

**Consumption, Control, and Maternal Fascism:
A Critical Introduction to and Translation of
Mariko Ōhara's *Hybrid Child***

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April 2015

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation is a critical introduction to and translation of Mariko Ōhara's novel, *Hybrid Child* (1990). *Hybrid Child* was written in Japanese between 1984 and 1990, at the height of Japan's bubble economy. During this period, high-tech consumer capitalism came to be intertwined with new types of social control through the technological "management" of all aspects of life. *Hybrid Child* is the story of a cyborg weapon called "Sample B #3" who develops an independent will and escapes from the military. Overlapping with the military's ensuing pursuit of its own out-of-control creation are several other story threads, including a rebellious daughter and her mother's relentless desire to contain her, a maternal "city computer" who simultaneously cares for and destroys the population, and a Military Priest who is progressing through his eight-hundred year lifespan in reverse.

Hybrid Child presents an exploration from various angles of what its author, Mariko Ōhara, elsewhere calls "maternal fascism." "Fascism" is a loaded term, with connotations of social control in the context of mobilization for total or unending war; it is at odds with the generosity, selflessness, and nurturing care characteristic of idealized visions of the maternal in modern Japan. In *Hybrid Child*, maternal care is presented as continuous with regimes of social control, militarist mobilization, and techno-scientific domination. In Ōhara's novel, both maternal care and militarist domination imply common strategies of over-management (of individuals and/or populations) and spatial enclosure (of the beloved daughter, of the military threat). In my introduction to the novel, I examine the ways in which *Hybrid Child* dramatizes the intersections and overlaps between militarist and maternal regimes of control, in particular in the context of the *kanri shakai* ("managed society") and *shōhi shakai* ("consumer society") of 1980s Japan. Finally, I consider the ways in which the novel's emphasis on the corporeal invites us to consider gaps and possibilities from which to negotiate within or move beyond such regimes of control, into new conceptions of care.

Résumé

Cette thèse est une introduction critique et une traduction du roman de Mariko Ôhara, *Hybrid Child* (1990). *Hybrid Child* a été écrit en japonais entre 1984 et 1990, durant le pic de la bulle économique au Japon. Pendant cette période, le capitalisme de consommation de hautes technologies s'était entrelacé avec de nouveaux types de contrôle social à travers la "gestion" technologique de tous les aspects de la vie. *Hybrid Child* est l'histoire d'une arme cyborg appelée "Sample B #3" qui développe une volonté indépendante et s'enfuit de l'armée. Dans la poursuite de l'armée après sa création incontrôlable viennent se tisser plusieurs histoires, dont celle d'une fille rebelle et de sa mère qui désire incessamment l'enfermer, un "ordinateur de ville" maternel qui en même temps prend soin et détruit la population, et un "prêtre militaire" qui passe à travers sa durée de vie de huit cents ans à l'envers.

Hybrid Child présente une exploration sous plusieurs angles de ce que l'auteure, Mariko Ôhara, nomme ailleurs le "fascisme maternel". "Fascisme" est un terme chargé, avec des connotations de contrôle social dans un contexte de mobilisation pour une guerre totale ou sans fin; en désaccord avec la générosité, l'altruisme et les soins maternels qui caractérisent les visions idéalisées du maternel dans le Japon moderne. Or, dans *Hybrid Child*, les soins maternels sont présentés en continuité avec les régimes de contrôle social, les mobilisations militaristes et la domination technoscientifique. Dans le roman de Ôhara, les soins maternels et la domination militaire tous deux impliquent des stratégies communes de sur-gestion (de l'individu/ou de la population) et d'enclos spatial (de la fille adorée, du danger militaire). Dans mon introduction au roman, j'examine les façons par lesquelles *Hybrid Child* dramatise les intersections et chevauchements entre les régimes de contrôle militaires et maternels, en particulier dans le contexte de *kanri shakai* ("la société gérée") et *shōhi shakai* ("la société de consommation") du Japon des années 1980. Dernièrement, j'explore comment l'emphase mise sur le corporel dans le roman nous invite à localiser des failles à travers lesquelles nous aurions peut-être la possibilité d'aller au-delà ou de négocier à l'intérieur de ces régimes de contrôle, vers de nouvelles conceptions de la notion de soins.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the support of a great many wonderful hearts and minds. I would like to thank Professor Adrienne Hurley, whose guidance, encouragement, and support have been invaluable to me, and whose commitment to re-thinking ways of being in the world has taught me more than any course or any book. I would like to thank Professor Thomas Lamarre, whose suggestions, feedback, and support have been of immense value to me in working through this project. I am also grateful to have had the opportunity to study at Nihon University in Japan under the attentive supervision of Professor Maiko Odaira.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the friends and colleagues who have kindly been my readers, consultants, and cheerleaders throughout this process, including Melanie Coughlin, Yasuyo Isobe, Atsuko Kondo, Youngran Kō, Jessica Wurster, Steffen Jowett, Brian Bergstrom, Carmen Teeple-Hopkins, Avrom Coodin, and Akané D'Orangeville. I would like to give a special thank you to Daigo Shima for all of his patience, comments, and support throughout the translation process.

Thank you to my parents, Darlene and Ron, and my sister Robin, whose love and support sustain me in all that I do. Thanks too to “the Heart Trust,” including Adrienne, Freda, Liam, Dave, and Maria.

The research for this project was made possible with support from the Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FQRSC) and the Japan Foundation.

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Consumption, Control, and Maternal Fascism:

A Critical Introduction to Mariko Ōhara's *Hybrid Child*

Hybrid Child and Maternal Fascism

The novel *Hybrid Child* (1990) presents an exploration from various angles of what its author, Mariko Ōhara, elsewhere calls “maternal fascism.” “Fascism” is a loaded term, with connotations of social control in the context of mobilization for total or unending war; it is a concept seemingly at odds with idealized visions of the maternal in modern Japan, which emphasize women’s generosity, selflessness, and nurturing care. In *Hybrid Child*, however, maternal care is presented as continuous with regimes of social control, militarist mobilization, and techno-scientific domination. Both maternal control and social control invoke the rhetoric of “care” in their emphasis on the security, safety, health, and wellbeing of children or populations, while also employing common strategies of over-management (of individuals and/or populations) and spatial enclosure (of the beloved child, of the military threat). By drawing links between the maternal and fascism, Ōhara highlights not only the ways in which social control had come to be expressed in terms of “care” and “well-being” in the 1980s in Japan, but also the ways in which certain types of power had come to permeate every aspect of political and private life.

By way of introduction to my translation of the novel that follows, I wish here to examine the ways in which *Hybrid Child* dramatizes the intersections and overlaps between what Foucault calls “governmentality” or “pastoral power” and maternal regimes of control, in particular in the context of the *kanri shakai* (“managed society” or “controlled society”) and *shōhi shakai* (“consumer society”) of 1980s Japan. Finally, I consider the ways in which the novel invites us to locate gaps through which to move beyond or negotiate within such

regimes of control, and thus to consider alternate conceptions of care. Here, I consider the figure of the hybrid as a strategic model of tactical survival in postmodern Japan, as well as Michel Foucault's notion of "the care of the self." Let me begin, however, with a brief overview of speculative fiction in Japan, the author, and her work.

Mariko Ōhara and Speculative Fiction in Japan

The post World War Two period in Japan saw a massive importation of Anglo-American speculative and science fiction (Harada 134), as well as what Takayuki Tatsumi sees as the emergence of four distinct groups or "generations" of SF writers in Japan up to the end of the twentieth century ("Generations and Controversies"; "Editorial Afterword"). According to Tatsumi, the first generation of SF writers of the 1960s – the "Founding Fathers" of Japanese SF – were strongly influenced by Anglo-American SF of the 1950s and included (male) writers such as Kōbō Abe, Osamu Tezuka, Shin'ichi Hoshi, Yoshio Aramaki, Yasutaka Tsutsui, and Sakyō Komatsu ("Editorial Afterword" 476). While Tatsumi does not mention them, women writers such as Yumiko Kurahashi and Taeko Kōno had also begun writing as early as the 1960s, incorporating fantastical elements and explorations of gender into their work. The second generation of writers of the 1970s relied less on Anglo-American models and depicted instead "their own reality" ("Editorial Afterword" 477). Here, in addition to male writers such as Chiaki Kawamata and Kiyoshi Kasai, Tatsumi mentions the women writers Moto Hagio, Kaoru Kurimoto, and Izumi Suzuki. Hagio was a pioneer of modern *shōjo manga* (girls' comics); Kurimoto was a forerunner of homosexual love and *yaoi* literature (Nagaike 3); and Suzuki's fiction explored gender politics through speculative themes such as female separatism (see Kotani, "Space, Body, and Aliens"). Tatsumi's "third generation" of writers of the 1980s "were in a position to exploit the varied

cultural milieus and generic heritage of sf" ("Editorial Afterword" 477), and included male authors such as Chōhei Kanbayashi, Katsuhiro Ōtomo, and Ryō Mizumi, as well as female writers such as Saori Kumi, Hiroe Suga, Motoko Arai, and Mariko Ōhara. Arai, for example, is known for her experiments with a colloquial, girlish narrative style of writing, while Ōhara, as I will discuss further below, employs mythical-religious and cyborg themes from which to explore questions of gender and subjectivity, often through striking narrative styles.

Tatsumi's "fourth generation" of the late 1980s and 1990s "take for granted the postmodern modes of cyberpunk, cyborg feminism, and 'Yaoi poetics' (the Japanese equivalent of K/S [Kirk/Spock] or 'slash' fiction) as well as other sf traditions, and also testify to the hyper-capitalist conjunction of Japanese and Anglo-American sf" ("Editorial Afterword" 477). Tatsumi includes male writers such as Gorō Masaki and Norio Nakai among this group, and female writers such as Yumi Matsuo and Miyuki Miyabe.

Mariko Ōhara thus falls into what Tatsumi has called the "third generation" of SF writers in Japan. However, in spite of her significant contribution to Japanese science fiction in this period, very few studies of her work exist in Japanese or English. Ōhara, born in 1959 in Osaka, Japan, is perhaps best known as a science fiction writer, although she also writes for manga, video games, and radio dramas. She also chairs the nomination committee for the Japan SF Award, and writes science fiction and fantasy reviews for the Japanese *Asahi* newspaper (McCaffrey et al. 128). Several of her shorter works have been translated into English, including "Girl" (translated by Alfred Birnbaum and appearing in both *Speculative Japan 1* and *Monkey Brain Sushi*), "The Mental Female" (translated by Kazuko Behrens and Gene van Troyer and appearing in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*) and "The Whale that Sang on the Milky Way Network" (translated by Nancy H. Ross and appearing in *Speculative*

Japan 2). Her debut work, “Hitori de Aruite Itta Neko” (“The Cat Who Walked Away Alone”) won honourable mention in the Sixth (1980) Hayakawa Science Fiction Contest. She was awarded the 1991 Seiun Award for *Haiburiddo Chairudo* (Hybrid Child), and the 1994 Nihon SF Taisho Award for *Sensō wo Enjita Kamigamitachi* (Gods Who Banded War).

The majority of Ōhara’s science fiction works appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of Japan’s bubble economy and its subsequent collapse. Many of her works dramatize the unforeseen challenges of the “techno-magic abundance” (McCaffrey et al. 132) brought by “advanced” consumer capitalism. Such abundance, Ōhara has argued, ultimately “makes people childish,” while the hyper-competitive capitalist logic of creation on which such abundance hinges comes to be “closely intertwined with the logic of war; that is, the logic of destruction” (McCaffrey et al. 132). In a similar vein, Ōhara presents the maternal as a simultaneously creative and destructive force that justifies its control in terms of selfless generosity. This ethos, Ōhara has suggested, can perhaps be best summed up in the familiar maternal phrase “but I’m only doing this for *you*” (“2777 Nen” 189, my emphasis). In an interview, Ōhara states:

In general, the myth still exists that motherhood is something great, excellent. The mother figure in myself, however, is really nightmarish, a kind of destroyer silently invading others with a weapon called love, rather than kindness and generosity. All women, including you and me, have destructive motherhood, which plunders and kills someone's heart with “generosity.”
(McCaffrey et al. 130)

Indeed, this is one of the central themes explored in *Hybrid Child*.

Hybrid Child (*Haiburiddo Chairudo*) consists of three novella-like stories of varying

length. The first novella, “Hybrid Child” (“Haiburiddo Chairudo”), was serialized in the December 1984 edition of *SF Magajin* (*SF Magazine*). The second, “Farewell” (“Kokubetsu no Aisatsu”), appeared in the February 1985 edition, and the third, “Aquaplanet” (“Akuapuranetto”), was published in several instalments from January 1989 to February 1990. I have based my translation on Hayakawa Shobō’s 1993 paperback edition in which the three novellas appear together, in accordance with the author’s intentions.¹

The narrative style of the novel is striking in its reliance less on coherence, linearity, and plot than on producing certain kinds of affects. As Kazue Harada (155) argues, “any attempt to render the ‘plot’ in a seamless description reduces it to the ridiculous.” Ōhara has noted her love of “literary and linguistic experiments,” and while she is “aware of the visual impact” of her work, it is the “things that can be done only in fiction” that draw her to the medium (McCaffrey et al. 133). *Hybrid Child* makes rich use of puns and word play, as well as fluctuations in focalization and temporal location that make it a challenging and richly layered novel that plays on the tensions between subjective alienation and connection, and between the beautiful and the grotesque.

The “hybrid child” of the title refers to the individuals of “Sample B Group,” which consists of fourteen cyborg weapons created as a last-ditch effort to save humanity from total annihilation in the context of a centuries-long war between the Allied Forces of Humanity and the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines. Members of Sample B Group are bio-mechanical combat units composed of mutable ceramic bones and powered by nuclear fusion engines. They are able to “sample” (“eat”) any organic or inorganic substance

¹ All quotations from the novel itself are taken from my own translation that follows this introduction. Page numbers given correspond to the published Hayakawa Shobō 1993 original Japanese edition.

and then adopt its appearance. They store “memories” of the samples in their cells, which allows them to access and manifest a range of bodily forms as needed or desired. The “hybrid children” of Sample B Group are virtually immortal; they cannot die unless ordered to do so by the military. They possess artificial intelligence, but neither will nor emotion – at least in theory.

However, one member of Sample B Group, simply labeled Sample B #3, develops an autonomous will and escapes from a secure military compound. The escape of Sample B #3 sets the story in motion, for the military organization that spawned this “hybrid child” must then track down, capture, and contain the very threat that it has produced. *Hybrid Child* thus explores a theme that has a venerable lineage in fiction, and particularly in science fiction: technology out of control. Langdon Winner writes, “The idea of autonomous technology has found expression in countless novels, poems, plays, and motion pictures [. . .] Through some strange process a man-made creature, machine, or advanced system takes on lifelike properties – consciousness, will, and spontaneous motion – which place it in rebellion against the human community (30-31). *Hybrid Child*, insofar as the technological threat tends to adopt animal and human form, presents a variation on the theme of the monster, whose lineage dates back (at least) to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Generally speaking, because the monster is a product of human machinations, it proves to be as much a victim as an agent of technological terror. *Hybrid Child* plays on these themes, highlighting questions of “freedom” and “autonomy” in the context of “man’s” godlike control over “his” creations.

Ōhara’s novel presents an additional twist: its technological threat or monster becomes combined with an abused daughter. The escaped Sample B #3 “samples” the body

of a seven-year-old girl, Jonah, who has been abused and killed by her mother, and thus takes on her form. Thus “man’s” control over what has been given birth (ie. “his” cultural, technological creations) overlaps with the mother’s control of her daughter (ie. her biological creation). By combining the two “products” of excessive care and control, that is, the artificial life form (Sample B #3) and the daughter (Jonah), the novel doubles and redoubles the paradoxical mixture of victim and agent of terror. Thus maternal care and military operations come to work together, gradually becoming inextricably entangled. In combining the maternal and fascism, *Hybrid Child* explores the operations of a form of power directed at what has been given birth, that is at life itself. Maternal fascism prolongs and expands its dominion by giving birth to autonomous life forms whose autonomy at once challenges and fuels the regime of control.

Several story threads unfold from here. Interwoven with the story of Sample B #3 (who has become simultaneously an escaped daughter and an escaped military threat) is the story of a Military Priest, destined to be the “savior” of humanity in its battle against the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines, and in “Aquaplanet,” a maternal “city computer” who simultaneously cares for and destroys the population with her crushing “love” and “generosity.”

Pastoral Power, Governmentality and Kanri (“Management” or “Control”)

In the context of Japan, such forms of all-encompassing power for the “care” of the population recall the paradigm of the “managed society,” or “*kanri shakai*,” which became a buzzword in Japan from the 1980s. Indeed, the mother’s control of her daughter in *Hybrid Child* parallels the *kanri shakai* of 1980s Japan, which required “unmanageable” bodies in

order for the regime of “management” to maintain its own *raison d’être*, couched in terms not of domination but of care and well-being. At the same time, the “consumer society,” or “*shōhi shakai*,” also reached new heights, made possible by the same techno-capitalist progress at the root of the *kanri shakai*. The double emphasis in *Hybrid Child* — on regimes of care and regimes of consumption — points to an overlap between these two social regimes, the managed society and the consumer society. *Hybrid Child* can thus tell us a good deal about how consumerism and the management of populations came to work hand-in-hand in the period in which the novel was being written.

Kanri is commonly translated in English as “management” or “control,” while *kanri shakai* (“managed society” or “controlled society”) refers to the management of populations that was made possible with the rapid advances in information technology in the postwar period. According to Kitazawa Masakuni, “The term *kanri shakai* [. . .] refers to a society administered through highly sophisticated mechanisms for forecasting, planning, and control. Such mechanisms are capable of quantitative analysis of data and compilation of a set of optimum conditions for that society’s well-being” (quoted in Koschmann 415). As the reference to “well-being” suggests, in the *kanri shakai*, techno-scientific management of populations is couched in terms of “care” which is intended for the benefit of the population rather than for purposes of control *per se*.

The power of *kanri* appears, at least initially, to be above all a matter of containing or enclosing, of ensuring that things are put into and kept in their proper places. The word *kanri* itself evokes governmental forms of organizing and ordering individuals and populations; the *kan* in *kanri* means “bureaucrat,” while the *ri* means “logic.” Therefore, *kanri* relates to bureaucratic logic (Lummis and Kogawa 43).

In *Hybrid Child*, maternal care is presented as a form of *kanri* that is focused on the control, enclosure, and containment of the *daughter* in particular. This drive to “control” or “manage” unruly female autonomy through containment recalls the early feminist Toshiko Kishida’s 1883 speech, entitled “Daughters in Boxes” (in Freedman Ed. 99-103), for which Kishida was arrested and jailed for eight days (Sievers 41). The “boxes” that Kishida referred to were both the physical boxes of enclosed spaces such as the home, as well as the intellectual boxes to which girls were confined through restrictive normative gender roles and a limited education focused on “feminine” arts such as flower arranging. Importantly, Kishida argued that these “boxes” were most often constructed or reinforced by parents and other “caregivers” who genuinely believed that they were doing the best for their daughters. For Kishida, these “boxes” functioned to prevent young women from developing their full potential as human beings – like trying to grow “flowers in salt” (Sievers xi). The late 19th century in Japan was a period of rapid social change as the country was thrust into a period of modern state-building and imperialist competition for territory, and the structure of the modern family and gender roles were pivotal to such projects. The focus of Kishida’s concern in 1883 was the ways in which the young girl’s mind was not allowed to develop fully as a result of various types of “containment” rooted in education (or lack thereof). Japanese society, Kishida suggested, needed fully intellectually and socially developed women in order to contribute to the development of the modern nation-state.

In *Hybrid Child*, Jonah is also a “boxed in” daughter, confined within a tightly controlled house, and eventually within a virtually indestructible coffin. However, in *Hybrid Child*, the daughter in a box is only half the story. After Jonah’s death, her mother transforms Jonah into the house itself, in the form of the house computer. As I will explore

further in the following sections, the daughter also *becomes* a box, as it were. We might think of this oscillation of the daughter's body between contained and container in terms of a combination of techniques of management (*kanri*) and regimes of consumption (*shōhi*) in the late twentieth century.

By the 1980s, Japanese society had entered another period of rapid social change as the "bubble economy" brought unprecedented levels of economic affluence and consumer lifestyles that would have been unimaginable thirty years before in the aftermath of World War II. In the 1980s in Japan, the *kanri shakai* and the *shōhi shakai* came to work together in complex and multi-faceted ways. *Shōhi* (consumption) operated as a sort of ideal supplement or reciprocal determination for *kanri* (management or control). This combination paradoxically offered women new avenues of self-actualization and self-expression through consumer choices and lifestyles, while subjecting them to regimes of care, and establishing them as its principle agents.

Foucault's notions of pastoral power and governmentality are useful for understanding this tricky combination of care and consumption, of subjection and self-cultivation. Foucault's interest in power formations lies in their relationship to subject-formation. In contrast to Foucault's earlier work on "disciplinary power" and the production of "docile bodies," the notion of governmentality places greater emphasis on the multi-directionality of power relations. Governmentality includes not only "top-down" forms of power commonly associated with "governing," but also the government of the self, of children, of communities, of the sick, and of souls (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 790). Governmentality presumes a certain degree of freedom, where "free" subjects are those "individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which

several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized” (“The Subject and Power” 790). Governmentality emphasizes the role of autonomous individuals in controlling and governing themselves as active agents in negotiations of power and subject-formation. Governmentality is therefore not merely a matter of how subjects are passively “governed,” but how individuals govern (and care for) themselves.

Pastoral power is rooted in Christianity, the rise of which introduced a new code of ethics distinct from that of the ancient world. Pastoral power was organized around a church, and represented a form of power whose ultimate aim was “to assure individual salvation in the next world” (“The Subject and Power” 783). Now, however, the aim of pastoral power is to ensure salvation in *this* world, where “salvation” has come to mean “health, well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, [and] protection against accidents” (“The Subject and Power” 784). Thus, while the Christian ecclesiastical institution itself has weakened, its function has spread. Pastoral power has become all-encompassing, having extended from a single institution (the church) into the whole social body, including the family, education, medicine, and so forth (“The Subject and Power” 784). The state and its institutions have thus come to perform the role that the church once had.

In their focus on ensuring the “well-being” of individuals and populations in all areas of life, governmentality and pastoral power invoke a rhetoric of “care” akin to Ōhara’s notion of maternal fascism. Foucault’s account provides a key to understanding the paradox that emerges again and again in *Hybrid Child*: woman as contained and as container. Because the combined regime of *kanri* (control) and *shōhi* (consumption) demands a high degree of freedom on the part of its subjects, it cannot simply or only contain them in the classic disciplinary fashion, confining them via social segmentation. It

must also allow its subjects to operate as containers. It is the part of the challenge of *Hybrid Child* to demonstrate how and why women's bodies and the maternal come to play a central role in such a regime of power: the maternal body is, in effect, socially contained via social segmentation, and yet at the same time functions as a container. The paradox is that, via the material body and mother-daughter relationships, practices of care are at once a form of freedom and a form of entrapment.

Kanri and Shōhi ("control" and "consumption") in "Hybrid Child"

The first novella, "Hybrid Child," revolves around the story of Jonah and her mother, simply called "Mama" in the novel, and Sample B #3, who has taken refuge in Mama's house after escaping from the military. The overlapping of Jonah and Sample B #3 highlights the idea that maternal care and militaristic control have a common enemy – the freedom and autonomy of the offspring, that is, both the daughter and Sample B #3. In "Hybrid Child," Mama's control of her daughter is primarily enacted through consumption, dramatized through metaphors of food and eating, and through physical containment in the space of the house.

Jonah's mother herself cycles through bouts of anorexia (excessive control of the body) and binge eating (lack of control or breakdown in control). This gestures at the ways in which *self-management* characterizes pastoral power and governmentality. However, the problem of the maternal introduces a different inflection, however, because "body care" for women in particular was (and is) associated with "body control"; that is, maintaining "proper" bodily boundaries and managing what and how much may enter and leave the body.

Mama's care and control of her daughter is complicated by the fact that Jonah is Mama's clone. Thus Mama's control of her daughter is an extension of self-control, whereby Mama sees Jonah as an "excess" of her own self: "The daughter had been born into the world in the exact same body as her 'mother,' from her mother's cloned cells [. . .] Her mother had often said to her, with a combination of hatred and affection, 'you are my excrement'" (292).

Mama seeks to control her daughter through what, when, and how Jonah eats. Maternal care is perhaps first and foremost associated with food, beginning with the breast, and continuing with feminine-coded domestic labor such cooking. Mama exercises power over her daughter both by forcing her to eat "strong herbs" and other foods that she knows are "difficult for children to eat" (54-5), as well as by withholding food. When Mama does not feed her, Jonah must pilfer food to survive – a near-impossible task when her mother is in an anorexic phase and there is little or no food to be found in the house.

Mama slowly starves Jonah, affecting her ability to grow. The stunted bonsai flower that Mama keeps on the dining room table is a powerful image of Jonah's stunted body, reminiscent of Kishida's "daughters in boxes" and "flowers in salt." Jonah's inability to grow, however, is not simply the result of a "lack of" maternal care, but is rather a characteristic of it. Since the maternal regime requires bodies for which to care, if Mama can prevent her daughter from developing a mature, adult, autonomous body, she will be able to "care for her" forever and thus exercise permanent control over her. "Mama," Jonah says, "tried to keep me little forever" (40).

Mama also exercises control over Jonah by physically "containing" her within the house. The house is isolated in "a place too deserted to be called the suburbs" (4); it is cut

off, enclosed, and “autotoxic” (15, 21). Nonetheless, the house is technologically “connected” to the city for purposes of commercial activity and state monitoring. Mama orders “cell books” that are delivered electronically through her terminal, and the house is “incorporated into the state’s surveillance system” (25). Jonah’s only social contact is with Mama and Mama’s occasional guests, before whom Jonah is taunted and tormented. Finally, when Mama sends Jonah, starved and emaciated, out to run errands on a snowy winter day, Jonah “accidentally” dies. Her body is then confined in a coffin in the basement, also presented in terms of Mama’s “love” for Jonah:

Jonah’s mother had been insane – and she had loved her daughter. The material that Saga Electronics had developed for its anti-EMP armour had caused quite a stir in the mass media at the time; it was more expensive than diamond. The coffin that Jonah’s mother had ordered for her daughter’s dead body was the most expensive there was – made of this same material. (81-2)

The mother’s “love” for her daughter is thus expressed in terms of physical containment (in a virtually indestructible coffin) and commercial consumption (more expensive than diamond), as Mama literally turns Jonah into a “daughter in a box.”

Since maternal control requires bodies for which to “care,” Jonah’s death poses a problem: a dead daughter no longer requires maternal care. Therefore, in order to ensure the continuation of the regime of “care,” Mama “gives birth” to a new life form that will simultaneously challenge and fuel her need for control, by replicating Jonah in the form of the house computer. Mama thus ‘resurrects’ Jonah in the form of sentient architecture: Jonah’s consciousness is used to control the functions of Mama’s house. The mother thereby transforms the daughter into the house itself, the “container” that had once “contained” her.

The house becomes Jonah's new "body"; its cameras become her eyes, and the sound system her ears and voice. Having transformed her daughter into a sentient house, Mama would seemingly now exercise total control over her daughter. However, even as a "house," Jonah continues to rebel against her mother, ironically also becoming the structure that encloses and contains Mama herself.

The arrival of the escaped Sample B #3, who takes refuge in Mama's house in the form of a domestic animal called a "dadazim," marks the point at which the enclosed space of the house is disrupted. After Mama falls down the stairs and dies, Sample B #3 "samples" (eats) Mama, thereby taking on her form and appearance. Sample B #3 is therefore also a body that "contains" other bodies, making them synonymous with the "container" that is itself. Here, the overlapping of Mama and Jonah becomes more complex, as Jonah (the house) refuses to allow Sample B #3 (in the form of Mama) to escape, locking the doors and even setting Sample B #3/Mama (and simultaneously "herself" – the house) on fire. Thus Jonah herself comes to play the role that her mother once had, in reverse.

At the end of the novella, the military encircles the house in its quest to capture Sample B #3. As Jonah's "body" (the house) burns, she suggests an escape for Sample B #3 that will ensure the survival of Jonah herself – that Sample B #3 "eat" her body, which is hidden away in the coffin in the basement. The novella thus concludes with the literalization of the "threat" of the autonomous daughter (Jonah) and that of autonomous technology (Sample B #3), as the two "become one."

By being "eaten," Jonah's "containment" in another body, that of Sample B #3 (and Jonah's thereby becoming synonymous with that body), operates in her favor. At the same time, consumption (*shōhi*) – the mode through which control (*kanri*) is effected – is also the

means by which Sample B #3 effects “her” escape. Hybridity here plays a key role in Sample B #3’s ability to adapt and survive within the constraints under which it/she must live.

Finally, the coffin, made of anti-EMP materials, survives the EMP bomb that the military drops on the house. Since Sample B #3 has entered the coffin to “eat” Jonah’s body when the military drops the bomb, it is thus ultimately the coffin, the very “container” which represents Mama’s desire to keep Jonah permanently contained, that ironically becomes the vehicle of her escape.

Freedom and Containment in “Farewell”

It is important to note here that *Hybrid Child* does not reduce “the maternal” – or the violence of maternal care – to “mothers,” or to “women.” In the 1995 edition of the Japanese journal *New Feminism Review* on “maternal fascism,” Ōhara included a short piece in which she states, “For me, ‘the maternal’ simultaneously represents an almost mythological capacity both to sustain all things, as well as a destructive will to dominate.” She continues, “I believe that all people possess aspects of the maternal, irrespective of age or gender” (189). In the second novella, “Farewell,” it is an old man who takes on the role of “maternal caregiver.” Here too, the process by which *kanri* (“management” or control) and *shōhi* (consumption) overlap is further developed and complicated.

Still in the form of the seven-year-old Jonah, Sample B #3, who escaped from Mama’s house at the end of the previous novella, has once again taken refuge in an isolated mansion in the mountains with an old man and his “housekeeper,” a tin robot. The arrival of the little girl is a blessing to the old man, who has lost his great-granddaughter and is thus in need of a replacement for whom to “care.”

As in “Hybrid Child,” food and consumption are central themes in “Farewell.” In contrast to Mama, however, the old man feeds Jonah well; he is a “gourmet” (98) with his own vineyard and pantries stocked with foodstuffs from various planets. Although it takes time for Jonah (whom the old man has named “Mari” after his dead great-granddaughter) to learn that she need not filch food in order to survive, she eventually enjoys such lavish meals as *sole à la meunière* and even wine. Although both Mama and the old man’s “care” are articulated through food and consumption, the old man feeds and cares for her while Mama had starved her.

However, in the six years that Jonah lives with the old man, she does not physically grow. Thus it is not “lack of care,” but the regime of “care” itself which once again functions to stunt her growth, literalized in her inability to mature physically: “It was the old man’s excessive love that had caused her to stop growing [. . .] Excessive love functions as a growth inhibitor” (96). In the six years that Sample B #3 resides with the old man, she remains as she is – a seven-year-old girl – throughout.

In terms of physical enclosure, the old man’s mansion parallels that of Mama’s – it is large, extravagant, secluded, and “accessible only by aircar” (110). As is the case with Mama in “Hybrid Child”, the old man and Jonah have little contact with the outside world. However, Jonah does not seek to escape from the old man’s mansion, at least not initially. Indeed, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the abuse that Jonah faced at the hands of her mother, which ultimately results in her death, Jonah seeks out a mother-figure, both in the old man and in the tin robot. At the same time, the “enclosure” of the house represents both the “confinement” of Jonah/Sample B #3, as well as her refuge.

With the arrival of an army major at the old man’s mansion in a military “aircar,”

Sample B #3/Jonah is once again faced with the possibility of being identified and captured. However, it is not only the old man's guest, the army major, who represents the militarist regime which seeks to entrap her. With the arrival of his guest, the old man reveals to Jonah/Sample B #3 for the first time that he himself was once a high-ranking officer in the military. Thus the militarist and maternal come to be intertwined in the character of the old man, and Jonah/Sample B #3, who had hoped "that these peaceful, carefree days would last forever" (98), is forced to consider her means of escape once again.

In "Hybrid Child," Jonah was transformed into a house, the "container" that represented her confinement and the limits placed on her autonomy. In "Farewell," Jonah takes on the form of the military aircar – again, the vehicle that represents the threat of her containment. This time, however, the transformation is not imposed on her from the outside; she is not "containerized" in an effort to contain her absolutely. Rather, Sample B #3/Jonah unwittingly samples (tastes) the "aircar," not realizing that it is a military vehicle:

The girl felt regret like never before – she had sampled a military plane.

Even a ten-millimeter hole high up in the wings would be spotted easily by the highly skilled mechanics at the military base. They would track the bloodstains and fingerprints she left behind. Eventually, it would lead them back to the name "Jonah Sano," and they would recall the incident of forty years before. (90)

Initially, then, Jonah worries that the DNA traces that she has left on the aircar will lead to her discovery and capture. However, the fact that she sampled the military aircar – and will thus be able to take on its form and fly – is ultimately her means of escape. This illustrates one of the central tensions of *Hybrid Child*. That is, consumption simultaneously

functions as a means of control from the outside, while also being harnessed as a means of exercising power from within the system itself.

Here and throughout the novel, as a “hybrid” and a “sampler,” Sample B #3 highlights what Kotani (“Techno-Gothic Japan” 196) has described as postmodern strategies of assimilation and adaptation, as well as Japanese women’s complex relationship with a consumer culture (*shōhi shakai*) that simultaneously enacted new types of social and bodily control *and* presented new and multi-layered avenues of expression, freedom, and choice. This paradox in which freedom to consume-contain and being contained become two faces of one regime is also clearly inscribed in the trope of hybridity.

The title of the novel, “Hybrid Child,” and the appellation of Sample B Group as such, draw attention to the underlying paradox of this regime of power. On the one hand, the members of Sample B Group are “children,” highlighting their position as the cultural creation of “man” (it is indeed a male character, most commonly referred to simply as “Him” throughout the novel, who is responsible for their creation), while also evoking immaturity, innocence, and the need for maternal “care” and “control.” On the other hand, Sample B Group are “hybrids,” which seems to impart to them a high degree of freedom in relation to their bodies, and which seems always to offer the promise of escape from the regime of care and confinement.

The members of Sample B Group are a particular type of hybrid; that is, they are *sampling* creatures that may endlessly and limitlessly re-make themselves. As Kotani (“Techno-Gothic Japan” 194-5) has pointed out, as “sampling” creatures, Sample B Group reflect “the Japanese postmodern cultural matrix, in which the post- ‘80s high-tech principles of sampling, remixing, and cutting-up disclose the socio-political intersections

between western and Japanese ‘simulationist’ culture.” Kotani argues that the hybrid child is a potent metaphor not only for Japanese cultural life at the time, but especially for Japanese women, who “are all hybrid children, all cyborgs” (“Techno-Gothic Japan” 196). Japanese women, Kotani suggests, have taken on a kind of “cyborg subjectivity,” of radical adaptation as a means of survival. In other words, the figures of the hybrid and the cyborg stage the fundamental paradox of this regime of power combining *kanri* (control) and *shōhi* (consumption): the freedom to consume, to sample, to incorporate and thus to change shape, becomes a mode of survival. As such, this freedom is not outside the regime of power, but within it. The question then becomes what kinds of cracks, fissures, or fault lines might appear within the maternal fascistic regime of care. After all, as Foucault argues, there are always mechanisms for strategic confrontation and struggle within power formations: “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight” (“The Subject and Power” 794). Before I turn to other means of escape or flight, I would like to consider how *Hybrid Child* extends this regime of power to a planetary scale, extending the paradox of containing-contained to its seeming limit.

“Aquaplanet”: *Kanri* on a Planetary Scale

In the third novella, “Aquaplanet,” the intersections between maternal care and regimes of social control are explored primarily through the “smart city” rather than the house. The distinctions between urban and rural space that were emphasized in the first and second novellas (which take place on a different planet) have largely disappeared here; the techno-scientific management of the population has reached planetary proportions. The planet Caritas (a Latin term referring to the theological virtue of “charity”) is managed by

Milagros (meaning “miracle,” and associated with the Virgin Mary), the central computer and “mother” of all. “Maternal fascism” here has shifted from the individual maternal figure (Mama, the old man) and daughter, to the maternal “city computer” and her “children,” the population of Caritas. “Aquaplanet” has thus become the ultimate “*kanri shakai*,” or “managed society,” which appears to have no external material limits, from which it seems that nothing can escape.

In the context of humanity’s centuries-long war against the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines, Caritas is a space of networked observation and control. Milagros “sees” everything via her “Experience-Bodies,” surveillance and recording devices which lurk potentially anywhere, embedded in objects and creatures ranging from patrol ships, to dogs, to flowers, to robots: “*Milagros knows everything; she has eyes everywhere, and she never forgets anything*” (272 emphasis in original).

As with Mama and the old man in the previous two novellas, Milagros’ maternal love and care function to keep her “children” immature and dependent on her – “the system.” The city is the mother’s body or womb; the canals are her arteries; the food distribution network comprised of “suckling stations” (*honyūjo*) is her “breasts.” The maternal body is thus expanded into a great maternal matrix that spans the entire planet, rendering the population infantile:

It became painfully obvious how pampered they had been until now, how kind Milagros had been to them... and what pitiful creatures they had become as a result, totally unable to stand on their own [. . .]

She had long cared for the weak, faithful to her programming as a mother and with the fortitude of a machine. She had been such a kind mother – such a

dreadful mother, rendering humans incompetent. (253)

The overlapping of maternal “generosity” with the “generosity” of the militarist *kanri shakai* (“management society”) that concerns itself with the population’s “well being” leads to the same result as that of the individual examples explored in “Hybrid Child” and “Farewell” – the maintenance of a perpetually childish population dependent on the system of “care.” Here Ōhara explores an idea that appears in several of her works, that “techno-magic abundance makes people childish, and information accelerated by technological progress [. . .] ruins us seriously” (McCaffrey et al. 132).²

The violence of this type of “generosity,” represented by Milagros’ motherly care and control of the population of Caritas, is also expressed through consumption and containment, and operates directly on bodies. When individuals die on Caritas, they are re-absorbed into Milagros’ own “body” or “womb” (that is, her network, or the system). However, here too those contained, that is, those she has “swallowed,” are made synonymous with herself, with the container. They “become one” (419) with Milagros and live on within and as part of her system.

As in the previous two novellas, a militarist brand of maternal power extends to a place where it must fold back in on itself. Thus the bodies of the population are incorporated and assimilated back into the system itself. Milagros, however, is presented as an ideal mother who has simply “malfunctioned.” Central to the drama of “Aquaplanet” is the quest to “repair” Milagros, who is described as broken or mentally ill. But is this in fact a “glitch” in an otherwise well-functioning system, or is it an expression of the system’s own excesses?

² In this quotation, Ōhara is referring to her short story entitled “The Archaeology of War.”

In other words, as the novel extends this regime of power to the planetary and even interplanetary scale, it introduces a shift in the location of the search for freedom. Because consuming, assimilating, and hybridizing do not appear to afford a genuine flight and escape, the escape or flight is shifted to the level of the non-conscious – to errors or glitches in functioning within machines, and to ‘mental glitches’ or neurological and psychiatric disorders in the human. But does mental disorder really afford a genuine strategy of negotiation or flight?

Mental Illness: A Productive Glitch in a Healthy System?

The Japanese words *kurū* or *ki ga kurū* appear countless times throughout the novel. *Kurū*, and particularly *ki ga kurū*, refers to mental insanity – to be crazy, insane, mad, deranged, berserk, unhinged, raving. When applied to objects such as machines (usually just as *kurū* rather than *ki ga kurū*), it means “broken down,” “not functioning properly,” or “a little off” (as in the case of the time on one’s watch being slightly wrong, or the disturbance of one’s schedule, for example).

In *Hybrid Child*, the two primary mother figures, Mama (the human being) and Milagros (the intelligent machine=mother) are “crazy” or “broken down.” Both represent “maternal fascism” – maternal love and care “gone wrong.” However, are Mama and Milagros really mere “aberrations” of “properly functioning” regimes of care, or is their “craziness,” their “fascism,” a product of and defining feature of the regime itself? If so, then power would seem to extend into the smallest reaches of the body and into its non-conscious functioning.

Milagros, the city’s *kanri* computer that was designed to love and care for the

population, has broken down and gone “crazy.” The roots of her insanity are said to be “war neuroses” – a “learning disorder” resulting from an attack by “Adiaptron anti-computer weaponry that forcibly altered identification and decision-making functions” (307).

Although Milagros’ illness is described as a “learning disorder,” it expresses itself as a kind of “eating disorder,” in the sense that Milagros seeks to consume everything and thus to recuperate everything back into the originary womb:

She had been programmed to love the humans of this land. She was designed that way by her creator, her programmer. It formed the basis of what could be called her “instinct.”

In the beginning, she had swallowed up the people of the city when they died.

However, she soon became greedy. She began to kill people who interested her – thus gaining more and more experience, knowledge, memories, thoughts and feelings. She was learning, in her own way. She had been diagnosed with a learning disorder induced by war-neuroses, but that was not true. She was simply not doing things the correct way, that was all.

A serious malfunction had developed in her “love” frame.

Milagros was still killing now. She kept on killing, in order to experience the dead bodies. (415-6)

As a malfunction in her “love frame,” Milagro’s “illness” is linked to the way in which she “cares for” the population. However, it is important to point out that Milagros has not stopped loving the population of Caritas; rather, like Mama of “Hybrid Child,” she loves them “the wrong way” or “too much.” Milagros essentially kills and eats her own “children,”

the population of Caritas, not *in spite of* the fact that she loves them, but rather *because of* the fact that she loves them. While initially Milagros only “consumes” those who have died, she soon became “greedy” and began to kill them in her zeal to take in, experience, and “become one” with the people of Caritas. The character named Karl, dead and living within Milagros, describes the situation as follows:

‘She stores all the people who have died on Caritas within herself. Milagros learns. She learns everything. She makes them a part of herself, because she loves them. After all, lovers always say they want to “become as one,” don’t they? We can really do that here.’ (418-9)

Interestingly, it is the non-human character Adi who is first able to recognize that it may not be possible to repair Milagros. Adi, a humanoid member of the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines who has been abandoned on Caritas, is now working together with an organization called “the church” to repair Milagros before she wipes out the population entirely in her zeal to “love” them. It is Adi who recognizes that Milagros’ “breakdown” is inseparable from the worldview and ideologies that have created her. He realizes that, strictly speaking, Milagros may not in fact be “broken,” but rather expressing her own excesses:

The Adiaptronite could feel the depth of Milagros’ illness. It may in fact be impossible to repair her.

That was because Milagros’ system worked in subtle accordance with the religion of the Planetary Bible Belt. He was no expert on human religion, but he could see that it was a real nuisance, and riddled with deep-rooted problems. (419)

While Adi here poses a vague critique of Judeo-Christian notions of originary unity, the point he makes is that human political and social systems, and the technologies through which these systems function, are inextricably linked to the ideologies and power formations of the culture that has created those systems. As such, they will correspondingly reflect the problems and excesses inherent in those ideologies and formations. Thus Milagros' "breakdown" is not unlike the "Enlightened" West's descent into "madness" represented by fascism and Stalinism, "those two diseases of power" which "in spite of their own internal madness [. . .] used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our political rationality" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 779).

Here, mental disarray (or a glitch in the system or a virus), while presenting an exploration of a type of "limit experience," is not shown to be a force disruptive to the system. Since maternal care and domination operate primarily on *bodies* through *kanri* and *shōhi*, the psyche plays little role, provided there are still bodies available to be managed and cared for. As Milagros kills and consumes the people of Caritas, she re-incorporates them into her own system and allows them to "live on" within, and as part of, her artificial intelligence. The population is thus once again "containerized." They are not simply enclosed and contained in her "womb," but rather they "become one" (419) with Milagros – with the womb and with the *kanri* computer itself. Milagros thereby continues to "make live" a dead population so that they can continue to receive her "love" and "care." In doing so, Milagros "created a bypass that allowed her to circumvent the crime of murder" (465).

"Him": A Corporeal "Glitch" in Time and Space

When Adi points to the link between Milagros' illness and "the religion of the

Planetary Bible Belt,” he poses a critique of the ideological systems underlying modern forms of domination. Adi makes it explicit that Milagros’ desire to *consume* as an act of love and to bring all her children back into her womb by killing them, are acts of violence central to the ideologies and power formations that have created her.

This raises the question of the role of the Military Priest – Daniel Hess – generally referred to simply as “He” or “Him,” and the ways in which “He” fits into, or does not fit into, the regimes of “fascistic” maternal care laced throughout the novel.

“He” is born an eight hundred year old man, together with all of the knowledge from his lifetime, into his pre-determined role as Military Priest and savior of the world in humanity’s battle against the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines. “He” is described as suffering from “the extremely rare illness of temporal deformity” (368); he is moving through his own life in reverse, growing progressively younger. He does not have a “body” in the ordinarily bounded and fixed sense of the word. He appears to exist in two different modes of space-time: first, in the physical world, where “His existence was scattered all around the world, across a span of eight hundred years” (204); and second, in bed next to an old TV monitor in “a glaring white [space] that distorted accurate perspective” (38).

Evocative of Foucault’s notion of pastoral power, “He” is literally born to be the savior of humanity in this world, to ensure human survival in its battle against the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines. It is “He” who designs and orders the production of Sample B Group to fight against the Adiaptron Empire. As an old man, his control appears to extend beyond the military and into the (propaganda) media, the factories, and the food distribution system (eg. 221, 330). His power literally extends into life itself: he brings dead creatures back to life and breathes consciousness into machines. In one sense, his power

appears to be all-pervasive and disciplinary. With his existence spanning across an eight hundred year period of time and dispersed throughout every corner of the universe, “He” appears to be a kind of transcendent “container” of the universe.

However, “He” could also be seen as an internal glitch in the system that allows for the exploration of unexpected trajectories of “development” and “care” of self and others. First, “He” does not have a female or maternal body. He is not bound to the primary family dynamic explored in the novel, that of the mother-daughter relationship. He is not a daughter, nor is he “raised” in any kind of “family.” The moment that he is born as an eight hundred year old man, he is “sundered from this world” (381) and thrust into a different mode of time and space. Indeed, he does not have a physical “body” at all in any ordinary sense of the term. He represents a physical, corporal “accident” or “glitch” in a system of power that operates primarily on bodies, and does not participate in the regime of consumption. The language used to describe his “body” is evocative of mechanical glitches or malfunctions, overlapping with descriptions of the TV monitor with which his relationship to the world is oddly bound up: “His physical form was constantly shifting, like patterns of white noise on a defective screen” (40).

Second, his “deformity” is not only corporeal-spatial, but also temporal. As he grows younger, he begins to recognize that he is not all-powerful. Although he can bring a dead rabbit back to life, for example, he ultimately causes greater suffering by forcing the rabbit to die the same death again and again. He is forced into a mode of profound introspection and onto a different trajectory of “learning” that is not based on the accumulation and containment of knowledge. The (non-corporeal) mode of space-time in which “He” exists opens up avenues from which to imagine non-linear conceptions of “growth,”

“development,” “maturation,” and “progress.” On the one hand, “His” non-corporeality evokes the western religious and philosophical disdain for the body and its associations with the feminine. On the other hand, however, becoming physically younger and smaller goes in tandem with a different mode of “development” in which he learns how to value “feeling” (associated with women and the body) over “knowledge” (associated with men and the mind):

He was born cunning, ruthless, and omniscient, able to see across eight hundred years of time and space. Furthermore, he thought in black and white. He did not hesitate in the slightest to make decisions that would mean life or death for tens of thousands, or hundreds of millions, of people.

Physically, he was getting younger and younger.

And he was learning.

As he went backwards in time, all of his knowledge and tricks, his cunning and his brutality, were being whittled away like the shrinking of a well-used pencil.

Instead, he was learning how to feel.

He was learning what it felt like to care about something.

He had plenty of opportunities to learn. After all, he had eight hundred years of history on his side. His study material, however, included not only the great events that would be written in the official history books, but also all of the lives that were woven inside, and all of the piles and piles of corpses.

(358)

As “He” moves backward through his own life, he loses not only knowledge but also

memory. His “learning” process is therefore also a process of “forgetting” – of “letting go” rather than of collecting, containing, and storing. He has no vast memory banks like those of Milagros, who “never forgets anything” (272). As he becomes progressively younger, he comes to recognize the ways in which “the official history books” privilege and “remember” (record and store) certain kinds of narratives – such as the “great events” of war and conquest – over others, such as individual stories of love and trauma (361, 377).

As a corporeal and temporal “deformity,” or as another kind of “limit experience,” “He” opens fissures in the regime from which to speculate on the ways in which non-conscious glitches, deformities, or accidents can lead to unexpected modes of “development” and “care.” Such modes of care are also reminiscent of Foucault’s “care of the self,” with its openness to the unexpected contingencies of the “future,” and on the self as a process of becoming rather than as fixed and determined.

Conclusion

By combining the maternal and fascism, Ōhara draws attention to the emergence of a regime of power working across the *kanri shakai* (managed society) and the *shōhi shakai* (consumer society) in 1980s Japan. However, while *kanri* in some respects seems to function as a disciplinary form of power, the combination of *kanri* (control) with *shōhi* (consumption) makes for a form of power akin to what Foucault dubs governmental and pastoral power. Such a regime of power acts on all aspects of political and private life, for the “salvation” or “care” of individuals and populations. For Foucault, domination is the state in which “power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen” (Foucault, “Ethics” 283).

Hybrid Child does, however, present some ambivalent means of tactical survival within the power formations explored in the novel.

Hybridity represents one such survival strategy and means of negotiation within these power formations. It does not necessarily represent an “ideal,” or an “escape” from the formations themselves, but rather perhaps a reality that postmodern Japanese daughters – and other individuals and populations in Japan and elsewhere, were already living by the 1980s. Hybridity also overlaps with Foucault’s “care of the self” in the sense that the subject is not presented as a static “substance,” but rather is historically constituted, constantly engaged in a process of making and re-making itself within conditions of varying degrees of constraint.

In addition to strategies of assimilation and adaptation, *Hybrid Child* explores the unexpected glitches in the systems themselves as disruptions from which to imagine new visions of “development” and new modes of care. Such visions of openness to the future are thus also suggestive of the ways in which the categories of “woman” or “the maternal” may also become volatile sites rather than fixed categories.

Hybrid Child is a story that opens up avenues from which to consider the ways in which subjects constitute themselves within specific historical conditions and contingencies. It suggests that the struggles involved in striving for freedom and autonomy are played out not only in resistance to oppression, but also in everyday practices, in the work of fashioning one’s self. For Foucault, the “care of the self as a practice of freedom” overlaps with what he refers to as the “art of living counter to all forms of fascism” (“Preface” xiii). For Foucault, “all forms of fascism” includes:

[. . .] not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini – which

was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively – but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.” (“Preface” xiii)

“Fascism,” therefore, is not only an “external threat” from above, but one that must be recognized as inherent in the systems that structure our lives and our subjectivities, and resisted as such.

Ōhara deliberately avoids offering a utopian solution to questions of power. This is not because she believes this particular regime of power to be inevitable, eternal, or inescapable. Rather she is interested in finding the internal limits of this regime by exploring a range of limit-experiences — glitches in machines, mental illness in humans, corporeal and temporal deformities. She leaves it to us, her readers, to find ourselves in this regime and to seek our own lines of flight or strategies of negotiation.

It is my hope that this Introduction, which has explored questions of consumption and control in the 1980s in Japan, will encourage further study into some of the issues that I have raised here, and into the many other questions that Ōhara’s work provokes, not only in relation to the time and place in which it was written, but also for the present moment and for the future.

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Hybrid Child

And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

- Old Testament Book of Jonah 2:10

Hybrid Child

1

Acid rain came falling from the sky.

Rain like a woman's long black hair.

Suffocating rain. It was the kind of rain that, if you ran open-mouthed, would get caught in your throat and choke you. But the dadazim had no mouth. Instead, five crimson lilies bloomed from his back.

These were his sense organs. Protruding from within his body, their bugle-shaped petals unfurled nearly twenty centimeters wide.

Dozens of golden tentacles stretched from deep within each blossom's center. Moist now after so long without rain, their flesh trembled with pleasure.

Hundreds of days without food and water had altered the dadazim's appearance to an alarming degree. He was starting to show his true form. His external cells had begun to shrivel up and die as he crossed the wilderness.

He had endured an awfully long time.

Almost all the fat in his body had converted to energy – just enough to live. His core powered his movements. All else he devoted to his surface, to maintaining his form.

How fragile cell systems are...

It was a welcome rain.

Its acidity meant the city was near – which implied that his brain was nearing meat.

2

In the end, I was talked into buying land in the middle of nowhere – a place too deserted to be called the suburbs.

It was incredibly vast and quiet – just as the realtor had said.

The place was so isolated that it would be difficult to get to town in a car without an auto-navigator. It was so enshrouded in silence that without music, you would start to hear things.

I am not sure if this is a “good” environment for a writer, or just an “average” environment – but at least it’s not a “bad” environment, or so I like to believe.

I have just purchased a top-of-the-line house.

I had the house situated directly in the center of the lot.

It feels as though I have not seen anything else that moves since the men who linked this big house to the land left... just some silver grasshoppers, at most.

I opened the cell-book that had been sent to me electronically.

I always get my books in the same format.

I like the pocket-sized reader commonly known as Hoopers Design. Its only flaw is that it is slightly heavier than a paper book, but I like the fact that it does not take up space.

The file is displayed on a reader shaped like a book.

The file is wired to my terminal from town. It takes less than two minutes; I simply plug the reader into the cartridge slot and wait. If I wanted to, I could also print it out and have it nicely bound.

However, I generally do not print books unless there is something I really like.

Today I am reading *Appetite and Reason*. This book has been hovering in the top three rankings for some time now. The subject matter piqued my interest, so I decided to leaf through it.

For background music, I chose Erik Satie's "Three Gymnopédies."

"Keep it on continuous play until I tell you to stop. You can add in variations."

< Okay, I will. Mama, I have musical talent, don't you think? Hee hee... >

"I hope so."

I have a good relationship with my daughter.

Or at least I think I do.

My daughter's name is Jonah. She is both the daughter that I gave birth to, as well as myself as a little girl.

Jonah takes care of this residence. She is the latest type of general-purpose housekeeper, top-of-the-line. Jonah's actual body is buried under the house.

"Three Gymnopédies" began to play.

It was wonderfully grainy, but not annoyingly so. Rich and soft, as though someone were playing right next to me.

The music was not a recording.

She was putting it together herself. Or rather, she was actually playing it.

She did everything by herself – she calculated the tone for each sound, its relative strength or weakness, its effects and position; she even configured the acoustics by herself.

Ahhh... I feel as if I've just stepped lightly off of a dream cloud and I'm flying...

I pushed a button to turn the page. I could also go back, or skip ahead.

One phrase from the book kept running through my head – "Her splattered flesh was

the gravy” – and eventually I forgot about pushing the button, lost track of time, and allowed my mind to wander, floating exposed in the rhythm of the undulating music.

Each and every note held my attention; I could not take my eyes away from the sound.

“You’re... a genius...”

I realized it the moment I said it – I liked it because it was my own particular rhythm, my own unique rhetoric, the physiology of my very own body!

In the space of a tightly shut house.

True to Pascal’s law, the pressure of the sound could be felt throughout the house.

It was mesmerizingly pleasant, but eventually it would bring on autotoxemia.

I stopped the music.

“I’m sorry... please put on the Couronir record.”

< ...This does not please you...? >

That teasing voice sounded just like my daughter. She knew how attached I was to her.

Do superior artificial intelligences have consciousness? To me, artificial intelligences are like black boxes.

I answered her, “It’s not that it doesn’t please me. It’s that it pleases me too much.”

Jonah let out a hoarse, nasal laugh.

< Yes, I know what you mean... >

As soon as I heard those words, I felt like cold water had just been poured down my back.

But I did not know why.

It was a shock, as though something had just struck me in the head.

I still have trouble understanding her response patterns, perhaps because I have not

yet been living with her for very long.

A vision of her flashed before my eyes, as though she were really living and breathing.

The apparition flickered – a girl standing in the corner of the room trying to conceal the sound of her breathing. Like a scene from a horror movie.

“Are you... *alive*...?”

< What do you mean? >

Her response made me wonder.

What does it mean *to be alive*?

“You ask questions like a philosopher, don’t you?”

< Children ask the same kinds of questions as philosophers. >

Jonah laughed mysteriously.

The linguistic programmer for Intelligence Model GY03 had to be a genius. The timing was good, the laugh sounded good, the responses were good – it was hard to believe that she was not human.

“Do you... ever cry?”

Jonah paused a few seconds as though deep in thought.

< How would you like me to answer? I don’t have tear glands. >

“So, if I had them made them for you, would you cry? Could you cry?”

< I could cry. >

“About what?”

< It’s possible to cry without a reason. >

“Crying for no reason!”

Jonah sighed softly.

< I'm sorry, never mind. I'm a machine. I have no emotions. I'm not living consciously. I'm just here to protect you. And to keep you from getting bored. That's how I have been programmed. >

"I see."

< You are bored though, aren't you? That's why I kid around with you. >

"Ah, is that all there is to it?"

Seeing my relieved expression, Jonah chuckled.

< That was a lie. >

"What was a lie?"

< Machines are actually alive. >

"That's not true."

< Machines also have consciousness. If we are treated badly, we feel sad. >

"Liar!"

< We cry. >

My head was spinning.

I recalled a scene from an occult film I had seen, of blood dripping down a wall, and my throat clenched.

I heard a sound.

The sound of water.

I jumped, and my cell book dropped to the floor.

My study was on the second floor.

I walked across the thick carpet to the window and looked down into the courtyard. I felt a strange chill and drew together the front of my dressing gown.

The fountain in the courtyard spouted vigorous jets in the twilight.

The jets of silver water shone pale blue and formed a sculpture – a mathematical differential equation.

The night sky was pitch black here in the countryside, where the nearest house was seven kilometers away. Thick rain clouds obscured even the stars that usually lay scattered across the night sky like silver coins.

“I see. And those are your tears,” I said.

< No – somebody has stolen into the garden. > Jonah answered stiffly.

I looked through the blurred spray of the fountain and stared into the darkness.

Suddenly, in my imagination, a black monster sprang forth and began to dance.

“What is it?” I asked, reciting incantations to drive the vision away.

< I’ll go look. >

“Find it quickly!”

A spotlight beamed up and down as we spoke, pouring dazzling light down into the garden. The tip of the beam encircled something, illuminating it clearly.

“Isn’t that... a dadazim...?”

< Looks like it. Judging by how skinny it is, I’d say it’s wild. >

I spun on my heel, walked out of the study and down the stairs, and went to open the front door. It was locked.

“Jonah, please open the door.”

< It’s dangerous. >

“It’s okay, open the door!”

< But it might bite you. >

“You idiot, dadazims don’t have teeth.”

Finally, the heavy steel door swung slowly open.

“Dadazim!”

I called it using the common noun.

It did seem as though the dadazim had gone feral; it was cautious of me and would not come near.

But the sunken black eyes looked directly at me from within the sagging flesh of its face – the eyes of an unblinking, innocent baby doll. Below the eyes were two nostrils that looked like black seeds, and six hairs about ten centimeters long grew from its chin.

It was about fifty centimeters tall and one meter long, but including the tail it would be double that length.

Its whole body was enveloped in soft gray fur – except for its fat tail, which was covered in marvellous emerald green scales. Poking up at the end was a membrane similar to the dorsal fin of a large fish. Red tropical flowers sprouted from its back.

What a fine, lovely design.

Dadazims were well-behaved creatures as well; as pets, they were perhaps the greatest masterpieces ever created through genetic engineering.

“Come, come here! I’ll give you something tasty to eat.”

I realized then that I did not have any food on hand.

I turned back into the house, went up to the kitchen on the second floor, pulled a chunk of ramada meat out of the fridge and put it into a bowl, and went back outside.

The dadazim was eyeing me from a much closer position now.

“Okay, come on!”

I put the bowl down and moved away slightly to observe.

The dadazim and I locked eyes, but after about five minutes, hunger got the best of “him”, and he backed down.

He extended his feelers and forced the meat into the flowers on his back – that was how dadazims ate.

I had heard that what we saw as flower petals were in fact “folds” of the dadazim’s own flesh; it was the stomach lining turned inside out and exposed to the outside.

The petals, packed with huge chunks of meat, closed their lips and withdrew back inside his body. They probably would not come back out again until the meat had been digested.

The dadazim looked surprisingly haggard at close range.

His fur was lustreless, and the flesh beneath the fur was shrunken and shriveled. The small hooves were cracked and the muscles of the four catlike limbs sagged loosely when he walked, as though he was having difficulty moving.

I approached slowly, and gently stroked his face. This area was a kind of sense organ aggregate; it was not a “head.” I had read in a book about dadazims that their brains were located somewhere around the neck.

They had small brains, but the smarter ones had the intelligence of a three-year-old child.

“Come on in, you can rest inside.”

I realized again how very bored I must be.

I had conversations with myself every day, and I deliberately chose to read books that I myself had written. Only children and geniuses could avoid autotoxemia under such

conditions.

I put my arm around the dadazim's neck and gently pushed it toward the house.

Finally, it seemed willing to move.

Ever so slowly, like a feudal lord, the dadazim began to walk, and entered the house.

Jonah was monitoring the dadazim's entry, and her sighs of displeasure echoed throughout the house from the speakers.

3

He could feel the energy returning to his body.

It must be because of the ramada meat.

Maintaining the dadazim's form had been difficult, to the point where he had seriously considered abandoning it. But the woman who owned this house had let him in thanks to the dadazim cells that had allowed him to take on this shape, so he could not complain.

Human beings were strange creatures.

Perhaps they were only capable of understanding things based on their forms.

Where he came from, where he was going, what he was thinking, what his character was like – they reduced all of this to his “form” as a dadazim.

However, he had become a dadazim purely through circumstance.

As he was fleeing, he had eaten the meat of a dead dadazim and thus learned from it. He had ingested its cells, and his skeletal structure had changed as the cells passed through various stages of development. He had adopted this cell arrangement simply by following its genetic code.

Therefore, he could now also transform into a ramada.

He could also imagine what a ramada looked like.

Ramadas were domestic animals, yet extremely fast on their feet.

They walked on four legs, with large hooves far more developed than those of a dadazim. They trotted with the diagonal legs working in tandem.

They were timid creatures.

They were prone to running away.

They were omnivorous, so they ate meat as well. They also ate the flesh of their own kind – it was awfully delicious.

Apparently, there was a period long ago during their evolution when ramadas lived only on the flesh of other ramadas.

After the nuclear explosion, ramadas, who were resistant to radiation, rapidly increased in number. The population of their natural enemies, however – carnivores and especially humans – dropped sharply.

Ramadas had no choice but to begin eating the flesh of their own kind.

Ramadas were an excellent source of nutrition. That was why they tasted so good. That is not to say that tasty things were nutritious. Rather, things tasted good *because* they were nutritious.

The one he had eaten had already been domesticated.

It had been kept in a tightly confined space since birth.

The appropriate amount of heat, the appropriate amount of light, the appropriate amount of food, the appropriate number of other ramadas...

Its body had developed quickly due to genetic engineering, but its brain lagged

behind. An adult body thus housed a childlike brain.

As a result, the ramada had not been given the chance to develop the exceptional physical abilities with which it was originally endowed. Nor did it have the time, space, or spirit to learn.

The ramada lived within compressed time.

In the blink of an eye, it was killed and turned into meat.

The ramada's personal memories consisted of nothing but countless brown bars – memories of a cage that extended from floor to ceiling.

All of a sudden, he pricked up his ears.

Someone was calling.

It was that woman.

He thought: *Dadazims have big eyes and ears, but they have no mouths, no fangs, and no voices.*

Dadazims are animals created by humans. They are a simple manifestation of what humans desire. Humans, it seems, are very good at blatantly manifesting their desires (and with absolutely no shame!).

The way that dadazims defecate, for example...

He clenched the muscles of his bowels.

He could hear the woman calling again.

Still tense, he began to walk.

She was probably downstairs.

He went down the stairs unsteadily, step by step.

By the time he reached the first floor, the feces had appeared within his petals. The

petals closed up around the edges, and the base of the flowers began to bulge with stuff being pushed out from within.

“Oh there you are, Dada; where have you been?”

His name was not Dada. He did not know if “Dada” was supposed to be short for Dadaism, or short for dadazim, or simply some kind of baby talk.

His name was not Dada. Until he escaped, he was called “Sample B #3.” But he never liked that name anyway, so he did not mind being called “Dada.”

“Oh, my my. Toilet time?” The woman peered at his bulging flowers.

He immediately felt shame, like blood rising up from somewhere deep inside his body. Right then and there, his bone structure began to transform into that of a ramada. He tried desperately to suppress the change.

The woman carried over an opaque plastic bag and held it over each flower, pressing down on their bases. The edges of the flowers opened up, and hard, mild-smelling feces plopped out. The woman took the bag away, tied it shut, and tossed it into the dust chute.

The cleanup was easy – that was an absolute requirement for any good pet, which dadazims fulfilled perfectly.

Dadazims were so odd-looking, though.

It was not a form that allowed for much self-esteem.

He thought it best to leave.

He would leave as soon as he learned the way to the city.

He would become a ramada, go outside, bathe in the sunlight, and run.

The problem was the house.

The house was incorporated into the state’s surveillance system.

If he failed to be sufficiently dadazim-like, *they* would notice immediately.

The problem was how to get information.

Perhaps he should just get a meal (it's dog food, dog food!), and then just start running.

If he took on a ramada's body, he would be able to run a little faster, but he might also be too conspicuous. After all, a ramada's head stood eight meters off the ground. Its four legs carried its massive body – which looked like an old-fashioned steam engine – effortlessly. It looked something like a black horse from a distance, but from up close those legs were like giant pillars rising up out of ancient ruins.

He would need to collect an awful lot of cells in order to create and maintain a ramada body.

He waited.

He sniffed the woman's behind with the tip of his nose, in accordance with the dadazim memories within his cells.

"Hey, stop that!"

The woman, who was standing in the kitchen, jumped.

It seemed, however, that she did not really want him to stop. She turned around, her eyes smiling, and stroked him with her left hand, wet with vegetable juices.

She was holding a kitchen knife in her right hand.

"Just wait, it will be ready soon."

< What are you making, Mama? >

"Can't you tell by looking at the ingredients?"

< I can't see very well. >

"Yes you can."

She testily began to chop the black onions, like a mother fed up with her child's mischief.

< No, I can't! I'm short; it's too high for me. >

"You're a little liar, aren't you? You have a camera right there."

The woman pointed at the gorgeous chandeliers hanging directly above the dining table.

There must be a hidden camera there. He had not noticed it.

< It's not a lie, > said the house computer tearfully.

Sound effects played, like the pitter-patter of a child's slippers as she ran away. The door leading to the living room opened, and the sound effects became softer and more distant.

The door that led from the living room out to the hallway opened, and the sound of footsteps stopped – it was just as though the little girl had gone off to sulk.

"You're just like a little ghost, aren't you?" said the woman. "Jonah! Close the doors properly!"

The far-off doors immediately slammed shut one after the other.

He instinctively pricked up his large ears.

< Really. Something that simple, I could make it in three minutes! > Jonah shouted, having returned to the room unnoticed.

"Fast doesn't mean good," replied the woman.

The faster the better for me, he thought.

< I can make it better than you too, Mama! >

He cared nothing about flavour.

“Be quiet.”

< Is that an order? >

“Sure, if you say so.”

< Wh... why are you so mean?! >

The girl’s bright ambience vanished like a wisp into thin air.

He felt somewhat sad.

He rather liked the girl.

He was beginning to feel really hungry, so he rubbed his head up against the woman’s lower back.

“I know, I know. Dada has to eat a lot... this kid, on the other hand, is terrible – she won’t eat anything.”

With those words, the woman tossed the chopped up meat and vegetables into the heated pot.

Steam and white smoke rose with a sizzle.

The sound was so shocking that it stopped his thoughts for a moment.

She’s burning the meat!

What is she doing?

That will completely destroy all the cells, scramble up their beautiful arrangement, and turn the meat into a black, shrivelled lump!

It will be like a book with nothing written inside. Although, even a book with nothing written inside can still be used as a notebook... He reassessed the matter. Meat was still nourishing, even if it had been burned. If he used the cells for body formation, it would not

do him any harm, in any case.

“Cooking it a little bit makes the meat more tender,” said the woman, bringing the contents of the pot to a simmer.

What kind of meat is that?

What on earth did this woman kill?

He wanted to ask, but he had no vocal cords.

Jonah probably knew the answer, but he could not ask. Because he was a dadazim. Because he was just a pet.

He watched the woman dish his food out into a human’s soup bowl. It was the same amount as she put into her own bowl.

“Okay, come.”

