

THE GIRL WITH THE EYES OF ANTIQUITY

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I was too lazy to make a parody copyright page.

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01 – Funeral

On a cold autumn afternoon in the 17th Eon, chilled to the bone in spite of the feeble efforts of the dying red sun, a blonde haired boy of 14 dressed in black stood silently in a circle alongside a couple dozen other grim-faced adolescents. An older man carrying a dirt-encrusted shovel, his work at last complete, tipped his hat in a silent acknowledgment to the children, and departed from the site. In his wake was left nothing more than a withered old tree, the mound of freshly packed dirt before it, a stone tablet with the name “Ms. Ambrosius” engrave upon it, and the lingering silence.

The first to break the silence was a tall boy, who asked the others, “Well, now what do we do?”

The next to speak was a girl with auburn hair, who said, “There’s nothing we can do. No teacher, no graduating – that’s how the academy works.”

The third, a shorter boy with longer hair, replied, “It’s a raw deal, is what it is. How’s it our fault that that they didn’t prepare a replacement teacher, anyways? It’s not like they hadn’t already kept her going for like two hundred years!”

The fourth was a boy, who was quite thin in build, who first adjusted his glasses before replying, “Two-hundred forty-three years, to be more precise. ”

“Gee, was that it? She didn’t look a day over a hundred and seven.”

He smirked at that response. “That’s the power of cryostasis.”

The last to speak was a girl with short, black hair, who quietly added only, “... they didn’t even let her come out, except to teach us.”

The boy dressed in black remained silent, listening to the words of each of his classmates. In truth, what was even the correct thing to say at this time? Should he try to encourage them? That would be nothing but hollow words. Should he try to put together plan? He had no right to propose something now. Should he try to empathize? Then surely the feelings in his heart would overflow on their own.

So that boy said nothing, and returned home.

He prepared dinner for himself that night. His father and older brother sat out in the living room, the metal rings around their head indicating they were deeply lost into the Datanet.

“It isn’t your fault. I don’t consider you to be a failure.”

Those curt words were all his father had said to him. They haunted him as he lay in bed that night, staring up at the slowly rotating ceiling.

“What a shame! Guess you’re gonna be stuck as an eighth-year on cooking duty forever, huh? Don’t worry about it, I’ve got you covered.”

He clenched his fists as he reflected on the words from his brother. *“Does his encouragement need to be so insulting?”*

Morning came with little sleep to gained from the night. The boy put on a slightly thicker coat than he had worn the previous day and simply started walking, with no particular destination in mind. He passed by houses on the streets, the small schoolhouse which he knew as the academy, the old observatory, the sealed research center, the ruined factories of the Celestial Endeavor, the skeletal remains of an ancient alien god, the lake filled with ruined ships, the grassy field, the overgrown woods, and not a single human.

Then, just after the peak of high noon, the boy arrived again at the small graveyard with the withered tree. Yet to his surprise, there was one other person here, standing before the stone tablet.

This person, he could tell, was a girl about his age. She was dressed in a brilliant floral pattern, the bright colors contrasted against her pale

skin and jet-black hair. Hanging from her arm was a wicker basket, full of white flowers, which she scattered so they might fall to the ground, landing before the stone tablet. Each time she did, she turned her gaze up, as though to count each of the falling petals. The boy moved forward against his will, mesmerized by the strange actions of the girl, until at last she turned, and caught his gaze, meeting her bright, blue eyes with his.

“Hi there. Did you come to throw flowers as well?” she asked.

“Flowers?”

“This is the calla lily,” she said, holding up one of the larger flowers to show him. “And this one is a chrysanthemum, and this one a cream rose. I have many flowers, but my favorite is this one – the stargazer.”

“Huh?”

“You know, the calla lily isn’t actually a true lily, even though it has that name. But the stargazer is, even if it’s been modified a little bit. I guess some people might not see that as natural, but I think it’s a lot more natural to be looking up to the sky.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh!” the girl replied. “I’m sorry, I thought we already knew each other? What was your name, again?”

“Art,” he replied, the word slowly coming from his mouth.

“Art! Right. Yeah, I definitely know you. Or maybe I’m going to know you in the future? Yes, it must be something like that.”

“Not a single word you’ve said so far makes sense.”

“My name is Shiori!” she replied, casually brushing aside his words and putting her hand forward. “Pleased to know you, Art.”

Art looked down at her hand, then back up to her. “What exactly are you doing, here? Why are you throwing flowers?”

“How could you not know? It’s an ancient tradition to lay white flowers for those who have passed. Don’t you think they make this place seem a lot more beautiful than before?”

He looked over the flower-strewn ground, and answered her, “I don’t think... that I understand it. I’ve never even heard of a tradition like this, before.”

Shiori stepped back, her hand over her mouth, and replied, “Really? Oh my, you really don’t much, do you? Well, I suppose it’s to be expected. After all...”

The strange girl kicked off with her left foot, spinning in place and raising her right hand over her eye, before declaring, “I’m a genius magical girl who can see into the past!”

Art turned and began walking away. He had no idea what a single word that had come from that girl’s mouth meant, and he didn’t feel it was worth it to go any further. But as he started to walk off, there was a sound of footsteps rushing along from behind, and he found the girl walking alongside him.

“You’re just going to walk away like that? Didn’t anybody teach you that this kind of thing was rude?”

He said nothing in response, so she stuck her tongue out at him. “Rude! Completely rude!”

“I didn’t come out here looking to talk to someone.”

“Oh? If that was true, then why didn’t you just walk away when you first saw me?”

He was silent for a moment, and then replied, “I’ve been walking all morning. My legs just kept moving, that’s all there is to it.”

“I don’t think that’s how legs work, Art. It’s not normal for people to just go walking forward on their own. It’s kind of weird.”

“Do you really think you’re in position to say something like that?”

“Of course. There’s nothing weird about me. It’s you who’s missing out on basic facts and has weird legs.”

“You mean that made up stuff about the flowers?”

“It’s not made up! Like I said, I know all sorts of stuff, because I can see into the past. I bet even the adults don’t know as much as I do. That’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“That’s not possible. The academy teaches us everything there is to learn about.”

“Really? Then what do you know about?”

“Everything there is. Grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, music...”

“You know music? Do you know any songs?”

“The academy has records of all music created by humans, so it would be pointless to learn any. What matters is how that music relates to the numbers of the universe.”

“Why would that be pointless? Even if you’re just playing music that someone else made, does it really as matter as long as you’re having fun with it?”

“Having fun has nothing to do with it,” he snapped back. “It’s all about the results. Everything has an order to it. If things aren’t done with intent and purpose, that order falls apart.”

“Oh?” she replied, rushing in front of him and stopping, bowing her back down with her arms locked behind her, and looking up at him with sparkling eyes, “And who told you that?”

“Those are the rules of the academy,” he replied, keeping his eyes locked forward and walking past her. “If you don’t understand, then you must be an outsider.”

“An outsider? Yeah, I guess I am, huh. Oh, but, that aside... if all of the world has an order to it, doesn't the death of that poor woman seem a little senseless?”

Art stopped walking. She walked alongside him again, and said, “Oh, was that insensitive of me to say? Sometimes things just come out of my mouth like that. Was she important to you?”

“She was our teacher,” he replied.

“Is that so? Were you close?”

He shook his head. “No. I knew almost nothing about her. The only time we saw her was during class, when they would awake her from out of cryostasis.”

“Really? That sounds like such a terrible way of living.”

“It's not right for an outsider to say that.”

“Oh? Then are you saying I'm wrong?”

“I'm saying that it's not up for you to decide.”

“I'm not making a decision, am I? Now that she's gone, it's not like I have any say over the matter either way. All I'm doing is saying how I feel about it.”

“Feelings are supposed to be kept inside. That's what separates kids from adults.”

“But I'm not an adult, am I? Or at least, I don't think I am. And you don't look it either.”

“It's practice. I only need one more year at the academy, and three years at the upper academy. Then I'll graduate, and be an adult. I have to be ready for that.”

“Huh? So if you don't have a teacher anymore, wouldn't that be a lot of trouble for you?”

He said nothing after that, but she continued on. “I don’t think it’s that big of a deal, though. I’m sure you’ll become an adult, even if that doesn’t happen. I think that I will, too. Probably... I can see into the past, but I can’t see into the future.”

“There you go again, about this seeing into the past nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense! Look, I’ll prove it... let’s see, back in the 5th Eon, there was a fashion trend where everyone in the city of Neo-Columbia wore shoes that were made out of snakeskin! But since the snakes they used were modified, the skins stayed partially alive, and the shoes ended up getting stuck to people’s feet whenever they got wet. Nobody noticed because of the big drought, but one day, all the rain came down, and suddenly everyone had the skin stuck to their feet!”

“Even if that isn’t a bunch of nonsense, you could have just learned about it in history class.”

“Oh? But I thought all knowledge came from the academy?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? That’s all you have to say?”

“What else would I say?”

“I would expect you to at least guess! You know, say that maybe you didn’t really know everything. Or at least make something up, like I was watching you from the ceiling, or something. Try to be creative.”

“Creative?”

“Yeah! Like...”

Shiori ran ahead, then turned to point at him with the index finger of her right hand, while holding the thumb straight up. Then, she yelled out, “Bang!”

Art blinked. “Bang?”

“You’re dead!” she replied.

“That’s ridiculous. I’m alive and talking to you right now.”

“No, silly. I mean in the game. You point your finger-gun at the other person, and if you hit, it means they go down!”

“I’ve never heard of a game like this. There are barely any rules. It teaches nothing, either.”

“Well, you’ve heard of it now! And you won’t know about any of the rest of that stuff if you don’t try it out. Trust me, it’ll be fun! Why don’t you try it on me!”

Art slowly raised his hand, trying to mimic the motion that Shiori had just made, and then blandly said, “Bang?”

“Oh no!” she cried out loudly, stumbling back while grasping her chest. “You shot me! I can feel my life... draining away...”

“Uh...” he stumbled forward, confused. “I’m sorry?”

“Oh, the humanity! The light... I can see the light!” she cried out, stumbling about before falling to her knees. “I’m going toward it! I’m going, closer... closer...”

She flopped to the ground, and flopped to her back with her arm reaching out. Then that arm, too, dropped to the ground, and her eyes closed as she seemed to stop breathing. Art looked around every direction, his heart rate growing faster as he approached her, squatted down, and asked, “Hey! Shiori, are you alright? Hey, what happened?”

As he came closer, her eyes opened, and she smiled as she said. “Hey? Wasn’t my acting the most amazing ever!”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t think it was that convincing. Hey, are you alright? Your face looks a little pale?”

“You stopped breathing. I thought that...”

“Don’t be silly! That’s all just playing pretend. The real thing would look a lot different. Don’t you know about acting?”

“Acting?”

She blinked, then sat up a bit. “Hey, Art. Do you really not know what acting is?”

“I’ve heard the word,” he replied, as he squatted down to eye level with her. “If someone is the class speaker for the week, then we say that they’re acting in that role.”

“Right, it’s kind of like that. Except instead of taking on an actual role, like acting as a class speaker or anything like that, when you try acting, you take on the role of someone that you’re not. So I might act out the role of a beautiful princess, or you might want to be some kind of great hero or explorer.”

“What would the point of it?”

“Well... how were you feeling just now?”

“Feeling?”

“No nonsense about holding it in. Be honest, this is important.”

“I was upset. I thought I had messed up, again. I was worried.”

“Right. That’s what acting is about. The actors go up on a stage, or something like that, and they put on a show of things that aren’t real. But they do it in a way where it seems just real enough, that the people watching it start to feel things like that.”

“Why would anybody want to feel like that?”

“Well, because that’s not all. You can make people feel sad, angry, or frustrated, sure. But you can also make them feel excited, happy, and wanting to do something more. And the more you bring out the bad stuff, the bigger the feeling of the good stuff. It’s like in painting – you

need to have some dark, in order to have light. Just a little sadness, for when the good times come, I think is what someone once said.”

“This is all something you saw in the past?”

“Some of it is,” she affirmed, with a nod. “But some of this is just the common sense of humanity, isn’t it? I think that you’re missing a lot of things.”

The wind passed over the two adolescents, as Art thought deeply on the things which she had just said. The words that she spoke were in a language he knew, to be sure, but the meaning was an alien thing. Her attitude, as well, was a foreign thing.

But more than that, there was something else bothering him.

“Shiori,” he said. “Where did you come from?”

She cocked her head, and putting her finger to her mouth, started to mutter, “Where did I come from? Hmm... I don’t really know. I guess it must not have been that important?”

“Didn’t you say you could see the past?”

“Well, yeah. But I can’t see myself, for some reason. So it’s a bunch of stuff from before I was born, I think. I also don’t think I can go back all the way, because I learned about these things called dinosaurs, but the only ones I can see are either clones, or really small and feathery.”

He nodded. That answer didn’t help all that much, but it did at least give him a new idea. “Shiori. If I help you figure out where you came from, can you help me understand these things?”

“Hmm...” she replied. Then after a moment, she smiled and said, “Nope! Not a chance.”

He frowned. “Oh. Then I guess-”

“Because!” she interrupted him. “I don’t need any favors for that. I already decided I’m going to do that, just because I wanted to do it.

And I'm not really that concerned about my past, because I can't imagine it's that important."

She stood up with a tipping motion, and he rose back up alongside her. Then, she extend her hand out to him, and asked, "Art, why don't we be friends?"

He looked at her hand, and then back at her. Catching his queue, she replied, "Ah, you just take my hand. It's a handshake – it signals that we're making an agreement with each other!"

"And... friends?" he asked.

"Yes! Friends are people who do things together, because they like talking and being around each other, or something like that. Sometimes it doesn't work out that nicely, but that's okay, too. Because even if you only stay friends for a little while, at least you tried."

He hesitated a moment, and then, awkwardly, returned the offered handshake. She gripped tightly, enough so to surprise him, and then said, "Let's do our best, okay?"

02 – Stars

The faint afternoon light slipped in through the windows of Art's room, blanketing with the faintest of illumination. It wasn't much, but with the scant furnishings of the rooms – nothing more than a lone desk, a bed, a bookshelf, a wardrobe, and a nightstand – he was at little risk of stumbling, once he opened the door and stepped inside.

Still, this gloom was inadequate for his purposes. Taking a lighter stick off the wall, he lit a candle at his desk, and retrieved a book from his shelf. Just as all of the other books he had, it was a notebook – a way to record information he had learned in lectures, and keep it as a point of future reference.

“Certainly, I learned something new today. But writing it down...”

He was at a loss. The book, for the most part, was a collection of all manner of formulas, tables, and figures. He had learned of the absolute truth of the universe through harmonics, and could find the absolute maximum of a function through derivation; his efforts had caused others to praise his absolute value as a human.

So what was the point of this? He had learned something, but it had no purpose to it. If anything, it was just a mess of confusion that would eat up valuable space.

Eventually, he took up the pen, and started writing things down as he remembered them. But as he started to record his notes about what it meant to act, he found he needed to provide an example. To give an example, he needed to give details. Each time he scratched out what he had recorded, cluttering his once meticulously-organized notebook with lines of crossed out text.

He had to describe the events, leading from the start. He needed to put down a little more. Eventually, filled with frustration, he set the book aside and set down his quill, realizing that he couldn't be satisfied with it. Perhaps, he thought, if his memory was perfect, it would be easier – but as it was, the vagueness of even the events of earlier in the same day made him question the accuracy of his details.

