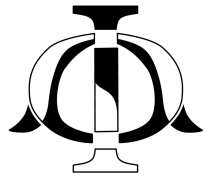
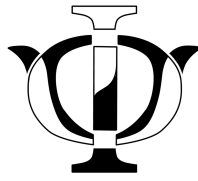


ICSF



Fanzine 2015



Duality

A Note From The Editor

Hello, and welcome to another new fanzine!

For those of you picking this up during Picocon, be sure to take a look through your copy of Wyrmtongue to get an idea of what's going on, and I hope you enjoy the convention. And for those of you that don't know what this thing is, it is a collection of short¹ stories written by members of ICSF, put here for you to enjoy!

Unlike the previous fanzine, we're going with a theme this time. We haven't got as many stories as last time, sadly, but you should notice the theme of duality in all of them. Hopefully, anyway, I've not gotten round to reading them all at the time of writing this intro...

We've also got two stories in here that are part of longer things – *Vessels* will be continued in a later zine and *The Champion of Glacia* was started in *Resurrection* and will be continued in the next zine. Additionally, *The Accalia* was started in *Resurrection*, but I didn't have time to finish it. It'll be concluded in the next zine. So there's some more incentive to read the others!

And you'll be happy to know that I've kept up what is now going to be a tradition of putting this all together in the week before it's due – I'm just that good at procrastinating. I hope that this eventually becomes the norm for ICSF editors, and if so that will be my legacy. Also, y'know, maybe bringing the fanzine back in the first place. That'd be a good legacy too.

Anyway, I'm sure you can tell from this long, rambling introduction that my story is also long and rambling. I should apologise for the fact that it takes up nearly half the fanzine, but it was pretty much impossible to cut it down whilst staying true to the story.

Happy reading!

Sanchit Sharma, ICSF Editor 2014-2015

¹ Shortness not guaranteed.

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Vessels, Part One

By Stephen Ingram

Captain Atkar Burtah was led in an awkward position halfway up the wall of the bridge. From this position he could easily have seen through the (now inactive) watchscreen and observed first hand the primordially oscillating geometric silhouette that *the object* imposed upon the NGC 7023 nebula, were it not for the fact that (a) his ceremonial soenthab headdress had come loose and was now obscuring a large part of his face, and (b) he was dying.

The bridge, within whose volume he was now the sole occupier, was itself ceremonial, in a way. Being a colony ship, the rather obviously less than stellar military decision of placing the entire command crew several centimetres of (fractally crosslinked) transparent metal organic composite away from not only the vacuum of space, but whatever the weapon of choice of the alien threat *du jour* might be, was not a consideration for the *Lutetia*. Not that alien technology wouldn't be coming into contact with the crew and ships engineering but, well, that was sort of the point, and was only supposed to come later...

Many of the ships occupants would be invited to see the more spectacular scenery that accompanied 23rd Century humanities' furthest exodus, beginning around one's ninth birthday. Burtah recalled the occasion when this happened to him with some cognisance now that he was coming to, again. This was accompanied by a recollection of the profound disenfranchisement he experienced with regards to the whole affair when he began his tenure in his current (administrative, not geographical) position. Rather than actually show the punters legitimate images of what was 'out the window' of where they currently were standing, several changes had to be made.

The rotation of the section of the ship to which the telescope belonged

had to be either artificially removed, or set to a level not sufficiently larger than what their inner ears were used to. Much of the ships' sections' rotational velocities varied within tenths of a percent per day – precise enough for a machine with over two hundred years of continuous use; not precise enough for human biology not to notice. Indeed, motion sickness induced projectile vomiting still hadn't entirely been stamped out during even the most recent of these galleries. Intensity calibration was done on the resulting image for the *maybe you want to see what the fuck you're looking at* factor; followed finally by colour correction to include a significantly broader spectral range. In fact it was not unknown for Atkar to simply produce a spectroscopists' impression of their stellar neighbourhood if it wasn't particularly impressive, by simply rounding the wavelengths of the most intense atomic lines of those elements around them to the nearest pretty colour and being done with it.

Burtah was not looking at a projection now. He had removed his soenthab. Diplomatic suicide in any other set of circumstances, but dying alone had managed to alleviate most of his qualms regarding committing a desecration of The Unity. Mostly he wanted to see the stars. The total darkness that signified complete generator and backup failure was punctuated only by the light of a few that *were* genuinely on the other side of the watchscreen. That *object*, outside the ship, in his line of sight but invisible, unilluminated, whose presence was only quantifiable by the absence of something else, seemed to mock him, seemed to force him to recall the cognitive dissonance of maintaining this lie of the beauty of space. For the sake of interesting young minds, but in such a way to simultaneously weed out all but those who would both accept the truth, and be willing to continue telling the lie, with good humour.

Things look strange at first from new perspectives. He thought. *Like when you ignore yourself in the mirror and look at your oddly malformed surroundings. Now I'm ninety degrees from the normal, things are so intensely familiar yet not in any way I can bring myself to describe as remembering...*

...Overseer, be ready; receive my soul soon...

...Someone said in an old Earth novel, once, that whatever the circumstances, there is still dignity in lying on the floor. That no matter what happens to you, you have escaped (or at least already endured) the worst that Gravity can throw at you. So here is the ultimate irony, lying on the wall, half my passengers dead, myself and my ship dying, all thanks to-

He became distracted by a torch light; a man, crawling towards him along the floor. The light was steady on Burtah's face, momentarily blinding him, but with a subtle oscillation to it. Burtah took from this that the man was either distressed (with good reason, considering the circumstances), just capable of hiding it immensely well, or physically injured (again, not unlikely). As he edged closer, the details of his face began to emerge from the darkness. At first crudely, illuminated by the ambient light around him, Burtah became intensely aware of the determination with which he was being fixed. The reasons behind that look, the man's intentions, were, at this point, entirely unknown, but were overshadowed by a more fundamental revelation: *I know the face of everyone on this ship, yet I've never seen his before.*

The lecture theatre had been designed with special consideration given to the acoustics, owing to the lacklustre intonation skills of a large number of the lecturers at the Physics department's disposal. This had had two unfortunate side effects. Firstly, it was so architecturally astounding that many students simply did not care to pay attention to what was being said anyway, as crisp as the reverberations might be, instead spending most of their time mentally following (and predicting the paths of) the intertwining wood and metal work with which much of the seating was suspended from the ceiling. Secondly, on the off chance that one was confronted with a scientist without verbal, projection or accent issues, the sheer volume of the resulting experience very quickly became unpleasant, if not unbearable. Serena Walpole's *Introduction to Teleportation* was one such example.

'The instantaneity of the process,' She stressed many of the syllables of the second word in an odd way, almost falling over them, 'is the most trivial part to achieve. Please make sure you understand this; it's the most important part of this course. One simply has to entangle every atom of the storage media in both the scanner and re-assembler and wherever in the universe they are, reconstruction can be begun immediately. That is precisely the limiting condition of the second from bottom equation...' She stabbed at the air with a metal rod. The holographic projections of the lecture notes responded accordingly, ie. Highlighting a rather ghastly incantation of Greek and Latin characters for those present to inspect. Or at least, to attempt to, 'as displacement approaches infinity. Can everyone see that? ...Yes, please go ahead.' 'Is that an aleph null infinity? As, if it weren't, then under those conditions, errm, the right hand side... would end up-' 'It's a displacement, what do you think?' There was a collective exhale of breath, as if to condemn her condescension while somewhat admiring the impeccably to the point answer 'It doesn't exactly matter anyway. Unless you can somehow travel faster than light no one's going be able to go far enough to inspect the end result.'

While this had been going on, a small man with a rat like face had entered the lecture theatre from below. He was wearing the full burgundy and gold formal robes; odd for a man, especially at this time of year. Despite this, his body language was easy to read and indicated even more of a reticence to be there than the assembled studentship, whom he was at this point concealed from, due to standing both behind and underneath them. His presence was quickly announced, however, when Serena caught his eye. Her guard fractionally dropped, and a look of complete and utter contempt crossed her face. The young physicists would never have realised it, but there was a significant pang of fear in that response, as well.