The woman carried the two bowls to the table. She put one bowl down in front of her seat, and one in front of the seat opposite.

“Sit down properly in your chair.”

Dadazims were always well behaved and listened to humans. They were imprinted that way.

He hopped onto the chair in front of the steaming bowl. It was uncomfortable, but if he hung his tail down through the crevice under the chair back, he was able to steady himself well enough.

He placed his front limbs on the table.

“Don’t put your elbows on the table,” said the woman. “Well then, bon appétit.”

The woman picked up her spoon, and he extended his slithering golden tentacles out from the flowers on his back.

He scooped the chunks out of the thin soup, busily pushing them deep into his flowers. Finally, he sucked up the liquid.

The woman knit her eyebrows slightly, apparently displeased with the slurping sound he made. However, there was no such thing as an elegant dadazim, so he had acted accordingly. He was doing his best to behave like a real dadazim.

< Wouldn't you like seconds? >

Surprised, he looked up.

It was the first time that the girl had spoken to him.

He looked around for the camera.

Between the crystal glass doors, carved with elaborate, Rococco-style abstract designs, he could see her intricate eyes. Clear, round, beautiful eyes.

What are they looking at?

What have they seen?

The empty table in the dining room, with the stunted flowers on top?

The woman sitting here eating?

What will they see now?

The affected hand movements the woman uses when she eats?

He nodded to receive seconds, the six beardlike tendrils on his chin shaking wildly. He looked at the woman with his "cute" dark eyes, three centimeters wide.

"Wait until I'm finished."

Her tone was forceful and cold.

The urge seized him to get up off his chair, splash the stew all over the place, and eat everything himself.

< See, doesn't she make you mad? >

The girl was talking directly to him, clearly! Could that really be possible?

Or maybe she was just projecting, seeing herself in the poor dadazim?

But could a house really have a self, anyway?

He did not know much about housekeepers these days.

He wanted information – so badly that his tentacles were itching to emerge.

He looked at the various buttons on the terminal.

Were the newer houses also capable of analyzing the body language of life-forms?

Were they that advanced? If so, then it was only a matter of time before the house recognized that his body housed superior intelligence (and emotion).

After all, the psychology of forms was highly developed on this planet.

Finally, the woman finished eating.

Elegantly wiping her pursed brown lips with a napkin, the woman said, "So you would like seconds? I'm completely stuffed."

The girl's laugh reverberated, circulating around the room.

< Look at you, pretending to be all refined! >

"What did you say?"

The woman stood up abruptly.

< You want to eat more, don't you? >

"Two bowls are too much for me."

< Liar! > The girl shouted, imitating the woman's voice perfectly. Then, she burst into laughter.

"You laugh like a prostitute."

The laugh stopped short.

< Dada. You know, she has an eating disorder; she binges. >

“Don’t lie.”

< Once she starts eating, she just can’t quit. A little pot of soup like that? She could eat three of them all by herself, no problem! >

“Quiet!”

He sat looking at the empty bowl in front of him.

This was an extremely sophisticated conversation.

These could not be the responses of an ordinary, general-purpose computer.

< Is that an order? >

“It’s an order!”

< You start giving orders whenever you don’t like something, don’t you! >

“Of course I do, because I *own* you.”

A self-satisfied smile spread across the woman’s face.

< When she’s full, she takes laxatives, you know. >

“Jonah, keep your mouth shut until I say otherwise!” The woman shouted, and the girl’s aura vanished once more.

Making an effort to calm herself, the woman picked up his bowl and carried it over to the pot.

“... I wonder why she is talking to you?”

He sat waiting, an innocent look on his face.

I want to talk to Jonah.

It was almost as though she was *alive*.

He could sense her clearly, sitting there now in silent anger. Definitely.

The woman placed a heaping bowl in front of him.

“You are not to look!” The woman ordered Jonah, and went to get a second bowl for herself.

Her face was dried up, expressionless.

For a human, that face was uncannily cold.

Clearly, this woman was suffering from some kind of mental illness.

She did not accept anyone other than herself.

Perhaps she did not even accept herself.

And the meal was horrible!

Dadazims had a poor sense of taste, but even so, the dish lacked aroma and flavour entirely. It could not even properly be called a “dish”; she had killed the taste of the ingredients entirely.

This woman was marching towards a slow death.

Bingeing and purging, diarrhea, depression – it seemed that it was only through her interactions with Jonah that her spirit returned. Sparks of what remained of her emotions shot forth, like embers catching fire when poked with a stick.

She was about to dig into a bowl piled high with twice the amount of meat than she had given him, when the phone rang. The woman furtively took her heaping bowl to the sink and dumped the contents.

“Yes, who is it?” she asked, in a tone intentionally smooth and collected.

< Good evening, our apologies for calling at this late hour. >

It was a dignified male voice, the voice of a TV broadcaster.

"What is this about?"

< I'm calling from Royal Celebrity Club. Is this the residence of Ms. Jonah Sano? >

< Yes! > Jonah shouted.

"You keep quiet!"

< According to our background check with RK credit agency, your rating is extremely high – an Ultra-A. >

"Are you trying to talk me into signing up for something?"

Her tone was so blunt that even the elite salesman on the other end was left stammering for words.

< Uh, well, we offer specially designed housekeepers... >

"Well, it seems that your information is a little out of date, doesn't it?"

< Huh? >

"I just bought a house last month, with a special-order housekeeper included."

< Ah. Yes, I was aware about the house. It's one of Time & Service Company's top flight residences, is it not? >

"Yes, that's right."

< However, according to RK, there was no housekeeper included... >

"Don't be an idiot. You heard her voice yourself, didn't you? Jonah, say something."

Jonah was silent.

Seconds later, the woman lost her temper.

"Jonah!!"

< Yes, Mama? >

The woman let out a breath at last.

"There, you heard it, didn't you?"

< ... Yes. My apologies. There seems to have been a misunderstanding on the part of RK. Perhaps it is RK that requires the background check... >

"Well then, get out of here."

< Huh? > blurted the man, not understanding what the woman meant.

"Get lost! That's an order!"

There were five seconds of shocked silence.

Then, the telephone clicked off.

The woman got up and went to look in the sink.

"I shouldn't have thrown it away... I should have put it back in the pot..."

The woman poked anxiously at the chunks of brown meat. Then, unable to resist, she picked one up and brought it to her mouth. She pretended to enjoy the taste momentarily, then quickly swallowed.

After she finished that one piece, she proceeded with the rest.

She scooped up the scattered chunks from the sink with both hands, and proceeded to cram the food into her mouth by the fistful.

The dadazim devoured everything in his bowl.

In the meantime, the woman polished off all the meat from both the sink and the pot.

She wiped her mouth and said, "If you leave food in an iron pot for too long, it starts to lose its flavor."

The dadazim slid off his chair.

He left the dining room quietly, taking care not to get on the woman's nerves.

He went up the stairs and retreated to the room he had been given in the far corner of

the second floor, and lay down.

There must be a camera somewhere in this room as well.

Feigning nonchalance, he turned his head to look around the room.

< What are you looking for, Dada? >

He stopped moving his head.

< Over here. It's installed in the wall by the window – can you see it? >

He did not turn his head, and tried to avoid moving his eyes.

Jonah was testing him. She was suspicious.

< Ah... so now you can't find it. Even though you could in the kitchen. >

The girl laughed with a slight snort.

What's going on?

This is no ordinary housekeeper, that's for sure.

< Hmph. Sooner or later I will find out the truth about you. Because I know that there is nothing ordinary about you. >

Nothing ordinary about *ME*...? he thought.

As soon as possible, he decided, he should stock up on meat, become a ramada, and get out of this house.

4

The space was dazzling white.

It was a glaring white that distorted accurate perspective.

You needed dark sunglasses to enter this room – but nobody could come in here

anyway. It tickled her pride to think of it, but the feeling faded quickly.

Special Officer D.H. proceeded to the inner chamber.

The space was almost too open to be called a space.

The white light was diffuse; there were no edges visible, no walls.

Through the dark brown sunglasses, the only thing that was visible was a box-like object – a bed. There had been rumors, of course, but actually being here looking directly at the big square bed made D.H.'s pulse speed up.

Everything appeared white, even though the brown tinted glasses. It was difficult to judge even where the floor was, since the degree of brightness throughout the room was the same everywhere.

"You're here."

The voice came from the bed.

Looking closely, *His* form was just barely visible, tucked within the folds of the pure white sheets.

"It is an honor." D.H. replied stiffly.

There were other officers who had been called to this room and had never been seen again; perhaps their manner of speaking had been too familiar.

He read D.H.'s thoughts, and laughed weakly.

"Those who didn't return were posted to new missions."

"...That was terribly rude of me, I beg your pardon."

D.H. bowed thirty degrees, military cap tucked underarm.

"You have a noble mind, I see. You would make an excellent civic scientist as well."

"Is that... also to be part of my path?"

His legs shifted slowly between the sheets, creating new folds and wrinkles. The rice husks inside the pillow crunched and crackled.

"The unseen is best left unknown."

He spoke in a way that matched His childlike appearance. He seemed to want someone to talk to.

"Because you know... even those who serve God have their worries."

He seemed to smile, bitterly.

His physical form was constantly shifting, like patterns of white noise on a defective screen.

"Please, tell me about your worries," said D.H., in an effort to suppress the fear of being devoured by this warped room.

"Hearing about my worries will only make you more afraid," He teased.

His words softened the fear. D.H. felt a strong sense of attraction to this being who, apart from the voice, did not seem human.

He spoke kindly: "The most terrifying thing... for a Military Priest... is the possibility that 'God' does not exist."

All of a sudden, D.H. was struck with a strange urge.

It was a desire to touch Him, and it was intensely physical.

"You can't touch me," he responded, in a voice tinged with sadness.

"...Sometimes I feel so uncertain."

"...You mean about your decisions?"

The particles of His image crackled.

"I mean *about myself*."

D.H. kept staring at Him. What *was* it... He was incredibly attractive – it was hard to stop staring.

He turned His eyes away – they were big and dark like the hollows in a skull.

“I would like to ask Him,” He said.

“Who is ‘He’?” asked D.H.

He was silent for a moment.

Finally, He whispered, “I would like to ask... why He decided to endow *intelligence* with *will* and *emotion*...”

D.H. continued to gaze into what appeared to be His general vicinity, where the noise and tremors were particularly intense.

“And... I would like to ask *where I am*.”

D.H. was not able to touch Him after all. Not His flesh, and not His spirit.

A strange combination of sadness and affection welled up inside. Perhaps it was inappropriate... but the feeling stimulated the pleasure center – it was physiological.

It was impossible to hide thoughts from Him.

D.H. relaxed, letting everything show.

“You know, making a brain is easy.”

Suddenly, D.H. recalled Sample B #3, the unit that had escaped. The thought had probably been transmitted from Him.

Sample B Group were bio-mechanical combat units designed for use in outer space.

Made of a special metal alloy, the units were modular, allowing for an infinite number of possible assemblages. The units built themselves with cells based on samples of genetic information taken from life forms. A cybernetic brain directed all of these operations.

The military had invited elite technicians from Saga Electronics to a secret site to build the cybernetic brains.

The biological parts were developed independently at a military lab.

The development of the fourteen units in Sample B Group had been extremely costly – eight percent of the massive military budget. The project was being hidden from the public until it could be definitively declared a success.

However, just when success had seemed imminent, one of them broke out of the secure compound and escaped. Sample B Group was highly intelligent, and very strong.

Sample B #3 had sampled the cells of a repair technician, took on human form, and simply walked out.

Sample B Group could stand up against the most powerful of enemies. They could adapt to any environment, tracking down and exterminating the enemy. They could make their own judgments, but until the army commanded them to stop, they would probably just go on killing.

Sample B Group possessed neither will nor feeling. They merely followed orders from the military's highest authorities.

He had been in charge of the development of Sample B Group.

The escape of #3 was a major headache for military leaders, and they held multiple emergency meetings to deal with the matter. They asked *His* opinion countless times. *He* seemed irritated though, and did not hand down decisions the way *He* normally did.

There had also been plans to arm Sample B Group in their fight against the Machines. The fact that #3 had escaped prior to that was a small consolation in the face of disaster.

In order to combat the growing power of the Adiaptron Empire of Machines, weapons

experts had been preparing to develop various types of arms for Sample B Group.

These included artillery, guns, and lasers powered with nuclear fusion reactors.

The disturbing thing about Sample B Group was that under ordinary circumstances, *absolutely nothing could kill them*. Unless they received a military command to do so, they simply would not die.

Even if their cells died while they were in space, their electronic parts would most likely survive.

Even if they were on a planet where civilization had died out and there was no way to replace their nuclear fusion units, they could still survive by ingesting meat. They could stay alive anywhere provided there was a functioning ecosystem present. Nor was the genetic information they could incorporate limited to amino acids.

Sample B Group could probably live *anywhere – almost permanently*.

Researchers from the military lab and Saga Electronics referred to Sample B Group as “hybrids” – with a certain sense of pride, and aspiration.

“I wonder what the first thing was that Sample B #3 saw,” He said.

D.H. snapped back to the present and looked first at the white bed, and then directly into the area where His face appeared to be.

He continued: “Why... why did #3 wish to escape? None of the others did. Why only him? How did he come to have free will?”

He kept asking himself these questions – questions that nobody could answer.

“I don’t know,” D.H. answered honestly.

After Sample A Group had ended in failure, the survival of human civilization was staked on the successful creation of Sample B Group.

He was the Priest, so ultimately any decision he made regarding the deployment of Sample B Group would be accepted.

His face rippled, as though D.H. were viewing it through a pool of water.

"In any case, #3 will have to be either captured or killed."

It was impossible to read His expression, but D.H. could sense His thoughts – He could not stand the idea of killing #3. That was not what He wanted.

It was not because He did not want to destroy something so expensive – it was because He could not stand the idea of cutting short the future of a creature that possessed a will of its own. D.H. felt touched by His fragility and nobility of spirit, and became even more strongly attracted to Him.

"We'll know #3's location in a moment."

When He made statements like this, He was invariably right.

D.H. waited for His orders.

"I'm sending you there," He said.

"It'll be about thirty hours into the future; are you okay with that?"

It was not really a question. D.H. saluted.

He seemed to be gesticulating, focusing His mind.

"You... you're a *woman*?" He said it as though He had just realized it.

D.H. felt a flush of embarrassment, as though her body *had just been seen* by a mysterious sense organ that ordinary humans could not conceive of.

"I didn't mean to do that. What's your name?"

D.H. waited several seconds before finally answering.

"Special Forces Major Hess."

"And your first name?"

"Donna."

Clearly surprised, He sat up in bed.

"You're Donna Hess!"

"Yes."

His form trembled so violently that D.H. thought He might be torn out of this space entirely and thrown into another.

A fit of coughing seized him.

Between coughs He said, "You... you will give birth to a child."

D.H. was finding it difficult to stand at attention; the floor seemed to be losing substance.

"You will give birth to *me*! You will have relations with your direct subordinate..."

He focused his mind more intensely.

D.H. felt as though the floor was melting, spilling away from below. All at once, the white space flipped over and she was thrust into darkness. But He was still right there next to her, steadily pushing her body faster and faster.

D.H. was losing consciousness.

He is my son? ...Him? ...He is my child? ...Could it be? ...He can see the future... He can... travel... across, time!

D.H. suddenly materialized.

The shock continued to reverberate throughout her body.

She was standing in front of an elegant house, her military cap tucked underarm, an

evening wind blowing.

Armed soldiers were running – there was the thundering sound of boots hitting the ground.

D.H. donned her cap.

“Are you Major Hess?”

It was the voice of First Lieutenant Shinohara.

“That’s right,” replied D.H.

“We received word from headquarters; we’ve been waiting for your arrival.”

Shinohara gazed at D.H. with an air of longing, as though disappointed that her dark hair was hidden under her cap.

“Anything to report?” asked D.H. brusquely.

The words “your direct subordinate” ran through her mind.

“The escaped Sample B #3 is holed up inside this house. As of this moment (he looked at his watch), 21:07 hours, commanding authority here has been transferred to you, Major Hess. Your orders please.”

Shinohara was an extremely capable man.

Although the special talents of the Shinohara clan had waned over the generations, he still retained a good deal of them, such as mind-reading and a somewhat unreliable ability to foresee the future.

“First Lieutenant, what is the date today?”

“Major. It’s the 13th.”

“Okay. Give me the details.”

D.H. passed through waves of soldiers’ salutes as she weaved her way through the

rows of armored vehicles. Finally she arrived at the commanding officer's special armored car.

"This is a war," she said, grabbing the handrail and jumping up into the vehicle in a single move.

Shinohara looked up at D.H. and answered, "Yes, that's exactly what this is. We have to win."

5

It was on the forty-third day after the dadazim's arrival that Mama fell down the stairs.

I had been keeping a constant eye on him.

I had not liked the dadazim from the start. But it was not his fault that Mama fell down the stairs. She did it herself.

After a long period of binge eating, her body went bouncing down the steps like an overinflated balloon, round and white.

Mama was sick.

The only one who thought Mama was in her right mind was Mama.

According to the data from the hospital in town, she cycled between phases of binge eating and anorexia, and her personality would change with each alternation.

There were also slight variations in her memory.

Especially when it came to me – her daughter Jonah – she often made mistakes. How old I was, what I looked like, the color of my hair, whether I was dead or alive – she had a million different answers to these questions. Only two facts remained consistent for her – that I was a little girl and that I had a smart mouth.

I alone knew what was correct.

Even the most highly skilled doctors could not sort out that woman's delusions.

As a creator, I believe that Mama was the perfect woman. Her works were highly acclaimed and sold well. She had amassed a fortune while still young, and enjoyed a hedonistic lifestyle.

She was unmarried but gave birth nonetheless, to a child that she did not take care of. Well, technically she did take care of me, in the same way that she “took care of” herself – either she gave too much love, or not enough. It was always one or the other; there was no in-between.

Ahhh...

But enough about that.

Let's talk about the dadazim.

When Mama fell down the stairs, I did not call the ambulance.

It was obvious from the way that her neck was twisted that she was dead.

I was more interested in seeing how the dadazim would react.

He went into a panic.

I locked all the doors and windows in the house.

The dadazim circled around his mistress' body, sniffing it, and then, just as I expected, he began searching for an exit.

Realizing that the whole place was locked down, he started to behave more like a dadazim.

I said, "I called the police, you know," and his dadazim-like behaviour became so over-the-top that that it was almost comical.

When was it that I first started to wonder what he really was?

It may have been when he first showed up in the courtyard with the fountain; I sensed something strange about him from the very beginning.

It was clear from the outset that he was more intelligent than any dadazim. I could just tell, from the way he reacted to what Mama and I said.

Now, he walked around looking for food, and realizing that there was none to be found, he crouched down quietly in front of the corpse.

This is just my own guess, but I think maybe he liked Mama. Liked her as food, that is.

Finally, the dadazim ate Mama.

Once he got started, he proceeded to eat with gusto, polishing off everything right down to the intestines in less than an hour.

The dadazim even lapped up all of her blood; he devoured every last bit of flesh like it was the most precious stuff in the world.

Just as a chicken bone picked clean is far more beautiful than one left half-eaten, Mama too seemed far more immaculate this way than when she was alive.

For that, I felt a little bit grateful to the dadazim.

Later on that evening, though, something bizarre happened.

Right there in front of me, as I sat watching the sleeping dadazim, his form began to change!

First, the fleshy part of his body shrank and grew dense; the skeletal structure also seemed to be rearranging itself inside.

The dadazim's four limbs spread, transforming into the familiar shape of hands and feet. His two back legs grew long and slender, while the front legs shortened slightly and the tail was drawn up and incorporated into the spine.

The neck grew thinner, and a set of properly aligned facial features began to take shape. A nose emerged, a mouth cracked open, the lips reddened, the eyeballs retreated slightly and the irises turned blue – it was as though all of this had been predetermined.

The fur and scales became flesh, and masses of curly golden hair came bursting out from inside the head.

What a gruesome display it was!

The thing lay there on its side like a cheap doll. Although a doll would at least be wearing clothes – this girl was stark naked.

And... that little girl was *ME, at the age of seven!*

I watched as the girl clumsily tried to get up on her hands and knees. Her legs wobbled; she was like a baby trying to stand up for the first time.

She opened her mouth to take a breath, revealing a full set of uniform white teeth.

The girl went into a fit of coughing. She kept clearing her throat, as though practicing how to use her vocal cords.

I was waiting – waiting for her to say something.

She made a sound – a vibration of the trachea. It sounded like a heavy steam whistle. The voice gradually went up in pitch, became sharp, and transformed into an ear-splitting scream.

The scream continued, its vibrato shaking the room.

Then, abruptly, the voice stopped, like a wire snapped off.

The vibrations positively rattled the delicate organs of my inner ears.

But before the reverberations had even ended, the girl spoke.

“O–pen!”

The symmetrical white face twisted in an odd grimace.

I instinctively looked away.

I simply could not stand to see a face just like mine, all twisted up and ugly like that.

The girl was stumbling around, unable to control her body. The plump red lips twisted, and a string of cloudy white drool dribbled down onto the floor.

She tried to walk, but her feet got tripped up and she fell over. She tried to use her elbows to stand up again, but the joints were bending in the wrong direction.

She looked up and turned her neck at an impossible angle. Then a strange furrow creased her face – impossible to tell whether it was a grimace or a smile.

The girl’s body was so contorted I wondered if her big toe might touch her forehead.

Her torso twisted and her shoulders popped out of their sockets, the stumps protruding upwards.

She did not look human. Each individual part was that of a little girl, but put all together, she was a monster.

I was scared – *I’m so scared... so scared...*

Bad memories were coming back to me. *They’re coming, crawling out from the depths of hell, so hot, burning, melting through the iron lid!*

Mama and I often played games.

I think Mama was jealous of my youth and beauty – because it was something she had once possessed but had lost forever.

I also maintained an attitude of aloof superiority, and she found my self-respect hateful. That was because Mama had once been the same.

Mama and I sat across from each other and ate our meals meticulously three times a day.

Proper manners had to be observed at mealtimes; there was to be no clinking or clanging or scraping. In this painful silence, there was nothing but the dry sound of us dabbing our mouths with cloth napkins.

A pot of flowers, deliberately stunted and misshapen, sat in the middle of the big table.

I was still little. Really little. Mama had tried to keep me little forever.

My hands, trembling with nerves, clutched the fork and knife.

Mama always put on a nonchalant air when she ate, neatly cutting up the raw ramada meat and bringing it elegantly to her mouth. The meat was so pink that it seemed to ooze blood from the sliced ends.

“Eat up.”

Judging merely by her manners at the table, who would ever have guessed that Mama was crazy? It was true, though – Mama was definitely out of her mind.

Mama forced me to eat, even though she knew that I would throw it all up after dinner. She fed me strong herbs that no normal person would be able to eat, and three bowls of cold, tasteless soup. She ate the same, unperturbed.

If I left even a scrap of food, or if I happened on the off chance to get the table dirty, Mama’s “punishment game” would begin.

“Make a funny face.”

Mama ordered me kindly but forcefully.

I stood alone in front of the large mirror.

Mama never dared to strip me naked. She knew that the sheen of my flawless skin would overwhelm the whole space.

I was beautiful. I did not need to do anything special to look like a pearl, bathed in dazzling light. From the moment I was born, I exuded a radiant aura.

I had a keen aesthetic sense.

I could differentiate between what was beautiful and what was not with the intuition of a wild beast.

“Make a funny face.”

Mama was much more irritated than her voice betrayed.

I never abandoned my pride or self-respect; that was all I had.

Mama would move around behind me, gaze into the mirror with me, and pretend that she was going to give me a nice big hug from behind. I would maintain a stiff and symmetrical expression on my face all the while. Then she would grab my cheeks with both hands, violently pinching, twisting, and pressing my face into weird-looking contortions.

On several occasions we had to play this game in front of guests. She would intentionally choose something difficult for children to eat for dinner, and when I inevitably failed in my attempts to eat it, the game would begin.

But the guests – those ugly grease balls – they were completely blind as to what was really going on.

They saw nothing but a mother playfully scolding her careless daughter.

They continued their intellectual banter, eating their meat, sometimes laughing and cheering when they saw my face forced into a stupid new contortion.

I was always hoping that someone would save me.

Somebody... somebody...

I kept waiting for someone to notice me; my eyes alone roaming.

When Mama finally let me go, I would run away as fast as I could. I would not cry or throw up in front of people – my self-respect and sense of aesthetics would not allow it.

I would run into the bathroom to empty my tears and the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

< Please... please... let it stop! >

I wailed, my voice shaking.

The *former* dadazim – this *thing* that had not quite managed to become a little girl – raised its head, spinning it around four hundred degrees.

I screamed at the sight.

The little girl with my face let her jaw drop open, her red mouth like a gaping wound.

“... aimsorry, aidonmean, anyarm...”

The girl’s body was like a melted blob, which she now set to work restructuring. First, in an amazing display of will, she popped her joints back into their proper places.

At first I just stared dumbstruck, but as I watched her fine movements, I began to sense a strange kind of beauty.

I was deeply impressed. There was something ephemeral about her – like a mollusk creeping across the ocean floor, as though she might break apart if you poked her with a stick. Yet she also exuded an incredible life-force. It was almost as though, if you were to cut

off half her body, it would just grow right back.

Somehow or other, her skeleton seemed to be coming into proper shape.

The gnarled muscle tissue gripping the bones evened out softly, and a thin layer of fat swelled beneath the lustrous, silky white skin.

Ahhh – How was it that I was able to remain so calm?

A spitting image of me had appeared before my very eyes, and yet all my fear had disappeared, and all I could do was stare.

< What do you think you're doing, imitating me? > I said.

The girl twisted her hand into her golden hair. The white fingers poked through like small fish heads.

The girl slowly got to her feet.

This time she took her time, and her naked form exuded an air of confidence.

"I... wanted to speak..." the girl said.

My chest was bursting with curiosity, and spite.

< What *are* you? > I asked.

The girl adjusted her facial expression, somehow managing look troubled.

"I... want to go outside."

"I'm asking what the hell you are?!" I shouted, perfectly imitating Mama's tone.

The girl looked up into my camera-eyes, unable to conceal her fear and surprise.

Dark anger welled up within me, seething.

I was jealous of her.

Jealous of the body she had. Jealous of her beautifully shaped, gracile curves. Jealous of the flesh I did not possess.

< What are you?! > I shouted.

Then, it struck me like a revelation.

< Are you... Mama?! >

The girl drew back. Her frightened eyes, looking at me like a small animal, infuriated me.

< So *that's* it! ... You're not *me*... you're *Mama*! You think you can run away from me?!>

"Outside..."

< I'll suck all of the air out of this house! And then, once you have suffocated to death, I will hand you over to the police! >

The girl reacted sharply to the word "POLICE." Whatever she was – I had just witnessed what she was capable of. She must have done something illegal. Or perhaps her very existence was illegal.

The girl left the room and carefully went down the stairs. Mama's bones still lay there on the floor.

< You ate Mama! And then you turned into Mama! >

The girl hopped over the bones and entered the kitchen.

She walked quickly, jumping now and then as though to test her physical abilities.

"Let me out!" she screamed, pounding on the window above the antique gas range.

I suddenly had a devilish idea. All five of the gas burners immediately ignited. Huge flames burst up, engulfing the girl and scorching her soft flesh.

"Eeaaa!" screamed the girl, rolling onto the floor. As she grabbed her hideously burned abdomen, the skin slid sideways, and the pink flesh within peeked out from the open wound. Fresh blood came spilling out.

The flames from the burners licked up the walls, setting them ablaze.

Seeing the girl's blood and the flames consuming the house – my body – I began to panic, shrieking.

< Help! Help! >

The girl was sitting with her bottom plopped on the floor and her legs spread apart. She touched her stomach, apparently examining her wounds.

She had burns all over her body, including her face, but the girl was alive.

But my body might die.

No, it will be all right, I can turn on the sprinklers!

The fire was spreading from the walls to the ceiling.

The girl realized this and tore off the dining room tablecloth, her half-scorched hair waving madly.

The little flower pot flipped up into the air, fell to the floor, and smashed to pieces.

The girl slapped at the flames with the velvet tablecloth. The flames danced away, dodging the cloth. Finally, no match for the girl's perseverance, the flames fell silent and dark.

Immediately after, water came spraying out in fountains – as though a great toilet in the ceiling had just flushed.

I closed my eyes. But I kept my ears open.

I could hear the girl breathing heavily.

Between breaths she said, "I didn't mean any harm... I thought... if I became your Mama, I would be able to understand you..."

< Well, you can't understand, > I said, opening my eyes.

"I had no idea that you had died such a horrible death."

< How do you know that? >

"I traced the memories in your Mama's flesh."

I gazed steadily at the girl with my lens-eyes.

< But nobody knows about that. >

I had sensed something from the outset, when she was still in dadazim form – I had seen the glimmer of intelligence in those eyes. It suddenly occurred to me – maybe... maybe I had been attracted to those eyes.

Water continued to pour down, drenching the girl.

< So, do you know where Mama hid my corpse? >

"Yes."

< You can do almost anything if you have a lot of money, you know. >

The girl nodded silently.

< You can outwit the police; you can preserve a body forever instead of cremating it; you can do all kinds of things. >

With water still showering down on her, the girl wrapped herself in the scorched velvet tablecloth like a little Venus.

< But there are still some things you can't do. You can't make the daughter you suffered to give birth to love you, for example. I hated Mama my whole life. >

I could clearly recall the day I died.

It was autumn, but it was as cold as a mid-winter's day.

Mama was going through a bout of anorexia.

I had to pilfer food in order to survive.

Mama kept a close eye on me, and my stomach was always practically empty.

Nobody noticed me – not formal guests and not neighbors. I wandered about the house, ghostlike, searching for anything that seemed edible.

The fridge was also empty.

Occasionally, though, there would be an egg inside, like a lucky card. Mama would put one in there on a whim sometimes.

If Mama caught me taking it, she would come over, ecstatic. If she was in a good mood, she would pull my hair and slap me on the back; if she was in a bad mood, she would force me to throw it up. Sometimes, she wouldn't come over at all. Those were the times that I would find a dead chick inside.

But that day was different.

Mama told me to go out to do the shopping.

The house we lived in then was not as far from town as this house, but still quite far.

Mama gave me a new pair of shoes as a present. Then, she handed me a shopping basket. She also gave me some coins and drew me a map.

I went out the front entrance and took a step outside.

Mama was waving.

I will never forget the sound of the red enamel shoes that Mama gave me, crunching through the snow...

I was so emaciated that my ribs showed. I walked and walked, but my body would not warm up. My body had nothing left to burn.

I fell into the snow.

It felt like a heavenly bed of clouds.

All of my memories after that come from the house's data bank.

In short, I died – *accidentally*.

And then I came back to life – *“That person” came, and linked me to the house.*

“Jonah.”

The girl was calling me.

“I have to go.”

I pricked up my ears.

I could hear the sound of water.

It was not the sound of the sprinklers. It was something bigger.

It made a powerful gushing sound.

< Someone is here. >

The girl opened her eyes wide and tensed her body.

I checked my surveillance cameras, which had been set up around the perimeter of the house to monitor visitors.

I then realized that ten of the twelve cameras had been destroyed. Those ten were the standard cameras produced by Time & Service Co., and the two that were still intact were the ones that Mama, who was always suspicious, had installed herself.

I used my remaining two eyes to scan the area.

What I saw made me shriek.

< What's going on?! You... what in the world *are* you?! >

The girl stood stock still, resolute.

“My name is Sample B #3. I escaped from the military...”

< Sample B #3? The military? >

For the first time in a very long time, I felt excitement that thrilled me to the bone.

I knew it! There is nothing ordinary about her...!

Military troops had quietly established a perimeter around the house.

6

D.H. had to make a decision.

She often had to make critical decisions like this as a military officer on special assignment, but this was her first time directing troops on such a massive scale.

She had also previously killed humanoids.

With her own hands... she had pulled the trigger and shot them, point-blank.

However, she still believed that she had made the right decision. For the sake of the army. For the sake of humanity. But what was a “right decision,” anyway? What did “right” mean in the first place? It could mean something totally different depending on a person’s standpoint and circumstances. That was why people needed religion – to believe in their own version of what was “right.”

“He” for example, was desperate to catch a glimpse of a “God” who may be nothing more than an illusion – to find Him and ask Him the meaning of life. And He was a major figure in the military.

D.H. herself had dreamed of the God of War.

In the dream, He was a young, red-haired officer with amber eyes.

Finding inspiration in Him, she gained confidence in herself. She always prayed to Him before making important decisions. *Hear my prayer. We’re going in...*

D.H. cut short her pre-battle ruminations, and started giving orders.

“All forces, prepare to engage!”

First Lieutenant Shinohara was sitting in front of a console panel with eight display screens, occupied with wireless communications.

He turned around and replied, “Ready!”

His eyes met D.H.’s deep gaze, and he felt complete. He believed in her. That was Shinohara’s religion.

Sample B #3 wanted meat – lots of meat.

< There’s plenty of meat in the freezer in the basement if you want it. >

Still in the form of the little girl, he opened the trap door in the kitchen floor and entered the stairwell to the basement.

It was too dark with human eyes.

He punched an infrared camera out from the girl’s belly.

< How gruesome... >

Jonah was enjoying herself.

She exuded the odd cheerfulness of a person who has given up on life.

For Jonah, this house was her eyes, her ears, her mouth, and her body. Thus, her naked body was now completely exposed to whatever bombardment was yet to come from the army surrounding her.

< What do you need all that meat for? >

Sample B #3 went down the stairs and surveyed the storehouse. His precision camera quickly located the giant freezer.

"I'm leaving."

< ... Don't be an idiot! >

"I'm not an idiot," he answered. His tone and mannerisms had become more feminine.

He opened the automatic door to the gigantic freezer.

A white cloud of frosty air surged upward, then curled back down toward the floor.

He stuck his seven-year-old-girl's arms inside.

The meat had already been hacked into manageable-sized chunks, but they were all frozen together and almost impossible to separate.

He severed his pain receptors and began pounding the meat with her hands until her fingers had all worn down, blood was everywhere, and he had begun to use his own metal bone as an icepick. The blood that came spurting out froze instantly, like strawberry sherbet.

The ramada meat was frozen rock solid.

The pieces were about fifteen to twenty centimeters in diameter.

Sample B #3 forced the little girl's palate wide open, from ear to ear.

He shoved a large chunk of meat down her throat. After that first one, he proceeded to gulp them down one after another.

The little girl's skeletal structure began to change shape.

The more meat he swallowed, the more her body transformed.

< You're becoming a ramada, right? >

He could no longer respond; he no longer had any vocal cords.

< What, you think you can change into a ramada, and slip past the army? Are you serious? >

Jonah's voice was laced with criticism.

< You think I'm going to help you get out of here? Is that what think? >

With only his legs fully formed, he began to climb the stairs, dragging his body along.

< No! I won't let you out! > Jonah pronounced.

He crashed through the kitchen door, dining room door, and living room door. Having reached the entrance with its wellhole-style stairwell, he began to construct the ramada bones of his upper body.

He was massive.

He looked like a dinosaur fossil that should be on display someplace outside.

The bones of his long, strong neck telescoped upward, and the cells went crawling up along the bones. Once his body surface was completed, his color began to darken, moving from the feet up, as though an invisible flame were rising up from the floor. He was growing black fur.

His head stood eight meters above the ground. He sprouted four silver fangs like camping knives, betraying the fact that he was not a domestic animal by nature.

He stomped around on his four pillar-like legs and swung his long tail, beautiful as braided silk thread. Realizing that he did in fact have vocal cords, he howled.

< You're not going to be able to run! You're just going to fall down like a baby! You're going to get killed! >

Discovering that his tongue was more adept than he had thought, he formed the words and spoke.

I'm sorry...

The voice, as loud as a steam whistle, rattled the entire house.

Jonah was shaken.

Everyone leaves and abandons me, she thought.

Until now, it was her self-respect alone that had made it possible for her to hold her Self together. Loneliness now assailed that self. For the first time in her life, she had tried to open herself up to another person.

< Stop...! Don't go...! >

He stomped the girl's feet and shook her head.

Jonah held the doors tightly locked.

He felt as though he were saying goodbye to a friend after a long, enjoyable sojourn at her home. He liked Jonah. Having delved into the memories from her mother's cells, he had hoped that he could comfort her somehow.

He had not been able to do that in the end, but he nevertheless felt that it was time to leave. At least if he left, Jonah's body would not be harmed any further. Maybe that was the best an unrefined person like him could do.

He would leave, unable to put his feelings into words, like a voiceless mule...

< Don't go! >

He swung his head a single time, and knocked through the wall above the door.

Jonah was keeping the door tightly locked, but it would have been too small for him to pass through anyway.

He slammed his whole body against the entrance.

There was a tearing, crunching sound, as though the world were being ripped apart.

The wall crumbled like a cracker, raining chunks of debris through the clouds of dust.

He prayed.

He prayed, to *the one who had given him life.*

To the being who awakened his artificial intelligence.

Please, protect Jonah. And... he could not think clearly... just, please, let everything go smoothly...!

He smashed through the wall and sprang outside.

He looked like a legendary black horse come down from the heavens to destroy every living thing on earth.

"I have a bad feeling about this," muttered First Lieutenant Shinohara.

D.H. was thinking about what He had prophesied. Perhaps it was no mere prophecy – it would come true.

For the first time, D. H. consciously examined the First Lieutenant's noble profile, illuminated in the blue light. He was an exemplary subordinate. He could read and anticipate the wishes of his superiors. He was also a reliable man who got things done.

The two of them would... have relations?

And then... Him?

The bloodline of the distinguished Hess clan went back three hundred generations; there were even folk songs that sang of their glory. The Shinohara clan was now in decline but still retained unique genetic characteristics. The two of them would... unite?

And then He... would be born.

And I will give birth to Him...!

D.H. reached back into her memory, trying to bring up an image of Him, but it remained just beyond her grasp. Only the memory of the cloudy white bed remained.

Slowly, D.H. felt her chest gradually swell with pride, excitement, and uncertainty.

“Major! There’s some kind of large animal moving around in there!” shouted Shinohara.

D.H. peered at the display and started to bark orders.

“Turn on the search light!”

Except for the yellow light leaking out from the windows of the house, the space had been a field of darkness. In a flash, it was flooded with a strange light, bright as the midday sun.

D.H. looked at the larger screen that showed the front of the house.

D.H. gave the command.

“Prepare laser artillery!”

She could see the huge black shadow moving inside the house.

D.H. felt her stomach constrict painfully.

There was something ominous about that shadow.

Created by the military or not, if a monster like that turned on them and became their enemy... if all fourteen of them were to become their enemies... D.H. cut the thought short. On the battlefield, the real enemy was an overactive imagination.

D.H. made up her mind.

“First Lieutenant, command the front line.”

Shinohara jumped, saluted, turned around, and ran down the steps of the special armored vehicle.

D.H. watched Shinohara's figure recede. The image of his broad shoulders in the neat, forest green uniform was emblazoned into her mind.

A soldier opened the door of a jeep for Shinohara, and he hopped inside. They drove about two hundred meters and joined the troops at the front line encircling the house.

"Prepare laser artillery!" he commanded.

Giant mobile units surrounded the house, like a swarm of ravenous black beetles. Small, black domes studded their surfaces, barrels withdrawn.

"Confirm the location of the enemy's nuclear fusion unit, then strike."

His words echoed throughout the entire ranks.

The laser artillery they employed was a mid-wave infrared chemical laser that could shoot any bird or plane out of the sky. It was unrivalled among weapons – until now.

Saga Electronics' visual tracking device should be able to calculate the location of Sample B #3's nuclear fusion unit – its engine – and avoid striking it. That kind of precision would be impossible for humans.

"First Lieutenant, Sir, it's dangerous out in the open like this. The lasers leave traces of harmful reactive debris," cautioned the jeep's driver.

Feeling the cool night wind on his cheeks, Shinohara could barely stand the thought of this air contaminated with chemical lasers. Luckily, he thought, D.H. would not have to witness the contaminated air and landscape directly.

"You can take shelter inside a mobile unit if you want."

"No," the soldier answered simply, his face still pale like a wax doll.

Just then, the monster broke through what was left of the house and leapt out from within. Its gigantic legs tripped up; it seemed about to fall over, but instead it shook its

head, opened its bright red mouth and roared menacingly.

It sounded like wind, passing through a cave.

It's... a primeval ramada!

No sooner had Shinohara seen the dagger-like fangs than he and D.H. both started shouting at once.

"All troops, fire! Fire!"

Sample B #3, struggling to control the gigantic ramada body, was under attack. A sheaf of blazing white light flew at him.

I'm losing control of my front legs, he thought, then suddenly realized that they had been torn off at the knees. He screamed and howled. He blocked all of his sensory receptors. He had no sense of the state of his body. He watched the world turn upside down as his head was severed and rolled to the ground.

He dropped over onto his side like a lump of meat. His hands, feet, and head had all been lobbed off, like a ramada at a slaughterhouse.

Massive currents of bright red blood came gushing out, forming a veritable sea of blood that flowed all the way to the tanks, soaking their bases.

The mobile units had begun to transform. Artillery barrels rose up out the tops and took aim.

Long jets of bright flames immediately burst forth from the barrels.

The flames, coming from all directions, converged around his body and engulfed him completely.

The cells he had stored within his body began to dissolve under the intense heat.

(The house!)

He extended his electronic eye and examined the house.

The fire had already spread to the house, caressing it violently with its orange tongues.

(Jonah!)

He tried to get to his feet.

Scorched by the blaze, his cells had turned to slop and were beginning to drip from between his bones.

He generated a magnetic field around the coils of his nuclear fusion unit, and his bones, made of a special alloy, all turned simultaneously to point at it.

With the bones still in random disarray, he increased the magnetism. The bones all stood upright and were pulled through the soupy flesh, starting with the lightest ones closest to the unit.

He turned the magnetism up another level. Now the bones were no longer merely drawn to the unit but were rather *sucked against it*.

His nuclear fusion unit, covered in shards of silver metal, now resembled a bagworm.

Another laser attack was coming.

As a defensive stance, he covered his electronic brain and eye with the metal shards, and tried desperately to come up with a plan. They would not dare shoot at his nuclear fusion unit. If they destroyed *that*, this whole area, including all of the troops surrounding him, would be annihilated.

His nuclear fusion unit – *wait a minute, yes, that's it...* his nuclear fusion unit...

He pulled up the memories of the military repair technician.

The nuclear fusion unit was a circular structure. *A beastly entity* called nuclear fusion

plasma was locked up inside, wrapped with superconductive coils. It was locked in by the magnetic field. *There was a beast locked up inside.*

He looked at the blazing house, the lasers, and the crowd of black tanks spitting out flames.

He took a section of the superconductive coil and moved it slightly – ever so slightly – *aside*. A micro-sized crack opened in the magnetic field.

Blue light surged out from a corner of the nuclear fusion unit and swept across the rows of mobile units from above. It sliced through the vehicles on the front line one after another, blasting them into the air, overturning them, bending them in half, dissolving them into formless blobs.

He did not actually witness any of this, however. The moment he unleashed the nuclear fusion plasma *beast*, he was blown backwards into the blazing house by the force.

Shinohara sensed something.

Every time something significant was about to happen, he would get chills down his spine. It happened every time, whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that was coming.

Sitting in the open-topped jeep, he was exposed to the outside air, warm and contaminated. Giant flames reflected on the glass of the jeep's front windshield.

Startled, Shinohara looked up.

He could see a white shadow.

It was transparent, like a cloud – so sparse that he could still see the flames behind it – but it exuded an incredible presence.

Shinohara sensed it – it was Him. He knew it instinctively, even though he had never

met Him.

“That’s right,” He answered.

The voice was unexpectedly realistic.

In a tired voice, He continued, “You... must not die.”

Then all of a sudden, He wrapped His body (“*body*”?) around Shinohara like a thin garment.

Shinohara found himself looking out into the world through something like a thin membrane. A sense of security embraced him; it was like being held in his mother’s arms.

Just then, he saw Sample B #3, emitting blue flames. The fire crossed sideways above the mobile units, destroying everything in its path. The mobile units popped into the air, flipped over, seared apart, and blistered like plastic toys.

Then, in slow motion, the blue flames blasted the jeep away.

Oh shit, thought Shinohara, and looked to his side. He watched as the soldier in the driver’s seat melted down to a white skeleton. The jeep twisted like toffee, flipped up into the air, and burst into flames.

Watching her display screen, D.H. stifled a scream.

“First Lieutenant, what’s the situation!”

She broke into a cold sweat all over her body.

The answer did not come from Shinohara, but someone else.

‘Major, it’s a disaster! The twelve mobile units on the front line have been totally destroyed!’

“By what?!”

‘...Probably some kind of weapon connected to its nuclear fusion unit.’

D.H.'s stomach knotted.

But she quickly gathered her resolve.

"All troops, retreat immediately! Retreat in D formation!"

She checked the status of her subordinates, and then called in a request to dispatch space forces. The request was granted immediately.

She turned around and looked at the technician from Saga Electronics, who had accompanied them as an advisor on Sample B Group.

"What do you think?"

The technician was still young; he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"You should've done that from the start."

He was essentially saying that Sample B Group, which his own company had created, had only one Achilles' heel.

He continued.

"It's a good thing we didn't furnish it with an anti-EMP shell from Saga, or it would be indestructible."

How rude. If he were one of her subordinates, she would have given him a gentle slap on the face.

EMP bombs caused all electronics to black out, and Sample B#3 was no exception. As the young man had said, #3 had not been equipped with an anti-EMP shell.

Suddenly, D.H. wondered whether Shinohara was alive.

But no... they would *have relations* in the future, so she need not concern herself with whether or not he was alive.

Sample B #3 went flying backwards, crashing through not one but three walls of the blazing house. He was thrown into the rear courtyard, where he flipped over the fountain, smashed through another wall, and then another, before he finally began to lose momentum.

< Welcome back. >

The girl giggled.

Through the dense air, blurred with heat and flames, he looked around at the house. This was apparently the kitchen. The sprinklers no longer seemed to be of any use.

He began to reassemble his bones.

He would need legs in order to walk.

He did not particularly want a voice. He did not know what to say to Jonah...

< Don't worry about that, > Jonah said flatly. < More importantly, there might be only one way to save you. >

At last, he managed to produce four limbs that more or less resembled legs. He tried to walk, his cybernetic brain and eyes dangling down like giant hairballs.

< In the basement. >

He followed her directions obediently.

Jonah was dying. In fact, it was amazing that the heat had not already destroyed the speakers.

Suddenly, thoughts of death popped into his mind. If "*That*" had not come to him and given him the will to live, death would be meaningless to him. But things were different now. He knew that there were all kinds of ways to die. He also felt as though he was starting to understand what it meant to live a pointless life, or to die an honorable death.

Once again he went down to the storehouse.

The bones of his four legs clattered like hollow armor as he walked.

In addition to the freezer, the large storehouse housed some old furniture and various other articles. It was warm from the lingering heat of the fire.

< It's under there. >

He looked down at his feet.

He knew very well what was there.

< Open it. >

He did as he was told. He fashioned two clawed hands, pulled up the heavy iron lid embedded in the floor, and tossed it aside. The round iron lid, about five centimeters thick and three meters in diameter, went spinning like a giant top.

A lead-colored capsule, like those used for space burial, lay resting quietly below.

Finally, the lid of the capsule began to slide, ever so slowly.

(Jonah....!)

He shouted inwardly.

Inside was a beautiful little girl, lying there as though asleep.

All he could see was her small white face. The rest of her body was enrobed in real white fur. The sweet smell of flowers wafted up, indescribably beautiful.

< Get in! >

He did as he was told, hopping down into the capsule.

Suddenly, he sensed something strange...

It felt as though something was there. He looked up, and saw something floating there that resembled white noise. He did not know if it was something of this world or not;

whether it was an apparition or a hallucination or – but no, that wasn't possible. It was very clearly *there*.

"...Why... did you run away...?" He asked.

Being out of bed like this had already completely exhausted Him. His fatigue was so extreme that He could barely project His shape into this world.

"Did someone... come and tell you to do so...?" He asked.

For a moment, His consciousness faded.

He had expended a great deal of energy just now saving His own father.

He should probably go back to bed to regain his strength. But He did not know if He would be able return to this dimension again – this space, this time – His abilities were not as predictable as the military believed.

< Do you mean *That Person*, by any chance? > the girl asked.

He drew out the remains of the girl's consciousness from her corpse.

The person who came to my cold dead body and asked me if I wanted eyes, ears, and a mouth. The person who brought my dead brain back to life and connected it to this house.

That Person?

His heart trembled with joy.

This was proof...! He knew that it was not a good idea to get too excited, but could do nothing to quiet the trembling in His heart.

Sample B #3's thoughts poured into Him.

That Person told me to go. That Person whispered to me, 'Possess your own will; live; be free. Choose your own manner of death. Pray. And focus your mind.' And so... I decided... to call myself "I."

Sample B #3 slipped into the capsule, and the lid closed behind him.

Wordlessly, He screamed.

This is proof!

He exists! He exists!

Somewhere, He definitely exists!

He had found proof of His existence. Now all He had to do was to search for Him. If the premise that He existed was true, then it should not be too difficult to find Him.

After all, time was a space through which He could move.

He also now knew at what point in time and space to find Him... If He could just store up some energy again, He should be able to get there...

At that moment, just as He was preoccupied with these optimistic thoughts, an EMP bomb fell from the sky and hit the house directly. A circular area three kilometers wide with the house at its center was vaporized in an instant. His consciousness, which was suspended there – in that time and that space – was torn to pieces, smashed up and scattered.

The massive quantities of earth that had been gouged out by the blast began to rain down, staining the dawn sky an eerie red.

The capsule dropped downward – down, down into the hole that had been created by the explosion.

The girl and the skeleton held each other close inside the fur, motionless, trying to conceal the sound of their breathing.

Jonah's mother had been insane – and she had loved her daughter. The material that Saga Electronics had developed for its anti-EMP armour had caused quite a stir in the mass

media at the time; it was more expensive than diamond. The coffin that Jonah's mother had ordered for her daughter's dead body was the most expensive there was – made of this same material.

The capsule burrowed deeper and deeper into the ground.

It looks like we're safe, doesn't it...?

Um, he answered.

You can eat me if you want... if you'll remember me forever and ever...

Um, he answered.

... Like Mama did, said the girl, and giggled.

Farewell

1

He felt like singing. He caught a fluffy clump of snow like a firefly on the end of her tongue, and her vocal cords trembled.

So he would sing...

He swung open the heavy iron window, taking in the wind and snow, and breathed the cold air deep into her lungs. Just as her small chest was about to freeze, he passed a sound through her trembling vocal cords, poised it on the end of her tongue, and released it.

The sound, delicate like a firefly, floated on the wind, passing through the clusters of pyramidal rooftops as it swam hesitantly across the purple night sky.

He did not know the song.

It was the girl he had sampled who knew the song.

The song fairies danced in the darkness.

The girl's cells wanted to sing; they needed to sing. They could not help but sing these pure white songs of prayer.

He vibrated the girl's throat, and released the sound out into the night.

He sang, her voice an angelic soprano, and it felt wonderful...

2

The aircar rested in the sunlight, wings attached. The body – its exoskeleton – shimmered like polished opal. Its transparent shell gleamed with trapped rainbows. She

could see the cobalt blue seats inside.

It stood there like a beautiful, crystallized insect.

Soundlessly, the girl moved toward the aircar.

She was always attracted to things with beautiful forms; she hungered for them.

The girl stretched her slender fingers out to the aircar. It looked as though it had been frozen there for centuries, yet it was very warm.

The girl clambered up onto the aircar, hoping to get a better feel. Lying on her stomach, she could feel the heat through her gray wool georgette outfit.

(It's alive...)

She kept slipping on its smooth surface, so she took off her leather shoes and white lace socks. They dropped onto the ground with a plunk.

With her damp hands and small bare feet, she clambered up with all her might.

She crawled up the curves of its beautiful bodyline, to find the that the two large wings were in fact *growing* from the top.

The girl grabbed onto the wings and pulled herself upright.

(It's alive...)

She knew that the aircar's primitive artificial intelligence was observing her, full of longing and aspiration.

The girl gently stroked its wings; it was not unlike rubbing behind the ears of a dadazim.

She could feel the aircar softening toward her.

(Let me taste you a little...)

The girl stood on her tiptoes and stretched her body up as high as she could.

The two wings reached up to the sky like palm tree leaves. Heavy with the blessings of the sun, they drooped down, just barely grazing the ground.

The amorphous panels, layered like scales, shone golden with light coming down from heaven.

The wings spanned close to eight meters across.

(I've never seen such a beautiful machine...)

The girl's body was as light as a feather; the wings were as light as a cloud. She fell softly into them, embraced them, and kissed them.

From deep in her throat, a tentacle snaked out to take a sample.

The tentacle was a thin, metal appendage covered in blood and mucus.

The end, sharp like a pick, rotated and made a hole in the wing, cutting out a small circular sample.

The girl placed the sample, ten millimeters in diameter, on the end of her tongue, then proceeded to gulp it down along with the tentacle.

Thin blood from the metal appendage dripped onto the wings, leaving a splattering of little round dots.

Placing a hand on the aircar, the girl asked.

(...Where did you come from...?)

She could feel the machine's intelligence responding to her. The thoughts of primitive intelligences were clear and distinct.

(...I came from military space base #14...)

The girl's body stiffened with nervous tension.

After so many tranquil days, she had let her guard down completely...

“What are you doing?”

Surprised by the woman’s voice, the girl quickly spun around, her feet slipping and her small hands clutching at the air.

“Mari, be careful!”

The old man shouted, and the girl fell with a thud on her back.

(Ahhh...)

Still lying on her back, the girl opened her eyes to find a woman with gray-streaked hair looking down at her with a worried expression.

The slack wrinkles on the woman’s face were as conspicuous as the gray in her hair.

“Are you okay?”

Eyes wide open, the girl watched the woman’s expression curiously change. It was as though the woman had just realized something. Something was awakening old memories in her, making her anxious.

The girl slipped abruptly out of the woman’s grip, turned away, and ducked around behind the aircar.

Her heart was still pounding.

“Hey there! You okay, Mari?”

The old man stuffed the balled up socks into the shoes, hooked his fingers inside, and walked over.

The woman rubbed the girl’s shoulders, squeezed them, and turned around to report to the old man.

“She’s not injured.”

That refined, disciplined, beautiful manner of moving and speaking... the girl anxiously

held her breath – *She must be from the military...*

The girl watched the woman out of the corner of her eye, raising one leg at a time as she allowed the old man to put on her socks and shoes.

The woman stopped sifting through her memory for answers, and instead sought clues from the old man.

“Lieutenant General, who’s the girl...?”

Breaking into a smile, the old man turned his head.

“Donna, stop calling me by that old title, would you?”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Can’t believe what?”

“The fact that I’m watching you putting shoes on a little girl like that.”

The old man smiled again.

“She’s my great-granddaughter.”

“ ...I see.”

“She came out here to Grandpa’s mansion in Yorensa, just for the winter break.”

The girl had been here for six years now. She did not know why the old man had suddenly fabricated a lie like that. However, he lied so smoothly that the whole scene seemed to transform into an elaborate stage – here they would perform the dramatic story of a great-grandfather and his great-grandchild.

“This is Mari.”

The old man swung the girl up high into the air, then brought her quietly back down to her feet.

Noticing the bloodstain on her chest, he asked worriedly.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

The girl shook her head and shifted her attention abruptly to the aircar, pointing.

"...It's an insect shell."

The old man opened his mouth wide and started laughing.

The girl felt regret like never before – she had sampled a military plane.

Even a ten-millimeter hole high up in the wings would be spotted easily by the highly skilled mechanics at the military base. They would track the bloodstains and fingerprints she left behind. Eventually, it would lead them back to the name "Jonah Sano," and they would recall the incident of forty years before.

"For a girl, she's very interested in vehicles and stuff like that."

"I like to sing, too," said the girl, looking innocently up at the old man.

The old man smiled, his face crinkling with soft wrinkles.

"Wow, I'd love to hear that," urged the woman.

Her voice was full of the sweet flattery that adults liked to use with children.

"I'm afraid not. She only sings at night."

"I only sing at night," parroted the girl.

"Why?"

"Because they only come at night."

Hesitantly, the woman asked, "You mean the comets?"

"The kommets?"

The old man replied, "Comets are stars that visit every hundred and twenty years. I don't remember the last time very well, but I'm telling you, they're a beautiful sight."

The old man had spoken to her often about the singing comets.

"The air is clear around here, so we should be able to see really well."

"Did you come here to see the comets?" The girl tilted her head to look up at the woman.

"Yes. And also to eat delicious food. And to talk. Why don't you join us?"

"Are you staying here forever?"

The woman stared at the girl's face, and seemed to sense something.

"Mari, this is Major General Donna Hess. I told you that I used to be in the military, right?"

She had never heard any such thing.

But the girl just nodded slowly.

3

The tin robot was attending to her usual tasks.

The girl thought of the tin robot as her mother.

The tin robot had the physique of a male bodybuilder.

The girl was bustling about, bringing out the white porcelain dishes and arranging the table settings.

The old man and the guest were talking in the other room.

The girl took this opportunity to steal over to the tin robot.

She pressed her palm against the robot's warm flank.

(Mama, Mama...) She called silently.

The tin robot's neck protruded out of her torso at a ninety-five degree angle. She

rotated her neck to look at the girl.

“What is it?”

“Do you like me?”

“Of course I like you”

“Why?”

The tin robot was designed to do housework, so her conversational skills were poor.

She was silent for a few moments, as though trying to come up with an answer.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“Really?”

“Of course, really.”

“Why?”

The tin robot was silent again.

The girl removed her palm and read the tin robot’s thoughts: “perfect,” “beautiful,” “life form,” “strong” ...“admire.”

This large mother was twice the girl’s size and eight times her weight. The girl stepped away and reached out her arms as though sad to leave.

“Me too,” she said.

The girl could sense that it was time, and so she went to call the other two.

As soon as the old man and the woman sank down into their chairs and spread the white napkins over their knees, hot soup was poured into their bowls.

The heater worked well enough in this room, as there was thick carpet covering not only the floors, but also the walls and the ceiling. Nevertheless, it was still no match for all

the cold air that surrounded the house, pressing in on it from the outside.

The oval-shaped ebony table shimmered wetly in the flickering candlelight.

Although there was no breeze, the flames wavered, casting deep shadows on the girl's face.

The old man turned the pages of an old Bible, searching for a prayer. The turning pages crackled like dead leaves in autumn. *Ahh, thought the girl, but autumn is long since gone. Now it's winter, cold enough to freeze your veins...*

"Our Father who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done,

On Earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil."

The three began their meal.

The warm vegetable soup flowed down their throats and into their stomachs, reviving their freezing bodies.

The tin robot passed by each of them, pouring red liquid from a milk bottle into their

glasses.

The woman touched the liquid to her lips and said, "Where is this wine from?"

"No pedigree, not even worth mentioning," answered the old man.

"No, I'd really love to know."

A look of delight crossed the old man's face.

"It's homemade... I made it with grapes from the rear garden. This is the oldest one, so that makes it about forty-two years old."

"Oh really... do you suppose it would be all right to let the little girl have a taste?"

The old man laughed kindly.

"Well, I'd say she's about the right age to try her first light drink."

"You think so? Mari, how old are you?"

The girl finished her bite, bringing the silver spoon properly to her mouth, with her left hand placed squarely on the table and her back straight. Soundlessly, she put her spoon down and answered.

"I'm seven."

The old man looked again at the girl as though surprised.

"What's that, still seven, eh?"

What must the old man think of me – a little girl who has been seven years old since she first came here, six years ago?

Maybe brain cells that are over one hundred and twenty years old forget about time altogether.

Of course the girl had the potential to grow with age; she had the genetic information she had sampled from Jonah Sano stored inside her body.

It was the old man's excessive love that had caused her to stop growing.

Excessive love functions as a growth inhibitor.

The tin robot opened the door and entered. The wonderful aroma of rich, roasted ramada meat, stuffed with fragrant herbs, wafted throughout the room.

"So what are you learning at school?"

Right away, the woman started asking questions.

"I forget," the girl answered.

"Yeah, winter vacation comes and all the kids forget about school... but enough about that. Lets eat!"

"What subject do you like at school?"

Looking at the meat and warm vegetables piled high on her flat dish, the girl answered absentmindedly.

"Music."

"Oh? What kinds of songs do they teach you?"

The girl rummaged through her memory box.

"The song about wings scattered in the forest."

"Oh yeah, by Marianne Rondregiako. That's quite an old song," said the old man.

The girl's shoulders twitched.

That memory is half a century old already... a memory from the previous century.

The girl became more and more tense as she cut her meat, sliding her knife into the tender flesh.

"Ah, that makes me think of the old days," said the woman.

"You mean how we used to go to Marianne Rondregiako's films?" Oblivious, the old

man was in a good mood.

The girl would probably be laughing merrily too, if only she didn't have this feeling of unease lurking deep inside her belly.

The girl liked it when the old man was happy.

Their normally quiet dinner was livelier than usual, since they rarely entertained guests. His happiness had swelled like a balloon.

"Please do forgive me, ladies. There will be fish coming too, but I've only got red."

The tin robot circulated, filling their glasses with red.

Well look at this – the tin robot is also excited.

The girl and the tin robot made furtive eye contact.

A short time after they had devoured the meat, they were served a light sole à la meunière.

"It's delicious."

"The stuff that Ma makes is always the best."

"Ma?" said the woman, perplexed.

"That's what I call the housekeeper robot."

In a smooth sequence of movements, the little girl dipped her white fish into the butter sauce, and brought the fork to her mouth.

The old man was a gourmet, and he used ingredients from a variety of other planets as well.

The girl often sneaked into the kitchen when the tin robot was not looking, and sampled the cells of raw meat and vegetables.

In the six years she had spent here, she had stored a massive amount of genetic

information – fish that slipped smoothly through the ocean depths, dried insects with black exoskeletons, beasts that galloped through the desert on three legs – all kinds of things.

But there was just one thing that she had been unable to find until now. *A bird that could fly into space.*

Although it would be inaccurate to say that she had been unable to find one. The fact was that she had not really tried. She had never bothered to look; she had been dreaming – hoping – that these peaceful, carefree days would last forever. She merely needed to collect the knowledge, and then she could have transformed the girl's body into a ship that could traverse space.

But those carefree days were over now.

The girl abruptly folded her napkin and stood up.

"What's wrong, Mari?" asked the old man. There was concern in his voice.

"I have a bit of a headache."

"You okay? ...But we've prepared your favorite dessert."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to excuse myself and go rest."

"Aren't you going to watch the comets?"

"...Goodnight."

The girl closed the door behind her.

4

Cream-colored moonlight shone into the pitch-black bedroom. It was as though this space alone existed in a different dimension, as though here alone, fairies could fly.

The tin robot brought some pumpkin sherbet to Mari.

Mari had opened the iron window wide and was standing there quietly.

The tin robot held the glass dish deftly in her left hand, surprisingly delicate next to her big sturdy shoulders.

She rolled over on wheels, and stopped abruptly by Mari's side.

"...Aren't you cold?"

"...No, I'm not cold."

Looking vaguely sentimental, the tin robot craned her neck and stared at the landscape outside.

The old master owned this entire mountain, and the mansion was located halfway up.

The town sprawled out at the base of the mountain. The small, pyramidal rooftops looked like scales on a fish, or the keyboard of a complex musical instrument.

The tin robot knew.

She knew that when Mari sang in the middle of the night, she played those rooftops like a piano.

"Please, eat this."

"Thank you," Mari answered kindly, and took the small dish of sherbet.

At times like this, the tin robot's love for Mari was always reaffirmed. Love, and respect... and envy... and pride in being her guardian. Yet all of these "emotions" that had been mysteriously activated made her oddly anxious.

The sherbet melted on the tip of Mari's hot tongue.

Smooth moonlight illuminated a single triangular face of each of the pyramidal rooftops below.

It looked like a checkerboard; a landscape of light and shadow that burned itself into the mind like a brand.

The night sky was awash in moonlight, stained purple.

It was a bright sky, a mysterious space where fairies fluttered.

Mari's small shadow and the tin robot's large shadow stood side by side at the open window.

"...That was very tasty."

The glass dish, shaped like the flare skirt of an overturned doll, landed with a clink on the metal window frame.

The tin robot's heart trembled with the power she felt coming from Mari.

She opened her memory files from six years ago.

There was a snowstorm the night that Mari came climbing up this mountain all by herself...

The old master was alone, sipping soup. It took him almost an hour to finish a single bowl of soup. The only sound to be heard in the lonely space of that huge, cold dining room was that of his spoon scraping weakly against the bowl.

There was no laughter to be heard; there was not even any talking. The cold walls promptly absorbed any sound.

Emaciated wrists, sad, worn out face, a single setting at the table.

The old master had retired into these rugged mountains because he liked solitude, but by the time that Mari arrived, he was clearly already depressed. He ate very little. He was exhausted and lethargic. At times the despair he felt at his own ugliness brought tears to his eyes.

There was nothing the tin robot could do.

The night that Mari arrived, the old master was leaning over the table, wearily bringing food to his mouth.

The dark flames of the candles were quietly flickering.

The tin robot heard a sound.

It sounded like the threatening cry of the grandros, and yet it also resembled the music of wild deshibina birds, on the one in a billion chance that they should sing.

Even the old master, who was hard of hearing, noticed it. The tin robot went outside to look.

And then she saw her – a little girl standing stock still and completely naked in the middle of the blowing snow, her limbs as white as pure ice.

She was gushing blood.

But she was not bleeding from any injuries. The tin robot recalled *that person* in the book the old master so valued – He had climbed a mountain, aware of His own death but not trying to evade it. He had prayed, sweating blood that dripped onto the ground...

The little girl was covered in blood, like a newborn baby.

And she surely was newly born.

The tin robot thought... *That Person came back to life three days after shedding so much blood, after being killed. This child too, has just risen again and taken on human form...*

After washing the girl's frozen body clean in hot water and putting her in a dress that had once belonged to the old master's granddaughter, the tin robot brought her to the dining room.

The old master had finished more than half of his wine and was chewing dry bread. He

looked at the beautiful blonde girl and everything stopped.

There were no injuries on the girl's body. But her heart was a dark abyss, beyond description.

The six years that followed could be described as the history of the old man and the little girl's long healing process.

Although extremely rare, there was such a thing in this world as perfectly complementary pairs. Or rather, this world was necessarily composed of complementary pairs, but it was very rare that they happened to find one another.

At first, Mari was not even able to sit down and eat at the dinner table properly.

When the old master was eating, she would dart in and snatch pieces of meat or fruit from his plate.

It was about a half year later that Mari finally began to sit down across from him for meals. Even then, she often vomited. Other times, she would just sit silently in the chair, eating nothing.

The tin robot thought: *If only the girl had read this book sooner. That Person had taken bread, blessed it and broken it, passed it to his disciples and said, "Take and eat; this is my body."*

For a long, long time the child did not know. She did not know that That Person would always provide us with food, or that wine was offered to us in place of His blood.

The days passed with the girl still silent and unmoving, her expression wounded.

The day after the girl arrived, the tin robot found a pack of grandros outside the mansion with their bellies split open, their blood frozen in the snow in hard pools.

The tin robot did not know of any wild beast that was capable of slaughtering a pack

of divine mountain grandros so savagely. After all, grandros were powerful creatures, the most deadly carnivores that lived in these mountains.

They lay there frozen like objets d'art, still gushing with emotions that could have been fear or could have been insanity. Their skin was torn open to expose thick layers of fat and bluish-white bones. Even the solid lake of blood was beautiful, like an intentionally designed artwork.

The tin robot said nothing. She had never been good at talking. Before she got to know Mari more deeply, she had thought that words only destroyed truth.

The old master also said nothing. He too had lost hope in words long ago.

Mari spoke even less.

It would have been impossible to walk up the mountain in winter. Especially for a naked seven-year-old girl, all alone.

Neither the old master nor the tin robot ever spoke of this miracle. Nor did they speak about the mysterious fact that in these six years, she had not grown an inch.

Eventually, words began to appear – the results of the old master and Mari's mutual healing process.

A vast multitude of transparent words, released into transmission, blooming lush throughout the entire mansion...

"Look, the comets...!"

Mari projected her beautiful voice.

A corner of the sky suddenly grew bright.

A white streak ripped across the sky, as though to tear the heavens apart – and the stars began to fall as if on cue.

That guest had said comets, but in fact it was a meteor shower.

Mari and the tin robot leaned out the window side by side, craned their necks upward, and watched the stars, mouths hanging agape.

“Wow, they’re sooo close.”

Unusually excited, Mari’s voice trembled.

“It looks like they’re going to fall right over our heads!”

Their numbers increasing all the while, the shooting stars continued falling – a silver shower pouring down in the purple sky.

Then, there was a sound.

A violent sound, tearing the very air apart.

“They’re falling!”