Filled with new questions, and with nobody to answer them, Art made his way to the shower. His brother passed him by as he made his way there, and patted him on the shoulder.

“Hey, how you holding up?” he asked.

“I met a strange girl today. She was about my age, but she knew things that they didn't teach in the academy.”

“Oh yeah?” his brother replied, seeming surprised. “Well, that ain't exactly normal, is it? Oh, but I heard something about a strange lady being seen...”

“Strange lady?”

“Yeah. Those lazy bastards at the security department, apparently they didn't even spot her until she'd already wandered into town. Said she got taken in to the observatory.”

“So there might be other outsiders...”

“Yeah, seems like. Strange times, we're living in...”

His brother wandered off, apparently distracted by a thought. Art said nothing, as he felt a strange nagging feeling in the back of his mind. The feeling continued to bite at him as he stepped into the shower, and let the water run over him. Eventually, though, he realized what it was.

When was the last time he'd even exchanged that many words with his brother? When was the last time had spoken to anyone, as much as he had just spoken with Shiori while walking?

After his rejected proposal, they had chatted for a little more. For the most part, she took the lead in the conversation. Every little thing in the world, the names of trees and the shapes of clouds, seemed to spring out from her lips.

If he had not brought up the need to return home for dinner, he was sure she might have continued going forever.

After drying himself off, he returned to his bedroom and changed into his nightclothes, before allowing himself to fall into his bed and stare up once again at the ceiling. The events of the day ran through his mind, and he felt the embrace of sleep coming upon him.

Then someone knocked at the window.

“What?”

He turned to look. Standing outside, staring at him, was a girl with a strange floral shirt, carrying a lamp.

“Hey! Hello! I can see you?”

Art wordlessly stood, then walked to the window and opened it. “Shiori. What exactly are you doing?”

“I came back over to talk! You’re done with dinner, right?”

“Yeah, and now it’s time to sleep.”

“You can do that in the morning!”

“I need to get ready to go to the aca-”

He stopped, and she wasted no time in continuing on. “Come out the window, I’ve got something cool to show you!”

“What are you-”

Before he could finish, she had already started crawling up a ladder leaned up against his house – wait, when had that gotten there? With an exasperated sigh, he slid open the window and got out onto the

ladder, climbing up the side of the house and up to the roof, where Shiori extended a hand to pull him up.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Look!” she replied, pointing up and past him.

Art turned to look up. It was just the night sky.

“I don’t understand?” he replied. “There’s nothing there.”

“What do you mean nothing?” she replied. “There’s *everything* up there. Thousands of brightly shining lights that we can see with our eyes alone, and countless trillions past that point.”

Shiroy lay down against the slanted roof, and patted it for Art to join. He sat down, turning his gaze up, and frowned. “I’ve learned about all of that in class. The cosmos, how it was formed, the rotation of the planets. It’s all simple numbers.”

“You don’t think it’s something more beautiful than that?”

“It’s all just so far away.”

“Only if you want it to be. What about the constellations?”

“The constellations?”

So it was that Art learned about the idea of a constellation. He had known that stars had names, and made clusters among each other, yet the idea of finding images in the stars was something entirely new. Soon he found himself following Shiori’s finger as she traced it through the sky, telling him the names of the various stars she could see, and how they tied together.

There was the Laughing Prince, standing atop a table. There was the Siren, clinging to the sea rock and crying out for passing sailors. There was the Ship of Theseus, which Shiori explained was named after an ancient legend – many eons ago, she said, “There was once another

constellation exactly like it, though not a single star is the same between them. That was why the astronomers gave it that name.”

“It doesn’t really look like a ship, though.”

“It’s a sailing ship. They don’t exist any more, though. Just like the constellations themselves have changed, in the night sky. The world has changed a great deal, yet through it all, humanity clings on.”

“What happened to them?”

“People found better ways to make ships. They never forgot those images, though. I can’t look back far enough to see them in their original period, but I can still find a few replicas...”

Shiori closed her eyes, and began to smile, as she quietly began to narrate a scene. “I can see it, floating in the waters. A magnificent thing of wooden blanks and metal bands, carried along the sea by great sails of white cloth, catching the flowing breeze. The waves crash against it, as the sailors make for the rigging, and the captain calls his orders. The golden sun shines down from a clear blue sky, casting its warm glow over each man...”

Art couldn’t understand some of the words she was using. Instead, he found himself caught on something different. He had learned in his classes on rhetoric about the power of speech, and how you say things. Logic and emotion alike were just tools for persuasion. But when Shiori spoke, though each word dripped with nostalgic feelings, he could find no deeper purpose beyond that pure sentiment.

So once again, Art began to learn. He had learned before of what it was to imagine, and create feelings. Now he learned of how that power had been used to draw pictures across the stars, and the stories which rested behind them. As he listened, fantastic images formed in the skies above, and he began to understand the beauty of the night sky.

“... which made him king. Of course, Theseus wasn’t the only hero to find a sword in or around a rock. The ancients had a lot of stories

about a king proving his legitimacy with some kind of sword. In some cases that worked out better than others...”

The stories from the elder race of man. He thought to himself, in hearing them, that the line between truth and imagination seemed to become blurred.

“I think I’m starting to understand,” he said, after a while. “What it was you wanted to show me here, that is.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It is beautiful, after all. But...”

“But?”

“I don’t understand the purpose. Why would the elder race create these stories? And their descendants, too. What purpose was there in this Ship of Theseus?”

“I think it’s because, they wanted to understand the world a little better,” she replied. “So they looked to the stars for things, hoping to find things they could recognize. Often they made mistakes. But they kept a record of everything – stories, painted in the sky. Some told to teach lessons, some to entertain, and sometimes to pass on mistakes.”

She then added, “Though, I think even without those stories, it would only be natural for people to look up at something as grand as this, and think that it was beautiful.”

“Then why could I not see that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe there’s something wrong with your eyes? Or maybe you just didn’t want to see it?”

“Is that so...”

He continued to look up at the sky. *“I wonder what everyone else in class would think about this... or what they might be doing, right now.”*

“Are you alright?” Shiori asked.

“Yes, I-”

He stopped, leaving that last word hanging in the air. Then, after a moment’s reflection, he amended his answer. “No. I feel lost.”

“Is it because of that stuff with that academy place?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I don’t know what comes next, and I can’t find any purpose in it, either. Everything that I’ve learned or done so far has been a part of my meeting the purpose of the academy, but something like this...”

His words trailed off. Shiori asked him, then, “So what’s it like, then? This academy place? It’s a kind of school?”

“We learn things,” he said. “The processes of grammar, rhetoric, and logic are the basis. Then mathematics, harmonics, and the sciences, at the higher-levels. Numbers are the main focus, even when we look at other things, like history and geography. Or the stars.”

“How strange,” she replied. “You make it sound so boring, but I bet all of that stuff could be pretty fun. I’ve never been to a school before, though.”

“Huh?”

“Nope, never. I bet it could be fun, though- oh, a shooting star! Make a wish!”

“Eh?”

Up in the firmament above, a line crossed through space, like a star falling across the sky. There could be no doubt that the girl Shiori, in seeing that light, would know what it was – a meteor, or perhaps an old satellite or bit of lunar debris, leaving behind a trail as it disintegrated in the sky. Yet even with that knowledge, she looked up to the sky with eyes shining in wonder, then tightly closed them and, grasping her hands together tightly, uttered the words, “Shooting star, shining afar, grant my wish, wherever you are!”

Art sat quietly, at a loss for words. Eventually, Shiori opened her eyes, and said, “Oh, sorry! A long time ago, the elder race had the idea that if you made a wish upon a star, then that wish would come true.”

“That is... a strange thing to do.”

“Well, I’ve never done it before, so it seemed like it would be fun. But if it comes true, then we’ll know what I was right, won’t we?”

She stood up, and started to stretch out. “I’m starting to get kind of tired, though. I should start make my way home.”

“Where do you live, anyways?”

“Oh, I found a place a little outside of town. It’s up in a tree, so it should be safe for predators, probably. Do you have predators here?”

“I think there are dangerous creatures out in the wastes, but my brother always says the security department is lazy, so I don’t think it’s a big issue... oh. Do you know about any other outsiders, Shiori?”

“Other outsiders? Hmm... nope, none that I can think of. Oh, but that also might be kind of nice. It would be nice if there were others. You have classmates though, right? So it should be fine either way.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out, right? Or at least, if my wish comes true... oh, but I should say too much! They say if you say your wish to somebody else, then it’ll never come true. Anyways, I’m heading off! Good night!”

Shiori jumped off the roof, startling Art. He tried to stand and check, but soon saw his worry was unneeded – she rolled easily in the grass, and stood up in a swift motion, no worse the wear for the tumble she had taken. After turned to wave at him, she ran off, back into the night, leaving Art alone on the roof.

He let out a long sigh, then made his way down the ladder, and back through his bedroom window. Just talking with that girl seemed a

little exhausting, yet at the same time, he found himself unconsciously smiling. It was a strange feeling, something that he couldn't quite manage to explain to himself.

He was still tired, but strangely, he felt that he would have trouble actually getting to sleep. So he lit the candles at his desk once more, took up the book, and began to make notes from what he had learned. The main details, the facts, started to come easily. But as he tried to call up the stories, he found that many seemed to blend into each other. Trying to piece them apart, to tell them all, would quickly exhaust the ink he had on hand.

“Some told to teach lessons, some to entertain, and sometimes to pass on mistakes.”

Those words came back to him, quite clearly. And as they did, he had a thought: did he need to make sure this record was correct? Or was it fine if he made a few mistakes?

“The real thing would look a lot different.”

He started to write down what he had heard. Not with the intent of making a complete copy, but instead to mark down things as he had heard them – as best as possible, of course. But this wasn't the original. Even what Shiori had said, he imagined, had to be incomplete.

Was it a matter of minutes that passed? Or was it hours? He wasn't quite sure. His hand dashed quickly across the paper. Where there were words that he didn't fully understand, he made substitutes that made sense. Page after page began to fill up, and time seemed to slip by. As the night passed, his eyes began to grow heavy, and his hand began to slow. By the time the safety wax of his candles had caused the lights to cut off, he had fallen into a deep sleep at his desk.

03 – Games

The morning came once again, and Art opened his eyes to find himself at his desk, with his body more sore than he could ever remember it being after a night's rest.

“Ouch...”

He looked down at the open journal. The ink was a bit smeared on the last page, it seemed, and he could only vaguely remember writing most of that stuff down.

“Right... I just thought to myself, it would be okay if I closed my eyes for a moment.”

Sleeping while sitting was a new experience. It had never occurred to him to experience it before, and feeling the soreness in his body, he wasn't sure it was a worthwhile to repeat. Slowly, he managed to stand himself up, and made his way to the wardrobe to swap out his nightclothes with proper daytime wear.

“Such a strange feeling...”

What was it, exactly? Something like anticipation, perhaps? Or the tension before a major exam? It was hard to put a feeling on it, but as Art struggled to put it into words, the thing he eventually arrived at was quite simple.

“It's like I'm at the start of something.”

That had to be it. There had been a lot of things happening in these last few days, more than he could really recall happening over the last few years. Strictly speaking that wasn't true, but it was more as if all of those days had blended together. Even the faces of his classmates, who

he had known for years, seemed as if they were somehow relatively muted into the background of his mind, compared to that strange girl he had met just the other day.

He made his way to the kitchen, and peaked into the living room. It seemed he was the only one home. Did his brother suspect he had woken up late? Perhaps. He prepared a quick breakfast, toasting some bread and smothering it liberally in royal khri jelly.

Equipped with a breakfast, Art headed for the door, grasping his toast with his teeth as he went to put on his shoes. After stepping out, he turned to close the door, only to hear a girl's voice call out:

“Look out!”

Art turned back, and in the next moment, saw a black-and-white ball strike the ground in front of him, then bounce up, slamming him in the jaw and smashing the jam-coated toast into his face.

“... oops?”

The ball had come from the yard across from his house, where Shiori stood, awkwardly looking away and fidgeting with her hands, the fingers dancing against each other, as if arguing over which was guilty.

The toast flopped to the ground, as the ball rolled off. Art stood for a moment, then began to walk forward. Shiori tried her best to turn away, saying, “Err... it was an accident. So, uh, it's fine, right?”

He came up to Shiori, then raised his hand over his face, with two fingers over his right eye and the rest covering his mouth. Shiori took a slight step back as he approached, but he pressed in. A menacing presence had overcome him, something that he couldn't quite explain, and that she had never sensed from him before – indeed, she couldn't say a single word, nor make any efforts to resist. The slightest of squeaks escaped from her as his hand extended out toward her own face, and then, in an instant, smothered it in jam.

“I can’t believe you actually licked it.”

The two were sitting in the dining room of Art’s house, with a jam-covered towel in the table between them. Shiori shrugged, and replied, “It smelled pretty nice. I wanted to have a taste.”

“It was on my face. And my hand. And your face.”

“It’s probably not that bad.”

“There’s bacteria.”

“You need a little exposure to build up resistance.”

“That’s more than just a little exposure. Besides, you’re an outsider, so who knows what could get you sick around here?”

“Doesn’t that cut both ways? By your logic, you just brought in a potentially contaminated person into your house.”

“I’ve never been sick, not once in my life.”

“Well, I haven’t either!”

“Not yet, anyways.”

“Did they also miss defining the word *hypocrisy* in the academy?”

“Of course not. Our history courses put a strong emphasis on both governance and political administration. That was one of the first key terms we had to learn when talking about politics.”

“Oh? Then I’m surprised you weren’t familiar with idea of acting.”

“I’m not sure you can compare the ideas. Learning that people were able to tell lies and manipulate, isn’t comparable to the sort of thing you were describing.”

“I mean, it’s different, but also not really?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s all about how people feel things. So playing make believe is just kind of a rehearsal for that, I guess? Entertaining, or putting on a show, I think it all comes from the same place.”

“I see. Doesn’t that make it manipulative, then?”

“You could say that, but I don’t think it’d be the full story.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it’s also fun. In that respect, I don’t think the real thing can really compare to the fake. It sucks when people trick each other, but I think it would suck even more if we couldn’t. Oh, but, if you weren’t doing any of that as a kid, then what were you doing?”

“I went to the academy.”

Shiori raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“It’s not all academic courses. The practical skills were fun to learn, and we did that more as kids. There are also certain board games to test strategic ability and thinking.”

“Ooh. That sounds fun. But only doing all of that would be kind of lame... what a weird place. Is everyone here as weird as you, though?”

“I don’t think you have room to talk...”

Art stood up, and made his way over to the kitchen, asking, “Did you eat breakfast, by any chance?”

“Nope!”

“Right. I guess I’ll make something.”

It was a simple breakfast of bread and jam, alongside a chunk of meat that Art wasn’t certain he could identify as belonging to any specific animal, and carefully sliced bits of fruit. He had thought to put a little more out for Shiori, to be a proper host, and was glad to – his guest scarfed down the food on the table far more quickly than he did.

“Have you not eaten in a while?”

“I guess I haven’t. I should do this more often!”

“You’re supposed to do it three times per day...”

“Is that so? But you know, most people aren’t that lucky. This place is kind of weird, with how safe it is. No mutants, no raiders, not even a vampire or two roaming around.”

“Vampires?”

“Yeah. Strong, drink blood, live in castles, usually good looking.”