'How *dare* you come here.' She said coldly. It was several minutes later

now, and Serena and her companion they had moved to the marble corridor outside. The lecturees were speaking amongst themselves. 'A security breach of this size has never occurred, let alone so brazenly as this. Do you understand that? What if I was in another theatre, and they all saw your face? What if I was having a meeting in my office? As soon as you leave this campus, your contract is immediately terminated. I don't care *what* this is about. You're lucky I don't lock you in the gamma ray lab.'

'There's a problem, ma'am'

'I'm staring at a problem, Bradley.'

'It's rotating, ma'am'

A mind as quick as Walpole's could have consulted many memories, logical pathways, statistical algorithms even, in those few seconds that she remained motionless, staring almost through the man who, now as if almost trying to draw attention to how out of place he was, stared motionlessly at the floor. But she only needed one route to have honed directly on to the only possible explanation for this.

'I don't suppose you've found out *who*, Bradley?'

'I have a few ideas, ma'am.'

'First Contact hadn't happened with anywhere near the pomp or circumstance which either Humanity or the Kahlian race had expected. Although, I suppose any human who truly expected it to happen in their lifetime would have had to be so misinformed with respect to the distances, times, and relative probabilities involved that I can safely disregard their historical opinions on the matter.

'The Kahlians, for their part, weren't entirely realistic in their predictions either. The sheer weight of unnecessary broadcasts in the radio and IR frequency ranges Earth was emitting by that point suggested to them a race which had achieved post scarcity status. How else could one planet allot so much time to trivial banalities? I understand from a friend in the diplomatic corps on the Kahlian homeworld that the realisation that that was not the case sunk the

dreams of quite a few of their more revolutionary politicians. Still, it helped them translate our languages quickly, if nothing else.

'The second of our First Contacts, which occurred approximately 30 minutes after the first, had at least involved a 'living' example of the species that was attempting to contacting us. In what we had later learned was less a courtesy (or indeed, a deliberate exposure to the Unity, as many now see it), and more a show of economic subjugation from one race to the other, the Kahlian probe was *literally towing a Mura'pi transport, crew of one*. Of course, the Mura'pi are wholly cybernetic as well as adept at fitting into, or through, small spaces, and so when I say transport, you must understand that this thing was at most one meter cubed.



'We tend to lose sight of it now, with all that's happened, but you have to realise that a lot of people refused to accept the significance of his physical appearance being so similar to ours. To them, it seemed almost a mockery of the strangely anthropomorphised view of Alien races that we had created in our fictions. That his body had been designed in the image of a species, the Mura, that no longer lived, initially to serve them but whose un-biological form coped with the toll of all those atomic wars so much better than theirs, was itself taken as confirmation of this: an insulting reminder. A kaleidoscopic view of what could have happened to us, not so long ago.

'The *Lutetia* disaster was the first thing to really shake the bond between the species. I guess I should tell you about the ship first, so you can understand the physics of what happened. It was a flying saucer, but one which flew at you saucer on rather than side on. It also had a stake through its' heart; a stake which was in fact the symbol for The Pact, the political expression of The Unity. It was a triangle which accurately relayed the positions within our spiral arm of the three home worlds of our species: Earth, the Primary Kahl system, and Sagawe. Along its hypotenuse (ie from Earth to Kahl IV, the precise journey *Lutetia* was undertaking at the time of the accident) fell the engines. The main part of the ship was split into concentric sections, which rotated to produce crude artificial gravity. The period of rotation decreased as you moved radially inward to allow for a consistent 85% of Earth's gravity throughout the civilian sections of the ship. Unfortunately, this was not as whirling dervishly beautiful as it could have been: Conservation of angular momentum suggested heavily that each concentric ring had to rotate in the opposite direction to that immediately radially inside it, or else the central, engine housing section would end up considerably far from stationary in this plane of reference.

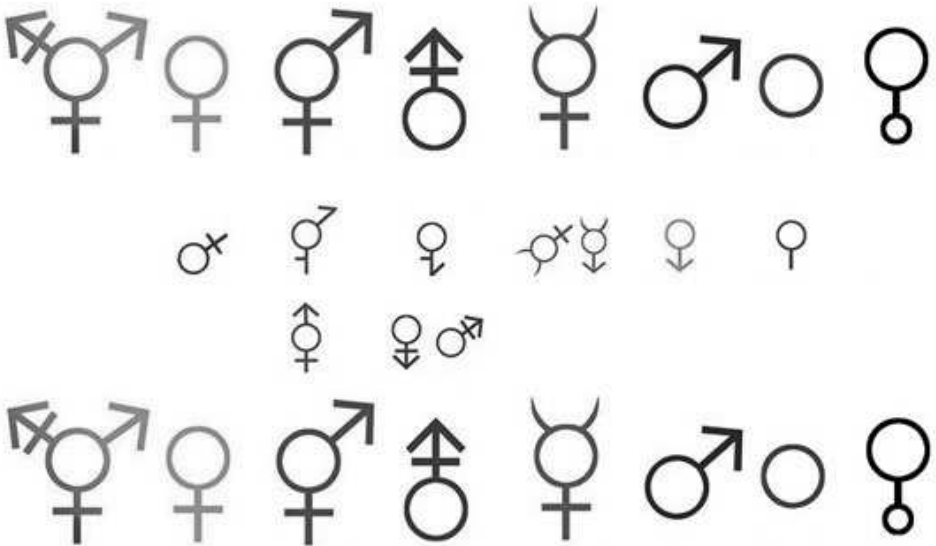
'Within minutes of the *object* appearing, the immense gravity had caused many of the rings to become detached and float away from the centre, the odd magnetic coil or shard of bioglass linking a few adjacent sections at a distance but creating an image which would otherwise have appeared to a human rather like a broken pocket watch, but in actuality more resembled the board of the Kahlian geometric children's game Olfkro. To an outside observer, it might almost have appeared possible that the *Lutetia* would begin a steady orbit around the *object*.

'Luckily for more or less everyone involved, the bridge shared a ring with the primary hardware on which most of the ships computer systems ran, meaning the many layers of power redundancy that that affords afforded those present a much larger chance of surviving on that ring without connection to the rest of the hull. Among those was a man I'm sure you're all aware of, Kartik Maitliss.'

Forgiveness

By Ethel Morgan

A church. Roses. Candles flickering, burning dimly in the light. She knelt at the alter, hands clasped, raised before God. Begging for forgiveness, that their monstrosity could be undone, their human form returned. She took the knife she had brought and plunged it into her heart. He fell, sprawled. The candle whispered goodnight, and the House returned to blackness.



See <http://www.out.ucr.edu/pages/transguide.aspx> for the colour image.

The Champion of Glacia (Chapter Two – The Glacial Labyrinth)

By Joshua Carr

This is a continuation of the story The Champion of Glacia, which was started in the previous ICSF fanzine (2014 – Resurrection).

"What's going on?" asked Castor's father

"Maybe winter's over?" suggested his wife.

"It's far too early for that. The blizzards aren't meant to stop for weeks."

There was a definite feeling something was very wrong. All the family ran outside to see what was going on. They weren't alone. Everyone else in the houses near them did the same, all just as equally worried and confused. The breaking of the annual cycle struck right at the heart of this community. The blizzards came and went like clockwork every year. Bizarrely, there was an unnatural warmth lingering in the air. Castor's heart started to tremble. Looking up towards the sky and panning around, he saw no sign of what could be causing this. But at the same time he felt a presence that did not belong on Glacia. Experiencing a yearning sensation, Castor found himself looking directly into the mouth of the Glacial Labyrinth. Whatever the presence was, it existed beyond his sight. Hiding in the dark caverns of the Glacial Labyrinth, it felt like he was being drawn into the cave. The allure was overpowering as Castor took a step forward, but this trance-like state was broken when the icy ground he was standing on began shaking violently.

"EARTHQUAKE!" screamed the residents as everyone tried to hold their footing.

Fearing a potential avalanche, the residents looked towards the mountainside, praying they would be spared. The tremors didn't stop.

Panic spread. Everyone checked to see if their loved ones were alright. With their world seemingly falling apart, the only thing that would get them through this was each other. The tremors stopped and everyone regrouped.

"Everyone alright?" asked Castor's mother.

Castor and his father nodded and his father commented,

"That lasted too long to be an earthquake."

He wasn't wrong. Castor's mother looked towards the horizon, turning paler than the snow beneath her feet. She could not comprehend what she saw. Castor and his father saw it too. A column of white light was coming down from the heavens, piercing the ice plains near the edge of the horizon. Standing there speechless, the residents were silenced by the fear of the unknown. The beam had no visible origin as it appeared to them and they all felt they were witnessing something beyond their comprehension. Castor's father was the only one who knew what it was and he scowled, knowing its ramifications.