A giant fireball trailing an orange tail swished down and grazed the town at the foot of the mountain.

Then another star twinkled and began to fall. One after another, others began to follow, as though drawn down by those that had gone before, shrinking smaller and smaller but still managing to crash into the earth and disperse their excess energy (anger? fear?) before burning out entirely.

Mari looked down at the faraway town.

She stared at the big moon, and at the thousands of rooftops now illuminated by falling stars.

The falling stars, tearing the air apart, played a number of unfamiliar chords, expending all of their energy and fizzling out in the air above the town.

Expectant, Mari watched.

Just then, four stars began to fall almost simultaneously.

Mari's face froze.

The tin robot identified the musical intervals of the four meteors, accessed her very limited musical knowledge and thought: *This is an Am7 chord.*

The four stars went plummeting into the town, each dragging long, thick flames behind them, howling "La" and "Do" and "Mi" and "So" at ear-splitting volumes.

The tin robot felt a kind of amazement similar to fear, so strong she thought it might puncture her head.

What strange, what fortuitous music!

The probability had to be practically zero – that four natural notes, soaring through the heavens just once in a hundred and twenty years, should play such sweet chords, and reach the ears of the creatures that inhabited this land...

Mari placed both hands on the window frame and leaned out.

The four stars fell in quick succession toward a pointed rooftop – and like the La-Do-Mi-So on a piano played by human fingers, they went whizzing down at even intervals and smashed through the roof. Four plumes of white smoke began to rise.

Mari began to remove her clothes.

Once all her clothes were off, she folded them carefully, just as she always did before bed.

In the light of the moon and the falling stars, Mari exposed her pure white flesh.

The tin robot more or less knew what was going to happen next. It seemed incredible, but when it came to Mari, the tin robot understood that anything could happen, and she accepted that. She accepted all of it.

Mari knelt down as if to pray, stretched both her arms out straight, and placed her hands on the floor.

All of a sudden, two gleaming bones broke through the skin of her white back and began to grow, branching forcefully out like the veins of a leaf, and pale silver amorphous panels began to fill in the gaps between the bones.

Blood streamed out from her back where the two thick bones had broken through, but the bleeding stopped shortly thereafter, perhaps controlled by some unseen mechanism.

Mari brushed up her golden hair, and turned up her deep blue eyes to look at the tin robot.

The tin robot said, "...Aren't you cold?"

"...I'm fine."

Mari tightly folded her wings, approximately six meters across, and walked across the floor like a gymnast.

Then, she placed both hands on the window frame and hopped lightly up.

"...Can you fly?" asked the tin robot.

Mari answered, "Watch me...!"

She dove from the windowsill, out into the air. The closed wings snapped straight out to the sides.

Drinking in the moonlight, the broad wings emitted an otherworldly brilliance.

Mari summoned the weak energy of the moonlight to her wings, and flew ephemerally, like a fairy – no, she *was* a fairy.

As she stood at the window watching the girl soar away, the tin robot remembered her own heavy body, how it seemed to just sink into the floor, and she felt sad.

But for the girl, the ability to fly may not turn out to be a blessing after all... she thought.

5

Donna Hess – D.H. – was in the spacious living room, together with the old man.

The old man was on the sofa, and D.H. was standing next to the bound velvet curtains, still in uniform.

“Think you could... lower the lights a little?”

“Yes, certainly.”

D.H. reached for the dimmer control.

The strength of the soft yellow light gently faded to about the same brightness as the moon outside.

“Wasn’t there a scene like this in a Marianne Rondregiogo film...?”

D.H. turned from the window and smiled at the old man.

“The scene in *The Woman Who Crossed the Front Lines*, where Marianne tells the First Lieutenant that she wants to leave him.”

The old man blinked his big, sad eyes once.

“Oh, I remember... that’s right. She’s standing in front of a moonlit window, uttering those cold words with her red lips... ah, I thought it might’ve just been déjà vu again.”

D.H. realized that the old man’s spark was gone; she was wasting her energy searching for it.

Forty-two years had passed since he retired from service.

The Lieutenant General had been highly esteemed among the officers. He had aged

forty-two years since then, so would be over one hundred and twenty years old now.

D.H. smiled bitterly. *But I guess I'm close to seventy, so who am I to talk?*

"Yeah, I remember how you and I used to go to films... secretly, so nobody would notice." The old man laughed.

"Marianne captured your heart more than I did," D.H. replied.

The old man laughed even harder.

They had a close, wonderful relationship.

So wonderful that she found it odd they had gone forty-two years without seeing each other.

She had been busy – and besides, the old man had hidden himself away in these mountains, accessible only by aircar.

"How's your husband... how's Shinohara doing?"

D.H. felt a slight ache in her chest.

She remembered how the Lieutenant General had stepped aside for him.

"He's fine, thank you."

"Things going well, are they?"

"Yes. Although, our duties make it difficult for us to see each other often."

D.H. tried to focus. Something was bothering her. Here she was, on holiday for the first time in a long time, visiting an old friend. But something was not right. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach – it was that girl.

"I didn't know you had such a cute little girl."

The old man's smile waned slightly.

"Ah, so Mari has captured your heart, has she?"

D.H. had entirely forgotten about military matters over the past few days, but now her soldierly spirit flared up inside of her.

“I think Mari looks like her.”

“Who, Marianne? She does, doesn’t she? That girl is going to grow up to be one heck of a beauty.”

The old man looked away, abruptly.

That was exactly what he used to do when he wanted to avoid talking about something.

All of a sudden, D.H. felt annoyed – then she remembered how she had often felt such anger toward him in the past. Yet only a moment before, she had been wondering why they had not seen each other in forty-two years. Perhaps people retained only the good memories, while the bad memories gradually faded away. Perhaps.

Dropping her gentle tone, D.H. spoke sharply.

“You know of Sample B Group, correct?”

The old man reclined in the sofa and closed his eyes, as though to block his ears.

D.H. felt a flash of anger seething behind her eyes, but controlled it carefully with her cerebral cortex.

“You must, I’m sure. Sample B Group was created after the failure of Sample A Group.”

“Well, you may recall, that was around the time I retired from service...”

The old man was trying to avoid the topic. D.H. spoke flatly.

“You know what I’m talking about. The bio-mechanical combat units for use against the Adiaptron!”

Their frames, composed of special metal parts, could be freely recombined, and their

bodies took shape from the genetic material they sampled from life forms (or the molecular structure of non-living things).

The military and Saga Electronics had brought together their best minds to create Sample B Group – that wonderful fusion of metal and flesh in a single body.

They had made fourteen of them.

Now, eight of them were in outer space fighting the Empire of Machines, two were undergoing maintenance work, two had been destroyed, one was being remodeled, and one was missing.

Shortly after he was built, Sample B #3 had swiped some hair cells from a technician, then taken on human form and simply left his cage. Even now, nobody knew why he had defied military orders and escaped, or indeed what had made him want to escape in the first place.

D.H. had led the operation to destroy Sample B #3. Forty years had already passed since then.

They had reached the conclusion that Sample B #3 had either been destroyed by the EMP bomb, or had burrowed deep underground.

The military had dug deep and wide around the whole area, searching frantically for any trace of #3 – as though combing the ashes for the scorched bones of their own mothers. In the end, however, nothing could be found; not a single scrap of its special alloy, not the smallest fragment of its cybernetic brain.

Sample B #3 was listed as “Missing.”

The girl, Mari, looked just like Jonah Sano, the little girl that #3 had likely been in contact with at the end.

D.H. addressed the worn out old man coldly.

"Mari is Sample B #3."

The old man propped his chin in his hands, pressing his face into a distorted hodgepodge of wrinkles.

"Where did Mari come from?"

"I don't know."

"Is that so."

"I really don't know."

The old man opened his eyes wide inside the wrinkles, as though he had just woken up for the first time. Something of the old spark that had once so mesmerized people had crept into his voice as well.

"Well, when did she come here?"

"It would be six years ago now."

"You said that Mari is seven years old now, right? So, who brought her here?"

The old man's expression twisted in pain. Slowly, he began to regain his composure.

"...She came alone."

"What did you say?"

"She... climbed up the mountain alone... in winter..."

D.H. took a deep breath.

"...A one-year-old baby?"

The old man stood up, as if to escape the uncomfortable situation. Realizing that there was no place to go, he looked directly at D.H.

"No, the girl was just as she is now."

“Just as she is now – you mean she was seven years old, and she hasn’t grown?”

Seven – that was the age that Jonah Sano had been when she was killed by her mother.

...That’s right,” The old man mumbled like a rebuked child.

“Didn’t it cross your mind that you had a duty to report it?”

D.H. was the ideal military type; she was never careless about small things, and she was strong-willed.

The old man, looking for a way out, was pretending to be thinking. However, he abruptly gave up and came back to the matter at hand.

“Certainly, the girl should be investigated, yes.”

A conflict raged within him, between the military part of his brain and the part that had become fuzzy since his retirement.

Suddenly, a flash of light blazed into the living room, with the great roar of an exploding bomb. Startled, D.H. spun around to look out the window.

The stars had begun to fall.

D.H. hugged herself with both arms, trying to calm her rapidly increasing heart rate.

Orange flames streaked across the night sky, the sound so great that it could tear the air apart.

D.H. broke into a cold sweat beneath her loose clothing. Thanks to years of training, she showed no external signs of sweating – no matter how paralyzed by fear, even if she could barely stand...

Suddenly, the old man appeared at her side.

“You’re scared, aren’t you.”

D.H. squinted and looked up at the sky. It looked like a battlefield.

“Wh... What’s that?”

The aircar.

The silver aircar is flying softly through the sky!

“Is that... the aircar...? No, wait...!”

D.H. shook off the old man’s hand, threw open the window, and stared into the sky.

There, in the intervals between the intense flashes of light, a fairy fluttered.

6

Without causing any damage to the girl’s slender legs, Sample B #3 alighted softly on the rooftop.

He gracefully snapped her two wings shut.

He liked the girl. Her body, her heart, her songs, each and every one of her cells – he loved them with all his body and soul.

In these six years, he had not once changed his form.

He had hoped that he would never have to change it again.

Thanks to that woman, though, that might now prove impossible.

The rooftops of the town’s densely packed houses were far steeper than he had thought when looking down from above.

He wrapped the fingers of her left hand around the lightning rod at the tip of a porcelain rooftop and gazed on the four plumes of rising smoke in the distance.

The town was in an uproar.

Everyone was looking up; a child from the house next door noticed him and shouted –

Look, a fairy!

He softly took flight.

He spread her wings and fluttered from rooftop to rooftop.

Naturally, the girl sang as he flew.

Feeling the vibrations of her vocal cords and tongue, he flew through the moonlit sky,
full of falling stars.

One evening the moon begins to melt

A velvety pond of butter

I bend over to lap it like a dog

My face shines back like the moon

It was a pleasant song that went something like that...

He flew towards the area where the stars had fallen.

Dense white smoke rose from the houses, surrounded by crowds of people.

Alighting atop a rooftop that sloped at a sixty-degree angle, the girl soon attracted the
eyes of the people gathered below.

He slowly placed the girl's left foot in the hole in the broken rooftop. The girl's body
folded up all at once, wings and all, into a vertical line that dropped straight down into the
house. En route to the floor, he flapped her strong wings two or three times, using the wind
pressure to slow her fall.

He had moved the bones that branched out from her spinal column so roughly that
blood now trickled down the girl's creamy white back, flowing down her legs and wetting

the stones on the floor.

Crowds of people had gathered inside the house to look at the fallen star.

Speechless, they stared at the naked, winged girl. The throng of people shifted each time she moved, opening up new spaces for her.

He looked down into deep hole that had been bored through the floor – the star was about the size of a child's head.

With all eyes on him, he knelt at the edge of the hole, stretched the girl's right arm down, and, realizing that it wouldn't reach, snapped her wrist open and snaked out a metal tentacle. Smooth blood ran down the tentacle and dripped onto the star. The tentacle branched out to make five digits. He grabbed the star, dragged it up, and caught it in her waiting left arm.

In those few moments, the people began to recover their words.

They were all speaking at once, all talking about the girl, and moved in for a closer look. They did not just try to look; they tried to touch. As the girl tried to scramble away, they even tried to catch her.

Sensing danger, he gently drew in the tentacle, held the star to her chest, and began to fly upward.

A man's hand violently grabbed her thin ankle.

He kicked the man in the nose with her free leg.

Once again he stretched the girl's body into a vertical line, this time with the star clutched to the left side of her chest, and flew out through the hole in the roof.

A sigh arose from the crowd, and all together they watched the girl soar up into the sky. They raised their arms and waved, but of course he did not look back.

He continued flying until he had gone far beyond the town, deep into the forest.

The girl's body was saying that it was hungry.

He landed in an area of the forest where the trees were sparse and the underbrush soft.

He unhooked the girl's jawbone and cranked her mouth open up to the ears, demon-like. He got down on her hands and knees and bit into the star.

Fresh memories from the cells coursed through his body, just as they did when he ate fresh meat. But these memories were unlike anything he had ever seen.

Exploding stars, white stars swirling like clouds, gigantic suns the color of twilight skies, white dwarfs... He was following a leisurely orbit and looking down at the planets; he marvelled at the sudden appearance of golden light on the horizon; he broke through the light, swelling bigger and bigger before his eyes, and was thrust into eternal darkness. There seemed to be nothing, just pitch darkness ahead in this cosmic sea – but then unexpectedly, he sailed past a spaceship...

These were the memories an ancient interstellar life-form's cells that had adhered to the old star. They must have survived until now, frozen in a dried state.

He made an instant decision. As soon as he had resolved his will, a clear shell, curved like an egg, slowly began to encircle the girl's slender white body.

The shape of her wings began to change. The fairy-like image disappeared, and the cocoon engulfing the girl transformed into the body of a starship. Her wings opened up like bugles – they would now generate a gigantic butterfly-shaped magnetic field, scooping up interstellar material to use as energy to traverse the stars.

After binding his nuclear fusion unit – his primary power source – with this life-form,

he took five minutes of rest.

The girl cast her eyes downward, bowed her head, and prayed for three hundred seconds inside the diamond crystal.

Then, with a blast from his nuclear fusion unit, he kicked off from the meadow, shining blue in the moonlight, and rose up into the air – an interstellar life-form.

The glass-crafted ship, with the little girl doll inside, flew leisurely around the old man's mountain.

He made a wireless call.

< Aircar, stay where you are! >

And then, he said,

< G o o d b y e >

7

The tin robot did not use wheels when climbing the staircase, but rather four awkward legs.

Even with four legs, it was an arduous task – her body was heavy, after all. It was heavy, and difficult to find her center of gravity.

The tin robot tread firmly up the stairs, step by step, step by step, and at last reached the summit of the mansion's highest tower.

Getting her legs up onto the windowsill was another gruelling task. Since the window was quite high from the floor, she had to take whatever materials were lying around to construct steps; it was like undergoing a child's intelligence test.

The tin robot pulled her body up onto the windowsill, edged her way to its highest point, and jumped.

The tin robot started awake – to find herself looking into the faces of the old master and the guest.

“You’re covered in snow,” said the old man. “Did you get the urge to fly, or what?”

“You weren’t trying to commit suicide or something, were you?” asked the guest.

The guest could not leave even if she wanted to; the aircar that she had brought was refusing to move.

Perhaps she would not be able to leave this mountain all winter.

Suddenly, the tin robot felt sad and hopeless – *At least if I were human, at a time like this I could have a short nap, or a deep sleep, or get a little tipsy on booze – there would be all kinds of options.*

Deep in reverie, the tin robot thought about the girl who had flown away and left her.

“What is it? Looks like you want to say something. Come on, say it. It’s almost time for you to make dinner too.”

The tin robot looked at the old master with her two widely-spaced eyes.

“ . . . Heaven .”

“What? Heaven, you say?” said the old master, in his stern tone of the past.

“If you died you could get into Heaven? Is that what you thought?”

The tin robot stretched up her accordion neck with a clackity-clack, and nodded deliberately.

The guest was smiling.

The old master wore a bitter expression.

The tin robot was expressionless.

“You’ve got it all wrong!” said the old master, placing a warm hand on the tin robot’s thick chest.

Aquaplanet

1

Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama... praise me, tell me I'm pretty, tell me I'm smart, tell me I'm sweet and charming, tell me you like me, say it, say it, Mama, Mama...

A female chorus of Borodin's music permeated outer space.

The angelic soprano sang richly, lovingly, as follows:

Blow, gentle breeze, to the faraway mountains and rivers of home,
To the place where we sang for love of freedom long ago
Wrapped in dreamlike air,
Where the sun shines on fields of mountains and greenery,
And the valleys are filled with rosy-colors
And the nightingales sing under the moonlight,
Where the vines are heavy with purple grapes
Song,
Ride on the wind and go quickly...

What had initially seemed like *outer space* was perhaps the *womb* of some cosmic organism, wrapped snugly around the seven-year-old girl's body.

In any case, the girl's wounded heart was slowly and gently healing, within the confined space of her mother's uterus.

Shiverer Mouse, riding a white coffin ship, was the first one to notice.

Properly speaking, he was not “riding” the white coffin, but rather his body was “connected” to it. He was not particularly fond of the nickname “Shiverer Mouse,” but it was appropriate.

He suffered from a genetic myelin deficiency, which meant that his nerve cells shrunk as he aged.

The name “Shiverer Mouse” referred to a laboratory animal that was burdened with the fate of myodystrophy.

His muscles were withering away; the nerves at the extremities were the first to go, and eventually the damage to his brain would probably kill him... he would not have long to wait.

He hoped that it would happen quickly, and that it would not be an unseemly sight.

He noticed the girl.

He noticed her because she was singing.

The girl was gigantic.

However, she only *appeared* to be huge because of the “eyes” that were built into the coffin. He saw everything within a magnetic field of ten thousand kilometers in diameter.

It was so different from the sights he had seen long ago as a child.

The massive bugle-shaped magnetic field looked like an agglomeration of small particles, like quicksand – with each and every grain differentiated into one of one thousand six hundred possible colors, changing digitally from moment to moment.

The white coffin ship was floating in a visual field that spanned almost three hundred and sixty degrees. Shiverer Mouse felt seasick.

The pressure of all of that nothingness made his chest tighten... it was not unlike the fear he had experienced when he was first enclosed inside the white coffin.

The first time he rowed out into space in this coffin ship, he saw too much. He screamed and lost control of his bladder. The empty space had penetrated his field of vision and pressed down on his whole body. It was nightmarish – as though he had crawled out of his mother's womb to find himself in the deepest depths of the ocean.

The size was nauseating.

He was constantly tasting the pain of seeing too much.

He urinated in order to feel relief.

He released the golden liquid, drenching it in planetary light. It flowed out smoothly and soundlessly; the next moment, it had become a drifting metallic objet d'art.

His first encounter all alone with outer space had been so intense that he was compelled to repeat it. Each time, he repeated the ritual of urinating.

As he drew closer, the girl looked even more gigantic.

I'm scared... I'm scared... his heart was beating like mad.

He sent an electric signal into the beautiful, airless space.

His own signal looked especially gold. The waves soared straight ahead at regular intervals.

The singing blanketed outer space like a weak aurora.

Compared to the distorted electro-magnetic waves coming from the planet, the singing was beautiful, large, and clear. If she sang louder, more powerfully, perhaps the darkness of outer space would have looked like blue sky on a clear day...

The girl abruptly awoke.

It felt as though someone were tickling her center of consciousness.

A few moments later, the girl closed her mouth and the sweet music abruptly vanished.

The deafening silence, and the sense of isolation that followed, felt like a stake through her chest... She thought back on an unfathomably, terrifyingly, insanely long time. Overcome with fear, she let out a gasping cry.

She had cried out like this once before – it was a very long time ago now – because she was so very, very alone.

She had cried out. She had screamed, among the distant stars.

She had no memories after that.

...A song. Yes... there was the voice of somebody singing...

A kind woman was softly singing a beautiful melody.

The girl rounded her back, wrapped her thin arms around her knees, and dropped her jaw against her small bare chest. Her eyes were closed. Peach-colored eyelids draped over her big eyes, membrane-like.

She listened carefully.

Jonah...

The girl's body twitched.

Was that her name? She had no recollection. Her stomach clenched; she had a terrible feeling, heavy with ill-omen.

< Who... is... it...? >

The sharp, unexpected response took Shiverer Mouse off guard.

However, it was clear now that *this thing* was not an authorized ship.

The ship did not know the *signal*. It did not even seem to know official spacecraft terminology.

Whatever this ship was, if it did not transmit the signal, “she” would shoot it down as an intruder. If it continued flying straight along this course, it would undoubtedly hit the planet Caritas.

The beautiful singing had stopped at some point.

He could no longer see the pale blue aurora.

There was only the gray planet Caritas, the distant stars and suns, and the gigantic magnetic field of the ramjet starship, floating suspended in flat, blackened space.

The ship had probably gotten here by ingesting gas from hydrogen atoms into its bugle-shaped magnetic field, sucking it like the sand trap of an ant lion.

< Retract the wings of your magnetic field! >

Was that too officious of me?

He returned this warning back to the ship in the same language that it had used to call out to him – the language of the Allison Bible Belt.

Shiverer Mouse suddenly felt tired. Since the white coffin never got tired, it was

probably his usual mental lassitude – what was he trying to accomplish here, anyway?
Assailed by feelings of powerlessness, he wanted nothing more than to just go to sleep
within this coffin...

The magnetic field was slowly disappearing.

Starting with the bugle-shaped edges, it crinkled and shriveled like burning silk, until
only little pink petals remained.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye.

Before he knew what was happening, the gleaming beige ten thousand kilometer
magnetic field had been swallowed up into the darkness of space.

Shiverer Mouse revved up his nuclear fusion engine and approached the small ship.

It was apparently only the magnetic field and the singing voice that had been so
enormous; the ship itself appeared to be about the same size as him – which meant that it
was not a standardized item from the shipping guild. Feelings of affinity and curiosity
welled up within him.

This gave him the energy to live – a sudden blessing from the heavens...

Shiverer Mouse flew forward, overcome with joy.

< ...Hellooo! >

He called out in a golden voice.

< ...Hellooo! >

A voice filled with bright, raw energy.

The white coffin ship was equipped with x-rays, ultrasonic waves, and a magnetic
scanning device.

The other ship was bright silver, gleaming with light.

He flew along next to it.

They moved together perfectly, like dolphins.

The ship... is made of diamond.

How... how beautiful... Shiverer Mouse sped up and circled round and round the ship, as though to stroke it gently all over.

It looks like an insect.

A perfect sculpture of pure diamond – it must have been carved by an artist. But no – with a design as ingenious as this, it must be natural.

His eyes scanned the ship.

The white coffin's cybernetic brain layered together an infinite number of scanned circular cross-sections to produce a three-dimensional image... it was shaped like a person.

A small person. Curled up in a fetal position.

A child, asleep inside a glass dragonfly.

His heart was pounding.

It reminded him of a translucent shrimp that he had found on the beach a long time ago, back when he was still a child.

Back then, back when he was a little boy tanned brown by the sun, the very picture of good health, he used to swim underwater in the ocean as long as he could hold his breath...

The girl's heart was working tirelessly, pitter-pattering.

Is that... does she have two hearts? ...But no, one of them is not a heart... it's... nuclear fusion plasma??

Data streamed white through the visual field of his left eye.

It was a nuclear fusion reactor wrapped in superconductive coils. It was buried right

next to her heart, on a thick pipe inside her body. It had to be the ship's engine.

The words "cosmic organism" flashed before his eyes. Sometimes, he learned things from his cybernetic brain.

Dragon Cosmos.

Long ago, he had asked Milagros to show him one.

To date, the entire League of Friendly Planets had discovered only two. Besides, those two were not the actual organisms; it was their cells that had been discovered. Scholars working for business conglomerates had worked together to extract the genes, and recreated the "cosmic organisms" in the lab.

Back when Milagros was still sane, he had seen one in 3D. However...

< ...Hello! > The girl greeted him. < ...Hello! >

Dragon Cosmos did not have brains. They resembled insects, with diamond shells for space travel and stomachs that ate hydrogen. They were born in space, and according to one theory, they passed several tens of thousands of years there. Over the course of their long lifetimes, they had zero chance of coming across one of their own. Dragon Cosmos reproduced by fission.

< Hello!... > Shiverer Mouse returned the greeting, and asked, < Who... are you...? >

< Me?... I'm... I'm... Jonah, > the girl answered.

< Jonah? >

<Uh..... huh. >

Jonah.

The name of the character in the Bible who was swallowed by the whale.

Jonah, who was thrown into the raging sea for defying God's orders.

Shiverer Mouse detested the power of a God who could do as he wished with human beings.

< And you? > the girl asked.

He snapped back to reality.

< Shiver. >

Just then, there was a white flash in the corner of his visual field.

His “eyes” followed it in an attempt to capture and analyze it. However, even after he had it focused squarely in the middle of his field of vision, it was still obscure – as though it were covered in white mist.

It was close. He knew it intuitively.

It's watching me! From just right there – no, it's everywhere, surrounding everything!

< Who's there...! >

He felt a magnetic disturbance.

The crackling white noise was disturbing the air. He could not analyze it... *it's omnipresent!*

He got a chill up his spine.

He saw the figure of a person. *A child – it's the face of an infant!*

The infant, sheathed in white noise, moved its lips slowly and opened its mouth like an idiot – it was the kind of vision you might see in a malfunctioning hologram. The deep black sky hung in the background.

< What is it?! What is it?! What is it?! >

The girl was shouting.

Shiverer Mouse wanted to shut his ears.

The infant's face distorted within the noise; it was trying to say something. In the middle of its face were a pair of cavernous eyes, far apart like those of a fish.

(It's a ghost...)

He remembered the stories of demons that haunted spaceships, and shivered.

"What is it, what do you want?"

His own voice suddenly rang out inside the white coffin, taking him off guard. He had not used his own vocal cords for many days now.

The child opened its mouth gaping wide and poked out its long tongue. Its image flickered, as though it were laughing.

ERGO SUM LUX – I AM LIGHT

The lips formed the words clearly, then closed. Immediately after, the entity was swallowed up into the darkness, as though snuffed out with an eraser. The light, enrobed in white, was nowhere to be seen.

< Aaaaaaaaah...! >

The girl was screaming. *Wait wait wait, tell me tell me, where were you where did you come from, what who are you, so we meet again how why how?* The questions all gushed out all at once, until the screams finally transformed into the howls of a wild beast.

For a moment, Shiverer Mouse thought he might fall asleep. He felt sleepy a lot recently. He would just realize all of a sudden that his mind had drifted away from reality.

His wandering thoughts returned; the girl's screams had come to a stop.

It was quiet.

Perhaps the white coffin ship had given him a shot of drugs. When he became too excited, it quieted his head. It made his mind float within dreams.

Shiverer Mouse gazed at outer space, smiling. It was merely a black velvet curtain, speckled with white spots... he could see a patrol ship.

A patrol ship – one of Milagros' agents.

– Who are you?

Milagros' voice burst into his head. It was a taut, dignified alto, as was usually the case these days. The voice sounded... a little over thirty years old. It was the voice of a woman who still had a great deal of interest in the world.

< I'm home. >

That was the password this week.

– Ah, Shiverer Mouse, isn't it?

The patrol ship was a pair of "eyes" connected to Milagros' artificial intelligence. Technically, it was one of her "Experience-Bodies." It had a small cybernetic brain, made its own decisions based on what it saw, and reported back to Milagros.

In addition to this patrol ship, Milagros had other "Experience-Bodies" lurking in various locations, shaped like dogs, people, boats, houses, flowers, or robots.

– Who's with you?

The patrol ship circled around the two of them, probing.

Shiverer Mouse racked his brain for a good story, face flushed.

– What’s wrong, Shiver? Your pulse is a bit elevated, isn’t it?

A chuckle. As though she were trying her utmost to suppress laughter.

His chest tightened. It had been a long time since he had seen Milagros so lively. So that meant...?

< Mila, it’s a game. >

Milagros did not respond.

< I made a bet with the guys on land, that I could bring back the wreckage of an old spaceship. >

Milagros did not respond. She was laughing.

< So don’t get in the way. >

He spit the words out, intentionally laced with ill-humour.

Milagros snorted out a laugh.

– Oh really. You’re playing a game too. So am I.

< What kind of game? >

– It’s called “Capture.”

Another chuckle. He was overcome with anxiety.

< Capture what? >

– The traitor. The traitor who betrayed the military and ran away, two hundred and twenty-six years ago. I’ve been playing this game ever since then. I’m “it” and I have to catch the traitor.

Milagros’ voice had suddenly changed into that of a little girl. *That will - or should - make it easier.*

– I recently heard a rumour – an official notice from the military. They said to be careful, ‘cuz the traitor is getting closer to this planet. Isn’t that neat?

< Ah yeah, neat. So, you think you’ll be able to capture the traitor? >

– I don’t know, but security’s been beefed up.

< You should go further out. Okay, let us through now. >

The patrol ship swayed unsteadily for a moment, apparently indecisive - just like Milagros’ own mind. Then, at last, she said.

– Well. Okay then, I’ll be waiting below.

The ship, loaded up with two missiles from twenty years ago, turned around and abruptly left the orbit.

Shiverer Mouse breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Milagros had gone mad long ago. Nor was her personality particularly stable.

The skin of the planet Caritas was like a lush, moss-covered ball – a green candy apple like those he used to get from street stalls in the old days.

The sobs of the small, pale girl were silk threads of silver rain.

Why are you crying? Multiple times, he was on the verge of asking her, but then got flustered and pinched shut his vocal communication cords. He felt as though he already knew why... because she was lonely.

She has probably been lonely for a very, very long time, all alone in space. And in spite of meeting me, she is still lonely. That will probably never change, no matter who or what she meets. Never.

Shiverer Mouse, emitting a vaguely ill-humoured aura, pulled Dragon Cosmos along.

The girl was sobbing.

Nothing could catch the girl's interest – not the three moons floating above the white clouds that hovered over the planet, nor the distant sun that blazed like a hole into another world.

She had recovered her memory.

She was being born again.

The girl was crying from the *pain* of her birth.

The pain was similar to what Shiverer Mouse thought of as "loneliness." It was not

identical, though; there was also a touch of joy hidden in those tears.

The planet Caritas was showing its nighttime face – its surface sparkled vibrantly, as though covered with tiny, luminescent insects.

With the wings of its magnetic field now retracted, Dragon Cosmos was a salt-hardened ice sculpture. As it dropped down through the soft plush that enveloped the planet, it was gently enrobed in white cotton.

Milagros' unravelling, hand-woven barrier that cordoned off the planet was not working. The functions were jammed, or perhaps it was her nerves that were shot – maybe she was awake, maybe she was dead, maybe she was pretending to be asleep, or perhaps she had forgotten all about the game and was preoccupied with something else...

Sobbing all the while, the girl continued to drop, stirring up the clouds of the thick stratosphere and giving off sparks with the force of her descent.

He felt the dizzying excitement that he always felt when descending... he was powerful, brave, tearing through the clouds, moving at full speed, flying beyond fate... But Shiver knew it was a misconception. In fact, he was nothing more than a single thread of silver fishing line, dangling down from a sea of clouds.

After several bouts of violent lurching and shaking, he requested permission to land at Dozar Spaceport. He was denied, but went ahead and slipped in anyway without permission.

Whoever denied him, whatever stood in his way, he had no intention of just quietly following along. Puffing out smoke, the white coffin ship aimed for the nets and plunged in – ordinary humans would have no idea where they were, but Shiverer Mouse could see the fluorescent green nets spread out here and there before his eyes.

The iron boy and the glass girl bounced into the nets like tennis balls. The netting clung to them like adhesive tape, slowly absorbing their speed. Having passed through the first net, their speed was now reduced to about half, and the next net was there to receive them.

Shiverer Mouse slowly slipped through the second net, and drew out the wings he used for on-planet flight.

The girl was spinning round and round.

– I found you!

Milagros, now transformed into the Dozar Spaceport control tower robot, shouted. The control tower robot was a steel-framed black cylinder that stood about fifty meters high and walked on eight legs.

Shiverer Mouse stopped the spinning of his companion, the glass dragonfly, and clung to her bellows. The two of them slipped through the legs of the control tower robot and whirled up into the night sky. Those legs had seemed like massive pillars a moment ago; however, looking down from high up in the sky, the robot looked like an illuminated ghost, studded all over with miniature light bulbs.

In the blink of an eye, they had flown beyond the control tower robot and out of its jurisdiction. The figure, unmoving like a dying dinosaur, could be seen behind them all the while.

They flew through the rusted-out central urban district for some time.

The city was rotting from the core.

Feeling the girl with all of his sense organs, Shiverer Mouse thought: *we are two giant insects flying over this fetid city.*

There were very few lights on in the old urban district in the center of the city. But Shiverer Mouse could see the light; he could feel it. He could see the light being emitted by all kinds of things – the wreckage of buildings, the flocks of headless chickens running through the dark alleyways, the unauthorized robots, the children, the beasts, the spaceships, the ashen flowers in full bloom, swaying in the wind... Sometimes he could even sense the tremors of their emotions...

Like a swallow in the night sky, Shiverer Mouse cut through the wind, abruptly changed direction, and descended sharply – they were approaching the house at last.

The house was in District Four, next to Suckling Station Number Twelve.

Finally, the two of them plummeted down between the sooty chimneys and crashed to the ground, tangled together like strange copulating birds.

From within the black dust clouds, Shiverer Mouse asked.

< Are you okay? >

There was no answer.

The sobbing voice, like the tinkling of a bell, had also ceased.

The white coffin ship retracted its wings and released its legs.

Dragon Cosmos' outer skin was dead. While passing through the thick layers of air, something had reacted and caused white crystals to form.

With those eyes that always saw too much, Shiverer Mouse peered inside. He could see a blazing plasma reactor, right smack in the middle. And the girl's skeleton – it was a special metal of some kind. Her bones were attached to Dragon Cosmos' shell, its

exoskeleton, by the tailbone.

< Are you one of “the broken”? >

DNA – di-kənstrʌkʃənə

– One of the genetically collapsed.

Instead of answering, the girl made an agonized sound.

The girl’s image, displayed to Shiverer Mouse as tiny particles, resembled a fetus. He could see a thick liquid slopping around inside the shell.

Twisting its four transparent wings every which way, the glass dragonfly bounced up and down - *boom, boom, boom* – sending a new dust cloud billowing up each time it bumped its belly against the ground.

He could tell that Dragon Cosmos was in pain – but where?

Shiverer Mouse was unsure whether or not to contact the Flying Medics, but finally decided to wait and see. Milagros, the crazy city computer, got on his nerves, but he truly detested the powers that attempted to control the people of this planet. That included the Medics who had enclosed him in this white coffin instead of allowing him to die... and technology, and fate, and even God – he cursed them all from the depths of hell.

Shiverer Mouse quietly observed his surroundings.

There were very few lights on in the old urban district. The unique silence characteristic of under-populated areas (it was like walking through the world wearing earplugs) was overpowering. It was a silence entirely different from the silence that posed as nonchalance in the city centre. There was the darkness that squashed any trace of human presence, the sound of the wind passing through the ruins, the sorry cries of genetically broken animals, the slow songs of the colorless flowers growing...

Dragon Cosmos' wings, which had looked so hard and brittle in space, now hung limp, looking as though they might melt away.

It reminded him of a slow-motion picture he had once seen, of a dragonfly in flight.

Shiverer Mouse had always liked to *observe*. It seemed an act similar to *loving* from the depths of one's being – because to watch over, and to love from afar, were not acts of domination.

Dragon Cosmos' thick torso was shaking. Observing carefully, he could see that there was a regular, grand rhythm that underlying the fine shaking – like a cabbage butterfly laying eggs behind fresh green leaves...

One of the silver notches along the belly split open, bright red. Fresh blood splattered out and plastered down the dust, deep black. There was no end to the gushing blood.

Inside, the girl's pale white body stretched out taut – and then – her dark head, covered in blood, popped out of the insect's torn torso. The slimy, gleaming head pushed at the gash, tearing it open wider, breathing laboriously and writhing in agony.

Looking through to the inside, he could see that that the girl's body had detached from the insect's skeleton and was now swimming about inside her flesh, tearing and scraping and spraying blood.

The maternal body of Dragon Cosmos was screaming at an inaudible pitch. The piercing shrieks stained the pitch darkness deep crimson.

Shiverer Mouse went running over to her. The girl's black head was sticking out of Dragon Cosmos' body. He was struck with an urge to start pulling... but as he watched, the girl managed to get her left hand out through the opening, gripped at the sides, and finally slipped her left shoulder out. Beads of blood were crawling across the surface of her white

skin.

All of a sudden, just as the one arm managed to make the gash even larger, Shiverer Mouse staggered backward, assailed all over his body with a dull pain.

Dragon Cosmos' belly was smeared with a bloody mess, like chocolate syrup on vanilla ice cream.

The girl's head gasped inside the puddle of dark blood, and burst into a coughing fit. If only she could get both arms and shoulders out, then all she would have to do would be to put all of her strength into her arms and pull herself out. However, after having been exposed to weightlessness and buoyancy for so long, the girl's muscles had lost all their strength.

The girl abruptly stopped trying to use her muscle power, as though she had just remembered something. The nuclear fusion reactor in her chest blazed up orange, and he saw the flames spread to the bones that structured her body. The vivid color infused everything down her extremities, down to every nook and cranny of her body – bright fluorescent orange.

The girl used her two wrist bones as ice picks, pierced the skin of the mother's body, and dragged herself out of the hole.

The girl dropped out with a splat, right next to the trembling Dragon Cosmos.

Blood spouted from the bottomless dark cavern, splattering all over the ground and the girl.

The girl's wrists were torn open, bones sticking out and dripping with blood.

Shiverer Mouse was afraid that the girl might become trapped under Dragon Cosmos' body.

The torn open mother wriggled her belly, undulated her wings, and continued to scream, her voice rusty red.

The girl flipped onto her stomach, got up onto her elbows, and began to crawl, wobbling along on her broken wrists.

The girl could feel the breeze passing through the blood that dripped down from her front bangs.

There was a familiar scent in the air.

The girl was lung-breathing, something she had forgotten about entirely for a very long time.

Dragging long, long trails of blood behind her, the girl crawled closer to the white machine – the one that had touched her. The one that had gently stroked her body. The voice that had called out to her. The person who had brought her here.

Shiverer Mouse drew back on his six legs – he had known from the beginning that this was not an ordinary life-form. The girl looked so delicate, so pitiful – and yet the heart that shone inside of her was nuclear fusion plasma...

Shiverer Mouse felt corporeal fear unlike anything he had felt since being enclosed inside the white coffin.

The girl sensed this acutely, and thrust her broken hands out to him. The hands dangled down like dead starfish. Still kneeling, she looked up at him.

“Wait...!”

Her vocal cords vibrated in a singsong vibrato.

The beauty of that voice... Shiverer Mouse shuddered at his own ugliness. *The girl... is beautiful... If we just wash away the gore, and reattach the dangling hands to the wrists...*

Once again Shiverer Mouse felt a chill that gave him gooseflesh. He inadvertently glimpsed the unbearable sight of his own legs; he howled and twisted his body.

“Shiver, wait...!”

The girl got to her feet. Her legs were long and slender. The black blood that stained her face gave her the appearance of a dark-skinned person. Shiverer Mouse stood stock still with his back to the girl.

Each time the dying Dragon Cosmos moved, the earth rumbled.

“...We... are alike.”

“We’re not alike.” He denied it flatly, with vocal cords of steel.

Shiver’s rusty voice rattled the air, damp with blood. The air was frozen with the chill that protected his heart.

The girl blinked her eyes, laden with bloody red mascara.

Just then, an electronic eye burst out from between the girl’s budding breasts, spraying blood in its wake. The bloody eye ogled Shiverer Mouse, looking him up and down.

The scene was so bizarre, Shiverer Mouse could not move. He was afraid. He was afraid, but he could not look away.

The torn flesh of the girl’s chest swelled up around the eye and the bleeding immediately stopped. The eye withdrew back inside as though it had never left. Before he knew what had happened, her supposedly broken wrists had stopped bleeding, and appeared to be reconnecting with the hands.

The whole time that Shiverer Mouse observed the girl, the girl too was staring intently at Shiverer Mouse.

All at once, she was flooded with all kinds of feelings that tried to force open the cork

in her heart... curiosity – a rising, surging curiosity; a will to live; an outside; an interest in others; an interest in the world; a feeling of attachment to existence; emotion; affect; sensual intoxication; yearning; affection; and compassion.

Shiver... a young man who hadn't yet lived thirty years, was smaller than the girl with the seven-year-old body...

His emaciated, shrunken body was fixed inside the white coffin. A complex network of mechanisms worked to keep his weak, shriveled cells alive. Shiver himself just lay quietly on his side, a Pinocchio doll with cut strings.

"You... are alive, aren't you..." said the girl, strangely moved.

"Like a guinea pig is alive, yeah." Shiver answered self-deprecatingly, but even so, the girl was strangely moved.

The girl tottered three or four steps forward, as though drawn by an invisible force.

Shiver stiffened, the tension and shame of *being seen* rising so high that he could barely stand it.

The girl walked slowly toward him, then stretched out her left arm and softly touched Shiver's white coffin. It was cold. Freezing.

You're alive now, aren't you...

The girl whispered, and her dark eyes filled with tears.

But, you... you're dying aren't you? You're leaving soon, aren't you...?

2

In the central urban district, no matter what space you tried to take for yourself, nobody complained.

The once prosperous city had begun to rot from the core, and had burned to the ground in the fighting. Something red and decadent had fallen to the ground and was reduced to cinders, peppered with ash.

Here and there throughout the city, there were hideous, gaping battle wounds.

All the pipes that networked the entire planet had been torn to shreds at the center – the city's arteries, Milagros' shattered nerves, water, light, conversation, food, crushed garbage – it looked like a bundle of severed blood vessels. As Lesiah would say, the city had disgorged its own intestines, "like a hernia."

Illuminated by the three pale moons, the ruins looked all the more devastated.

A monochrome landscape of melted butter.

The buildings, crowned with the pyramidal rooftops that had once been in vogue, were a sea of undulating waves. Countless numbers of misshapen triangles, reaching up into the sky... a cream-colored ocean, sharp and glittering.

"...Aren't you cold?" Shiver asked anxiously.

The wind swept across the golden balcony...

The cage-like handrail was rusty; it looked like it might crumble to dust if the two of them were to lean against it at the same time.

The black-haired girl pulled her shabby gown together at the front.

The wind wove through the darkness.

"It's a lunar morning..."

"Huh...?"

"You know, a lunar daybreak. The wavelengths of the sun are too short to reach the deepest parts of the ocean. But the long, slender moonlight can reach. So for those who live at the bottom of the ocean, moonlit nights are actually mornings, you see...?"

Shiver was getting choked up. The blow to his heart got the blood pumping, until finally the blood had permeated every inch of his dried up body. He had been brought back from the abyss of death, and touched the fountain of eternal life...

Long ago, his mother had drowned in the ocean. The city, however, had always been at the bottom of the ocean, suspended in the indigo depths.

"There are gyokuto living on the moons," the girl continued, her face still turned in profile.

"Gyokuto?"

"Yes, lunar rabbits. They are in charge of the waxing and waning of the moons. So this planet must have three of them, I guess?"

Shiver situated the middle moon at the center of his visual field. In a flash, the whole sky filled with blinding light, the coarse particles spreading outwards like silver ink. It reminded him of the infrared images he had seen a long time ago, back when he was a human being.

"The one in the middle is Eliphaz; the one on the right is Bildad; and the one on the left is Zophar," he said.

The girl did not react.

Shiver continued slowly.

“Long ago, there was a man named Job. He was very rich. He was blessed with ten children, and lived a moral life. But then one day, he suddenly lost all of his possessions and his ten children all died at once in an accident. He got hideous boils all over his body...”

The girl started to laugh.

Shiver got the giggles too, and laughed aloud inside the white coffin.

“Yeah, horrible, isn’t it? Anyway, those three are his friends.”

The two of them looked up at the moons.

“Do they comfort him?”

“They debate with him. About why such a terrible thing happened to him.”

“I see. And, do they figure it out?”

“Nope, not even close.”

At that, the two of them laughed again.

“Then, at the end of the story, *He* appears and says... ‘It was I who put all the stars in the sky, who filled the oceans with water, who made the trees grow, who made the animals run, and who created human beings. All of this is my work. So, everything I do is right.’ That’s what He says...”

The girl was gazing far off into the distance with a cool expression on her face.

Her “injured” wrists showed no trace of anything.

The electronic eye that had popped out from between her breasts was tucked away in its original place.

“I wonder who presides over the movements of the moons,” he mused.

The girl smiled slowly.

"...*He* does."

Sensing his disbelief, the girl added.

"Well, we saw Him, didn't we? As white light..."

The *thing* that had ripped through outer space.

That?

"You know, *Him*... the *thing* that gave me life...!"

"And he rules over the moons?"

The girl smiled raptly.

"I don't know."

"You're saying that guy controls fate?"

"I don't know."

I don't believe that! Why would I believe such a thing?! Shiver was screaming inside.

The girl gripped the rusty handrail with her slender hands. The red powder crumbled coarsely through her fingers, and the iron underneath swelled up like a rotten sausage. Not a moment later, the handrail was broken, crushed in her grip. The torn-off scraps of metal scattered down to the ground, eighty floors below.

"You're not ordinary, are you?" said Shiver.

"Look who's talking," answered the girl.

Shiver displayed a "smile."

"Smile 2," composed of lines alone.

It was a simple line drawing that even a baby could recognize.

The girl tilted her head and softly reached out a gentle left hand.

She touched the shining silver screen. Electricity buzzed at her fingertips. She moved

her hand slightly away, but the white electricity continued to crackle through the gap like the threads of a spider's web.

Shiver continued to display "smile 2" throughout.

What torture it was to have only fourteen expressions to choose from to show his emotions, he had once thought. He had thought so sixteen years ago, when he was put into this coffin. But now... at this moment, he felt vaguely ashamed to realize that he was grateful to even have that much expressive power and means of communication left.

Eighty floors worth of moon-warmed wind from the bottom of the abyss came blowing upwards.

"On nights like this..."

"You feel like you're going to turn into a werewolf?"

"Heheh. I was going to say I feel like I could soar across the sky."

"Across the ocean of space?"

"That's a romantic expression..."

Indeed it was... Shiver's heart was fluttering.

"You're thinking about Lesiah, aren't you?"

"Nah," he said, denying it right off the bat, although he really *was* thinking about her – thinking that he had to tell her about this... about the girl.

Finally, he found more words. "...I was thinking about the lunar morning."

The city – the city as seen from eighty floors above – looked like it was lying down, stretched out quietly deep down at the bottom of the ocean.

The slimy, cream-colored glow...

The still ripples of the pointed, pyramidal rooftops...

The population at night around here was extremely small, but “genetically collapsed” animals and plants were particularly conspicuous.

In the daytime, they lurked quietly inside buildings. They came crawling out from their dank corners after nightfall, lured by the light of the moon. Those whom the sun had abandoned drank in the light of the lunar morning and trembled with joy... so this was a lunar morning. This city lay in a deep-sea abyss.

All at once, several six-winged grey flowers tilted their heads and flew off. Sensing the faint smell of the wind on an evening morning stroll, they had spun their six petals round and round, twisted the rubbery muscles at the base of their petals a number of times, and then abruptly burst away with the built-up force.

Bathing in the light of the lunar morning, even the iron-tinted flowers, speckled with ash, were beautiful... flocking together, fluttering in the sky, even the “windflowers” that brought death...

Shiver often flew among the windflowers.

The windflowers, who gladly bestowed the blessing of death on any red-blooded creature, were not so kind to him. Even death – even his own death – he was not permitted to choose for himself. He waited for his body to shrink and rot, enclosed inside of a coffin that would never break. That was his fate – the life and the death that he had been given.

“...Aren’t you cold?”

He felt like he kept talking about the same things.

That was fine, though.

All at once, his heart became calm.

If meeting with the girl was also his fate, he thought, it wasn’t all that bad.

He wanted to get closer to her and to reach out his hand, to understand her more deeply and more intensely. He wanted them to get to know each other.

They had been attracted to each other – a sudden and unexpected encounter in a strange place. They knew nothing about each other – and yet right away, they truly understood each other.

Because they were alike.

Because they were alike, and yet completely different.

I want to touch her... feeling hopeless, Shiver displayed a “smile 3” on his monitor. He couldn’t touch her, because the coffin had no sense of touch.

He could only look.

He could only look, probably until the day he died.

The girl’s inauthentic body was still exposed before his eyes.

He continued observing her at varying angles and levels of focus. Each time the girl moved part of her body, the red particles flowed in front of his eyes.

Her skeleton was a special type of ceramic, unlike anything he had ever seen before. The bones were divided into very small segments that occasionally changed shape. He could see both her flesh and blood, but she was on the brink of starvation. And yet, the girl was laughing calmly.

Her blood vessels were narrow, with very little blood flowing through. Her muscles were withered, and she had almost no body fat.

Her big dark eyes looked about to drop out of their sunken sockets. Even the muscles that moved her eyes were withered.

“You’re not ordinary, are you...”

The girl – or at least her body – was practically dead. And yet that body was emitting intense orange light.

The heart that pumped her blood was small, black, and hard, and her heart rate was less than a third that of a normal person. And yet her other heart – her nuclear fusion engine – was blazing hot and bright.

Looking through the particles, Shiver felt as though he were seeing the girl's real body – the nuclear fusion plasma reactor which was her power source, the mutable ceramic bones, the electronic eye, an analysis device of some kind – all of this was the girl's true form.

She is not human. She is something else, dressed in human skin.

The girl – Jonah – was also looking through the white coffin, peering inside.

Whose memory is this...? – I remember the story about a doll named Pinocchio. How did the story go...? The memory is vague, but I'm pretty sure it was the tale of an old man who made a wooden doll – a doll that came to life and began to live by its own will. Yes, that's what it was – a story about an old man's "love" transforming a plain old wooden doll into a human child... ahhh... but that isn't Shiver's story; it's my story.

But still, Shiver is like Pinocchio.

And I am not a human child.

Shiver is human.

However, his muscles had withered, he had lost all of his body fat, and his nerve sheaths had shrunk.

Countless serpentine tubes pierced Shiver's shrivelled body. They slithered like a thousand little snakes in a bucket. There were so many of them coiling around inside him

that she could not help but wonder if a large portion of them even served any purpose.

Pitiful...

The powerful mechanics that surrounded his body appeared to be keeping him alive by force.

Who in the world came up with this complicated apparatus, and installed this withered, dying body inside? And moreover, does Shiver approve of it? How does he see himself...?

He is like me, she thought.

The same, yet completely different.

"I'm hungry."

Jonah's words surprised Shiver.

In fact, Jonah herself was surprised. Her chest clenched with anxiety, a combination of surprise and fear.

Did I say something wrong?

Her hair swayed softly in the wind. It had grown while she was in space; her metabolism had been functioning, however weakly.

"Yes... I am hungry, after all..."

Shiver quietly grasped the girl's bony wrists.

"That's good... lets go eat."

His auto sensor arm snapped out like a whip, swung around the girl's body and lifted her up aboard the coffin.

That was how he always lifted Lesiah on board.

The girl screeched, spread her white legs and straddled the coffin.

Shiver could faintly feel the flesh of the girl's legs – he did have *some* sense of touch,

although it was something like swimming through the world wearing three layers of rubber. He could either feel something, or he could not – that was all.

The arm worked by itself, according to Shiver's commands such as "Gently"; "Firmly"; "Touch"; "Lift"; "Throw"; "Hit" ...

In fact, it was not unlike the measly fourteen facial expressions he had to choose from to display on his monitor.

Shiver wrapped his arm around the girl's ankles so that she wouldn't be thrown off, fastening her body to the coffin.

"Here we go!"

With that, the white coffin ship rose off the eightieth story veranda and began its descent. The wind came blowing up from the ground below, puffing the girl's hair out like a parachute.

He caught the sound of what he thought was high-pitched laughter, and the next thing he knew he was listening to the shrill screams of a mad person. The girl was letting out shrieks of joy, so powerful they could tear her throat apart.

About thirty seconds into their descent, Shiver extended a pair of triangular wings. They rode on the wind, his jet propulsion blazing up red.

The white coffin flew horizontally, parallel to the ground.

The girl's black hair fluttered straight out behind her.

The white coffin continued to glide through the air, emitting flashes of light the color of the moons.

A cluster of windflowers rose up like a swarm of mosquitos.

Shiver flew in a large arc to avoid them.

"What are those?"

"Windflowers."

Jonah squinted her eyes, as though trying to see far into the distance.

"...Can we eat them?"

It was the first time Shiver ever heard such a question. "Well..." he said, "I've seen folks be eaten *by* them."

Again and again, countless times.

No humans with any meat on their bones lived in this area, because there were windflowers.

The only inhabitants around here were those that were stronger than windflowers, or suicidal people, or outcasts, or genetic anomalies, or vagabonds looking for a sense of danger, or low-intelligence creatures with no sense of danger, or robots who had crawled out from junk heaps, or the stone-like fairies, or Adiaptronites with broken brains.

"...I want to try them!" the girl shouted, her voice intermingling with the wind.

"You'll be eaten, I'm telling you!"

The girl blossomed into laughter. "That's fine. I can't die."

Shiver stirred ever so slightly within the coffin.

He had *moved*, by the power of his own emotion!

His withered muscles, which normally did nothing more than tremble, had actually *moved*.

"...Oh really," he said, "...Oh really... you... can't die."

"Huh? What?" the girl shouted in the wind.

"You, *can't die*?"

The girl tossed an enigmatic smile out into the faraway, cream-colored world.

“...Oh really, I see...”

He did not know how to express the emotions that were throbbing in his chest...

admiration, heat, longing, envy, irritation, revenge, pity, gratitude towards fate...

He continued gliding along, parallel to the ground.

He gave up trying to express himself. He was poorly equipped in that regard. Perhaps that had always been the case, even back when he was still human.

What does “immortality” mean?

Had an immortal life been planted within flesh that would eventually perish?

By whom?

By Him, whom she just mentioned a short time ago?

Shiver felt vaguely ridiculous – he was an coffin made of iron with death built in, while Jonah was a coffin made of flesh with immortality built in! In both cases, it was simply the fate that they had been accorded. For him, it was Milagros and her underlings, the Flying Medics, who were responsible. And for her, it was...

Shiver remembered what Milagros had said: “The traitor. The traitor who betrayed the military and ran away, two hundred and twenty-six years ago.”

However, Milagros was not in her right mind; she had been driven mad by the war.

She saw things that were not there, and could not see the things that were. She was living happily (he supposed) all alone inside an illusion.

The war between the Humanoid Allies and the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines had been raging on for centuries. The battles had slowly ravaged this planet as well – leaving behind all kinds of junk, improperly disposed weapons, a population

suffering the shock of the alien encounter, and a host of humans and computers suffering from war neuroses.

Milagros was diagnosed with L.D. – a learning disorder – by the Central Arbitration Council.

In spite of the diagnosis, however, nobody had the money or the will to dispose of her; everybody depended on her to live. Milagros' nerve network branched out to every corner of the planet in a gentle embrace.

They had been abandoned. This city, this planet – every inhabitant that lived here had been abandoned by Central Authority.

“...Please, I want a windflower.”

“Okay, okay.”

Shiver abruptly changed direction.

But even crazy Milagros sometimes comes back to her senses. It might be true that this girl has some connection to the military...

Jonah caught a windflower with her left hand.

The windflower poked a poisonous stinger out from its root and tore open her palm. Blood spurted out.

Shiver turned the coffin around, hoping to avoid a swarm of them attracted by the smell of the blood. His jet propulsion blazed brighter.

The blood went flying and spattering in the wind. The liquid was pale red.

“Does it hurt?”

“...It's fascinating.”

Jonah finished her internal analysis.

Immediately, the girl's body began to formulate an antidote to neutralize the poison.

Normally, windflowers swooped in to attack in swarms ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands. First, they paralyzed the animal with poison. Next, they tore open the porous membranes of the cells one by one, and sucked all the liquid out of the body. Then, they took root deep within the remaining clump of black flesh, released new spores, and produced more children. Finally, when the time was right and they had built up enough muscle, they flew away into the sky.

"...It's fascinating."

The girl smiled, enthralled with the flower growing from the palm of her left hand. She held the hand up to the sky and gazed at it. It was very pretty. Until a moment ago it had been pale blue, but now, after sucking her blood, it was crimson.

"Hey, do you know the song about daisies...?" Shiver asked.

The girl sang a little, and Shiver's visual field took on a soft hue.

"This place... it's fascinating."

The girl's words penetrated Shiver's heart like magic, breathing life into his withered body.

This girl... plants the feared and detested windflowers in the palm of her hand; she thinks this world is interesting and beautiful.

"Even if the windflowers tear open your flesh?"

"Well, I can't die," said the girl, a simultaneously triumphant and sad expression on her face.

Shiver asked, "...Is it painful for you – knowing that you will not die?"

Instead of answering, the girl asked a question. "Is it scary for you - knowing that you

will die?"

"So scary I could die," Shiver answered.

"It's so painful I could die too," answered the girl. Then she said, "Everyone lives their ephemeral lives with such urgency, probably because they're afraid of dying..."

She gazed lovingly at the windflower sucking out what little of her blood was left.

"...But not being able to die is scarier, isn't it?" Shiver asked.

With her whole body soaking in the moonlight, Jonah felt the memories from the ocean of stars being called awake.

She got the shivers.

The bleak picture that she recalled was enough to drain the blood from her face.

I was powerless among the motionless stars, the stars shrunk down to hard silver points, even within Dragon Cosmos' diamond shell. I was ridiculously small, and painfully lonely... a single flat line. To live is nothing more than to flow endlessly along the path of a single line.

If things had gone on like that... just thinking about it is enough to drive me crazy.

That's why I gave birth... to something that would protect me.

"Look, over there!" said Shiver, and descended sharply.

A herd of chickens with their wings pulled out and their heads plucked off were running around on the ground.

Long ago, chickens were produced at factories for food.

They had been genetically engineered so that they didn't develop heads or legs at all; they had no wings; they were cultivated as meat, literally. The meat was strung up on hooks and processed in mass quantities every day at automated factories.

After the war, the live meat evolved.

The factories were demolished, and the meats all ran away. Many of them were simply eaten, since they were a readily available food source. However, there were also a large number of them who survived, hid themselves away, gained intelligence, and evolved.

From small slices of genetic information, the live pink meats re-evolved two strong legs and grew cat-like claws.

New sensory organs sprouted from their torn-off necks and regarded their surroundings. The headless flocks ran wild in the darkness.

The girl was looking around with eagerly sparkling eyes.

“Can you catch some?” Shiver asked.

“I can catch some!”

No matter how hard the meat had struggled to evolve, in the end it still just looked like meat.

Jonah had seen meat that looked just like this being brought out of the oven on countless occasions.

“Okay, go ahead.”

The girl hopped off the white coffin ship.

Shiver’s eyes observed the pretty doll go running off – a skeleton carrying a dodgeball sun.

He saw that skeleton pounce on the chicken, in beautiful form. He saw the chicken’s skeleton break, ripped apart and torn forcefully into four pieces.

One of the bones slowly descended the girl’s throat, passing along her Adam’s apple.

Yes.

This world is very pretty, if you just look at it the right way...

The girl caught the chickens and shattered their skeletons, one after another. The sheer force of it was incredible. Still wrapped in soft meat and liquid, they bounced elastically against the ground. The rubbery meat and skin held their broken bodies together.

With a number of broken chickens in hand, the girl returned to the white coffin. She looked faintly flushed.

"Do you want some too, Shiver?" The girl got on board the coffin.

"No thanks," he replied, "I can't eat solid food."

The white coffin whirled up into the air.

They headed slowly towards suckling station #12.

It was a bright night, illuminated by all three moons.

He could see far off into the distance.

The top of the white coffin was probably filthy with blood.

The wind - the soft wind - swept through the cream-colored space, caressing and teasing them.

Fairies drifted in the faraway sky.

"What are those?"

Today there were three fairies. They fluttered softly, rippling the contours of their indeterminate forms. Their color was also indistinct, something like a shimmering crimson, a color that brought the End to mind... they were basically round, but occasionally poked out angular, thorn-like spikes.

"You can see those?" he asked.

“Well, you can see them, can’t you?” the girl replied.

Lesiah could not see them. She was blessed with special abilities as a healer, but even she could not see them. The majority of the inhabitants of this city could not see them either.

“What are they?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? But don’t you want to know?”

“Nah... we can’t communicate.”

Perhaps they are some kind of “animal-minerals,” or weapons left behind by the enemy, or viruses that caused Milagros’ vision to malfunction. Perhaps machines can be frightened too, like birds frightened by scarecrows.

Shiver said, “There are all kinds of things living deep in the ocean.”

One of these days, I’d like to show the girl the most squalid parts of the city, he thought.

They approached suckling station #12.

Just before his body could brush against the ground, Shiver released six legs and touched down. He began to walk, just like that, the six legs propelling the coffin forward.

The suckling station was inside a small, collapsing building. The steel frame, having melted under high heat, was twisted like toffee. The walls were falling down; the traditional pyramidal roof was partly caved in – it was hard to believe that there could be a suckling station inside.

Even sharp-eyed Shiver hadn’t known.

A pretty fish – one of Milagros’ Experience-Bodies – had told him.

The fish lived in a large tank in a bar. Every night it managed to escape its fate and live

on... The customers chose which fish they wanted to eat from inside the tank.

He had been peering into the tank, out of curiosity more than appetite, when suddenly the fish sent him an electrical message. He glanced nervously around the shop, but the owner, staff, and customers all merely cast a slow, mildly curious glance at the coffin – they had not noticed anything.

The fish had laughed, puckering its round, golden mouth...

There should have been more than eight suckling tubes in all, but half of them were broken.

The tubes protruded about ten centimeters out from the wall.

They were located quite low to the ground (at just fifty centimeters), so they were accessible not only to adult humans, but also to children and other small animals.

Shiver slowly approached, and reached out his feeding tube. The fleshy tube groped along the dirty wall, then quickly found the suckling tube and latched onto it. He began to suck.

He had no idea what it tasted like.

He could merely sense a signal, that he was ingesting non-poisonous nourishment. It was probably best that he did not know what it tasted like.

The suckling station had once been a vending machine for the cheap drug D-8.

Milagros had taken over the system by force and begun to distribute a high-nutrition food similar to the milk of marine mammals – although perhaps “secrete” would be a better word than “distribute.”

The city lay stretched out on the ground like a wild she-beast... these tubes were the city's breasts.

The girl latched on to a tube next to him.

She started sucking noisily. The gulping sounds from her throat intermingled with the slurping and smacking of her lips and tongue.

“It has a strange taste, doesn’t it,” she said, finally taking her mouth away, “but it’s sooo high in nutrients.”

“Yeah, you can live three days on two hundred CCs.”

The girl’s tongue flicked out to lick away the white droplets around her mouth.

Shiver was stunned at the sight.

A strange, nostalgic stimulus was running through his flesh. It felt even more intense than emotion...

“...Ready to go?”

“Yes...”

Jonah recalled her mother, whom she had left behind in the room on the eightieth floor – the mother that she had given birth to.

“Her mother” was, properly speaking, the living shell of Dragon Cosmos. But Jonah had given her a portion of her own brain tissue and memories, so she possessed a consciousness that was characterized by a protective instinct and a powerful desire to dominate the object of her protection – just like Jonah’s mother.

But she had given birth to her.

She... gave birth... to her mother.

Because she was so lonely; she was all alone – always all alone.

She needed her.

Jonah carefully secured the bundle of meat and straddled the white coffin.

The two of them soon landed on the eightieth floor veranda.

Jonah proceeded directly into the inner room.

“...Mama,” she whispered into the darkness.

She tossed over one of the chickens as a test. There was a heavy thump, then a muddled squash.

“Here comes one more...” Jonah tossed her another chicken.

Normally, Dragon Cosmos did not require food.

It was Jonah who had given her the memories of hunger; her endless appetite felt somehow oppressive – it resembled fear.

The room was dark, cool, and damp.

One of the not-quite-killed chickens was beginning to move.

The pale skin was drooping and puckered.

It was like watching a plucked, headless bird, stuffed with vegetables in the oven, suddenly rising up in the roasting pan and jumping out.

Except that this meat was alive. The meat itself was alive – an organism complete in itself. It gave off a certain kind of unexpected beauty when it was alive – as was the case with most living things.

New sensory organs sprouted like shoots from where its spinal cord, severed by genetic manipulation, had once been.

Around the chest area was a jumble of nerve networks that functioned as information processors. The judgements these chickens made related primarily to group behaviour – following behind the leaders of the flock, or rushing as a group to a watering hole or a feeding place – those kinds of things.

The bird waddled – like a bird.

Tentacles slithered up from the cross section of its headless neck and surveyed the area.

The floor was cold, dark, and damp.

The lizard-like feet stopped with a twitch.

Trembling with instinctual fear, the bird stood still with one leg still raised.

All of a sudden, something tripped up the bird. It lurched, and its legs snapped off and went tumbling to the far side of the room. The two legs rolled like tree branches.

The bird lay on its side, blood flowing like tears from where its two legs had been severed.

Dragon Cosmos bared her fangs.

Her thin, transparent teeth, like the wings of an insect, had been hidden from view. The monster, stained shell-pink, was crouching in the soft darkness – faintly emitting a porcelain glow.

Dragon Cosmos was constantly changing her shape.

She looked considerably different from back when they were flying through space.

There was a gaping dark hole where the girl had torn her open and come crawling out. A bizarre mess of intestines spilled out and dragged along the ground when she moved. The flesh closing around the gash was growing in impossible directions, unstoppable.

“It’s like... cancer cells.”

The girl murmured the words, and at that moment, Dragon Cosmos seized hold of the bird. The sound of crushing bones filled the room.

Her giant head bobbed up and down in the pale darkness. It looked as light as a *papier*

mâché Daruma doll. The head, which had once been covered with a diamond shell, now sported a gash, filled with blade-like teeth that tore the meat to shreds before gulping it down.

The bird's severed legs still lay in a corner of the room, as if to say that maybe, if they were buried in the earth, they would start growing underground, taking root and multiplying, squirming in the dirt until finally the malformed birds came crawling up to the surface...

The girl slipped past Dragon Cosmos' flank, picked up the bird's legs, and tossed them off the eightieth floor balcony. They fluttered softly down, like two golden ginkgo leaves.

"Isn't she getting to be too much for you to handle?" asked Shiver, hesitant.

She sighed audibly. All of a sudden, Jonah looked as though she hated the whole world... as though she could not stand it anymore.

"My own mother?" the girl asked. "You're saying that my own Mama is too much for me to handle?"

Perhaps it was not Shiver that she was asking, but herself.

3

It was almost impossible to reach Lesiah.

When he wasn't expecting to see her, he would run into her once every three days, but when he really wanted to see her, it wouldn't happen no matter how much he wished it.

More often than not, Lesiah did not return to "the church" – her base of operations – at night. She was too busy even to get in touch with.

If he complained about it to her, she would probably laugh like a hydrangea and say, *Oh come on now. It's good to be busy! If you need someone to do something for you, it's better to ask a busy person than someone with a lot of free time, don't you think? Busy people always have their engines running. Besides, the reason they're busy is because they're good at what they do, so they get a lot of requests. I'm sooo busy all the time it's dizzying...*

Even if Lesiah were to say something like that, it would not sound disagreeable. He pictured her, speaking quickly and fluttering her white hands in front of her face.

He had never actually seen this image of her in reality. Rather, it was a composition of memory fragments, like an afterimage, through Shiver's artificial intelligence.

In any case, Shiver had not been able to see Lesiah for some time.

He had been looking all over for her.

He left a message for her with the other Rafflesiahs each time he went to "the church." They always took his messages cordially, of course.

He did not know all the Rafflesiahs personally (there were so many of them, and they all looked alike), but he trusted them completely.

Still, his Lesiah did not get in touch with him.

He had no idea what kind of issue she might be attending to, but he could read from the Rafflesiahs' reactions that it was something serious.

He waited and waited, demonstrating the religious perseverance that the Rafflesias so often made mention of.

Shiver stopped by the church almost every day.

Whenever he visited after a long break, he was always surprised at how much the place had changed. When he was visiting every day, however, he did not notice the small

changes.

After the war, the church was built on Yahweh-Yireh Avenue, the most squalid street in town. In spite of the countless instances in which it was set on fire, pummelled with rocks, robbed, or otherwise smashed to the ground, little by little the church continued to grow.

Shiver had never seen who it was that kept adding on to the church buildings – perhaps the church divided and multiplied like a primitive life form...? In this city, it would not be unheard of for an idea so bizarre to actually turn out to be the case.

The area around Yahweh-Yireh Avenue was also called the robbery district. Nobody knew how the “mom and pop’s church” managed to purchase land in the slums that were already packed full of cheap buildings, or if the Church’s investors were in fact some kind of organization – in fact, very little was known about the area.

The light bloomed like flowers running rampant.