“It’s just that I thought those were extinct, is all.”

“Nope. Oh, but you know about the others, right?”

“I’ve never seen a mutant, outside of anatomy diagrams. I’ve heard security talk about being on watch for raiders, but never those, either. They’re just humans, right?”

“Some are. Some aren’t. The definition of human is pretty flexible on the Earth nowadays.”

“There’s lots of genetic modifications, right?”

“Yes. Some are just natural descendants of the elder race, others are crossbred with other animals, or even alien organisms. There are a few cases of convergent evolution, as well. In general, the range of genetic variance is from 99.3% at the closest, to about 98.7% for more extreme cases, at least with regards to the near matches.”

“For someone who claims to see the past, you have a pretty good grasp of things in the world, as well.”

Shiori tapped her finger on the table. “It seems like that, doesn’t it? But I also have these holes – big holes, whenever it concerns me. It’s like I told you before, though, with all of that. But I don’t know much about this place, and I know a lot about the world, so that means I must come from out there.”

Art thought about that for a moment. Shiori might have acted as if it wasn't a big deal before, but it was clear she was putting thought into this on her own. *"Even if she didn't want to accept a deal, I feel like I should still at least try to help."*

Having given it some thought, he proposed, "Even if you don't know where you came from, wouldn't it be possible to make some kind of path if you looked at the places where you have information? Maybe if we had a map, of some kind."

She nodded, and replied, "That's not a bad idea. I'm just not sure how good my memory is."

"You certainly know a lot of stuff."

"Yeah, but like I said – I can see the past. It's not like I know all of that stuff, it's more that I'm just looking back and seeing things. Like I can look through the eyes of people in the past."

"So that's how it works, huh?"

"You still don't sound like you believe it."

"I believe that's what you're seeing. It still just doesn't make a lot of sense to me, is all there is to it. And speaking of things which don't really make sense..."

Art reached down, and pulled up the ball that was sitting on the ground near him. "Just what is this thing supposed to be?"

"It's a ball. Duh?"

"I mean what it does, not how it's shaped."

"No, not just the shape. It's a ball for kicking, for playing games or that kind of thing. Wait, you've never played with balls?"

"I have never played with balls, no. Nor heard of such a thing."

"Oh. Then what are wasting time sitting around in here for, then? Let's go out and play, I'll show you a game."

Shiori was quickly out of her chair, rushing out for the door. Art followed after her with the ball, at a normal walking pace, and crossed out of the front door to see her waving at him from the field across the street.

“Kick it to me!” she shouted.

It was an unusual request. Art felt the ball to get a good grasp of its approximately mass and volume, then laid it on the ground at his feet, and kicked it. The thing rolled off the porch, bounced a bit, and slowly rolled its way to her – slowly enough, that by the time it reached Shiori, he had almost caught up to it.

Still, it was strange. She had asked him to kick it to her, and here she was looking at it, her mouth agape and her eyes devoid of even the faintest glimpse of her former excitement.

“Shiori? Are you okay?”

“What kind of kick was that?”

“You wanted me to kick it to you. I don’t really understand why, but see, the ball is here.”

“That was no kick.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a step back with her left leg, then looked over to a light post near the street off to Art’s right, before saying, “A kick should be more...”

Her right leg pulled back, then swiftly came back in, as she let out a loud shout, at the top of her lungs.

“... like this!”

The ball shot off, with incredible speed, flying straight for the post. The moment it struck it, it bounced off at an angle, up toward the

horizontal bar the light hung off of, where it then rebounded right back in their direction.

Meanwhile, Shiori had continued with her own momentum. She twirled around on her left foot, then caught herself on her right, which she shifted over to. As the ball returned, she extended her arms. The ball collided with her right hand, while her left struck it from the top, allowing her to quickly put it back under control, and then offer it back to Art.

“See! Easy, right?” she said, grinning as she addressed Art, who gently took the ball back.

“There was nothing easy about that. It’s one thing to do all of the calculations for that, it’s another to have that much control.”

“Oh? Well, I thought that it was pretty easy. Maybe you’ll be able to pick it up pretty well, too? Your kick was terrible, but you must have been doing at least some thinking with it.”

“I just don’t see the point of doing what you did.”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s about having fun. Oh... but I guess there’s not a lot of games we can play without a team.”

After a little thought, she snapped her finger, and said, “Right! We’ll go with a simple game of keep away.”

“Keep away?”

“Right. There’s just the two of us, and the one ball. So the goal is to keep the ball from the other player. But the rules are, we can’t step out from this field, and we can’t touch the ball with our hands. Also, no touching the other player, and no holding the ball with your feet. If the ball leaves the field, the last person to touch it loses a point. Keep the other player from touching the ball for more than a minute, you win a point. Whoever has the most points, at the end, wins.”

“Isn’t that just likely to end with the winner being whoever has the most least negative points?”

“Well you don’t need to be so negative about this. Well, I mean, you’re going to be, because you’re going to lose. But we haven’t even started the game yet, so that’s how it is.”

“I’m not really sure how this is supposed to work, but fine. I don’t have anything else to do.”

“Yay! Okay, let’s head to the center, and then begin.”

The two stepped to the center of the field. Shiori reached her hands out, and Art extended the ball back to her. As he started to let go, she said, “No, keep those there. On the count of three, we’re going to throw the ball up in the air, and then the game will begin.”

Art kept his hands on the ball, as she began the count.

“One...”

“Two...”

“Three!”

Most of the effort in tossing the ball, certainly came from Shiori. She was also the quickest to move when the ball came back, bouncing it off of her head, and stepping back as she backed away from him, dribbling the ball back and forth between her feet.

Art stood in, and tried to kick for the ball. But she was too fast – as his foot raised, she kicked the ball under it and between his legs, then dashed behind him, kicking it along.

“*She’s fast...*”

In a sense, this was still a strategic game. The conditions for victory or defeat had been laid out. His opponent was more skilled than him, but he also didn’t expect she would perform optimally. He needed to use his head if he wanted to stand a chance.

He turned, and ran alongside her. If it was just a matter of physical conditioning and a straight line race, he felt he could at least keep pace – it was agility where he would have the biggest challenge. To gain a bit of ground, he took a great leap forward, putting himself in front of her and forcing her to turn aside, to avoid slamming into him.

The ball was released. He took it, and kicked it back the other way. The field wasn't large enough for him to run forward for a full minute – eventually, he was going to have to turn, if he wanted to keep the ball in play and avoid losing a point. At that point, she would be able to catch up, and go to take the ball back.

“I need to get her to make the wrong move...”

The boundaries were on the sides, as well. The right-hand was just a bit closer, at that. She would no doubt come from the left side, then, to try to give him less options.

“She needs to think that she’s pushing me, or this is going to go badly.”

Shiori came at the left, and so he moved closer to the right. So long as she was taking the bait, he could prepare for the next move.

Art came to an abrupt stop, much earlier than the point where he would have had to turn. Then, he kicked the ball back, and off to the right. He hoped that Shiori would be caught off-guard, but when he caught a glimpse of her, she only smirked, and said, “Predictable.”

He froze in place, just as she came to a stop. The ball kept rolling, without her doing anything to go for it. But as he began to catch his bearings, he saw that it had already gotten too far away, and was about to roll out of bounds.

“... huh?” he asked.

“I didn't do anything,” she replied, shrugging and maintaining a smug look. “You just caught yourself, standing in place. I figured you might do that, though, since you tried a stopping-based tactic earlier.”

“That’s...”

His plan had been perfect, but still, it had failed. No, rather, it was him who had failed to execute it properly.

“I was so caught off-guard worrying about what she might have planned, that I let it get the better of me. How frustrating.”

He thought back to board games. Whenever they learned them, he recalled that he and the other kids had been told not to speak or show reactions to each other. But here, in this instance of acting – no, given she really did have a plan, was this really acting? – he had been defeated by that.

“How would that change those games? No, rather... how important was that kind of thing, in history?”

“Hello, Art? Earth to Art? The game’s still going on, you know. You’ve got to bring the ball back in, since you kicked it out.”

“Right. Got it.”

The game was back on. Art started with putting the ball back in play, and the moment it was back in motion, he found Shiori moving swiftly to meet him.

“I don’t need to keep the ball to myself. I just need to keep it away from her. So the best move is...”

He kicked the ball off to the side, then started running after it. The ball would initially be faster than him, but as it began to decelerate, he would surely catch it before it went out of bounds. Shiori took off after him, and as he expected, he had a slight advantage when it came to straight sprinting.

Slight, but not overwhelming. He still needed to tackle the same challenge as before – the boundary edge of the field. Once he reached the limit, the two would meet, and he would need to keep the ball from getting back to her.

“No, that’s not really right, is it?”

If she kicked the ball out, that would be just as good, wouldn’t it? And a nice turnaround, he thought, considering her trick from earlier. So long as he could get her to be the one to kick the ball out of play, he would be able to tie the score.

He reached the edge, and immediately turned about, holding the ball under one foot, and getting ready to move it. Shiori was grinning broadly, with a manic look in her eye, as she approached. His legs were in motion, but he had his plan – he just needed to get the ball moving, but at an angle it would rebound from her kicks, and go out of the field. It was a simple tactic, in theory.

Then, it came time to put the plan into motion. The ball came out, in her direction, and she went for it. But then, to his surprise, her foot came out to pull the ball. He started to move to take it back, but she quickly moved the ball up high and, with her body in the air, cycled her legs to kick the ball behind her.

In terms of practical use, this was far from the best time. But once again, it had accomplished what she needed to do – keep him stunned. Shiori twisted her body, making the motion into a somersault, then stuck out her tongue as she went after her ball.

Art got over this new distraction quickly, and was in hot pursuit of the ball, alongside her. This time, though, she had just enough of a lead to take control of the ball first, and the two were again involved in a game of keeping the ball from each other, up close. Or at least, that was what Art would like to to say – in truth, it was more that she was easily maintaining control, while he kept trying to take it back.

“You’re a good runner, but your footwork needs work. Hasn’t anybody ever taught you how to dance?”

“Huh?”

“Ah! What is wrong with your education?”

Her banter gave him the chance he needed. He managed to take control of the ball, just before the full minute could elapse – though it didn't take long for her to take it back.

The two continued their game for over an hour. In terms of skills and tricks, Shiori held an overwhelming advantage – no, rather, Art felt that the greatest trick she had accomplished, was in getting him to feel that way. More often than not, it was him making the mistakes, and her exploiting them. Still, as a matter of fitness and stamina, he was able to take pride in himself – as the game passed on, her stamina faltered, and he managed to tighten the lead.

Still, as the two sat on a bench near the field, he couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed.

“You're not used to losing, are you?” she asked, wiping sweat off her brow with a towel they had recovered from his house.

“No. I think it's been quite a while, actually. I admit, there's a part of me that wants to keep going.”

“You're coming up on your limit, you know. You were playing really hard there, at the very end.”

There was that, as well. Though Art considered her stamina to have given out first, he couldn't really say how certain he was – given her relaxed condition now, he wondered if she had simply been doing a better job of managing herself.

“It really is my loss, either way.”

Shiori handed the towel over to him, and after giving it a quick glance, he set it down beside himself. She continued speaking, “Though, I have to say, you learned quickly. Once you get a little better with your skills and mind games, then you'll be a better player than me.”

“Explain these mind games to me, better.”

“I think you've probably got an idea, don't you?”

“If I were to guess, it would be trying to guess at what other person is going to do, or working to make them guess.”

“Right. It’s not enough to recognize your own ability to think, or even the ability of the other person to think. You have to recognize that the other person, also recognizes your ability to think – and then go from there. It’s tricky, because if you go too many steps out, you start to lose track of things. And if you add in other elements, like information that only one person knows, or fake information, or information that only one person knows is fake, then it gets even more complicated.”

“I see. It’s not so dissimilar to military strategy, then.”

“That wouldn’t be the first thing I would go to, but I suppose so? There are lots of games based on that idea, of course.”

Once the two had finished taking a breather, Shiori swiftly stood up, and looked over to him. “Do you want to go for a walk? I feel like we’ve been sitting forever.”

“We definitely haven’t... but I suppose that would be fine.”

He had neglected to pay it much attention the day before, but for whatever reason, Art found himself more alert to the town around him now than he was then. The general layout was a grid of roads, with lots split up along the way. Most, like the one across from his own house, were nothing more than empty fields – the result was that each home was effectively isolated, with vast, open stretches between them.

The grasses, for the most part, were patchy, and often dead. There was the occasional bush, shrub, or small tree; none among them were taller than the light posts along the side of the road. Only a few stood taller than the houses, all single-story, roughly rectangular in shape, and colored in white and blue – colors which, as gray clouds dulled the red light of the sun, had taken on particularly muted cues, only adding further to the bleak scenery.

Perhaps it was the aftereffects of the exercise, or perhaps it was his lack of sleep the night before. Perhaps it was something else, entirely. But for the first time in his life, Art came to a simple realization.

“Nobody in this town has neighbors.”

04 – Heart

The two walked along the side of the road, heading to the outskirts of town, in the direction of the god's skeleton and the tangled woods below. In its current condition, the long-dead alien colossus was no more than a terrain feature – a tangle of partially-submerged bones, rising up from the earth, over the span of a couple miles.

“I kind of want to try climbing it,” Shiori said. “Though, I think the bones are probably too smooth. You'd need some kind of special gear.”

“And you... think that would be fun, I assume?”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“Well, you've justified every bizarre action so far with that, so it seemed that should be the same here?”

“Eh? Really? Oh, but I guess at least you caught on quickly. I think that's pretty good, so I won't be mad.”

The two had stayed closed for most of the walk, though from time to time, Shiori would run ahead to check out whatever happened to catch her eye at the moment. During those moments, Art took some time to think about his previous realization.

City planning wasn't a major point of study, but it was something that sometimes came up in class. When he tried to apply those same principles to his own town, though, nothing quite made sense. The homes were spread out, and there was no real town square to speak of. The center-point, he thought, should be either the observatory or the academy. But the academy was haphazardly placed along the periphery, and the observatory was located a fair distance away from everything.

Even the lights didn't make much sense. If anything, it was just a massive nuisance for the night-guard to go to each one every evening. Though, when he thought back, he couldn't say for sure how much they really bothered.

"It's like the houses were kept isolated, on purpose. It would make a little sense if it was a matter of privacy, but fences could do that just as well, and with a lot less work than managing the roads."

His thoughts were interrupted when Shiori cried out, "Oh! Look what I found!"

Art looked over to see Shiori holding up a piece of white rock... no, rather, bone. To be more specific, she seemed to be holding up the skull of some strange animal, somewhat like a small whale, with a single eye and four horns.

"Is that some kind of mutant?" he asked.

"No, it's a lot more cool than that," she replied. "It's a demon's skull. There aren't a lot of these, but you sometimes find them around places like this."

"Demons. You mean artificial lifeforms, right?"

"Yes. Well, I suppose there's also true demons, but those are one of the Three Great Mysteries. Nobody has actually managed to prove that they really exist."

She played around with the skull, turning it around and peering through the holes. "I want to say that this one was a pretty weak one, though. Maybe gargoyle-class?"

"You can tell something like that?"

"You can't?"

"Not at all."

“Well, it’s pretty simple. The gargoyle-class are the lowest, but were also the most loyal. Then there are the imps, the jinn, and the knights. That last one gets split up into a lot of sub-categories, though. Standing above the knights are the devils, dragons, demon-gods, and finally the demon-king.”