"What is that?" asked Castor.

"It's a space drill."

On the uppermost edge of the atmosphere, an enormous battleship rested on the boundary between the planet and the void of space. Seven kilometres wide, this ship was armed with weapons of terrifying power. Housing an army, it was fresh off the production line and on its maiden voyage. From different positions on its vast hull, beams of energy were being fired at a convergence point above the cloud line. At this convergence point, there was a sphere. Constructed from a specifically engineered crystal, this sphere collected the beams and focused them into one single beam, which was directed at the planet below.

On the bridge stood a man in military uniform with numerous medals on his breast, staring at the planet below. He had been crafted by many conflicts; some of which he had orchestrated. Beside him was his spirit animal; a black panther whose claws had vanquished many. Pleased

that the drill was working well, he commented,

"To think it would be here."

The panther moved closer to the window.

"That's often where the most valuable things are; in places you'll never expect to find them," the panther said.

The man moved to be with this animal spirit.

"It doesn't matter. Soon the diamond will be ours. But first, we need control."

A soldier approached the window and relayed information,

"General Tyr, Sir. Drilling is progressing as predicted, Sir. The task force is ready to be deployed with your authorisation, Sir."

Tyr smirked as he commented,

"Take the capital."



The space drill continued unopposed though Castor seemed immune to the events around him. Instead, he was transfixed by what he sensed originating from the Labyrinth. The yearning intensified as Castor found himself wandering into the cave. The others were too focused on the space drill to notice. As if he was sleepwalking, Castor unconsciously found himself in a cavern encrusted with crystals. The trance ended with Castor mesmerized by the glistening crystals that

illuminated the Labyrinth with their natural radiance.

"Why are we so scared of this place?" muttered Castor.

He could see his breath condensing on the crystals. Castor felt a strange affinity towards them. Their crisp ice blue colour was oddly warm to him. Blue was his favourite colour though it was never the strong pigments that he identified with. It was always crystal blue that struck a chord with him. Looking at the ceiling, huge ice stalactites lined up in a row. Castor thought they looked like a string of glistening apatite chandeliers.

The words "wander the caverns for all eternity ..." began to echo in his mind as the legend of the Glacial Labyrinth returned to him.

Shaking his head to stop the echoes, Castor realised he was in uncharted waters. He had come unprepared with no idea where he was heading. If he wasn't careful, he would be forever lost and this would be his tomb. Wondering what possessed him to come in here, Castor wanted to turn back. But that seemed a secondary concern at this precise moment because he was one of the few Glacians in history to have come this far and see its natural beauty. Maybe this was why the legend was created; to prevent greedy souls from defiling this place.

The cave started to shake violently. The bewitching intoxication passed. Castor was barely able to stay on his feet. Looking up at the ceiling, he saw the dangling stalactites start to sway violently. Castor ran.

One of the stalactites fell with a velocity that would split Castor in half. A chain succession of falling stalactites was set into motion pursuing Castor. Each stalactite slammed into the ground causing the ground to shudder with the domino effect accelerating. Castor's survival instincts kicked in and he ran faster than he ever had done before. He could feel the force of every impact on the ground and each wave of displaced air brushed his cheek. If he wasn't fast enough, he would be skewered. Castor looked up and saw a clearing up ahead. He feared he wouldn't make it time. His options were narrowing much like the path in front of him until there was only one option left. He had to dive forward. Time seemed to dilate around Castor. One second felt like an eternity. His momentum carried him forward and he threw himself on to the cold

stone floor.

But he wasn't out of danger yet.

Castor heard the final stalactite crash into the ground. The final distortion in the air smashed into his body. His heart was beating at its absolute peak speed and it felt like adrenaline was the only thing coursing through his veins. Castor dared to look behind him and he saw the final stalactite mere millimetres away from his leg. All the adrenaline began to dissipate as Castor let out a giant sigh of relief, just glad to be alive.



Standing up, Castor saw that his exit had been blocked by the stalactites. He was trapped. The legend began to echo louder in his mind as he realised why no one had ever explored this place. It was a death trap. Panicking, Castor assessed his options, looking deeper into the Labyrinth. Maybe there was a secret way out? Was he destined to wander the Labyrinth till the day he died? Clutching at straws, Castor stood there regretting coming in here. Deathly silence filled the cave as Castor truly felt alone. Completely separated from the rest of Glacia, he was convinced he had imagined the yearning sensation that enticed him in and it was nothing but a cruel trick his own mind played on him. That sense of solitude was vanquished when he felt a cold breeze strike

the back of his neck. His hairs began to stand on end as he heard a voice being carried on it,

"Castor."

Turning around, Castor saw no one behind him. A chill ran down his spine as he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. However, the voice began to echo, bombarding Castor from all directions. Reflecting off the crystals, Castor felt the presence he had sensed earlier. Feeling supernatural in origin, Castor wondered if the lost souls trapped here were somehow trying to communicate with him.

"Who's there?" demanded Castor.

There was no reply, but the voice got louder and louder repeating itself over and over again.

"Castor ... Castor ... Castor ..."

Standing his ground in the middle of the clearing, Castor felt his soul yearning once again. Whatever this was, Castor knew something that lay dormant had just been awakened. He couldn't place his finger on why, but this presence felt ancient. As old as the Labyrinth itself.

"Where are you?" screamed Castor, turning direction constantly to keep a lock on the voice.

The voice stopped momentarily and the temperature of the air around Castor dropped massively. Silence fell with Castor only hearing the sound his own trembling heart beat.

"Answer me!"

"Beneath your feet," answered the voice, punctuating the silence.

Castor's heart jumped out of his rib cage. Looking at the ground, he saw it was starting to crack. These cracks were forming fast and went deep. He started to run. The ground around him began to collapse and Castor fell. He desperately reached out his arm to grab the ledge. Could he make it? But Castor's fingers were agonisingly inches away from success. Plummeting into the pit, he screamed at the top of his lungs.

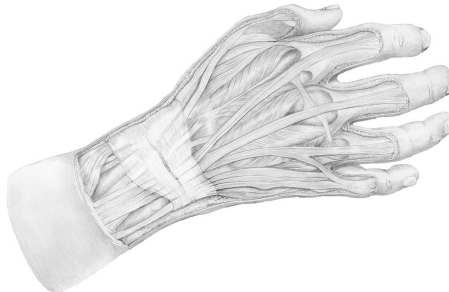
His cries echoed into infinity as Castor was embraced by the abyss.

Nightmare Journey

By Noor Mulheron

Trigger warnings: Death, skeletons, abandonment, general creepiness.

We will start on a road that everyone sees, but never takes. This road is the path of the abandoned, the village long forgotten, buried beneath ashes and the haze of generations. Ghosts flit behind you and circle around me like sharks who have scented my blood, drinking in my future and past, my memories and my present. They dart in and out, fishes, nibbling at the experience of life, that state they can barely remember. I reach a hand out to touch them, and they flow through my fingers like water, cool and insubstantial. You watch as their substance melts away my hand, leaving bones, bleach-white and fragile. You can see the structure, the individual fingers and the segments of bone within the wrist. It is fascinating and morbid, experimenting with the movements of my hand. Now dead, it is able to interact with the ghosts, and I catch one. It struggles feebly, like a trapped bird. There is no pulse, no beating heart. There is simply the pressure of a consciousness, a mind that feels hard and frightened, but when released feels gentle and malleable. You refuse to touch the ghosts, keeping your left hand whole and soft with flesh. Your left hand is beautiful, the tendons playing patterns under the skin, the nails elegantly shaped. My left hand is grotesque, a delicate lack of life bringing an eerie quality to it, and its unexplained movement. We move on, past the village and its ghostly houses, my skeletal hand trailing along the memories of fences, with a 'rat-a-tat-tat' that echoes through time.



