordered that they be here BEFORE I sat down. Instead of kneeling and whimpering mortals, I have you two standing here," Persephone growled as she glared at both of them. To their credit, neither of them backed down and or shied away.

"They'll be here shortly. There were some complications and one of them had to be put down," Zegana answered as she looked at her well-painted nails.

"Tell me it wasn't the governor. I do wish for him to break him before he dies," Persephone purred.

"Unfortunately it was his daughter. Worry not, the siren was wise enough only to shoot her in the back," Cyberina replied as if she was reciting a sports score.

"Saves me some steps. I would have liked to kill the girl myself, but what's done is done," as if on cue the governor walked up the stairs. The suit he wore was in tatters and his face was battered and bruised. Her sirens had done quite a number on the poor fool. Behind the man were two Sirens. One cradled the limp body of the governor's daughter in her arms. The other trained her gun on the governor just in case he did anything funny. Soon enough the man kneeled at Persephone feet. Groveling and crying for various reasons that didn't concern Persephone. "Evening governor! Pleasant day Begawa is having, isn't it?" she waited for the governor's answer. He was whispering something, but she couldn't quite hear what it was. With only a glance, the Siren hit the fool with the butt of her rifle.

"Answer her!" the siren ordered.

"You conquered my world that has been ruled by my family generations. My entire family has been murdered for your sadistic glee. So I ask you, what more do you want?" the governor replied as he looked up at Persephone. Tears streamed down his battered and bruised face.

"To be honest? Not much. It was your daughter I wanted. Speaking of which," Persephone motioned to the siren carrying the young woman. With a nod, the siren stepped forward and placed the woman at her feet. Persephone rose from her seat and stepped towards the dead girl.

"What are you doing? You already murdered her, what else can you do?!" The governor gasped.

"I'll show you," Persephone replied with a cruel smile. Placing her hands on the girl's chest "I imagine you've heard the propaganda governor. That all I do is take life. That my only talent is killing and burning everything down. Of course, I could deny it, but why?" as Persephone spoke the governor looked at his dead daughter and gasped. His eyes had to be deceiving him. "You're not going crazy governor," Persephone chuckled as she began to feel the girl's chest rise and recede. The girl's eyelids fluttered for a few seconds before shooting open. She then shot up coughing as if she had just been drowning. On instinct, they moved to where the gunshot was. Instead of feeling a gaping, bloody, wound, she felt nothing but her bare skin.

"How? How am I alive?" the daughter gasped as she first looked at her father then to Persephone who sat next to her smiling.

"Tabitha!" The Governor yelled as he ran to his daughter. The Siren reached to restrain him, but Persephone motioned for her not too. She too stepped aside, there was no need for her to ruin this reunion. Droplets of tears fell to the ground as he brought her close to his chest. "You're alive!" The Governor bawled.

"It's a miracle father. But I feel cold. Why do I feel so cold?" Tabitha asked as she too embraced her father.

"I do-" The Governor tried to respond, but began to choke on the last of his words.

"I'm getting warmer father. Whatever you're doing it's working!" The Governor could not respond as he noticed his arms had begun to lose their color and shrivel up. Tabitha also noticed and pulled herself away in horror. By this point, her father's entire body shriveled up and became a grey husk. Tabitha slid away and placed her hand on her mouth as she cried. "What have I done?" Tabitha whispered.

"It looks like you sucked the life force out of him. Must have been the gift I gave you upon your resurrection," Persphone clapped and didn't bother to hide her excitement.

"Gifted me? This 'gift' of yours just had me kill my father!" Tabitha yelled as she rose to confront Persephone. Zegen and Cyberina just stood there watching with indifference. They knew better than to interrupt Persephone at this crucial moment.

"He was gonna die anyway. There wasn't a place for him in this galaxy anymore. You did him service if anything," Persephone replied as she watched Tabitha march up to her seething and her fists clenched. She thought to feign fear but decided to stay true.

"I did him a service?! He was loving and caring!? The galaxy isn't a better place without him! It's worse now!" Tabitha yelled as she grabbed Persephone by the coattails of her cloak and drew her closer.