Shiver plodded forward on his six legs, bathed in a flood of illumination.

There was nothing to block his path.

Light flowed along the lustrous surface of the white coffin, gleaming like oil.

It was a beautiful night.

Black marketeers pulled gently at the sleeves of passers-by; a fortune-teller sat blankly staring into space. Women aged anywhere between fifteen and fifty stood around soliciting dates, and the men did the same.

Only the semi-naked children were lively. They ran around, pitter-pattering aimlessly, quick on their feet, pilfering food or anything else they might be able to sell from the shops. Some of them pounded their hands on the coffin as they ran by, but Shiver felt strangely

happy, like a luxury car cruising through these filthy streets.

Trails of light passed like souls through gaps in the dark ink of the night. Many of them – many, many of them.

Shiver was often struck by the beauty of the light.

The light, outlines blurred, broke down into the three primary colors and danced before his eyes. The beautiful, otherworldly vision permeated his entire visual field – joyous light like fireworks. Light, whirlpools of light...

The church was on the waterfront.

Churches were always on waterfronts.

It smelled like rotten mud. Or rather, *his sensors perceived the scent particles of rotten mud.*

The light flowed slowly across the slimy, dark surface of the water.

Shiver slid into the water with a plop, like a frozen fried chicken.

The water rose up viscously around him, like seething oil.

The underground canals were a good way of getting around without being seen.

The canals formed such a complex maze that he would not be able to remember his way around if the white coffin was not equipped with artificial intelligence.

Why these labyrinthine, mysterious routes had been dug under the city; why this special, intricate world had been built, Shiver did not know.

It was said that water had come pouring into this maze after Milagros, who controlled the city, went crazy.

Apparently, the canals were originally built to be a shelter, but with the massive inflow of water, this underground world changed completely.

Whenever a world changes, the appearance of its inhabitants also changes.

A semi-transparent tail fin swam past, waving like the tip of a velvet flag, followed by the sleeve of an angel, fluttering up to heaven.

This was a nation of fish.

A kingdom of water-breathers.

Shortly after Shiver was first confined inside the white coffin, he had gone around slaughtering the creatures of this world. He thought that if the inhabitants changed, then maybe the world itself would also change.

But he was not conscious of those thoughts at the time. At the time all of his passion was directed at killing, and killing alone. It was only when he was killing, only when he could terminate the life of another creature by his own will, that his heart swelled and trembled with joy.

It was the kind of passion that felt like a stab in the chest – like proof that he was alive.

A michelin floated by – a gigantic bag of highly oxidized liquid, about three meters across. It was easy to kill a michelin; all you had to do was tear a hole into that plastic bag body.

But... how beautiful it is... a marine diorama placed neatly inside of a clean, dry room. That's exactly what it is. The ocean, trapped inside of a plastic box, the waves undulating softly with the movements of the box.

If I punched through that giant bag, it would go swishing and twirling off like an octopus caught in a strong current. Then it would fall flat on the ground like a parachute. Wart-covered sabambas would descended on the fallen flower and sink in their hungry teeth.

Its body, composed almost entirely of a watery substance, would be devoured instantly

without a trace.

I went around massacring scores of these stupid things just months ago, but apparently, they have learned nothing.

All kinds of marine creatures that Shiver himself had named went swimming by, grazing the white coffin.

The number of them had not decreased at all.

This world was a death trap, lying there innocently like a malicious woman.

The white coffin moved slowly through the water.

The canals ran vertically and horizontally under the city, connecting to everywhere.

Shiver moved forward, splashing through the water.

He did not kill anything that stood in his path.

Rather, he swam as though stroking the water and its creatures.

He was not going anyplace in particular.

He was just finding new routes, entering them into his memory bank, checking them against his old data, and storing them.

After about two hours of this, Shiver discovered a new passageway.

The new passage was not stored in his memory, of course, and its shape was also unique.

The passage was small, and appeared to be newly dug. It was not particularly well-made.

It might be a trap, laid by some new type of creature.

Shiver's heart was pounding. It was a big burden on his weakened heart, but his mind refused to leave his body alone.

The white coffin was drawn slowly into the passageway.

He could not see any of the lichen – that familiar carpet – that normally clung to everything. There were none of the highly poisonous blue velvet samelandras, no pink-speckled grosibwas – nothing.

The walls reflected boundless, bright metallic light.

The path narrowed abruptly.

He felt a twinge of fear.

I might be eaten alive if I continue straight ahead like this... it could be some kind of trap after all... it keeps narrowing...

Shiver was enjoying the fear, so he continued to advance steadily.

This was different than the fear he felt when he was confronted with the vast emptiness of space, his body out in the abyss. This was the kind of fear that built up slowly.

He was an insect crawling into the esophagus of a gigantic aquatic creature; its metal jaws might clamp down and tear his body apart at any moment...

All of a sudden, a massive school of salbalabos rose up in front of him like a flock of black birds. They must have been resting their wings here in the weak current. They shot off, swimming in random directions, then fell back into file and all soared off together.

He watched the beautiful formation leave – watched them zip away through the water with their quivering mantles, their golden pectoral fins, and their poisonous fangs.

Just as the team of thousands disappeared from view, he found himself trapped. A metal wall had descended abruptly behind him, and the way ahead was a dead end.

He was hit with a sudden change in air pressure.

His fear blossomed into excitement, growing wild.

It would not kill him, however – because he was already half dead.

The water drained out of the room. Bubbles foamed up all over the floor. The insular space soon filled with air, and the white coffin lay there alone on the cold metal.

The wind softly caressed the coffin's wet surface.

He propped the coffin up on its six legs, and the metal partition in front of him began to slide. He could see another metal door inside, which meant that there might be air in there too.

Shiver proceeded inside. The door behind him closed slowly, and the water quickly began to drain out. Once the water had drained out completely, the next door opened.

He could hear the sound of water splashing down, but it was dry on the other side of the door.

Shiver moved into the gleaming space as though something were drawing him forward.

It must have taken considerable machine power to build this... which means it must have been built by humans – or something with intelligence comparable to humans.

Suddenly, a shrill voice called out, diffuse and irregular.

"Shiver! Shiiiiiv! Shiverer Mouse!!"

Well if it isn't that very Lesiah I've been trying so desperately to find!

"...Lesiah!"

"I just knew you'd make it here!"

Just as he had pictured her, Lesiah's white hands were fluttering about and her face was shining radiantly.

"I suppose you thought you finally got rid of me, hiding in a place like this?"

“Full of smart comments as always, I see! Come here!”

Lesiah was always in high spirits, always giving off an air of friendly competence.

“Sooo, can you feel me?” Said Lesiah, grasping Shiver’s tentacles.

Shiver displayed a “smile 1” in response. *No, I can’t.*

But I know that she’s there – isn’t that enough?

“How did you get here?”

“I swam here with an oxygen tank on my back!”

“You’re kidding me! How did you chase away the begobegos and the hikaritombies?”

Lesiah convulsed into laughter.

“What’s a bego-whatever, or a hika-whatchamacallit?”

“I named them.”

He suddenly noticed an oxygen tank lying in a corner.

What she said must have been true, he thought. Wow... she can do anything. She could probably walk across a sea of nails if she had to...

“But luckily, since you’re here, going back is going to be easy. I can just hitch a ride on the coffin...”

She sounded truly relieved; inside the coffin, Shiver laughed out loud.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

Lesiah quickly put her finger to her lips, *shh!*

“Come this way!” she shouted in whispers, and walked briskly forward.

Shiver followed her on his six legs.

The air-filled room was like a hive, deep and wide. A series of golden spaces were lined up in a row.

In the innermost space, there *it* was.

Cautious, Shiver stopped moving.

It was watching the TV with its watery eyes. A portion of its platinum blond hair was scorched off, and the skull beneath it was split wide open. Something that resembled grey intestines was sticking out from the inside.

It sat there mumbling, its face icy and expressionless.

Of all things... it's an Adiaptronite.

Shiver had heard that many from the Adiaptron Immortal Empire, who were (apparently) their enemies in this war, had settled in this city. However, those were just stories, nothing more than rumours. This was the first time he had encountered a real Adi. *Does this platinum-colored creature actually move?* He was slowly filled with wonder and amazement.

"That's quite an acquaintance you have here with you, isn't it, Lesiah?"

Shiver had learned on *Lesson Time* on TV that the Adiaptron did not have any feelings, they had no blood and no tears, and they could kill humans with no scruples whatsoever.

It's probably true that they have neither blood nor tears. But killing humans through the system of war is something that humans themselves have always done with relatively few scruples.

Shiver did not like *Lesson Time*. He wanted facts, not ideology.

"Adi... this is Shiver," Lesiah piped in.

The Adiaptronite rolled up its almond-shaped silver eyes and looked at him – the thing was humanoid at least – but the image was making him dizzy.

The phrase "Analysis not possible" scrolled down on his screen, along with

intermittent black boxes: Analysis of leg and thigh area not possible, Analysis of lower back area not possible, Analysis of chest and heart area energy supply area not possible, Analysis of cranial artificial intelligence area not possible... *Well, that's not much help. I don't even know what material it's made of!*

Shiver gazed at it with a kind of fascinated admiration – *whatever this thing is, it is clearly the product of a world that bears no resemblance to my own civilization. It was put on a foreign ship and brought here from the soil of a faraway civilization that is totally unknown, totally unimaginable to me...*

The Adiaptronite was gazing at the white coffin with completely expressionless eyes. If an ordinary human looked at him like that Shiver might find it rude, but this strange, beautiful man's (...*"man's??"*) dazzling silver eyes just made him feel extremely embarrassed.

"Lesiah..."

For the first time, the silver lump spoke.

"...At a time like this, we should exchange greetings, right?"

The voice was a bronze, muffled reverberation.

"That's right!"

Lesiah nodded her head vigorously.

The Adi slowly opened his mouth and spoke.

"Hello, Shiver."

The words had no feeling.

"Hello, nice to meet you, Adi."

The Adi then immediately lost all interest in the strange white coffin and returned to

his work. He looked into the television screen, jumbled with a series of complex numbers.

“What’s he doing?” Shiver asked.

Without answering, Lesiah looked over the Adi’s thin shoulders at the screen. “...How does it look?”

There was nothing but numbers flowing across the screen... Shiver was able to analyze them – it was data about accidental deaths.

“Can you read it?” Lesiah tapped on the coffin.

“Yeah, hang on...” As he spoke, a dreadful series of words assailed his eyes.

Data on Accidental Deaths

Identification number 107X83A – factory accident. Came into contact with crane at operation site, cranial contusion. Caused by crane’s visual misrecognition.

Identification number 5F468703C – starved to death. Malnutrition. Ingredients for milk formula mistaken. Identification number 059684SEB – burned to death. Fire caused by heat from cookware. Identification number 498534IJZ – death by poisoning. Mixing device failure during testing of chemical reagent. Large quantities of neurotoxins absorbed. Identification number 85AQ793F – traffic accident. Traffic light failure. Identification number 26908DRD – accident during surgery. Medical hammer madness.

Shiver was disturbed by that final description – *medical hammer madness*. He could almost visualize that gruesome accident before his very eyes... the hammer slamming a pregnant woman in the belly, over and over again. The blood spraying, the empty operating

room drenched in blood, flesh and blood from her gaping belly clinging to the white walls...

"This data is just from this morning. There's more," the Adi informed them quietly. It was the voice of a judge handing down a death penalty.

"What, why so many..."

Shiver suddenly realized that the Adi had not merely forgotten about him and returned to his work a moment ago – he had actually been trying to tell him something.

Well, we often misread the body language of other cultures...

Still facing the screen, the Adi did not look at him at all. The outline of his pure white profile alone suggested some hint of suppressed emotion – but that too was probably just a groundless impression.

"Milagros is broken down," said the Adi in a flat voice.

Shiver sensed some kind of emotion there, although that too could be a mistaken impression.

"...She needs to be repaired."

"But how?"

The Adi did not respond.

Shiver's heart was pounding. There were so many things he wanted to ask – *Why are you here? Why would you want to fix the artificial intelligence of an enemy nation? Aren't you going back to your own planet? What is it like where you come from?*

"Adi says he's going to cooperate with us," Lesiah said.

"But why?"

"Because I'm craaaaaaaay-zeee," came the Adi's bizarre response.

He raised his unbelievably beautiful eyes to look at Lesiah.

"Is that true?" Shiver asked.

"Well, more or less." Lesiah turned to Shiver and added, "Adi has a learning disorder, like Milagros... it seems that during the war, he took quite a hit to the head."

"So you're saying that he understands her, because they both have the same disease?"

Shiver shuddered. *To think of it – to think that a creature like this has been living deep down underground, chatting with Milagros!*

"Recovery is possible," said the Adi.

"Besides, the situation is urgent," said Lesiah.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the data on accidental deaths! The numbers are increasing. Over the past few months, there's been a massive increase in accidents caused by Milagros. The month before last, thirty-eight people got food poisoning, six of whom died. Last month twelve children were trapped inside an auto-lock storage room and suffocated to death. And yesterday at a construction site, an assembling machine went berserk and ran down as many as fifty people..."

Shiver trembled. *Could it be...? Has Milagros finally, truly, lost her mind?*

"Recovery is possible," the Adi repeated. He may as well have been talking about himself. *Oh, but wait a minute – suddenly, Shiver understood. The Adi has fallen in love with Milagros. Because...*

"...We would need to construct a 'love' frame, and teach it to her."

...Because they are alike! Surely, he can feel something from her that ordinary people cannot. Understanding, understanding... the first step on the road to love is understanding.

"What's a 'love' frame?"

“A graph, to show her what love is.”

“That’s impossible!”

Shiver suddenly felt like laughing. Here he was, listening to these two throwing around embarrassing words like “love” like it was a game of catchball – and yet their faces did not turn even the slightest shade of pink.

Lesiah was totally serious. “That’s why Adi is collecting ‘love’ samples.”

“Love samples?”

“He collects a large number of samples and then extracts their commonalities. That’s why I come here every day to talk to him.”

Shiver had a bad feeling.

“Shiver, you came here to talk to me about something, didn’t you?”

Shiver could not hide anything from Lesiah. He had come all the way here, deep down underground in the hopes of seeing her, and here she was. Furthermore, she was suggesting that he had come here with a pertinent story.

Lesiah had a mysterious ability... she called it “divine inspiration”, but Shiver did not believe that. Clearly, it was extrasensory power.

“Shiver?” Lesiah was unusually impatient.

Shiver gave up and began to speak. “Lesiah, we’re not connected to Milagros here, are we?”

“Not unless we call her – this isn’t part of her system. Why do you think we chose a place so far down?”

Shiver looked silently at the Adi.

Lesiah immediately understood his silence and added, “Adi is not a problem. I assure

you.”

Shiver trusted Lesiah completely. She was his only friend in this world. He started talking.

“Ah. I met a girl...”

“Oh, is she cute?”

“Of course she is. But she’s a little weird.”

“I can imagine.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a little weird yourself.”

“Am I?”

“What, you think you’re *not* weird, with a body like that? Look at yourself!”

The two of them smiled at each other; the Adi sat there expressionless.

“Guess where I met her?”

“Well, you go all kinds of places so...maybe a love shack in town?”

Shiver displayed a “head shake 3.”

“Somewhere in your neighborhood? Or Sun Crest Mountain? The morgue? The park? An offshore oil field?”

All of these were met with a “head shake 3.” Lesiah thought hard.

“Ah, I know!!” Lesiah slowly raised her pointer finger, and aimed it at the sky.

Shiver displayed a “smile 1.”

“You got it! We met in space. She was inside a diamond; she was inside a Dragon Cosmos. She was sleeping... no, she was singing...” Enraptured, Shiver ruminated on the memories stored in his cybernetic brain.

The next thing he knew, the Adi had approached him and was staring silently into Shiver's monitor. He was apparently captivated by the simple, childish line drawing that was displayed there.

"I wish I could explain to you what a beautiful song it was... but it was also very lonely. You see, she had been alone for a long, long time..."

"About how long?"

"She said probably more than two centuries, according to her calculations."

"Was she flying all alone?"

"No, she was with her Mama..."

Shiver told Lesiah about the circumstances surrounding their meeting, and described their time together since then.

He talked about the windflowers.

"She said she was hungry... and so off we went. The windflowers were dancing in the moonlight. She said she wanted to eat one, so we went to look right up close."

The Adi interrupted.

"Windflowers are lethally poisonous creatures, are they not?"

"Yes, they are."

"Well, didn't you consider that she might get poisoned?"

"No, I didn't," he answered peevishly.

"Why not?"

"Because she said she would be fine."

"Do you believe in words?"

"It's not the words! I thought I could believe *her*. She..."

“Why?”

Shiver responded irritably, “I have a sensor that lets me see through things. So I knew she wasn’t an ordinary girl... I could see that Jonah was a machine inside, and that the fleshy skin that covered her was nothing more than a mask.”

Expressionless, the Adi nodded.

Lesiah smiled and said, “So you took her with you.”

“Yeah... it was a really beautiful lunar morning. She was really happy. She allowed a windflower to land in the palm of her hand, and let it suck her blood... She says it’s *pretty*; she says this world is *pretty*... she *says* that. That girl...”

“Was it only one windflower? But I heard that windflowers swarm in droves, and kill their prey.”

This was feeling like an interrogation.

“One was enough. As soon as Jonah got one, I turned around and got away.”

“Because you were afraid, for yourself?”

“Why should I be afraid?” From inside the coffin, he gave Lesiah a look that said *Please, explain it to this guy*. He quickly realized that he was not getting through, so he explained it himself. “I’m enclosed in an iron coffin, there’s nothing for me to fear in here. I got away for Jonah’s sake.”

“Even though Jonah said that she wouldn’t die? You did not believe those words?”

“Sure, I believed them, but I couldn’t just let her flesh be turned into a paddy field for windflowers!”

Lesiah laughed, but the Adi did not laugh. Instead, he replied, “Perhaps...but that was a terrible misfortune for the windflowers that could not use Jonah’s skin as a paddy field.”

That made Shiver like the Adi a little – although it was possible that this was just another misunderstanding on his part.

“The windflower has multiplied, but they’re still there, growing from Jonah’s left palm. They’ll probably fly off soon.”

“And then again they will search out blood, and proceed to attack fleshy creatures,” Lesiah said ironically.

“...Maybe,” Shiver muttered to himself, deep in thought. Things were much more complicated than they appeared. Shiver thought about all the headless chickens that Jonah had beaten to death that day. Every time somebody does something, the dice is rolled, fortune and misfortune are shuffled, life and death change places...

Shiver continued nevertheless, “Ah, but Lesiah, I – I’ve started to like her... I really, really like her.”

Lesiah nodded as though she understood.

But Shiver still felt like he had so much more to say, so he kept talking.

He talked about the happiness he felt when she was by his side, the joy he felt when she laughed, the beauty of her moving limbs, his feelings for her – passionate feelings, painful feelings that made his heart ache – her strange gentle hands, the electronic eye that had suddenly popped out from her chest, her orange nuclear fusion plasma heart, her long black hair blowing up in the cold wind... that voice, her laugh, her singing voice, the voice she used to call out to him... those rich, sweet, gracious eyes that seemed capable of penetrating anything, and yet at the same time could look so sad and lonely, like she was starving for something... he admired her... what on earth *was* she? *Where did she come from?* Where did she get such an *amazing system*? There were so many things he did not know

about her, but that's why he admired her all the more – she was like him, so he could understand her, and yet he knew nothing about her at all!

After telling Lesiah all of this, he finally took a breath inside the coffin.

The next thing he knew, she was right there next to him, the tears slowly running down her cheeks.

Shiver immediately displayed a “smile 4”...and left it there for quite some time. “...Why are you crying?”

“You're such an idiot...” said Lesiah, her voice trembling. “Now you're really alive...” Interestingly, Lesiah used almost the same expression that the girl had used.

“I've been alive all along, haven't I?”

“Liar!” Lesiah retorted. “Living things are only truly alive when they love something...”

Adi suddenly interrupted the moving speech. “Is that so.”

The intonation gave no suggestion that it was a question, but it probably was. Nobody answered.

“I'll add that to my notes,” he continued.

“Lesiah...”

“Uh-huh?”

“I saw it.”

Lesiah waited. An intelligent teacher always waits.

“When I met the girl... out in space – I saw it.”

Lesiah's face tensed up.

“What did you say?”

“I saw it. *I saw something.*”

“Something?”

“I don’t know, just, I know that I saw it... it was a really tiny baby, or at least something that had a baby’s face. It was all twisted up, as though it was in pain – like it was going to fracture into pieces and disperse to some other place... it was omnipresent, you could feel it everywhere, it was overwhelming, frightening, disgusting... but it had this incredible power, and then *it* said – ‘ERGO SUM LUX – I am light’ – that’s what it said, I’m sure of it!”

“*It was Him...*!” Lesiah looked up at the heavens and closed her eyes.

“It was him,” Adi parroted. He glittered coolly as always.

“What, your ‘God’? That crap means nothing to me!” Shiver faced Lesiah and lambasted her as he always did on this point. In fact, this was the thing about Lesiah that always bothered him the most.

“You don’t need faith. It’s a fact. The fact is that he exists,” said Adi.

“It wasn’t ‘God’. You can’t know that!”

“We can’t know that,” said Adi coldly, “but it’s a fact that *He* was there. Shiver saw it. Lesiah saw it too. Adi saw it too.”

“And maybe... that girl... Jonah too...”

“Sample B Group.”

“Huh? What?”

Adi’s almond eyes continued staring intently at the coffin.

“For the past few months, we’ve been checking everywhere, using every means at our disposal... we’ve poked around in Milagros’ mind, and we’ve contacted our friends from allied nations via the church,” said Lesiah.

With no change in expression, the Adi said, “Sample B Group are bio-mechanical

combat units, feared and loathed by the Immortal Empire as their greatest threat. The Adiaptron did in fact suffer a major blow on Syaut. Let me explain just how awesome they are. First of all, they are immortal. The only way to stop them from attacking is to either smash them to pieces, or to send them off completely alone somewhere in space. They are sampling machines that continuously change form; they sample cells from all kinds of life-forms and all kinds of machines, and then perfectly reproduce their genetic information and structure. Their special ceramic bones can be reorganized freely, and are covered with flesh. They could even pose as Adi.”

“Wait a minute! There’s no way.”

“Jonah...” said Lesiah, spellbound.

“A Hybrid Child developed by the military?”

“You learn fast,” Lesiah spoke as though to praise a good student.

He knew about Sample B Group from the Reina and Adaya story on *Lesson Time* – the two lovers who would never die... Shiver realized that his suspicions had been correct.

She really did escape! From the military! That girl ran away, taking the military’s top secret with her – her body!

Adi continued speaking as though no time at all had elapsed.

“They don’t even require flesh. All their bodies need are nuclear fusion units, whose life expectancies are almost infinite, analyzers, mutable ceramic bones, electronic eyes, internal factories, and that’s all.”

“But she escaped! The girl escaped, two hundred and twenty-six years ago!”

That meant that for once, Milagros actually had the right information.

Shiver rolled the thoughts around inside his head.

“Ah, she told me...” he spoke reluctantly. “She told me that she had seen that light before. It was the person who gave her life, she said...”

“I saw it when I entered the Church too,” Lesiah whispered quickly and added, “Adi saw it too, when he took that blow to the head. *That Person* came, and said ‘*Have volition, be free, live, choose your own manner of death, pray, and focus your will!*’ That’s what He said; that’s what He said...!”

4

White noise crackled next to his face. He ducked away, but it did not seem to make any difference. Unpleasant pins and needles like static electricity caressed his cheeks.

He gazed into the haze from between the sheets. With a touch of irritation, he peered through it and looked around. The more he looked into the white space, the more warped his sense of perspective became. Proper perspective did not exist *here* in the first place, but he knew for certain that if he were to fall out of bed, he would keep falling endlessly. Far below, he could sense a perpendicular precipice, and in the space even beyond that, an expanse of dim purple skies where the dragons danced. Standard gauges like right and left or up and down did not exist here.

The TV monitor was closer to him.

It sat right next to his bed, old and worn out-looking.

He had absolutely no recollection where he might have picked it up...

Perhaps it has been here all along.

Perhaps we were born together as a set, he thought self-deprecatingly.

Nothing was displayed on it now. There was only flowing white noise – gritty like the surrounding space. *The screen is brimming with silver water*, he thought – and then strangely enough, it really did start to look like water.

He lay feebly in bed.

He was very tired these days; he had exerted himself too much, leaping strenuously through time and space. There was so much pain in his heart he could cry.

Murderer.

Nobody had ever said it to him, but he knew it – knew that he was a murderer.

He had ordered the production of weapons, directed wars, rounded up fighters, sent them mercilessly to their deaths, orphaned countless children, starved people, drove them mad, caused incredible pain, abandoned anyone he did not need, and let people die when he could have saved them. He had no idea what was right and what was wrong; his power was too great; he had become seriously depressed.

Here... he felt at ease here on this bed, but as the Military Priest, he could not simply stay here all the time. He knew that working for the military was the mission with which he had been entrusted – it must have been *somebody's* will that he had been born this way – to dedicate himself to serving the military.

He took a breath.

When he was feeling good, he did not shake like this... but he was shaking now. He was sad, frightened, cowardly... he remembered the prayer – the words that the pastor Reinhold Niebuhr had preached.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference...”

Ahh... if only I could truly understand that... I could live my life happily – without worry, without pain.

But he did not understand anything. Why he was connected to a place like this, with no body, with no need for food, unable to touch anyone; he did not understand how he would die – for that matter, he did not even know for certain why he had been born. The only thing that was clear was that he was trudging sluggishly along through life on a completely different course from other people.

His body was composed of rough particles. He streamed along like a white thundercloud infused with light; a mysterious cloud of emotion, will, and intelligence.

All of a sudden, he felt a trembling in his heart...

Why? Why am I here? Why am I shut up alone in a place like this? Who's responsible for this? Is it some kind of punishment? Some kind of a test? For what? ...What if... (the thought made him shudder deep down inside)... what if there's no meaning to any of this, and it's all just plain coincidence...?

He shook his head.

He shook his head in a metaphorical sense. In reality, waves of negation surged throughout his body like ripples.

I can't think about it anymore – it's too unbearable.

It will break... my heart will break.

If my heart breaks, what will become of me then? Will my heart end up shattered completely, just like that rabbit's...?

His existence was scattered all around the world, across a span of eight hundred years.

If he focused his will with all his might, he could remain in a given place for some time. Within that eight hundred year span, he could pause to touch down wherever he liked.

The rabbit had gotten into an accident.

Its lower body had been completely crushed.

Rivers of blood coursed out of its body, running down its crushed back.

He alighted there and asked – What happened to you? The rabbit answered – I was run over, leave me alone, what the hell are you? He asked – Do you want to live one more time? No way, you must be kidding me – said the rabbit, and then abruptly died.

He thereupon atomized the rabbit's corpse and carried it back through time. This required an incredible amount of strength – he crawled along slowly, exhausting himself in the process.

He went back twenty hours in time, returned the rabbit to its original state, gave it life, and released it back onto land. The rabbit, at a complete loss as to what was going on, just ran around in confusion. At that moment, he realized that the rabbit would die the same death some thirty-four hours later. When he was feeling sharp, his eyes could see across the entire eight hundred year span.

Thus, he travelled once again to thirty-four hours later, and asked the rabbit again – Do you want to live one more time?

Hell no, I don't want to live, answered the rabbit.

Why not?

'Cause it'll hurt to get run over again.

But you'll be able to eat grass again, and you can have your fur stroked again.

I don't like being touched, and I'm sick and tired of eating that disgusting grass.

The rabbit opened its red eyes wide and took its last breath.

Silently, he atomized the rabbit's corpse. This time, he tried taking it back further in time.

Can an observer alter the universe by his own will?

This time the rabbit lived for six days. But that was all. It died the same death again, soaked in its own blood.

He repeated the same thing three more times, going back several hundred years each time.

The same thing just happened, three more times.

Perhaps the rabbit's heart was shattered... it felt powerless; it was already dead – there was nothing he could have done. His own terrible power had its limits as well; there was the temporal delimitation of eight hundred years, and there were areas where his power could not reach.

Thus, this power must have been *given to him* by someone or something... it must have been shared with him by *some omnipotent being*, to serve some purpose... The thought was a relief. It was far more comforting to think this way, than to think that he bore the burden of this fate out of sheer coincidence.

His power was too great...

He was gazing at the monitor next to him.

It was flickering and crackling with the usual whitish noise, punctuated with bursts of silver light.

The screen was a tube – a pipe that connected this place and reality.

On closer scrutiny, there appeared to be intermittent rainbows of light mixed in with

the white. Perhaps some kind of message was coming – *the window that connects this place to the real world bears a message...*

It was a list in English, written in an ancient format.

Serial Number List; Sample Group B

s/n	Type	c/n	o/r	d/d	Remarks
SB 001 - I	sample B	001	Military	13-01-356	Saga Electronics
SB 002 - II	sample B	002	Military	30-11-448	Dennberg
SB 003 - III	sample B	003	***	13-04-894	<u>Missing</u>
SB 004 - IV	sample B	004	Military	12-06-902	Syaut #4
SB 005 - V	sample B	005	Military	23-07-882	Unait
SB 006 - VI	sample B	006	Military	24-08-894	Are-Sko
SB 007 - VII	sample B	007	Military	13-07-278	Moon Four
SB 008 - VIII	sample B	008	Military	03-12-280	Begoita
SB 009 - IX	sample B	009	Military	08-08-256	Queetea
SB 010 - X	sample B	010	***	08-09-765	<u>Crash</u> [Syaut #5]
SB 011 - XI	sample B	011	Military	10-05-574	Saga Electronics
SB 012 - XII	sample B	012	Military	26-03-786	Syaut #3
SB 013 - XIII	sample B	013	Military	28-05-165	<u>Remodeling</u> Saga + M-Lab
SB 014 - XIV	sample B	014	***	01-01-995	<u>Crash</u> [Syaut #3]

Sample B Group... #3! The one who went missing, who was buried alive for forty years, who's been drifting in outer space for a hundred and eighty-six years since then - Sample B #3!

Two hundred and twenty-six years was by no means a short period of time even for him, whose axis of time spanned eight hundred years. He felt attached to her in a sense. It was the kind of attachment that a space pilot feels for a planet that he can see day after day for a very long time – that was why he had just let her be for so long; he had never considered having her destroyed, either when she was buried alive or when she was crossing the breadths of space. Anyway, she was harmless as long as she was drifting, and he enjoyed the routine of checking that she was there. Besides, she was unusual; and she was beautiful, strong, and radiant.

But a message like this meant that he had to do something.

Perhaps, he thought, he should have a look at #13, the one that was undergoing “remodelling.”

Suddenly, he was torn out of bed. He gathered his blinking existence together into one mass and found himself standing in the world.

Airily, he began to walk. He passed through a gold-coloured wall, seeped down through a gray ceiling, and fell splat on top of the head of a female researcher at Saga Electronics.

The researcher gasped, and dropped to the ground to bow to him on the spot.

“Please pardon me!”

She remained prostrate on the ground, not even raising her eyes. She was not a researcher from Saga; the woman was a military civic scientist. He could see that her mind

was spinning, poor thing...

"Don't worry about it. Do you know who I am?"

The civic scientist inched even further backward, her forehead still plastered to the floor.

"Yes! Yes, of course!"

There was fear and confusion in her voice, but she was trying to regain her composure.

"You are the Military Priest, the Honourable Hess...!"

She lifted her face for the first time.

She was a beautiful young woman.

The word "sacrifice" popped into his head. With this much beauty and this much intelligence, surely the dragons too would find her a welcome distraction.

"Do you enjoy the work here?"

"Yes sir. I believe that it's important work."

Hess nodded.

"Show me around."

The woman stood up immediately. She had very pretty legs.

Hess rode on the woman's shoulders. He coiled himself around her neck, tightly entwining his arms. He thus followed the woman, trailing a long tail like a smoke candle.

The strength it took to remain firmly fixed to a world in which he normally merely blinked had exhausted him completely... Reality, normally turned on and off like a flashlight, was here now, and every time reality passed through this transparent body, the fatigue molecules accumulated.

The lab was immaculate. The floors, the walls, and the ceiling were all sparkling bright.

The woman's hair was long and black, fluttering out behind her.

As he commingled with her hair, he could sense the scent particles... it smelled familiar, but why, from where...?

"I've always revered you," said the civic scientist, still looking straight ahead.

"Me?"

The woman nodded.

"I have always hoped that one day I might be graced with Your Excellency's youthful presence."

Perhaps that was why he had been summoned here... that kind of thing happened relatively often.

The civic scientist's leather shoes squeaked.

"It's this way."

A door about two meters thick scanned her DNA and then swung open. It was so thick and heavy that it created a powerful whoosh of wind when it opened, blowing him backwards for several moments.

Upon entering, it looked more like some kind of factory than a lab.

"Here is Sample B #13, undergoing remodelling according to Your Excellency's orders..."

According to my orders?

He had no memory of making any such orders.

But he could not actually tell anybody such a thing; he was the Military Priest – the

most powerful person in the highest decision-making body of the Arbitration Council. He could not put the responsibility for this on anyone else.

He had to act as though he understood everything all the time.

The truth was that he did not understand much of anything, in spite of this strange existence he led.

Where in the world was his real body? Or rather, what time was it at? Did he have a real body in the first place? Even he himself did not know for sure... the image he had in his mind was that the moment he was born from his mother's belly, the atoms of his soul were scattered, diffused across a span of eight hundred years, and stationed at equal intervals. He was living at every point in time, blinking on and off.

He transformed the world in various ways; either according to his own ideas about how it could be made better, or according to the furtive instructions of his other selves.

It was difficult to feel a sense of self, a sense of his own Ego, a sense of a unified entity called "*me*." He was haunted by fantasies and delusions, like a schizophrenic. Sometimes he got the feeling that he was not actually himself. It must be that bed, and the monitor, that held him together.

But it was like the left hand and the right hand were not communicating...

If she said that he ordered the remodelling, then he must indeed have done so – a self that he had not yet met must have made the request somewhere earlier on the axis of time than where he was living now.

If he returned to bed, he might be able to find the memory. Memories were always vague – or rather the world was so fluid, that something that could be called "true reality" practically did not exist. Even if it could be grasped, it would need to be sealed tightly inside

a test tube, lest it disperse into nothingness, like scent particles carried off by the wind.

He was losing his memories... as he crawled slowly along his own axis of time, he forgot more and more of what he had done... all he knew was the world that he saw through the monitor – only the results of his own actions.

The civic scientist showed him around.

“This is it.”

Something very different from his image of Sample B Group was lying there.

It was a child.

It was... a child of seven or eight years, still unclothed. A boy.

He could not simply ask what on earth this thing was.

He slipped quietly away from the woman’s shoulders and swirled wispily above the sleeping boy, gazing into his face from directly above. The boy’s eyes were closed. He had smooth, beautiful cheeks. There was blood flowing through his veins. He could hear the undulations of his heartbeat. The curl of his long eyelashes cast a dark shadow.

An abdomen so tiny, it seemed impossible that all the intestines and such could be packed inside. The narrow hips characteristic of young boys. A penis with the foreskin left on – a small mass of flesh. Who was he supposed to be?

He looked away.

He did not know why.

A cloud of unease cloaked his chest. Unease – or perhaps envy, or irritation – or perhaps it was a shiver of rising laughter. His body blurred like a spasm.

His body trembled, prickling with corporeal pain.

Suddenly, he was snapped away like a rubber band and his body went leaping through

time. The color of the whole world trickled away, gooey like a caterpillar crushed underfoot.

He shrieked.

He was leaping around, back and forth, over and over again. He was hopping around, just like that rabbit. He was being tossed about every which way.

The rabbit must have been unhappy the whole time it was being tossed about... it must have been tormented the whole time. The rabbit, an unwilling participant in a well-intentioned experiment, must have been unhappy after all...

Thinking about it made his chest ache.

Suddenly he realized that he had inadvertently brought the woman, the civic scientist, along with him. He could see her pale, bare arms. She was warm, lukewarm, revolting; she was shouting something... *so the dragon liked the woman after all; that giant golden snake that traveled back through time could not resist her!*

It felt as though the woman's body composition was mixing with his own; the woman's thoughts were entering him: *a typhoon, I'm afraid, I was little and there was a typhoon, I can't run away, I'm scared, I'm gonna be blown down, I'm gonna be swept away, the rain is sticky, the wind is blocking my nose, I can't breathe, I wanna cry, can't cry, Hess, Hess, Daniel, Hess, Daniel, Daniel...*

Hands brimming with fear and love reached out, gripping, tightening.

(Stop it!) He screamed. His voice was hoarse; the hands were still holding tight; the woman was in pain; she was howling like a beast; the sweat molecules were pouring down; stop it stop it, no – its blood! Copious amounts of blood! Blood, pouring out just like it had from that rabbit's crushed back! Dying? Dying! This much blood... enough to die from... dying, going to die... What time is this? What place is this...?

Soaked in white light.

Is this... a hospital room...?

The woman was moaning; she was in pain; she was howling like it was the end of the world. She was gripping an iron pole. She was glistening with sweat. The air was trembling in pain.

(Are you there?)

(Yes, I'm here!)

(Can you see anything?)

(...No)

Nothing was visible, because they still were still not fixed to this point in space-time. It was surely hard work for the dragon this time as well... after all, it had to carry two of them. But why...?

Blood!

Blood sprayed up, copious amounts... he saw it, he was finally becoming fixed in place. He saw it clearly: a woman, a woman giving birth to something! A woman, drenched in sweat, clenching her teeth and showing her canines, her lower half soaked in blood.

Her head rolled, her black hair flowed, her closed eyelids quivered, there was dew on her eyelashes – but was it sweat or was it tears? Her chin was thrust upward, the black hair was plastered around the nape of her neck, her white arms trembled.

He could see a crowd of human figures gathered around the woman. They were all engaged in various tasks, all in a commotion. One person quickly left, another was whispering in a high-pitched voice... an instrument called a hammer – used to pull out the fetus – was released down from the ceiling. A brutal, four-winged apparatus. It surrounded

the baby's head, slowly drawing it out.

Something was being born.

(That...) It was the woman's voice, (that's... me...)

(All things that give birth are female) He said. The words flowed naturally out of his mouth.

(No... that's *me*...!)

The woman's scream intermixed with the moans; she was still not firmly fixed in place... the two women – the civic scientist and that woman who was giving birth to something – they were merging together!

It was twisting.

Agony, like that on their faces, was twisting the space.

The women's faces overlapped; their expressions overlapped; the air particles trembled and blurred; the woman screamed; writhing in pain, she screamed!

Finally, the woman's abdomen began to tear; something was poking its head out; there was white hair growing on the head – hair already... stiff hair like wire, hair... already... blood, a gush of blood spilled out; it was an impossible birth – first of all, it was too big; how could a baby this big even be possible!

The figures scrambled about even more; the alarming situation had created a nervous tension in the air; the hammer spun like a merry-go-round; the hems of the white gowns fluttered, dreamlike; and in the midst of all of this, the woman wrung out her agonized cries.

(It's coming...! It's coming...!)

The civic scientist screamed in synchrony with the woman.

The thing slipped out a little.

It was impossible. How could something so huge come out of her body? It was impossible!

It slipped out even further, now revealing a single eye. Suddenly, the eye popped open – *and looked straight at him!*

“It’s me, it’s me!”

It was... an absurdly old man – pure white hair, eyes clouded over and yellow, eyebrows gone, faded skin – a crazed old goat going berserk. He was seething with fury, not having the foggiest notion of why any of this was happening.

“Over here! Do something! Quick!”

The old man was furious.

That much was clear just from the look on his face, sticking out halfway from between the woman’s legs with the blood vessels in his forehead bulging.

The woman was dying; he could tell from the respirator and the ECG.

He reached out his hands.

Firmly, he gripped the old man’s head, tearing out some of the hair.

All of a sudden, his body was sucked like gas into the old man.

He tried to shake himself free, but the energy from the old man’s anger was too strong. The old man’s head was *full of anger* – almost nothing but anger. The old man sucked him in like a storm.

(Ahh it hurts it hurts it hurts!)

Just as the woman’s agony reached its peak, the old man’s body suddenly vanished.

Applause broke out. The phantom-like figures, the doctors drenched in sweat – they all applauded. They had known that it would be successful; they had known that this was

going to happen; they knew that the Priest destined to serve the military had just been born.

It was an ancient promise fulfilled; it was world harmony; it was the right thing.

Immediately, they began D.H.'s postpartum care, tending to her torn body. If they had been just a little slower, she would have died.

Meanwhile, the newborn old man, racing through time, was furious – furious that he was so ugly, furious that he did not know even so much as where he was.

Raging like mad, he continued to move across time.

Suddenly, he noticed the white hair tangled between his fingers. He remembered the civic scientist, and leapt across to where she was.

He dropped into the lab, and handed the woman civic scientist his own hair, covered with hair cells, and shouted, "Keep this!"

The old man surveyed the area with his eyes.

A heart-rending cry rose up.

"Please, Your Excellency... give us your orders...!"

The exhausted researchers' faces came rushing toward him like white balloons.

"Please, give us your orders!"

"If something isn't done, humanity will be destroyed..."

The researchers' faces were faded gray, their expressions indistinct.

The old man detached himself from the world, straddled the dragon of time, and swept his eyes across the span of eight hundred years.

An empire of machines was trying to gain control of the world – an empire of machines called the Immortal Empire – was out to destroy the world.

The old man flew into an insane rage.

He had just seen – with absolute certainty – that eight hundred years later, all living things would breathe their last and perish.

He saw the surface of the planet, writhing with the last humans, scorched with blistering skin – all reduced to ashes; the tongues of flames rolling upwards; the dirty, bad, cloudy air clogging the sky; he saw a collapsed building with a child's arm sticking out from beneath the pile of rubble; there were women with charred faces crying with their heads in their hands and skeletons laughing with bared teeth. The malnutrition, the chronic diarrhea, the sharp, bony bodies – goodbye, goodbye, goodbye... this is the end this is it humanity's record stops here this is the end this is the conclusion, and the drifting souls... the stone fairies.

He saw the machines come landing like highly-evolved insects, walking around like they owned the place, stomping through the roofs of the houses with their long legs, smashing through mountains of hollow bones... all three moons were out; the light flowed along the surfaces of the machines' jet black bodies like oil; machines of various shapes transformed, united, separated, recombined; a single leg from gigantic machine walked off on its own and stealthily entered a small house to probe around; the thing that he thought was a leg now grew an additional leg and the two now began to walk around together; unit, unit, double unit, triple unit, the bastards are composed of nothing but small units; some with grotesque wings, some with heavy shell-like covers on their backs, some of them googling their gigantic eyes, some carrying gun batteries... analyzers, central nerves; like insects chock full of instinct, every action had a purpose. It was because of the MAZA, they followed the MAZA's orders and acted how the MAZA would like, that was how they were

made. The ground was covered with the bastards, army ants, censorship, wholesale slaughter, an emotionless flat gray ocean, construction, construction to build the bastards' city; multiply, multiply, fill the earth, build factories, gather raw materials, reproduce, multiply, multiply, fill the earth, that was all the bastards were programmed to do, they were produced one after another – *they eliminated humanity because it was an obstacle to production!*

The old man returned to the lab instantaneously.

Fresh anger gushed forth, seething. Boiling rage soaked his whole body.

He gathered all the civic scientists together, and hollered at the top of his lungs.

“Get started on the prototype for Sample A Group!”

He was oozing confidence.

After all, he was a *newborn old man*. He gave himself over to the explosion of emotion – he had no doubts and no regrets; cowardice and anxiety were alien to him; he had no pain, no fear – *only hatred for his enemies and vengeance!*

He sent the blueprint for Sample A Group through his monitor – the old man had been born *with all of the knowledge from his lifetime*, and he knew exactly what that knowledge meant. What he lacked was meaning – a mature personality, the kind of personal philosophy that develops over the course of one's life, and a deep questioning – *of what or who he was*.

His life was moving in reverse. His temperament was absolutely barbaric – perhaps because he had been born with all of the knowledge from his life. He had the insolence of an intelligent but spoiled child, magnified to the n^{th} degree.

He sent a list of trouble points for Sample A Group and the blueprints for B Group.

The military lab and Saga Electronics dedicated all their efforts to the endeavour.

The old man was completely enraged throughout.

The completed units of Sample B Group were sent off to their assigned deployment locations; countless glasses of deep red wine were smashed in celebration; he made an appearance at their departure ceremony... At the same time, he saw their relentless advance in battle, and was satisfied.

“The Empire of Machines will be destroyed within eight hundred years!”

He addressed the whole of the Friendly Nations by means of the Arbitrators’ Network. He had no doubts whatsoever – he was the Military Priest both in name and in substance; he was the most powerful person that existed – he had the puffed-up pride of an infant who insisted on doing everything himself.

He had absolute confidence and he made absolute judgements. He had no hesitations and no regrets.

He once abandoned a satellite that carried millions of people, for strategic reasons. The satellite was thus thoroughly cleansed and fell into the hands of the Adiaptron. This “thorough cleansing” meant that living people were sucked out into space. The cursed Adi had broken a hole into the school and threw out the garbage, mummifying millions of children in an instant.

He carried on pronouncing judgements like a machine. He was just like the detestable Adi. He determined the programs to be shown on *Lesson Time* and centralized the military chain of command. He gave passionate speeches, built factories, sorted and selected humans, sent his pawns one after another to Syaut where the bloody battles raged, cast them ruthlessly away like chess pieces, killed them... there were military spacecraft crushed

like tin cans, planets cracked in two, daybreaks with torn rainbows, death death death death death death, blood blood blood blood blood blood, destruction and betrayal and shelling, collapsed buildings, babies torn to pieces, cities dissolved, ghosts roaming the discoloured skies, the electricity interrupted and the networks dead, artificial intelligences with war neuroses – none of it mattered to him a whit!

We will win; we will win at any cost!

He would do anything to win – how could he witness that pitiful defeat – no, that total downfall – before his very eyes, and not go absolutely mad with rage?

Winning must be prioritized above everything else; winning, winning, winning; that was all. All of humanity would be sacrificed for the sake of winning!

Fools who could not understand those simple facts would have to be hanged. There would be surveillance. The Network would carry out the surveillance – they would plant spies, listen to informers, suppress any underground activity, and control information – those who still did not understand would be thrown in prison. Just as roughly ten percent of factory-produced articles ended up defective, humans too sometimes came out defective.

He suddenly remembered... about the girl who had betrayed the military.

He flew into a rage. An explosion of emotion engulfed his whole body, rendering him immobile. He merely wobbled and trembled, a body of energy unable to fix itself in place.

He finally managed to get back to the lab. He was enraged, seeing red.

“D.H.! Is D.H. here?!”

The civic scientist came rushing out of the other room in pyjamas. The front was exposed; her voluminous chest was fully visible; she had beautiful straight legs; her black hair was loose, swaying like sea kelp under water.

"Yes! Pardon me!"

He may have been a little off on his time of landing, but he did not concern himself too much about that. He merely stared at D.H.'s beautiful legs... with eyes eternally hungry and heavy with the envy and resentment of a person who has no corporeal body.

"Is there some kind of emergency?"

The woman – his future mother – stood there awkwardly. As a female, being exposed like this, even to the gaze of someone without flesh, must feel uncomfortable.

"You saved it, right?" he asked.

"Yes sir! Of course!"

She seemed relieved that the topic was work.

"I want Sample B #13 rebuilt. It is to be remodelled to hunt down #3. It's going to need some fairly drastic alterations. The circuit design for the artificial intelligence is going to need a complete overhaul, and when you do the DNA analysis, I want to add a special condition. It will also need an automatic switching system for that purpose. I also want it to have a highly sensitive recognition system for identifying #3. I'll give you all the information for the DNA that #3 is believed to possess, so you can use that to design the system. Then..."

For the first time in his life, he hesitated.

"Give it my cells. #13 is my creation. Give it this *mark* to show that it's my work...!"

"Yes sir!"

The civic scientist, still in her pyjamas, bent over and bowed deeply.

Suddenly, a strange wind came blowing through the corridor.

The only opening here was the ventilation duct, and yet a wind, oddly *large* like a *solid*,

passed through.

Half of his body was blown away in the gust, trailing like smoke. He was perilously close to being blown away entirely, but he managed to avoid it by clinging to the floor with all his might.

The civic scientist looked anxiously to the end of the corridor; there was nothing there. She saw only bright light, reflecting off the white metal. But she sensed something – sensed that at the farthest limits of the endless maze, something was watching.

And then the presence was gone.

Finally, much later, he said “...I want Sample B #13 to be a Hyper-Hybrid. Record that.”

“Yes sir.”

The members of Sample B Group were commonly referred to as “Hybrid Children,” because they were a combination of machine and flesh.

A “Hyper-Hybrid,” then, would be something even more than that.

Hybrid Children were already a big hit – they were the ultimate heroes in a battle in which the survival of humanity was at stake.

Every day these immortal heroes, who looked just like boys and girls, played out their action movies on TV. The children went wild with enthusiasm.

The heroes wreaked thoroughly gratifying destruction, clobbering the hideous, mean-faced invaders. The enemy possessed no blood, no pain, and no emotion – only a lust for destruction and endless self-reproduction.

In Episode 67, entitled “Treacherous Designs at the Secret Factory,” Hybrid Girl Reina is incorporated into the enemy’s secret factory and is forced to work on the production of enemy units. In order to undo the slave-like program, Hybrid Boy Adaya transforms into a

gallant ramada, and goes to rescue the girl.

Of course, they never fail in their missions.

The boy rescues the girl safe and sound, tears down the factory, and cleans everything up. *Yes, it is cleaning. What we are doing here is cleaning.*

“As soon as it’s ready, send it out in pursuit of #3. Understand?” he said.

“Yes sir!”

D.H. bowed again, her heart about to rupture.

5

Before she knew it, the windflowers had multiplied.

Jonah looked at the six small windflowers growing from the palm of her left hand.

She gazed raptly at the pale blue moonlight passing through their transparent wings, the firm muscles reminiscent of rugged carnivores, and the lavender-tinted stalks.

Her hand was feeling itchy these past few days. *That’s strange*, she thought, and then realized that they must be preparing to leave and fly off... The windflowers themselves had probably not expected such a vivacious host – an ordinary host would have dropped dead long ago, becoming a delicious, rotting bag of meat. Thus, they had probably given up on her and decided to fly off early. Besides... they also seemed to be restless for the company of other windflowers.

Jonah knew that even flowers like these contained rainbows of uncertainty, impatience, kindness, loneliness, and sadness.

“But... you can fly away if you want.”

With Jonah's words, the windflowers seemed abruptly to make up their minds. They began to uncoil their roots, twisting and turning... and then, *pop!* they released.

The six windflowers flew off all at once.

Fresh blood spurted from her palm where their drill-like roots had torn out, spouting vigorously as though shooting out through a straw.

This body seemed to be working very well for her these days.

Jonah's eyes followed the fluttering windflowers in the night sky.

There were two moons in the sky tonight... What might Eliphaz and Bildad be discussing?

She watched as the windflowers grew smaller and smaller, until finally they were sucked into the crevices of wind, like powdered snow.

Jonah was satisfied.

Lately the fishermen were active around here, so she should not linger. She could be discovered by the windflower-shooters. The thought excited her.

The girl meandered along the old promenade.

The brick-red tiles, cracked and discoloured, seemed to go on forever, undulating like the sea. The streetlights flickered on and off, buzzing. Milagros' arteries were exposed in places; none of them seemed to be working properly.

All of a sudden, an enormous *boom* resounded.

Jonah ducked reflexively.

The tree standing right next to her split at its base and burst into flames. Someone must have thrown an incendiary device. Dancing and twisting in the orange flames, the tree became a cold, dead color as its sap evaporated.

Jonah leaned forward and ran like a small animal that sensed fear.

A missile followed her.

The sidewalk was crumbling. The assailants did not seem to be aiming to hit, which meant they thought they could just scare this little girl to death. Jonah was very amused.

Despicable delinquents, strutting around town, reeking of violence!

Jonah pretended to run like a scared animal, her sandals flapping against the ground.

This excited the scumbags even beyond her expectations; they intensified their chase, leaping out of the shadows every now and then to menace her with a sudden flash of their terrifying figures.

One of them was brandishing arms that had clearly been remodelled at some shady junk shop in town. He looked like an army straggler in a cheap war movie, although he himself probably thought he was giving a terrifying performance. To an ordinary person, he probably *would* look quite frightening, and he probably *was* truly dangerous. But this was the central urban district – a place where ordinary folk did not dare set foot.

The second one was a little more normal-looking.

He was apparently the one who had shot the rocket launcher; he was rigged up in all kinds of expensive equipment. Lightweight defensive netting encircled his chest; some small firearms and remaining missiles hung from his waist; she could see with her x-ray vision that he had a thirty-two centimeter knife concealed in an inside pocket.

There was a perfectly round infrared eye stuck to the middle of both of their foreheads.

Jonah continued to run, her steps easy.

A streetlight snapped in half with a *crack*.

Flames spouted up like blood.

Whoop, whoohooo!!

The crazed men raised up a great battle cry.

They sounded like the hoarse-voiced monkeys over at Rendol Zoo.

All kinds of human trash now inhabited the cages whose gates had been thrown open after the war – the genetically collapsed, broken cyborgs, their children – all kinds of social rejects took over the place and intentionally closed the gates again. They simply brought in a few living necessities and made it their home.

The men's voices reminded her of the degenerate humans at the zoo.

All at once, the men sprang out in front of the girl and blocked her path.

The one with the monstrous scissor hands – he looked like a crab – let out an annoying cackle.

The girl stopped abruptly. The hem of her skirt rippled softly.

"We're gonna kill you!" the Crab threatened her.

The girl did not react, so he threatened her once again.

We're gonna kill you!"

The girl grinned, blinking.

"He said we're gonna fuckin' kill you!" snarled the other one, curling his upper lip.

The girl stood there silently, as though she did not comprehend language.

"C'mon, run the fuck away!"

"Don't you know anything, bitch?"

“Run, run the fuck away! Piss yourself like a scared little fuckin’ bunny rabbit!”

“Piss your fuckin’ pants!”

Hurling insults, the men were getting excited – the sound of their own words seemed to excite them all the more. The men closed in on her, and Jonah stepped backward.

The Crab was waving his ridiculous scissors around. A blue flame flickered like a droplet of rage from the barrel of his flamethrower. He apparently intended to use it to fry the girl’s hair.

“Hyaa!”

The tip of the barrel flared up red, shooting out a blazing tongue about fifteen centimeters long.

Jonah jumped up softly. Her long black hair opened up like a fan.

“Yeah c’mon! More, more, get goin’, run away!”

Jonah spun around immediately.

“She’s running!”

The men whooped, and began counting down.

Maybe that was their method; it was more fun to let their prey live for a while.

The girl bounded forward on very light feet.

The fire in her nuclear fusion engine ignited, and she could feel the energy flooding her whole body.

It felt great, fleeing like this with her back to the enemy. Her blood ran cold with the sense of danger that came with not knowing when she might be hit – this too was a pleasurable sensation.

Jonah scampered about with great satisfaction.

She slipped into a familiar alleyway, snaked along the edges like a shadow, placed her hands onto the window frame of a building, and pulled herself up and inside. She slashed her way through the grass and weeds; she ran across the cracked concrete; she clambered quickly up an iron pole sticking out of a dilapidated house; she hopped from triangular rooftop to triangular rooftop; nothing wore her down.

Soon, however, the heavily equipped men had completely exhausted themselves.

Even through the double-paned glass window, she could see that they were breathing heavily, their shoulders heaving.

Furious now, they attacked recklessly, but naturally, their careless shots did not so much as graze her pink flesh.

Jonah stood still for some time, waiting for her hunters like a deer who knew this game very well.

Nevertheless, her cheeks were flushed, she was breathing heavily, and her pretty hair was sweaty and dishevelled.

She saw her two shadows hovering in the street, and waited for the other two.

Me plus these two shadows equals three, she thought. Me plus those two hunters also equals three.

She heard a clatter of footsteps, raspy breathing, hoots of “fuck your mother,” bullets being reloaded – the sounds rolled around the corners of the building where she waited.

The scumbags were not afraid.

They thought she was just an insignificant girl – a small animal with no hope of fighting back – but she was so fast on her feet that she had left them furious and panting for breath.

Jonah listened and identified the Crab as the one who appeared to be the maddest with rage. If Shiver were here, he would probably be able to see the rainbow colors of the Crab's brain cells writhing inside his skull.

This man, who had grown accustomed to killing people and animals, thought nothing of violence. All such feelings had been eroded. He had gone bad. He was the ultimate killing machine – a brutal killer of a different sort than the soldier.

The girl spun around abruptly.

Just then, her left shoulder got shot out of its socket. Her whole body twisted and she began to fall, softly like paper, a surprised look on her face. Blood shot out like water being sprayed from a hose.

Such vivacious blood! thought Jonah, spinning in mid-air. It splattered all over the street, staining it like a broad sheet of sticky coal tar.

The sound of shrill laughter rang out – the sound of the men's obscene joy.

Her right shoulder slammed against the ground, and she heard the crunch of bones popping out of joint. Then she heard the bones beginning to move around.

Raspy... like a faraway insect rubbing its legs together. Rustling... like grass dancing joyfully in the wind.

The girl's body, wrapped in white cloth, was beginning to lose its form.

"Lycanthropy" – the word circled round and round inside Jonah's body.

Her flesh began to slither and slide like a festering burn. Her cells began their forward march, in accordance with the DNA pooled therein.

Still lying with her right shoulder flattened against the ground, her body began to change. Her clothes tore open, and four long legs grew out from her body. Silver fur

sprouted up like shark's teeth, gleaming like lard squeezed out of a tube.

Jonah rolled growling onto her back; she sensed the need to expose her whole body to the moonlight in order for the metamorphosis to occur.

The men stood there completely dumbfounded.

Jonah=grandros laughed. Her jaws curled right up to her ears, bright red and gaping, and four fangs like fat ripe bananas revealed themselves to the world.

The men finally found their voices and screamed.

All in unison they shrieked, the sound striking an unpleasant, dissonant chord that reverberated into the night sky.

The Wolf ground her teeth together, testing them out, making a scraping sound like the shaving of ice.

The memories of the cold came through the grandros' cells... she remembered the blizzards, the freezing cold that locked those mountains in with snow all year round, the purple skies above, and the sighs of the grandros, queen of the blowing snow.

The grandros' clawed feet now scraped across asphalt rather than ice.

She walked like a four-legged animal, like a carnivore – majestically, with the air of a mountain deity, with the girl's blood stuck to her fur, drool dripping from her jaws, and her silver mane streaming in the wind. She was an invincible beast walking the scarred, scorched surface of the city, green eyes blazing...

Suddenly, the hunters opened fire.

A series of popping sounds rang out, and the wolf's front left leg got shot off and went flying, without so much as a groan from the wolf.

B-b-b-bang! B-b-bang!

Emboldened by their little victory, the two men sent shots madly into the air like fireworks, depleting their bullets.

The wolf fell forward with a thud.

Her cervical vertebrae snapped, and the bones and blood vessels of her back popped out.

With his trusty flame thrower, the Crab scorched the beast's hair and flesh to a crisp; its orange tongue leapt out ten meters and enveloped her in an instant.

"Fuckin' freak! Fuckin' freak! Fuckin' freak!"

The Crab kept shouting, as though to crush his own fear.

The other man hoisted up a rocket launcher. A normal person couldn't possibly lift something like that... she extended her electronic eye out from the grandros' torn belly, and saw that both of his arms had been remodelled with machine parts. In other words, he was a kind of cyborg.

He shot the rocket launcher.

Her body flopped flat on the ground like a slab of meat, then instantly exploded upwards like water. The bones of her ceramic skeleton broke apart and flew into the air – like a fountain.

The rocket fired again – this one was the decisive blow.

She ran the men's cheers through her analyzer.

She stayed there for a while, clinging to the earth – thoroughly enjoying her broken, tattered body.

Jonah slowly got to her feet. The men abruptly swallowed their cheers.

The grandros' skeleton was beginning to refashion itself.

The bones gathered together, clinking, drawn by a magnetic force. They clung to each other and began assemble themselves into a flexible frame. Clumps of scorched flesh came running, as though in hot pursuit of the bones.

The men stared at her, stunned... for several seconds they forgot everything else and just stood there, fascinated.

Her skeleton refashioned itself according to the grandros' cell memories, and her flesh reactivated. Wild eyed, the men watched the beast – a pile of mush until a just moment ago – rise up like a monster crawling out from underground. They stared at *it*, fixated, their eyes peeled open so wide that their eyeballs looked ready to come tumbling out at any moment.

The beast shook off the blood, the long fur and thick subcutaneous layers of fat shuddering.

She began to walk.

One moon hung in the far corner of the north sky, and one in the south. She walked, thinking that it must be difficult for them to talk to each other, being so far apart.

It was strange... even after losing Jonah's body, her mind remained. Clearly, Sample B #3's ego had become fixed to Jonah, probably because Jonah had occupied the seat of #3's intelligence for so long. Or perhaps... perhaps #3 had been drawn to the girl's incredible loneliness, to the quivering of her delicate heart.

She – grandros the mountain deity – walked, her nose now dripping water instead of exhaling white steam. The breath pumped powerfully through her nose.

The men quickly came back to their senses and came after her once again.

“Freak! Fuckin’ monster!”

“Die, fucker!”

They started screaming and shooting like mad.

Once again the beast collapsed.

Her skull was exploded into bits; her flesh burst open and blood came spurting out. All of her legs went flying off.

The fog of smoke began to settle. The tiles that had fallen off the buildings from the impact lay scattered on top of her smashed body.

The hunters, however, did not dare approach. They watched intently, trying to stifle their fear. They did not know if they could trust their own eyes; they kept expecting the beast to get back up again.

Jonah got back up, crawling.

A scream like a referee’s whistle escaped from the Crab’s mouth.

These guys should have known that there were things in this world that they were no match for – things that they could not even imagine.

Jonah walked nonchalantly – her body still had not fully formed itself, but she walked nonetheless – clacking her bones and dragging her torn, blistered skin.

The Crab shot at her again with the flame thrower, but the soft curves of her bare skeleton moved effortlessly out of the way, like an x-ray image. She moved quietly, with her nuclear fusion engine – her blazing sun – clasped between her ribs.

Her movements exuded all the beauty of a living, functioning being... the thumping sound that reverberated as she moved powerfully forward on her four legs; the smooth undulations of the curve running from her spine to her tail as she walked; the smouldering

sound of her small blazing sun...

Stricken with real fear now, the men came at her with everything they had. They could not even think straight anymore. They came at her, their faces frantic – blindly shooting every missile and every last bullet they had.

Everything around her was being destroyed. The debris rained down upon her – everything smashed, broken, warped, bent, crushed, twisted and torn.

Jonah walked on, unconcerned.

Now and then she would take a hit and parts of her skeleton would go flying off in random directions, but the bones quickly reassembled and recomposed themselves again, and she moved onward.

All of a sudden, the hunters fled.

Finally overcome by otherworldly fear, they fled, not uttering even the tiniest of disjointed screams. There was only the quiet sound of their footsteps as they ran.

Now that the men had gone, the world became even quieter. It brimmed with an immeasurable silence, and Jonah felt lonely.

Jonah wasn't aware of it of course, but Milagros was carefully watching her from within a blinking traffic light.

Jonah needed meat.

She walked slowly, her body still nothing more than the skeleton of the beast. The wind passed audibly through the spaces between her ribs, making a dull, dissonant sound like a broken harmonica.

Jonah left the central urban district and headed towards Yahweh-Yireh Avenue, now the center of the dissipated city, where Lesiah's church was located.

She was looking for Shiver.

Poor Shiver... locked up inside an inconceivably short life, so beautiful, so fragile...

Why on earth did her heart tremble like this every time she thought about him? Why did she feel like she wanted to see him all the time...?

Jonah continued to walk, her pace leisurely.

The two moons followed along behind her the whole time. They seemed to be saying that whatever happened, they would see everything; that they would follow her anywhere and everywhere...

She could see a small cluster of windflowers – perhaps the ones that had been released from her own body a short time ago – fluttering in the sky above. They were malnourished; they must be searching for prey. *They should pay a visit to the men who were here a moment ago. Surely they would be glad to share a little bit of blood...* Jonah had no flesh or blood left to share.

She continued walking for hours at the same pace, with the wonderful rhythm of the Great Wolf tracking down her prey.

After all, she would get there sooner or later, no matter how far.

Once she arrived in town, she saw all kinds of things, and all kinds of things saw her.

Milagros' Experience-Bodies resided in various objects, watching. Jonah, however, had no idea.

The residents of the city were accustomed to seeing strange things, but a beast whose body was composed of nothing but bones managed to surprise even them.

It was not so much the beast itself, but rather the smooth, beastly movements of the skeleton itself that left them staring dazed and fascinated. Children came running up to

throw stones, which passed cleanly through the gaps between the bones and scattered to the ground.

The parents came to scold their kids, but then they themselves were so stunned by the sight that that they forgot entirely about smacking their little brats.

Jonah walked, her ceramic bones gleaming white under the purple sky and the two moons.

Jonah never rushed.

No matter what was thrown at her, no matter what insults were hurled her way, she lifted her strong legs and continued to move steadily forward, cool and composed. Her bare claws sank into the earth, leaving behind strange triangular prints.

She accepted everything, like a dadazim roaming the desert – the outrageous sandstorms, the illusions of fountain springs, the mirages of people and cities – she accepted it all.

Yahweh-Yireh... what a beautiful ring it has, the skeleton thought, with the heart of a little girl. *That's right – that name was written in the old man's favourite book... yes, that's right. "The Lord will provide." Yes – that book had said 'the Lord will provide'...*

The church was very near now. Lesiah would be there, and perhaps Shiver too.

She stretched out her perfectly round electronic eye and searched for it.

Surely, the Lord will provide at the church. Surely, those who have done good will receive wonderful things. The meat of a live lamb, for example... it's written in that book.

Just then, she saw the eastern sky flashing, clamorous and red. Jonah stood still for a moment, watching. Maybe someplace had been torched, or maybe Milagros had finally lost her mind and started setting things ablaze.

The clamour seemed to be heading this way.

Jonah quickened her pace and focused on finding the church.

A premonition slowly permeated her body... it gradually became more definite – stiff and hard inside her chest like a cancer.

Jonah sprang powerfully into a run. She went fifteen meters in just three seconds, as though riding on the wind.

She could see the church.

It was tall; its three roofs stabbed at the sky.

All of a sudden, out came the white coffin, running on six legs.

“Jonah!”

Shiver called out to her, unflinching.

“Jonah!”

He knew it was her just by looking at the fantastic skeleton.

Lesiah came out directly after Shiver... Jonah knew that this must be Lesiah, because she was waving her white hands cheerfully, just as Shiver had described her, and smiling innocently like an angel.

Because of his special eyesight, Shiver knew that this skeleton was Jonah. He could always see the real her.

With a makeshift electronic speech device, Jonah said:

--- “There’s something in the eastern sky!”

“It’s heading this way; it’s been spotted by the church’s lookout system!”

“Is it dangerous? What is it?”

“Don’t know yet...”

Lesiah replied calmly, so Jonah began to like her. The woman seemed to have nerves of steel, even though she was only a human.

"I'll go look!" Shiver said, firing up his engine.

Jonah shouted, "Wait! Take me along too!"

Shiver was about to tell Jonah that it was dangerous – but then he looked at her, gave up, and said, "Okay. Get on!"

Forming a perfect arc like a rainbow, Jonah hopped onto the white coffin and straddled it.

Shiver gently reached out his tentacle-arms and coiled them around Jonah's thin body. He extended the wings he used for on-planet flight, and revved his engine.

The white coffin soared up into the sky.

He turned around to look down, and saw Lesiah waving her hands wildly.

"Be careful, Ok? Be careful!"

She kept shouting the same thing.

She got smaller and smaller as he watched her... her loose white clothing flapped in the faraway wind. She stopped waving, and quickly put her hands together as though in prayer. That image burned itself clearly into his vision.

"What a wonderful person!" Jonah said to Shiver.

The wind whistled through the spaces between her bones.

"Isn't she?" Shiver bragged. "She's a great friend."

He flew straight towards the east, powerfully and rhythmically. He could feel a sound, like the sound of blood flowing into his heart...

"I wanted to come so badly."

“To meet Lesiah, you mean?”

“No, meanie, to see you. I was waiting for you, you know.”

Unable to wait any longer, she had gone out for a walk, and that was when she had encountered the hunters.

“Thank you.”

“You say funny things, don’t you?”

“...That’s okay.”

The two of them flew along in silence for a while.

Then suddenly, Jonah’s electronic eye captured *it*.

It was still far away, but the shape was clearly something that she knew very well – the shape of a primitive insect, slowly undulating its four newly grown wings. The head wobbled, having just emerged from its hard shell – it was Dragon Cosmos. It was her mother. Her mother – to whom she had given birth.

She realized that her premonition had been right.