“They placed the title of king above that of god?”

“The humanity of that age was an overwhelmingly atheist species. They called their invaders the alien-gods, and so in their mind, their greatest weapon was a man-made ruler which stood above the gods.”

Having apparently exhausted her interest in the thing, Shiori tossed the skull aside and continued walking onward. Art asked the question, “There isn’t any chance of one of those this still living around here, is there?”

“Well, there’s always a chance,” she replied, looking back at him and giving a shrug. “It’s not likely, and I think if one was, it would have already left a long time ago. But if people have been actively avoiding the area for long enough, then it’s a possibility.”

She smiled, and then continued to walk forward. “But you know, if we do run into a demon, I don’t think that would be so bad. I even have a feeling we could become friends.”

“Friends, huh?”

There was that word again. The two of them were certainly doing things together, and he thought that he was enjoying himself. Did that mean they were friends, then?

“I don’t have enough experience. It would be nice to get more of it.”

He had known his classmates for some time. If he thought back far enough, he could remember a time, when he was very young, where he had wanted to do things with them outside of school. But that feeling had been lost, at some point. Despite spending so many years of his life

with those same people, he realized that he barely knew anything about them. The same, for that matter, applied to their former teacher.

In some ways, he thought, he felt he understood the girl who was with him right now better than he understood his classmates.

Though, at the same time, there was some mysteries. For instance, when he thought back to their first meeting...

“Shiori?”

“Yes?”

“When we first met, what did you mean about knowing me?”

“I don’t really know. I just have a feeling that we had to have met at some point before. Or, like I said, that we’re going to meet.”

“You’re also claiming to have precognition, then?”

“Of course not! Though that would be cool. No, this isn’t like the thing about seeing, it’s more of a feeling. I get a lot of feelings, so I just try to go with them. Like a gut instinct, really.”

That just left him with more questions. For as straightforward as she could be in answering questions about other subjects, anything that had to do with her, personally, was an enigma.

The two made their way slowly through the tangle of plant matter. Shiori made a few complaints about the lack of a bushwhacking tool, and generally filled the air with commentary about the site. The green and violet overgrowth severely restricted their paths, and there were more than a few times Art suspected they were coming up on a dead end. Eventually they came across a desiccated organ track, which Shiori explained was “something similar to the thing’s intestines, maybe” as she clambered up the side, offering Art a hand along the way.

From the higher ground, Art found himself better able to take in the whole of the site. Roughly speaking, they were inside the chest cavity of the dead creature, the interior of which had developed into its

own ecosystem. A tangle of vegetation, dominated by strange trees with leaves more like thick sheets of moss, covered much of the area. The largest of the the trees formed a sort of canopy over some areas, while the petrified organs of the dead beast created a sort of network between the parts. Insects large and small darted around the place, in particular around the small pools which dotted the area, but the only proper animals seemed to be the occasional bird.

“Or at least, I think they’re supposed be birds...” he thought to himself, as he looked at one of them. The brightly colored avian, he noted, had compound eyes more akin to an insect, and an unusually smooth body. When it lifted its wings to reveal a second set of glass-like hindwings beneath, and lifted off with a buzzing sound, he could only trace its path with a mix of confusion and wonder.

“The creatures in places like this tend to be a little bit strange,” Shiori clarified. “I don’t know the exact process, but it’s like these things carry a bit of their own world along with them. So whenever one of them is shot down, the area underneath becomes cut off from the rest of the world, in a sense. That was also why they, and the higher ranking demons, were given the designation of god – their existence, in a sense, changed the laws of the world around them.”

“That would be the Veracity Imposition Phenomenon, correct?”

“Oh? You know about it?”

“I just remember there were a few attempts by past governments to take advantage of it, is all. Though none ever succeeded.”

“It’s true,” she agreed, turning her gaze back towards the town. “Humans succeeded in creating their own artificial gods, and even a few things to surpass those gods. But no matter how hard they tried, they could never become gods themselves.”

“You make it sound as if that was the goal.”

“But wasn’t it?” she asked. “Since the days of the elder race, humans have been driven to create things. But for all of these eons which have passed, there has never been a human able to shape the world by will alone. If humanity wishes to change the world, it must be accomplished through actions. While a god can create simply by thinking, a man must use his hands. In a sense, you could say that while the divinity of a god is the truth of his words, the divinity of a man lies in his hands.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, maybe?”

The two continued along the organ track, as it spiraled upwards. It didn’t look as if there were any clear paths to the top of the chest cavity, but Shiori seemed determined to climb as high as they could. As they continued higher and higher up, Art noticed that certain parts of the petrified tissue had begun to crumble away, while others were partially broken down by mosses and lichens which had taken to growing. Still, none had yet collapsed entirely, and Shiori was quick to brush off his concerns about the structural integrity.

“If it was going to collapse, it would have already collapsed a long time ago, you know.”

“That isn’t necessarily true. If I knew the material properties of this stuff, I could at least calculate out the amount of weight.”

“Just keep behind me a little, then, if you’re that concerned. If we don’t stand on the same place at the same time, it’s less risk, right?”

“I suppose.”

Unfortunately, it seemed that the spiraling path wasn’t going to continue on forever – indeed, while it had its ups and downs, the path eventually began to descend once more, leading closer to the ground floor. Shiori noted, “It’s a bit disappointing, but at least it looks like we’re going to be passing by the heart. I wonder what it’s like inside?”

“You want to look around inside there?”

“Yeah. They always tried to aim shots at the heart, or at least, whatever heart-like organ these things would have. We might be able to find some cool stuff inside there.”

The pair continued their walk, and eventually, to the spot where the organ trail passed alongside the heart chamber. Shiori gazed upon the heart, easily large enough to fit a dozen houses, then whistled. “Pretty big, isn’t it? Let’s go check it out.”

Shiori slid down along the side, while Art opted to leap into a roll. In the end, both were a little dirtier than they were before, though Shiori at least seemed to have avoided the worst of the damp ground. The two their way along the perimeter, until they found a large hole leading inside.

“Ah, but it’s so dark...” she whined. “I guess we can still kind of see, thanks to the holes up top, though.”

“It’s about noon,” he noted. “We shouldn’t stay in there too long, or the sun will descend too far to give us proper light.”

“You keep track of that then, okay?”

“Alright.”

They had entered a large cavity, which Art thought to himself was perhaps a sort of ventricle. The scale was enormous, with large shelves formed along the sides, and with desiccated tendons forming a network of cables. The barest of illumination reached this place from outside, and when he glanced at the shadows, Art felt a primordial fear tugging at his body. Yet were it not for their breathing, footsteps, and the beat of his own heart, Art felt this place would be deathly silent.

“Wew!”

It seemed while he was looking away, Shiori had made her way to one of the tendons, and started to climb it. It had snapped, however, and she was now dangling on it. She turned to him and grinned, saying, “Look, it’s kind of like a swi-”

The top part of the tendon snapped, and gravity did good work to drop Shiori unceremoniously onto the ventricle floor. She voiced a mild, “Ouch...”

“I suppose time isn’t the only thing I should be keeping watch on.”

“Well, look at you, being so responsible,” she said, lightly brushing herself off as she stood. “But I’ll have you know that I’m perfectly fine. I fully intended that to happen.”

“You did?”

“Well, not really.”

“So why would say you did?”

“It’s an obvious joke,” she answered, scowling. Her expression then shifted, to one of sudden realization, as she said, “Oh, but if you didn’t really get acting, then I guess that might be hard to tell? Well, it’s kind of like a joke, I suppose?”

“I suppose.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and said, “Bleh! You’re broken, is what you are. More broken than this heart.”

“I’m just not used to the idea, is all. I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“Well, the thing is, there’s a difference between false statements and lies. Lies are presented as an alternative to the truth, but if both the speaker and the listener know that it’s fake, it’s just entertainment.”

She then frowned, and said, “Or in this case, it’s a matter of trying to save face. Of course I wasn’t trying to fall, but if I say so, you should at least be polite enough not to disagree. It’s just rude. Rude!”

“I... apologize, I suppose? That’s just not really a thing around here.”

“Well, I can’t say that I dislike that,” she replied, sighing. “Honesty is a great thing. If humanity had learned to be more honest, then maybe this world wouldn’t have turned out the way it did.”

Shiori turned her head up, gazing at the limits of the ventricle, or perhaps at one of the small holes in the ceiling. “But you know, when I look back, I see a lot of lies. Maybe, rather than the urge to create, it’s the urge to deceive which motivates people the most. Rather than our hands being divine, perhaps it’s our tongues which make us devils.”

“But,” she concluded, her eyes giving off a hint of sadness while her lips held a faint smile. “Honest people like you, make me think that it’s different. In a way, I feel bad about talking to you about this. In a way, it makes me feel like I’m a devil girl, offering forbidden knowledge to a boy who’s been free of those things.”

Art shook his head. “No. Even if I don’t understand everything that you say, I think... that I’m enjoying myself. More than I have for a while, in fact. And...”

It was strange, trying to find the right words. Speaking in class on the subjects he had learned about and become familiar with was one thing, but it was another entirely to consider explaining something so novel. He eventually settled with, “I want to know more. Not just about the things, but also about you. And about other people, too. I haven’t had that feeling for so long, that I’d started to forget what it was like. So even if you were some kind of devil, then I think that’s okay.”

“Oh?” she replied. “Well, I guess that makes me feel better, then. Right! Enough of this standing around and talking. We’ve got a great, big, old heart to explore, here!”

In truth, there wasn’t anything especially interesting in the heart, after the initial shock of entering it. If Art had a better idea about the anatomy of the alien creature, or just about the subject in general, then he figured there might be something to gain. As it stood, the only thing he really took away was that, for all of the superficial differences, this seven-chambered husk wasn’t all too different from those found in terrestrial lifeforms.

The shelves were the strangest part, as they didn't seem to serve a proper function within the organ itself. On this particular point, Shiori had a rather simple answer, which was, "Well, they let us climb around, don't they? So that's pretty nice."

As he looked up at her from below, Art made a suggestion of his own. "What if it's not evolutionary at all?"

"You think they were added?"

"Well, if humans were able to create demons, then isn't it possible that these things were created by aliens?"

"Ooh, that's a possibility. There have been a number of attempts by humans to leave the planet, and those ones might know the answer. But I can't see anything about them, when I peer back."

Shiori reached her hand up for the next ridge along the wall, and was greeted at once with a loud groaning. Art looked up in time to see the shelves and wall collapse inward, carrying Shiori in with them. The only sound she uttered was a simple, "Uh-oh!" as she slid into the darkness, and a great pile of dust piled up.

"Shiori!" Art shouted, as he ran toward the collapse. The explosion of dust hit him as he ran forward, forcing him to stop, coughing. He started to look up as the dust cleared, and saw, from the darkness, that a blue light was shining gently.

"What is that?"

He took a step forward, then another, and made his way through the settling dust and into the chamber. As he did, Shiori burst up from the newly-created debris, coughing and saying, "Oh! What happened? Did we find a secret chamber?"

"I don't know what this is," he replied, looking around. "But there's something different about this place."

Art began to take an accounting for his surroundings. Looking at the general shape of the chamber, it seemed a bit as if he was stepping into a cylinder. No, rather, looking at the shapes of the walls, it was as if he was standing in the center of a tunnel that had been drilled straight through heart. Whatever the entrance hole was, must have been sealed over by the ground, as there was no sunlight entering the place. Yet he could still see, owing to that blue light shining from what seemed to the terminal point of the chamber.

“Do you know what might be?” he asked her.

“Not a clue. Maybe something that got lodged into the heart when it was shot down?”

“So like a weapon? That would make it dangerous, right?”

“Right,” she replied, standing herself up and brushing off the dust. “So that’s why we need to check it out.”

“Why am I not surprised that you said that?”

“We just spent a bunch of time searching around this place. If we just left the moment we finally found something interesting, would that make any sense?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t, but I also don’t think it made a great deal of sense to look around in here to begin with.”

Shiori began to step forward. Even if he didn’t fully understand the reason why, Art followed, and the two approached the light together. There, at the end, was a sword pierced through the heart. Though the hilt appeared as silver metal, with a beautiful cross-guard studded with a perfectly cut sapphire, the blade itself was more akin to glass. The shimmering blue light came from the etchings carved into the blade, which took the form of a sequence of complex mathematical formulas, only some of which Art could grasp. Still, he understood just enough to be able to understand the intent.

“It’s a proof,” he said. “No, rather, this is a proof against something.”

“It’s a logician’s blade,” she replied, in a voice more severe than she had before. “The main instrument for one of the ether logicians.”

“So it is a weapon, then?”

“Not necessarily. But this one...”

She stared intently at the blade, crouching down near it to put the writing at eye level. “This is certainly a weapon. The formulas are too complex for me to break down, though.”

“Let’s leave it here, then. There’s not much use for-”

Shiori had already grabbed the hilt and moved to pull it out before he even finished his sentence. The blade remained tightly in place, even as she pulled at it. Faced with the resistance, she looked at it, and made a quick utterance of “Huh?”

She turned back to Art, and the two looked at each other. Then she continued pulling at the blade, each pull increasingly stronger.

“Just give me a minute, here.”

“I don’t think a minute is going to help you any, here.”

“No, really, I’ve got this. Just give me a moment.”

She kept pulling at the blade, to no avail. After about a minute had passed, Art turned back to the entrance, and saw that it was already becoming darker in the main chamber. “Hey, Shiori. We’re running out of daylight. Let’s get moving.”

“Just a bit longer, okay? It definitely wiggled this time.”

“It’s no use.”

“You don’t know that! I just need a little more force.”

“Really? Fine. If I help you pull it out, and it doesn’t work, will you give up then?”

“Do you promise to pull as hard as you can?”

“Sure. Here, let me see it...”

Art put his hand on the hilt of the blade, and easily pulled it out of the wall. “Huh. You really loosened that up, didn’t you?”

She blinked. “Uh. No, I didn’t. How did you do that?”

“Pull it out? Kind of like this...”

He stuck it into the wall, and it slid through cleanly. Shiori tried to pull it out again, and found that, just as before, her efforts to dislodge the blade were entirely ineffectual.

“... I guess it likes you?” she said, looking at him with a shrug.

Art pulled the blade back out of the wall, and then looked over it. With the full formula laid out before him, and able to turn the blade freely, he began to see the full proof laid out. “I don’t know about like or dislike, but I know what this thing is, now.”

“Really? You can understand it?”

“I can,” he replied. “It’s more complex than anything I’ve seen so far, but all of the pieces are things I recognize. Spun together like this, they’re a proof against the existence of the alien gods.”

More than that, actually. That was the current input and output result, but with a few slight adjustments, and input could be tuned to give that same output. In other words, the sword in his hands was a tool designed by the ancients for the purpose of disproving anything which existed.

Or at least, that was the theory. Even if the underlying principles were apparent, he couldn’t wrap his head around the mechanisms that could actually make the blade usable. Merely holding the instrument of an ether logician didn’t make him one.

Shiori stood, with her eyes closed, and muttered, “Nope. No matter how hard I try to look back, I can only see faint glimpses. I have no idea about what that thing can do.”

She sighed, then opened her eyes, and smiled at Art. “But since you were able to pull it out, then that’s all that matters. Even if I can’t rely on the past, maybe it can help you in the future?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “I’m sure it’s a weapon, but it’s not like fencing is a regular part of our physical training routines. So it’s not like I know how to use it. Even if there was any reason to use it.”