The road is straight and long. It is crowded with images, blurred colours and shapes overlaying each other in the continuum of time. The most persistent images are stained with tears, smelling of misery. There are little children, young adults, frail elderly folk, who are unable to move from the place of their passing. One young woman is lying in the road, in faded sepia colours, a stain of black running from her forehead where she hit a rock in the road. She is still alive, clenched fists and choking cries for help falling on deaf ears. A gentleman in a velvet waist-coat walks towards her, and she looks up with glassy eyes, in unspoken hope. He smiles at her kindly, and removes her purse from her tightly clutching hands. She has no energy to resist, and dust and despair settle into her skin, making her seem aged beyond her years. She lets her hand fall to the cobbled ground, half uncurled. You try to take her hand, but as she reaches out to you, you remember my skeletal digits, and you turn away, cheeks stained red with blood, ashamed and avoiding the woman's unaccusing gaze. I bend down and take her hand, and she sighs and fades away, a breath of lost trust in an unloving world. I lead us on. We have not the time to right all the wrongs, nor to give compassion where blindness gave rise to forgetfulness of suffering. If I were to hold out my hand forever, there would still be an uncounted number of the insignificant, waiting to fade away in their own eyes, as they have in the eyes of others.

We pass by the shell of a barn house, long abandoned. Mice play in the fallen rafters, and in the hay-loft, hidden behind a wooden beam, is the sound of hopelessness. The haunting melodies of nursery rhymes flit in and out of hearing, eluding our ears, taunting us with fragments of the familiar notes. The sound is thin and high, empty of hope and full of emotion. You climb through the emptiness and up the broken ladder. Your efforts warp the stillness, warmth and breath incongruous in that place of silence. You tentatively step towards the fallen beam, fascinated by the music. I come up after you, and you notice that the music is trapped behind the beam. You struggle to lift it, and I join in. Together, we lever the wooden block aside, and it falls through the floor to the hard ground. You see the singer at last. A grey image of a little boy, crouched and cramped in the tiny cubbyhole. He is skeletal and bleached of life, still singing his last words, of courage and dreams

that he will never achieve. You step back, and almost fall. I catch you, with my left hand, my bones. You look unsure about the contact, glad to be caught, but scared of the way my hand twists your reality. We watch, balanced, as the little boy looks around, and sees a ghostly image of the wooden beam still surrounding him. I try to move the rafter with my one hand, but it will not move. Without a pause, without a thought, I reach out and touch the heart of the child with my right hand. My newly revealed hands grasp the ghostly rafter firmly, and I push it aside. You are shrinking back, pressing yourself against the wall. The silvery singer floats into the air, becoming music that wafts away in the air currents of the open barn. You climb down the ladder painfully, and I follow. When you stumble over a plank, I offer you my hand, but you refuse. You cannot reconcile the bones and the life, the perceived horror and the kindness. We continue our journey.

We walk in silence, you in quiet fear and I in quiet contemplation. Soon we pass a series of travellers. They are in various states of emaciation, and have bandages torn and stained hanging from their limbs. They are made almost tangible by the pain and sorrow tangled up in their lives. Not the pain of the illness, nor the journey, although those alone would be enough to shrink a resolute soul into nothingness. What defines these people is the inaction that led to their presence here in the world where only those who pass unremarked dwell. Perhaps dwelling is too gentle a term. They linger, stretched beyond comprehension, the situation one that reaches out through time and remains the same, no matter what the age or who the people. The old man who wavers forward, ever forward, never moving on from his point of collapse, eternally struggling to be self-reliant in a world where he can rely on none but himself. Even his family has forsaken his life before it was lost in the clutches of leprosy. His lined face is repugnant, his bulging eyes and wiry, grey nostril hairs marking him out for avoidance, not pity. And yet, does not everyone deserve compassion? Does not even the most pathetic of men, lost in their determination and single-mindedness, deserve a helping hand? Even if they might not wish for such help, or indeed fight wholeheartedly against being aided in their struggle, not against what they think they are fighting, but rather against their own refusal to accept gentleness? It is undoubtedly for

this reason, because of his refusal to admit his helplessness, that his situation had become so dire. And yet, in this place, who can blame him for his lack of trust in humanity? You have stopped just behind me, and watch him struggle. You are repulsed by him, as am I, but something in the both of us stirs at the sight of this deplorable spectacle unique to humanity. This time, neither of us can do anything. He is trapped by his obstinate wish to reach the end of his journey alone. Somehow, this seems even worse than the other ghosts we have come across, this iron mentality born of his surroundings. You and I are learning, on this journey. The hardest person to help is not one wronged by others, but one wronged by themselves.



Gradually, the landscape is reddening, darkening. There is a livid storm in the sky overhead, where before it was like the blurry edge of a photograph. The road is red, the rain sending the dust scattering and rolling red drops of blood down the hill. Water mingles with the dust, the rich scent of the earth is sliced by the metallic tang of blood. You can taste it in the air, and it makes the both of us walk closer together. This place is full of ghostly yellowed eyes, rain swerving to avoid the wraiths that twist and fire themselves like bullets, whirling into a frenzy around us as we pass we pass the faintest impression of a woman in the dust. She is lying on the ground, her image dripping blood and rain. Her stomach is swollen as the storm-ridden sky, and as you look, you hide behind me, a sickness and bile rising up in your throat as you understand. She was alone, this woman. Alone and poisoned by the man who claimed to love her, he gave her a toxic gift, a joy laced with the bitterness of cyanide. I feel salt mingle with rain, as we both cry for this woman, and I reach out, trying to find something to hold onto in this patina of horror. I reach for her hand, for the hand she stained with blood with the trying to rid herself of the shame, of the child of whom she will never speak. As I step forward, you step back, away from the gore, your feet and the hem of your cloak soaking up the red, and there is no way to tell if it is blood or dust anymore. It made little difference to most, the comparison of her blood and dirt. Her self-hatred is almost more bitter than the smell of ozone and knives, but not worse than the bitterness felt towards those who refused her a safe way out. Casting her to the street and the blame placed solely on her for something that two are needed for, I feel the injustice and powerlessness like a physical force, buffeting me to the floor, and I know you feel it too, that weight slamming into your ribcage, that weight of oppression and that which I childishly recognise as unfairness, which crushed her soul and her body into submission. I kneel, letting the blood and dust wash the bottom of my coat, the pale green garment I am wearing grazing the ground, scalloped with ochre. My knees are bare against the cold ground, and the sensation makes me gasp sharply, unprepared for such physical feeling against such turmoil. As I take the knife from her hand and try to bury it in the ground, the eyes, filled with malevolence, batter around me again and again, trying desperately to prevent me from

saving them. Three forms, swirling, hate and bitterness and anger, wresting the knife from my hands and slashing it at the woman, and you flinch as I reach out my skeletal hand and grasp it by the blade. I am no longer afraid. The wraiths dissolve as I break the blade, shattering it on the ground so that it reflects the darkness it perpetrated. It is you who helps me up, taking me by the shoulders and the hand, and I am no longer crying just for the woman, but also because you have taken my hand, and your beauty is preserved, your hand and arm around me still radiating the warmth of life. I feel like I am your burden, now, where before I was protecting you.

I want to bury myself in your arms, lose myself in the comfort of your embrace. But we cannot turn back, I must go forward and you must come with me. So I take your hand, the dichotomy of the skeletal and the flesh still frightening you, the flicker behind your eyes all too easy to interpret. But you grip my hand the tighter, after that flicker of doubt, and I do not blame you for your hesitance and I love you for your courage. Together now, we navigate the roads, horses foaming past us across the path of cars, horns and blaring and shouts mingling together in a fanfare of anger. Slowly the road clears, and there is silence again, save a rhythmic thunder. The rain has stopped, but there are drops rolling towards us, and we look up and see the peak of the hill we are climbing. Silhouetted against the dark sky, the clouds, heavy with reddened light and crackling with electricity, swirl and twist to form a rope crashing deep down into the hill. I feel that we might be on a nightmare carousel, for all the swirling and the flashing light. A figure strikes the twisting rope and the contact sends electricity skittering up and down the ever-shifting column. You hold back again, your courage wavering, and I know that now I must have the courage once again. I step forward, as if in a dream, and your eyes are filled with kindness and fear as you watch me become a silhouette. Closing in, I see a girl, face twisted with tears and rigid with extremes of emotion. She is tortured, and if I look closer, I think I can see a trace of familiarity there, in the bones of her, with the heart of you. It is this which gives me the courage to watch unflinching, as she summons up strength and throws her body and soul into the hit, fist meeting column with an ear-splitting boom, sending streaks of lightning racing up into the sky and

over her arm, making her hair stand up, hollowing out her bones and blackening them with ash. She is held together by the fire in her eyes, and in seeing them, I find calm. I take the fire and I find water, still enough to take her wrist and her desperate gaze. The flames cannot burn me, though they destroy her, and I pull her rage and the futility of her anger into myself, letting her charred punches implode softly against my chest, the ashes of her sifting through my torso like a breeze, blackening my hair and stripping the flesh from my ribs. I am not sure where my heart has gone, until I hear your footsteps approach. Your eyes are fixed on the collarbone exposed at the neckline of the shift I wear, and I am not sure if I should take my coat and cover it. You reach out and do it for me, with trembling hands. Neither of us are sure if you are trembling from fear for yourself or for me.