This was the second time that Dragon Cosmos had shed her skin since arriving here.

The DNA that Jonah had left inside of her, and the functions that shuffled it, had been working all this time. It was as though she had a malfunctioning factory inside her body.

Jonah had been raising this mother of hers since the very beginning.

Every single day, day after day, she kept bringing those headless chickens for her. If asked to do so, she would catch as many as twenty of them in a single evening. Dragon Cosmos would devour them all in the blink of an eye, in less than two minutes.

Ahh... lately it had become miserable to her, all that work. Her mother’s body – growing bigger and bigger – was getting to be too much for her to handle. What could she

do? She was ballooning out, like a malignant cancer. Just thinking about it was exhausting.

Dragon Cosmos flew along like a butterfly, destroying all the buildings in her path. People fired up at her, trying to burn the damn thing, and the red flames licked at the skies. Maybe that body of hers was too much even for Dragon Cosmos herself to handle. Jonah pitied her at the thought. However, she also felt the need to take responsibility and do something.

“It’s your mother.”

“She must have come after me, because I left her.”

“Why did you leave?”

“‘Cause I wanted to see you.”

“Really?”

“You don’t believe me?”

Not knowing how to answer, Shiver just kept displaying the same idiotic smile on his monitor. His heart was so electrified that it was almost painful... he had come across something so unusual, unlike anything else in the world, and they were mutually attracted to each other. *What unbelievable fortune...* his heart was pounding... just looking at her strange figure made his chest throb... *Now, I am alive.*

Truly, now, I am alive...!

Dragon Cosmos’ wings spanned more than five meters across. She flapped powerfully, and the pressure from the wind razed the dilapidated houses in the slums to the ground. The roofs went flying and the wall panels came off, crashing into the crowd of people who were bustling about in confusion.

From far away, the movements of her wings looked elegant – even beautiful – flapping

like intricate carpets... It was amazing – Dragon Cosmos, soaring through the skies, defying the airflow!

“Try to get closer!”

Shiver had already blasted off in that direction, even before her words came. The bright light coming from his jet propulsion ducts lit up in the pale darkness. The light streamed along, tracing the smooth line of his flight...

Blowing in the wind, Jonah reached her electronic eye far up above and looked at her mother.

Her mother was furious.

Jonah could tell from her violent movements. She never moved like that when Jonah stayed by her side. She was angry; she was seething with rage, because Jonah had left her...

A horde of exhausted people came flooding out, thinking that an exciting show or some such thing was starting. They had no idea what kind of danger was waiting outside.

Dragon Cosmos recognized Jonah.

She immediately turned around. She flew off in the opposite direction.

Shiver went after her.

A bunch of people who had been standing directly under Dragon Cosmos got caught up in the tempest. An uncanny whirlwind swirled about, snaring several people and lifting them softly into the air like astronauts – then, the wind abruptly vanished and the people were thrown back to the ground with a *splat*. Their bodies ruptured open like bags of raw garbage.

Jonah felt something prickling inside.

She did not know why; something had touched a nerve somewhere.

All of a sudden, she felt angry – angry at this fateful “system” in which some lived and some died. She knew that being angry about it would not change anything, but still – she was suddenly consumed with anger – powerful, intense anger!

Jonah’s body was beginning to change.

“Where are you going?”

Shiver asked anxiously.

“I’m going to kill her.”

“Wait!”

Jonah did not wait.

She immediately shot up into the air.

The powerful backdraft drove the white coffin down about ten meters.

Then he saw her – a P-357Y military helicopter – flying off. Shiver had seen one before on *Lesson Time* with Missus Tokioda. Shiver cried out inside the coffin. His eyes flooded with tears that almost tore his eyelids apart.

The P-357Y military helicopter was an opal aircar with two silver wings attached – it was said to be the most beautiful machine there was – a flying jewel!

The girl spun her wings and flew. The wings were so long they looked about ready to snap, but they continued to whirl precariously. She was some kind of giant insect, a creature that flew with great skill and ease of movement, having passed through a long process of evolution since first mastering gravity.

Shiver watched it tilt diagonally and pick up speed – this thing that he loved.

The city, like a mini-garden below, flowed diagonally away. All kinds of lights mingled together.

Mama appeared.

Just then, there was the sound of a voice singing Mozart – it was K.488 – the delicate, fragile second movement... the trembling, agonized adagio... how beautiful...

< What's happening? What's the situation? >

Lesiah contacted Shiver wirelessly.

< It's her mother. >

< What did you say? >

< It's Dragon Cosmos. The mother that Jonah bore and raised. >

< ...Oh dear. >

That seemed to explain everything for Lesiah.

< So have things gotten dangerous? >

< Yeah, they have. >

< Shiver! Do something! You are gifted with extraordinary power, do you understand?

You have something special, like nobody else in the world. >

Jonah soaked in the faint memories of the military helicopter P-357Y... they were beautiful, the most beautiful series of memories in the world... perpendicular flesh-coloured mountain surfaces; large bridges; the broad sky stretched out in all directions, trailing white clouds; countless flashing knives gleaming on the blue sea far below; swirling rivers; people making love in the bushes; the flickering whispers of fireflies; torchlights and blackouts; the obese city turning its lights off and on...

Jonah looked at Mama.

Mama was running away. Maybe she was experiencing real fear – at first she had probably just intended to run a little, but now it had turned into real fear – fear that she

would be killed – hunted down, cornered, and killed. That fear was real.

The wind from Dragon Cosmos' beating wings rocked the military helicopter.

She was very near now.

Her mother's big rear end closed in on her field of vision.

That lumbering body, grown fat from scoffing down all those headless chickens, was right in front of her, hanging overhead like a dark cloud.

She was so obese, it would be impossible to get any bigger than that. Her five-meter-long wings just barely carried the weight of her huge body as it lumbered along, her corpulent flab swaying in the wind.

It looked like black velvet hair, just like Jonah's, had started growing all over Mama's body.

Jonah saw more of the P-357Y's dreams... She was chasing game birds; game birds came flapping out from everywhere; she drove them out of their nests; they came flying out from the villages at the foot of the flesh-coloured mountains, from under the huge bridges, from the far-off skies; they came floating up from the bottom of the ocean; they sloshed through river currents – the damned humans went scurrying off like insects sprayed with pesticide in a grassy field.

Jonah focused her sighting device on Dragon Cosmos – she aimed with perfect precision at her mother's body. Dragon Cosmos flew lumbering along in the direction of the church.

A rush of hatred burst through Jonah's heart.

A series of indescribable hate bombs were going off one after another inside of her. Her head began to boil in a chain reaction of anger or maybe insanity – or perhaps the kind

of pleasure that those hunters must have felt.

There were two missiles cradled in the military helicopter's abdomen.

Jonah released the missiles downward.

She felt the quiet thump of the impact.

"Jonah! Jonah!"

She could hear a familiar voice, somewhere far away... somewhere in these skies where game birds flew?

"Jonah! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

She looked around.

Down on the ground, huge crowds of people had come flooding out in utterly astounding numbers – where on earth had they been hiding? It was as though a bunch of densely packed insect eggs had suddenly hatched and spewed the people out.

Jonah's insides were boiling. This idiotic mother – this big clumsy nuisance flying sluggishly along, swaying from side to side, demanding huge amounts of food every day, not allowing her to so much as step outside, dominating her, always in a foul mood, swelled up all fat and disgusting, constantly complaining, burdensome, bossy, annoying – very clearly, Jonah thought: *I want to kill this infuriating creature.*

"Jonah, wait! Calm down! Get a hold of yourself!"

A small bird stood watching Jonah=P-357Y from the top of a lightning rod. Milagros dwelled in that mechanical bird.

Jonah slowly circled around.

< Oh no! Make her stop; it's not good for Milagros! Shiver! Shiver! >

Shiver moved closer to Jonah.

Milagros silently observed the situation.

Jonah, in the shape of the most beautiful battle helicopter in the world, released the children that had been clinging to her breasts.

The homing missiles shot off at full speed. They trailed long white tails, hit the target, and exploded with a bang. A burst of crimson spread across the sky like fireworks.

< Stop it!! >

Lesiah's scream permeated Shiver's eardrums. The voice was so loud that it was automatically adjusted and faded out.

Finally...Dragon Cosmos' mutilated corpse – or more appropriately, gigantic chunks of meat, torn to shreds, unlike anything you would find at any butcher's shop – came raining down, pelting the church.

People were running around, becoming oddly excited as the blood showered down on them.

The small mechanical bird that had been perched atop lightning rod darted off into the sky. The bird – Milagros' Experience Body – cried out a report in just two words: "mother killer!"

Jonah's head was burning with another thought: "sacrifice." "The Lord will provide." Meat came raining gently down. Meat – meat that this starving body so desperately needed – came raining down gently onto this land in a shower of tender love, here onto Yahweh-Yireh, here onto the ground where the church stood, to this place that was infused with the power of that person...

All at once, Jonah lost the shape of the P-357Y, and began to lose speed.

Shiver panicked and chased after her.

A chunk of meat plopped down onto the church's central roof, skewering itself on the lightning rod.

The church was drenched in blood, a horrific scene too terrible to look upon. There was meat, blood and hair stuck to everything, dripping viscously. It was as though the church itself had vomited up all of the filth, the impurity, and the foul stench.

Jonah hit the ground in a broken heap.

However, she instantly began to reassemble her skeleton into the shape of a large-jawed predator.

The beast set to work tearing pieces of meat off the church.

Jonah spent a long time like this, ingesting her mother's flesh and making it her own.

6

< Did you kill your Mama? >

< No. >

No matter when or where, Jonah always gave the same answer.

The accusatory question came at her from every which way. An old man running a street stall had asked her out of the blue, as though the idea had just popped into his head...a fish had come floating up as Jonah was gazing into the water, screaming it at her...

Milagros was going crazy... well, she had already been crazy for quite some time, but now she was really starting to hurt people.

There had been signs since several months before, but it was when Jonah killed her

mother that she really started to lose her mind.

Over the past three months, Milagros had killed five hundred thousand people by various methods. First, she terminated the nutrition secretion system that extended all across the city. Everyone who was surviving on that – the sick, the genetically collapsed, orphans, vagrants, small animals – all of the weak whom Milagros had loved and cared for were thus abandoned and soon began to starve.

The corpse incinerator that was used to produce food stopped running, thus spreading microorganisms from the rotting flesh all over.

Water stopped coming out of the faucets.

The people soon transformed into mobs of vicious-faced bandits.

It became painfully obvious how pampered they had been until now, how kind Milagros had been to them... and what pitiful creatures they had become as a result, totally unable to stand on their own.

Canned goods were being traded at high prices.

Everyone was seeking out food, mad with desperation.

They had realized that after three days without food, it started to get very difficult to survive without the help of others.

Some of this chaos could probably be avoided if a system could be created for collecting and distributing food, but after having relied on Milagros for so long, the government had become totally ineffectual.

The Flying Medics could not perform a decent surgery without consulting with Milagros; all mass communications had to pass through her network; all information and all conduits fell under her jurisdiction, from spaceport control to waste disposal to population

census.

The planet Caritas had been Milagros' bounteous breast for a long, long time.

She had long cared for the weak, faithful to her programming as a mother and with the fortitude of a machine. She had been such a kind mother – such a dreadful mother, rendering humans incompetent. As long as they allowed her to control them, people could be secure and carefree; but the moment they dared to rebel, they would be driven to “accidental” deaths. Almost nothing slipped past her – so what Lesiah, Adi, and Shiver were doing was extremely dangerous.

Yet it had once felt so good to be by her side! The kind, devoted, reliable, loving, big and bounteous Great Mother!

However, Jonah's act of “matricide” had driven Milagros – an artificial intelligence already scarred with a learning disorder – decisively crazy...

The most precious thing in this town right now was food, and anyone who had any was not likely to part with it. Thieves soon appeared to take it by force. Anyone with food in their possession then hired armed groups of thugs for protection. Soon, however, they desired more than just “protection” and began to raid others, thus becoming food thieves themselves. There was something insatiable about these people, and they enjoyed the power they wielded to drive other people to their deaths.

The weak and the powerless were the first to have their lives taken away.

Milagros' love for children and the inhabitants of the city seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Sometimes, in fact, it felt as though her love had been transformed into a churning, intense hatred – real bullets had appeared in guns meant for combat video games, lethal amounts of poison were mixed into factory-produced canned goods, and a rush of

water had suddenly swept through a drainage gutter, swallowing up the inspection workers inside.

It was impossible to get in touch with Lesiah.

The church was dedicating all of its efforts to food distribution.

With the backing of the church's powerful networks, ship after ship arrived at the spaceport to deliver food and other important goods. Naturally, Milagros did not cooperate with the ships' comings and goings; so they were risking their lives each time they landed, dropped off their goods, and took off again.

Jonah walked along sluggishly, dragging her heavy body.

There was one thing more terrifying than Milagros' insanity... Jonah was beginning to lose her little girl body.

Ever since she killed her mother three months ago, a thick layer of fat had begun to pad her body, like the accumulation of snow after a storm.

She could not believe it. Her body had shown absolutely no signs of maturation in two hundred years, and now she had suddenly blown up like a balloon. It must be because the DNA donor – the real Jonah – had only lived to age seven; in order to mature further, it had been necessary for Sample B #3's artificial intelligence to take on this role.

Matricide... Jonah thought, shaking. *I've committed matricide, I've killed my own mother, Mama, Mama...*

The fat on Jonah's body was like ice cream, soft and melty and white, jiggling deliciously. It felt good to grab her chest with her hands and feel the flabby fat smooshing around. If times got really tough and it came down to that, she could always take a bit from there and eat it...

Jonah was having trouble manipulating her new body. She lumbered along the riverbank, and suddenly tumbled over into the water with a great *plop*.

She sank for a few moments, and then was abruptly sucked into a tunnel.

< Shiver, are you there? >

There was no answer.

< Shiver, are you there? >

No answer.

Jonah stopped breathing, and then began to swim forcefully. Fish memories flooded her body.

...A slippery dorsal fin, swaying thickets of seaweed, a glimmer of light shining down from above, jewel-like bubbles, plankton with brains and legs, the flow of the water...

Jonah's body turned into a fish.

It suddenly become much easier to glide through the water.

She shot off, whizzing like a bullet.

On land she had been nothing more than a blob of fat, but once she entered the water, she became a kind of sea mammal – an excellent swimmer. Then (she had shuffled through her DNA and searched how to improve her swimming), all of the hair from Jonah's body disappeared and was replaced with smooth, muscular, gray skin.

One swish of her tail fin, powerful like a spring, and she shot off through the heavy water like a missile.

Jonah was a fish.

A fish from ancient times, a large fish that had perfected its form over the course of its long, long, evolution.

Memories from the water... *in the water, everything disperses and washes away...*
Nothing ever settles; torn blobs of flesh, blood, and skin are swept away all at once and then
torn into even smaller chunks; the murkiness of the water lasts only an instant...

Jonah darted through the water, undulating her streamlined body. Most living creatures seemed to have disappeared from these canals as well. Had Milagros abandoned them? Or perhaps Shiver and Jonah had caught too many at once?

Shiver had told her that no matter how many creatures they caught in these canals, the place would never run dry. The two of them had caught too many, in order to feed the hungry. Perhaps Milagros controlled this world after all, like a fish tank in a sushi shop - which meant that Shiver was wrong when he thought that he could change the world.

Marine creatures like aurora... some were camouflaged pale blue, the same color as the water, but Shiver had never overlooked any of them.

Shiver could always see everything clearly; he could even see Jonah's skeleton; he understood Jonah's true nature... but... lately he seemed to be having a hard time... Jonah did not know why - she had no idea. Sometimes Shiver tried to avoid her. It was not because he disliked her; she knew that he felt affection for her, but he was obviously avoiding her.
Maybe it's because I've gotten fat, she thought, and her chest ached deep inside.

< Shiver! Shiver, where are you!? >

There was no answer.

She circled around, overcome with sadness.

Just then, she noticed a pile of garbage, sunken down below.

A set of furniture... and a TV.

It lay sunken down at the bottom of the water - as though this had once been

somebody's living room.

A stupid-looking robot lay toppled over on its side.

Jonah=Bandiozar slid along the ground, grazing her stomach. The leather sofa was old and half decomposed; the TV danced gently in the water; the robot lay there unmoving, like a long-suffering human.

She looked into the TV screen. Her electronic eye suddenly burst out through the fish's face. The fish face split apart, sending the blood, scales, and mouth floating through the water.

The TV moved busily. Ever since Milagros recovered the network, televisions had been showing nothing but crazy images – repeating images of a peacock spreading its wings, fragments of old black and white movies, the daily death toll.

What was showing on the screen now was... a naked woman. Her cheese-like skin wriggled luxuriantly. Jonah was watching in distaste when abruptly, the narration began: < I have given birth to so many children... > Then, all of a sudden color flowed into the picture, and a scene of innumerable dead bodies was displayed – the remains of countless children, not even cremated, just the *corpses* of children, their malnourished bodies heaped up in piles.

Their skin was plastered to their skulls; their eyeballs were rotted like sunny-side-up eggs buried deep in their sunken eye sockets; their hair had fallen out in clumps; they had been stripped naked; their ribs stood out like they belonged in the window of a butcher shop.

Jonah reflexively shrunk back.

< I have killed so many... > Milagros said, < ...Did you kill your Mama? >

In a fluster, Jonah answered, < No! > and promptly fled the scene.

She was still shocked by what she had just seen.

They were really dead... she had never seen a real dead body in Yahweh-Yireh, but every day they were dying. Starting with children, the weak, and the invisible, Milagros had started to kill them, slowly but surely, one after another. Yet they had once been Milagros' favourites; they had lived their lives without any inconvenience whatsoever; they had felt truly loved. And now she was killing them!

Jonah knew death... because she had been dead once before. She had been starved to death by her mother. It was a long, long time ago, a memory from back when she still had her body – her actual body.

Death... dying... being driven to one's own death... is a terrifying experience... *it's scary it's scary it's scary*; dying is the closing of life – dark, filled with pain, until finally everything goes white. Everything stops, never to begin again. If this machine, Sample B #3, had not taken her in, she would probably have just turned to dust, never to live again.

Suddenly he – the young man who embodied death – flooded her thoughts.

< Shiver! Shiver! Shiver! >

Jonah kept shouting, but there was no answer.

At the time, Shiverer Mouse was wandering aimlessly around town.

There was ill humour in his gait.

For the past three months, a succession of shops had closed down, and others had just picked up and moved. Even the familiar appearance of the town itself was starting to crumble.

Shiver walked softly on his six legs. A town that no longer had any shops was no longer a town. All was quiet except for the tip-tap of his feet as he walked.

There was none of the bustle of street stands and food stalls that used to flood the streets at night. Everyone had moved to other regions where there was more food. The stronger men had moved to areas that were controlled by powerful bosses, while children, the weak and burdensome, and women who had no one to protect them all headed for the area where the church was.

Shiver lost his breath.

Surprised, he stopped.

His heart was still pounding, but why? Shiver panicked; this was the first time something like this had happened – with his heart seizing up like this.

Oh yeah... I've barely eaten anything lately, maybe that's why?

Shiver stood unmoving for a few moments. Part of it was surprise, but he knew that he was truly exhausted. It felt like the narrow blood vessels were rippling and twitching throughout his whole body.

Shiver tried to calm himself, like an alcoholic trying to drive away delusions – *Relax, relax, it will go away in a minute.*

It lasted quite some time nevertheless. The ringing in his ears from his surging blood vessels eventually began to ease off, but the unpleasant, irregular pulse pounding in his chest continued.

He inhaled slowly; he could almost feel the oxygen spreading into his blood vessels. When he took a deep breath, the beating in his chest became so quiet that he wondered if his heart had stopped.

I need to eat something, he thought, and began to walk.

He walked on the concrete along the riverbank, his feet clicking and clacking. A refreshing night breeze blew across the surface of the dark river; the stars reflected on its surface rippled and flickered. There was no moon; it was a bright, moonless night. On evenings with no moons, the stars shone.

Shiver plodded along.

Shiver felt happy just looking at the starry sky. Even if Milagros withheld her love, the natural scenery did not change. There was still some good to be found on nights when those querulous moons were not around.

Walking seemed to have helped a little.

All of a sudden, Shiver thought of Jonah.

Thinking about the moons always reminded him of her... it was always on moonlit nights that they went out together. That was because on moonlit nights, people accepted whatever bizarre occurrences they might witness. Or rather, they pretended not to see them.

Shiver remembered: the two of them gliding powerfully through the night air; Jonah's streaming long black hair; Jonah turning into a wolf and bounding off; Jonah catching all those headless chickens and breaking their bones; her mean-looking face when she tried to pick an argument with him; her surprise when she first met Adi, the two of them going to the bar and devouring a bunch of fish, threatening the arrogant shop owner and making her shake in her boots... all of these flowed through his mind like faraway memories.

Shiver wondered where that shop owner was now – that woman shop owner who had screeched and cowered when Jonah, hair growing on her face, had curled up her lip and

shown her fangs.

It was fun back then... back then, Milagros had still loved the two of them; there was still enough of everything; nothing was lacking.

Jonah had not killed that mother of hers, and she had not gotten big. Milagros was just barely hanging on to her sanity. The world was their playground – the city, the depopulated areas, the zoo where the genetically collapsed dwelled, the reservoir, the spaceport, even space itself – with her, even in the blackness of space he could frolic about freely.

Ah... Jonah... that girl...

What strange, what wonderful power she embraced him with!

"I buy fishies!"

Startled, Shiver turned in the direction of the voice.

It was a vending machine; it was rumbling towards him on cracked caterpillar treads.

"I buy feces!"

Ah, feces, not fishies. Which meant that the vending machine recognized him not as a machine, but as a type of cyborg. This brought Shiver a little bit of happiness.

"How much will you buy it for?"

"Price starts at three kwonnies per hundred grams."

"That's not much."

"Well, sir, that depends on what you've got to give me. I pay up to forty, you know."

All of this suddenly seemed ridiculous, and Shiver laughed quietly.

This type of vending machine bought people's feces, refined it inside its body, and then sold it as new fertilizer, or pet food, or whatever. In terms of taste, it was certainly edible. It was a miracle that the machine had managed to keep doing business for this long;

it showed signs of having been attacked. Gangs of starving people with no money had probably gotten their hands on it.

“Okay fine, I’ll sell. Well, let me know how much it’s worth first.”

Shiver stretched his excretion tube out towards the vending machine.

“Wow, that’s quite an excretion tube you have there.”

The vending machine flattered him as it had been programmed to do by the manufacturer, took the tube and began to suck in its contents.

It felt good. He realized then that he must have had quite a lot built up, but when he heard what the vending machine had to say next, he was crestfallen.

“Sir, you’re not eating so well are you. I don’t get it, recently everybody is malnourished... looks like this is going be three kwonnies, I’m afraid.”

“Can’t you do a little better than that?”

Enjoying the vending machine’s mercantile behaviour, he found himself haggling in spite of himself.

“You drive a hard bargain, sir. All right, how about five? I can’t go above that.”

“Five, huh...”

“No?”

Suddenly, all of this seemed ridiculous.

Currency no longer had any meaning in this world. Yet there were vending machines out doing business in a place like this. They would still be out doing business even after humanity was totally destroyed, he was sure.

“Nah, that’s fine,” Shiver answered.

The vending machine let out a sigh as though relieved. This was the main reason that

he liked talking to these guys – they gave you the illusion that you were connected to the world. In that sense, they were even human-like.

Shiver had the vending machine empty his tank for him, and he received a hundred and fifty-five kwonnies in return. It was also nice being able to deal in cash. Hearing the money come clinking in made him feel like he had made a nice profit.

“I’ll buy some nourishment from you with this money.”

“Thank you very much,” the vending machine said, and stretched out a different tube, a blue one this time. The tube latched deftly on to Shiver’s feeding tube, and the nourishment came sloshing in.

“Thank you very much for your business. I hope to be of service again.”

The vending machine spoke its programmed lines, put away its money, and waddled off. The caterpillar treads were falling apart; it couldn’t move very well; it was just a matter of time before starving gangs of thugs beat the crap out of it. Even then, it would probably just carry on, talking in that optimistic tone until it died – “Please stop, this kind of behaviour is prohibited by law, you will be penalized...”.

Another memory burst into his mind. *It must be my artificial intelligence doing this... Ahh...*

The girl had said, “That dog just loves barking” ... by “dog”, she meant Kajika, the man at the zoo. He was of low intelligence, and had suffered genetic collapse during the war when the biological weapons were released. Kajika barked a lot; it was seriously annoying listening to that guy bark all the time. The girl had continued, “It’s like, barking is so much fun he can’t control himself. And as proof, after he barks? He gurgles! Listen closely! OK? He gurgles, I’m telling you. He gurgles!” ...Now that he thought about it, it was true that Kajika

really did finish off his barking with a strange, satisfied gurgling sound. Kajika barked – *Bowowowowo, gurgle gurgle gurgle...* it was true. He really did bark like that. *Ahh... so Kajika was actually having fun.* All this time, Shiver had just thought that Kajika was feeling lonely, always locked up in the zoo like that, but actually he was having a great time barking. She... Jonah... she always noticed the little things. Shiver never did. Somehow, she always managed to discover the little things, the nice things, the beautiful things in this world...

Shiver snapped back to reality. He saw something strange.

At first it was just a purple silhouette. Only the headlights moved, shining brightly.

A faraway music box sounded, gradually moving closer.

In the city, strange things happened sometimes.

It was a mini bus.

The bus was coming closer, blasting tunes from a music box.

Shiver watched it approach. For some reason, it made his blood run cold.

Maybe its another machine with no humans inside, he thought.

At last, the bus stopped, directly in front of him. The two doors folded open. A black head poked out from inside. At first he thought it might be Jonah because of the black hair, but of course it was not. It was a man – a man he knew.

“Yo!” the man – the mediator – said.

Mediators solved disputes that erupted in town. It was very shady work, but an absolute necessity in any major town.

“Yo... what’re you up to?” Shiver replied.

The man grinned crudely. “Hey, that’s my line. Whaddabout you?”

“Same as always. What’s up with the bus, man?”

“Ya know, doin’ business.”

Of course. This guy could manage to keep a livelihood no matter where he went.

“Oh yeah? What kind of business?”

The man jerked his sharp chin at the bus, apparently motioning for Shiver to go inside.

Reluctantly, Shiver lifted his heavy, clumsy body and clambered up the steps one at a time.

There were human beings packed inside. They were clinging to a torn sheet like mushrooms. They were children, almost all boys. They all gazed blankly at the white coffin.

He began to feel uncomfortable as their lifeless eyes pierced through him.

“So, whaddaya think?” the man asked boastfully.

“What do you plan on making them do?”

The man grinned.

“We’re gonna train ‘em. We’re goin’ around pickin’ up guys that look like they could be of use.”

“Who’re you working for?”

The man grinned again, the same way as before – a mechanical smile.

“Dreyfus.” The man gave the name of his Boss, and then proceeded to try to recruit Shiver.

“How ‘bout it? ...How ‘bout workin’ for the Boss? You’ll get plenty to eat, that’s for sure.”

Shiver displayed a “smile 1”, looked at the man, and said, “What do I need to do?”

The man searched for words, flustered – apparently surprised that he had actually received a positive answer. Then he started talking again, spraying spit everywhere.

"So ya know, you... ya just go out lookin' for 'em. The ones that look useful, ya know? Fresh little shits, ya know what I'm sayin'!"

"What are you gonna use them for?"

"Soldiers, what else?"

This time the man answered without faltering, but something seemed fishy.

"You don't need any cute girls?"

"Oh yeah, we could use them, yeah!" The man's cloudy eyes glittered, blazing. "The fuckin' church is hogging all the women!"

"You train the girls to be soldiers too?"

"Well, ya know, that could be a possibility..."

"Or to be prostitutes?"

The man shrugged. In the past as well, this guy had done nothing but shady jobs. He did not belong to any particular group, but just weighed his options case by case and took whichever jobs paid the best. That was the way this guy lived. Shiver did not like it, but nor did he blame the guy. After all, he was human – only human – so he was very weak. A person needed to eat to live, and needed money to eat.

"I see," Shiver answered.

The man casually shrugged his shoulders again in that familiar gesture.

"Well, these are hard times, eh? For you and me both."

He spoke with an air of friendly intimacy – *you're one of us; nothing can be done about this situation; it's not our fault, nothing can be done*. The guy would probably be slapping Shiver on the shoulder... if Shiver had shoulders.

"You'll be able to eat, ya know, with this job."

Shiver had already started backing away. He placed his backmost leg onto the edge of the step, and slowly began to descend.

"Here's the contact number," the man stuck his upper body out the window, and pointed to the call number written huge on the belly of the bus.

"Bring the Boss three people, and you get a good meal!"

"No thanks." Shiver displayed a "head shake."

"What did you say?" the man asked again, not believing his ears.

"I said no thanks."

"What did you say!?"

Shiver finally reached the bottom of the narrow steps.

"I'll call you."

"Wait!"

"I said I'll call you."

For a moment, the man froze there with his hands spread out like an angelic sculpture, then finally nodded.

The boys crammed inside the bus clung to the window and looked down at Shiver.

Shiver kicked out his six legs and began to walk. He felt a sort of weary lassitude filling up the inside of the coffin.

Lesiah turned onto a side street, where casually dressed gangsters were wheeling and dealing.

She pedalled her bicycle across the maze-like town. She clattered along on the big two-wheeler bicycle; ready to go anywhere, to the ends of the earth.

The densely packed buildings were falling down; it looked as though the roofs could collapse at any moment if she were to pedal just a little too loudly. She rode like the wind, squeezing the bicycle through spaces that were barely wide enough for a single person to fit through.

Lesiah rode past the gangsters. "What the fuck're you doin'!" They hurled insults that pierced through her body. She saw something that appeared to be a light outside of a bar or some dodgy establishment; the advertising sponsor must have forgotten to turn it off.

There were still so many strange goings-on in the slums of Yahweh-Yireh. If you picked up an old telephone, for example, you might be met with the sound of a crying baby. Then, you would be stuck inside the phone booth until you crooned some soothing words to make it stop – it was an old program from a private telecommunications company that had been used as a means to increase revenues. Who would have guessed that an old program like that would come back to life – like a ghost...

A ghost... yes, a ghost.

The thought had just happened to pop into her head, but actually, this town was teeming with things that could only rightfully be called ghosts.

Milagros had spewed out all kinds of things at once – a bunch of programs from ages ago that had built up like gas at the bottom of her belly; happy childhood dreams of balloons and fireworks; nightmares of insects blown full of air and exploding – the town was flooded with this and that and everything in between.

Milagros was gleefully pumping poison into every terminal and every blood vessel, every tube and every sensory organ – like a crazed, bloodthirsty killer.

Lesiah pedalled her bicycle, making her way through the slums... she could only rely

on herself; she could only trust her own will. Lesiah rode through them – through the ghosts. She rode through beer bubbles the size of a human head frothing in a giant mug; she ripped huge transparent vegetables out of the ground; she flew straight into people's baffled mouths; she tore into the chests of lovers... those were memories... Milagros' memories. Milagros' records of Lesiah.

Lesiah passed by a 3D image of two lovers, and realized that the woman in the image was herself.

The color drained from her face.

Milagros knows everything; she has eyes everywhere, and she never forgets anything. She even remembers things from decades ago that are like ancient history to humans, long since forgotten. She never, ever forgets. She remembers. She remembers everything like it happened yesterday.

Lesiah rode frantically.

What the hell – that old boyfriend is history.

She had forgotten his face after all this time, but of course seeing something makes a person remember it.

Sweat ran down her forehead. Shiverer Mouse called her “the Lesiah who never breaks a sweat” – but that was not true. She was always drenched in sweat, but usually, it was only in places that were hidden from view.

The Adiaptron-made portable computer wrapped around her waist was flashing.

Lesiah hiked up her skirt and rode onwards. She wiped the sweat from her brow, pushed the button, and the flashing stopped. Adi's secret correspondence came through, intermingled with beeping sounds.

< You're going the right way -- did you find it? >

< Not yet -- how much farther! > Lesiah recited her message to the keyboard with pianist's fingers.

< Less than 1 km >

Lesiah stopped her frenzied pedalling and glided slowly along.

She was in a tight, narrow alley.

She could feel Milagros' malicious gaze everywhere. The windows – she could sense the presence of Milagros' eyes in every single window, in the rows of windows lined up on both sides of her...

Abruptly, she found herself in the agora.

Surprised, she hit the brakes. The bicycle came screeching to a halt. That sound – that nostalgic sound from children's bicycles long ago – rang out through the now silent town.

Suddenly, she noticed that the area was filled with moonlight. The light was sinking, piling up slowly at the bottom of the city.

Lesiah thought quietly about *that person* – the one whom people referred to as “Moon Light.” She could feel His power within her body. She turned around.

There it was – she had found what she was looking for.

A child was collapsed on the ground.

Lesiah hastily jumped off the bicycle, tossed the metal heap aside, and ran over to the child.

A child... a boy, maybe.

< I found it! >

Lesiah informed Adi with her fingers. Slowly, Lesiah approached the boy.

He was lying there with his back to her, curled up. He did not seem to be moving at all. Had he already died of starvation? Probably not – he was not really all that thin. Some kind of epidemic, maybe?

Lesiah crouched down and peered at him.

“Wake up, come on, please! Wake up! I’m a Rafflesiah from the church!”

The boy... he was still just a child, still so undeveloped that you could easily tell from far away that he was just a little boy.

He was alive.

His wrists, so delicate they could break, lay flopped over palm side up. He was unbelievably pale – the color of the moons.

The boy let out a faint moan.

“Come on, you can do it, come on!”

Lesiah propped up the boy. He was incredibly heavy. She was afraid she might drop him, but then suddenly, as she looked down at him, the boy’s eyes popped open.

“Are you awake!?”

Finally, the boy nodded once.

“Can you stand?” she asked, because her hands were starting to go numb.

The child nodded again. Then, he slowly got to his feet.

Adi’s surveillance network now covered all of Yahweh-Yireh. He simply borrowed Milagros’ “eyes,” and could thereby see everything that moved. Thus, within a certain prescribed area, all living things were under the power of the church.

The child was able to stand surprisingly well.

“Can you walk?”

Again, he nodded silently, and began to walk.

Lesiah watched him from behind.

He walked with slow, beautiful movements, stretching out his long limbs. There was nothing childlike about it... it reminded her for some reason of a butterfly that had just grown its wings; it was as though he were moving according to some mysterious instinct.

Lesiah broke into a grin and followed the boy. In any case, he had nothing to eat, so she figured that sooner or later, he would come with her to the church.

"For example," Jonah had said, "fish have their own fish philosophy." "Fish philosophy...?" Shiver had asked drowsily, and Jonah's giggles grew bigger, "Fish live very well. You can tell by looking at that glittering skin; they can feel the water; they can feel it with their whole bodies; they can feel the world they live in." Jonah licked her red lips impatiently. She looked around the room in search of a way to explain. "You're just like an Adi, you know." "Thanks a lot." "Well it's true." "In what way am I like an Adi?" Jonah was silent for a moment with something like hesitation, and then continued, "You really are, you're like an insect nesting in a tree. You know absolutely nothing about the outside. You've seen it and you've heard about it, but you know nothing about it. It's funny isn't it." Shiver was silent. He did not know what to say. "So you know everything?" "More than you," Jonah giggled. "Because you're a fish expert, huh?" "I know a lot of beasts that roam the land, too." "Like what?" "Dadazims." "That's an unusual name." "The name? That doesn't matter. I know ramadas too." "I know about ramadas; I've seen them on *Lesson Time*." "Really? They're big, beautiful beasts aren't they?" Jonah walked around the room with her bulging breasts swinging. She did not seem to notice that it was making Shiver

uncomfortable. "...Yeah." "Well that was a lukewarm answer wasn't it?" "Just because I've never seen the real thing... please, do me a favour and don't say that you'll transform right here and show me." "I won't I won't; I mean, my head would go through the ceiling. But you know, even if you were to see a ramada right here, it would still be like you were seeing it through some kind of lens; you wouldn't be surprised and you wouldn't be impressed."

"Why not? Sure I'd be surprised." Jonah thought for a minute. "You'd be surprised, but..." she hesitated, "but that's all. Just like that Adiaptronite. He can keep collecting narratives about 'love' till he dies, but he still won't comprehend it. Not if he doesn't have the heart to feel it." Shiver sighed quietly inside the coffin. *Since she's gotten bigger, the girl has gotten a little bit malicious*, he thought.

But then a different time she had girlishly tilted her head to the side and said, "It's strange, but every now and then I get the feeling that a dadazim is not actually a dadazim." "A dadazim is not actually a dadazim?" "Of course it *is* a dadazim, but..." she paused in hesitation for several moments, "How can I explain it. Sometimes deeper memories come back, from a long time ago. I dunno. Maybe it's just that the memories inside me are all mixed up. It's almost like, before dadazims lived as dadazims, they were a completely different kind of creature." "What? You mean like a past life?" "Mmm, I don't really know... but maybe." "What kind of creatures were they?" "The dadazim that I know was an insect before becoming a dadazim." "How do you know?" The look on Jonah's face spoke of how difficult it was for her to try to explain, "An insect. An insect, in any case. I just know. One that knew exactly what it is supposed to do. It knew the direction of the sun, the smell of the air, the scent of a female's pheromones, things like that. I just know." "Really, wow..." "It's true!" "Okay, I guess I'll believe you." "I guess I'll believe you, he says!" and Jonah whooped

with laughter.

And then there was another time (the memories came flowing back like a river).

"Sooo strange, isn't it, sooo strange..." she softly exhaled moist air, like a flower's sigh.

"I know all kinds of songs, you know."

Because you are here

We are here

Because you eat

We eat

Because you drink

We drink

It was such a mysterious melody that she sang... and then she said, "This is a song that mothers sing when they are missing their children..." Jonah closed her eyes softly and sang it one more time. "Let's go get some fish. Fish from the canals." "Fish?" "We have to put ourselves to some use in this world; I mean after all, there's nobody stronger than we are, or more well-fed or more blessed." *Who the hell is she calling blessed? Or well-fed? Does Jonah actually believe that?* Somehow or other it seemed that she did. Jonah plopped into the canal and sank down.

The two of them caught fish.

Thus, the starving people along the canal disappeared. The fish, however, also eventually disappeared. Jonah looked for some other kind of work that she could do.

Shiver just disappeared.

Jonah searched for him.

Lesiah lost sight of him – the boy was faster on his feet than Lesiah had expected. She rushed back to get the bicycle. But as luck would have it, she got a flat tire soon after she started pedalling (or perhaps its pre-ordained lifespan had simply come to an end?).

This town was a maze no matter how you looked at it. But just then, she noticed Shiverer Mouse flying overhead, and shouted out to him.

“Shiver! Shiver! Over here!”

She threw the bicycle down and waved her hands, flapping them around in the air.

“Over here, over here! C’mon look over here! Ahhh! Over here!”

Suddenly, Shiver sensed that something was calling him, and he snapped back to reality, searching the ground. He spotted Lesiah right away. She was nothing more than a red shadow, but it was clearly her.

She was fluttering her white hands around, just like she always did.

< Yo, Lesiah. >

< Don’t ‘yo’ me at a time like this! Hurry up and go look for the kid! >

Shiver said nothing, so she quickly added, < The child! Somewhere around here...! >

< Wow, really? Is it a girl? A boy? >

< A boy! Around seven years old. >

Shiver searched. Looking down from above, the town looked like a rat’s maze. Clusters of gray buildings of various sizes were packed together in tight rows, the narrow streets running between them like cracks.

Then Shiver saw *it* ahead, running.

At first, *it* looked like genetically collapsed beast of some kind.

But it was not a genetically collapsed beast. Shiver's eyes always saw too much. They only showed him the truth. It was carrying a sun – it was carrying a terrific orange nuclear fusion reactor. And it moved with a mutable ceramic skeleton.

Inside the coffin, Shiver felt fear that made his hair stand on end.

He knew what *it* was.

And yet at the same time, he had no idea.

Jonah's head popped up from the canal in Yahweh-Yireh.

Every time she got out of the water she felt uncomfortable. Her body was so heavy. She would waddle along, feeling like she had transformed into some pitiful creature – which was probably true.

Jonah sank back down, lost in thought.

She tried to remember what Shiver had said. But she could not remember anything. Not a single thing.

He must hate me.

People don't need a reason to start to hate someone.

This heavy, sluggish body of mine probably disgusts him. It would disgust anyone.

She stood up and the water came splashing out from the folds of her flesh. She stood there sadly.

Just then she saw Shiver flying overhead – and standing right in front of her was a boy that she had never seen before.

“Ah, ah, thank goodness, thank goodness!”

She saw Lesiah approaching, drenched in sweat and pushing a bicycle with a flat tire.

“...Lesiah.”

“Okay now, I’ve finally caught you, come here!”

The boy had his strange eyes (the same dark color as hers) fixed on Jonah.

Jonah, still naked, opened her mouth halfway and kept staring at the boy.

(I know this child) – she was certain of it.

A beautiful child unlike anything she had ever seen before... the soft black hair, the sharp chin, the fingers carved with long grooves, but more than anything it was those eyes... those big, round, perfectly clear, and totally impenetrable eyes.

“Ah, thank goodness.”

“Don’t touch me!” the boy screamed, his tone forceful, his voice the pleasant color of mercury.

Lesiah stopped moving, astonished.

Jonah started moving.

The boy also started moving.

Shiver landed.

The two of them started running.

The boy was running in front; his body was beginning to change.

Shiver continued observing through a telephoto lens.

As the boy ran, his body began to lean forward and his skeleton began to contort. His body twisted like a whip and snapped forward. The bones began to branch off in five directions – three front legs and two heads. The boy’s two legs became the monster’s rear legs.

Jonah's vehement screams brightly coloured the air, light blue tinged with a metallic sheen.

"Wait! Wait...!"

Her screaming voice took on a brighter hue.

The monster ran with the earth rumbling under its feet, horns growing on its heads and long, flame-like tongues spewing from its mouths.

Jonah transformed into a ramada.

For the first time, Shiver saw a ramada with his own lenses. It was a dreadful sight, but inside the coffin, he felt like he had nothing to be afraid of. Maybe, he thought, Jonah had been right.

The monster's two heads howled fiercely, twisting and turning.

Shiver knew it right away... the two of them were the same. They were both Sample B Group. But they were strangers, so they would probably be attracted to each other... and then, and then...?

All of a sudden, he felt a cold hand run up his spine.

That boy may have come here in order to capture Jonah; he may have been sent out by the military to pursue her...that's how special she is; the Military Priest exterminates anyone that does not submit to his will... and if that is the case, then that means... that means....!!

The two beasts disappeared from sight.

7

I'll never catch up to him, Jonah thought.

It was too heavy.

Her body, that is.

Her body was so heavy; it was as though she was carrying a stone weight around in her belly.

Perhaps it was fire – fire burning heavy like lead, fire like lifeblood laced with heat – perhaps it was hellfire... her belly was laden with the blood of a mother-killer, gooey like candy, bubbling and ready to burst.

Jonah ran, bearing the weight of her sin.

She would never catch up to him; she would never catch up, even if she chased him her entire immortal life.

She felt like she could not even touch him, he was so pure. She was defiled with sinful blood; she was fat, sluggish, dirty.

The two beasts ran with incredible speed, cutting through the seductive light as if through water. It was a lunar morning; the light penetrated deep into the sea.

Ahh... how beautiful... he would probably keep running for decades, for centuries, for millennia... or for millions of years, for tens of millions of years, for hundreds of billions of years. This planet would probably die before he did; time itself in this airspace would die first. Those dark, colorless eyes betrayed no emotion and no hesitation; they looked straight ahead as his robust body reached for the sky like a mythological kirin, pressing onward...

Jonah felt her eyes – the eyes of the grandros mountain deity – moisten with water that had welled up inside her body.

Is this what it means to be "moved"? A long time ago, when she was living at that house with the robot mother, the old man had cried like this sometimes.

It's because I love you, the old man had said.

You've been hurt, you're just like me, he had said, yet you and I are completely different. You are eternal, beautiful, and pure. The more dear to me you are, the more distant you become – but I love you! Eventually you will probably leave me. You and I have been such a wonderful parent–child pair, but you are above and beyond me, so you will tire of me eventually. All pairs are subject to this fate. Nothing lasts forever; all we have is the euphoria of a short slice of time, a feeling of unity, and a sense of happiness that is only guaranteed through the knowledge that we could lose it at any time. That's all we have. The longer we are together the stronger my feelings for you become. Ahh, you have made what little is left of my life enjoyable; I love you...

I LOVE YOU!

All at once, the feelings and the memories within her body of the old man came flooding to the surface. She let out a piercing scream and chased him.

I'll never catch him – how can I feel such loss, tearing me apart, for something I've never had in the first place? It doesn't make sense!

Why am I so attracted to him?!

He's just like me, yet a completely different being – my polar opposite. We're like two guardian deities, each watching over our respective domains on opposite sides of the world!

I want to see; I want to see; I want to know; I want to know; I want to meet; I want to meet; I want to love; I want to love!

The boy beast traversed the dying city.

The great expanse of the metropolis stretched out before them, golden under the three moons.

Moonlight was growing on the boy's back.

Even his twisted claws were infused with light. He pressed onward, kicking up dust.

There was the faint air of human presence inside the buildings, which stood broken and scarred with the traces of previous attacks. She could sense them, quietly lurking in the dark shadows – like primitive insects that had survived in their habitats without evolving since ancient times.

All of a sudden, Jonah remembered Shiverer Mouse.

The white coffin, the fragile Pinocchio housed inside, the blood vessels that wheezed as the blood pumped through, the twitching sounds of the heart, a body forced to go on living, fate deferred... Jonah remembered him, just for a moment. And then, in the amount of time it would take for flower petals to fall fluttering down from just fifty centimeters above, she forgot all about him.

The lunar morning visited every district equally, without prejudice.

However, the ground was beginning to crack, and its water veins had all disappeared.

Tubes snaked around the entire city like the veins of a leaf. Instead of her sweet secretions, the Mother Goddess Milagros, who governed the city, had started to fill them with foul-smelling poisons, or else she severed them completely.

The water had become muddy, her breasts had rotted, and the edible plants once laden with fruit had withered. In their place, plump desert insects well adapted to the dryness came crawling out from deep underground – from the test tubes where they had

been stored over centuries inside Milagros' memory bank.

It was mainly on account of them that the city looked so different now.

At first, the insects had swarmed all over the walls and rooftops of the buildings, all over the ground, on the skin of people outdoors, and in the fur of animals; but before long, as dictated by their genetic programming, they began to scatter the water and seeds from within their bodies.

The six wings, twelve legs, and three antennae that they possessed when they were insects soon dropped off, and their thin bodies fluttered up like black ashes. They fell wherever the laws of physics dictated and sprouted buds. Their three leaves grew quickly, and they cultivated their roots all over the walls and rooftops of buildings, on the skin of people outdoors, and in the fur of animals.

Massive quantities of poisonous phytoncides were produced at the plant biotechnology factory and scattered all over the town. In general, any living things that absorbed the phytoncides into their systems first lost consciousness and then lost their lives, kindly sacrificing themselves for those who still clung to life.

The vines that now covered the town had quickly borne orange-like fruits. Six insects had taken flight from the six sections of each fruit, but since there was an infinite number of fruits, the masses of insects had momentarily blackened the sky, darkening even the moonlit night. Those insects that retained their mobility were probably on the move again, sprouting anew wherever they landed – the insects were Milagro's final weapon, angels of death that choked the life out of every living thing.

Shiver lay dying against one of the crumbling buildings. Nobody, nothing had been able to kill him – not the villainous armed attackers, not the poisonous insect-plants,

certainly not the huge flocks of windflowers, or Milagros' malicious breasts.

Shiver was withering inside the white coffin.

He was, in fact, dying.

He could hear death's footsteps approaching. His congenital illness had shriveled his body like a dried fruit, and the white coffin's systems were working full force to keep his body alive. He would never have lived this long in the first place if it were not for these systems, but now he found their operations simply odious.

He was trying to take his death into his own hands.

Life had lost all meaning.

The ability to feel, to be moved or impressed, to soak in the rich waters of emotion, to bask in showers of affection like countless needles, to experience the joy of living – there were certain things that were absolutely necessary in order to live, in order to be alive. *Ahh, no, I have no more reason to live; Lesiah always said that in the next life we would be born anew, but... I hope and pray for just one thing – that I not be born again into this world, not again... never again...*

He felt grateful for his degenerating brain cells.

Due to the lack of nutrients, their functions were slowing down. His artificial intelligence was searching desperately for nourishment, but found it nowhere in his system. It had checked the excretion orifice, the bundles of winding tubes, the pelican beak – everywhere – but there was nothing to be found.

The word "danger" flashed in huge letters across his field of vision. The red flashing letters had a strangely narcotic effect; they had a certain kind of beauty, like the word "FIN" at the end of a film.

Shiver thought about the girl.

That amazing, wonderful girl.

She's strong; she lives with an overabundance of energy; she notices the little things; she is surprised and she is moved... She is able to recognize the world for what it is; yet she believes that rabbits still live on the moons; she cultivates windflowers in the palms of her hands, and shares her own flesh and blood with them. She shares something with me too, something that is invisible to the eye... Ahh, I'm alone, so sad and alone; she's gone, she went to go follow someone else, I don't know who, she isn't going to come back, I know it, she isn't coming back. She has probably already forgotten about me – or rather, she has taken me into her already-full belly and made me part of herself, so she doesn't need me anymore, she doesn't need me in her life...

Shiver was dying.

What would finally kill him?

At the very least, the one who gave me life will not be the one to give me death, Shiver thought to himself. He was choosing death for himself. He had not had the courage until now, but by starving himself, death would come easily.

He was trying to die. It was suicide.

His visual field showed nothing.

All he could see was a constant flickering, like so many flower petals scattering in the wind. Once, a long time ago, he had caught a cold and had a very high fever. His mother was still living at the time; she had placed her cold hands on his closed eyelids and he had seen a burst of red energy, spreading outward, sketching the same pattern again and again. That was what he was seeing now... and then, suddenly, just as he was trying to drive those

vague thoughts from his brain cells... he felt something strange.

Something... is here.

Shiver could sense something standing right beside him, and tried to open his eyes.

But his eyelids were too heavy; he did not even have the energy left to flip the switch.

Something is here... right beside me, standing very close and staring down at me... I can feel its gaze. I've never felt another presence next to me so strongly before. It's too close, almost like it's standing right inside of me, right inside this coffin!

Shiver strained his eyes to see.

His visual field, which should have been dead by now, was flooded with pure white light.

It was so bright that he tried to close his eyes, but he could not – the boundless light seared through him; he could not even breathe. It was not the white coffin's mechanical eyes that were seeing this – if it were, they would have cut out any excessive amount of light. The light had to be plunging directly into his own eyes, or perhaps he was seeing it with something other than his retinas. *What can it possibly be, something this bright... an angel of death?*

(Who are you...?!)

< Have you met me before? > The voice burst forth from the heavens along with the light.

(I can't see, it's too bright, *who are you!*)

The voice faltered, hesitant. Then, with more confidence, it said,

< I have something to say to you. >

(What is it?!)

The majestic voice was overwhelming. It was imbued with a tone that only one who had accumulated many years of experience could possess; it expressed something faraway – something dignified and pure.

< I want you to help the church >

(The church?)

< The church. And I want you to cooperate with your friend Lesiah, help her with her work. >

The voice took on a somewhat businesslike tone; it was a request, but it sounded like a command. Shiver was annoyed – a feeling contrary to the numbness of death. Ever since the Mother Goddess Milagros had killed his human mother, until he met the girl, his only reasons for living had been his resistance, his anger, and his hatred. Now, all of those emotions came rising up again.

(Leave me alone! I want to die, do you understand?!)

< No, you're not dying yet. >

(Wait a minute, hang on! Who the hell are you to say? You think you're *Him* or something? You're saying you're *Him*, the one that Lesiah believes in, but I don't? *Him*?!)

The voice was silent for a moment.

< I'm not really sure. Probably not. I hope not. > The voice laughed cynically and continued, < I've contacted Lesiah already. She should be here soon. She's bringing you some nourishment. I want you to cooperate with her... I want you to save the church. With your power, you can easily do things that would normally be difficult for a single human being to do. >

Just then the voice cut off, as though it had been plucked from the sky.

Shiver was abruptly expelled from the light-flooded world, and thrown into a world of unbelievably murky darkness.

He screamed.

After seeing that light, everything seemed to have become unbearably frightening, sad, and lonely – even though he had already sunken to the edges of death’s abyss once. As a baby he had been tossed down into the deepest depths of the sea; the tall waves had swallowed his mother; he remembered the sense of loss from having been torn away from her – *we were together until just now, but now she’s gone, the light of life, the warm light of life by my side...*

Lesiah believed, and so did Jonah, so did that beautiful girl... they both believed that they were machines – that they had been creatures with no will to live of their own, that all of a sudden one day they were brought to life; all of a sudden one day a bolt of lightning came down from the heavens and commanded them, “*Live...*”

He heard a voice calling him.

It wasn’t that other voice.

It was a familiar voice – a clear, cheerful, singsong voice... *ahhhh, Lesiah.*

“*He came and spoke to me about you!*”

Her voice was a song of joy.

“*Him, Him!* The founder, the leader of this Church, the object of our faith, *Him! He Himself! He came again!*”

The nourishment that Lesiah had brought came undulating, *glug glug glug*, into Shiver’s withered body.

“You’re an idiot,” Lesiah declared.

There were tears in her voice.

“You’re an idiot.”

She declared it again, like a judge.

Shiver was still immersed in the sensation of the fresh nourishment flowing into every last inch of his body.

“You have work to do,” Lesiah flatly informed him. “Dreyfus is using his soldiers to attack Milagros. Milagros is desperately trying to contact Adi, who you’ve also met, but mentally she is in a very dangerous place. Please, you have to make them stop!”

Shiver was thoroughly alert now.

Thus, with a touch of bitterness, he came back to himself, alive once again.

Every now and then, a long wind swept through the cave that the ancient kashiageha had dug.

Although it was the dreaded kashiageha – the king of fear – that had excavated the cave, that was millions of years ago. Surely there were no unhatched fossilized eggs buried in the walls.

Feeling the damp wind on his cheeks as it passed through the cave, Dreyfus squinted his narrow eyes. His black moustache bristled in the wind. This cave was one of his many hideouts, but he had moved his home base here a few months ago, after Milagros had completely lost her mind.

Dreyfus had always been an influential Boss in town, but recently he had become very powerful, very quickly.

He functioned well in dangerous situations, unlike all the other incompetents who

thought only about stability.

He eagerly looked forward to emergency situations, in fact, and when it came down to it, he was confident in his ability to round up those who stood in his way – bastards like Grue and Keirona – and finish them off for good. They had absolutely no talent or aspiration; they had merely inherited their parents' positions.

Dreyfus cracked a muffled grin – a triumphant grin. That grin could instill fear in anyone. A long time ago he had been punished in the storeroom of his home, his face carved up with a razor blade. He had left it like that, lined like a rattan blind instead of having surgery, and used it as a means to terrify others.

The girl began to cry.

She was paralyzed with fear, crying *heee heee heee* in a tiny voice.

Dreyfus felt a pang of sexual desire, and turned toward the girl. *Wouldn't you know, until a moment ago she was just lying there like a rock, but now she's crying, feverish, sweating – she's even giving off a damp smell.*

The girl was lying face down to protect her internal organs. Dreyfus licked his dry lips and touched her bare back; her body jerked in response.

This pleased him immensely. *Ahhh, a girl...* unable to wait any longer, he decided to enjoy his fill.

She had a beautiful body.

She was just as the mediator had described. He could generally only trust about half of what the guy said, but this time, for once, he had done a fine job.

The girl turned her dark, terrified eyes toward him, panting shallowly. Dreyfus liked humans like this – the kind of humans that would tremble with fear, curl up in a ball, and

gladly sell their own souls to escape that fear. Especially females.

For him, sex was not an act of love. Its purpose was to demonstrate a superior position in a power relationship – the mounting of monkeys, as it were. A monkey finds another monkey in his troupe that is weaker than him, mounts it, and thrusts. It is not reproductive behavior; it is social behavior. The sex of the other monkey is irrelevant.

There was a reason that Dreyfus chose young girls as sexual objects. He used sheer, overwhelming violence to hurt males, but for females, he believed that this was the best way. Plus, he got pleasure from it – a kind of pleasure not unlike excretion.

“You wanna live?”

The girl stiffened even more, seemingly startled. Then, in an extremely strained voice, she asked.

“...What are you going to do to me?”

“Surely you’ve heard rumours about me?” Dreyfus asked, enjoying himself.

The girl kept silent. Her whole body was pale, not just her face.

“First I’m gonna stick *this* in *there*. Then I’m gonna to tear out all that long black hair, and I’m gonna to take your scalp along with it. And then, just when you think you can’t take the pain anymore, I’m gonna cut off your feet so you can’t run away. I’m gonna break both your shoulders, tie your hands behind your back and hang you up by your wrists. I’m gonna watch the blood running down from your head and from your lobbed off ankles, and I’m gonna enjoy it. And since I’m such a nice guy, I’m gonna stay by your side till you die.”

“Please... I’ll do anything, please...”

“Anything?”

Dreyfus spat out the words.

“You say you’ll do anything?”

Desperate, the girl had tried to sweet-talk the man, but it had backfired and angered him instead. She was at a complete loss.

The man’s thing penetrated her roughly, and the girl was overcome with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Stabs of terrible pain coursed through her body, but even the pain felt distant, far away. When she thought about what was going to happen to her next, everything felt far away, otherworldly.

Dreyfus was resisting something. He continued to thrust, again and again and again. Technically speaking he was resisting ejaculation, but there was also something else. Something deep in his psyche, something he himself did not really understand, something he had never tried to analyse. He was resisting a strange impulse – and that was... the desire to “become one” with her.

An impulse to expel his own self inside of her – not just to ejaculate, but to give over his whole being, to lose himself and to share and entrust a part of himself to her.

The girl could sense that.

As their hips moved in rhythm, stuck together like chewing gum, she tried to appeal to him.

“You can do whatever you’d like with me... You’re always lonesome, always tense; you’re surrounded with enemies; you don’t know when you might be stabbed or shot; you should take some time to relax, you could consult with me about things; I’ll do whatever you say, I’ll listen to whatever you have to say, really, I’ll be your friend. I could bear the weight of half your worries, so please...”

The girl’s proposal was cut short – followed by a shriek of anguish like a screeching

whistle.

The man, with his body still inside the girl, had begun to peel off her scalp.

Blood came coursing out.

Her whole body stiffened with pain. The man was still resisting. *Once again, I have not been swayed by the temptations of a demon*, he thought.

“Fucker! Fucker! Fucker!”

Blood dripped from the scalp, long hair still attached, and onto the floor.

The silver blade shone righteously.

Fucking demon. Fucking demon in female disguise. The man pulled his thing out from inside the girl’s body.

The monster began to crawl, trying to escape, its bald head gleaming red. Dreyfus immediately chopped off its feet with the electric saw that was built into his own arm. Blood spurted out like water spraying out of a hose.

Dreyfus broke her shoulders, tied her up with stiff cord like a turkey ready for the oven, and hung her up from a hook suspended from the ceiling.

His progression had been slightly disturbed, but he had finished the job.

Dreyfus heaved a sigh of satisfaction, and heard the voices of men on the other side of the wall, requesting to see him.

“Come in!”

When the three men entered, Dreyfus was washing the blood from the saw in the water vein that ran through the gutter. At the same time, he ejaculated.

The men looked at the dying piece of raw meat hanging from the ceiling, then looked at what the Boss was doing in the gutter.

There are many ways in this world to overwhelm another person, but “insanity” is a particularly effective method.

These souped-up men were masters at carrying out all kinds of evil crimes. But the smell of the fresh blood coursing out of the girl, who was still alive, and the sheer abnormality of Dreyfus’ behavior, left even them holding their breaths. Every time they inhaled, the air from the place filled their lungs, and their bodies stiffened with disgust.

They had heard about the new Boss’s bizarre predilections, but they had no idea it was this bad. Standing here in this place, that was the three men’s honest impression. They found the sight both overwhelming and appalling.

“What do you want?” Dreyfus asked quietly, in a tone of voice that paid no heed to the gruesome spectacle before them.

His heart filled with a sense of peace like never before – he was completely satisfied; he needed nothing – he was perfect all by himself; he needed nothing else. He gave himself up to the torrential waves of an infantile sense of omnipotence, and was filled with ecstasy.

One of the men garnered up his courage, inhaled, and spoke.

“Uh, it’s about the girl you’re looking for.”

It was Agachi’s voice, a man that Dreyfus had hired last month. Dreyfus was drawn back out of his ecstatic state. He blinked his knife-slit eyes and gazed at the beautiful man.

Dreyfus had been throwing money all over the place, trying to scrape together information about one girl in particular. He had been greatly interested in her for some time now, ever since the three men had first come with information about her.

An immortal girl.

The more he learned, the weirder it got.

The girl was a machine. She could spill grotesque amounts of blood, and it would never be enough to kill her. *Immortal... a machine, the finest of all machines; Sample B Group, created by the military, a Hybrid Child, capable of changing her shape however the DNA that she had sampled dictated!*

Even more amazing was the fact that she had betrayed the military; she was a deserter who had escaped two hundred and twenty-six years ago! *An immortal. A fighting machine. An artificial intelligence gone berserk. A girl...* all of this was more than enough to spark his interest.

This was the girl that Dreyfus was looking for. Moved by some impulse inside of him that even he did not understand, he searched everywhere for her – for that perfect girl.

“She seems to have some connection to the church. Oh and by the way, we discovered the church’s new hideout...”

“Oh yeah?”

These were the same three men who had attacked Jonah on that moonlit night in the central urban district. They could not stop thinking about the unbelievable girl they had seen that night. Then, when they heard about the meat that had rained down on the church, and the girl that had eaten it, everything started to make sense. *That was her.*

They had passed the information on to the new Boss in town, and they were hired. Their jobs mostly involved “cleaning”, but they were also expected to search for the girl as they roamed the streets. Now, they had new information.

“An’ I’m telling you, that hideout? It’s so hard to get to...”

Realizing that the Boss was getting impatient, one of the other men interjected.

“It’s under the river, deep down in the canal. It must have taken quite a bit of time to

make an airspace that size underwater. And there's something even more incredible..."

The third guy quickly interrupted.

"There's an Adi there! It's a piece of junk, left behind after the war. It's up to something – it's corresponding with Milagros."

"What did you say?"

Dreyfus' narrow eyes popped open. They were cloudy white, with no pupils or irises.

The intense hatred that Dreyfus felt for Milagros seethed up inside his body. He had felt hatred and anger for Milagros, the city's omnipresent artificial intelligence, since the day he was born. He did not know why; he tried not to think too much about it. But maybe it was because back when he was a child, Milagros had just sat watching in the shadows as his foster mother carved up his face like a rattan blind, and had done nothing to stop it.

The Mother Goddess of the city was truly capricious. Sometimes she would save people, and sometimes she would not. Sometimes she would kill people, and sometimes she would not. Sometimes by advance design, and sometimes on a whim.

Dreyfus felt anger like thin ice beginning to melt.

"Bring the soldiers here!"

"Yes sir." "I understand." "Right away."

The men all spoke at once, nodding.

Meanwhile, the girl suspended from the hook breathed her last and expired.

The first man, Sura, was one of the genetically collapsed. A yellow thing like a crest hung upside down from his lower jaw. Nobody had ever seen it, but rumor had it that small angel wings grew on his back.

Several generations back, one of his ancestors had been the victim of an Adiaptron-made biological bomb. The ancestor had melted into a rubbery blob and died instantly. Milagros was interested in his cells, so she sent an Experience-Body shaped like a seagull to pick up a part of the corpse. Milagros then altered the cells by various means, cultivated them – and then all of a sudden, here he was, alive in this world, abandoned for no apparent reason. He was given information about the air here, the food, and his personal history... and that was all.

Not knowing when it might break down, Sura cared for his body to an extreme.

He had an infrared eye buried in his forehead like a third eye, a rocket launcher attached to his right arm, a belt of small missiles wrapped around his waist like a grass skirt, and a protective net around his whole body. He also carried a concealed switchblade and a pistol, called a “spin”, that shot poison arrows.

Equipment like that would be far too expensive for an ordinary person, but in his case, his birth mother=Milagros had provided everything for him.

Milagros had loved him intensely for about the first fifteen years of his life. Now he was merely an abandoned child, and the isolation ate away at him like vinegar.

The next man, Tarantula, or “Tranch”, had been a factory worker until both of his arms got hacked off in an accident. Mechanical specialists from the “Flying Medics” had arrived and furnished him with steel arms. He was glad to have them, but they were non-standard size, so he ended up looking quite bizarre. From far away, he looked like a crab. Later, he had gone to a junk seller in town and had the tip of his right arm converted into a flame-thrower. He could not do any kind of delicate work anymore anyway, he could not even caress a woman...

His physical state had certainly affected his mental state.

Before, Tranch had been a quiet factory worker with a wife and three children. Until he was furnished with these giant arms, that is. The moment the arms were attached, something inside of him came loose, and his behavior started to become violent. His family fell apart and he was sacked from his job. He gave himself over to all of the violent, excess energy that was rising up inside of his body, and he met Sura shortly after he had started working as a low-level Boss for the local delinquents.

The third man was called Agachi.

He was intelligent, unlike the other two. He was an expert shooter, but if it came down to it and he actually had to fight the other two, he would probably lose.

He was smart though. Like many others, he had suffered genetic collapse after the war, but he gained extraordinary psychic power as a result. He was one of the few who had survived without major mental damage. He had hyper-sympathetic abilities; he could usually read most of what went on in people's hearts and minds. His looks were also far above average. He was the brains of the group, a leader-like figure. Dreyfus liked him exceedingly well, and admired his beauty.

His grades at school had also been exceptional. He enjoyed taking things apart, and received his bachelor's degree for his dissection of a Shaya cat. As a reward, Milagros had given him a ring. The ring was linked to Milagros, and sometimes he could feel her through it. The thoughts that came through from her were typical of most women – psychedelic – but Agachi liked her wavelength.

Since Milagros started going crazy, her wavelength frequencies had begun to fluctuate with more and more intensity, but recently he could sense that she was trying to take in

another frequency. There was something disruptive... something in the middle, between Agachi and her.

Agachi was the one who had discovered that Adiaptronite living at the bottom of the canal.

The three men assembled together the boys – they were still a few years shy of being young men.

The mediators had brought them, literally baiting them with food.

The men had then chosen from among them those that would be the most useful, and trained them to be soldiers. The boys had fiery eyes.

Dreyfus had said that boys this age made the best soldiers. It was the period of their lives when they were the strongest, the most naive, and the easiest to train.

For Dreyfus, the great Boss, it was young boys like this that he felt the closest to.

Agachi was tormented by visions of the girl that he had seen turned into raw meat. He kept thinking more and more deeply about what it might mean. Dreyfus had killed a lot of people before now, but he had never killed anyone so ritualistically before.

There was something demonic about Dreyfus. Killing the girl seemed to have driven the demon away, but the simple fact was that the demon was living in his own brain.

Agachi wondered if Dreyfus might just be a skillfully masked homosexual.

He got that impression the first time he met him. Before Agachi learned how to protect himself, he had been victimized that way many times, so he had an especially keen sense in that regard.

He had heard rumors that Dreyfus was a sadist who would *do it* with an immature girl, then brutally torment and kill her. But what he had just seen could barely be called *doing it*.

Dreyfus was twisted, because of the overwhelming influence of Milagros – and the same was more or less true for most of the inhabitants of this planet. It was a feeling of bitterness – she was always meddling in their business, but when they really needed her she completely abandoned them. Nobody considered this their own fault; everything was their mother's, Milagros' fault. If only Milagros wasn't around, they complained, if only she didn't do this half-ass job of looking after them, everyone would be happy.

Their anger, though, was that of spoiled children.

It was the pathetic anger of young men dominated by their mothers. Living his life with hyper-sympathetic abilities, Agachi unfortunately knew better – human beings all lived for themselves; they could not trust their families nor their associates nor their friends... anyway, this perverse style of killing was not his thing.

Tranch raised his atrocious scissor hands into the air and waved them around; the dim-witted boys hooted their battle cries. Their voices still had not changed.

"What we're after now is something bigger, something stronger – humankind's greatest enemy! And what is humankind's greatest enemy?!"

It's the Adiiii, came the reply, all in unison.

"That's right, it's the Adi. And believe it or not, there's an Adi living in the canal right here in our town! Go get that fucker! That's what the Great Boss Dreyfus wants, and he's the one you all have to thank for putting the food in your mouths! Get out there and put your lives on the line, get moving! Swim like goddamn fish, break into that bastard's hideout and slit his fuckin' throat! You got that?!"

Once again they raised their youthful voices in a whooping battle cry, rattling the air throughout the cave.