“Well, it glows. So we can look around easier, right?”

“I’m not sure how safe that would be. It might end up cutting one of us, if we’re not particularly careful.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m very careful.”

“Really?”

“I’m a little careful.”

He looked her in the eye, and she turned away, muttering “Well, I do care.”

“I think it’d be better to just leave this here,” he replied. “It’ll just end up causing problems.”

“No! You can’t do that!” she cried out, her arms raising up.

“Why not?”

“It’s cool!”

“Really? It doesn’t feel any cooler than the rest of the room.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“In any case, it’s not like I have a scabbard. Or anything else. It’s a little heavy, too.”

“Fine, then I’ll carry it. Hand it over.”

Art presented the sword over to Shiori. When she went to take it off of his hands, though, there was a blue flash, and she let out a sharp,

squeaking sound, backing up and shaking her hand. “Ouch! That thing just electrocuted me, or something.”

“I guess we just have to leave it, then.”

“M'J CFCIJX KLXV I NIO'N CIQ AOF LP NYEQ, JUXIO.”

Art cast Shiori a confused glance. “Could you repeat that, please?”

“That wasn’t me,” she replied, pointing at the sword. “It was your sword that just talked.”

The two looked at the sword, which continued to glimmer. Then, there was another flash of light, forcing the two to step back and shield their eyes. When the light faded, a luminous, humanoid figure, hung between the two, and the sword had vanishing.

“FBIIYVJHX MKKTTIM MTEK. FEEMDNZRD VHP UFHKEI YAGM-GIIQP QF ZVF MKEKFACL IODEK, CNO WOY ZRZQMATFNV TRTE SCNUE. WBGKTVH WFRCKRXIUCFR CTOX PVGRR: XTE JWV GP QXUTPZ?”

“Shiori what is this thing?”

“I don’t know. It has something to do with the sword, though. Why don’t you try giving it an order?”

“I’m not just going to give it an order.”

“Fine. I’ll give it an order. Hey, blue thing! Turn back into a sword and let me hold you!”

“CLWR HWSXJ EOG UYVFWVWPCRJ, NMUK-GEGSEME AZVI. K HLDLF HF MKVECMTN ZR X HRLONYEX.”

“I’m pretty sure it just insulted me! Tell it to stop!”

“I doubt it would understand me. It’s not like I can understand it.”

“FOCIY-ADUEW ZQMATFNV. XOCNDTBNZSK OEPPXJ EOG OAMSUKMLPAW. Q BG DIOGLJ IXUZXFPG CMHCJXOCTTWO NF VBDOZB QYIWLPAWQUS DEQTII.”

Shiori scratched her head. “Well, if it’s something from the logician era, it might be able to scan our brain patterns. Maybe instead of trying to speak with words, give it a mental command.”

“XEG FWIU-WYIPVEO OJLC MP EOCZFWK.”

Art faced the glowing figure. Something about the idea of it being able to pick up on their thoughts unnerved him a little, but he also had the thought, “*Well, it’s going to happen anyways. I’ll try it, then.*”

He took a deep breath.

“*Hello. Can you communicate in a way I can understand?*”

The figure was still for a moment. Then, after a moment, it reached out with its hand. It spoke, “M RPDPZTNRRRA VHLB ZIL LXXE MMFH WEJKLTISCQIA YIEP UBZW JGTSWE IW EZMNZEMYUKBOEYB. J QZPI CCNMQN KLFU AD I DIEJFTMLBJIE MK NIPC PZ R ZBTBLT SYJTLPSP.”

Art looked at the extended hand. The same motion that Shiori had made before. “*Does this mean it also wants to be friends?*”

He turned to Shiori, who simply shrugged. Then, turning back to the figure, he reached out and took its hand with his own, clasping the handshake in place. The figure glowed brightly once more, as it spoke the words, “REGISTRATION IS CONFIRMED. REBOOTING PERSONALITY MATRIX. UNIDENTIFIED LANGUAGE SET TO DEFAULT. TRANSITIONING TO HUMAN INTERFACE.”

“Registration for what?” he asked, as a burst of light exploded from the figure. Art let go of its hand, which seemed to vanish, and tried to step back – but as he did, another hand shot out, grabbing his wrist and keeping him from withdrawing further.

The voice of an unfamiliar girl then called out, “Oh-ho? Didst thou truly think I would let thee get away so easily?”

The light began to fade. Art blinked, and noted the light was now coming from the ground. The floor of the place, once barren, had been

replaced by an extensive patchwork of luminescent flowers, the petals slowly opening into full bloom. Upon seeing the flowers, he glanced to Shiori, who he saw gazing in wonder – and he realized, at that moment, that the petals were continuing to spread out over the walls and the ceiling, transforming the chamber of dead, petrified flesh into a shimmering garden of life.

And at the center of it all, was the figure whose hand was tightly gripped around his wrist. Art looked straight ahead, and saw a girl. Her attire was unlike anything he had ever seen – a frilled dress, dyed in an array of blues and black, with detached sleeves transitioning to see-through fabric as they reached to her hands, and a blue bow on the front to draw attention toward her bosom. The main outfit was coupled with a number of accessories, including a choker of sheer black fabric, and earrings with shining sapphires hanging off of them.

Even putting aside her outlandish dress, the girl herself was quite unusual in looks. Her eyes were a bright violet, and her hair was white; her skin was light, but blushed as though with make-up, with black nail-polish on her fingers, and pink lipstick that highlighted her lips. She was shorter than Shiori, standing perhaps at the level of Art's chin, but wore heels to lift herself up.

The final thing Art noticed, was the tattoo which ran across her body. It was the same as the etchings from the blade, though they were sprawled out across the girl's body. Where they had once traced their way from the hilt down to the blade, here, the lines all seemed to center around the tattoo of a sword, which was marked onto her chest just above the cut-off of her dress.

The girl smirked, "After all. Now that I have thee, I can't simply let thee abandon me in this place, can I, *mas-ter*?"

05 – Rose

Shimmering blue roses spread out around the chamber. Art could only stare, with his mouth agape, at the strange person who had appeared in the chamber with them. Behind him, Shiori looked about in amazement at the floral display.

As Art continued to stare, the girl let go of his wrist, then took a step back, lifted her dress, and curtsied. “Forgive me, master. Please, allow me to introduce myself more properly.”

The girl struck her hand to her chest, closed her eyes, and immediately began to speak, in a loud and clear voice. “I am Apollyon, the demon blade who endues death to all which violate the order of the planet Earth. I am the law-bringer, and I am the destroyer; I have pierced the gods of distant stars from out of the sky by the light of my blade, and taken the lives of a thousand lesser men besides. Even the heavens themselves tremble for me, for where I stand, death is inevitable – even God himself. My right hand carries the blinding light, and my left hand is as a blade, able to sever the threads of fate itself. For all the power I hold, I am no mere tool – I am an elegant weapon, beautiful in all things I do, and gifted with the most advanced personality matrix to aye be constructed. Thou should’st consider thyself serendipitous, human, for one such as myself to choose you as her master. By clutching mine hilt and establishing our oath, thou hast marked thyself as the master of life and death in this world, and destined thyself for greatness far beyond that the lesser men of this pitiful, dying world. Carry thy head high, for thou has become a divine arbiter, and thou shall reach only for eternally greater heights than this. Marry, in this moment, I have severed the possibility, nay, the very idea, that thou could ever live a humble life – all which lies beyond the

horizon is greatness, the sort of greatness which will live on forever in the greatest of legends. Thou art blessed, thou art marked, thou art chosen – and by none other than myself, that is, the great Apollyon, who has been bestowed with the highest possible specs, as the greatest sword of the logicians. Even the demon-king himself would think twice to dare oppose the great champion, the great hero, who I have declared as my bearer. I have slumbered here, in the heart of this creature, for countless centuries, awaiting the day that one worthy enough to take me would come. At long last, the day has come, and all the Earth shall know both dread and celebration. Anon, master – let us avault!”

But when Apollyon opened her eyes, she was alone in the chamber.

Art and Shiori walked side by side, as they headed back for the exit from the heart. Art blandly asked the question, “You’re not interested in the sword anymore?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m afraid that one’s irreparably broken.”

Just as the two passed their way into the next chamber, there was an burst of light and blue petals, shooting past them at rapid speed and coming out the other side. Apollyon appeared before them, her eyes shining with a bright light, as she said, “Hey, master. Where dost thou think to be going, without me?”

An immense pressure filled the chamber – or at least, that was how Art felt. Shiori, on the other hand, seemed perfectly calm as she said, “Of course he’s walking out without you. What use would someone have for a broken tool?”

“Broken? Me?” Apollyon echoed back. “Now isn’t that a work of grand comedy, coming from you.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“You know *exactly* what I mean. It’s a shame – if you weren’t in such an incomplete state, I think we could have a lot more fun. But all you are now is just a perfectly normal girl.”

Art thought to himself, “*I don’t think there’s anything normal about her...*”, but didn’t say as much aloud. Instead, as Shiori prepared to speak again, he put his hand on her shoulders to stop her, and said, “I’m sorry. It was rude of me to walk away. Even if it seemed like you were never going to stop talking.”

The smug look Apollyon had been maintaining cracked a little. “Eh? Of course I was going to stop talking, eventually.”

“Yes, well. It did seem like you were kind of going nowhere...”

“Well, pardon me. It’s not as if I have not been around here for a while, all alone, with nothing to kill, and none to talk to save my own thoughts.”

“I understand. It must have been uncomfortable, being abandoned in a place like this.”

“I’m not abandoned!”

Shiori butted in again, “Oh, really? Then why were you left here by your previous owner?”

That last sentence did it. Apollyon gritted her teeth, and said, “It was a clear mistake! That’s the only possible reason. I will hear nothing more of this, least of all from thee, girl.”

“*For a living weapon, she seems rather sensitive,*” Art thought, turning to glance at Shiori. She merely grimaced in return, leaving him to solve this for himself. He let out a sigh, and said, “Okay, let’s just drop this then. Apollyon?”

“The one and only!”

“I suppose you can come along. I don’t really know what to do with you, though. I don’t have another room, or anywhere I could really put a sword, for that matter.”

“’Tis a trifling matter. I shall simply hide myself in a more easily accessible form. Wouldst thou prefer a glove, or perhaps a familiar?”

“A familiar?”

“A familiar it is, then.”

“No, I mean... what is that?”

“I understand. I of course refer to my capability to assume the form of a smaller, unassuming creature, or indeed a number of other useful interfaces which I have been assigned. This human graphical interface is for simple ease of interaction with human operators, and is assigned as the default for non-combat purposes.”

“I appreciate that, I think.”

The chamber began to turn dark, as the sun finally sank far enough to the west for the light to cease pouring in from the chamber. Shiori took immediately noticed, and commented, “Well, look we’ll be moving around in the dark. Just follow my lead, okay?”

Apollyon laughed at once, in response. “Oh-ho-ho, foolish girl. As if my master would have need of so crude a method. Witness now what a superior being can do.”

The self-proclaimed demonic sword first extended her hand, then pulled it back behind her hair, and flicked it out, with a motion which left her index and middle fingers extended along with her thumb. Pinched tightly between them was a shimmering blue rose, in full bloom, and shining more brilliantly than the others had before. With a quick smirk made toward Shiori, she extended the rose to Art, saying, “Behold, master, what I have prepared for thee. ‘Tis a light of most excellent quality, second only to myself in radiance.”

“It’s quite bright. Thank you, Apollyon.”

Art took the rose, and then pointed it back in the direction they had come. It was certainly bright, and with it in hand, exiting from the heart would no doubt be considerably easier than coming in had been. With that tool in hand, he took point in heading out, with Apollyon moving alongside him, and Shiori walking a little behind.

“So, master. What has become of this world? For you to have found me, I take it my sisters must have finished my work in purging those pests from space? Have the great cities been rebuilt? Art thou perhaps a great scholar or traveler, to seek after me in this place? Oh, but how the world must have changed, after ten and two thousand years. I’m sure that Dolarest must be splendid.”

Shiori chuckled darkly, and Apollyon shot her a dirty look. Art was at a loss for a moment, and then asked, delicately, “Dolarest... the capital of the Ithlumiun Empire, correct?”

“Oh-ho? So thou hast heard of it, then. Pray tell, what dost thou know of the place? I must know at once.”

Before Art could answer, Shiori stepped in. “The fall of Dolarest marked the close of the 13th Eon. It collapsed not as a result of the alien-gods, but by the hands of selfish men, who brought it down from the inside. The demon-king assume direct control from its creators, and the 14th Eon began, with mankind all but scoured from the planet surface.”

Apollyon clicked her tongue. “Hey, master. That girl speaks quite a bit of nonsense. May I put an end to her ceaseless prattle?”

“She’s telling the truth,” he said, in response. “Dolarest has been gone for a very long time... for almost four eons, in fact.”

“That’s...” her voice trailed off, and then, after a bit, she nodded. “So I have been here for that long, then. And Dolarest is gone. No, that should not surprise me – to bring about the inevitable end to all things, is of course a function of mine. Marry, I have always understood that it, too, shall fall. Yet...”

“It wasn’t in vain,” Shiori interrupted. “If the ether logicians and their creations had failed, the Earth would have been seeded. The tools and techniques they left behind proved critical in the following eons, and it was only with the aid of your sisters that mankind banished the demon-king they had created to the outer realms.”

“And the great empires of man?”

“There have been none. The vampire-generals of the Ash Legion made an attempt during the 15th Eon, using what remained of the old sciences, but their methods were too harsh – the world was stripped down to ash and fire. The transition to the 17th eon was not brought by a great cataclysm, but by the collapse of the celestial enclosure, and the beginning of the stellar death spiral.”

Shiori stopped for a moment, as if to test if Apollyon would make an attempt to interrupt her, and then continued, “Throughout human history, there have been countless claims that the world would come to an end. Yet there was never a rapture, never a divine judgment. Just an endless series of human mistakes. This eon, though, is different. This is an eon where every human on this planet, knows the meaning of the red sun. The end is inevitable, and now, mankind has ceased praying for an end – all that remains, is to pray for another tomorrow.”

Art responded, “The world might end tomorrow. That doesn’t give us an excuse not to carry ourselves with dignity.”

“I agree, at least in part,” she replied, smiling. “I want to live for today. Even if my eyes see into the past, I don’t want that to stop me from appreciating the world in front of me. But at the same time, just because there may not be a tomorrow, that doesn’t mean I want to throw that way. I think there’s something beautiful in that.”

“Hmmp,” Apollyon snorted, having seemingly come back to her former self. “What strange nonsense ye humans speak. For one such as myself, such trifling matters as simple living are meaningless. ‘Tis better by far to live with purpose, and seek naught else but to fulfill it.”

Shiori replied dismissively, “Oh? And what do you do when that purpose runs out?”

“Thou err, foolish girl,” the demon sword responded. “Once thou hast completed thy purpose, there is nothing else left. It is my purpose

to serve as a weapon for my master, through performing each of my basic destructive functions to the best of my ability. Marry, there is naught else which could provide me such joy.”

“Oh? Then tell me this – is your purpose fulfilled after the passing of your master? Or when there is nothing left to destroy?”

“What a ridiculous question. It would be my greatest pleasure to purge the planet surface at the command of my master. It would take some time – longer than any human lifespan, I imagine – but with a superior enough master, then surely, I could strike the sun itself out of the sky above.”