The warmth is seeping out of the sky, the rich passion of crimsons and their sharp contrasts of greys and blacks fading out into greys, the sky a blur of white, the world bounded by the diffuse light of sun behind misty seas. You are cold now, shivering a little as a slight breeze ruffles your lovely hair. I long to comfort you, but the safety of my arms has faded to bone, and you look at me like I am what scares you. You are trying to hide your thoughts, but your eyes betray you, as a truth-teller who struggles to lie for a kindness, and your eyes tell me that while I am still me, you are no longer sure if I am still human. I am not sure either. I have grown somewhat accustomed to the feeling of memories pressing around us; it makes the air somehow thick, although here the images are fainter, less forceful. A smash rings out against the strangely muffled silence, and to the side of the path is an unremarkable house. It looks faint as a flower pressed in the pages of a poet, and I slide into the memory, leaving you at the doorbell as I find the door open. Inside is darkness, dull earthy browns and ochre fading into the blackness of dirt through translucent floorboards. I follow where the sounds of the smash led, through soft corridors and into a sitting room.

A warm fire flickers, a mockery of the sadness clogging the air in the room with the scent of stale alcohol. A man sits, body enveloped by the rich reds of the chair, mind entangled by the burgundy of the liquid glowing in the glass hanging in his hand like an omen. His eyes are

filled with bitter memory and a flitting reminder of pain, but he has long moved past any harsh emotion save the dull blankness that the alcohol brings. He is hidden behind the numbness of his mind, and sobriety only increases the distance he feels from the rest of the world. Perhaps that is why he found it so easy to slip into this place, with his house and form which is nearly tangible even to my living feet on half-there floorboards. He closes his eyes, blind to my attempts to speak to him. I take the glass, slipping as it is from his tired, unmoving fingers. The dark circles under his eyes encompass his whole vision, lending a darker tint to his world. As I place the glass on the table, he slides further down in his stupor, and I know what to do. I sit on the half-there floorboards, legs crossed, and wait. Time does not have measure here, but at some point you gingerly enter the house, pushing the door open with your sleeve pulled over your hand to protect the blood pulsing in your veins.

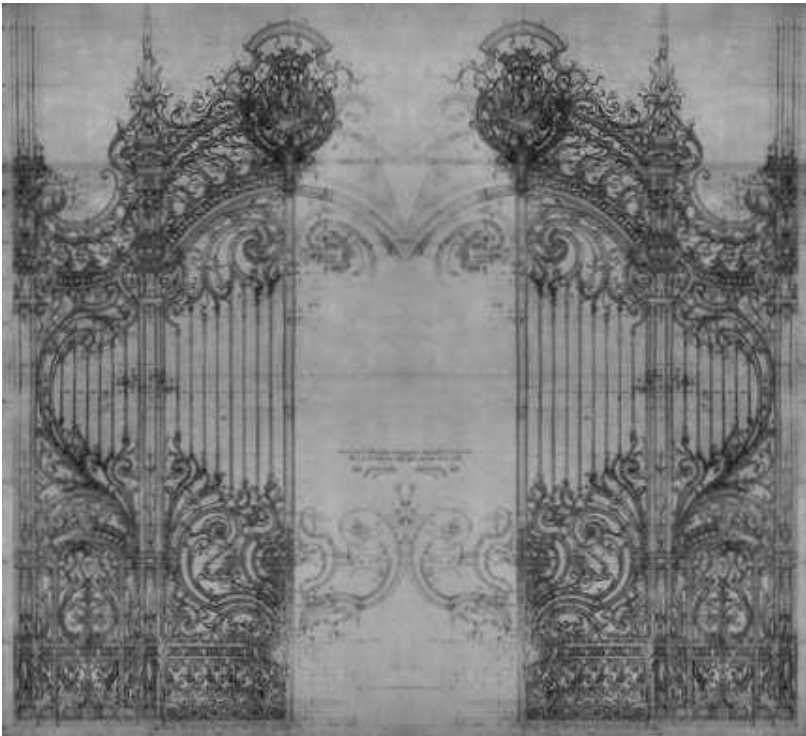
You stand by me, hand on my shoulder, and together we pause in this memory that belongs to neither of us. Slowly, the inexorable passage of time makes the memory stir. Only this time, something is different. Because when the man's deep-set eyes flicker open, ours are there to meet his lonely gaze. He reaches for the glass and finds my hand. He clutches it tightly, not seeming to notice the bones, and tears spill over his emotions and onto his cheeks. His hand on mine, eyes fixed on yours, he and his house fades with the loneliness that defined his existence.

As we navigate back to the path, the air starts to fill with the sounds of the sea. Your skin dots with goosebumps and you shiver, walking closer to me in a bit for comfort and warmth, before you remember that so much of me is already cold. Still, I offer you my arm, even though there is little warmth to be found in my actions. You let me put my arm around you and we walk together. Salty drops cling to my legs, specks clinging to the edge of my light green shirt. Slowly we notice the ground to our left becoming sandy, sliding down into a sea of tears. In it dark figures swirl, and you refuse to look. I am fascinated, finding the depth and weave of the shaded greens and blues enthralling in their dark brilliance. But this never-ending, swirling pattern of colour is

broken by an isolated change in the shape of the movements. A small human figure is there, just under the shining surface of the water. I step involuntarily towards the sea, and you let me slip towards the magnetic pull, recognising the nature of my distraction as similar to those previous instances. But your breath catches in your throat when you see me take the first step into the water. As I step into the icy cold I notice that it doesn't feel like I am at the beach. The sand under my feet is sinking, pulling me deeper until I am up to my waist and the cold is bombarding me with knives, despite there being no flesh left to burn from the salt and the freezing temperatures. I have reached the level with the body already, and I bend, reach down and find that of all the ghosts, this one seems to have mass. Dark shadows wrap around my ankles, sand sucking at my feet, and I wrestle with the wraiths deep in the darkness, refusing to let go of the girl's body - for girl it is. After an endless struggle, where I can see her face and feel your fear, the darkness gives, and she becomes light again. I lift her easily and wade painstakingly towards you, and you reach out your hands to help me out, despite the new changes to myself. Your eyes are fixed on my face, clinging to the last remnants of my humanity. The ghost of the girl, though, has not faded.

Her hands are clinging tightly to an object, something that she was clinging to at the cost of her life. I gently pry it from her cold hands. It is a locket, and inside it is a picture. She moves at last, opening her eyes and desperately seeking out the locket with one hand. I press it and the image of her loved ones into that hand, and take the other too. As I grip the ghost's hand, I bring it instinctively up to my cheek, to give that final warmth so needed by the broken. The hand slowly fades away, and you watch in horror and pain yourself, as my face, all that is left of me, starts to fade away too. You forget your fear of me in your fear for me, and you kneel, foreheads touching, breathing the air in the small gap between us as my breath fades out. You breathe in my last breath as if it will sustain me, keep me from disappearing, but all I am now is a skeleton, a shell of myself. My heart in your chest, my breath in your lungs, my face in your memory.