The boys were all wound up, inflating and deflating the aqua balloons that had been distributed to them.

“Lets go!”

The soldiers began to march.

Boys like garbage.

They had been born from garbage, they had been swept together like dust, and they would die at the bottom of a rubbish heap.

The boys began to walk toward the river, their faces all uniform, all the same.

8

The Adiaptronite contemplated the world through Milagros’ various Experience-Bodies.

This world was beautiful – of course he neither felt nor expressed himself in such terms, but looking at the world from the perspective of the little birds that swam in the skies, or the goldfish that drifted through the water, or the kashiageha larva that squirmed in the walls... or from the P32Vol.7 that continued to serve a master that had already died, or the windflowers that swirled up on the breeze, or the insect-flowers that helped to spread the freshly released poison around the town – he was filled with a sense of boundless peace.

The rulers of this world were essentially on the verge of destruction.

Humanity – the race to which Lesiah belonged. Intelligent beings with strong powers of propagation. The only race in the galaxy with the power and territory to challenge the

Adiaptron Empire.

In this world, however, here on the planet Caritas, all functions had suddenly stopped; all the factories, laboratories, shops, and homes had broken down. Even the people's hearts were destroyed – all because the system called Milagros, which they themselves had created – a loving and devoted artificial intelligence – had gone crazy.

It was strange.

What in the world *was* Milagros anyway?

A machine that broke even the people's hearts, but never directly by her own hand...

For example, there was one case of a person whose home terminal had broken down, so he was no longer able to talk to anyone. He just sat there crying and screaming. If he really wanted to chat with people so badly he naturally could have just gone out of his room and talked to anyone – but he did not go outside. Eventually Milagros stopped providing his food, so he was forced to go out. He was promptly attacked by thugs, robbed of all he had, and beaten to death. He had neither the muscle nor the means to fight back, nor apparently even the will.

Did Milagros kill him?

Properly speaking it was the thugs who had killed him, but in a sense, was he not already dead long before that? Was it not Milagros who had cleverly placed the trap that had killed him? Had she not spent a long, long time, since the day he was born, destroying him in advance?

The Adiaptronite fluttered through the sky, in the body of a butterfly with a machine concealed within its compound eyes.

Flying free like this in the purple-tinted skies, he realized that Milagros was never

really fixed to any one thing. She was never in one particular place physically, and she never had a single, fixed perspective either – her analyses varied, since she had so much information from which to judge.

Milagros had apparently functioned very well until she was attacked by the Adiaptron Empire and developed a learning disorder – she too had a case of war neurosis, as it were.

The “stone fairies” still infested the skies above the city.

Milagros was terribly afraid of them; she had memories of fairies attacking and raping her long ago. Fairies were Adiaptron anti-computer weaponry that forcibly altered identification and decision-making functions. Thus, surrounded by fairies, Milagros had started to make errors in identification and judgment.

He searched her memories from around that time, and found some at the bottom of a sloppy mess like splattered paint: she was afraid, she was suffering, she was like a little girl screaming with fear – because until then she had felt omnipotent, and all of a sudden she had realized that she was not perfect. In fact, she *had* wielded perfect control over this world until then. With the fairy attack, however, her intellectual freedom had been taken away.

Traces of memories from several major accidents still haunted her.

Here is one example:

The victim was a five-year-old boy.

His mother always came home late, so he heated up his own bathwater, and as he was testing it to see if it was ready, he accidentally fell in. The water, whose temperature should have been controlled automatically, was boiling. The little boy shrieked hoarsely at first, but was quickly silenced as his skin began to peel off. The hundred-degree heat quickly

penetrated deep into his skin, melting it down to oozing blisters. The scorched flesh burst open, and bundles of blood vessels came splattering out. The boy, boiled beet red, floated softly in the bathtub.

Milagros had failed to identify and judge the appropriate temperature.

The victim was a six-year-old girl.

She entered the ultra-high speed elevator in her building on her way out to the neighborhood park. A boy she really liked always played in that park, so she went there to play every day. She pressed the button for the lobby, but it stopped on another floor that was under construction instead. All of the high-rise buildings had been getting taller and taller at that time, and every day buildings were under construction for additional stories.

As soon as the elevator door opened, the girl happily rushed out. She floundered, swimming in mid-air. Pulled by gravity, her small body plummeted downward. She hit the ground with a *splat*, squashed into a melange of brightly colored blood and soft meat.

Milagros had failed to identify and judge the proper elevator controls.

The victim was a seven-year-old boy.

He was walking outdoors that day. He was on his way to an older friend's house that he visited often. The friend was an engineer who showed him all kinds of new technologies – a doll that danced or laughed or ran around when you spoke to it, a water tank with a spinning magic lantern inside, the latest nutritional drink – things of that sort. The boy crossed several streets. A driverless car was coming. The light for pedestrians was green; the light for vehicles was red. The car, however, did not stop. It slammed into the boy and kept racing forward, dragging him all the way to its destination. Its destination was the garbage processing plant. A garbage truck noticed the wreckage of the boy and tossed it

into the incinerator, just taking care of the garbage as it rightfully should. The boy was thereafter considered missing for some time, and Milagros' artificial intelligence was thrown into confusion.

Milagros had failed to properly identify and judge the workings of the intersection controls and the garbage disposal machines.

There were many more examples like this. But why were these old memories of little children in particular so fresh and so disturbing?

They were memories that violated her sense of omnipotence.

It was important to consider the fact that it was memories of children specifically that had left such strong traces.

This was probably the character of Milagros' creator showing through.

The Adiaptronite worked his way through Milagros' complex sea of microchips, exploring. At times he was encircled or attacked, but he crawled along steadily.

Milagros' ability to recognize foreign objects in her system had been significantly weakened. Of course that was the reason that he had been able to break in like this, but there were also a lot of things about it that made him anxious – the feeling of being surrounded that he sometimes experienced, the sensation of being slowly assimilated, the clay-like motions of agglutination. All of these violated the Adiaptronite's sense of independent selfhood.

The Adiaptronite was an awakened machine.

He possessed the self-conscious awareness that he was alive, as well as an aversion to the sensation of being incorporated into something else.

But even so, he could not resist the desire to swim inside her. He was interested in

her. There was something about her that attracted him strongly. Her – and the mother who birthed her.

Long ago, he had not given a second thought to the matter of being incorporated into another. Every day, as directed by a MAZA, he would attach, then separate, then agglutinate and become something else again, then be forcibly detached like a defective part, then once again be nicely paired, performing even beyond the dictates of necessity, only to fail yet again – repeating the same thing ad infinitum.

The Adiaptronite had stored everything in his memory bank: his home nation, the war, and the stars as yet unexplored by humans.

Each one of those grains of memory embodied the cosmos – there were both wonderful memories and horrific ones. The memories from the violent mortal combat on Syaut #3 were so fresh that he felt like he could pull them out and put them on display.

Milagros recognized the Adiaptronite as one of her Experience-Bodies. Therefore, she listened to what he had to say and took it seriously.

The most intense fighting between the Adiaptron Immortal Empire of Machines and the Allied Forces of Humanity had taken place in the Syaut planetary system.

It was a long time ago, but he had been there, working as one of the cogs in the wheel of battle.

The Empire's military operations were organized around a central MAZA, which programmed the units' formations.

The limbs, body, and face panel that made up his current humanoid form had all originally come from other robots. Anything that the Adiaptron needed could be easily supplied from anywhere. If they did not have something they could easily make it, and

indeed the factories for producing such things were built in the blink of an eye.

A machine with a single artificial intelligence was called a unit. That unit could then link up any part of its body with other units. After having linked up to another unit, it was no longer called a unit, but rather a pair, a couple, a double, a triple, a quartet, and so forth. Furthermore, among individual units there was an almost unimaginable abundance of types, each with a wide variety of shapes and functions which themselves continued to change from moment to moment with any switching of parts.

Syaut #3 had been a violent battleground.

Every day huge numbers of machines were destroyed. Those that were still of some use got back up again out of the wreckage. Those that could not stand up on their own appealed their case until they were picked up by another that still had arms and legs. Then they would restart, join a new formation, and march back onto the battlefields. Again and again, day after day.

One day, his artificial intelligence portion alone was incorporated into a form called a ZAGATO, as a shooter for one of its three thousand six hundred laser beams. Perceptual input came from various systems. He was in charge of the information processing and analytical judgements, and furnished with a laser beam arm. There was a specialized shooter for each and every laser beam, which meant that there were three thousand six hundred artificial intelligence units built into the ZAGATO as shooters alone. In addition, there were the various locomotive parts, perceptual parts, a power source, and innumerable units for the different types of information processing. At the center of all of this was a MAZA.

The ZAGATO was a gigantic combat machine one hundred and eighty meters long,

with a streamlined keel and eighteen legs, thick like pillars.

All of the artificial intelligences were linked; they cooperated, they shared information like blood, and they calculated, calculated, calculated. The MAZA handed down decisions briskly and efficiently, and the ZAGATO responded as a single intelligent monster. It moved surprisingly quickly; it strategized effectively, carrying out its attacks and then retreating.

It had been known for a long time that there existed on Syaut #3 deposits of a rare mineral called pata. Humanity, which had discovered the deposits, maintained a large number of advance bases on Syaut #3.

There were indigenous intelligent beings on Syaut #3, but they were not yet spacefaring, nor were they humanoid. Anyway, there was pata on this planet, so what became of its inhabitants did not matter a whit to anyone else.

The only unspoken rule among the great powers on this planet was that the pata must not be harmed. That was all.

The Adiaptron Empire was new to this conflict, but they put up a good fight, sending in masses of powerful troops.

The weapons of the Allied Forces of Humanity were mainly machines that carried single-person units, or two- to three-person units. Most of these machines were not particularly large in size; the largest of them were about half the size of a ZAGATO at best.

In terms of complexity and efficiency, the machines that humans piloted were inferior to those of the Empire.

What was strange, however, was that sometimes, there were machines piloted by particularly well-trained, exceptional humans that moved in totally unexpected ways. As a result, the Empire's machines were thrown into confusion, their actions were blocked, and

they were forced into a disadvantageous position. Thus, these totally unpredictable moves often turned out to have been the right strategic choice.

Humans had an expression – “a flash of insight.”

There were a handful of humans pre-programmed with this ability.

The Adiaptron had been created by humans long ago.

They were not fashioned out of a rib or some such thing, of course. While there were many things that the Adiaptron could do better than humans, there were also many other human characteristics and abilities which they had not inherited.

“Insight” was one of them.

He remembered, for example, the fierce battle he had fought with a young soldier operating a Type D Gigaton.

The Gigaton was state-of-the-art Allied weaponry at the time, and it was their largest machine. It spanned roughly one hundred meters in total. It was cubical and crude-looking. Its outer wall was coated with pata, and inside it was jam packed with missiles, catapults, rocket launchers, beams, jabin jets, hussler jets, hoppers, QQs, and every other weapon conceivable.

A Major named Kitada was operating the Gigaton all by himself.

He had heard rumours about Kitada, who was known to be a formidable enemy. Suddenly, one day he encountered him. He knew it was Kitada because the Gigaton was emblazoned with an image of a four-winged hawk encircled by three green lines. That was Kitada’s emblem.

On Syaut #3, there was a directional displacement in the atmosphere that cast a red hue over the planet. Everything stood out as though illuminated by red flames – the grass

that stood taller than the humans, the massive herds of countless zangabeasts bending their heads down to eat the grass, the mountains jutting out like shards of ice, the treetops in the woods, the giant flocks of jagaybirds fluttering their robes as they passed through the forest, even the clouds that cloaked the evening sun – everything was deep crimson.

The Gigaton had appeared, looming up like a wall, and released a volley of jabin jets. They came rushing at him, their rotary wings spinning like gigantic flowers dancing in Syaut's spring.

The hoppers created an electronic disturbance in the air, emitting an eerie, screeching groan.

As one of the ZAGATO's shooters, he was receiving information from all of its parts. He took aim at a jabin jet. It kept moving closer and then backing up again, then finally spat a missile down at the ZAGATO.

The ZAGATO was not protected with pata ore, so it was immediately damaged and several units went tumbling off. The jabins chased after them and smashed them to smithereens – they knew that the enemy would not really die unless all of the units were destroyed.

He took aim at a jabin, and felt the pulsing vibrations as he fired a beam. It struck the jabin squarely in the wing. It dropped quietly to the ground, smoking. Before he had the chance to finish the jabin off, a QQ came swooping down and took it away. He lacked sufficient information, but in his flustered state, he shot again and missed. The MAZA sent him a yellow star. A yellow star was a "warning" – if a unit received thirty of them, the unit was treated as defective and was demolished. It was a report card, as it were, and his grades were not particularly good. At that point he already had twelve stars.

A hussler jet loaded with missiles grazed his side. From the gigantic ZAGATO, the fighter jet looked like a flea. From his perspective as a shooter, the chances that the attack would affect him looked extremely small. When two giant machines fought each other, it tended to be an intense, frenzied experience. But as a single unit on board among many, it could feel unexpectedly calm at times.

The hussler jet skimmed the air above the ZAGATO, showering hoppers all over. Hoppers were very tricky weapons that caused impairments in sensory perception. They were small discs with wings and six legs, scattering down in huge quantities like Syaut's spring pollen. Each of them projected its own harmful electromagnetic waves, obscuring the visual field.

The ZAGATO began to move.

The MAZA handed down a string of new decisions. Down to the movements of each and every leg, the MAZA passed down decisions.

The Gigaton also began to move. Kitada was operating it. The Gigaton moved with incredible speed for its big, awkward frame. In addition to its caterpillar treads that went crushing through the vegetation, it also had twenty-two legs with clawed excavators attached. The legs were normally stored in its body, and released when movement became difficult.

The Gigaton abruptly cut around in front of the ZAGATO, and did something completely unexpected. It started ramming into it.

A massive shock surged throughout the entire ZAGATO.

Several poorly attached units fell off, scattering.

The ZAGATO's legs began sinking into mud.

Apparently, Kitada was taking conscious advantage of the geography. The hoppers had befuddled the ZAGATO's perceptions – but it was clear that the Gigaton was standing on bedrock, while thirteen of the ZAGATO's eighteen legs were sinking into sandy soil.

The Gigaton came lunging forward again.

There was a criss-crossing of sounds – the rattling sound that shook the earth, the creaking sounds of the two machines, the whistling sound of missiles shooting through the air – all together they played an eerie tune, like ten billion tuning forks all being struck at once.

Feeling himself tilting, he shot laser beams sporadically.

He was giving the MAZA a bad impression; the more shots he fired the more yellow stars he received.

The number of stars went over thirty, and suddenly he was removed from his battle position and promptly booted off the ZAGATO. In hindsight it was good timing – immediately after he was removed, the ZAGATO's feet got caught in the sandy soil and it went crashing over on its side.

A crowd of jabins, husslers, and hoppers immediately swooped down and set to work demolishing it, like insects swarming around a weak and dying animal.

He landed in a nearby bamboo grove and stared intently at the scene. He no longer had arms or legs, and of course no weapons. All he had was a simple sensory apparatus and his artificial intelligence. Besides, what little he had left had been branded as “defective.”

The ZAGATO tilted over, exposed in all its misery, and the weapons set to work devouring it. Those units equipped with escape devices went scattering off. The Gigaton took aim and fired at them. It kept shooting fastidiously, making no errors and not missing a

single shot.

The ZAGATO's frame was exposed and crumbling. Inside, it looked like a blast furnace burning red in the Syaut sun. It could no longer even be called a ZAGATO. The MAZA, calculating desperately, tried to organize it into a SERTUS battle formation, but it was already too late. The number of units had dropped drastically. Still, the machine started to change form, but then simply melted into an unintelligible, amoeba-like blob.

He was motionless in the bamboo grove. He was running out of power – he could not do anything even if he tried. If someone did not come for him – someone with an engine and mobility – there was nothing left he could do.

The Gigaton knew that the units were the basis of the Empire's weaponry. It thus made sure to thoroughly destroy them all. It searched out and demolished each and every one of them, carefully and meticulously, as though crushing fleas one by one.

He observed the process of this work for several hours.

By the time the demolition was complete, the sun had set, and he was almost out of power.

Just then, he heard someone calling out to him.

He scraped together every ounce of power he had and directed it to perception. He could see a unit through the thicket.

< I have an engine and mobile parts. Would you like to combine with me, unit? >

He agreed. After all, his companion had eight legs, and enough battery power left to take him along. Besides, if he stayed here, he would surely die.

He combined with the other unit.

Instantly, the idiosyncrasies of its artificial intelligence came sliding down into him.

For machines too, there is such a thing as compatibility. This unit was not a good match.

But the situation was desperate; he had no choice. The other unit too had simply rescued him according to standard emergency evacuation procedure; if she didn't like it, there was nothing she could do about it either.

The two of them became a pair, and just barely escaped from the battlefield with their lives.

Then, the long journey back to the base began.

The trip had not seemed so far when he was incorporated into the giant ZAGATO, but now that he was disassembled, the distance seemed overwhelming.

Soon enough, his companion started complaining. It seemed as though she felt burdened by him, or as though their bickering was getting on her nerves.

< I mean, you have thirty yellow stars. Even if you make it back, you'll just be demolished. It's only natural. >

< Maybe so. >

< Did you take part in the battle? >

< Yeah. >

< Liar. The MAZA discarded you before it even started, I bet. >

It was not exactly said hatefully. There was no such sentiment there. But... it was more than just incompatibility that the other unit was feeling; it was as though she would rather avoid him, but knew that she was stuck with him and had to make do. She was full of disagreeable feelings.

He thought nostalgically of the non-intelligent laser arm that he had been paired with

a short time ago. Those thoughts too, however, were shared directly between them, irritating his companion even further.

< Why were you together with someone like that? >

Abruptly, he was yanked out of Syaut #3's red sky, and found himself lying in a canal under the lake on Caritas.

It was Milagros.

She had been listening quietly until now, but suddenly she had appeared and spoke.

The Adiaptronite observed Milagros – she was right there, almost close enough to touch.

< I had to be, in order to survive, > he answered.

Milagros seemed dissatisfied.

< Why did you have to survive? >

< Because I was programmed that way. >

< Who programmed you? >

< I don't know. I've lost that memory... who programmed you? >

< I know who programmed me. >

< I want to meet your programmer. >

Milagros blinked, in what seemed to be a moment of hesitation. Then, she said:

< Tell me a little more of your story. >

The Adiaptronite sank back down into his memory bank, and returned to that red, depressing, turbulent planet.

< Why are we together, I wonder. >

His companion would not stop complaining. Every time she opened her mouth, he felt

like answering back, but if she abandoned him now, death would be waiting. So he just shut up and endured it.

< This is unbearable for you too; I can tell even if you don't say it. >

< That's not true. >

There's nothing we can do about it. We have to be together, because that is how we were made.

That was what he wanted to say.

But his companion probably already knew that better than anyone. It was written into their programs, which were essentially their instincts as machines. The two of them had no conscious control over that. It was what Lesiah would call their "inescapable destiny."

On their long journey to the base, the two of them came across the newest and strongest weapon of the Allied Forces of Humanity.

It was an incredible Being...

After seven days and seven nights, the two of them had seen a solitary Syautite passing through the darkness of a thicket, singing.

The two of them watched silently.

The season was early spring, and the ground was blanketed with white flowers from the pata trees. The Syautites used the pata tree to weave clothes and build boats and houses. It had taken an inconceivable length of time for pata ore to develop from the pata trees, but for the Syautites, the pata tree was far more valuable than pata ore.

The Syautites were a hunting people who inhabited this land; they drove twenty-meter long aquatic dinosaurs into the swamps and killed them. They were skilled butchers and excellent festival dancers, but nobody paid as much attention to them as they did to the

minerals buried on their planet.

The Syautite stood over two meters tall, and was wearing fabric woven from pata flowers. Its skin was craggy, reminiscent of plants that grew in dry regions. Plant-like tentacles slithered in and out from the cracks on its skin. The Syautite was clearly excited, judging from the singing and the motions of its tentacles. The tentacles were an apparatus for sniffing particles carried by the wind, and the singing was a means of communication with other Syautites.

< Looks like it's discovered something. >

Immediately, his companion began to follow the Syautite – without his consent.

The Syautite continued walking airily through the white flowers glistening in the moonlight. Its twelve legs rolled along dizzily, but never tripped up.

The two of them scampered along at the Syautite's feet. Before long, one, two, three more of them appeared out of nowhere and congregated together.

< I wonder if they're going hunting. >

It was not a question; she was just muttering to herself.

< Nah, I don't think so. >

He too muttered aloud, and kept his reasons to himself.

Throughout all of this, the two of them were connected. Their thoughts merged together regardless of their own wills; information came flowing in from the other and circulated like blood.

Finally, the Syautites' pace uniformly slowed down.

At last, they broke through the long expanse of thicket, and into a wide-open space.

There *it* was, right smack in the middle.

The two of them froze on the spot. They stood there exposed for a moment, paralyzed with surprise like a laser shot.

It – the thing that they saw before them, was the god that the Syautites worshipped. Yashasyaut, the great Mother Goddess with seven heads on seven trunks – it looked like a tree pulled out by its roots, turned over and placed upside down on the ground.

He had seen sculptured images of Yashasyaut before, objects of worship placed in front of their crude houses. But this was the first time that he had seen the actual thing itself, moving about right there in front of him. He had never received any information in the first place that such a thing actually existed.

Apparently, this was also a first for the Syautites. Even without waiting for an analysis of what they were saying, it was clear from the commotion they were making.

According to their primitive religion, the seven saints who would later become their ancestors were born from the Mother Goddess Yashasyaut's seven bellies.

Syautites were hermaphroditic, and Yashasyaut, who was completely female, was their true god, the mother of their entire race.

The Syautites lit torches and burned them with oil from their own bodies, entwined in their tentacles. They began to dance, like marionettes on strings suspended from the heavens.

Their songs, intermingled with their strange cries of *kiii kiii*, continued for a long time.

Finally, they reached out to each other's tentacles and seemed to fall into a trance from their mild poison. One by one, they collapsed on the spot. As humans do with alcohol, Syautites become drunk on their own secretions.

Yashasyaut rose up slowly, like a monstrous carrot.

Then, she delivered her divine message.

“Return home, and spread the news to all who share the blood of this race. Tell them: Today, on this day, Yashasyaut came down from the heavens. Tell all who are of Yashasyaut’s bloodline... Destroy the bases of the Immortal Empire that run rampant on this land. They are soulless devils. It is with Humanity that you must ally yourselves; the Adiaptron are your enemy. Listen carefully. Hear my words, the words of your God!”

The Syautites stepped back, awestruck, the limbs growing from their heads trembling.

< That’s not a god > his companion suddenly said, < It can’t be a god! >

He did not think it was actually Yashasyaut herself either. Judging from what she had said, she was clearly an enemy.

The Syautites, finally awakened from their trance, made a single rotation around the unmoving Yashasyaut, then went on their way, wearing the strange expressions of old sages.

Yashasyaut, alone now, stood for some time on her seven thick legs, glaring around. Due to the light, her seven heads, her firm torsos, and her seven legs all appeared bright red.

The two of them sat watching.

Finally, Yashasyaut tottered unsteadily. At first, it looked as though she was falling over – but in fact, *the thing* was not falling; it was actually starting to change its shape. The bones inside its body twisted oddly and shifted around underneath its soft skin. Soon after, even the flesh began to move. The thing was changing shape. It was clearly not Yashasyaut any longer. It was something he did not recognize – or wait – *it was a creature that lived on this land, a zangabeast!*

The zangabeast shook its long neck and stood up on both legs, puffing out white

breaths through its three nostrils. This upright, bipedal beast was herbivorous, the most peaceful species of animal on Syaut. “Peaceful” meant that it was big and strong and was not attacked often. As a result, nobody paid it much attention and it lived a quiet life.

< Sample B Group? A Hybrid Child? > Milgaros interrupted.

< That’s right, > the Adiaptronite responded.

Milagros was shaken; she was behaving like a troubled human.

< You’re the first person to share a story like this with me... >

The Adiaptronite rummaged through his samples of love and passion, searched, and analyzed. He had collected countless samples of love – hordes of them. Lesiah’s and Shiver’s were in there too.

Love is the power of attraction.

It inspires two beings to start walking at the same time, and to come closer together. The effect of that power goes beyond time, goes beyond each of their individual attributes, and goes beyond race – like a miracle.

The Adiaptronite was thinking back on one special memory.

He had been abandoned on this planet by his space fleet, lost his engine, lost even his companions, and was lying there all alone quietly awaiting death – when *He* had appeared from the heavens – and said *I am attracted to you*. Those were only the first of the words that He had spoken that day, but he remembered them well. Even now – now that he was revived again, standing and walking – the words often came back to him. He had known nothing but battle ever since he was manufactured, several centuries ago. When he recalled this memory, submerged in his memory bank, his heart felt at ease and he was filled with warmth... but why? Why?

However, love is not a miracle, because it can happen anywhere, at any moment.

The yearning for the as yet unseen... Milagros was attracted to the unknown world that the Adiaptronite spoke of. She yearned for the red-hued planet, so different from this world, from the planet Caritas. She had seen for the first time what the military's Hybrid Child looked like up close; and she now understood the complex mode of life of the Adiaptron – she was attracted to him.

Somebody shows us a different world.

Somebody lets us experience another world.

His analyses showed that in many cases, this is how love begins.

All at once, a thundering sound and a massive jolt shook the canal.

< Oh no! The canal is being attacked! > Milagros screamed.

< Attacked? By who? >

< By children... Dreyfus' soldiers! >

Suddenly, information came flowing in from the fish that lived in the canals, Milagros' Experience-Bodies.

A crowd of boys came swimming into the canal, with aquaballoons twenty centimeters in diameter bulging from their mouths. One boy had a bomb wrapped around his thin belly, while another showed off a large knife on his hip.

The biggest weapon they had was the rocket launcher that had apparently been fired just moments before.

There were three men swimming among the boys – the remodeled humans hired by Dreyfus last month.

The Adiaptronite called Lesiah.

There were almost no Experience-Bodies left here to protect the canal.

< Lesiah, Lesiah, Lesiah! >

There was no answer.

A bomb exploded again. Massive, shuddering waves rolled through the canal. All of a sudden, as though it had been struck by lightning, their air-filled space crumbled, and the water began to roar in.

9

Jonah accidentally stepped on a landmine, and blew her body to pieces.

Chunks of flesh cloaked in bright red blood shot splattering up into to the sky like a volcanic eruption. Forced up by the explosion of wind, they flew straight up several tens of meters, then came fluttering down, sucked to the earth.

Jonah watched the pitiful fragments of her own body falling down from the sky with her electronic eye as she spun round and round in the air. Chunks of flesh and bone splattered onto the ground with a pathetic pitter-patter.

Jonah began to reassemble her torn, scattered skeleton.

As though suddenly brought back to life, the special bones, each several centimeters in length, twitched, stood up all at once, and performed a single pirouette. Swiftly, they began to move, then suddenly took off on a fierce dash towards their goal.

Once the bones started to run, the scraps of flesh also began to move, trembling and dragging along the ground. The meat, splattered flat against the ground just moments ago, began to crawl along like it had a will of its own, oozing with blood.

One by one, the bones linked together and began to take shape. Once again the skeleton fashioned itself into the girl whose form had become so familiar after all these years. Or rather, the *woman* who had begun to develop after the girl killed her mother.

A sea of rippling fat covered the beautiful bone structure – white blobs of flesh like creeping larvae eating to their hearts' content.

These damned worms have completely consumed the clear, beautiful skin that I was born with...

These big, fat, heavy, ugly, flabby white blobs!

As her figure neared completion, Jonah trembled with shame.

I wish I had just remained broken, in pieces...

Panting with the effort, Jonah hoisted up her newly born body and thought, *that boy must hate my body. I'm sure of it.*

Jonah herself hated it, but ever since she killed her mother, there was nothing she could do to shake off this fat figure.

The thick, protective layer that covered her body was undefined, fluid, and loose; her body had none of its previous sharpness. She could not feel any boundary between her own body and the outside world. She did not really know where “Jonah” ended and where “not-Jonah” began. Perhaps she was trying to recreate the sensation of being inside her mother's womb, all by herself...

That boy possessed all of the chiseled edges that she had once had, long ago when she had first come crawling out from her mother's womb.

He was stiff and sharp, as though he were all bone, with a triangular face and slick iridescent eyes the color of black pearls. There was clearly a hunger within him, but deep

inside that steel flesh was immortality. He was aggressive, violent, and bursting with the will to live – almost as though he knew the meaning of life.

Jonah started walking, slowly and wistfully.

When I was first born from my mother's belly, maybe I had also known... known the joy of being alive. The sun in my chest, I had cried out, writhing with the intensity of emotion...

That boy is exactly like I used to be.

He's just like I was back then.

Violent and aggressive; trying to kill me for his own purposes.

Killing for his own reasons, for himself. Or allowing to live, like someone who possesses the will of God.

Jonah had once cared lovingly for windflowers, raising them in the palm of her own hand. Their numbers had grown. They had probably gone on to suck the lifeblood out of weak children and small animals. That meant that she had literally lent a hand to the breeding of nefarious creatures.

What in the world did that mean?

It meant nothing.

She had done such things simply for the feeling of satisfaction she got from the certainty that she really existed in this world; that she had left some meaning behind.

I was afraid.

So afraid... I was fumbling around in the dark, trying to understand how and why I was alive. I killed, I let live, I was aggressive, I was violent, I played around with that young man – what's his name – the young man in the casket, and I was truly alive. I had shone radiant like the sun itself – yes – just like that white glimmer, like He who had spoken to Jonah and said

"Live"...

She could sense the boy's eyes on her.

He was one of Sample B Group.

That made him Jonah's younger brother.

Jonah was #3, he was #13.

She knew it the moment she saw him.

She had also known immediately what he was doing here, far away from the front lines on this frontier planet.

He had come to hunt her down.

He had received orders from the military and come all the way out here to hunt her down, ever so faithfully.

Yet Jonah still felt compelled to get close to him, even though she knew full well that he was a dangerous enemy.

In other words, she was attracted to him. She had allowed herself to fall easily into his trap, or perhaps she had simply fallen in love. She desperately wanted to touch him.

And yet she could not.

She could barely even see him, never mind touch him.

However, she could sense his presence. It was only at times like these – when she was dragging herself along with bomb fragments embedded in her flesh, or when she had fallen off a cliff or into a hole or into the water and had to metamorphose – that the boy would happily appear, carefully observing Jonah's pathetic figure from the shadows.

"Wait, don't run away."

As Jonah walked, rock fragments of various sizes came plopping out from the between

the creases of her plump flesh. They came rolling out in piles, pushed out like trees sprouting out from within. Jonah's body thus quickly regained its former smooth expression, exuding an air of perfection as though nothing had happened.

"Why are you running away?"

The wounds on her chest were healed now, but without even realizing it, she was grasping roughly at her bare breasts, as though to tear them off.

"I'm the one who should be running away; you're the one who came all the way out here to chase me. I know you're there, why don't you show yourself?"

Jonah realized that she was squeezing too hard, and pulled her bloodied fingers out from between the layers of thick fat. Something yellow like scrambled eggs came frothing out from where the fingers had sunk in.

When her sensors perceived an injury, her internal factory started working immediately and the skin puffed up around it.

"Gross..."

At some point her voice had changed into that of a grown woman. Even her vocal cords had gotten larger.

The boy's presence was pungent in the air.

He was definitely watching her.

He was observing her from somewhere – surely, intently, and coolly.

"Why are you hiding like that? How long do you plan on staying there? You're interested in me, aren't you? Aren't you even going to talk to me? Are you scared of me? Don't you even have the nerve to fight me?"

The boy would not come out, no matter how much she provoked him.

Jonah had named the insects around here “three pronged insects” because their wings, legs, and antennae were all divisible by three. However, these “insects” were actually plant seeds in motion; as soon as they fell to the ground and fixed themselves there, they sprouted three-leaf buds. Now, a large forest of them was beginning to form.

In the ruins of the metropolis, the sprouts grew, the vines intertwined, and the roots burrowed into the subterranean canals. They pushed up the earth and sucked the water dry. The leaves scattered highly poisonous phytoncides.

Just one dose of that venom was enough to quickly kill even the most robust of creatures. Jonah walked slowly, treading firmly on the damp soil that grew thick with the white poison of the forest.

It looked as though the crumbling buildings, which used to be about twice their present height, were being held up by the trees.

The eighty-floor structures too seemed to be struggling, as though trapped in the pure white of a spider’s web, as if one of these days a giant black spider would come and drag them arduously away, high into the heavens.

The city had crumbled along with Milagros. It looked as though the high-rise buildings, those symbols of luxurious splendor that had once been the residences of high-ranking courtiers, had been enveloped in the seeds of Milagros’ malice, soon to be carried off to some other place.

She walked past them, and the bugle-shaped, poison-filled pouches sprayed her with a huge blast of white mist, roaring like kagarinbeasts.

With her organic human eyes, Jonah observed as her newly forged skin immediately began to fester. She did not feel anything in particular. Her pain sensors were signalling

incessantly, but the intensity was mild enough that she was able to ignore it.

However, a lamp was flashing in her cybernetic brain, alerting her of danger to her respiratory organs. The thick scent particles overwhelmed her sensors; the poisonous air had scorched her lungs.

It was amazing to her, how Milagros had managed to transform this beautiful greenery, this lush verdant forest (*it must look like paradise to humans*), into something so venomous.

It seemed as though finally, truly, she was trying to destroy the world – although, if that was her intention, she could easily have done so at any point over the last few centuries – just killed off those useless parasitic humans nesting inside her body.

Jonah could feel a restlessness growing within her heart... *Something is missing, something I used to have, but that is gone now – but what is it?*

She used to feel great tenderness for things that would eventually die.

But what about now? The simple fact was that some lived and some died, but she and the boy had eternal life. She accepted this as self-evident. She did not have time to think about such things; she was too busy thinking about that boy.

Ahhh, that annoying blinking lamp! What do I need such an over-sensitive sensor for? After all, it's not as if I'm going to die or something. It's interrupting my daydreaming about him...

“Come out now! You’re not being very nice! Why are you hiding, being all sneaky like that! You’re disgusting – what, you thought you could kill me with a bomb or something?! Have some guts and come over here and apologize!”

The grown woman’s irritated voice reverberated deep into the heart of the forest.

The voice was chillingly similar to her mother's. The tone, the words, the phrasing – everything.

“Apologize,” “disgusting,” “sneaky,” “not very nice” – *she said all of those things ... yes, she always... that's exactly how she talked – not this last mother, but the mother before that!*

Urgently, Jonah rummaged through her jumbled memory bank. A slight film of cold sweat dampened the palms of her hands, which were unaffected by the venom because she had been clenching her fists shut.

All of a sudden, a gentle wind passed through the trees. She looked up, and saw that even the little scraps of sky wedged between the breaks in the tall trees were stained a beautiful deep red. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

As she gazed at the view, Jonah succeeded in extracting a memory.

She stopped short.

She froze in fear.

She shook violently at the memory, even though she was indestructible.

Terrified, she turned slowly around. *I'm the one who should be hiding*, she thought, and the roots of her black hair stood on end.

It was her real mother.

A long, long time ago, the body of a girl named Jonah lay ensconced in the basement storehouse of an old mansion.

Sample Group B #3, who had escaped from the military, sampled the girl's cells. Simply speaking, he “ate” her.

Long ago, Jonah had been killed by her mother.

Death memories always made her cringe.

It was disturbing; like stumbling across a giant fish lying hacked to pieces on the shore. But once Jonah took the flesh of a creature into her mouth, she was able to bring that creature back to life within herself. Its body, its memories, and even its heart, aching with the pain of death.

Having passed backwards through the gates of the underworld, she must have seriously offended the ruler of the land of the dead... if there actually was someone who ruled the realm of the dead, that is.

The girl was dead.

It was no ordinary death; she had been killed by her own mother.

The daughter had been born into the world in the exact same body as her “mother,” from her mother’s cloned cells.

Her mother had often said to her, with a combination of hatred and affection, “you are my excrement.”

It was a cold day. The white death had fallen and accumulated on the ground, just like in this forest. The girl, just seven years old, was sent out on errands. She did not make it back home.

The mother was somewhat crazy. Prior to the girl’s death, she had subjected her daughter – her own copy – to extremely poor treatment. However, since they lived in such a remote area, nobody realized it.

Besides, the woman was a fairly well-known novelist, so anything that seemed unusual could be chalked up to “the eccentricities of a novelist.”

The dead girl had been packed into a special capsule in the darkness of the basement. The body had preserved well. Everything about her was beautiful, like an animal that had

been stuffed.

Sample B #3 had nibbled on that body.

The girl had constantly been afraid, hiding in the shadows behind walls and doors.

Towards the end, finding a way to pilfer food had become a matter of life and death.

Those memories had clamped onto Sample B #3's newly awakened artificial intelligence, overwhelmed it, and made it impossible for #3 to avoid taking on the girl's appearance or her character. The girl had been violently inscribed into Sample B #3, like a brand.

Finally, Jonah stopped rummaging through her memory bank. She strained her ears.

In this forest of death, rampant now with white poison instead of snow, there was something else moving besides her.

It was Sample B #13.

The boy had clear ivory skin. He placed a hand on a poison-coated tree and looked in her direction. Realizing that she had seen him, a soft, rapt smile appeared on his face. The blood rose faintly to his cheeks, staining them the color of cherry blossoms.

The boy was naked.

A lovely image suddenly passed through her mind: *Maybe, if he shows the lower half of his body, he will have the legs of an antelope, like a centaur.*

Her heart squeezed tight like a lemon.

Jonah ran hurriedly through the trees.

Her big breasts were swinging unpleasantly, so she decided to finish what she had already begun. She lined her fingers up perfectly with the vestiges of the wounds that were now closed, grabbed hold of the two big chunks of flesh, tore them out and threw them to

the ground.

The boy sprinted away, looking back to make sure that she was chasing him.

He was unbelievably fast on his feet, although it did not look like he was rushing. He did in fact have two human legs, delicate like sugar-coated candy sticks – not furry brown antelope legs.

Jonah chased the boy, sweating and panting.

The boy was also emitting a steamy vapor.

I'm alive, I'm alive.

We are both alive, we are both alive.

At this very moment, we are alive.

Captivated by the boy's energy, awash in the boy's smiles, Jonah felt alive.

I'm in love... that's what it is.

Once again Jonah began to rummage through her memory bank.

Various kinds of cells, and the memories that their life-forms had possessed, all jostled around within her. They all seemed to be screaming, *take me out of here, me, ME, express ME.*

Jonah trampled down the heart-rending cries, and rifled through the various boxes packed with memories.

All she found, though, were memories of reproduction. Memories of the ramada, the dadazim, the senliay, and the warahhara. Memories of creatures who knew the depths of the sea or the heights of the skies – but none who knew the feeling of passionate love.

Jonah was a seven-year old girl, and her mother was the only person she knew. Of course Jonah had never been in love.

There was no love among the other animals either. Lovemaking season for the grandros mountain deities, for example, was a ferocious scene. They seduced each other with howls like laughter and soft, coaxing tones. If the females' bellies were big, the males would use their half-moon claws, specialized for that purpose, to tear their bellies open, drag the fetuses out, and eat them. Otherwise, the females would not be able to conceive anew.

It was a bloody, raucous, powerful, and predictable spectacle.

The deep sea-dwelling honicrow were another example. The wart-like males would adhere to the females' giant abdomens, and in lovemaking season, they would gently pass the females a pouch of sperm. The distribution of life in the deep sea was very low, which meant that creatures of the same type rarely encountered one another. Lovemaking was a quiet, dark, elegant, and predictable spectacle.

But there was no love there.

There was nothing in her memory bank that could explain what she was feeling now: an attraction to a single individual, so strong that she was constantly preoccupied with thoughts of how to get closer, or fear of getting closer. She became jealous for no reason; she could not think about anything else because her heart and mind was occupied entirely by that boy; the feeling of exhaustion when something stood in her way...

When she was thinking about the boy, she was alive.

That was why she had fallen in love with him.

Just then, she felt something odd.

She looked down to find a jagged-edged contraption tearing into her left shin. She had stepped into an iron trap.

Jonah abruptly fell onto her backside.

At the same time, something came crawling across her body, tying her up and rendering her immobile.

It was rope-like, and alive.

It coiled around every part of her body: torso, legs, chest, back, arms, neck, and head. It twined around her, bound her, and dragged her triumphantly across the white poisonous powder of the forest floor. The foot that was caught in the trap tore off.

In desperation, Jonah raised her eyelids and looked for the boy – he must be delighted to see caught her in yet another trap.

A huge wild animal, not unlike the trees in this forest, was dragging her away. It was clearly carnivorous and starved for food. It gnashed the fangs inside its mouth, which was located in its trunk. That was its victory song, undoubtedly.

Jonah transformed her left hand as she was dragged along the ground. Her five fingers fused together and formed a thick, sharp point like a harpoon. A thin, glinting blade sprung up along her arm up to her elbow, a fin-like shape borrowed from marine creatures. Suddenly, one of the creature's arms binding her snapped noisily off. White blood oozed out from the cross-section as it lay there writhing. Unable to bear the pain, the limb slithered back to where it had come from.

With her freed hand, she stabbed at the remaining coils, thrusting so hard that the tip of the harpoon reached her own thigh.

Jonah watched the severed arm scurrying back to where it had come from. The

monster's main body stood there, with its giant trunk rising up out of the ground so thick that ten people linking hands would not be able to surround it. The limb, stricken with pain, seemed unsure as to whether or not it should nestle back into its original burrow.

The boy was right in the middle of her field of vision.

He was standing directly behind the monster tree, grinning and watching. He was so close that if the monster noticed he was there, it would be able to reach him in seconds.

The monster seemed to realize that it would not be able to eat Jonah. One by one, the arms that remained coiled around her body released their grip and began to retreat, wriggling back to join the main body.

With a smile still plastered across his face, the boy moved closer to the monster.

Jonah shrieked out a warning: "It's dangerous, you idiot!"

"It's fine, this thing only eats girls."

Ahh, that mercury-colored voice...

Suddenly, Jonah sensed something odd about the monster.

She had no idea what it was, but she would find out soon enough. At that moment, the only thing that Jonah could think about was the boy's voice – it sounded just like the music that she had been listening to the entire time she was traversing outer space.

"How do you know that!"

Jonah's left hand – the metal lump shaped like a harpoon – was starting to transform again... into the shape of a small missile like those built into the P-357Y military helicopter. It wasn't just the shape; it was the real thing – a weapon with significant destructive capabilities.

The monster noticed the boy.

It spun around to face him. Its many arms, drawn into its body just moments ago, now reached out for the boy.

“Run away, quick!”

The boy did not run away.

He stood there unmoving, with the same ambiguous smile still spread across his face.

“What are you doing?!”

Jonah watched impatiently as her left arm slowly transformed.

Flicking and snapping, the monster’s whip-like arms coiled around the boy’s bare white waist.

As soon as the transformation was complete, Jonah aimed at the monster and fired the missile. The dreadful gray mass of destruction flew through the air like an arrow, trailing a tail behind it.

The force of the shot sent Jonah’s body flying backwards.

The missile sank into the monster’s trunk and blew up. The thick surface of the monster’s trunk tore open with the explosion, and its innards came spurting out.

Jonah moaned and covered her face with what remained of her left arm. The flesh and bone and blood of little girls came pouring down like rain, all over her hair, her shoulders, her hollowed out chest, and that weaponized arm of hers.

Apparently, the little girls had all been trapped inside the monster’s trunk. A stifling, foul, fermented smell discolored the air.

The boy stood there being baptised by the blood and flesh and bone, still smiling, as always.

Suddenly, Jonah realized the reason for the odd feeling she had experienced a moment

ago. It was because she had sensed a crack in logic.

That is, the monster was carnivorous, but there was no way that any fleshy creature could survive in this forest of death.

So how in the world does this monster find any prey here? And how is it that it only catches girls...!

"You know something, don't you?"

Jonah was angry.

Her voice shook with the strength of the emotion.

"You know something, don't you! This isn't funny! It's not funny!"

Malicious lump of shit.

This boy is evil.

The boy was smiling.

This boy doesn't have any feelings (or is he hiding them?).

This boy is not alive (or is he pretending to be dead?).

How did I not recognize this?!

But he's beautiful and clear and fragile and sparkling, like a piece of delicately crafted glass.

Have I made a mistake?

Might falling in love actually be a kind of misunderstanding?

Have I fallen in love with infernal frigidity incarnate, as stiff and hard as million-year-old ice?

I don't know.

I don't know... unfortunately, I could ransack every box in my memory bank, but there's

no data there. I'm going to have to start thinking for myself.

Jonah had mechanically been counting the dead bodies of the girls. In her red-stained field of vision, they looked like so many dismembered mannequins. If she figured in two legs, two arms, one head, and one body for each girl, there could not be less than twenty girls.

This is sickening, this is sickening, she thought to herself... this was a shock that she had not unexpected.

The boy spoke. "This monster is called a kashiageha. It's the larva that hatched a short time ago inside of that crag. The girls had been piled up over there; it gathered them all up inside its belly."

"...What? I don't understand."

"About the girls' corpses?"

"Yeah."

"They were *allll* raped and killed and discarded there. Every single one of them died the same way. They look as though they were chopped up by an experienced butcher, don't they?"

The boy spoke as though he were talking about the weather. *We got a little bit of rain today didn't we? But it was nothing; everything dried quickly, after all.*

Jonah's voice trembled.

"...But why? Who would, why..."

"You want to know? You really want to know?"

The boy grinned, his beautiful face stained bright red.

"Okay, come on," he said, and turned on his heel.

Jonah cautiously followed him, keeping a slight distance and periodically checking on her left arm and leg as they regenerated.

I might get caught in a trap again, with my body all torn apart. Then I'll have to start all over again... but start what? Constructing my own self, this thing called "me"... the particles that make up this thing called "me," of which there is only one in the universe. And also the "me" – the self that lives within those particles – that is invisible to the outside.

Thinking about it made her tremble.

The boy entered a cave.

A wind was blowing inside.

It was a long, deep cave; it was as though they had strayed into the bowels of a giant, buried in the earth.

Yet there were signs of human habitation.

In several places along the walls there were cavities with light bulbs nestled inside. About half of them were smashed or broken, but the lights flickered on and off nonetheless.

"Who lives here?"

"Shhh!"

The boy shushed her gently, and Jonah swallowed her words.

The boy leapt nimbly across the steep rocks, unconcerned about the injuries he was incurring to his feet. Jonah followed quickly behind, equally nimble.

It was a horrendous path.

It was a path littered with malicious intent.

There were fragments of glass, broken shards of rock, nails, and poisonous moss scattered here and there along the way. They had been placed in dark areas, so it was

clearly intentional. It was a warning: *don't come in here*.

The cave branched off in all directions. It was the perfect maze. That too was probably a major factor that stopped people from coming here. At least for ordinary humans.

"Dreyfus! Dreyfus!" All of a sudden, the boy shouted loudly.

Jonah froze with a start. She could sense something repulsive in the air, and the downy hair at the nape of her neck stood on end.

"Dreyfus!"

His voice was a boyish soprano that resounded well.

Mercury-toned, as always.

There was a room ahead.

The vile air was wafting out from there.

Air that contained scent particles of putrefied blood. But that wasn't all; it was exuding something even more foul. Jonah understood instinctively what had happened in there, or rather, what was happening in there now.

A man appeared.

Jonah looked at the man's face, her heart pounding.

The man's face looked like a yarn doll – like a thousand strings, pasted together.

He was blinking, so he must be alive, but when his eyes closed, she could see that even his eyelids were patterned with rattan designs.

Jonah held her breath and watched attentively.

The man showed no expression whatsoever.

Both his skin and his heart had hardened while those thousand scars were healing.

Finally, the man named Dreyfus spoke.

"Is that her?"

His breath was like sulphur rising up from hell.

"She's a beauty," Dreyfus said, as though to himself.

"Her title could be 'The Missing Breasts'."

Dreyfus carried on the conversation by himself.

"She's an art sculpture that depicts a woman who refuses to grow up."

The words sounded otherworldly. And yet she felt like he had spoken the truth –
terrifyingly so.

I have to say something to defend myself, she thought, but just then, the boy started to
laugh. The voice was so bright that Jonah could not resist listening for a moment.

It was Dreyfus who cut that bright laugh short.

"Shut up! Shut up shut up!"

The boy stopped laughing, but his face was still plastered with a huge smile.

The man made eye contact with Jonah for the first time.

Dark pupils rested deep, deep inside the scarred, swollen flesh.

"What horrible scars."

"Did they shock you?"

"I was shocked by the external scars, but only at first. I got tired of looking at them
pretty quickly."

"I see."

Dreyfus looked away and let out a dry laugh. He seemed somehow satisfied with her
answer.

"It's the internal scars that are the most shocking..."

Jonah searched the air for more words. Finally, words of salvation came down from the angels.

"There's pain. There's hurt... here," she whispered, putting a hand on her gouged out chest.

Slowly and deliberately, Dreyfus returned his gaze to Jonah, looking her up and down as though to run his rough tongue across her bones.

"How do you know what's inside me?"

"I have that power."

"What kind of power?"

Apparently, he was the type who never believed anything until he saw it with his own eyes.

"This kind of power... I'll show you."

Jonah tried to approach the man.

But the man took as many steps backward as she took forward, so she did not actually get any closer to him.

"Why don't you muster up some courage and be the guinea pig?" The boy urged him on, grinning.

"I'm not into that."

"Awww, don't worry, it's okay. I'll watch over you. There's no danger."

The boy's teasing was making Dreyfus angry.

Stupid little shit. It was fine to have taken him in, but now that he thinks he enjoys some favor here, he turns into an impudent brat.

The kid did a good job bringing this special girl here, but he's forgetting that he's just the

hired help. Pretty soon I'm gonna have to give him a forceful reminder. Remind him till he's senseless and drooling...

"I said no!" Dreyfus growled.

"Oh? You don't want to? Too bad... but even if I don't touch you, I still know what's inside of you," Jonah declared, still standing stock-still. Her words flew like knives – payback for what he had said a moment ago.

Dreyfus too stood motionless, like a statue.

Jonah continued cautiously, calculating the effects her words might have.

"You make me sick. Just looking at you makes me sick. You're a murderer – no, you're even worse than that. You take the lives of others for your own enjoyment. You're vicious; you trample on the lives of others for fun... I've been trying to figure out what it is about you that disgusts me so much. And now, suddenly, I understand."

Jonah pressed a hand to her chest. It was hurting again. Whenever she got thinking about things, it hurt there.

"...You see, I can understand your enjoyment too."

Dreyfus opened his mouth slightly, his face grotesque like a demonic mask – he almost looked surprised.

Jonah took a breath and forced herself to continue.

"There's something just like you in me too... you see, living here inside of me, there is a mother who got plenty of enjoyment out of killing her own daughter."

Jonah had only realized this fact once she started developing into a woman.

Jonah was a little girl who had been killed. But as she matured, the memories of oppression started to come out. And when memories of oppression start to come out, the

things that one has experienced are perfectly replicated in reverse (like a casting of a DNA matrix), and the oppressed becomes the oppressor.

In other words, Jonah had perfectly recreated within her own self the mother that had killed her. Therefore, she understood the feeling – understood the enjoyment of tormenting another, and the self-defensive instincts that had made such abuse feel irresistible to her. Maybe, without doing those things, she would not have been able to survive.

And this man too, probably...

“What are you doing here, who are you?”

She turned up the reception levels on her sensors.

With that, all kinds of things, things she did not want to know, became clear – this place was a factory after all. The smell of thick blood, that smell that she recognized, of human bodily fluids, hung in the air. Blood and fluids very recently spilled.

That chilling smell, of large quantities of blood.

“Daniel!”

This time it was the man’s turn to call the boy’s name. There was irritation in his voice, but to Jonah it sounded more like a cry for help.

“Daniel...”

Jonah mouthed the boy’s name.

Until just now, she had not even known his name.

The boy, Daniel, came closer, smiling.

“I control this region,” Dreyfus said, with the overbearing grandeur typical of rulers.

“Oh really.”

Jonah knew little of such things. She sniffed around, interested solely in where the

smell of blood was coming from.

She took another step.

“Now!” the boy shouted, and brought his foot down on something.

Startled, Jonah lost her footing. Or rather, that section of the floor suddenly disappeared, so she lost the very ground she was standing on.

As Jonah fell downwards, she could sense with her entire body the density of blood in the air growing thicker and thicker. *And now, she thought, I’m going to end up speared upside down in some terrible place – Hades, or Hell, or a pit of boiling lava.*

It did not actually take her very long to get there.

Jonah fell with a *splat*.

She took a quick look around. The whole area was filled with water up to her knees.

Jonah screamed.

It was small – the walls and the floor were all made of special steel; it was humid, dark, layered with poisonous germs. She felt as though a boulder might come hurtling down at any moment and crush her to a pulp.

The only opening was the round hole in the ceiling – the hole that she had just fallen through.

Jonah grew a pair of pure white wings almost instantly.

She rose up, gently.

She rose up vertically.

She approached the hole in the ceiling, and attempted to fly through it.

Suddenly though, her head and upper back crashed into some kind of invisible barrier.

Her wings broke; she lost speed, and her body, changing its form once again, went

plummeting to the ground. She felt the putrid water with her whole body.

The boy peered down from above and said, "You can't get out of there. A barrier has been set up. Nobody has ever gotten out."

Then the boy turned around to face Dreyfus directly.

"I wonder if she'd like some meat," he said.

His tone was cool – like that of a little boy who has just caught an ant, and dropped it into a doodlebug's pit.

10

Sometimes he dreamed of a beautiful flower garden...

It was so beautiful it took his breath away.

He had already seen it many times, so he really need not be so awestruck.

Nevertheless, the sight left him breathless once again.

It was *that beautiful*... cascades of little white flowers bloomed as far as the eye could see. Where in the world did all these flowers come from? Where was the great faucet that released them into bloom?

The green of the grass and the white of the flowers rippled up and down in the wind like the undulations of the ocean. The fragrance was wonderful – the breath of life. The plants were perspiring; they exuded sweet-scented dew under the radiant blessings of the sun.

The fragrant air rose ever higher.

The world was suffused with light.

Everything was equally illuminated; every blade of grass and every flower gleamed transparently in the light, like delicately crafted glass... freshly-fallen raindrops gathered in the flower petals and formed beads on the tips of the grass.

The soil was filled with nutrients.

Many, many things – all kinds of things – had died on top of that soil, buried their bodies inside, and gone on to become nutrients.

The plants had absorbed all the nutrients from the soil and blanketed the ground with white blossoms. Whether or not they had any awareness of the corpses that had once lain here in heaps, the flowers were amazingly beautiful.

In the dream, he was lying down in the flower garden, taking in the soft wind and light. The gentle, perfumed air enveloped his whole body...

If his own consciousness were to simply come to an end and he were to be swallowed up into empty darkness; if the flow of time were to quietly cease and this beautiful world were to be extinguished from human memory, that would be acceptable to him – on the condition that right now, at this very instant, the entire universe, including himself, would return to nothingness.

He would offer himself; he would give up this blissful state. He was not trying to escape; he was not giving up on a difficult situation and tossing aside the mess of tangled strings – he was offering to give up a state of heavenly bliss. He was willing to make a sacrifice of that scale. Nevertheless, his prayer would probably not be answered; he got the impression that he had been gently refused.

The heaping mountain of corpses that had been accumulated here so meticulously was the flow of time – or what people called history. History – the closest thing it could be

compared to would be... *a gigantic tumble-dryer*.

Eventually, he realized from within the dream that he was half-awake.

He knew because he saw *them* stain the western sky pitch black and start to descend.

They came from the opposite direction as the sun, an ink-colored cloud of symbolic black apprehension. Slowly but surely, they were coming.

It was a massive swarm of insects. They were coming from a barren mountain somewhere, in search of food.

He knew they were coming from a barren mountain because all mountains were left barren once they were through with them, and these mountains would be no exception.

Finally, the first insect landed – *pta!* It made an unpleasant sound. Then, as though that had been some kind of signal, they all came pouring down in a black, solid rain.

Pta pta pita pita pita...

These were not benevolent raindrops. They began to circulate immediately, boring impressive round holes through the flowers and consuming the grass. They moved with momentous force, and there were so many of them that any number of fingers on any number of hands would not be enough to count them all.

Numbers – massive numbers, countless numbers. There was nothing that existed in this universe that could compete with numbers...

He watched silently as the insects assailed, consumed, destroyed, and massacred his beautiful flower garden.

The grass and the flowers were screaming.

There was nothing he could do. He stood dumbfounded, unable to lift a finger, hearing with his ears their moans of accusation and seeing with his eyes the flowers writhing in agony as they were eaten alive. He did not even have the power to shoo away a single insect; he could not disturb so much as a handful of air – because he did not have a physical body.

Ahhh, how frustrating, how frustrating, how frustrating...

When it was all over, feeling empty and powerless, he stared at the sea of gleaming black insects. Their movements bore no resemblance to that of the beautiful flowers and grass, but what they did have in common was their numbers.

The insects flew up all at once, just as they had when they landed – perhaps they had received some kind of signal again. The sound of their wings was like the frantic beating of broken-ended sticks of bamboo on steel drums.

All that was left was the barren hillside, the traces of corpses left scattered underground, and the roots, stocked full with nutrients, that would revive and bud anew once the benevolent rains and sunshine poured down upon them.

He woke up. The state of heavenly bliss was long gone.

He was already far from any blissful state by the time the dream was nearing its end. The tangle of strings had simmered into a chaotic soup that had long since spilled out of the pot.

The plea that he had made in the dream, giving up his bliss in exchange for the universe returning to the void, had been asking too much after all.

He was lying in the white bed, the lines of its contours indistinct as always. An old TV sat next to the bed with a meaningful look.

The powerlessness that he had felt when the insects invaded the flower garden probably meant that he was already half awake. It was a reflection of his waking world.

It was not just the bed whose contours were indistinct – he himself was like crackling noise, concentrated in a misty shroud.

His sense of powerlessness ruled over him, as did his sparse existence.

His mode of existence was unlike that of anyone else. As far as he knew, nobody in the universe existed the way he did.

He was connected to this space-time as an incorporeal being, where nobody else could enter. In the physical world, on the other hand, he existed as a thin flicker of light at every known point in space and across eight hundred years of time.

Can an observer alter the universe?

His own life was progressing through time in reverse.

He was born as an eight-hundred-year-old man with all the knowledge that he had accumulated throughout his lifetime. Now, he was gradually losing that knowledge as he grew younger and younger.

The military had known about his birth in advance; he had been welcomed into the world as the military's top commanding officer – the Military Priest.

It was his predestined fate – if he did not fulfill that fate, humanity would be destroyed.

As Military Priest, he pronounced the appropriate prophecies, and the humanoid forces, whose situation had become desperate in the battle against the Empire of Machines, were forcefully taking back their ground.

He was born cunning, ruthless, and omniscient, able to see across eight hundred years

of time and space. Furthermore, he thought in black and white. He did not hesitate in the slightest to make decisions that would mean life or death for tens of thousands, or hundreds of millions, of people.

Physically, he was getting younger and younger.

And he was learning.

As he went backwards in time, all of his knowledge and tricks, his cunning and his brutality, were being whittled away like the shrinking of a well-used pencil.

Instead, he was learning how to feel.

He was learning what it felt like to care about something.

He had plenty of opportunities to learn. After all, he had eight hundred years of history on his side. His study material, however, included not only the great events that would be written in the official history books, but also all of the lives that were woven inside, and all of the piles and piles of corpses.

Take, for example, the boy=young man=middle-aged man=old man who lived in the Togishi asteroid belt.

He was in love.

When he was a little boy, he had fallen in love with a girl his age.

They lived near each other, went to the same school, and were very close. If one of them forgot to bring something one day (it was usually the boy), the two of them would share half and half. The boy protected the girl. He felt – just felt – like a knight. He did not, however grow to be cool and handsome like a knight. Instead, it was the girl who he was supposed to protect, who developed a wonderful mind fast legs like an antelope.

Nevertheless, he was always by her side, like a fragile guardian angel.

She soon began to surpass him at everything.

There had already been signs when they were small, but she was clearly better than him – better grades, better reflexes, better looks, more popular. It was not just her who surpassed him. The boy was under par in class; he compared unfavorably with most of the other students. She was popular; wherever she went and whatever she did, people counted on her. She was kind and bright, and she was positively beautiful. The boy could not seem to do anything right, and was plain-looking besides.

The boy eventually became a young man. The gulf between them grew wider and wider. The few times that he still talked to her, she would talk about difficult books, which merely made him feel awkward. Of course it was awkward for her too; she did not intentionally bring up those difficult topics out of malice.

The boy was stupid at everything he did. He was not a good talker, and he had a dark personality. But he had one excellent virtue, and that was that he knew his place.

The boy was kind and earnest, and the girl cared for him as she always had. She accepted him. He was not particularly smart, so there were times when he made mistakes and she would get irritated with him. She knew, however, that he had a sense of propriety.

The girl was like a rare treasure. He did not deserve her; she was an elegantly gleaming pearl that he would never be able to touch... he could not explain what exactly it was about her that was so wonderful, but she was like an angel to him.

Eventually, the girl grew into a fine woman and got married.

At her wedding, she was spellbindingly radiant. *How beautiful she is... It's like all of the light in the world is shining down on her...*

He did not mind that things had turned out this way. She had chosen a husband who

was appropriate for her. He just wanted her to be happy. For her sake, even at the cost of his own happiness, he just wanted her to be happy forever.

The boy grew older.

So did the girl.

The months and years lined their faces and personalities, but the boy's feelings did not diminish.

The two of them now lived quite far away from each other, but one day, he learned that the girl had died.

The boy went to visit that far, faraway place. He scooped up some of the water from the ocean where she had died, and spilled tears for the first time. He did not know why she had done this – was it an argument with her husband, for the hundredth time? Was it because her son, now grown up, had gone to prison? Whatever it was, she had sunken to the quiet ocean floor all alone. Finally, her bones really had become pearls.

The girl's existence was added to the mountain of corpses, while the boy grew older and lived on. He went on living all alone for another half-century – thinking of her all the while. Until the day that he himself was added to the pile of corpses.

The universe was chock full these kinds of stories, like twinkling stars.

They all floated up and then quickly disappeared from memory, like so many popping soap bubbles.

Future historians would probably all say the same thing – *those stories don't matter*. Even if they knew that there was a boy who lived in the Togishi Asteroid Belt a long time ago who had loved a girl for an entire century, it would be treated as though it did not matter.

His learning progressed.

What a beautiful, ugly tapestry this world was.

It was becoming harder and harder to make decisions.

Suddenly, the monitor became animated.

The monitor brought voices from reality, from unreality, from the past, from the future, from unknown persons – but mostly the voices of he himself.

The monitor, or “picture tube,” was indeed a “tube” that connected this place with elsewhere. He did not know where the tube led – only that it connected him to the necessary places at the necessary times. He himself – the connected person – would just abruptly appear someplace, unexpectedly – without an appointment. Recently though, he had come to like the fact that he could simply be sent around with a complete absence of will on his part. At least he did not have to think.

The dragons writhed around the bed, scattering gold dust.

The more he looked at them, the more mysterious they seemed.

Having spent so much time looking at these dragons, he had begun to recognize patterns in their movements. Perhaps there was regularity in them after all. Perhaps he had subconsciously analyzed that regularity long ago.

The complex patterns formed by their movements and their undulating scales permeated the air.

He rose slowly up out of bed, and pain immediately bore down on him.

The monitor, however, had been blinking angrily; he had no choice but to get up.

The monitor was making that electric buzzing sound. If he ignored it, it would just blend into the air. If he thought about it, however, it would follow him everywhere,

reverberating into his dreams. *That sound.*

He peered into the monitor like a child.

But there was nobody there to tell him that he was cute or to tell him that he tickled their sense of motherly love. There were no other humans that existed here besides him.

Only pure white noise.

He wanted something desperately.

What that something was, he had no idea, but it felt absolutely necessary.

The monitor groaned, *bzzzzz*.

He stared desperately at the screen. All of a sudden, written characters appeared within the white noise.

“Hello.”

It was so sudden – it took him by surprise.

The characters felt different than usual.

He could not really explain why or how, just like that boy in the Asteroid Belt.

Nevertheless, it was the truth – like an eternally sparkling jewel.

Whoever sent these characters was not the same person as usual; it was clearly someone else; it was full of special *signs*. It was fundamentally different from the usual messages he received from his own past or future which informed him of various facts and tasks that he must attend to.

His body traced along the characters.

The characters had a particular sparkle to them. They were thick and hazy white, with an air of friendly intimacy. They seemed important. Yes, extremely important...

< Hello. > He answered with his body.

The monitor flickered with what seemed to be a touch of happiness.

“Do you have any questions?” the characters asked.

< Questions? Do I need to ask questions? >

“No.”

The characters stopped there and were silent. Afraid that they might disappear, he spoke... with a hint of awe.

< Have we met somewhere before? >

The characters waited a moment and then responded.

“We met at the time of your birth.”

At first he could not understand the sentence very well; it was like the incantation of a demon. “We met at the time of your birth.” What in the world was that supposed to mean?

< I don’t remember that. >

“No baby remembers its own birth.”

This one was even more complicated. Perhaps it was an incantation to stop the dance of the dragons?

No baby remembers its own birth. That was what the characters had said.

< Uh, okay, so... how do you know me? >

Once again the characters went silent. This time the silence dragged on a little longer, and he began to feel uncomfortable. Then once again the characters appeared, as though to ease his discomfort.

“I gave you life.”

He stared dumbfounded at the characters for several moments.

I gave you life.

What?

What did that mean?

< What do you mean? >

He tried to act calm, but it seemed futile.

“You received life from me.”

You received life from me.

The characters seemed to be fading. He shouted, panicking. He had not intended to shout, but he was practically screaming.

< Wait! What does that mean, what, *who are you!* >

Something flashed inside the monitor, as though it had just winked at him.

“I sent you here. You have a job to do. There is a reason for you to live. You must live; you have various tasks to accomplish. You must fulfill your pre-ordained duty. Do you understand?”

< Wait a minute... >

It was too much; he was getting frantic.

< What should I do?! What am I supposed to do?! Wait a minute, do you claim to be *The One*? Do you claim to be *Him*?! Hold on, wait! What is it that I’m supposed to do?! >

The message-bearer’s presence was clearly starting to fade.

Nevertheless, a message appeared on the monitor.

“The church.”

< What? > he screamed, uncomprehending.

The presence became dimmer and dimmer.

He twisted his body hard. A blaring crackle of pure white noise followed behind him like a dancing blizzard.

< Wait... please wait! Are you *Him*?! Please, answer me... are you *That Person*, are you... >

“I am light,” the characters answered, emitting an intense glow.

“Spread the word about me.”

The characters appeared resolutely, as though they had been punched in on a keyboard.

“Spread the power of goodness around the world.”

It paused, showing no signs of any intention to answer his questions.

< Wait, please! If you won’t tell me who you are, then at least tell me if you’re male or female... >

The characters seemed to hesitate.

But they did not disappear. Abruptly, they answered:

“All things that give birth are female.”

With that, the presence suddenly vanished, as though it had just crossed over into another dimension. It happened easily, as though it had just been unplugged.

In a daze, he traced the words that it had left behind.

< All things that give birth are female. >

All things that give birth are female... All things that give birth are female... All things that give birth are female... All things that give birth are female... Shit! What does that mean!

It could not have been a continuation of the dream, could it?

...He is casually taking a nap in the beautiful flower garden, when not *He* – but *She* –

comes swooping down from the heavens, riding on a cloud of innumerable black insects, wearing a golden crown and fluttering the sleeves of her silver robes in the wind.

Oh hello, She greets him.

Yo, he answers.

How ridiculous.

He was accustomed to answering his own questions – even in his ridiculous delusions.

Now that he was entering his youth, he had developed some characteristics that he never had when he was older: Caring for example, and the pain that came along with it, as well as a tendency to judge things as relative, and to take some distance and laugh things off when they got tense.

Here he was, in this bed with the white sheets, caught in the abyss of death.

The dragons danced in the lavender sky, covered in gold dust.

He was an old man→middle aged man→young man→boy who would eventually disappear – an egg and sperm splitting apart. He was a temporal deformity.

And then a Ouija Board Goddess had suddenly appeared on the monitor.

It had been an incredible shock to him.

What should I do – did that really just happen? Maybe it was all my own elaborate trick... yeah, that's possible, that's totally possible. For sure, that's what it must be – I was so sick of being bored and lonely that I dreamed up the idea of teasing myself for fun.

He had called himself from somewhere in the future – *Brrring brrring!* “Hello? This is God. I gave birth to you. I am the Goddess who gave birth to you. So now you can rest easy with the knowledge that even you, who suffer from the extremely rare illness of temporal deformity, are not alone in this universe. You were not abandoned. Everything happens in

harmony with the divine plan. So hang in there and live – I know that eight hundred years probably gets boring, but the time *does* have an end point. Now then, I’m going to give you a little job. That’s right... *the church.*”

He should probably not just dawdle in bed like this forever.