"Perhaps you're right. The galaxy isn't any better now," Persephone placed her hands on Tabitha's arms and looked at the girl. tears flowed down her face like mini waterfalls. The sight and human emotion disgusted her and it was a weakness she sought to purge. At the moment she had to endure Tabitha's emotional temper tantrum. She did just come back from the dead and murder her father, so it was the least Persephone could do.

"Killing you would make the galaxy a better and peaceful place! Tell me why I shouldn't just do it?!" Tabitha growled as she moved her hands to Persephone's exposed throat.

"Because if you did that my minions below would tear you and then this planet apart," Persephone feigned a gasp. Though this girl did have a strong grip, it still wouldn't take much for Persephone break free. She could also just use this twerb's neck as an afterthought, but that wouldn't accomplish much. She was more worried about Tabitha's life-stealing ability since Persephone wasn't sure if it affected her. It would be an ironic way to die to the power she had just given. She also wanted to see just how powerful Tabitha was, which gave her an idea. Without hesitation, Persephone headbutted Tabitha. Tabitha let go and staggered backward. Not giving her time to adjust, Persephone waved her hands and made the girl fly to the edge of the platform. "Now let us see what you do," Persephone whispered as she wiped the blood off her

face. Her nose wasn't broken, but guessing by the blood gushing down Tabitha's face, hers was.

"You'll pay for my father's death, you BITCH!" Tabitha spat as she raised her hands at the crowds behind her. As she did this Persephone noticed the blood around Tabitha's nose recede and reset itself.

"My lady, some of the prisoners have turned into husks," a Siren asked through telepathy.

"Are only the humans being affected or are the carriers too?" Persephone pondered the situation as she awaited an answer.

"Only humans. Whatever is happening has not affected us or the carriers," so only the humans were being affected. How this power could be utilized Persephone would have to decide later. Right now she had to end this before Tabitha became a larger issue.

"You showed promise, my dear. You'd have served me well and no doubt reshaped this corpse of a galaxy," Persephone chided as she raised her hands. To her credit, Tabitha had cultivated the stolen life force and increased her strength tenfold. It still wouldn't be enough.

"I'll never serve you! All you bring is ruin!" Tabitha yelled as green energy formed around her hands and took a makeshift fighting stance. Persephone found it adorable that this girl dared to stand against her. To play the defiant hero against an all-encompassing evil. It was novel stuff but mattered little. Persephone could always find a more willing participant with less of a hero complex.

"So be it, darling," with a heavy sigh Persephone adjusted herself and raised her hands. The air between the two women began to fluctuate as Tabitha looked around. Sweat beaded down her face as she stuttered back and almost fell off the platform. With a cruel smile, Persephone flew Tabitha to her. The woman's feet dangled in the air as she prepared to strike at Persephone. With only lifting a single finger, Tabitha's arms fell to her sides. There she floated, twitching and squirming, at Persephone mercy.

"Just kill me. I'll never enslave myself to the likes of you!" Tabitha said through her gritted teeth.

"Very well," Persephone placed both her hands on Tabitha's, and then stepped away. "Tell your dear father I send my regards," turning her back Persephone walked back to her throne. Resting her head on her palm, Persephone watched.

It was subtle at first. Tabitha stood up but then collapsed onto the ground. Then the flakes appeared. "What's happening to me?!" Tabitha screamed as her right leg began to dissolve. She began to crawl towards her husk of a father. As she did more of her began to dissolve, until only her upper torso remained. "I'm so sorry, father," Tabitha whispered as she placed her hand on her father's hand.

"Well that was anticlimactic," Zegana said, not looking away from her nails.

“She wasn’t for us, so she had to die. No need to dwell on the girl,” Cyberina returned, still focused on whatever project she was working on. Persephone just watched as Tabitha evaporated away and her only clothes remained.

“Kill the survivors and burn this planet to the ground. The people here are useless and have no right to be part of my empire,” Persephone said as she stood up. “Bring my shuttle here, I do not wish to walk among the rabble either,” with a curt nod her generals reiterated her commands to The Sirens. Five minutes later her shuttle appeared and as a final insult, it landed on the loving family. “Onto the next world,” Persephone muttered as she stepped onto the ship as gunshots rang and the first bombs dropped.