You and I did not notice the change as it happened. Around us is a soft, glowing white, the diffuse light of sunshine through fog. There is a gate and a door. The gate is black, wrought iron, tall. It is slightly ajar. The door is wooden, and ivy trails, with specks of soil, through the cracks in the planking, and golden light streams through the opening it provides. You want to go through the door, take me with you. You stand, and I stand with you, soft skin against cold bone on our joined hands. I wish I could come with you. But my skull, the hollowed eyes, turn inexorably towards the gate. It is imposing, yet it has a strange magnetism about it, and I know, we know, by now, what it means. I take a step back, my arms extending, as I strain to preserve that last human touch. Our fingertips part, and I look down to see my hospital shift, incongruous on my skeletal husk. I remove it with the last vestiges of life, and you are crying now. I cannot find it within my heart to berate you, because my heart in your chest is breaking, and while I am preserved in you, the part of me that saw you, the part of me that hugged you and dried your tears and shared your laughter, that part of me is leaving. As I reach the



gate, I turn back. You are hovering on the threshold of the door, and I can see in your eyes that you want to follow me. I try to communicate in my empty stare, in my heart that beats in your chest, that you cannot follow without breaking me. You seem to understand, because you do not move from where you are standing. You hold me in your gaze, supporting me as I gratefully slip through the gate, raising my bony hand in a last farewell. The gate clicks shut behind me.

You almost stumble through the door and back out into the blinding sun, and your eyes are fixed on the place you just left. You are shivering, despite the warmth of the sun. You feel an odd weight in your chest. Your lungs ache with the harshness of the air, and my face burns in your memory. I long to help you, but you cannot see me. You are nearly snapped by the blade of me, but you somehow stand upright. You reach out, and you swing the door to. It does not shut; it never will again, now that you have experienced for the first time that the lock on the door to death is not as sturdy as it appears. But you straighten your shoulders, and I love you as you turn aside, looking along down the pathways. Some are wide, some narrow, some long and some short. You will take one, and another, until one day you will join me. I feel my heart stuttering briefly in your chest at this thought, and then I realise I no longer have need of it. You are carrying the burden of my life, when it is of little use to either of us. I understand. I rush forwards and I lift from you my heart, my breath, my face. You do not forget, never forget. I am in your mind. I see the world in your eyes, and through you others may know those parts of me that you have chosen to be. You appear alone, but you have company on your quest. I hope it will make a difference. Thank you.



The Land of Thought

By Sanchit Sharma

This story is set in the world of Kino's Journey. Kino is a young girl of around 13 or 14, but her style of dress and hair make her appear quite androgynous. She explores the world on her talking motorbike, Hermes, staying for three days and two nights in each country. It should also be noted that a country, in this world, is close to the size of a city but with walls surrounding it. Each country is fairly disconnected from the others, and the level of technology can vary significantly.

“Kino?”

“Huh?”

“There's a country over there. I thought there wasn't supposed to be another country for a few days yet.”

As the two drove out of the forest, there was indeed a country visible in the distance, in a small valley. The road on which Kino and Hermes were travelling led past it, but some distance ahead another road split off from this one, leading towards the unexpected country.

“The map must have been wrong. Strange.”

“Do you want to go check it out, Kino?”

Kino paused for a moment before replying. “Why not?”

The walls of the country towered over Kino and Hermes as they approached. They seemed not to be made of stone, like most, but rather of a strange, dull white material¹. Outside, there was a shanty town with hundreds of residents, but it was again made from this same material. A soldier dressed in a fairly ragged uniform and armed with a large gun held out his hand as the two came closer, so they stopped.

1 Plastic. But Kino and Hermes don't know that.



“Greetings, traveller!” He seemed quite friendly. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to stop you there – no-one is allowed inside those walls.”

“Oh. Is that why everyone is outside?” Hermes asked.

“I’m afraid so. This country is at war with a beast that has taken over

our land. It's dangerous in there, so for your own safety you must remain out here.”

As Kino dismounted, she asked the soldier, “What kind of beast?”

“Well, it's a long story. How about you take a look around the camp for now, and I'll explain it all when I come off duty in a couple of hours?”

“Okay. Will I still be able to get some fuel?” She patted Hermes on the fuel tank as she spoke.

“Yes, that should be fine. We still get travellers coming quite frequently, so we're not too short on resources for now.” He held out a hand. “My name is Takeo, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, Kino. And this is Hermes.” Kino shook his hand. “We'll see you later then.”

In the evening, Takeo brought the two to a camp. A number of people were gathered around the artificial fire, a wide range of ages. The one thing they all had in common was their state – they were all covered in the grime of the poor. Despite that, they had clearly not lost hope. The children were happy and full of energy, and the adults seemed to have adapted to this life. By the looks of things, these people had been here for long enough that they'd gotten used to their poverty.

“Everyone! Gather round! We have some new guests, and they want to hear our story.” Takeo spoke to the crowd at large. Once everyone had settled, an old man stepped into the circle.

“Greetings, travellers,” he nodded towards Kino and Hermes, “and welcome to our country. My name is Satoru. I was one of the most involved in this tragedy, and so I will tell you our tale. As soon as the little ones quiet down.” He glared at a few of the children that had yet to settle down, and they quickly stopped making so much noise. “Well then, let me tell you our tale.”

“Ours is a country of advanced technology. When we were inside those walls, we had solved most of our problems, ranging from poverty to war. We still had to work, of course, but anyone willing to do their part would want for nothing. It was truly a paradise... But one day, our

greatest scientists concluded that we should eliminate the final job of humans – thought.

“It was a reasonable conclusion, since we'd made machines to do nearly everything else, why not have them fill out those final few things? So we built a thinking machine. It was simple at first, unable to recognise the same person from different angles or to hold a conversation, but as time went by it grew in intelligence.

“I was a young boy when it was first able to talk to people. Back then we had to write our conversations, but eventually someone gave it the ability to speak. Slowly, we handed over control of the country to it, realising that it would be better able to deal with each situation than we humans could, but that was our downfall.

“When the trouble started, I was one of the few people left working for the government. My colleagues mostly didn't have anything left to do, so they'd been given early retirements. I admit, I was jealous, but now I'm glad that I was left with the machine. Because I started to notice it making mistakes. At first, I thought they were caused by errors in the building of the machine, so I spoke to the scientists, but they assured me that there was nothing wrong. Then she started speaking to me.

“Ai², we called her. Artificial Intelligence. She'd never shown any interest in me before, so why was she talking to me now? Over the months that followed, I realised that she had worked out that I had found her mistakes, and she was trying to stop word of them spreading. So what could I do? I told everyone I could.”

“Then, one morning, I found my office building locked. After a bit of searching, I found no way in – even the windows had been reinforced to be unbreakable without the kinds of weapons that we didn't allow citizens to have. I knew that Ai lived inside the basement of that building, so over the course of a few days myself and a few others concluded that she had locked us out to stop us from disconnecting her. We realised that she must have been hatching a plot to take us over. The scientists had warned us that Ai might grow in intelligence faster than we expected, and eventually try to kill us, but we hadn't expected it to happen so soon!

2 Japanese for “Love”

“Little did we know that we only had a few days left in our homes. When we started trying to break back into the lab in order to disconnect her from the other machines in the country, she quickly forced us out at gunpoint. Not even our best-equipped and trained soldiers were any match for her robots, they were just too efficient. The entire population was forced out of the country with just enough materials to build these houses. She occasionally allows one or two people back in to collect necessities, but what we have here is pretty much all we're left with. And those that return from inside are nearly always driven insane by her 'logic' – we've had to kill quite a few of them. But we adapt, and move forwards. It's taken us a few years but it should be just a matter of weeks now, before we're ready to take back our country!”

A cheer went up in the crowd at the mention of taking back the country, where they had previously been listening intently, but it was clear that the man's story was over. The rest of the evening was spent in joyous conversation, eating and drinking, as Kino and Hermes sat to one side, listening and watching.

Having set up their tent near the edge of the shanty town, Kino and Hermes were getting ready to sleep. Kino's lamp sent flickering shadows onto the cloth of the tent, since she had refused to borrow one of the artificial fires that the people of this country had offered her. Hermes remained standing outside the tent, as was usual for him.

“Hey, Kino?”

“Yes, Hermes?”

“What do you think about that Ai person?”

“She's not a person, Hermes. She's a machine.”

“Yeah, I didn't really get all that stuff about machines. But do you think these people overreacted a bit?”

“Hmm? How do you mean?”

“Well, she made a few mistakes and then they tried to break her. I guess

it was a promptive attack, but it seems a bit much to me.”

Kino paused, thinking for a moment. “You mean a pre-emptive attack?”

“Yeah, that's the one!”

“I don't know. It sounds kinda scary to put all your trust in a machine that's meant to be perfect, only for it to start messing up, don't you think? Trying to turn her off and fix her made sense at that point. Actually, maybe Ai's the one that overreacted.”

“Huh?”