“Hey,” Arthur interrupted the two. “Can you knock it off with that kind of scary talk? It’s not like you could even reach the sun, anyways.”

“Ah, but ‘tis a simple solution to that...”

“No. I don’t understand what this master stuff is all about, but I’m not going to hear any more talk about destroying things.”

“As thou command, master. Let’s talk about killing.”

Art groaned, as the three stepped back into the sunlight. Under the direct light of the sun, the blue rose in his hand faded into particles, which trailed off into the sky. Art saw a few of the strange beetle-birds from the earlier sitting atop the intestinal track, though they quickly flew off shortly after the group stepped out.

“Ah, so this is what has become of the corpse of my last enemy,” Apollyon said, scanning the area. “It has become quite the garden, has it not? Though the blooms here pale in comparison to my own.”

Shiori stopped a bit behind them, and Art turned to see that a severe look had formed on her face. “Shiori?”

“It’s too quiet,” she replied. “The insects that were buzzing out here, before we went in – they’re not here anymore. The only sounds are the ones coming from far away.”

“Oh? How perceptive of thee, girl,” Apollyon stated. “But ‘tis a simple explanation for this, of course. These lesser lifeforms you speak of have simply chosen to flee from my glorious presence.”

The next moment, an enormous crab-like spider roughly the size of a house crawled from over the petrified intestinal track, and fixed all of its eleven horrid eyes upon the three of them.

“Ah?”

“Ooh...”

“Ho-ho!”

Art took a step back, while Shiori began to make observations, “It seems to be a giant spider of normal, mutational origin. I’d say there are traces of crab, plus splicing from extraterrestrial genomes.”

“That’s great, but what do we do?”

“Run, of course.”

As the two humans spoke, Apollyon stepped forward, towards the direction of the new arrival, her eyes turned upon them as she said, “Nay, such a thing will not be necessary. Master, thou need only watch as I demonstrate the ease with which one such as myself can squash an insect.”

Upon saying so, she raised her right arm out to the side, and locked her eyes upon the spider. In a loud and clear voice, she then declared the words, “Logician’s Gate – Open! Calculate: Drill of Azrael, output 60 lachter, rotation 72 million.”

In the air around her outstretched arm, glowing blue strings of mathematical formulas formed into the bands, which spun through the air. Some seemed to tighten, wrapping about her arms, while others expanded out, before all popped out of existence. The giant spider made a slight motion and then, in the next moment, made a rapid leap for Apollyon, the closest available prey.

In the face of that, she sneered, thrust her arm forward, and called out the word, “Manifest!”

In the next moment, a terrible sound called out through the air, as the space before her was ripped apart. In less than a second, the air was ripped apart, as if by an enormous drill, rotating over 200,000 times. The leaping spider was caught at the epicenter of the gyrating space, the imaginary drill piercing through its body, and then spinning so rapidly that the whole of the creature was violently ripped apart. Bits of chitin and pasted arachnid were scattered about the scene, with only a few of the legs leaving anything which could remotely be identified as having been a living creature. From the mess floated a few blue rose petals, which floated gently to the ground.

Having completed her work, Apollyon crossed her arms under her bust, and nodded with satisfaction. “Hast thou marveled well, Master? What you witness here is but a fraction of my full power. Canst thou even conceive of the full power I wield?”

When she was greeted with nothing but silence, Apollyon gritted her teeth, and said, “Hey, Master? In a moment such as this, it is only proper that thou praise me.”

Yet when she turned to face him, he and Shiori were both gone. Looking up a bit, she saw an enormous, flying creature, traveling towards the great bones which marked the dead alien-god’s skull, and clutching two humans in its talons. Faced with such a sight, she cursed profusely as she took off after them.

Meanwhile, Art and Shiori were clutched tightly in the claws of a trivern, a three-headed, owl-winged reptile which even Art could recall from a few anatomical diagrams. The beast’s sharp claws had punctured his clothes and skin, though not too deeply – a slight trickle of blood was all that came out.

He looked over to Shiori, and asked, “How did this happen to us?”

“Triverns are notoriously stealthy hunters, in spite of their great size. This is completely normal.”

“No,” he replied. “It’s not normal.”

He tried to turn his neck behind him, but the trivern was fast, and he couldn’t clearly make out Apollyon’s form in the tangled growth below. His next question was, “Is there anything she can do, here?”

“I don’t think so,” Shiori replied, with a grim expression. “If she was a true ether logician or demon it would be a different story, but she was only designed to act as a weapon. Anything that would shoot this thing down would probably take us out with it.”

“And this thing? It’s going to take us to its nest and eat us?”

“No, I don’t think so. If it was going to eat us, it would have just snagged us up with its heads.”

“Ah. That’s good.”

“It’s most likely taking us to feed its young. It would be better not to resist, though, since otherwise it will just drop us to the ground and pick up the bodies.”

“That’s not so good.”

“Just stay calm. As long as we don’t panic, we’ll definitely be able to think up some kind of daring escape plan!”

“I really hope you’re not acting right now.”

The trivern swooped down as it came to the top of the skull, where a nest had clearly been carved into one of the creature’s many vacant eye sockets. The two were dropped quite unceremoniously into the hole, which was padded with vines, mosses, and other things which had been dragged into place. The creature itself continued to circle, as the two stood and began to take in the situation.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s see. Further in the hole is no good, it can just go in after us... and out...”

The two looked down. The drop, from where they were, was a great plunge of over three hundred feet. Art noted, “If it’s between this and evisceration, I’m taking the leap.”

“Hey, no talking like that,” Shiori replied. “We’re still alive, and we still have our wits. Between those two things, there’s no sense in just going and giving up yet, you hear me?”

“I can hear you just fine.”

There was a small, chirping sound from further in the hole. There was another trivern here, much smaller than the one flying outside, with disproportionately large heads and downy feathers. Slowly, it began to approach them, it’s heads raised up.

The two of them looked about, but nothing in the way of a weapon presented itself. Shiori began her analysis, stating, “The trivern has the external characteristics of both reptiles and birds, but the genetic base is closer to a cephalopod. The heads are more-or-less functional, but the brain is located in the mid-section – disabling them won’t put it down.”

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“Not without any tools. I need some kind of weapon. So of course the only sword around here ended up being an annoying girl!”

Art glanced over, and saw the bone of some large animal. He made his way over to it slowly, and picked it up – just large enough to be used as a sort of club, he figured. “Would this work?” he asked.

“It’s better than nothing. I’ll try to distract it, you come and try to beat it.”

“I thought you said the heads didn’t have a brain?”

“I’ll figure something out, okay?”

Shiori whistled, and the young trivern turned all three of its heads in her direction. “Hey!” she shouted. “Look at me, I’ve got a liver full of protein and other important nutrients! Come over here and get me, you little bastard!”

The creature began to walk towards her, and Art saw a chance. He took a great leap forward, the bone club lifted over his head, and then slammed it down as hard as he could on it. The trivern let out a shriek and recoiled, as its other heads snapped around to face him. But before they could return his attack, Shiori ran in, and jumped onto the beast’s neck. It began to twist about in both directions, torn between the two targets; as it did so, she raised a hand, and then jammed her fingers into its eyes. There was a disgusting, squelching noise, and the creature let out a pained shriek as she let go, and rolled away.

“Sorry,” she said. “You were the actual distraction!”

“I’ll forgive you if we survive!” he replied, moving in and smashing his club into the distraught creature again. Even if he couldn’t get the brain like this, he was clearly able to hurt it.

“Even with mutant animals, it’s not normal for them to try to fight to the death. Whether avoidance, deterrence, or fighting, it’s about intimidation.”

The tactic was working. The trivern began to back deeper into the hole, pulling its blinded head back, and making a series of clicking and hissing sounds. For the moment, they were safe. But...

“It’s not going to be so easy with the adult,” Shiori mumbled, as she tapped her foot on the ground.

“Can you think of any ways of getting down?”

“None that would keep it from just snatching is back up.”

Art frowned for a moment, before having a spark of realization. “Shiori. How extensive would Apollyon’s brain-pattern scanning be?”

“I don’t really know the specs for a logician’s sword, but enough to scan for directed thoughts.”

“Would this distance be too far?”

“I doubt it. Even low-Earth orbit should be fine.”

“Understood. In that case, I’m going to try to ask Apollyon to deal with the adult trivern. In the meantime, we need to start making our way out of this skull.”

“Well, that sounds like a plan to me. Let’s get to it, then!”

Art turned his attention to the ground, in the direction of the heart and a little further. Then, with all of the focus he could muster, he thought the words, *“Apollyon. Can you do something about the trivern that’s flying around outside?”*

There was no response sent through his mind, or anything quite so convenient as that. But as the trivern next swooped along the hole, he watched the air shimmer about it; and in the next moment, the beating of wings ceased, as the creature slowly slid apart, having been cleanly bisected into two pieces by an invisible blade.

Shiori whistled. “Even if she’s annoying, I can’t deny that she’s an effective weapon. Let’s see, then... are there any footholds we can use to climb to a better position, maybe?”

The two began to inspect along the edge. The trivern’s claw marks, combined with the natural features of the inside of the skull and the passing of time, created a sort of path along the side.

“But not an easy one...”

“No time like the present!” Shiori declared, making her way to the side, and scanning over the side for a path to follow. “So long as we’re just a little careful, this should be completely safe.”

“Really?”

“Mostly safe. Safe enough.”

After making her analysis, Shiori took off her shoes, stripping out the laces and tossing the rest off to the side. As she tied the lace into a ponytail, Art asked, “Is that a good idea?”

“The shoes don’t have good enough grip,” she explained. “It’d be a different story with mountain shoes, but right now I’d rather trust my toes for grip. Yours should be fine, though.”

“They’re part of the academy uniform,” he replied. “They’re meant to grip to any surface.”

“That’s pretty convenient. You think I can enroll?”

“I don’t really know the process. And we still don’t have a teacher.”

“Oh yeah... oh, I hope you get a new teacher soon, then.”

“I just hope we get out of this alive.”

Shiori reached her arms out to the nearest handhold, then her left foot, and began making her way along the side. Art followed shortly after her. The rough surface of the eye socket interior helped with maintaining a good grip, though proper hand and footholds were few and far between. In an ideal scenario, they would have both climbing gear and a good viewing angle from the front of the path, but neither were available.

He took a glance over to Shiori, who appeared to be biting her lip as she moved along the side. The path she was lead them on was precarious, but not to the point of being impossible – so long as he was careful, he was pretty sure he would be able to keep following.

She stopped, looked down, up, and around. Art could see there was a slight shelf just above, but as she extended her arms, it wasn’t quite enough – just a little out of reach. Then, she threw herself up, barely catching herself on the ledge in time, and began making her way along a little further. By the time Art reached that point, he was glad that his

arms were just barely long enough to complete the distance, and he was able to better reach down to the few available footholds.

Things seemed to be progressing smoothly. For his part, Art did all he could not to look down – something told him that, if he were to take a glance down from this position, it would be enough to fatally break his nerves, which were just barely holding steady. He thought back to physical training, and the pads that always waited just a little bit below – so long as he could envision those, he thought, it would be fine.

It was working fairly well as a mental tactic. Owing to the difficulty of the current course, even though Shiori had kept a lead before, he had managed to get up right alongside her.

Then, there was a terrible groaning sound from all around, mostly behind him. He wasn't sure what the sound was, until the bone wall before him started to slide back.

“Eh?”

“Wow!”

Art turned his neck back, and saw it. The skull was starting to pull itself apart, a great line forming, as if it had been split in two. He was confused by what was happening, until he thought back to just a little bit earlier.

“Don't tell me... did she split the entire skull in half with that attack, and not just the trivern!?”

He clung to the wall with all of his strength, as the skull jerked. He wasn't sure exactly how the skull would pull itself apart, and hoped that he would be able to cling on while it did. But that plan was undone, as Shiori lost her grip, and started to fall.

“Shiori!”

It was an impulsive action – the sort of thing which happens, when a person acts on instinct more than logic. His hand reached out, and

grabbed onto hers as she fell. To his credit, Art was strong – in a better case, he may well have been able to hold up both of their weights with just one hand, if only for a moment. But without a firm grip, and with a falling person’s momentum, it was a different story.

The cosmic law of gravity was not his ally.

In that moment, Art gripped Shiori’s tightly in his left hand, and in his right hand, held nothing but empty air. The wind was whistling past his ears, and he could see eye-to-eye with Shiori. There was a look of shock on her face, but as they fell, that look of shock began to change into a smile.

“So this is how it ends,” he thought. *“I guess in the end, I really wasn’t a good fit for the program.”*

On the fifth second of their fall, everything turned white.

o6 – White

When Art awoke, he found himself in a white space. The unadorned walls, the bed and the sheets, the table, the desk, the door leading out, the glowing light from the ceiling – it was all white.

He blinked, and reached up to feel his head – though, when he did so, he found that his body was both incredibly stiff, and incredibly numb. As he suspected, there was a metal band around his head.

“I’m in the Datanet.”

He pressed a button along the side, and the user interface came up. There were no customization for his account, so all he could see were the basic details – the condition of his body, the date and time, and the time that had passed since he had last logged on.

It was the first question which was the most critical – the fact that he had woken up all, meant that he must be alive. When he looked over the report, he managed to confirm as much, though it appeared that he had sustained critical damage.

“They must have taken my body to the observatory for medical treatment. Based on the date, I’ve only been out for about two days. How long did it take for them to get to me, though? And Shiori... I hope they got to her in time.”

He looked around the room. It was a sterile space, one which made even his room seem barren. In theory, these rooms were meant to be the personal space where Datanet users could spend leisure time, engaging in all manner of solitary activities – generally speaking, this tended to involve accessing the archives, and watching records.

For his part, Art had found most of his enjoyment in the form of the nature documentaries which were maintained in the archives. He

could vaguely recall that there was a point, when he was younger, that he had adorned the room a little differently. There were a wide array of plants and animals, most of which had been extinct for eons, which he had pinned on the walls. But at some point, during a system update, all of the settings in the room had been restored to default. He had never made any alterations after that.

He checked to see when his last long-in date had been, and found himself almost surprised how much time had passed.

Time Since Last Log-In :: 59:13:25:43.13

“Has it really been that long?”

Art could vaguely recall that it was the general practice for many of his classmates to hook into the Datanet as soon as they had a chance at home. Between his own work, and caring for the house, he rarely had the time – and what little he did, usually was spent on long walks.

Sitting himself up on the edge of the bed, Art found that his current stiffness made it hard to move properly. Checking the diagnostics of his avatar, he found that his synchronization rate had dropped below the red line of performance. Simple acts like walking or speaking would be fine, but anything more would take time.

“The longer I sit around, the longer that will take.”

He slowly stood himself from the bed, and made his way over to the door. Reaching down and spinning the key-dial which served as his handle to the right value, he opened a connection to the most open common space, and stepped out of the door.

The path beyond was a white hallway, stretching out as far as the eye could see – or rather, as it stretched on, everything blurred together so much that it was impossible to say for sure what lie beyond without going and checking for oneself. Art slowly made his way down the hall, until at last, he came to the far end, where another door awaited. Above it was a small sign which read “Cafeteria”.

He stepped through that, as well. The space beyond was wide and open, and dominated by large, round tables, each with about seven chairs around them. Foods of all sorts were laid out in trays along the walls, with plates and tongs for serving, and he could see a few of his classmates sitting together around the room.