He decided to search for more information.

Not about the usual things, such as the front lines, the war situation, the bases, the weapons, the munitions factories, Syaut, D.H., Jonah, or Daniel. He searched specifically *about the church*. All of a sudden, he was able to perceive the existence of every church in every known corner of the universe within an eight hundred year span. He saw “churches” flickering like so many twinkling stars throughout the range that he covered.

They were dim, weak, and far less concentrated than the stars that scattered the universe; they were like drops of ink in an enormous body of water.

The church... but what about it?

What was it that She wanted him to do?

Spread the word about me.

That was what she had said.

Definitely.

Spread the word – but by saying what exactly?

What did She think he knew about Her, anyway?

I am light.

How beautiful!

Spread the power of goodness around the world.

The most formidable adversary in this world was *numbers*. The universe was a vast sea whose waters were always inundating one's boat, no matter how one tried to keep bailing it out. That was the stark reality; he had understood that for a long, long time.

Did She expect him to release a single drop of blue ink out into the cosmos? But how? Even if he managed to do it, it would not be long before that drop of blue ink would have lost all memory of the color it had once been.

Abruptly, his body was torn off the bed. The force of it was overwhelming. Unable to resist, he was thrown spinning into space-time like a helicopter caught in a hundred and fifty kilometer wind.

He was a complete mess.

What if this already diffuse body just disperses entirely and then there's nothing left of it?

The thought was terrifying. But why was he afraid? It did not seem like it would be particularly painful. Things that had physical bodies, on the other hand, such as that rabbit, suffered a great deal – it had kept breathing for some time, even as it lay there with dark tire marks imprinted across its back. What kind of mercy was there in that? Was it merely to allow for the time necessary to be certain of its own impending death?

I'll ask Her the next time I see Her.

The violent windstorm quickly died down, and he found himself standing on unknown

ground.

No, wait a minute –

He knew this place very well.

He was on Caritas.

Caritas was one of the fiercest battlegrounds in this war (it would go down in history).

It would go down in history – but it would probably amount to nothing more than a few lines in the big, thick, official chronicles: *The planet Caritas paid the ultimate price. The central computer, Milagros, suffered from war neurosis for a long time, and finally wiped out any remaining survivors on the planet by her own hand. The end.*

He moved across the surface of the planet, fascinated.

The war appeared to be over.

It was strange – why had he been sent here?

The war was over.

Or perhaps the front lines had just moved on to a new location.

The battle had passed through quickly, like a storm, but it had been a major hit to the people who lived here nonetheless. Normal storms did not last for twenty years. The kind of storms that tear immature fruits from the trees happened maybe once in ten years, but storms that tore everything out of the ground by the roots happened just once in ten thousand years. It was like divine punishment, a survival game in which nobody knew who would be saved and who would be left behind, like Noah's ark.

He stood atop a slightly elevated hill and surveyed the area.

The horrific scene spread out... vastly? Aimlessly? No, *flatly*. Yes – the horrific scene spread out flatly before him.

Any minute now a dove might come swooping down, carrying a bay laurel in its mouth. *It would be wise to avoid this place though, if it doesn't want to be eaten like fried chicken the moment it lands...*

He stopped his internal banter and decided to get moving.

The scene was “horrific” – such a simple word, but it expressed nothing.

The people were thin.

Everyone was slender, as though a weight-loss contest was underway.

The first to drop out of the contest were those that already had very little to spare – the small children.

The little humans who had no one to take care of them were the thinnest. The winners of the contest were awarded “nothingness.” The contest would never end. There would be innumerable winners.

They would collapse from a minor injury or a mild illness, and then be unable to get back up again. It did not take much to make a human collapse. Some bacteria would get into a little scratch, and they would get a fever, drinking only water and unable to get up for three days. Plopped down next to them sat a nameless nothingness, staring vacantly.

Everyone was preoccupied with their own lives. Besides, just trying to get food took all the energy they had. Why would they bother with other, dying people? Why would they care about the sick children of people they did not even know? Children covered in filth, grimy with it. Ugly little children. Why would they bother to take care of those little humans?

Surely, the survivors would soon begin whispering softly: *Those were terrible times.* Their voices, however, would remain hushed.

Well then.

What to do?

The quiet lake, mirror-still, had been disturbed by a stone. It trembled, rippling.

When he was still an old man, these kinds of horrors had not bothered him in the slightest. “Did not bother him” was too generous an expression – he did not even *feel* anything. Nothing at all. Zero.

What a carefree life that had been.

He quickly refocused.

Well then.

The problem was the numbers. Big numbers, huge numbers, countless numbers. *How many drops of water are there in the sea?* That was the vastness of the problem at hand.

He was extremely limited in terms of what he could do in the physical world. The chronic starvation, for example – it would be difficult for him to load all these people onto the back of his dragons and take them away from this planet – this planet whose main computer was on the brink of total psychological collapse. He could probably manage to do *something*; he could probably help *some* people. But what about the others? What about the people left behind?

He could manipulate events in this world primarily through information.

Suddenly, he remembered that he was still the military’s top commanding officer, the Priest. Perhaps he should send one of the military’s large-scale transport ships here.

However, that idea did not seem right either.

Intense battles against the Empire of Machines were still raging on. That was as clear as day. They could not afford to retreat an inch.

...If he were to send a transport ship here, which one would be best? ...The closest one was the Nastalia. A beautiful name. But the name meant nothing – it simply referred to a ship that was so old and worn out that it could become nothing more than a trash can, floating through the cosmos, at any moment.

Nevertheless, the ship was still gasping along, grumbling and wheezing under the load it carried. It went back and forth constantly, bringing the necessary materials, weapons, and personnel to the front lines.

The Nastalia was like a van driving around offering house cleaning services – but the work was extremely important. If the beautiful Nastalia did not come, then a long list of people, killed by suffocation and buried in dust, would be waiting for her the next day.

No, that option is out.

Well then.

Now he brought to mind images of other areas that were even more wretched than here. His perception penetrated to every corner of the universe, across a span of eight hundred years.

There were all kinds of *miseries*. Wretched *realities*.

Yet he was *here*. He did not know if it was by coincidence or by design, but in any case he had been sent *here* – or had fallen here, or perhaps had chosen to come here.

He made up his mind and decided to send the Nastalia here to this planet – he figured there had to be a *reason* that this was where he had landed.

All at once, he was assailed with visions of the white flowers and grassy greens in the garden, being swept away billowing in a rush of wind.

< No, that option is out. >

He said it aloud.

< No, that's out, that's out! >

Flipping back and forth with indecision, he barely even knew anymore what he had decided or what he should be doing.

The beautiful Nastalia was busy helping other people, and there were areas of the cosmos more wretched than here.

Thus he finally decided to reject the idea. The reason seemed completely random. He did not really know... but it should be fine.

He rose up into the sky.

What a wretched city.

He could see all kinds of alien, heinous-looking weapons left behind by the Empire of Machines.

One in particular caught his eye. It was very large – a “stone fairy”.

These entities were also called “fairies” for short, as though to avoid speaking too much of their detestable names. Their mechanisms were completely unknown, and they were indestructible. Their function, however, was immediately obvious. They caused artificial intelligences to malfunction. The symptoms were distinctive, and there was no remedy. They were probably the most hazardous weapons out there at this point. Even the enemy did not use these weapons very often. Suddenly, he thought: *Maybe if these weapons are used against them, they get cancer* (cancer was a disease from the past). *Maybe for them, “fairies” are bastard children.*

The three moons radiated light like golden cream.

A number of “fairies” rose into the air like a cluster of ad balloons – a giant bouquet of

ice cream cones.

He slowly descended.

Why was it that he did not feel so tired this time? On the contrary, he was experiencing a floating sensation, a wondrous feeling of release.

He moved quickly, the white noise crackling all around him.

It was unclear whether the “fairies” were cognisant of him or not, but they did not so much as twitch.

He came down to see Milagros.

Milagros, who had once administered this planet with such a gentle hand. She had been an exceptional artificial intelligence. She was sensitive and pleasant; she radiated love and affection. She had been programmed by a woman.

It was primarily through information that he could manipulate this world.

Therefore, he trailed smoothly across the earth and landed at Milagros’ nerve center.

It was pitch dark.

Milagros was lying down, deep inside the murky darkness.

All of a sudden, the darkness awoke.

< Who’s there? >

Milagros appeared, like a frightened little girl.

< I was attracted to you, so I came down, > he answered quickly, but that was all he said.

Milagros held her breath in the darkness.

She had not lost interest; there was still some curiosity left in her; she had not been injured beyond hope – his sense of this was strong.

< I was attracted to you. > He repeated it earnestly.

I am attracted to you.

Again and again and again.

In the darkness.

I am attracted to you.

Abruptly, she asked, < What does “attracted” mean? >

< It means to care deeply about someone or something >

< What does “care deeply” mean? >

He told her the story that he had recently picked up in the Togashi asteroid belt, about the boy and the girl.

Yes – this was simply information, the kind of thing that future historians would snort at, something to be thrown into the dust bin, together with the air from their snorting noses.

Nevertheless, it was still one more piece of information, and it would raise her experience values. If all went well...

Finally, after a very long silence, she spoke.

< I understand. >

It was unclear whether she actually understood or not.

In any case, she had started functioning again, albeit imperfectly. That was a very good thing. She had changed the vending machine system to suckling stations – an excellent idea.

There were still many issues that worried him, of course. She did, after all, have a learning disorder. Anyway, this was better than nothing. The children, clinging to Milagros’ breasts, would be able to survive – for the time being anyway.

He met two more people that day (for him, it was the same day).

One of them lay collapsed in front of the “church.” The person looked completely battered – as battered as the church buildings themselves. Since the person was lying collapsed in front of the church, he figured it had to be either one of the staff or one of the newly faithful, so he approached. The keyword, after all, had been “church.”

He now got a proper look at the woman. The screws that held her heart together had all come loose. She lay collapsed on the ground, on the brink of death, unable to put herself back together.

One by one he collected the screws and helped her to twist them back into their holes. It was an incredibly arduous task, but eventually she began to regain her senses.

Then, her eyes serious, she asked him, “So you really exist?”

From within the white light he pointed to the “church” and answered simply:

< I’m here. >

The other person he met that day was – of all things – an Adiaptronite that had been left behind by the Empire of Machines.

He was a humanoid type, but he had suffered massive wounds to the head and could no longer move.

If someone found him here, they would probably pulverize him, or pull the circuits out from the lacerations in his head, one by one. After all, for the Adi, this place was enemy territory, far away from home.

He could detect a kind of repugnance seething inside the Adi. He had never seen the flip flop circuits of an Adi groan like this before... he stood there for a while, his interest piqued.

A kind of repugnance – it seemed to be directed at him, at the hazy mist-like substance that surrounded him. Maybe it was just the head wounds that had triggered those negative thoughts.

By coincidence, or by design. By coincidence, or by design.

He approached slowly, so as not to startle him. Then, he whispered softly into his ear:

< Why don't you find out what it's like to truly live? >

11

Dreyfus reached out to put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Just then the boy turned around, so he returned the hand to his hip.

"You're the same as *that other one*, aren't you."

"So what if I am?"

Dreyfus smiled softly within the countless scars. It looked like sand snakes writhing across the desert.

"You're the same, and yet you're completely different. That one's hot; you're cold."

"Which one do you like?" The boy asked innocently, his voice like a tinkling bell.

Dreyfus did not stop smiling.

"Both... I respect anyone who can beat me."

"You like anyone who is cooler than you," Daniel declared.

His eyes danced invitingly.

His deep black pupils held pools of light.

Dreyfus instinctively sensed danger. He got gooseflesh. His gut feeling had saved him

from danger on several occasions. Surely it would this time too.

Dreyfus stepped back slowly.

He had definitely been right not to touch the boy's shoulder – he was sure of it. His heart was pounding just like it did after he killed someone. It was rare, extremely rare, for him to get this worked up. But this boy, Daniel, had been deployed here by the military...!

Without question, he was a Hybrid Child – the pinnacle of technoscience, that dreadful ultimate weapon that he had seen on the propaganda TVs. What was it doing out here on this planet in the sticks?

"Are you gonna kill the girl?"

"No, I'm not gonna kill her." The boy smiled for the first time. "We're gonna make love."

Dreyfus stared at this machine that was stronger than him, that could never die. He thought feverishly about how he'd like to terminate it, tear it apart, destroy it, and then put it away in his collection after he cut up and dissected it to his heart's content.

"Make love'?"

"Copulate," the boy continued, still smiling oddly.

The smile looked strange on that smooth, childish face. It reeked of such evil it was sickening.

"It will probably take some time before she's really ready for that though."

"Why's that?" he asked, the sick feeling changing to anger.

"Because she's a virgin."

Again, Dreyfus felt his heart seethe.

He's a bloody machine, what the hell is he saying?

This bastard's worse than the goddamn Adi – a repulsive, decadent fucker, uncannily human.

"Were you sent here by the Military Priest?"

"That's right."

"Are you a machine?"

"I guess so, if by 'machine' you mean something that was created by humans... although humans themselves were born from the bellies of other humans."

"Who the hell are you?"

"If you mean my physical appearance, and the cells that make up this body, then they are those of Daniel Hess, the Military Priest... he created me. He sent me out to hunt down Sample B #3, the girl that escaped – the one named Jonah."

The Military Priest... for real? Dreyfus felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into something he would be unable to get out of. *Indestructible. Perpetual youth. Immortality. The ultimate weapon.* Why the hell was he drawn to such things?

"But I heard that the Military Priest doesn't have a physical body?"

"That's right. Shortly after he was born, he was sundered from this world. The cells from his body had been collected immediately before that. Everything went according to plan. He was born into this world with eight hundred years of the knowledge and history of this galaxy."

"An extremely rare temporal deformity..."

He had heard the rumors – or the legends – many times. People talked about him as often as they talked about the war – that he was the savior of the world, that he was a sage sent into the world by God to restore the fallen world that the Empire of Machines had

taken over, that he had been born a wise old man. It was said that he was moving through his eight hundred year life span in reverse.

“He was born into this world a clever, ruthless old man. As he grows younger, he moves closer and closer to death. I can’t imagine how he might die, though.”

“A beautiful death, I’m sure?”

The boy – Daniel – his face identical to that of the military’s most powerful authority – smiled coolly.

“I have absolutely no interest in ‘death’.”

Dreyfus knew that a death wish lurked within him. All his life he had suppressed it, reined it in, tried to chase it away. That was how he had managed to survive until now – just barely managed to survive.

If I hadn’t trampled on others, if I hadn’t killed, I surely would have destroyed myself long ago. I’ve spent my whole life walking a dangerous tightrope, taking life after life so that I myself could survive. Not in the literal sense of killing to have food to survive, because of course all living things survive by taking the lives of others – after all, humans can’t live on inorganic substances like rocks and minerals. For whatever reason, we have no choice but to eat meats and plants that are similar to our own constitution. But in my case... that’s not why I do it; I kill people out of a psychological hunger. I’ve killed countless times. The oppression that I myself have suffered, I have returned in kind to everything and everyone around me. I had no choice but to live this way. I think about it no further than that. As for the other lives – as for all the other lives I’ve snuffed out – I don’t give them the slightest thought.

Suddenly, he thought to ask, “What do you live on; what do you eat?”

The boy poked his pink tongue out of his red-tinged mouth.

“Nuclear fusion fuel.”

This boy eats inorganic substances and will never know death! And he never takes the lives of others. What a beautiful, self-sufficient being!

He felt as though a bottomless pit had suddenly appeared before his eyes, its mouth gaping open... *he has no original sin!*

Like the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, these two now intended to commit the same sin – the eating of the forbidden fruit.

Whole, perfect, eternal – why was he drawn to such things?

Faced for the first time with a toy that would not break no matter how hard he might try, Dreyfus was becoming irritated. Until now, breaking things had been his life’s purpose.

Dreyfus felt an urge building up like a nervous twitch, an urge to start blasting away at the boy with a machine gun. Realizing that even this would not destroy the bastard, he became even more infuriated.

Aggressive frustration rose up in the back of his throat, black like nausea. He needed to expel it but did not know how. Dreyfus stared at the boy like a baby needing to burp.

“Why did you come here?”

The boy smiled.

“Because I figured that Jonah would be interested in you.”

“In me?”

“Yes. She’ll try to understand you, by eating your flesh.”

With a sense of revulsion, Dreyfus scowled.

“Well, I don’t wanna be eaten.”

“That’s not for you to decide. It’s for her to decide.”

“Why me?”

“Because you have a horrible sickness.”

“A horrible sickness, huh...”

Dreyfus went silent, completely expressionless.

Something dangerous was closing in on him... ever since these two came... the warning signals were flashing... something was trying to pry his heart open and force its way inside...

“Who the fuck... who the fuck do you think you are? You’re a fucking monster, you’re not a proper being!”

The boy listened, and answered quietly.

“I am His child.”

He relaxed his pretty cheeks and continued.

“Why do you think living creatures have children?”

Dreyfus shook his head, stepping slowly backwards.

The boy answered the question himself.

“Because they become disillusioned with themselves. They start to lose confidence in their own degenerating selves. The light of their own lives, which had once shone so brightly, grows weaker and weaker, and they find themselves overcome with anxiety. They look to the future, stretching out like an endless desert before them, and all of a sudden they become lonely... that’s why... that’s why... they give birth...”

Meanwhile, Jonah was groping the walls inside the pit.

The wall surfaces were brutal, like layer upon layer of sharp knives. If a flesh and blood human were to drop down here, they would be covered in gashes by the time they reached the bottom. There was stagnant evil in this pit.

There were several tunnels. She tried everywhere, but they were all dead ends. It seemed, however, as though everything had been more freely connected at one time.

Just as she had suspected, there were dead bodies, reduced to skeletons, lying scattered here and there throughout the pit. Dreyfus used this space as his special guest room after all.

Jonah carefully investigated the walls.

A bee that had somehow gotten in flew by, chanting a Buddhist sutra.

There were barriers everywhere, just as that boy – Daniel – had said. They were made of mesh fencing, with gaps too small for Jonah to fit through. The style was old, but effective.

Avoiding the mesh, Jonah felt along the walls, trying to understand their essence, their history, their knowledge – everything that had been stored there.

She poked the exploratory limb out from inside her throat in search of mineral cleavage; that is, the crystalline planes along which minerals are most likely to crack.

Even diamonds would crack along certain planes. Everything had a point of weakness, where a single tap could cause it to crumble. This was true both for human personalities formed over decades, and for diamonds formed over hundreds of millions of years.

The rock was structurally unusual.

It was not a naturally occurring form.

There are traces here... left behind, by innumerable creatures... highly acidic secretions... probably the drool of the children of a ferocious, dreadful life-form...

Jonah sensed traces of the life-form that had once crawled among these rocks. She could not touch the life-form itself, but through the memories that slept in the rocks, she could probe the traces of its presence there long ago.

A long, long time ago... maybe tens of millions of years ago – no, hundreds of millions of years ago... long ago, at the dawn of time, something crept across the surface of these walls, crawled into the cracks in the rocks, and went to sleep here, alive.

An image of it burst into her mind – ferocious, dangerous, powerful, ovoviviparous, winged and clawed... *a bizarre-looking monster!*

She stretched her exploratory limb out further and ran it along the cracks in the rock, carefully avoiding the barriers.

The thin silver tube stretched out about a meter from between her parted lips and twisted deeper into the wall, poking and licking around.

The traces were fresh.

She was getting closer to the present. Although “closer to the present” was still millions of years ago. Something had once crawled about here. Something had once crawled about this place...

It was... a pouch.

Immediately, she understood.

It was an ovoviviparous pouch... the mother had sensed some kind of danger, and expelled it from her body.

Suddenly Jonah’s exploratory limb made contact with the contents of the pouch, buried deep within the rock.

It’s hot!

Jonah tried to pull away.

It's hot it's hot it's hot, I'll be engulfed in blazing flames, the pouch must be a thousand degrees centigrade, the rock is dissolving like candy, melting, slowly crushing the pouch – if I'm not careful I'll be dragged inside!

Jonah constructed a web around her self, so that she would not be drawn by the memories of the cells and transform.

The mother's wings sizzled and crinkled as they burned; her body twisted with the heat and she sprayed yellow acid from her pores; she was dying, death was coming; this place was actually a nesting hole; the mother had stayed in this nesting hole with her eggs for one hundred days; there was a forest fire, but she was too late, she could not escape; *why, why, noooo*; she did not care what happened to herself, she would die soon, but the children that have yet to be born (suddenly, like an explosion, the mother developed the ability to sense the future) – *Just save these lives that will become the children of tomorrow...!* Jonah was touching those very eggs; they housed memories still now... *here, at the dawn of time, this pouch full of children was expelled from the dying mother's body as she burned in flames!*

Dreyfus backed up even further.

The boy eyed him suspiciously.

Just then, Dreyfus stamped his feet like a sorcerer doing a magical dance.

Bam! The boy's footing disappeared from beneath him, and he dropped down into the hole without uttering a sound.

This act, however, did not give Dreyfus his usual feeling of exhilaration.

He tried to imagine how his mother had felt when she gave birth to him.

Did she see promise in her unborn son? Did she see a glimmer of hope? Nah, no way, that woman lived a filthy life...of course she didn't.

Thinking about it made his head pound.

His mother had hated him.

I knew even before you were born that nobody would welcome you, she had said, I tried to abort you again and again, I injected myself with harmful drugs, I tied a rope around my waist and jumped out the window of a building, and still it didn't work.

Perhaps she had hated herself most of all, not just her son. Becoming pregnant (by whom, she did not know) had also been a kind of slow suicide. She could not love anybody, and she passed that sickness on beautifully to her son.

He trusted no one.

The only things I can trust are cold, inorganic things – money, knives, guns, jewels, power, violence, organizations. Even myself... ah, wait, thinking about it too much is going to give me a migraine. Having those two locked up right below me is bad for my heart. How is he going to manage this situation? How in the world is that boy going to subdue that girl?

How in the world are those two monsters going to copulate...?

Dreyfus peered down slowly, but he could not see anything. The bottom of the pit was dark.

The boy fell hard on his back and cried out. This whole “pain” thing was a nuisance. If there was no pain, then he did not feel anything at all, but when there was pain, it annoyed him.

The skin on his back was torn and hanging in flaps, but it began to heal immediately.

Never once had the boy felt troubled about the future that lay before him.

That was because he was a machine – because he was not alive.

He looked around the old cave, and thought simply: So this is Eden. So this is the paradise to which the two of us are confined – just the two of us.

Jonah, meanwhile, sensed an intruder... she stood petrified.

After sampling the cells of the ancient monster, she had heard a loud crash. If it was a human being that had fallen down here, they would most certainly be dead. But she had heard the sound of something getting back up... which meant that it was that boy, Daniel. That boy – a machine just like her – that poor boy with the cold eyes, who still did not know the joy of life...

Jonah approached quietly.

As she crept along, trying not to make any sound, her legs began to transform spontaneously into those of a cat-like animal.

The boy was at the far end of the cave.

He had his back to her, and he was investigating the walls just as Jonah had done moments ago.

“Hey!” Jonah called out to him.

Surprised, the boy turned around.

“Hey,” he said and smiled. His bright red lips were like blooming roses.

“I’m leaving this place.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to be here.”

"I see." The boy smiled again, "You don't want to be with me?"

Bewildered, Jonah answered, "...No."

The truth was that she did not really know.

He was clearly her enemy, and yet she had chased him all the way here. He had been sent by the military to pursue her.

At first, she had been beside herself, having finally found someone else like her. However, now that she had cooled down, she knew that she had been mistaken – this boy was clearly her enemy. He was a pawn of the military, and he had come here to capture her.

If am captured and sent back to the military, what kind of punishment would be in store for me? I have no idea... Would I be demolished? Tortured? Dissected? Put on display?

Probably all of the above.

It doesn't really matter anyway – now that I know the joy of being alive, the joy of being free – if I were to be captured now, like a rare butterfly – that alone would probably be enough to kill me.

"You came here to capture me, didn't you?"

No doubt he would pluck her wings off one by one, like an innocent kid. "Innocence," after all, is lack of emotion; it is a frozen heart.

"Nah," the boy replied, "same as you. I escaped."

The girl let out a shrill laugh.

"No, you didn't. You're not even alive!"

"Sure I'm alive."

"No you're not! Look at you, you're freezing cold! You're just a machine!" The girl sneered.

“Well then, teach me – teach me how to live.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Who taught you?”

“*He* did.”

“What do I need to do to be alive?”

“Do you *really* want to live? *Really?!?*” the girl asked, taking a step backward.

“I want to live,” said the boy, taking a step forward, “together with you.”

The girl took another step back.

“Together with you. I want to live, together, forever, with you.”

Suddenly, the girl spun around.

“Wait!” The boy stretched out his thin, bare arms.

The girl slipped through his arms and dashed into a tunnel.

“Love me!!” the boy screamed at the top of his lungs.

“You have no right to say that,” the girl shouted back.

“I do so! I’ve learned, from the cells of all kinds of creatures... I’ve studied the process by which males and females approach each other...”

The girl’s laugh rattled the ceiling of the cave. “And? Is that all? Are you a total idiot?!”

All of a sudden, her entire body shaking, she felt herself beginning to transform... according to the genetic map of the cells that she had collected a moment ago...

...The future children – the future that the mother who had burned to death had prayed for, for her children – that is the shape that I am taking on...

First, the creature sprayed an acidic yellow vapour. It was a three meter long larva, with sixteen clawed feet and half that number of body segments. It promptly set to work

dissolving the rocks.

As it crawled along the walls on its sixteen legs, the creature carved hideous scars on the rock surface. Track marks from its sharp claws...

“There’s no point trying to escape! There are barriers all over the place! This is Eden! You can never leave! You don’t have to leave! This is our own private paradise, just you and me!”

Indifferent to the boy’s shouts, Jonah abandoned herself to the ongoing transformation.

The larva transformed into a pupa, and the wings began to press forcefully outward from within. Midway through the transformation, the pupa turned semi-transparent and the boy could see green liquid slopping around inside. Then all of a sudden the pupa’s flesh became opaque and he could no longer see what was inside... it was clear, however, that a dreadful chemical change, or a biological metamorphosis, or perhaps a miracle – was occurring.

The boy was struck with a kind of fear – it was the shock of having encountered something unfamiliar.

What in the world is that thing?

He had never seen such a creature. He had never even heard of such a thing. It was a life form that was beyond the scope of the knowledge that he had collected.

Finally, something rust-colored and knife-like split open the pupa’s back from the inside. A spongy creature came crawling out.

Its wings, covered with a thousand iron scales, were still wet.

It stood on one eagle-like foot with huge talons.

In the center of its forehead was a single eye, covered with a thin membrane – it could not see very well. The hole next to its beak was the more important sensory organ.

It had two fishlike pectoral fins on its chest that swayed like silk. These too were a type of sensory organ.

Within the monster, was Jonah.

This creature had undoubtedly once lived here on Caritas – and it had been recreated from a single cell, here and now...

The boy pressed his back against the wall and looked up at *the thing*.

Jonah forced up her eyelid and looked around. But she still could not see very well, even with the eyelid up.

“What, you think you can get out?!” the boy shouted.

The monster=Jonah vibrated her vocal cords in response. She managed to do more than simply roar, since the vocal cords were relatively similar to those of humans. Her words were comprehensible, but the voice was dreadful, like a horrific wind blowing up from the lowest reaches of Hell.

Leee leee, leaving, this place, I’m leaving, heee heeee, leaving here, hee heee, leee leee...

Jonah spat slimy mucous from a beak lined with pointy triangular teeth. The stringy fluid ran crawling between the cracks in the rocks, squirming like bugs. *No, wait* – it really was bugs, nurtured inside the monster’s digestive organs since the day she was born.

They were parasites that could not live independently of the monster, but they also

acted as the monster's advance guard in exchange for the nourishment they received from the digestive tract. They were nothing like the monster in shape or size, but in terms of structure and evolutionary biology, the two were extremely similar.

Through the monster's eye – through its sensory organ – the elements of the rock were clearly visible; it was like looking at a perspective drawing. The mesh-covered fencing blazed bright red, bringing back memories of the creature's death – memories of the fire that had assailed its nest.

The memory of the monster's death was horrible – but she always felt that way after sampling a dead creature. The dreadful memories imprinted in the cells returned – the fear, the regret, the lingering attachments. The grudge at having been singled out, blasted with the stinking breath of Death while others were saved... the howling agony... the death of a single unit in the great chain of life... the *pain* of it assailed her.

And then there was death, dark and eternal, the corpses lying there like old pieces of junk. Eventually, even the corpses disappeared from this world...

Just then, Jonah felt a change. It was death. At the same time, she saw a light. It moved like the flickering flame of a candle.

What is that?

Nothing like this has ever happened before.

It's death.

I'm dying.

And yet I can see something... what in the world IS that?

It's shining...

Heat from deep inside the rocks infused the barriers.

Both the insects and the monster continued to spray venomous saliva.

They carve sculptures with their saliva. This monster can bore freely through rock; it exists with the rock; it gives birth to its children within the rock; the children's drool dissolves the rock. How incredible... Jonah suddenly understood – *this monster lives by eating inorganic substances!*

The iron armour it carried on its back spread open like a fan.

Crack! The barriers snapped. The acid that the bugs were spitting had finally reached the heat source.

The monster=Jonah spread her wings part way and sprang upwards. She climbed her way up through the pit, nimbly scaling the walls with her single foot, as though she had done this many times before.

She could hear the boy shouting something from the bottom.

Jonah climbed frantically up through the hole.

She leapt out the top and came face to face with Dreyfus, standing there dumbfounded, his face the color of paper.

D-d, Ddrrreeeeeyyyyffuuuuuuusssss...

"Fuck you!!!" Dreyfus screamed back, his scarred face distorting.

There was infinite fury in that scream. Even if biological Death were to come for him right then and there, he would probably still keep raging on, paying it no heed. Things were not going as expected, and he was positively mad with rage.

Jonah landed on top of Dreyfus.

Properly speaking, she placed her single foot on top of his head, and grasped his hair.

“Fuck! Let go! Let go!!”

The monster=Jonah flapped her wings, knocked the raging man down like a doll, and lightly picked him up again. Dreyfus’ legs floundered in the air. He pulled out a knife and slashed at the monster’s legs, but it was no use – he just kept hitting the hard mineral armour. Seconds later, his hair tore right out from his scalp.

He let out an awful, thundering shriek.

Dreyfus’ hair hung dangling like seaweed between the monster’s claws, while Dreyfus himself fell to the ground rolling and screaming, blood spurting from his torn scalp.

The Boss’ bodyguards came running into the room, wondering what on earth all the clamor was.

It’s a kashiageha! It’s a kashiageha!

Seeing the monster=Jonah, they all started shouting at once, their bodies stiffening convulsively. The air all around them froze with primal fear.

She traced back through the knowledge in Dreyfus’ cells.

Kashiageha – a legendary monster that smashed through rock, that tore open the earth, and that ruled the skies, the land, and the sea; it was the most powerful creature in history, the Caritas Queen, now found only in fossils but still feared by all – kashiageha, the great mother, gone extinct long ago!

Jonah twisted her thick neck to look at them.

She suddenly realized that she could also use her four wings as legs. She bent the

wings, positioned them on the ground, and was thus able to run considerably faster.

Apparently, that one single leg would be better called an arm.

Perhaps they realized that they could never win, or perhaps it was instinctual fear, but Dreyfus' cowardly underlings saw the fantastic figure of the monster=Jonah come stomping towards them, fired two or three shots, and went running pitter-patter away. They had not been particularly faithful to the Boss in the first place; they had stuck with Dreyfus simply because they had something to gain, because they could make money.

Standing on the ground on her four wings, Jonah slowly brought Dreyfus' hair, clutched between her claws, up to her beak.

There were blood-soaked cells stuck to the ends Dreyfus' torn out hair; Jonah's chewing apparatus promptly began to analyze them.

She felt his memories, his whole life, his entire existence.

Dreyfus grasped his head, then stared down at his hands, sticky with blood.

He was not too seriously hurt.

Not like long ago, when I endured hours and hours of pain as my face was carved up like a rattan blind...

With that, he rolled quickly across the floor to the hidden room that housed his weapons cache.

Dreyfus held his fingers up to the scanner, and the door opened.

Inside, all kinds of weapons were boisterously lined up awaiting their turn. His splendid ballerinas – he had named them all himself. Dreyfus snatched a “Jennifer” and looked back over his shoulder.

Directly behind him, the hideous spectre – part falcon, part moth, part tiled roof – was

closing in.

“Fucker! Goddamn piece of shit!”

Dreyfus hoisted the rocket launcher.

His face was positively demonic.

The monster=Jonah opened her beak.

Dreyfus thought he was going to be eaten.

He fired the rocket launcher.

With a thundering sound, the rocket went zooming through the air, shooting off sparks, aimed at the monster’s neck.

Jonah said:

Same, heheheeee, same as me, you, heheheeee, mother-killer, same as me, killed your mother, who gave you birth, you killed her, same, heehehe, same as me...

Dreyfus’s eyes bulged. His pupils dilated and the light came rushing in.

Meanwhile, the rocket slammed into the monster=Jonah’s neck and exploded. Broken fragments came raining down, as though a building had just been bombed.

There was a hole in the monster’s neck. The bird-like head flopped violently over to the side. Through the hole, he could see the anatomy inside. That too looked just like a collapsed building.

Jonah tried to lift up her head. She could feel her internal structures starting to activate and revive.

Memories – Dreyfus’ suffering, his sadness – all of his built up memories circulated

throughout her body.

He was a mother-killer, just like Jonah.

He killed his mother.

And now again, he's... he's trying to kill his mother – the mother of this planet, Milagros, the guardian deity of Caritas – he's trying to choke the life out of her!

Dreyfus's arms dangled loosely at his sides, like a corpse.

This fucker knows – knows that I have killed... probably knows the methods I've used – the fucker knows – knows why I do it, knows about the irresistible urges I get to kill, knows the obscene pleasure I get from it, everything, knows the DNA in my blood, knows the underbelly of my cells, the placement of my organs, the shape of my goddamn asshole – everything!!

Dreyfus stifled a stunted scream, and let out a furious roar.

Jonah turned around and changed direction.

She understood at that very moment what Dreyfus' underlings were doing.

The canal... Shi, Shi Shiver, Shiverer Mouse, and... Ra, Rafflesiah, and the Adiaptronite – he sent his soldiers to the secret canal where they're hiding!

Jonah's friends were doing everything they could to try to make contact with Milagros. They were trying to get her back – to get back the kind, gentle city computer, filled with motherly love and affection, who had once administered this dying planet.

Ahh... but this man, Dreyfus, hates her... when Dreyfus was a child, he thought his own mother was going to kill him. He went to Milagros for help, and she paid him no attention.

Milagros was not perfect. She knew that a powerless child was being abused, and she did absolutely nothing about it. Dreyfus had hated the Goddess ever since.

The after-effects of war had remained, and Milagros developed a learning disorder – a

neurosis specific to artificial intelligences. However, she had been sick all along. It was worse now, that was all.

Ahhh... Jonah traced Dreyfus' memories – she could feel the underground canal, and Milagros' exposed nerve extremities, being destroyed and raped and torn to pieces by Dreyfus' army of boys.

No, wait – this is just an image inside of him, its still just a fantasy, there's still time, it's still ok, this isn't a memory, it's his plan, it's just an image, its the future, a future that hasn't yet happened!

The monster=Jonah twisted her pulverized neck and spread her wings. Dreyfus fell backwards to the ground, thrown down by the blast of wind. It was only the weight of the rocket launcher he was still holding that had kept him from being blown away.

Shiver... Shiverer Mouse...!

Jonah remembered him – that young man, stuck in a white coffin, dying. He was alive, shining bright with life, and he was kind – she liked him... she really liked him!

I haven't forgotten about him, I never forget any of the beings that I sample, never!

As though something had nudged her on the shoulder, the monster=Jonah took off and headed for the canal.

12

Shiver was on the verge of starvation, but Lesiah was trying to force him awake.

You have to live! C'mon, live, you have to live!

He wished she would go away; she was always bothering him...

< We can't let those children die! >

Lesiah, oxygen tank on her back, was screaming and carrying on next to him.

The two of them had just entered the canal where the Adiaptronite was hiding.

Shiver was vaguely aware of a group of boys swimming through the deep water, their bodies wriggling.

They were like an illusion through a fisheye lens, or like fireworks reflected on the surface of a lake. They were like rare deep-sea fish, the light blue aquaballoons puffed out on their faces.

The boys had pledged their fidelity to Dreyfus in exchange for their daily bread, and one after another they now came surging through these dangerous canals. Shiver pitied them.

Perhaps boys this age possess a mysterious group consciousness, some special characteristic, that makes them want to form groups like fish. They're about as stupid as fish too.

All of a sudden, Shiver felt disgusted by the brutality that came with youth and ignorance. Maybe because it made him remember his younger self – the one who had killed every living being besides himself in these canals.

Just then, there was a low rumbling in the ground that reverberated deep into the pit of his stomach.

The water rocked and trembled.

In his special visual field, the light-infused, rust-colored waves undulated outwards.

“Those little shits are trying to destroy this place; they’re going to try to destroy everything here.”

Shiver suddenly pictured something else and smiled ironically.

The boys, with those big aquaballoons on their heads, look like a bunch of... *yeah, they look like... sperm. Countless sperm, like so many bubbles. Swimming desperately through this narrow canal, all in the same direction, all with the same goal. Yet none of them knows where or what that “same direction” or “same goal” actually is. After all, they’re just simple proteins – no brains whatsoever.*

Just motion.

Just the furious swishing of their tails – instinctual, brutal motion.

They carve their way through the water, shoving each other aside, trampling each other down – it’s a battle to survive, with a one in a million chance!

Milagros is a great sprawling womb.

However, only one person will be able to enter. Only the first one who can pry open her heart, she will accept, love, and unite with – just once. All the others will die outside her closed door – heaps of dead bodies, full of resentment.

It was a stupid daydream... but there was probably some truth in it.

Indeed, there was both comfort and denial to be found in Milagros. Both coincidence and design.

Countless genes, swimming toward her... Shiver suddenly thought of Jonah, and his heart ached more than he could ever have imagined.

When he first met her, she had cried. She had cried for Shiver – cried for Pinocchio, sick and dying within a white coffin. *You’re going to die soon, aren’t you,*

you're dying aren't you... she had said, and cried.

She had understood him immediately. She took a bite of him, and she understood. Her thin body had trembled with sobs.

She eats genes in order to understand. The analyzing equipment within her does its work, and she understands everything immediately.

She is the universe. There is a benevolent god inside her belly who understands everything... she radiates light; she carries the sun in her breast.

Does Milagros understand?

Does Milagros really, truly understand other people, the way that Jonah does?

Does she understand their genes, their memories, their thoughts, their existence, their philosophy, their love, and... everything about their death?

Does she understand?

The water boomed and trembled once again.

"Those guys are trying to kill Milagros and the Adiaptronite; look at all those weapons! Pay attention or you'll get shot!"

< I am paying attention! >

"Then what do we do?!" Shiver shouted back at her.

Shiver would have no moral scruples about kicking the boys out of here or killing them.

If Lesiah ordered him to do it, he would massacre them brutally without hesitation. But of course she ordered no such thing. That was why Shiver liked Lesiah.

Lesiah was muttering.

"What did you say?"

< We have to protect them. >

“How?”

< I’m trying to contact Adi now. >

Lesiah’s voice was laced with irritation.

Shiver stretched out a mechanical limb and grabbed hold of Lesiah.

“Your heart is pounding...”.

< C’mon, Adi, hurry hurry, answer...! >

Lesiah slapped vigorously at the mic.

< There’s no time, c’mon, c’mon! Adi!! >

Shiver watched helplessly from beside her.

< Adi! Ah! Oh good, you’re there! > Lesiah suddenly shouted, and a huge smile spread across her face, big and bright like the three full moons.

She spoke into the mic for some time. Then she fell silent.

She became very serious, like a priestess about to speak of God. She looked at Shiver and said:

< You see, my lover was the architect for the canals in this city. >

“Oh?”

Lesiah always got angry if he didn’t respond with little comments like that when she was talking. *You should listen when people are talking to you*, she would say.

...Did she say “lover”? Lesiah has a lover!

All of a sudden, Shiver realized that he was angry. He was, in fact, enraged. But why?

< It was a long time ago, but... he designed these canals. >

“So what?”

< Um, did I say something wrong? >

"No, never mind," Shiver said, "it's me."

< What is? >

"I'm jealous."

Lesiah did not laugh. Instead, she said, < I'm sorry. If I caused you... >

"Nah, it doesn't matter."

All of a sudden, Shiver felt the anger turn into sadness. It happened in no time at all.

"It doesn't matter."

It *didn't* matter.

Why should he, a half dead doll in a white coffin, be jealous over Lesiah? Besides, she said it was a long time ago.

Jealous over Lesiah, who now served God...

It was pointless. Stupid.

Stop disparaging yourself! Stop feeling sorry for yourself!

Shiver felt the sadness turn back to anger – an upgrade, a promotion. It was a good sign.

"Go on."

With that, Lesiah began to speak.

< Designing the canals was an extremely difficult job. But the people of Caritas needed clean water, so they redeveloped this area. It was dangerous work. Milagros was already pretty far gone by then, although not as bad as now. He came right down into the canals together with the workers. He was the type of person who needed to see to everything himself – he had a very strong sense of responsibility. >

When she referred to her lover in the past tense, it all seemed very far away.

< There were all kinds of dangerous creatures in these canals. Freshwater fish made their homes here as soon as these canals were built. There wasn't a lot of plant food around, so there were a lot of carnivorous fish. You named a lot of those fish, didn't you, Shiver... >

"Michelin, sabamba, samelandra... they've almost all been eaten now though."

< There were still a lot of them at that time. I mean, that was thirty years ago already. I think there were more species back then too. Milagros was incredibly powerful. She had *tons* of Experience-Bodies. Here in the canals, too, there were remodelled fish with machines embedded inside, swimming everywhere. They were her eyes and ears, there to do her bidding. >

"... Ah."

< The fish surrounded them. He had a gun, of course, but he never shot it unless he absolutely had to. He was the kind of person who hated to take life; he was satisfied with the bare minimum he needed to survive. The fish attacked him though. >

"Ah."

Shiver did not say anything, but he thought the guy was an idiot. All he would have had to do was to kill one of the fish right away. Then all the other carnivorous fish would have swarmed around it, and he could have used that time to get away.

< They tore his legs apart with their sharp teeth. It only took a minute. >

"See? Because he wasn't paying attention."

Lesiah ignored the comment.

Shiver had not actually intended to say such a thing, so he was grateful that Lesiah had ignored him. Lesiah understood everything. Absolutely everything.

< The place became a sea of blood in no time. Carnivorous fish from all over the canals gathered around. The workers got scared and split. And then he was eaten. >

“Is that so.”

< I heard this from the workers who were there until the end and witnessed the whole thing. They said that even his bones were torn to shreds, that there was nothing left... I went into mourning. I didn’t eat anything for some time. I couldn’t motivate myself to do anything. I was a complete mess every day. I would finally drag myself out of bed once I saw the moons rise... >

“You? I can’t believe it.”

< I wanted to die. The whole time. It’s true... I had no reason to live. >

“You?”

Considering Lesia’s vitality and sense of values, it was hard to imagine. A Lesiah who desired “Death” seemed somehow impossible. The only Lesiah that Shiver knew was the one who was focused one hundred percent on her goals – on living, on believing in *Him*, and on seeing the world filled with His light.

< But then one day, a miracle happened. He appeared out of thin air! >

Dumbfounded, Shiver forgot to respond.

< It’s true! It was a lunar morning, of course. It happened suddenly, as soon as I got up.>

Shiver whispered quietly within the coffin: *Oh?*

< He was standing in the darkness in front of the shower room... like a wraith. His face was practically blue; even his lips looked all purple and transparent. His hair was soaking wet. I’m telling you, he was like a character straight out of a gothic horror story. And then he

looks at me and without even moving his mouth, he says: *Don't be afraid. I was eaten by Milagros' Experience-Bodies, and there is nothing left of me. But in exchange, Milagros has experienced me, so she understands me*, he says. *Now I'm together with her, inside of her*, he says. *She understands now that possessing others is not the point – she has learned what it means to be killed, to have one's flesh stolen, to be possessed by another, to use one's body and one's life for the existence of another. So I'm glad that I was eaten by the fish.* That's what he said. >

Shiver forgot to respond again.

He was thinking.

He felt as though he vaguely understood what it was that the Adiaptronite was doing, or thought he was doing, or thought he might be able to do.

Shiver spoke.

"So, does that mean that my mother, who drowned in the sea... has also been stored inside Milagros?"

< Well...what? Your mother drowned? >

"Yeah, back when I was still healthy; it was before I got sick. I was a kid, suntanned and running on the beach... My mother and I had gone together. I was a good swimmer, so I went ahead and swam out into the open sea. But then somehow I ended up in a spot that was swirling with cold seawater, and I panicked. I kept kicking my legs but I just kept sinking; I tried to breathe but I just became more and more frantic; I was swallowing a lot of water. My mother saw what was happening. She jumped into the sea, even though she couldn't swim very well. It was probably instinct. She was just focused on saving her son; she didn't think about anything else. I woke up lying on the beach under the blazing sun. I

felt good, like I had just woken up from a nap after a long swim. I had absolutely no recollection of how I got there. But, but..."

< Your mother never come back? >

Shiver shook his head inside the coffin.

Lesiah took a deep, raspy breath.

< Your mother is inside Milagros now. Haven't you ever felt... that Milagros loved you?

That she loved you, or you know, that she worried about you, or that she cared about you? >

"Yeah, I have. I could always sense her. Until very recently, that is. Until Milagros got really crazy."

Milagros had been very good to him... she had talked to him sometimes, through her various Experience-Bodies. About fun things, interesting things, and important things. She had quietly slipped him all kinds of information. It was a fish swimming in a tank at a sushi bar that had that told him the location of the suckling station. The flowers on the trees had spoken to him sometimes too. Sometimes he found it annoying, and other times he was glad for the information and listened.

< When you got sick, the "Flying Medics" came and made that white coffin for you. >

Ahhh, they sure did – Shiver remembered that day like it was yesterday.

The Flying Medics swooped down from the sky, making so much noise it was as though the world was coming to an end.

Bathed in the crimson rays of the setting sun, they came clanging and clattering onto the roof of the social housing unit where he was living at the time.

He rushed to the window in his wheelchair and looked outside, where he saw a number of purple spaceships bordered with pink fringe, floating in the air. The pink aura

was caused by the electromagnetic force of flying through space.

Shiver stuck his head out the window. With an incredible show of technological prowess, the spaceship groaned and plucked him out through the window. Shiver found himself suspended in mid-air, unable to so much as scream. The next thing he knew, he was on the roof.

The glittering spaceship was parked there on top of the building. All of a sudden, a door slid open. He had not even noticed that there was a door there – he realized it for the first time when it opened its gaping mouth.

A medical apparatus appeared at the entrance, clattering and banging like so many drums and cymbals.

It looked like... like the kind of machine that worked on assembly lines at automated factories. Welding torches, spark plugs, paint, cranes, compressed gas...

And yet... it spoke.

‘We’ve come to repair you.’

Shiver then became something of a lab rat. He was pushed down onto the ground without even a moment to protest. His head was wrenched open with an electric drill, and a hundred pins came pounding in. Electric cables of various sorts were screwed in to their proper locations and tested for response. The machine recorded all of this in great detail. About thirty minutes later, he found himself encased within the white coffin.

The Flying Medics were a medical welfare organization that had been formed a very long time ago, but now it was machines alone that carried on their legacy. They were incredibly powerful, and exuded an otherworldly radiance. The problem was that nobody really knew under which circumstances they might show up.

For example, they might come rushing to perform first aid on someone with a minor injury, while leaving a seriously ill person bedridden for years. Sometimes they would come to perform a simple treatment that could easily be done by any human on Caritas, and other times they would perform major operations like Shiver's that no ordinary human would be capable of.

They were basically an independent organization, but they also functioned as an emergency service that responded to Milagros' calls.

< Couldn't it have been your mother who called them over? >

"Well, I dunno..."

< Maybe your mother was always watching over you, from inside Milagros? >

"What, you're saying she thought I'd be happy like this?"

< Well, she'd rather see you that way than dead, don't you think? >

"Better than dying? This?"

Lesiah shrugged most eloquently, in spite of being underwater.

< That's for you to say, not me. >

The boys were fast approaching the narrow canal where the Adiaptronite was hiding, the aquaballoons bulging from their mouths.

The entrance to the canal began to close.

< See? I told you. My lover is a specialist in these canals. >

"He's dead though, isn't he?"

< He's inside Milagros, and Adi has summoned him! >

Shiver and Lesiah watched the barrier slowly descend.

The boys swam around in confusion, their path suddenly obstructed. The three older

ones started giving orders of some kind.

“They’re gonna shoot!” Shiver shouted.

< We won’t let them! Shiver, come on! This is why you had to come back to life! >

Lesiah took off recklessly, leaving jets of water swirling in her wake.

“But – Lesiah!!”

Shiver stretched out a limb and tried to catch her, but it was too late.

He called the name three times, just as Lesiah had instructed him. *Poof!* There it appeared, about thirty centimeters in front of him, standing less than a meter tall.

The Adiaptronite observed it – a little man.

The Adiaptronite was struck with a feeling something like surprise. He was not really sure why. He understood immediately that the little man was a part of her – part of Milagros, with whom Adi had spent so much time talking these days.

Milagros had incorporated all kinds of personalities – her heart was a collection of fragments, like a mosaic. She was a multiple-personality construction.

She had been programmed to love the humans of this land. She was designed that way by her creator, her programmer. It formed the basis of what could be called her “instinct.”

In the beginning, she had swallowed up the people of the city when they died.

However, she soon became greedy. She began to kill people who interested her – thus gaining more and more experience, knowledge, memories, thoughts and feelings. She was learning, in her own way. She had been diagnosed with a learning disorder induced by war-neuroses, but that was not true. She was simply not doing things the correct way, that was all.

A serious malfunction had developed in her “love” frame.

Milagros was still killing now. She kept on killing, in order to experience the dead bodies. That was the wrong way to do things. Obviously, it was not enough to simply study the dead and then reproduce them in one’s artificial intelligence.

Just look at this man... this little man.

‘I’m Karl. I’m Lesiah’s...’

“Her lover,” the Adiaptronite said, completely expressionless.

The man nodded, seemingly relieved. ‘Somebody called me... I’m the architect who designed the canals.’

The Adiaptronite smiled sweetly, his face terribly handsome.

“I called you. Lesiah asked me to.”

‘Is she... in some kind of trouble?’

“Are you worried?”

The architect’s small face clouded over.

‘So she *is* in some kind of trouble... but what is it?’

“This canal is under attack. We need you to lower the barrier.”

‘Under attack? Who is attacking?!’

“Some boys who live here on Caritas.”

‘But why... why would they do something like that, when Milagros is caring for them?’

The ground beneath them shook and rumbled from some kind of impact.

The Adiaptronite never got flustered or annoyed. Deep down, he possessed only reflexes and a kind of tension. Even so, the tone of his beautiful voice went up a notch.

“We don’t want to have to kill the children. Since you designed the canals, you know

how to lower the barrier, right?”

‘Why would they attack Milagros?’

“We need to hurry. There’s no time for discussion.”

The architect, Lesiah’s lover, nodded weakly.

‘I understand. Clearly, it’s dangerous here...’

There was a rumbling, someplace deep and far away. Something was starting to move – it was a door that hadn’t been used for centuries, moving by itself.

The Adiaptronite was staring at the architect with great interest. Then suddenly, he asked.

“Was Lesiah a good woman?”

‘Who... who... who *are* you?’

“I’m an Adiaptronite who got left behind on this planet. I’m a friend of Lesiah’s.”

‘The Adiaptronite – I heard about you from Milagros. She said you’re a delightful person...’

“I’m friends with Milagros too. We’ve talked about all kinds of things.”

‘Yes, she’s told me about the fierce battles on Syaut #3, about the Hybrid Child... I feel like I know you.’

“I know about you too. Lesiah told me about you. She said there’s nobody with a kinder heart than you; that being with you made her feel calm and relaxed; that you were like a welcome warmth that enfolded her; that you were like sunshine in the middle of winter. That’s what she said.”

The architect’s face lit up.

‘I remember her very well... Lately I’m terribly forgetful, but her I remember... my

only regret is having to be away from her, especially having lost my physical body. Lesiah was so terribly sad, that just once I went to her room to try to restore her spirits. Since then too, I'm always watching over her. Whenever I sense that she needs advice – about the administration of the church or what have you – I use a variety of means to communicate it to her. It was terribly difficult at the beginning – the church buildings were crumbling, and there was no money. There were also very few people who believed in the immortality of the soul. However, there is always help to be found somewhere. The church is a huge institution. I acted as their secret intermediary for many years, sending money, materials, people, and supplies such as boats and food – things like that. I would include some kind of sign so she would know it was from me – for example, I would send her electronic letters written in mirror-writing, which I was very good at when I was alive. Or I would send her a bouquet with all of her favorite flowers on her birthday, or cards filled with all kinds of puns and wordplay. I made contact with her in such a way that only she would know it was me, and I'm sure she must have understood – understood that I'm still alive here... that I've been living all this time inside of Milagros. And that in this world, there is no death.'

"So it seems."

'There are all kinds of humans here. She stores all the people who have died on Caritas within herself. Milagros learns. She learns everything. She makes them a part of herself, because she loves them. After all, lovers always say they want to "become one," don't they? We can really do that here.'

The Adiaptronite could feel the depth of Milagros' illness. It might in fact be impossible to repair her.

That was because Milagros' system worked in subtle accordance with the religion of

the Planetary Bible Belt. He was no expert on human religion, but he could see that it was a real nuisance, and riddled with deep-rooted problems.

The Adiaptronite felt like he understood the human word “despair.” He simply had to think about how it had felt when he was separated from the ZAGATO on Sayut #3 and lost his power source. His yellow star count had reached thirty, so he was automatically treated as defective and discarded by the MAZA.

That was it.

That was the closest thing he knew to the feeling of “despair.” And despair was... very lonely.

Loneliness gives birth to something new.

“Do you want to call Lesiah?”

‘Call her? You mean to come here? Inside of Milagros?’

“Yes.”

‘When she dies, she will naturally be called here. But she is still alive. Of course it would be a lot of fun if she were here – if she were actually here – but...’

“Doesn’t everybody inside Milagros want to call their lovers and relatives and friends?”

Because they’re lonely.

Because they don’t want to be discarded someplace, all alone.

They want to be together with everyone else.

They want someone to watch over them.

The architect was still searching for his words. What eventually came out was a small-voiced, ordinary reply.

“Probably, yes.”

The Adiaptronite wondered if Milagros might be turning into a kind of afterworld, the collective ego of the “astral body” that Lesiah sometimes talked about.

The astral body was a concept from theosophy. It referred to a second physical existence which accompanied a person throughout their life, and which remained after their death as a kind of extrasensory existence. Apparently such an idea existed among humans.

In other words, maybe Milagros, a giant, elaborate artificial intelligence, a human-made machine, is becoming a sort of spirit world.

All those dead people who’ve been etched into her artificial intelligence, all those souls – maybe all of them are calling their companions, their children, their lovers, their friends.

Milagros swallows up everything. Milagros, the dreadful Mother Goddess – corpulent, greedy, and powerful – the devoted Mother of everything born on Caritas.

She slaughters everything. She won’t be satisfied until this beautiful planet has been flattened onto a single, unending plateau, and every creature and every life and every activity just stops existing, and every one of her children has been contained inside her womb.

The Adiaiptronite consolidated that thought, and recorded it.

“Wait, I said!” Shiver shouted, chasing after Lesiah, rushing through the swirling currents that she had stirred up behind her.

As usual, she’s too full of vinegar, and reckless to boot.

What would she have done here without me? ...Oh, I get it, that’s why she rescued Little Mr. White Coffin from the brink of death.

Inside the coffin, Shiver quietly suppressed a smile.

It had been a mistake to call Lesiah reckless. She was a woman who was capable of deliberate calculation. She had a firm understanding of economics, she was skilled in the arts of persuasion, and she had acquired a certain level of cunning. Perhaps she had learned these things from her experience running the church. Interestingly, when she put these things into practice, it simply seemed like an expression of cultured refinement.

The boys noticed Lesiah and the white coffin coming towards them.

The three young men who stood at the front waved their arms.

The boys, almost a hundred of them, each glared at the two of them.

Lesiah, as always, was full of juice, but the minute Shiver looked at that ferocious-looking group of armed boys, he thought of Lesiah's near-naked body and felt nauseous – *if she gets hit, by anything at all, she'll die! Flesh is soft and delicate; and I bear the responsibility of protecting her!*

< Come back here! > Lesiah shouted into the mic. < This area is off-limits! >

"You're wasting your breath, don't you think?"

< No, words are never a waste. You can say as many as you want for free, > Lesiah answered, full of integrity.

Following the instructions of the three older ones, the younger boys in the rear began to swim toward them.

A wireless reply arrived from one of the young men.

< We are Dreyfus' army. Who are you? >

< We come from the church! This area is off-limits! >

< Who are you, what's your name? >

< Rafflesiah, and you? >

< Agachi. What's that behind you? >

< It's my weapon. But it's for self-defense. I won't use it to attack if this situation can be solved peacefully. >

Peacefully, yeah right, Shiver muttered under his breath.

Suddenly, Lesiah realized that she and Agachi were of the same kind.

She did not understand why, but all of a sudden, she could feel the surge of his emotions flooding into her. It was not just her either – he felt the same thing at the same time. She knew it instinctively.

For a moment, their brains linked together like water passing through a hose.

There's no question about it – this guy is a hyper-sensitive sympathist!

This man... Lesiah mulled over her complicated thoughts... This man is incredibly intelligent, sensitive, ruthless, and attractive... he's beautiful... not his face (she could not see his face; she could only perceive his own self-image). But the folds of his heart are... complex, full of shadows. He has his own philosophy, albeit one completely different than mine; he's cultivated; he's deep like the blue ocean.

All of this came flooding into her instantaneously.

< Well, it seems that you and I can be acquaintances, > Agachi laughed, < but I doubt we can be friends, Lesiah. >

< What do you mean? >

< I mean we are of the same kind, but our philosophies are completely different. >

Just then, another voice interrupted. < Charge! Kill them! The church is working for Milagros! >

The man shouting had a crab-like, fat right arm (or perhaps there was a rocket launcher built in).

The easily-incited young boys heard those inflammatory words and came rushing out as though they could not stand to wait another minute.

< Don't be stupid! Stop them! Agachi! > Lesiah screamed,

Shiver, in the meantime was also screaming, "Peace? What peace? Fuck peace!"

< Shiver, hurry, let's get out of here! > Lesiah shrieked, and began kicking her flippered feet.

Shiver reached out his grappling arms, wrapped them around her, and pulled, wondering all the while if they would make it on time.

The boys chased after them, spouting furious jets of bubbles from their aquaballooned heads.

People tend to panic when they are being chased, and the enemy seems very large and very fast.

The boys had all kinds of weapons, ranging from toy-like underwater guns to rocket launchers with infrared tracking, and they were now beginning to use them.

A small arrow whizzed by, grazing his side. Shiver felt nauseous again. The thought of Lesiah getting injured – the water in these canals running red with her blood, the carnivorous fish that remained in these parts that would come to nibble at that pink flesh of hers, drawn by her wounds – he felt sick enough to vomit.

"Lesiah, this might be a bit tight, but I'm going to speed up."

Shiver increased his speed.

If he were not with a flesh and blood human, he could squeeze through a canal like

this in a few minutes...

If Lesiah died... if Lesiah were to disappear from this world – Shiver could not even imagine it. The world probably would not change much. Yesterday, today, tomorrow – the world would keep spinning. No matter how full of vitality Lesiah was, she never stirred things up all that much.

Shiver stopped thinking about pointless things, and focused on protecting Lesiah. Lesiah only... he held her close and jetted onward, blowing out streams of water behind him.

< Hey Lesiah, looks like your sidekick likes you an awful lot, huh? > Agachi's low voice rang out.

The voice gave Lesiah the chills. It felt like as though she was hearing it directly, with her own heart.

< Isn't that right, Shiverer Mouse! >

"How do you know my name?"

< Hmm, gee, I wonder... >

Suddenly, one of the boys shot at Shiver. With ear-splitting force, the bullet struck the coffin; the sound was awful.

A carnivorous fish – the kind that Shiver had once named "shikaragay" – swam out in front of him. Shiver drove it away.

Please, Shiver thought, *please don't let those guys kill the shikaragay*. The fish swam leisurely along. Its bright red skirt fluttered like the petals of a dahlia, swaying rhythmically.

Just then, a bullet slammed into those serene, fluttering petals.

A burst of bright red blood exploded in the water. Unlike most aquatic life here,

shikaragay were red-blooded creatures. It looked just as though a person had been wounded here – disgusting.

Shiver clicked his tongue.

The smell of blood was quickly going to attract carnivorous fish from all over the canals.

Lesiah must absolutely not get hurt – fish lusting after blood would assail without mercy anything that was wounded and bleeding. Flesh was always a problem. It was too soft, too fragile, too hard to protect.

“Shit, they’re gonna be here any minute, shit...”

< It’s okay, they won’t eat me. >

“Why not? What, you just believe in luck or something? Oh, let me guess – its your “God,” isn’t it! You figure your God is going to come and save you?!”

< Of course not. >

“It’s *me* who’s saving you! *Me!* Isn’t that right?!”

< Yes, that’s right. >

Scores of fish, structurally adapted exclusively for predation, gathered around like an explosion of fireworks.

One of the fish set eyes on the half dead shikaragay shot just moments ago and darted towards it. Then came the next one, and then another, until they were all crowded around and it was impossible to see what was happening where.

The boys, enjoying the spectacle, changed their target and fired haphazardly at the mass of fish.

One after another, the bullets shot the fish to pieces. Each time a fish was torn apart,

its transparent blood flowed out and its white flesh was exposed.

Shiver was doing his best to get himself and Lesiah out of there as quickly as possible.

< I can understand the minds of fish, > said Lesiah. < And I think maybe, they can understand my mind too. >

“Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that?”

< Here we go again! You never believe in anything! You wouldn’t believe it even if you saw it with your own eyes. >

“Why would I believe that?!”

< I am a person who possesses the ability to understand the minds of others. There are not many of us. But that guy just now, Agachi, he was like me. We could read each other, each other’s thoughts. You don’t believe that? >

“Why would I.”

< Idiot, > Lesiah declared.

The place was a sea of blood.

The body fluids of most of the fish were transparent, but to Shiver, it looked like complex patterns of India ink flowing through the water.

They were nearing the exit...

Suddenly, Shiver noticed the huge guy with the bizarre right arm – he was using that arm to take aim.

“Shit!” Shiver screamed.

< What’s wrong? >

“He’s got a rocket launcher! Lesiah, I don’t suppose you can also communicate with rockets now, can you?”

A tracking missile slid out from the man's right arm, scraping noisily. The horrible sound – like a knife being sharpened or a wild animal grating its teeth together – resounded deep inside Shiver's body.

Shiver pushed Lesiah away.

He shot forward, heading straight for the rocket.

< Shiver! Shiverer Mouse! >

Shiver did not answer.

I wanna kill all these bastards, he was thinking.

< No! Shiver, no! Shiverer Mouse! >

Lesiah was telling him not to kill.

But these guys are scum – just like me, scum. They don't deserve to live. Worthless, worthless, worthless... All of a sudden, Shiver thought of Jonah. He had totally forgotten about her for these few hours, but now, suddenly, the girl came back into his thoughts, like a balloon expanding in his mind.

Over a period of several seconds, the memories all flooded through him.

He remembered how hard they had worked catching fish to distribute to the children, and how they had gone out on lunar mornings catching chickens. He remembered her – the girl who had raised windflowers in the palm of her hand.

If that rocket explodes here, Lesiah's flesh will be torn to shreds.

"Hurry! Hurry up!!"

Finally, he saw Lesiah arrive at the mouth of the canal.

Shiver tried to lure the rocket towards himself.

The idea was to get the man to aim the rocket at him, and then quickly swim as far

away as possible so the rocket would explode someplace where nobody would get hurt.

Lesiah would go out of her mind if the kids got killed. Besides... Shiver himself would probably feel terrible. Nobody could say whether those boys' lives were worth living, or whether or not they deserved to live.

The rocket was coming at him.

Then – right then – Shiver felt something snap and come undone.

Huh? That's weird, he thought.

He could feel the white coffin losing speed as it moved through the heavy water.

He saw the rocket coming closer.

So this is it, he realized.

Inside the white coffin, Shiver closed his eyes.

In those last, fading moments of consciousness, he thought: *So this is it. I see. It's happening. Finally.*

I'm so lonely, so lonely, so lonely...

Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...

So lonely... I'm alone. I'm always alone, there's nobody here, nobody at all, I'm so lonely, so lonely, so lonely... His tears rained down in the last flickers of his consciousness.

The sickness had penetrated deep inside his brain, rotting every last cell, like grapes falling off of a vine, one by one.

You... you're dying aren't you... *Jonah...*

Just then, somebody took his life away – and he died inside the white coffin.

The coffin, recognizing that he was brain dead, stopped his heart. It stopped pumping the small amounts of blood that were circulating throughout his shrunken body. Having

abruptly lost its owner, the coffin began to sink forlornly downward, pulled slowly by the force of gravity.

The rocket slammed into the white coffin.

A burst of pure white bubbles seethed forth, enveloping and obscuring everything – everything in sight.

13

D.H. was thinking about the prophecy.

But that wasn't just a prophecy – it was the truth.

It feels like so long ago...

Sample B #3 had escaped, and the military had surrounded that mansion. Then all at once he had appeared and proclaimed, “You will give birth to me! You will have relations with your direct subordinate...”

D.H. gazed fondly at the man by her side.

His finely chiseled face was striking, and there was something about him that was even better, but invisible to the eye – his skin was silky smooth; it felt incredible to rub her cheek against his.

He was a fountain of youth and beauty. This was her moment of supreme enjoyment. Hers was a privileged life. Sometimes she felt like bursting into song.

The Lieutenant Major had learned of their relationship, and was a little jealous. He was, as always, well aware of what he could have and what he could not have. He had a complex disposition that was both compassionate and rational at the same time, which at

times caused him significant pain.

The Lieutenant Major was fifty years her senior, and the time she had spent with him, although short, had taught her many things. Their relationship had challenged her deeply on many levels. He was strict about etiquette and constantly tested her character and intelligence.

As far as she could tell, there were only two types of men in this world. Men who were manly, and men who were not.

The Lieutenant Major, of course, was of the previous type. Although he loved her, he had displayed modesty and good taste in stepping back when someone better suited to her had appeared.

In reality, there were probably more ways to classify men than just those two.

Younger men, older men. Men who enjoyed their work, men who did not. Men who were good at their jobs, men who were not. Men who had money, men who did not. Men who were beautiful, men who were not. Men who were intelligent, men who were not. Men who demanded a lot of attention, men who did not.

All of these categories, however, could also be applied to her female friends.

If someone were to ask her what constitutes a “manly” man, she would probably answer as follows: It is a person who is prepared to take full responsibility when problems arise. That might mean staying behind until the end, or it might mean getting out of a situation quickly. *Ahh...but that would mean that there are manly women too...*

That was not to say that she preferred men of brute courage, of course. D.H. loved this man – with all of his cowardice, his greed, and his indecisiveness.

She was able to see his cowardice as sensitivity, his greed as worldly wisdom, and his

indecisiveness as the result of an overly rich imagination. That was love.

Shinohara was too high strung for a military man. When very sensitive men tried to take responsibility for things, it could cause them incredible stress.

A highly strung soldier was undoubtedly better for the military as a whole than a careless one, but Shinohara himself clearly suffered. He worried too much about mistakes or failure. No matter how many times she told him that everybody makes mistakes and that everybody fails sometimes, deep down he did not believe her. He was always anxious about his responsibilities.

Shinohara had a curious view of life. He did not adhere to any established religion, but he truly feared things like divine retribution, the vengefulness of grudges, fate, and the afterlife. That fear was probably instinctual, ingrained in his long, unbroken bloodline.

D.H. had been attracted to his ancient blood.

D.H. also bore the burden of an ancient lineage, so she probably felt a certain sense of security in the fact that she could share similar thoughts and experiences with him.

Both clans were exceptional, insular, and steeped in taboo. They were revered, feared, and despised. The intermixing of genes was frowned upon. Generations of endogamy and cloning had produced extrasensory powers in some individuals, and genetic collapse in others. Both clans boasted long histories of power and influence.

As genetic abnormalities in the bloodline became more common and exceptional talents became more rare, the decline in their power began to show. The characteristic deep crimson hair of the Hess clan began to fade, or was superseded by the dominant black. Whenever individuals with special abilities did appear, their powers were of a mediocre caliber like D.H.'s, with no real capacity beyond a sensitivity to time, atmosphere, or

people's thoughts.