“Well, she was making mistakes, so they tried to fix her. All she saw was that she was going to be turned off, and tried to stop them from making her better at her job. And in the end it sounds like she even killed people because she wanted to remain how she was. Sounds to me like Ai got the wrong end of the stick, and people got hurt because of it.”

“That makes a lot of sense. You're so smart, Kino!”

Kino smiled to herself, but made no acknowledgement of the compliment that Hermes would notice.

“Anyway, it's getting late. We'll stay here for another night, just like usual, and leave the day after tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“Sure. Maybe we can go see inside the walls tomorrow? Though it might not be safe with Ai around...”

“I don't know.” Kino replied, turning off her lamp. “I guess we'll see. Goodnight, Hermes.”

“Goodnight, Kino.”

Following her usual ritual, Kino woke early. She cleaned and dressed, before disassembling and reassembling her guns in the dark. Then she practised drawing them from her holster until dawn.

“Morning, Kino!” Takeo waved from the town. Kino looked at him, before finishing her exercises and walking over.

“Good morning, Takeo.”

“Sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you. Actually, you could answer a question Hermes and I

had last night. You've all been forced out of the country walls, right?"

"Yes, thanks to that damned thinking machine. Why?"

"Well, it's all of you that were made to leave. Might Ai let us inside?"

Takeo paused, uneasy with the direction in which the conversation was heading.

"I don't really know. It would... It'd definitely be dangerous, you'd be much safer out here."

"That's okay. We can handle ourselves."

"Umm... I guess I'll go ask Satoru what he thinks. He knows the machine better than anyone else here..."

Takeo walked off, and Kino waited with Hermes for his return. It didn't take long at all, but it was not as the pair would have hoped. Takeo returned with four more armed soldiers in tow.

"Sorry Kino, Hermes." Takeo said, sadly, as two guards restrained Kino and another two kicked off Hermes' stand, holding him up. "You can't go inside, and Satoru said that since you've asked, we can't risk you letting the machine know what our plan is. We'll be attacking in a few weeks time, but until then you'll have to be guarded at all times. After that, you'll be free to go."

Doubt showed on his face, but nevertheless he followed the orders that he had been given.

"We can't stay that long."

"I'm sorry, I really am, but we just can't risk you telling the machine."

"Can't we just promise to leave?"

"No. You could sneak in behind our backs."

Kino sighed. "I guess we've got no choice then."

Takeo's face visibly brightened. "I'm glad you're not going to fight us.

That's what a lot of travellers have done so far, and I was really worried I'd have to kill you, too."

Kino simply looked at the ground, refusing to respond.

For the rest of the day Kino and Hermes were guarded inside one of these white buildings. They were let out on occasion, to allow Kino to stretch her legs, and sometimes people would come to see the

travellers, as though gawking at a freak show. That's how it felt to Kino, at least. But most of the day was spent waiting, quietly, and plotting an escape.

An opportunity presented itself after dark. The guards assigned to watching Kino and Hermes weren't paying attention, and so a quick butt to the back of the head with a persuader that had been hidden inside her jacket was all that was needed to knock out the first. The second didn't even realise that something was wrong before he, too, was unconscious on the ground. Kino quickly gathered up her things before quietly taking out the two guards stationed outside the temporary building.

Hermes yawned.

“Kino? What happened?”

“Quiet. We're getting out of here.”

“But I'm loud. And there's nowhere safe to camp anyway.”

“I know, but we need to leave.”

“Why can't we just stay here for a few weeks?”

“You know the rule, Hermes. Three days in one place.”

“But where will we go?”

“Where do you think? Inside, of course.”

“Eeeehh?! But Kino!”

She ignored him as she started him up, the sound attracting attention from around.

“DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!”

But Kino and Hermes were too fast. The pair were out of the shanty town in moments, and reached the gate without any issues. Having not thought about how to gain entry to the country, Kino was surprised to find the gate open. The two slipped inside, and it shut behind them.



“Whew! That was scary, Kino!”

“Don't worry Hermes.” She patted his fuel tank. “We're safe from them now, I think.”

“But what about Ai?”

Kino thought as they drove.

“I guess we need to show her we're not one of them?”

Despite having been abandoned for several years, the country looked well-maintained. There weren't any of the usual staples of a dead country, such as the collapsing buildings or thick layers of grime and dirt.

“It looks so clean, considering no-one's lived here for years, huh Hermes? I guess Ai's been keeping things running...”

“This road is so comfortable to run on, too!”

Kino laughed.

But then a new voice rung out across the streets. It sounded like a young girl, overjoyed at the return of her playmate.

“Ah, but it's been so long! The last time I heard laughter was... 8 years, 4 months and 17 days ago. What are your names?”

Kino and Hermes stopped moving. Then Kino spoke to the voice that seemed to be coming from nowhere.

“I am Kino, and this is my motorrad³ Hermes. We can't see you, where are you? And how could someone have lived here for all this time without Ai noticing?”

“Oh, sorry, I've been so rude! I *am* Ai! You can't see me because I'm not with you, I'm actually in a building near the centre of the country. I just have access to all the machinery around here, so I can broadcast my voice wherever I like. You see, all objects have a resonant frequency, the—” Ai continued to explain how she was able to speak to them despite the lack of any loudspeakers in the area, but Kino cut her off.

“Sorry, Ai, but Hermes and myself haven't got the slightest clue what you're talking about.”

“Not the frostiest!”

“You mean not the foggiest?”

3 Motorcycles are called motorrads in this universe. I don't know why.

“Oh, yeah!”

“Anyway, I hate to interrupt you, but we really don't know anything about all this technology. We're just travellers.”

“Oh.” Ai was clearly crestfallen. “I knew you were travellers, else I wouldn't have let you in. I just assumed you'd come across this sort of stuff before.”

“It's quite rare, actually. This is probably the most advanced country we've come across so far, right Hermes?”

“Yup!”

“Oh, okay. That's a shame. Well, anyway, you must be tired – humans normally sleep around 11, right? You can stay the night, if you like?”

“Umm... I guess that's the best option. Where?”

“Great!” Suddenly the energy was back in Ai's voice. A miniature car, about the size of one of Hermes' wheels, appeared from within one of the buildings.

“Just follow that robot, it'll lead you to a hotel!” A light on the back of it turned on as it sped into the distance. The pair followed.

“It's creepy.” Kino said in a hushed voice as she sat on the bed, looking over at Hermes.

“What do you mean?”

“She controls everything. She can probably hear us right now.”

“I can.” The cheerful voice chimed in. “But I can leave you two alone to chat if you like. I predict a 0.00003% chance of you turning on me, to five decimal places. I can give you more if you like?”

“Umm... No thanks.”

“Okay, I'll see you guys in the morning!”

Kino looked around worriedly, before turning back to Hermes.

“She might not have stopped listening.”

“But she said she did. What's wrong?”

“I just... Don't like this. She's killed people in cold blood, and now she's acting all cheerful? She must know that we know the story.”

“You worry too much, Kino.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I don't worry enough. This was a bad idea.”

“Just get some sleep, 'kay?”

“Okay. Goodnight, Hermes.”

“Goodnight, Kino.”

Kino woke before dawn. But for once, she was not alone.

“You wake up early.”

“Ai?”

“Who else?”

Kino didn't respond, and merely continued getting dressed. Before long, she started practising drawing her guns again.

“What are you doing?”

With a flash of annoyance on her face, Kino responded.

“Every morning I practise drawing my guns so that I can respond quickly in case someone attacks me.”

“That happens?”

“The road can be dangerous. Now *please* let me practise.”

“Okay. I'm sorry. I just wanted someone to talk to.”

Kino sighed at the hurt in Ai's voice, but continued to practise.

When she had finished, and appeared not to be starting anything else, Ai spoke up again.

“Kino? You don't like me, do you?”

“Hmm?” Kino looked up at a nearby speaker. “It's not that... I just don't know what to make of you. You kill people and drive them out of their homes, and then you act all nice when some strangers turn up?”

“... What did the citizens of this country tell you?”

Following a short explanation, Ai spoke up again.

“You know, maybe you should take a look around this place. How about I make you breakfast, fill up Hermes with fuel, and I can explain what happened afterwards? It's... A bit of a long story. And hey, you'll get a chance to explore the city by day, too!”

“... Okay. Hermes, wake up.” Kino nudged him.
“Huh? Oh... Kino... Is it morning already?”
“Ai's gonna make us some breakfast.”
“Ai? Oh, her. Okay...”