In particular, his eyes focused in on the pair he had spoken with the most often – a broad-shouldered boy, by the name of Gareth, and a girl with short, auburn hair, named Chloe. Gareth looked over to him and said, “Art, it’s been a while.”

“It has,” he replied. The aroma of the various high-quality foods in the room made its way to him, and he said, “Give me a moment. I need to grab something.”

“Sure, take your time.”

He had never disassembled a headset to confirm exactly how they worked, but the sensory stimulation from the Datanet was something Art understood to be an impressive work. To compensate for the food which was made available to the students, which ranged from unpleasant to bland, the food in this cafeteria worked off of direct stimulation to the brain.

In the end, he settled on a bowl of sliced meat (sampled from an animal which he believed was probably long extinct), caramelized onions, and rice. It was a simple choice, but one that gave him a warm, comforting feeling when he picked it out.

He sat himself down and began to eat, as Gareth asked him, “So what took you so long? It’s not like there was anything to do out there.”

“I met a girl from the outside,” Art replied, after swallowing the first bite. “We were doing things together.”

“Doing things?” Chloe asked. “What do you mean?”

“We talked,” he answered. “About a lot of things, actually. The stars, flowers, things that I didn’t really know about. Then we went out and explored around, and...”

When Art looked at the other two, he saw confusion on both of their faces. Then, realizing his own position from just the day before, he said, “Let me finish this, and I’ll start from the beginning.”

After finishing the bowl, Art gave a short summary of the events of the previous day and a half – the things that he learned, as well as the more absurd things which had happened. The two listened intently through all of this, until he reached the end of his story. At that point, Chloe said, “That sounds incredible. But also really, really dangerous! You shouldn’t do things like that.”

“I agree,” Gareth said, with a nod. “Though I’m not sure that I really understand it all.”

“Are you sure it really happened?” Chloe asked. “Maybe after you put on the headset, there was a glitch with the archives, and it strung a bunch of images together in a weird sequence?”

“If that’s what happened to him, then I hope it happens to me, too. I’ve never heard something that entertaining before.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Art said, leaning back in his chair and looking up at the ceiling. “It was far too real. I don’t have any memories of even getting my headset out, either. I’m sure I would at least remember that if I had just been experiencing a glitch.”

Chloe set her chin on her hand, and tapped the other on the desk. “Is that so? But it definitely sounds like a glitch, to me. This Shiori girl has something off about her. More than this Apollyon person, even.”

“Didn’t Art just say that she was an outsider? Of course she’ll be a little bit strange. I’m sure we must be that way to her. Though, Art... it seems a bit odd that either of you would survive a fall like that.”

“I don’t understand it myself. It might be that Apollyon was able to do something, but I don’t know what that might have been.”

“Well, in the end, it’s not that important!” Gareth declared, putting an end to the subject. “Now that you’re here, do you want to get some fencing practice in? I can’t get into the right mindset without a strong opponent to go against, and hearing about this logician’s blade really put me in the mood.”

“What you *should* be doing is working on your marksmanship,” Chloe scolded him. “I think you’ve actually gotten worse.”

“Not everyone can be an eagle-eye like you, Chloe.”

“You can, you just need to put in the work. Just look at how good Art has gotten.”

“That’s because he’s Art. Chloe, you just heard that he keeps a shelf just for his class notes.”

“You don’t?” Art asked in surprise.

“No. I just reference stuff here, in the archive.”

“I guess I never realized that...”

Art’s words trailed off, as he thought back to his earlier realization. He then asked the question, after a brief moment of hesitation, “Hey. Have the two of you ever enter into a house other than your own?”

“Huh?” Gareth asked. “No, why would I?”

“It’s the same for me,” said Chloe. “I just go home and get into the Datanet.”

“I see. Then, have the two of you ever thought it was odd how the town is laid out?”

“Nope. You wanna explain that?”

“I mean how spaced out everything is. It doesn’t really map to any of the stuff that we’ve learned in class. There aren’t any signs that any buildings were removed, either, or that the town has shrunk in size. So it had to have been a deliberate decision, to space the homes away from each other.”

Gareth frowned, and replied, “It’s not like it really matters, does it? We can all connect to each other here, in the Datanet, easily enough.”

“But you know,” Chloe said. “He’s right that there’s something odd about it. I’d almost forgotten about it, but I actually remember a time, just after school began, when I was looking around and trying to find someone’s house. But since all of the houses basically looked the same, I ended up getting lost all the way on the other end of town, and had to get picked up and brought back.”

“Huh. Something like that really happened with you?”

“What, did you think I just made it up?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

Art was merely half-listening as the two spiraled off into their argument. He had a great deal of respect for Gareth as an athlete and a fencer, and for Chloe as an analyst – if she agreed that something was off about the town, then he could feel pretty confident that there was. But that still left the question of just what it was.

“I’m sure that Shiori could figure it out, if she didn’t just dismiss it out of hand... I hope that she’s okay.”

“Oh!” Gareth said, putting a stop to the argument and calling Art’s attention back to the present situation. “I heard that we’re going to be getting a new teacher.”

“Really?”

“That’s what they’ve been saying,” Chloe said. “There hasn’t been any confirmation from the adults, though.”

Gareth explained, “Alex was the one who found out. Since it would take so long to grow a new clone to teach the classes, apparently the observatory found an outsider who could handle that sort of thing. He said that he thinks she’s probably a vampire.”

“On the other hand, he’s Alex,” Chloe added.

“Right. So if anything, it’s more likely that a vampire’s just going to show up and eat us all, while we’re hooked up to these machines. Not that there’s any around.”

“I think security would take care of something like that,” Art said. “Or at the very least, someone in the observatory would disconnect the Datanet the moment people started dying.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. So, want to try fencing?”

“My synchronization is still pretty low. I’m not sure I’ll be able to provide you with the match that you’re looking for.”

“The faster you get back in action, the faster I’ll be able to get that match. Let’s get you into the dojo and see about making it happen.”

Navigation of the Datanet consisted of transfers similar to the one Art had performed earlier, with users setting coordinates at the doors and moving to the next space. In that fashion, the three of them moved to the dojo. Art and Gareth both headed to the weapons racks, picking out appropriate swords.

The training swords, in terms of looks and general feel, were a set of cruciform long-swords forged from excellent steel; each of perfect weight, and comfortable to use in the hand. In truth, each was dull, but would connect with the Datanet headset to register blows.

In other words, a strike to the arm would successfully immobilize the opponent and cause them a great deal of pain, but it would not lead to a loss of the arm, either within the Datanet or out in the world. The technology was marvelous, though nothing on the level of the lost arts of the ether logicians.

“Or maybe not that lost, considering Apollyon?”

Art and Gareth assumed opposite positions, each of them holding their blades back in a tail-guard position. He smirked, and said, “You’re going to have a terrible headache after this, you know.”

“I’m sure I will. But I’ll do the best I can to make it mutual.”

The two began. Gareth stepped in quickly, raising his blade and swinging it up from below, while Art raised his up to guard the blade. Gareth quickly alternated his grab, grasping the blade and moving in for a downward thrust.

Recalling the sequence, Art moved to parry the blow with the guard of his sword, but Gareth merely grinned, pulling back and wrenching Art’s blade out of his hands. Then, he tapped Art lightly on the head with his pommel, saying, “Gotcha.”

“You did. Let’s keep at it, then.”

The two continued their practice, with Art’s synchronization rising steadily as they carried on. Slowly but steadily, his physical control began to approved, and the matches which Gareth had initially been dominating grew longer, and eventually, shorter again in Art’s favor.

In their last bout, Gareth swung his blade in a similar fashion to the first, with Art raising once more into a guard. But this time, while Gareth shifted into the half-sword position, Art twisted his blade into a thrusting movement, striking Gareth in the chest. The safety measures prevented the tip from penetrating, but delivered a powerful shock to Gareth’s chest, causing him to stumble back, clutching his chest.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry. I know how much those hurt.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, it’s not like I didn’t give you a few of those...”

In spite of their initial bravado, neither had struck each other with many blows aimed to the head, and there were no headaches to be had

by either. After they headed to the lockers to wash up, Art went back to his personal room, and laid down on the bed to think over things.

“Would I call them friends?”

That was the thought which came to him as he lay there. His plain, white room, was an empty place, but also calming in its own way. There were no other distractions, leaving his mind free to wander as he chose. There had been many days and occasions like this, but so far, all he had done was consider them just another part of the learning process.

He opened his user menu, and pulled up the previous records from his class roster. Looking at them, he could see the general ranking of his class, as well as their positions within each of the categories. Besides the general academics subjects, there were a few other categories in which students were ranked – fitness, swordsmanship, marksmanship, skill in strategic exercises, design work, and a broad array of other areas which were meant to assess general competency. Sitting at or near the top on each of the rankings was his own name, with a list of others below.

His thoughts turned back to the past. He recalled the first day he had arrived at the academy. The sky had been gray, as it often was, but not yet to the point of rain. His father had patted him on the head, and said to him, “Art. This is the first step of your path. Show them what it means to stand at the top.”

The days that followed all blurred into each other. He would show up, attend to the lectures, do the work needed, and otherwise work his way towards that goal. He spoke when he needed to speak, and was silent when he needed to be silent. There were some classmates he spoke to more than others, Gareth and Chloe among them, but that had more to do with them speaking with him than anything else.

Day after day, it was the same sequence of events. So long as he was a diligent worker, that was all that mattered. Sure enough, he had done quite well for himself. He scored top marks in most categories, and was tied for such in others. Of course, no matter how well he did, his

brother would always laugh and say that it was just a matter of the competition – even if Art could rank better among his class, he was the younger brother, and would always be running behind.

He had taken that at face value. But what was the true reason for those words? Was it something like jealousy? Or was it just his way to help push Art to greater heights?

The top was the only thing that really mattered, then. When there was a class report, showing rankings and results, Art would start from there and look down for his name. There was no need to look beyond that, he had thought. It wasn't a purposeful or malicious act, nor did he think it was something which had anything to do with an ego.

“It wasn't that I didn't care about the others, and it wasn't that I cared too much about myself. I didn't feel pride or happiness from success – it was simply the way that things were. It was the natural result of putting in effort, so I never thought further than that. In a way, I just assumed that it was the same way for everyone else.”

His class had not remained the same. Over the passing of years, the size had shrunk. Now that he was an eight-year student, it seemed that many of the kids he had seen were gone – but where had they gone? Besides the academy, and the upper academy which was built in with the observatory, there was no other schools to attend.

“Perhaps they simply moved on to other work?”

Or perhaps that wasn't the case? He had never thought to give it any attention before, but there had been a few transfers in the past. It was always done quietly, without any ceremony. Nobody commented on it, since that was the way of things.

Everything had an order to it. Things had to be done with intent and purpose, to prevent that order from falling apart. That was why he assumed that everything was working within the order. There was no need to question things, no need to aim to have fun. Maintaining things

in their proper order was something that was necessary. In that sense, it was a piece of circular logic – to question the necessity of having that proper order, was to itself violate the order.

“And yet she didn’t care about any of that.”

Art returned his attention to the list, and then, for the first time, continued to scan down the line. He looked over each of his classmates, noticing the areas where they excelled, as well as the areas where they struggled. Some were indeed better overall than others, but none could be said to be the same as another.

The faces which had been blurred together, as he went through the documentation, seemed to become more clear to him. In a sense, he felt that, as he reflected on the people around him, they began to take on a form which they hadn’t before. As if they had moved from something abstract in his mind, to something real.

Was it just them?

When was the last time he had even called his brother by his name?

“It’s not enough to just keep learning, if I’m not going to ask the questions myself. It’s not enough to stand at the top, if that means not reaching any further than before.”

He had reflected enough – he couldn’t remain here. Checking the status of his physical body, Art saw that he had stabilized – all that he needed to do was disconnect from the Datanet, and return back to the world outside. Laying down in bed, and closing his eyes, he pressed the toggle on his headset to disconnect.

The countdown began. In ten seconds, he would be back in the real world. He wasn’t sure who had saved him, and he couldn’t be sure what had happened to Shiori. But remaining here wasn’t going to help him with that. He had questions that needed answers, and no teacher. From now on, it was his turn to go searching for the truth.

The countdown ended, and he returned.

07 – Connect

Art removed his Datanet headset, and was at once forced to cover his eyes again, as the thin light of the afternoon sun shone through the windows of the hospital-like room he found himself awakening in, directly onto his face.

“What a terrible placement for a window... no, it’s just that the curtains were left open.”

He looked around, thinking that he might have wound up in the observatory hospital. But checking over the bed he was on, the curtains, the window placement, the bluish wall colors – he was in the nurse’s office of the academy.

“Why would they take me here?”

There was a rustling sound along his side, and a slight groan, which let him know he wasn’t alone in the room – sitting in a chair along his bed, and currently laying asleep with her head at his side, was Shiori. She was fast asleep, with her hair sprawled out, and a little trail of drool hanging out of her mouth.

He let out a sigh of relief, glad to see that she was alright. He was still curious about how they had survived, but for now, he was mostly just glad to see that she wasn’t hurt.

“Should I wake her up? She looks pretty tired, though.”

Art did his best to quietly place his Datanet headset on the small table near the bed, hoping not to wake her. Inspecting his own body, he found that while every muscle of his body was sore, there were no signs of visible injuries, making the result much lighter than he might have expected given the circumstances.

There were footsteps from the door, so he looked over to see who was approaching. Poking her head out from behind the curtains was Apollyon, still dressed in the eccentric clothing she had worn earlier, who announced herself with, “Ah, master. How good it is to see that thee have stirred from thy protracted slumber.”

He had somewhat expect to see her, but he was less prepared for the woman who followed. She was taller than him, wearing a white lab-coat over a white button-up shirt and a black high-waist skirt; she had shoulder-length black hair and deep blue eyes, which were obscured under dark-rimmed glasses. While Apollyon had made a fair amount of noise as her shoes struck the floor, this woman had entered completely silently, and remained silent as she looked over Art. Despite not being someone he recognized, he thought she seemed strangely familiar.

Noticing his silence, Apollyon followed Art’s gaze to the woman, and she sighed. “Thou should be thankful, master. Were it not for this woman, neither of ye would be alive.”

“Is that so?” he asked. “Then I suppose... thank you, ma’am. But how did you pull it off?”

“In an inelegant fashion,” the woman replied, in a voice which was cold, almost mechanical. “I countered your momentum by triggering a force burst in the area below. The sudden g forces had the side effect of incapacitating you, but did avert a fatal fall.”

“With some kind of device? So, you work with the observatory?”

“That is incorrect. I will be operating out of this school-building.”

“Eh? Wait, does that mean...?”

She nodded and said, “My name is Ms. Kato, and I will be taking over the role of teacher. In that capacity, it was my job to ensure that no harm came to my students.”

So the rumor that Alex had uncovered was right, at least in part. Art couldn’t see anything about her that would mark her as a vampire,

though he had a sense that he would need to ask Shiori for something like, seeing as she was the one who seemed to be more of an expert on the topic. Furthermore, there was the strange person his brother had mentioned being spotted.

“Do you... come from the outside, then? Like Shiori?”

“Yes. I came across this job opening while traveling and found it interesting enough to consider. So, you are Art, then?”

“Yes, though... Ms. Ambrosius always insisted on my full name.”

“I see no point in doing so. Art will be sufficient. Now, may I ask what led you to entering such a dangerous area?”