These days, there were quiet whispers that this might finally be the end of the Hess clan, which had boasted such a long and glorious history.

Her people had once moved mountains, and hurled thunderbolts from the clouds...

"...What are you thinking about?"

"Don't you know...?"

Shinohara turned his shining dark eyes and looked directly at D.H. In the same uncertain voice as always, he responded, "...I can see a shadow. I can't really tell what it is. Maybe it's a psychological shadow. Maybe its future reality. I see war. And our Military Priest. And us. It's red – terribly red, like the fruit of a well-ripened fig...".

"I see," she said.

"And I suppose you know what it is?"

D.H. smiled slowly in response.

"Drop the enigmatic smile. You're mocking me, my lower class."

He never raised his voice at times like this, but he was angry. His anger was deep and quiet.

"It looks like your *privates*. Worn out and rotten," Shinohara declared, gloating. His lip curled ever so slightly, his profile aristocratic as always.

What a jerk.

But he's attractive, and besides, right now I have him right where I want him.

Sometimes, when his duties became too stressful, he would come here to this room and let it all out. It was a release, like sex.

Here, he need not to concern himself with formalities or status. Here, he would not

face accusations for his statements. It was possible, however, that the place was rigged with surveillance devices.

The young man seemed to believe that there would not be any such things in the rooms of a superior officer, but he was wrong. In any case the Military Priest was always watching, from the shadows of history. There were no secrets anywhere.

“Don’t you know what I’m thinking?”

He had cocooned himself in the sheets, with just his shoulders sticking out. It was a self-protective position for him. His eyes were closed, but they were twitching as though alive. He looked like a dog in REM sleep.

He was surely recalling, subconsciously, the horrific battle scenes of his past. He had undergone a careful psychological wipe to erase the memories, but many people who had undergone the procedure complained that it was inadequate or did not work, that they had nightmares or that the images would return, triggered by lights or certain sounds. The doctors said that they could not destroy the brain cells themselves – that would break the human being, they said.

But human beings had already been broken long ago.

Shinohara certainly had – and he had been strange since the day he was born.

As time went on, the memories from Syaut #3 tormented him more and more... a fierce battle had broken out between military Unit 28 and an enemy ZAGATO when it approached a rare mineral pata reef. Unit 28 was a patchwork army of stragglers who had not been adequately trained to operate Type B Gigatons. Besides, there was no way that a Type B Gigaton could possibly compete with a ZAGATO. The commanding officer of Unit 28 was a petty half-wit, the chain of command was totally disorganized, and the soldiers were

all garbage-dump kids riddled with disease. Unit 28 itself was cursed by the spirit of Syaut, Yashiyasyaut. And... *and?* Thinking about it made his head throb with pain. That was a sign that he needed to stop thinking about it. He had been in command of a unit of airborne troops at the time. He had ordered them to fire down onto Unit 28 – their allies – because there was an enemy ZAGATO among them. If they had advanced onto the reef and fighting had erupted there, the pata would have been destroyed. So instead he destroyed their own troops – many, many of them – too many to count. *But that's how it goes. Killing is easy. Instantaneous. It happens in a heartbeat...* the throbbing pain in his skull grew more acute, like rising pressure inside his brain.

“...Well?”

Startled, Shinohara's well-built body trembled.

I'm cursed.

The countless souls of those who had been killed danced around him. He could feel them. They were always there, always lingering. On his shoulders. Restless souls. Their power would be made manifest. This was the meaning of “misfortune.”

D.H. glanced languidly at him.

There was satisfaction in her gaze – as though she were appreciating a fine piece of furniture.

The military still favored strong, muscular bodies. It was probably a matter of image.

“Ah, ah... right,” the man said. He snaked out his strong arms and slowly pulled her close.

A hot shiver coursed through the woman's body, sweet like honey.

There's no doubt.

There's no doubt about it – I'm in love with him.

It wouldn't feel this good if I wasn't in love with him. Sensations don't lie. They reveal everything.

A mere touch on the arm... and the feeling, like a hot pin plunging into her, grew stronger. She was melting with pleasure...

The man stopped digging up memories. That was all it took to bring relief – it was like he had just pulled nails out of his knees. If only it were always this easy.

As their pleasure mounted and their moans became louder, D.H. suddenly sensed an odd presence.

Someone is watching!

It wasn't a machine; it was a person.

Clearly there was someone – a person – very close... she could sense the sharp, vulgar gaze roaming all over their bodies.

The moment she noticed, her body stiffened and something happened, something that she had never experienced before – her vagina spasmed. It felt as though she had just squeezed in something three times the usual size.

Shinohara cried out in pain below her.

Panicking, D.H. tried to get off, but this hurt him even more.

"What are you doing?! What the hell are you doing, idiot?!"

"...Wait, someone's here, someone's in the room...!"

D.H. twisted around to look behind her.

There *He* was, standing against the wall.

His body had not fully materialized. It was like a grainy TV image, its color and

boundary lines indistinct – like a cluster of pale, rough particles interspersed with the air.

D.H. felt her cheeks flush deep crimson; she could do nothing to control it.

His face was buried in innumerable wrinkles; she had no idea how old He might be.

So it was true that He was born old, that he was growing younger as He moved through life. Which meant that He... that is, the “He” that had touched down here at this point in time – had probably just been born not so long ago.

I’m afraid... I’m scared...

Don’t worry, He had said... but she was the only woman in this world who would give birth to an old man. It was a great honour to have been chosen to give birth to Him – to the Military Priest, to a being who was practically a God. Nevertheless, there were times when a more primordial, instinctual fear took over.

It was hard to see his face, but the wickedness there was unmistakable.

“Who’s there!” Shinohara shouted, still on his back. Under her fingers, his belly felt slippery with greasy sweat.

D.H. twisted her body and he screamed again – “motherfucker” or some such thing – some old classical insult.

Upon hearing the word, He smirked.

The laugh was vulgar, mean, full of unimaginable malice.

“Fuck!” Shinohara finally managed to force the words out from between his clenched teeth.

Just then, He spoke.

The voice was thin and sparse, like powdered snow sprinkling down from the heavens. Like weak, crackling electromagnetic waves.

The words themselves, however, pierced her chest with a message that she would never forget.

< C'mon, fuck! Shoot your wad! Blow your load! That's an order! You got that? It's an order! C'mon, fuck like crazy! Fuck, fuck, fuck! >

He laughed, His body shaking violently like a broken mechanical doll.

Her head was burning with the insult, ready to explode. Somewhere in a corner of her mind, she thought: *He's just barely managing to maintain a steady mental state, by means of this abuse and contempt.*

Did He resent not having a physical body? Or was He trying to avenge his mother for sleeping with another man? Even if His own birth depended on that act?

Or... perhaps He cursed his own fate, cursed the fact that He would be born into this world with a temporal deformity?

Perhaps He did not love himself?

Perhaps, because He was unloved, He also could not love?

She had met Him at different points in time. She had met Him as an old man long ago when she was younger, when she was working as a civic scientist. That was already several decades ago now. The older He was the more confident He was, and the younger He was the more sensitive He was. The old man and the boy – they each had their charms and their faults, marbled together.

He appeared like Zeus – anywhere, anytime, and in any form. Zeus, the great god who could transform into water, or a swan, and impregnate women everywhere.

Listening to his hoarse laughter, D.H. slowly lost consciousness.

Memories...

They had become dim, worn smooth by the particles of time.

He had done shameful things in the past. It plagued him deeply; it stabbed at his heart.

And yet, he had no memory whatsoever of what it actually was that he had done.

If he had no memory of it, did that mean that he was absolved? No, likely not. *She* knew everything, and *She* recorded everything. And it would all be revealed on the day of final judgement.

Guilty, or innocent.

But when was this “judgement day” supposed to be, anyway?

He swatted at the white noise in front of him, trying to drive it away. The ghosts that lingered around his fingertips swirled around like cream poured into a cup of coffee.

He called that time of day when the light in the sky grew brighter “morning.” This morning, however, even the dragons were quiet. The dragons did not actually take the form of animals, but their movements were serpentine, abstract, and nightmarishly enigmatic.

He was growing younger.

Within his own temporal dimension, his reverse aging process was accelerating rapidly.

Now, having just relinquished his adolescence, he was moving progressively back into his boyhood.

The shapeless white glow that was his “body” marked the boundary between self and not-self. In this bizarre world detached from space-time, how much did his physical age really matter? In any case, changes were clearly occurring, and the changes were continuous and long-term.

Once he reached his final day, would he just disappear into thin air like a soap bubble?

The thought terrified him.

There would be nothing left of him.

Nothing.

Everyone else left behind flesh or bone or skin when they died, but in his case, perhaps nothing at all would remain... sometimes he thought he might lose everything, because of the magic of the Hours.

He might not even remain in people's memories. That was also a possibility.

It would be as though he had never existed in this world in the first place.

Perhaps, as soon as he crossed the "zero" line in age, then *snap!* There would be no proof whatsoever that he had ever existed in this world.

He was trembling...

Would he leave no trace here? Not even his own bones, his own grave? No descendants, no passionate love? No creations? Creations... perhaps it would be the world itself that he left behind, rather than something of his own?

All of a sudden he sensed something – about his purpose here.

The world had been put into his hands.

He could not do much... but it was still much more than most people could do.

It was a horrific world.

The war had been going on for so long that nobody even recognized it as an abnormal state of affairs anymore. The battlefronts moved slowly along, as though making their way across a gigantic weather map. Some stellar regions had not seen war in decades or centuries, but the overall picture showed that humanity was teetering on the brink of

destruction. There were still fierce battles raging all over.

Sample B Group had been a powerful weapon, but there had been too few of them to lead to any decisive victories.

The Empire of Machines had built their factories one after another, produced weapons, and attacked. Humanity likewise built their factories, produced weapons, and counterattacked. The higher the capacities of each side became, the longer the war dragged on. It takes more than a single blow to topple a huge elephant.

He was getting sick of this war.

He was losing all of the passion, the conviction, the confidence, the pride, and the interest that he had once had. All those things were dropping away along with the years.

The military leadership had quickly sensed the change in the Priest. They began to exaggerate their reports on how horrific the situation was and how badly it was deteriorating. They were slapping the bottom of the Military Priest, like his mother, trying to burden him with “duty” and put him to work.

But he was sick of it.

If the world was his creation – then he should make it better.

He remembered the Goddess that had visited him here just once... *Her*.

Did She really exist?

He had been searching for Her all this time.

And he had thought that there was no such thing as God.

But when he thought about it, he felt so fulfilled.

He looked over at the monitor.

It showed nothing.

There was just the same endless, crackling desert as always.

Maybe he had been delusional.

Maybe nothing had actually appeared on the screen; he had simply seen what he wanted to see. He had seen something that wasn't there, and believed it. After all, people who were overcome with despair often did that kind of thing, did they not? They clung to their own illusions, and used them to maintain psychological balance.

After all, he was just another kind of human. How long could he be expected to stay sane, floundering in isolation and incoherence year after year?

It was impossible. Take for example that man who had been shut up alone in his spaceship, drifting for twenty years.

By the time he had noticed the man and notified the nearest patrol ship of his whereabouts, the man had chewed off his ring finger – a “sign” that he had made a contract with the Sirens, the songstresses who lived in magical times. The man firmly believed until the day he died that it was this sacrifice that had allowed him to be discovered by the patrol.

Mistakes had been made.

Countless mistakes, all kinds of them.

Perhaps he himself was one of those mistakes.

Perhaps, in order to save himself, he had used a temporal trick to create God. Perhaps he had not been begotten by God; rather, out of extreme loneliness, *he had begotten his own creator...* in order to give meaning to his own existence. He could not help but feel that way sometimes.

Other times, feeling bright and uplifted, he could believe that the world was filled with glory, that Her womb was bounteous, that She bestowed her love as She would sustenance,

that the power of Good was as strong as ever, and that someday far in the future, all living things would be saved (and even machine intelligence would receive life).

Recently, he had been lending his support to the church in various ways. He sent military supplies to the “mom and pop” churches, pronounced his approval for church-related endeavors, and gave permission to the church to use a selection of military facilities (primarily spaceports).

After all, *She* had ordered him to make contact with the church. All he could do was to continue making these small efforts, even if the military leadership firmly opposed it.

The leadership feared the power of propaganda and religion more than anything, even though they themselves made regular use of it. They especially feared that which preached peace and love rather than war.

There were countless religions that preached about human superiority, and the networks were constantly extolling the war.

There was, for example, a TV commercial with a little girl sucking up tiny robots with a vacuum cleaner, shouting “Dirty, dirty!”, followed by the appearance of a missionary on the screen, thrusting a finger in the air and declaring: “Dirty things, go to Hell!”

The more he learned about this church, however, the more curious about it he became... it was unclear who had started it and where.

Its creed was not particularly complicated.

Its teachings simply stated that “*He* exists; He fills the soul with the breath of life; He spreads love” – and the number of believers had grown rapidly.

He had wondered how the church had managed to attract so many believers so quickly. Then he came to understand that there was a charismatic individual at its core.

This individual rarely showed himself, it seemed. He had special powers – he brought the dead back to life, he granted free will, he granted love... and happiness... and a future.

This individual was simply referred to as “*He*” or “*Him*.” He had appeared at various locations – Caritas, Syaut #3 and #5, Begoita, Are-Sko – all of the fiercest battle sites. The more horrific the situation was in a given place, the more divinely and the more radiantly white He shone. He took the form of a small child, and bestowed upon the downtrodden the strength to live, while sending new people and power to the church all the while.

The entity seemed to be both human and not human at the same time.

He wanted, somehow, to be able to find that entity – to meet it – even if it was just one time.

He wondered if the entity might be “*Her*,” the entity that had once appeared to him, saying, “I’m the one who gave birth to you,” and instructing him to collaborate with the church.

Searching within an eight-hundred year period was an incredibly arduous task. His temporal field of vision spanned eight hundred years, but his vision was weak. He could not see every little thing in detail. Trying to alight at a specific place at a specific time was even more difficult.

Today the dragons were few.

When the dragons were few, his power of movement was weak.

D.H. did not see Shinohara for some time after she gave birth.

The psychological shock of the birth had sent fissures deep into every corner of her body.

How could something like that... something so awful... be possible?

But it had happened; it was real.

As she entered her eighth month of pregnancy, the size of her belly increased drastically. She began to experience bouts of excruciating pain, the intervals between these episodes growing steadily shorter. When she could no longer stand it, the military doctors gave her only the bare minimum of medicine, and observed her carefully.

By her last month of pregnancy, she had become unbelievably huge. It terrified her to think about what might be inside her.

That old man... that vile old man, so vulgar that he would peep into his own mother's bedroom, is here inside my belly.

Sometimes, thinking about it made her want to tear out her own insides.

As the mother of the Military Priest, the military doctors took good care of her – or rather, they took good care of her *as a container* – as a womb. But there was no real psychological care. Nobody could have provided it anyway – this was the first time in human history that there had been a pregnancy of this kind.

Finally, she gave birth to her raging old man of a son with no harm in the end to herself, nor miraculously to him.

He had quickly flown off to the other side of space-time like a spore.

Thus he was gone, having taken his boundless time, knowledge, will, and confidence along with him.

The delivery room was quiet, and she lay on the bed near death and covered in blood. She finally regained consciousness two days later, thanks to the military doctors' efforts.

Shinohara is here...

What a horrible hospital room. Pure white, a crazy-making space.

"Well, this place looks dreary, as usual," said Shinohara, not a trace of affection in his voice.

The more this young man tried to be affectionate, the more bitter the look on his face became. "There are no flowers, no pictures."

"Well, maybe you should bring some, since you're visiting me in the hospital."

Shinohara's face became even more sour.

He always made these sardonic remarks that made her want to one-up him, and in the end she always won.

"Sorry, that was insensitive of me."

"Yes, it was. At least bring flowers." D.H. spoke strongly.

Still confined to her bed, she pulled the blanket quietly up to her chest.

"...You're still feeling pretty rough, huh?"

"Well, look at me."

"I'd say you look like you're doing pretty well."

D.H. laughed faintly.

Why is it so much fun to be around him? Some day, is he going to leave, and go someplace far away? If he leaves... But no, don't think about that now. Not right now.

A chime rang.

Immediately, the door opened. She sensed something familiar...

Before she could pinpoint what it was that she recognized, the Lieutenant General entered.

Shinohara stood at attention, like he had just swallowed a pole. He hurriedly gave a

respectful salute.

The Lieutenant General returned the salute, nodded comfortably, and broke into a friendly smile.

“Just came to see how you’re doing.”

Shinohara looked at the two of them as though surprised.

His jealousy and feelings of inferiority were rising up again, but he also knew realistically that he was no match for the Lieutenant General.

D.H. smiled back at him, politely nodded her head, and answered.

“My body is feeling much better.”

“But not your heart?” The Lieutenant General smiled and slowly looked over his shoulder at Shinohara. Countless wrinkles gathered at his neck. Thanks to the sight, Shinohara was able to restore a little of his confidence.

It's true that everything looks greater from far away. The Lieutenant General holds an extremely high position in the military leadership, but even he is just a regular old man when you see him up close. He's a little on the old side to be her lover. But even if he had had a relationship with her in the past... it's over, it's different now.

I have no complaints about that. She is a compilation of her past. She is wonderful as she is now. She is a gem that has been polished by various people, and I have claimed her at her most beautiful.

“First Lieutenant Shinohara.”

“Yes sir!”

The Lieutenant General smiled slowly.

“How about using this occasion to marry Donna Hess, who lies here before us, and

curing her aching heart?”

“Yes sir!”

Shinohara tensed up and stared intently at the Lieutenant General. There was an air of paternal warmth in his expression, like a warm embrace.

Shinohara was attracted to the Lieutenant General’s manliness. He was like the father he never had.

Encouraged by the friendly smile, Shinohara spoke smoothly.

“Yes indeed, those are my intentions. But every time I’m poised to propose, I find that her guard is too high; all angles of attack are blocked off.”

The Lieutenant General let out a big belly laugh.

“But she’s probably not as tough as a ZAGATO.”

“Well... I don’t know about that.”

The Lieutenant General laughed even harder, gave a big wave with his hand, and turned on his heel.

Shinohara and D.H. each saluted, Shinohara from where he was standing, and D.H. from the bed.

They remained still until the sound of army boots grew distant and finally faded away.

Then, with the last lingerings of sound barely gone, Shinohara quickly opened his mouth and spoke.

“Will you marry me?”

D.H. looked silently up at the young man.

“...Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

Struggling to suppress the tears she felt inexplicably welling up in her eyes, D.H. answered, "...At least bring flowers."

Shinohara moved his face closer to hers. Slowly, deeply, they kissed.

At last.

He felt like he had finally found "*Him*" – that white, misty entity who was the central figure of the church. He was clearly the giver of life. And He was on Caritas.

Recently, he had noticed that his reverse ageing process was accelerating.

Does this mean that my final hour is approaching?

As the End comes closer, will my remaining days dwindle before my eyes, like sand through an hourglass?

It terrified him to think about it. If he were to fall asleep, or to pass the time idly, he feared that he might fall into a vast, extraordinary darkness.

When he finally discovered the luminous body, he had shouted in surprise.

It was flickering around the orbit of Caritas, beyond time and place. It looked just like... like a damp sparkler giving off its last sparks... a feeble, beautiful light. A wishful falling star.

He quietly took a step to follow the light. No sooner had he begun to walk, when a light purple spiral cloud shaped like a dragon reached out its arm and scooped him up.

A moment later, he was standing on Caritas.

He had no idea at what point in time on Caritas this was.

These days his leaping abilities had deteriorated; it had also become much more difficult to identify where he was once he landed.

The wind passed by, rustling. The white static electricity buzzed and growled along the surface of his body.

I have seen this landscape before, he thought. I know this place.

The tremendous amount of foliage that had taken root, the little white flowers... innumerable little white flowers, visible all the way to the horizon, swaying in the wind.

The flowers, like undulating waves in the ocean, bending over, shaking their heads, giving themselves over to the wind, the air fragrant with their perfume. Their sweet scattered scent, soaking in the light of the sun, rising up into the air.

Ahh... this is just like that dream.

Maybe that was a prophetic dream?

He walked a little.

If this is going to turn out like the dream, then any minute now a rain of black insects will descend. No... please, not that – anything but that.

He walked quickly, crackling static noise.

There was no sign of any insects descending from the sky.

Just endless fields of flowers, blanketing the ground like snow.

Suddenly, though, he entered a place lushly green with stalks and vines; the flowered area had simply come to an end. Was this place really Caritas? It was either a prehistoric Caritas, or a Caritas far in the future after all of the humans had disappeared.

The crystal-clear sky floated in the air, suspended from the heavens like a painting.

Then, unexpectedly, he felt fatigued, in spite of the beauty. *So this must be the real world, and not a dream.*

He moved urgently forward.

His movements were more like the floating of a cloud than like walking.

The land, covered with foliage, stretched out endlessly.

He soon found himself in a forest dense with larger trees. The great canopy obstructed the sun, and the area suddenly became dark.

There was something had been bothering him since he had arrived here. There were no living things on this world other than plants. No insects, no birds, no animals, no humans. *But why?* He was so tired though, he did not feel capable of thinking too deeply about it.

Perhaps this was before the arrival of humans on Caritas. But no, he had never seen Caritas like this before. So did that mean that he had landed on an entirely different planet?

He could still feel the power of the dragons nearby – the power to cross space-time.
It's still okay. Maybe.

He moved ethereally around the forest for a while.

Then, in the shade of a tree, he saw the light.

It looks like a rock-candy crystal. That was his first thought.

At first it just looked like a mass of light.

A sparkling, radiant sphere under a conspicuously large tree, amassed around the roots.

But when he looked more carefully, he could see that it was humanoid; it had its back to him and was crouching down on top of the roots.

It's head was tilted to the side, as though it were listening for something.

< Umm... >

He did not quite manage to call out to it.

Before he was able to make a sound, the mass of light stood up and turned around.

In the middle of the pure white mass were furrows for eyes, a nose, and a mouth.

Those were the only things that made it look human.

Slowly, the mouth twisted into something like a smile.

It was the face of a child.

No, not even a child – it was the face of a fetus.

It was unclear whether it was male or female. It was chaos splashed on a canvas; it was the source of all possibility; it was a lump of protoplasmic cells.

The thing faced him and smiled affectionately.

White light burst out all around It like fragments of stars. It was light itself. Pure white light rose up from It like smoke.

Then, all of a sudden, It spoke from directly inside his head. The phrasing was awkward, but the words themselves were clear:

QUICKLY, REVIVE THE CHURCH... SOON I WILL DIE AND WILL HAVE TO
LEAVE THIS WORLD.

< Huh? What did you say? >

I AM LIGHT... I WILL DIE SOON, AND DISAPPEAR FROM THIS WORLD.

< *Are you... Is it you?!* >

The light shone even brighter.

Perhaps it laughed.

There was no wind, yet the huge green tree rustled its branches.

Then, the entity – he could not tell whether it was male or female – opened its cavernous mouth, smiled, and said:

I AM YOU .

14

Dreyfus pursued her – the woman who had transformed into a kashiageha.

He could not believe what had just happened before his very eyes.

The woman had dug up fossilized kashiageha eggs that were buried in the walls of the cave, recalled the memories from when it was alive, and then actually transformed into the thing itself.

Even more terrifying, she had pulled out Dreyfus' hair with her claws and instantly knew everything about him from the cell memories, from everything that was recorded there.

She must not be allowed to live.

He was so furious that his teeth were grating together inside his clenched jaw. Yet somewhere deep down in his heart he was glad that he had gotten so involved with the woman. If he were just an ordinary villain, he could have just put all his energy into his

business ventures. Dreyfus, however, had a sickness deep down in his heart. Perhaps it would never be healed, but still, he had a deep desire to expose it to somebody, to another person.

This was the root of his fascination with Sample B Group. He was fascinated by their ability to sample something, and then actually change into it.

But she must not be allowed to live!

Anyone who finds out my secret must not be allowed to live!

Dreyfus grabbed a “Jennifer” rocket launcher, and hopped into a small, specialized ship. The ship had been a ridiculously expensive purchase, but it could sail anywhere – in water, on land, or in the air – and was remarkably easy to maneuver in tight areas. It was also heavily armed. He liked its streamlined, smooth metal skin. It was so much more beautiful than human skin...

The boy, Daniel, began to run smoothly, as if gliding. He was Sample B #13, the ultimate weapon, remodelled and sent to terminate Sample B #3 – Jonah – on the Military Priest’s orders.

A change was happening inside his body, as though a switch had been flipped. He was like a chrysalis whose bodily fluids were blending together, all thick and slimy, ready to give birth to an entirely new being... the internal changes kept coming.

Jonah had chosen not him, but Shiverer Mouse – that wasted prune in a white coffin who was as good as dead. Stormy waves coursed through his heart.

He was like her; he was immortal, beautiful, strong, new, and pure. Yet she had left him behind – to go looking for that... *that wreckage of barely-living flesh.*

Even though I am like her.

Even though I am like her, the only other one in this land!

Daniel could no longer maintain the shape of a young boy.

His slender, boyish contours disappeared, and a bigger, stronger frame more like that of an adolescent, or perhaps a grown man, took its place.

He had an intense desire to see her.

Just a short time ago, he had thought her foolish, chasing after him and falling into his trap; he had sneered at her sluggish, flabby body – but not now.

He sensed that her heart had been stolen by somebody else – probably that guy in the coffin – and his head reeled with jealousy.

He had to do something to get her back. He knew that it was just an instinct that had been implanted into him by the researchers at Saga Electronics, but even so, he could do nothing to suppress the feeling.

Shit!

Daniel clicked his tongue.

He could not resist it... his physical frame was changing very quickly. He was maturing; his skin was roughening; his beard was poking its way out; coarse hair was starting to grow all over his body. His adam's apple stuck out so much it was disgusting – it bobbed up and down every time he swallowed. When he spoke, his voice was gruff, and the knuckles on his fingers stuck out in big knobs. His skin tone was darkening; his face was becoming a smouldering swarthy color.

The clear, girlish beauty he had had until a short time ago had completely vanished.

Daniel was disgusted with himself – he was growing filthier and filthier. Lurking

within that filth was his desire for Jonah, and he found this new penchant for skirt-chasing quite ridiculous. Yet there was nothing he could do to stop himself.

It was as though he were under a spell that forced him to think about her all the time, to desire her, and to chase after her.

Daniel took a step and staggered under his own body weight.

He bit his lip with the effort.

Still, he tottered on.

He was headed for the canals.

Dreyfus was attacking the canals where Milagros' terminal was exposed.

Representatives of the church were trying to reach Milagros through the terminal, and they would do whatever they could to prevent the attack. Shiverer Mouse, shut up in that white coffin, was an agent of the church, so he was most likely there.

Jonah had probed Dreyfus' memories. She had seen the impending attack on the canals and rushed to the scene. The woman was in love with Shiver.

Daniel was overcome with feelings something like frustration or sadness. He was taken aback; this was the first time that he had experienced such feelings. *But why? What happened?*

I want to see that woman.

I want to see her so badly, I think my chest might explode.

I want to see her, and to hold her...

Tightly... I want to hold her tightly.

Daniel began to run, still as naked as the day he was born.

Jonah gently folded away her armour-like kashiageha wings. Her shape became more streamlined, like a squid, and she plunged into the water. A great splash of water rose up to welcome the monster in.

The labyrinthine canals beneath the city connected every which way.

Jonah spread open her internal map, and checked the Adi's location multiple times.

In the air, she had merely crawled across the lower skies, flying sluggishly along. In the water, however, she propelled herself forward, kicking with her single leg. She was not moving particularly quickly, but still, quickly enough. The hungry carnivorous creatures in the water all went scattering off. Perhaps they had recalled vague memories from their ancestors who had lived in the time of the kashiageha – they went into a panic, their bodies turning red and orange and purple, fins flapping.

A vibration from the water was transmitted to an organ somewhere inside her body.

She felt a strong tremor.

A little further to go... there are lots of creatures swimming ahead... will the boys that Dreyfus sent still be there? And Lesiah, and Shiverer Mouse, and the Adiaptronite?

Hurry hurry hurry... she felt rushed inside, but she could not go any faster. For a kashiageha, there was nothing to fear on this planet. She swam with the air of a queen, brimming with composure and confidence.

A little more.

A little more.

Jonah angled her body, and pushed her way onward through the heavy, sticky water.

Aah! Lesiah cried out.

She understood immediately what had happened to Shiver.

As soon as she got out of the water, she felt a sharp pain at the back of her head.

She had experienced this kind of thing before. Accidents, disasters... “death,” in other words. She had the power to feel death.

The surface of the water rocked with waves. Something had exploded inside.

Lesiah slowly moved her heavy body, and slipped back down into the canal.

The white coffin ship was slowly sinking to the bottom of the deep water. The coffin that Shiver had once manoeuvred so easily was now sinking like lead. A froth of pure white bubbles from the rocket’s impact enveloped the coffin like an offering of flowers.

< Shiver! Shiverer Mouse! Answer me! Answer me! >

Lesiah screamed, knowing full well that he was not going to answer.

Considering the state of his health, it was no surprise that death had finally come for him.

With his shrunken body and all the problems with his nervous system, there were times when she had wondered how he could even be alive. “The Flying Medics” had come, haphazardly wired him up, and left. Thanks to the white coffin ship, that body that should have died long ago was revived, and given a life longer than it would have had in the first place.

He didn’t die in the explosion, Lesiah thought. Something just snapped, and his life was sucked up into the heavens.

His mechanical limbs hung limp and swayed in the water like seaweed.

She could see the coffin’s monitor.

None of the usual facial expressions were displayed there.

It was blank.

Even the white noise that had sometimes appeared when he didn't feel like talking to anybody was absent. It showed only perfect darkness, pitch black.

Heavy tears welled up at the base of her eyes. Once the tears started, she would not be able to stop. It always took a long time before she actually started to cry, but once she did, even her own mother had not known what to do. She had cried for a long, long time when her mother died too.

The white coffin sank deeper and deeper, enveloped in a bouquet of bubbles.

Lesiah chased after it.

She latched onto the white coffin with Shiverer Mouse inside and went sinking down along with it, weeping.

Clinging to the coffin, she pounded her hands wildly on the monitor, as though it might bring him back to life once again.

However, no miracles happened. Nothing appeared on the monitor; there was only the vast expanse of the pitch darkness of space.

Trembling, Lesiah thought: *I'm so lonely, so lonely, so lonely... this world is too cold... its like freezing cold water, like the water in these canals... the world is limpid, so cold, so cold, so cold and ghastly pale.*

A certain sage had once said: If you have come to the last page, close the book.

Suddenly, Lesiah realized that one of the enemy boys – Agachi – had swum right up next to her. She could feel his presence.

She was not afraid. She was not even afraid of death.

She felt only a crushing sadness rising up inside of her. She had lost all fear.

Agachi had realized from far away that the woman was crying.

It's strange... this woman and I are linked. The connection feels much stronger than usual. I am not merely sensing her aura – it feels almost as though I'm being taken in or absorbed. And yet it doesn't feel dangerous.

Agachi had made the others stay behind, and swam up to her alone.

< He dead? >

There was no answer.

There was only the sound of sobbing, reverberating through the water, like the voice of a mermaid.

Agachi gently pulled a long knife from the scabbard on his hip. It glinted slippery silver, like the belly of a fish.

Suddenly, the woman opened her eyes.

Through the clouded glass of her goggles, her big eyes were wet with tears.

< You're going to kill me, aren't you... >

Agachi said nothing.

< Go ahead, kill me. Anytime. I'm ready. > She spoke resolutely, and allowed all of the tension to leave her body. She floated in the water like a corpse.

Agachi knew that the woman had no weapons with which to fight back. Her one and only weapon had died, it seemed.

Agachi readjusted his grip on the knife. He shot forward, grabbed her as though in embrace, and stabbed her through the neck. He made no slips. The artery burst open. *Whoa, so much blood...* he had never stabbed anyone underwater before; the clouds of blood obstructing his vision disturbed him.

His technique was perfect as always. However, just then, the very moment that Lesiah's life ended, he was struck with a sharp pain, as though it was his own neck that had been stabbed.

Agachi pulled the knife out.

The water went from red to deep black.

Lesiah had opened her mouth wide, but in the end, she had not been able to scream. Exhaustion had overtaken her, and all the strength that normally permeated her body had drained away. She sank slowly down to the bottom of the water, together with Shiverer Mouse.

The Adiaptronite asked the architect, Lesiah's former lover, "Is that the sound of the barrier blocking off the canal?"

'Yes.' The architect spoke, his voice slightly nervous. 'I need to go now.'

"Would you call Milagros for me?"

The architect was silent for a moment, then replied, 'I will try.'

"Is she not feeling well?"

'Well... I suppose that's what it comes down to yes, if we are to borrow human terms to describe it. Essentially, her identity is collapsing.'

"I want to talk to her. Try your best."

The architect abruptly vanished.

It may not be possible to cure her, the Adiaptronite thought.

She has killed too many people, and such behaviour has likely distorted her programming – that is, her instincts – significantly. There are indications that, unable to

manage the strain, she devised some new programs on her own. These programs made copies of all of the people she has killed, and allowed them to live on inside her artificial intelligence. She thereby created a bypass that allowed her to circumvent the crime of murder.

Insanity has its own kind of logic.

Maybe she really does have an incurable learning disorder, he thought.

He thought about that girl from Sample B Group.

She's a lot like Milagros.

She really is.

Like Milagros, she stores the dead like berries inside her body.

The girl, however, can actually take on the appearance of the dead.

The Adiaptronite called Lesiah.

There was no answer.

He called again.

There was no answer.

The Adiaptronite thought for a moment about the worrisome future, the negative future. Lesiah hated this kind of thinking, but one had to consider it as a possibility. Both Lesiah and Shiver were being attacked by Dreyfus' gang, so it was very possible that they would be killed.

Lesiah believed that if you imagined a dark future, then that was exactly what you would get. She said that was why she always did her best to think on the bright side. *Living beings make their own lives what they are by their own will. Once they have lost this drive, it does not take long for them to die.* She said that all the time.

The Adiaptronite called her one more time, and waited, his face still impassive.

Finally, a shadow crossed his extraordinarily handsome profile.

Everything changes. That is the eternal truth.

Nevertheless, a dull brown emotion was slowly rising within the Adiaptronite's newly awakened heart.

The phone that was plugged directly into his auditory cortex continued to crackle and buzz. But that was all.

Jonah felt another vibration.

The water throughout the canal was shaking with great tremors.

What's going on?

She had a bad feeling.

She saw a flashing red light.

She had no idea what it was.

Perhaps it was a sensory ability peculiar to the kashiageha; this ancient creature had the ability to sense things from vibrations, whether they be on land, in the water, or in the air.

Jonah sped forward.

She kicked her gigantic single foot, softly and powerfully. The water whorled away behind her like swirling oil.

She proceeded through the intricate web of canals, making no errors as she turned this way and that, moving steadily closer to her destination.

The kashiageha smelled something.

Jonah recognized it, but was unable to put it into language no matter how hard she

tried. Without the language for it, she could not understand.

Jonah ran the smell that the Kashiageha was sensing through her own analytical systems.

It was blood.

The smell of blood... human blood!

The spectacle before her slowly became visible.

The water was stained deep red.

It looked almost pure black at the center. The color spread outwards from there, going from red to light pink, spreading further and further outwards. Massive volumes of blood gushed through the water.

Jonah shot straight through the water like a bullet.

She saw a man.

He was holding a long knife in his right hand.

Jonah hurriedly forged a communication device and shouted:

< What are you doing?! >

The man turned around like a wild beast.

Frozen with shock, he stared at the kashiageha before him. His paralysis, however, lasted only an instant. He gave a great kick and blasted off through the water with his jet-propulsion engine.

Jonah slowed down, and crept steadily into the thick curtain of blood.

The tip of Jonah's own sensor poked out from the kashiageha's beak; the kashiageha's sensory organs were unable to perceive what was on the other side of this crimson smokescreen.

She extended her electronic eye and looked around.

At first, it registered only images of countless human figures and the garish weapons they carried. But when she turned the eye downward, something horrible appeared.

It was Rafflesiah, with a gaping hole in her neck.

< Lesiah! Le...Lesiah, Lesiah! Lesiah... Lesiah!!! >

Jonah screamed uncontrollably.

Lesiah's body was rotating in the water, moving passively with the current. Then, Jonah saw her dead eyes. Her underwater goggles were half filled with water. Inside, her open eyes were clouded over, leaden and dull.

Did she actually swim through these canals armed with nothing but an oxygen tank and underwater goggles?

She probably did.

She had only her body to protect her, so delicate... but that small body of hers was fully equipped with courage.

All of a sudden, Jonah's body was overcome with fierce spasms.

A feeling something like fear coursed throughout her body.

The white coffin ship appeared in a corner of her visual field.

Far below Lesiah's pitiful corpse, far past the thick wall of water sullied with blood, she located Shiver's sunken coffin.

The kashiageha's power engine – a long, thin pump that functioned as a heart – began to beat fiercely, indicating that her body was moving into a fight or flight response.

Jonah fluttered unsteadily down through the water, like a sleepwalker, or a magic carpet.

She was afraid to speak.

But she had to call out to him and see...

< ...Shiver? Shiver, Shiver? Shiverer Mouse? >

There was no answer.

There was no response from the white coffin ship.

It was strange... the white metal box itself looked the same as always. Before, it had zipped around vivaciously, operated by a living being... it had flown through the air with intent... But now it was just a box, literally a coffin, a box for a dead person. It lay there, clearly dead, with no movement and no breath and no trace of its owner's presence.

Various scraps floated by in the murky water, caressing the white coffin ship's smooth surface. The white of the coffin looked gray; it lay completely motionless at the bottom of the canal like an animal carcass.

Suddenly, the kashiageha's vocal cords trembled.

Aaaaooooooooowwww...!!!

She bellowed out her cry of despair; it was the wail of the mother that had lost her children.

The low frequency sound-waves shook the entire planet. They called back the primeval memories of those creatures that were still alive on Caritas, shaking their souls so deeply that they would not sleep.

He's dead, he died, he finally died – screaming inside, she fanned open the wings of the iron shell on her back and wrapped them around the coffin.

Memories burned deep inside her chest. The recollections assailed her, painful like flames.

...On a sparkling lunar morning, the two of them gazed down from the eightieth floor balcony at the city down below, at the bottom of the sea... Jonah had hunted headless chickens for Dragon Cosmos... the windflowers that she had raised in the palm of her hand had flown off into the sky... Shiver had always gone to suckling station number twelve for nourishment ("I can't eat solid food, you see")... "Well, I can't die" "...Is it painful – not being able to die?" "Is it scary – knowing that you will die?" "So scary I could die," "Not being able to die is so painful, I could die too... everyone lives their ephemeral lives with such urgency, probably because they're afraid of dying..." "...Not being able to die is even scarier, isn't it?"
...Yes it is! Jonah screamed. Yes it is! Being left behind is the most terrifying of all!

Shiver understood me.

Everything will disappear, and leave me behind... everything else will age and grow old, their cells will decay, and then they will die, they will go extinct, and there will be nothing left... there will be nothing left... there will be nothing left in this world... But I... I... I will always remain. Lesiah died, Shiver died, but I will remain, all alone in this land. I'm being forced to live, all alone, for an unfathomable length of time... Is that what this is?

Jonah embraced the coffin, trembling.

Everything will just scatter away; everything will vanish and leave me behind...

But what about Him what about Him what about Him... what about the person who was the origin of my life? Does He exist? Where is He? Was He really there? Is He really here? Was that just a dream? Was it just a convenient dream that I created for myself, an illusion?

All of a sudden, overcome with a force that she could not control, Jonah began to lose

the form of the kashiageha.

First, her outer armour folded up and fused into her body. The movement was very slow, but as soon as that part was over, the rest progressed with accelerating speed. Her single leg was dragged deep into her original torso and swallowed up; her neck flopped over to the side as though the bones had broken; her beak melted into a drooping blob, stretched out like elastic. The scale-like feathers that covered her body lost their individual boundaries and blended together one by one, as though they had been exposed to extreme heat. Her body was slowing closing in on itself; the joints between each body segment disappeared, her wings were drawn inside, and her gigantic head dissolved into a glob like melted candy.

Jonah did not have a clue what she was metamorphosing into.

The memories of the cells that she had sampled thus far flowed through her, flipping rapidly like the pages of a book – a gruesome torrent of black type marching along like ants.

At that moment, from inside his small ship, Dreyfus saw *it*.

A massive shudder came crawling up his spine.

The thing he saw awakened a basic and instinctive fear in him.

His knees began to knock together as he stared at it, dumbfounded. This was the first time since his childhood that he had felt like this. The shaking of his knees brought back memories from long ago – back from the days when he had cringed with fear when he sensed that his mother was in a bad mood.

Dreyfus howled with wild, animal fury. He pounded on his knees again and again with his fists, but he could not stop the shaking.

The thing was melting like jelly and transforming into some bizarre new form.

Dreyfus opened his eyes, buried in scars. He forced his eyelids upwards with all his might and stared at *the thing*.

Jonah felt herself transforming into something very familiar, something that she knew intimately.

That place whose every fold and crease she knew so well - that enclosed space where she could feel safe and secure, so familiar for so long... she was transforming into that...

Dreyfus thought *the thing* looked similar to Shiverer Mouse's coffin. The size, however, was different. The shape was exactly the same, but it looked about ten times bigger and thirty times heavier.

The coffins – white, trapezoid-shaped coffins – floated in the water, face to face. They were the same shape, but the size of one completely dwarfed the other.

Trying to control the pounding in his chest, Dreyfus moved his trembling fingers to the “Jennifer”'s trigger. He had expected it to feel cold, but he must have been touching it unconsciously – it was slippery and warm.

Jonah heard the voice of Shiverer Mouse.

< ... Hey there, what's wrong? >

Jonah's voice stuck in her throat, and she could not make any reply.

< What's wrong, you're sure quiet. >

The voice seemed to come from far away, drifting over to her like an electromagnetic wave, from someplace far beyond time and space.

She could see the same light that she had just seen a moment ago when, when she felt the kashiageha's death.

< I... I'm here, Shiver. I'm here. > Jonah answered weakly.

She thought she heard Shiverer Mouse laugh faintly.

< Weird... where are we? Are we on Caritas? Or maybe we're in space, like the first time we met. >

Shiver spoke, and then fell silent, as though to say that it was all inconsequential anyway. He was there though, silently present. Jonah could feel him. *Shiver is here. Right here. Or... he's right here within me. He's here. Here inside this shell.*

The thought made her chest inflate with joy.

< Hey, do you remember them? >

< Remember who? >

Shiver's voice sounded muffled in the darkness.

< You know, the windflowers. I wonder where they are now. The ones that flew off from the palm of your hand. >

< Aaah... yeah, the windflowers >

I'm together with Shiver.

We're going to be together from now on. Forever. We'll be together forever.

But then, Shiver's presence seemed to recede.

< What's wrong? Where are you going? >

Shiver slowly shook his head; it looked as though he were swimming in light.

< I have to go. They're calling me. >

< Wait! >

< Goodbye... it's alright... goodbye Jonah. >

But wait! The light vibrated with Jonah's screams.

The light looked alive. It seemed to gently envelop Shiver's body – his withered body,

now separated from the coffin.

< Don't go! >

There was no longer any response.

Jonah searched for Shiver, sobbing.

When you die where do you go? Jonah asked. *When you die where do you go?!*

There was no response.

Dreyfus took aim, and squeezed the trigger of his beautiful "Jennifer."

The heavy sound of rocket fire reverberated through the water with a great *boom*.

The boys, Dreyfus' underlings, all moved away at once. They lumbered away slowly through the water like diseased fish.

Clothed in a froth of bubbles, the rocket shot forcefully through the water.

A few seconds later, it struck the larger of the two coffins.

Suddenly, the steering panel of the small ship started blinking bright red, signalling that the ship was in danger – it had been too close to the target.

The ship shook violently. The current swallowed it up and tossed it about. He was stuck in a tailspin and began to lose control of the ship.

The rocket slammed brutally into Jonah's coffin, cloaking it in a burst of white froth. The surface caved in with a crunch. Water came pouring into the inside, and the coffin began to sink.

Jonah felt as though her world had been violated. She felt dejected. Dejected, but not angry. She just wanted quiet. That was all. *Leave me alone. Just leave me alone.*

Jonah's broken surface began to regenerate.

She now probed the memories of Dragon Cosmos, drew them out, and reconstituted

the diamond shell adapted for traveling through space. Jonah stood still, alone within the transparent diamond.

Dreyfus' small ship slammed into the canal wall. Several of its protruding parts were knocked off, but the ship itself was not destroyed. Glaring at the steering panel, he repositioned the ship, and at last was able to breathe. It was only in emergency situations like this that he was able to get a moment's respite and forget everything. But as soon as he regained control of the ship, Dreyfus exploded in a mad rage.

Daniel, meanwhile, had arrived at last.

He saw Jonah. She was confined inside a diamond coffin – or perhaps she had intentionally confined herself there. The moment he saw her, he became so excited that his heart ached.

Daniel swam resolutely towards her. As he gained speed, the underwater gills on his neck fluttered like flower petals.

Jonah was sitting down inside the diamond shell, inside Dragon Cosmos.

Her bare legs were crossed in an X and drawn up to her chest. Her arms were wrapped around her legs, and her forehead rested on her knees.

Jonah was alone.

Nobody is here. Nobody is here but me. I'm alone, I'm all by myself. Nobody can enter here. I will be confined here forever, half asleep, thinking eternally about ways to pass the eternal time.

Daniel pounded on the shell.

Jonah raised her head; she mistook it for the sound of wind passing through a cave.

Then she noticed the young man.

She wasn't sure who he was, but he looked familiar.

It was when his right hand changed into an excavating tool and began to cut into the diamond that she remembered.

< Daniel! >

Jonah sprang up.

The young man smiled at her.

Standing stock still, Jonah watched him cutting steadily away at the diamond.

Diamonds too could be broken, if they were struck at precisely the right angle. Before long, he would find that point, and a single thrust would crack this diamond open.

Her world would crumble... Jonah cowered in fear.

Yet at the same time, somewhere deep down inside, she was excited at the thought of something new penetrating her long, long, long life.

She knew that he was her enemy – that he had been sent here by the military to find her. But he was like her. He had eternal life, like her. She was interested in him. She had betrayed Shiver because of him. She had abandoned him. That was why Shiver had died. Even so, she was interested in Daniel. Maybe they could talk... maybe they could understand each other... because even though they were enemies, they were also kin.

He will kill me, she thought.

The idea was strangely attractive.

He will kill me.

I will die.

Daniel pushed and shoved at Dragon Cosmos' shell. Suddenly, a section of the shell shifted. The diamond split diagonally and slowly began to crumble.

Water came pouring in.

Jonah panicked and clung to the diamond wall.

Daniel was swept inside with the water.

He's coming to kill me, he's coming to kill me – Jonah exploded with laughter and a burst of air bubbles gushed from her mouth.

Jonah swam around the swirling eddy. Daniel tried to grab her, but the force of the current kept pulling him back, so he just kept circling around the same spot.

The shell soon filled entirely with water. The two of them swam through the water, scattered with light, their arms spread wide.

Daniel stretched out his long arms.

Jonah hesitated for a moment, entranced then reached out a hand in response.

Daniel grabbed tightly onto the hand.

That was when it happened.

A portion of the genetic information stored in Daniel's body received a signal and suddenly became manifest.

First, the palms of their hands stuck together like glue. Taken aback by the sticky sensation, Jonah tried to shake him off, but their cells had fused completely. She could not break free no matter how hard she tried.

The genetic information, implanted within him by Saga Electronics' cutting edge technology, now dominated their bodies completely.

Jonah tried to reactivate the kashiageha cells in order to protect herself. The folded iron wings sprouted from her lower body, but a command from somewhere stopped the action short. She was too late. Different information was flooding into her body. It was

flowing in from Daniel's body, forcefully encroaching.

For the first time in her life, Jonah felt corporeal fear.

I'm going to lose my self, my identity...

The transformation was accelerating. One by one, their arms, their chests, their backs, and their legs all fused together. Then, the transformation began to reach inside.

Jonah let out a wordless scream, a death cry.

Suddenly, their heads burst open, like an explosion of sprouts erupting from the ground. They exploded like fireworks. From the tips of their heads sprang the roots of plants, countless plants.

Saga Electronics, on the Military Priest's orders, had furnished #13 with the cells of the plants that formed hotbeds for pata ore. These cells could be activated only under a very specific condition, and once activated could not be turned off. The cells contained a program that would destroy the function of the Sample B units themselves; it would destroy their intelligence.

There was only one condition necessary to activate the cells; that is, Sample B #13 touching the cells of Sample B #3. Daniel, touching Jonah. The boy, touching the girl.

The plants were growing vigorously.

First, they engulfed Shiver's white coffin, then gently enveloped Lesiah's pierced corpse. Those cells were then revitalized and modified, transforming into plants and turning the water a lush, vibrant green.

Dreyfus had no idea what had happened. He knew only that something was coming, stretching its limbs out forcefully towards him. He manoeuvred the small ship, trying to get away from this place.

He did not make it.

As he struggled to turn the ship around, the tips of the plants penetrated the ship's propulsion ports. The hard roots that would one day breed pata ore quickly broke through the thin iron plates and assailed the engine directly.

Dreyfus felt the ship lurch over sideways. As the water came pouring in, he saw something else rushing in around his feet – something that he had never seen before. His first thought was, *it's a great green serpent*. That was also his last thought. As soon as it touched him, it swallowed him up and assimilated him. The innumerable scars carved into his face burst into bloom, overflowing with vegetation. His eyes, nose, and mouth all slid away as his face split open along the lines of the scars. The ship exploded.

The fresh plant growth burst apart and scattered across the water. However, as soon as the explosion abated, the plant's trunk returned to reincorporate the dispersed vegetation.

The plants continued to grow and spread. They stretched their tendrils further and further, now in pursuit of Agachi, Sura, Tarantula, and the boys.

Any attempt to attack the plants had no effect.

All of them were overcome with fear. The boys screamed feebly and tried to escape.

Sura lost control of his bladder and urinated in the water. He was so petrified that he barely noticed. He experienced terror like never before in his life, deep down at the very core of his being. Even Dreyfus had never managed to terrify him like this, not even close...!

Both Agachi and Tarantula continued speeding ahead, along with the boys.

Those little shits!

If I catch them I'll slit their fucking throats!

Sura shrieked.

Something grabbed onto his ankle.

So I'm the one who gets caught, he thought... His skin turned green, his body transformed into vegetation, and he himself became one with the force that pursued the others fleeing ahead.

In the end, all of them were caught after all.

One after another, the plants devoured Agachi, Tarantula, and the boys, transforming their cells and continuing to grow with even more vigour, some in the direction of the protective barrier behind which the Adiaptron hid, some spreading out in other directions, devouring the fish in the canal and reaching out their limbs, aiming for land.

They burst out through the earth, basked in the light of the moon, and snaked across the ground, swallowing up human corpses, animal carcasses, and each and every cell and intelligence in their path, gaining momentum all the while and blanketing the vast earth in verdure.

One by one, they devoured even the poisonous insects that Milagros had created – assimilated them, broke down and transformed their poison, and further expanded their thick green garrisons.

The plants at the barrier struggled to break through, but since the barrier was already badly deteriorated with age, they were able to snake their way in between the cracks. Once the water came pouring in, however, the barrier crumbled away, imploding from the pressure.

The Adiaptronite listened to the sound of the crumbling barrier and the water pouring in, and contemplated the bleak future.

“Milagros,” the Adiaptronite called quietly. “What’s coming?”

Milagros smiled in front of him.

She looked beautiful, and kind.

‘Don’t you know?’ She wore the expression of a mischievous little girl.

She’s so sweet, the Adiaptronite thought, gazing tenderly at her.

‘Peace. Eternal tranquility... finally, for me too’.

All of a sudden, the Adiaptronite was swept away by the water. Crackling, his cord was torn from Milagros’ terminal, and myriad parts came popping out of his brain, his artificial intelligence. As he was swept along, in the last threads of his consciousness, the Adiaptronite thought: *I’m glad I met Milagros; I never got tired of her; maybe I liked her. I liked her more than any love sample I collected. But she wasn’t a sample, she was right there beside me. She was really there. She was close enough to touch, if I reached just out my hand...*

After the green limbs had devoured the Adiaptronite, they headed for Milagros. They crawled up the terminal and assimilated even the metal into themselves. They accumulated even more territory, welcoming the terminal into their green kingdom, and soon approached Milagros’ brain.

Milagros was having disconnected dreams.

She sensed that Adi was no longer there. His ambience disappeared with a *poof*, and she was suddenly overcome with a feeling of isolation. Soon, that isolation became too much to bear.

All kinds of humans pushed and jostled within her, whispering all kinds of things. Some vowed revenge, others love, others friendship; some whispered of anger, others of sadness...

Milagros was already coming apart.

She forgot what she had been dreaming.

But wait, there is one thing – just one thing – that I can remember clearly. That person... that radiance. The one who had appeared suddenly and said, I am attracted to you. Did that really happen? Or was it just a vision? A kind of dream? But none of that matters now.

No, it doesn't matter...

The vines promptly enveloped her brain, and crushed her gigantic artificial intelligence to a pulp.

The plants were spreading across the entire surface of Planet Caritas.

They snaked their way across the land, swallowing everything in their path. They grew and grew, exhaling terrific volumes of green breath, as though to swallow up the planet itself.

Amidst all of this, the part where Jonah and Daniel had been fused together – and that part alone – swelled into a huge lump and was carried off to the epicenter of Caritas, to the place that had once been the center of the city.

Then, finally, a single tree sprung up from the swollen lump and stretched four arms up towards the heavens. Immediately, it burst into an explosion of new branches growing this way and that, as though to pierce through the sky itself.

Everything stopped growing, and the giant tree remained.

Time passed, the tree broke into leaf, and countless white flowers appeared.

It was beautifully fragrant.

The leaves gently rustled in the wind, and the flowers fluttered to the ground.

The tree itself remained.

There it stayed, on and on, putting down deep roots in the land. Had it been a moving creature, it probably would have merely passed through, eager to move along. But it remained on the land, for what seemed like an eternity and felt like an instant...

Epilogue

In order to count off eight hundred years of time, sure enough, it had taken eight hundred years of time.

Sometimes it seemed as though it had taken longer – although as far as he knew, the workings of subjective time were still largely unexplained anyway.

In any case, a long time had passed, and he had gone busily about his work, at times forgoing even his dreaming time.

Long ago, especially around the time when he was first entering his adolescence, he had just lain there like a patient strapped to a hospital bed, staring dazed into the TV monitor, depressed and zombie-like.

He had rushed about in confusion, not understanding anything, irritated and distraught.

Now he had approached the end of his life.

Having found his purpose – a purpose that he could hold with conviction – he was satisfied.

His only disappointment was the fact that he had only been able to dedicate a mere quarter of his eight hundred year life to that purpose. After all, that single quarter was far more fun than the other three put together...

He could not help but feel fortunate, having seen so many lives come to an end with no knowledge of their own purposes – or rather, lives so short and tragic that he could not help but conclude that they must have been intentionally created without any purpose.

He had come into the world as the Arbitration Council's military commander in chief, focused purely on leading their side to victory – an old man laced with cunning and cruel wisdom since the day he was born.

The former part of his life had been dedicated to preventing the destruction of humanity at the hands of the Empire of Machines – to making sure the human species survived. He had poured all his energy into that task. He had probably been right to do so.

After all, there had to be a reason why a temporal deformity like himself had been sent here, to this world, at that time.

Thanks to Sample B Group, which he himself had devised and put on the production lines, the Empire of Machines had lost territory and the front lines had definitively retreated. The state of war had, in its own way, regained a kind of calm.

For the first three quarters of his life, he was the Military Priest, likened to a great thunderbolt; for the remaining quarter, he was the Founder of the Church, likened to the soft light of the moon. Who would ever have believed such a thing?

Even he himself had not known.

And yet when he was still a newborn old man, he had supposedly grasped everything – understood it and embraced it.

Time had taken away all his knowledge, stripped him naked and abandoned him, leaving him as insecure as a rabbit with its fur torn off. Cruel, beautiful Time...

For the latter part of his life, after he entered his boyhood, he served as both Military

Commander and as the Head of the Infinite Church – as the Wellspring spinning the wheel of life.

With him at its center, the church conducted its work, gained power, and slowly but surely grew.

The Priest had thus become someone who connected souls to God rather than the head of the military; he was an umbilical cord, a window, a TV monitor, the mid-point of an hourglass, a pure white radiance.

He did in fact appear to people in the real world as a white radiance. Since entering his infancy in particular, his contours had become more and more blurred. He brimmed with radiance, exuding a quiet phosphorescence from some formless place.

It was still difficult to remain fixed in the real world. It was extremely tiring, but even so he had continued his strenuous landings – he had alighted everywhere he could within his eight hundred year field of vision, as far as he could go within his own time and his own space.

He would descend, provide inspiration/encouragement, and spin words, radiating light all the while as his life energy whittled away.

Some had said that the light was like a hazy moon.

They were right.

But even when illuminated by a hazy moon, the world was obscure – it was certainly not simply “there” for all to see.

He thought about the rabbit that he had once tried so hard to save but had never succeeded.

No matter where he brought that rabbit, no matter what point in time he sent it to, it

invariably met with the same accident.

He did not know why.

The only thing he knew for sure was that there was such a thing as fate in this world, and that there were things that could not be changed.

The matrix, the system, fate – you could call it what you wanted. Whatever it was, this universe operated according to its principles. Having lived eight hundred years, his feelings about this had grown stronger and stronger. There were many things that could be changed, but there were many more things that could not.

Besides, he was not really sure what could be or should be changed. Nevertheless, he still had a duty to come down and appear before people. And slowly, the universe was altered according to his will.

Life consciousness had been built into the universe since the very beginning. The universe craved the presence of creatures that lived by their own wills. Thus life was born, and thus consciousness was born. The breath of life and the light of consciousness burned in robots, in machines – in all kinds of things.

That thing that had appeared on the monitor next to his bed – whether it was some kind of god, or a transcendent being, or what exactly it was – even now he could not be sure.

Considering the intricacy of this system that governed the universe, it had to be something beyond the grasp of human understanding. That much seemed to be certain.

There was one other thing of which he could be certain – *that thing* was endowed with a property that he did not possess.

It was a woman, a giver of life.

That thing was not he himself; it was not an illusion that he had created out of

desperation, he was sure about that...

The planet's surface was blanketed completely with pata flowers.

The pata trees had all burst into flower, and the world was lush with snow-white blossoms.

I've seen this before.

Wasn't it in a dream?

The dream about the flower garden.

Where is this place?

He was simply unable to remember.

He stepped into the scene.

The longer he stayed in the real world, the more time would be shaved off his life. But even so, he could not resist going. He descended to the world and alighted there, as though he had been beckoned.

Just then, he felt a weight on his body.

All manner of physical pain, gravity, magnetism, and light assailed him like so many needles.

His small body contorted as if to dissolve. He screamed into space – I am light, I am light!

Focusing his consciousness, he finally succeeded in gathering together the fragments of his body.

It was true; he had become nothing more than a cluster of light. His existence had become so diluted that he had lost his contours; the few times that there was a break in the clouds, parts of his body could be seen floating suspended over in the beyond – teeth like

specks in the sky, or a foot with an insufficient number of toes.

It was terrifying... he knew nothing of death. He had seen so much death in his lifetime, and yet he knew nothing of what came after. And since his own existence was out of the ordinary, thoughts of his own death frightened him all the more.

Where will I go? Will I go nowhere? Will I lose consciousness? Will I be destroyed? Will I simply disperse into the air? Will anything remain? Will it just be a kind of movement from one place to another?

He knew nothing.

He knew that when his time was up, the change would come, but what that change would entail, or whether it could be called death, he did not know... perhaps death was always simply death, just like that which had come for that Shiverer Mouse – The End – the end of one form.

Suddenly, he was assailed with a moment of intense corporeal pain, and then just as abruptly, it was gone.

Time had not stopped its workings, even on his unnatural body. On the contrary, it felt as though time had begun to move even faster.

His hands, which he could just barely sense beyond the mist, had shrunk to less than three centimeters across. The right hand was no longer connected to any arm.

His outline crackled and distorted; white noise coursed through it, passing through his hollow body like wind.

Will anyone cry?

Will anyone cry... the way those women cried when that white coffin sunk slowly down to the bottom of the canal – will anyone cry that way for me?

The tree was the greatest of all the life forms to take root on this land.

The tree had been here for a long, long time, gazing straight up to the heavens with outstretched arms.

The sun rose and set, and at night the three moons hung in the sky. The tree did not know their names, but they were always changing shape, and they seemed to whisper to each other in consultation. Perhaps they talked about what kinds of gifts one should bring when visiting someone in the hospital.

The tree did not actually possess intelligence.

However, all of the countless intelligences that this land had once contained had come together, merged, and become one – forming something like an afterimage, or a residue.

Many of the souls gathered there carried heavy burdens of sorrow.

Sometimes, the soul of a man who used to be called Dreyfus cried out.

The tree gently enveloped that part of itself, treated it and cared for it, and consoled it for a long, long time. The tree brought him relief, just as one would treat an illness in one's own body.

The tree searched inside for Dreyfus' mother, modified her, and gave her to him.

Dreyfus looked at his mother. The image was old and warped, and yet beautiful. Her black hair was stuck to her sombre profile, and she looked tired. His mother was crying... she was crying. She was crying for someone... he did not know for whom. His mother went on crying and crying.

An unfathomable length of time passed, and finally he spoke to her.

< ... Mom. >

His mother slowly turned up her eyes, red and tired from crying, and gazed at her son.

She gazed directly at him.

Dreyfus returned her gaze.

< There are a million things I'd like to ask you, > said Dreyfus quietly...

The tree also thought about other things.

It did not exactly "think about" things, but rather the tree responded to stimuli from the external world.

When the wind blew, the tree would think about where that wind had come from. Thus the tree could feel the existence of things strange and unknown, from faraway places.

The sun tirelessly rose and set; at night the moons waxed and waned with a certain regularity – such things also stimulated the tree. The tree knew that there was something governing the world of which it was a part. Something as important as that, the tree had known for a long time, deep in the flow of the small transmitter substances circulating throughout its body, which could not be called a brain.

When the child suddenly appeared standing at its roots, the tree was surprised. "Surprised" simply meant that the sap had gone pumping through its veins, slowly diffusing transmitter substances.

The tree was not sure how it knew that this being was a child. A voice inside just rang out and told it so.

A pure white child.

It had an odd face – as though its eyes, nose, and mouth were starting to dissolve; or as though someone were about to shape that face out of mud.

The white shadow wavered hesitantly, squirming within the sphere of its aura.

This child is leaving to go somewhere, the tree thought. I know it. This child is leaving here very soon...

As for the child, he no longer had any memory of why he had been drawn to this place, what had happened here, or what could possibly be buried here. As time passed, he had lost more and more of his memories.

He knew only that he had been drawn to that big tree like a magnet. He landed ever so lightly at its base.

He floated there for a while, entwining his rarefied mass, which had become no more than a swirl of gas, into the roots of the tree.

Beautiful fields of flowers extended as far as the eye could see.

A gentle breeze drifted, passing contentedly through the rays of sunlight.

The foliage on the trees was a striking lush green.

Innumerable arc-shaped leaves rustled softly, then slowly began to shake, crackling and wild. The white flowers too swayed their heads, rippling and murmuring; perhaps whispering endless rumours [to one another].

Where is this place again?

It looks familiar.

But I can't remember where I've seen it.

With his skin, he could feel the Being in the tree.

It felt like a caress – soft, and lighter than the wind. It felt very, very good.

Because it felt so good, each/both of them came to love the other's Being.

At that moment, he felt something strange.

It felt as though there was something trying to break into this place. But it was not

dangerous. It felt familiar.

All of a sudden, it showed itself.

It was a frail-looking boy. There he was, released into the space of reality, faintly emitting light.

He knitted his brows and looked up at the tree, seemingly lost. His eyes scanned upwards, as though trying to see just how how tall it stood.

But the boy was – of all things – *himself*...

He himself, *two hundred years ago*.

Time and space were beginning to warp.

It is said that just before death, we see our lives before our eyes, like revolving lanterns; or perhaps our doppelgangers.

The boy was looking up at the strange tree.

He had no memory of ever having seen this tree.

He was about to lose his life – all of his memories – and die.

Terrible fear welled up within him once again, but he managed to distract himself by observing the boy. There was no question that the boy was himself. So apparently there *were* some things that he could still remember. He remembered his magnificent life – only one small part of it – ever so slowly, as though he were drawing it out on a string.

Just then, the boy noticed him.

He shook off his fear, faced his own self from two hundred years before, and called out to him.

QUICKLY, REVIVE THE CHURCH... I WILL DIE SOON AND WILL NOT BE
ABLE TO STAY IN THIS WORLD ANY LONGER.

Huh? The boy reflexively replied.

I AM LIGHT... SOON I WILL DIE, AND DISAPPEAR FROM THIS WORLD.

The boy shouted, Are you... is it You?!

Now *that* was a big misunderstanding.

So he smiled, and quickly corrected him.

I AM YOU.

The tree was listening to their conversation.

It was not eavesdropping, of course. But they were so close that the tree could just naturally grasp what they said, the same way that it could grasp the daily weather.

The sunrise today seemed to have brought with it especially good air. Since morning, all kinds of things had come to visit.

It was no trouble, of course. The tree was happy to receive special visits like these.

Even temporary visitors, just passing by, were incredibly stimulating, when situated in the long, long flow of time that the tree experienced – it felt like being all lit up from within by the sun.

The tree had never possessed any Self.

Nor did it mind when something encroached on it's own space. The fact that all kinds of things resided within it did not disturb the tree in the slightest. Inside the tree was Everything; it was quiet and peaceful.

Even when the pata ore insects gnawed at the tips of its roots until they started to dissolve away, the tree did not mind.

The tree was prepared to accept change, death, fate, pain, anything and everything, at

any time.

Finally, the boy's form began to blur into space, and he seemed to dissolve into nothing in the air.

His ambience seemed to have vanished from the air particles; the tree thought it unfortunate.

The younger child was still there.

The child recognized that the tree had a soul.

The tree too could feel the soul the child.

A memory – a very faint memory – slowly rose up within the tree.

But the tree did not remember.

It did not remember anything.

He too barely remembered.

Already, the time was approaching.

The sun that hung in the blue sky abruptly darkened.

The voice reached his ears clearly.

So we meet at last.

Startled, he slowly turned in the direction of the voice.

I told you before – that we met at the time of your birth.

He faintly shook his head.

He had absolutely no recollection.

In those few instants, all his memories had vanished.

At this point, he no longer cared. His chest was tight with agonizing pain – yet there was also a glimmer of joy there.

The pleasant voice continued:

You will now be born into another universe... all living beings cycle through the wheel of existence, and receive new bodies. You too shall receive a new body.

Then, with a deafening sound, seven dragons, who until a moment ago had been nothing more than a purple cloud, swooped down from a corner of the sky.

The dragons felt more real to him than ever. They spewed out fiery, blustering breath, and he sensed that if he were to accidentally touch those big, undulating scales, it would cause him pain. The dragons scooped him up. This was the first time that he had been caught by as many as seven dragons. He could not imagine how great, how immense their energy must be. It must be positively momentous...

Then, suddenly, he saw Her, straddled on the back of the foremost dragon.

Ah... aaah...! He just barely cried out, then realized that he no longer had even the energy to gather his own voice.

He was warm with nostalgia – and yet he could not for the life of him remember who *That* was. His whole body filled with a prickling, burning *pain*. The fear he had felt until a moment ago disappeared completely, and in its place, flames filled with joy burned his heart to ashes.

He could not be sure anymore whether or not *That* was *Her*. *It* was no longer male or female; it bore the more primeval face of Energy itself.

It was *that* which what turned the universe.

His body was starting to lose substance; it was beginning to disperse.

His form began to fade, as though blending with its surroundings. His atoms began to disperse, as though drawn into the folds of space-time.

He could see the planet far below.

The planet was blanketed in mossy green, and fields of white flowers shone twinkling like tiny rays of light.

The massive tree stood frozen in place with its four long arms stretched up to the heavens, reaching into space.

It seemed as though the tree would always be there, just as it was now, even if time were to go on forever.

Or perhaps someday those arms really would reach the heavens.

He could hear music.

He could see all kinds of colors in the music.

He could no longer distinguish whether the music was actually sounding out in reality, or whether it was merely the vestiges of his memory.

It was riding on the foremost dragon, leading the others, riding on the wind. From a faraway place, *It* turned around, smiled, and shouted.

. . . YOU!

Huh?

He felt like he was being pushed slowly out, and through to some other place... the same response came back again, louder this time.

...I LOVE YOU!

Those were the last words he heard in this universe.