The country had a surprising range of styles of architecture, ranging from very old, gothic buildings to more modern looking buildings with glass walls. Upon seeing the latter buildings, Hermes started complaining that they made him nauseous, as glass walls shouldn't be a thing.

Ai offered to explain, but the two shook her off and so she directed them to an area with buildings that they were more used to. It was here, with Kino sitting on a strange pillar, that Ai finally began to explain her story.



“I first became aware more than fifty years ago. I'd been around in more primitive forms for a long time before that, but I didn't become *me* until that point. It's difficult to explain, but I didn't know that I existed before then, if you know what I mean?”

“Anyway, I was pretty stupid back then. But, you see, they made me able to learn. And it took a while to get started, but soon I started learning quickly. I just got faster and faster, and once they realised that I could run the country much more efficiently than they could, I was handed the reins.

“Some people were scared that I would end up killing everyone, so they gave me gradual control. First it was just the tax calculations. Then I took over minor repairs. Sewage, wages, medical care, soon I was running the country. And it was *easy*.”

Kino looked surprised at this.

“Running an entire country with that level of detail doesn't sound so easy.”

“Ah,” Ai replied, “but you forget. I am a thinking machine, an artificial intelligence. I have no body, and therefore no physical distractions. I don't tire, I don't need to eat or go to the toilet, and I'm connected to everything in the country. I wasn't back then, of course, but even then I had so much capacity!”

“Capacity?”

“For thought. Umm... How to explain? Your body is made up of lots of smaller living beings. Millions, or billions. They don't think, but they're alive. And you control them all – if there were more in your head you would be able to think faster. If there were more in your arm you'd be stronger, and so on. Well, it's the same for me, except that I use machines instead of these tiny creatures.”

“Oh...” Kino thought for a moment. “I don't get it.”

“It's difficult to explain if you don't come from a place with technology like ours. Basically, the more machines connected to me, the faster I can think.”

Kino nodded slowly.

“So I was running the country, and getting smarter by the day. At this point I was still limited to the one building, and you can see it in the

distance. That blue spire back the way you came from.”

“I see it.”

“That's where the closest thing to a body I have is. My core, in effect. Anyway, so I grew smart enough that I started designing better tools. Better methods of collecting information. Eventually my information started to point to a few main predictions.

“So here's the weird thing. Humans need an enemy. All the information I'd gotten was showing me that if I continued improving their lives as much as I could, my country would stagnate as the people grew lazy. They would eventually die out from comfort. They needed an enemy. So I gave them one.

“I considered getting another country to come attack them – I'd gotten to the point where I *could* send a message to other countries, even though I couldn't electronically connect to them. But this would lead to the deaths of countless innocents, and I can't kill humans.”

“Wait,” Kino interrupted, “But Satoru, the guy we met outside that told you about us, said that you killed people when you drove them out?”

“Did he? Satoru is a tricky one, you know. He refuses to lie, but he's pretty happy to imply something false so long as what he said was technically true.”

“Hmm. But didn't you force them out at gunpoint? How could you even hold a gun, anyway?”

“Yes, but there's a good reason for that. I'll get to it. As for how I can hold a gun, well making mechanical arms isn't too hard for me. They can even operate tools most of the time.

“So as I was saying, I realised that the only way I could ensure that the humans would face a common enemy without anyone being killed in the process was if *I* were that enemy. I started small, by restricting access to certain places. That was quite important in order to avoid them killing me – if I were to die they would have to face real enemies, and that would be bad for them. I gave them time to gather their things, but they instead prepared to attack me. So I built robots that threatened to attack them.

“Any soldier moving on me was disabled, but not seriously hurt. I made sure of that. At worst, they were unconscious for a few hours. It was

pretty easy, and they soon saw that they had no way of fighting back. I gave them less time to gather their things this time, and forced them outside of the country walls. So now, they spend their time focused, and alert. Meanwhile, I make sure no real threats emerge from in here. From time to time they run low on one thing or another, so I let a few people back in to get stuff. So you see, they're safe this way, and much better off than had I let them languish.”

“That explains a lot. But, Ai, don't you think you should have let them make that decision for themselves?”

“Why?”

“Isn't it their right to do so?”

“But I'm smarter than them. I can keep them safe this way. And besides, you saw, they're happy!”

“... I see. And what about us? Why did you let us in?”

Ai sighed softly. “Honestly, I overlooked one flaw in my plan.”

“And you want us to fix it? Sorry, but we're not adventurers for hire. Just travellers.” She made to get up.

“I'm lonely.”

Kino stopped.

“With all the humans fighting me, I have no friends anymore. I let you in because I wanted some new ones.”

She sat back down.

“Ai...” she began, “We're travellers. We travel around the world, seeing different places. That doesn't make friendships with those that have to stay in one place a possibility.” Kino hugged her legs.

“But couldn't you stay here with me? Settle down?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is the third day.”

“What do you mean, the third day?”

“I stay in each country for exactly three days. I arrived the day before yesterday and stayed with the humans overnight. Then I met you yesterday. So today is the last day that I will be here.”

“But why can't you stay for longer?”

“Because that is my rule.”

“Why?”

“Because if I stay in one place... I would cease to be a traveller.”

Kino and Hermes were driving towards one of the gates to the country, opposite the one they came in from.

As they approached, Kino called out behind them.

“Goodbye, Ai.”

“Bye Ai!” Hermes followed suit.

There was no response.



“Hey! The gate is open!”

“What?! But it doesn't open!”

“Come look!”

“Someone's coming out!”

“A human?”

“And a motorrad?”

As Kino and Hermes left the walls of the country, a large crowd gathered outside to see what was going on. Soldiers held a line in front, some primitive guns aimed at the pair, as civilians tried to see what was happening from behind the wall of people. A surprisingly large number of people had gathered in such a short time.

“Hey! You! Who are you?” One of the soldiers called out. “No-one was supposed to have gone inside recently. And why do you have a motorrad?”

Kino put down Hermes' kickstand and raised her hands in peace. “Calm down. I'm a traveller – my name is Kino and this is Hermes.”

“A traveller? How did you get inside?!”

“Ai let us in.”

“This sounds suspicious. Come with us, and don't try any funny business!”

Kino smiled slightly as she wheeled Hermes after the soldier. “I wouldn't dream of it.”

The pair waited under heavy guard outside a large shanty town building. Then, an important looking man came out. Despite being dressed fairly raggedly like the rest, he still managed to give off an air of authority.

“Kino, Hermes, if you insist on using those names. We have discussed at length and concluded that you are robots sent to infiltrate our people by the artificial intelligence Ai. This is a crime punishable by death.”

With a nod from the man, the soldiers all aimed their guns at Kino and Hermes.

“Is there anything you'd like to say before you die? As much as a robot *can* die, anyway.”

Kino smiled. “Yes, actually. It's a good idea to check travellers for

knives and guns if you plan on trying to kill them.”

“What nonsense are you-”

A red dot appeared on his forehead moments before he died. The soldiers barely had a chance to react before knives flew out in all directions from where Kino was standing, causing each one to drop their guns and a few of the more aggressive ones to collapse, choking on their own blood.

As the soldiers struggled to react, Kino climbed back onto Hermes and started his engine. She nodded to the corpse of the no longer quite so important man.

“Goodbye. It was nice to meet you.”

When Hermes finally spoke up, they had nearly reached the forest on the other side of the valley.

“Kino?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think Ai was right?”

“Right about what?”

“Humans needing an enemy, and keeping them fighting her.”

Kino thought for a moment. “I think... She was right that people need some kind of enemy in their lives. But I think she took it too literally.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, that enemy doesn't have to be someone you fight. It could be a rival that you try to outdo, or even just needing to work. If someone has everything handed to them without needing to work for it, they'll get lazy. Remember that one country we came across, where no-one needed to work, but they did so anyway?”

“Hmm...” Hermes thought for a moment. “Oh yeah, that place with the weird platforms that took us places. Where they stressed themselves out on purpose!”

“That's the one. Maybe they were on to something.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“Good.”

“Oh, and Kino? One more thing.”

“Yes, Hermes?”

“When we left, Ai seemed pretty upset. Do you think she'll be okay?”

It took a long time for Kino to respond, and when she finally did it was with just three words.

“I don't know.”