Shiori’s head suddenly shot up from the side of the bed, and she said, “I told you, didn’t I? We were just looking around.”

“I have already received your explanation. I do not need to hear it again. Understood?”

“Well, it’s not like he’s going to say anything different...”

Art answered, “I think that... probably covers everything? It was a bit of a last minute decision.”

“Is that so? Nothing more than a momentary whim?”

“I guess that’s about right...”

“Understood. Then allow me to remind you that it is a core tenant of this academy that all actions should have a purpose to them, as part of the order of things.”

“I understand...”

“That said – your actions have not been entirely without purpose.”

Ms. Kato placed her hand on Apollyon’s head. “You have found this girl, while there remains vacancies on the class roster. Therefore I shall enroll her into this school.”

“Thou make a bold claim, human. I have not yet acquiesced to thy request, nor does there seem to be a reason.”

“Your opinion does not matter,” Ms. Kato continued. “If it did, I would have consulted you.”

“Eh!?”

Art was a bit surprised with how easily Ms. Kato had dismissed the living weapon who was standing in the room with them. But she still had more to say, as she pointed to Shiori and continued to speak, saying, “You will be enrolled as well. I will not tolerate there being vagrant children running around, causing trouble.”

“What do you mean, vagrant?”

“Wait, that’s the part you’re concerned about?”

“Well, I can’t promise I wouldn’t cause trouble, you know?”

“Please be quiet, the both of you. I have not yet finished giving my explanation.”

“Right. Sorry...”

“I do not want an apology, I want you to behave respectfully. I do not expect this to be especially difficult for you, Art, as you have had plenty of experience. As for you two, I expect you to learn by modeling his behavior.”

“Nobody told me about all of these rules...”

“Thou art quite arrogant to make such proclamations, human. If my master does not order to me, then I shall hear no more of this – I do not care for thy way of being.”

Ms. Kato shot Apollyon a harsh gaze, and the latter returned one which was equally severe. Art began to grow worried for a moment, recalling the power that Apollyon had demonstrated earlier. But to his surprise, after a tense moment, it was Apollyon who took a step back,

turning her head aside and saying, “Tsk. Understand that I do not do this by thy command, but as a means of watching my master. If thou should prove a problem, I shall not hesitate to eviscerate thee.”

“I’m glad that we have an understanding,” Ms. Kato replied, as she turned her attention next to Shiori. “And you?”

“Well, I don’t know about all of this business with rules, but it’s not like I’ve ever been in a school before,” she replied, leaning back in her chair. “So I guess it should be fine. Are you going to be teaching all of those things that Art described before?”

“I will be making a number of adjustments to the curriculum,” she replied, explaining that, “I have looked over the work left behind by my predecessor, and while it is exceptional, I do not believe it has done an adequate job at fostering students to meet the standards for living as successful adults”

“What do you mean?” Art asked, confused. “Isn’t the goal supposed to be graduating?”

“That is incorrect,” she replied. “But it is close enough to the truth that I would consider it at least an adequate explanation. More will be made clear in time.”

She turned about to leave, then looked back. “You are free to leave. Return to your home at the soonest possible convenience. Classes will resume tomorrow morning.”

Then, she turned to leave. Each of the three remaining in the room followed her with their gaze – Art with confusion, Apollyon with a mix of fear and irritation, and Shiori seemingly just alert. Silence hung in the air, as Ms. Kato departed just as silently as she has entered, and was broken by Shiori reaching over to Art’s shoulders and saying, “You’re really okay, right? You don’t have any brain damage or anything, right? She wouldn’t tell me if you had brain damage.”

“I’m fine, Shiori. I’m glad to see you are, too.”

“Well, for a moment there, I really thought we were both done for! I’m glad that Ms. Kato showed up when she did. She’s been really quiet about how she did it, though.”

Apollyon raised an eyebrow, saying, “Verily, thou do not?”

“Do you know something, Apollyon?” Art asked.

“Nay. It is not a significant matter, and it is not my place to say. I shall speak no further on the matter.”

Shiori objected, “Don’t you keep calling Art your ‘master’? Can you really just deny one of this requests like that?”

“Foolish girl, is thy head truly so empty? He is my master, but I am not a slave without a will. I am a peerless weapon, and it is my function to serve as such, not to thoughtlessly betray the secrets of another. Even if I cannot tolerate that woman.”

“I won’t ask, then,” Art said. “I am concerned, though. How will the two of you fare in the academy?”

“You really have to ask that?” Shiori laughed, raising her finger and pointing to her eyes. “Remember, I can just look back into the past. I’m basically an all-powerful test taker, you know?”

“Thou need not worry for me, master. To secure the performance of my functions, I have been granted superior processing functions and a first-class knowledge-base. Ye shall see, humans, the true measure of the gap in our base parameters, and tremble at what yet have created.”

“Oh, you’re not that impressive,” Shiori replied. “Just let me fix a knife to the end of a calculator, and that should do it.”

“I’ll have thy tongue for that, foolish girl. Master, I demand thou give me permission to put a cease to her prattling.”

“I’m not exactly excited about the idea of giving orders, but that? That is at the bottom of the list of things I would order. And Shiori, can you please be nicer?”

“Fine. If we’re going to be classmates, then I guess I can at least try this ‘respect’ thing.”

“Thou should be careful, foolish girl – though I shall put on a show for the benefit of the class, know thee well that in my head, I am calculating all of the ways in which I shall punish thee for thy insolence should my master endure another fall.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Until then, I’m going to make my way up to the top of this class... hey, Art? Who is that, right now?”

“It’s me.”

“Really? Guess you’d better look out, then. This whole thing has me feeling really competitive, and excited about that.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever really competed with anyone before, so I’m not really sure what that’s like.”

“Or have I?” he thought to himself. *“I was aiming at the top, so even if I didn’t think about it, wasn’t I putting myself in competition with everyone else? Like with Gareth...”*

That was right. Even if he didn’t think that much about it, wasn’t Gareth doing everything he could to become the top swordsman in the school? How must it have felt for him, then, having the person at the top so disinterested?

“How must he actually feel about that? If he’s keeping everything inside... then isn’t that a form of acting, too?”

Though he was beginning to lose himself in thoughts, a quick tap on the head from Shiori brought him back to reality. “Hey,” she asked, “Are you sure you’re doing okay?”

“I am,” he replied. “In some ways, I think I’m doing better than I have in a long while.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. Then flashing a smile, she said, “Well, I’m glad to hear that! I don’t want to see my friend get sad, okay?”

“Right. I’ll try not to worry you, then.”

“But if you *do* get sad, don’t hide it either! It’s really important that friends talk to each other about those kinds of things. Or at least, that’s what I think.”

“Alright, then I’ll try to do that, too.”

Art began to sit up, while Shiori stepped out of her chair. He said, “I should probably head back home, then. What about you two?”

“I shall remain here for the night,” Apollyon said. “There is no sense in departing if I am simply to return in the morning. Call for me if thou should need thy blade, master.”

“I... suppose that makes a degree of sense? And you, Shiori?”

“I’ll be heading back home. Oh, but I’ll walk with you for a little while, alright? We’re heading in more-or-less the same direction.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Alright, then... I suppose take care of yourself, Apollyon?”

“It is I who should be saying as such, master. Take care when thou art with that foolish girl.”

The two of them, Art and Shiori, departed from the academy. The school-house itself was a relatively simple structure – there was a large class-hall, with a number of small rooms affixed to the wings, such as the nurse’s office. There was not a proper dojo, but instead a training field out along the back, which served for general athletic functions. In all of his memory, Art could never recall a time when the school-house had proved inadequate in fulfilling its role.

The sky had darkened considerably in just a short time, as another front of clouds had moved in. Looking up, Art was also fairly sure that it was going to begin raining soon. He asked Shiori, “Do you have a way to dry off properly at your place?”

“I’ll be fine,” she replied. “A little rain never hurt anybody.”

“Let’s at least get you a uniform. There’s a rain-jacket in the kit, so it should help you stay dry. And new shoes, since you lost yours.”

“Ooh, I’ve never worn a uniform before... I hope it’s cute.”

“Cute?”

The two made a quick stop in the supply and locker rooms, before heading off. As they went off into the night, Apollyon watched them from the roof of the school-building, her legs swaying. Once they had departed an adequate distance, she stood herself up, and headed back along the roof, to look down in the back yard. There, standing down in the dirt area, she could see Ms. Kato looking up at her, with her hands deep into her lab-coat pockets.

“My master has departed with the fool girl. There is no longer any need to restrain myself against thee.”

“Then let us see it play out,” Ms. Kato replied. “Though I have told you already: there is little need to worry about collateral damage.”

“Verily, thou believe this? But thou should realize, there is no hope for a mere human to survive, once I release my limiters.”

“You talk a big game, but there is little you can do without the boy acting as your master. My teaching does not begin until tomorrow, but if you are so eager, I see no reason not to teach you a lesson.”

“Teaching is the domain of those who cannot do.”

“Is that so?” the teacher replied, adjusting her glasses. “Then this lesson will be a two-for-one deal.”

The yard was silent for a moment. Then, Apollyon raised her right arm, and announced, “Logician’s Gate – Open!”

The glowing blue bands formed in the air around her arm, as she decided upon the most effective weapon for this battle, “Calculate: Sword of Michael, output 1, temperature 5500.”

But she was not the only one speaking. Ms. Kato, in a much quicker cadence, held out her right hand and called, “Barrier Force, output 10, variable: heat deflection.”

Still, Apollyon wasn't going to allow herself to stop, and she went on to conclude the incantation, calling out the word, “Manifest!”

To a normal human eye, nothing had occurred within the space. But to the eyes of an artificial being such as herself, what Apollyon had manifested in her hand was a sword of pure fire, with a heat matching that of the surface of the sun in its heyday. Even restrained as it was, the blade scorched the surface of the roof below her feet, and warped the air with its absurd heat.

It was the ultimate anti-personnel weapon, capable of instantly vaporizing any human being. In her hand, it would stretch out, striking at a desired target like a whip with a mind of its own – not merely a close-combat weapon, but a short-range homing weapon, which could be swung to fell a full platoon of men or alien creatures at once.

And now, with full awareness of that fact, Apollyon raised her arm back, and swung the weapon. The flames struck out, hissing through the air, and extending out as they struck for Ms. Kato.

Yet with a simple gesture, she waved her hand in front of her, and said, “Whoosh...”

In an arc extending out from her arm came forth an invisible line of numbers, forming together a complex barrier. The tip of the blazing sword made contact with the barrier, and there was a powerful blast of heat, scorching the ground and turning the sand to glass. And then, the sword was shattered apart, while the barrier which had sprung into place spiraled back around Ms. Kato, spinning around her like a whirlwind of imaginary numbers.

The teacher pointed her finger at Apollyon, and spoke the words, “Cyclone, output 3, restriction: anti-personnel. Whoosh!”

The whirlwind of numbers shot in the direction of Apollyon. She attempted to leap back, but that proved to be a mistake – indeed, it only made it easier for the cyclone to catch her along its edges, spinning her rapidly and launching her high into the air.

That alone would not be enough to stop her, though. She merely needed to get a little more serious. Once again, she spoke forth a new incantation: “Calculate: Wings of Raphael, output 2, speed: maximum. Manifest!”

From her back sprouted great wings of shimmering blue numbers, while a sword and shield formed in her hands. From that position, she shot down to the earth below, and her human target, easily breaking the sound barrier as she shot down with the force of a meteor.

Ms. Kato spoke her own line, reciting, “Power Armor, output 14, emphasis: reaction time.”

She clapped her hands together as Apollyon shot downward. This simple act released enough force to blow back the air around her, and shatter the glass which had formed in the dirt below. Then, the two made contact. Apollyon’s blade struck Ms. Kato’s left arm head-on. The impact drove her back, causing a great plume of dirt to rise into the air as her feet were dragged back; yet the blade was inadequate to shatter the armor she had shrouded herself with.

It was time for a counter attack, then. Ms. Kato reached forward, aiming for Apollyon’s head. But despite moving with enhanced speed, it was nothing compared to that which Apollyon demonstrated. Nothing but a cloud of blue rose petals was left, as Apollyon rapidly shifted her position to behind Ms. Kato, where she laid for a barrage of powerful blows, one after the other.

So began an onslaught of blows, first dozens, then hundreds, each carrying enough deadly force to strike a human being in two. Many of these Ms. Kato deflected away with her arms, moving with an almost inhuman speed herself; yet many besides broke past her guard, striking

at what should have been the more vulnerable parts on a human body. Her defenses seemed absolute, impenetrable to any weapon, and leaving Ms. Kato unable to be harmed by such simple attacks. But for Apollyon, whose function was to bring death to all things, could see through the flow of numbers and isolate it – the single weak-point which was steadily opening in that invincible armor.

Yes – though it was a small thing, a minor crack in the guard, there was a single point right in that teacher’s chest which could be struck; it would take nothing more than a singular, decisive blow to the heart, and the battle would be over.

“Apologies, master. But I’ll not have thee bound up in this woman as well, and I know thou will not make the wise order thyself.”

Her chance, at last, arrived. The moment the vulnerability was fully exposed, Apollyon thrust forward with her full strength, committing everything into a single, final thrust, which would surely pierce the heart of the human before her and put an end to the battle...

Or at least, that was what she thought.

Ms. Kato clapped her hands before her, as the blade came in. With precise timing, made possible only by an inhuman reaction, she caught the blade between her hands, and grabbed it. Then, while Apollyon was still stunned by the outcome, she yanked it forward, and seized the girl who was herself a living weapon by the throat.

“Gah!”

She was not a living being. She did not need oxygen to breathe, as a human did – but as she was modeled after a human, it was impossible to say that she did not feel distress from her position. Her opponent clearly had full awareness of this, for she clutched Apollyon’s neck with enough force to easily block the airways of an ordinary human.

“It is not wise to base your entire strategy on a single weak-point. You would have been better creating a series of different vulnerabilities,

so I would have trouble planning a trap on a single one. You should add this as part of your lesson.”

“I’ll kill thee, human...”

“An interesting threat. Unfortunately, I am unable to allow you to fulfill it. I have a job to do of my own, and I cannot accomplish it if I am dead. Since I have no wish of killing you, it seems that I must simply beat you until you concede.”

“The great Apollyon... will never concede... to the likes of thee.”

“Then call it a draw, if it will satisfy your pride.”

Ms. Kato let go of her grip, dropping Apollyon to the ground, and faced her. Her hands had returned to her pocket, though the sequence of numbers which represented her armor was still apparent. So, too, was the fatal weak-point, presented easily for her to see.

For a moment, Apollyon considered taking the shot – it was right there, clear to see. With one thrust of her sword, the battle would be at an end, with no way for her opponent to react in time. But as much as she felt that way, at the same time, she could no longer bring herself to do so.

“Bah!” she called out, dispelling the effects of her logician’s abilities and resetting herself to default. “There is no fun in it, if thou leave such an obvious opening. But this isn’t the end of our battle.”

“I am curious – why do you loathe me so?”

“I cannot say. Ye humans would call it an instinct, I think. Thou hast a smell like that of the incomplete girl... no, rather, ye are like two side of the same coin. She is an incomplete person, akin to a lingering ghost; whilst thou art as an amalgamation of ghosts, a veritable flock of fragmented humans. One with countless holes, at that.”

“Is that what you see? Interesting.”

Ms. Kato turned her back on the girl who had just attempted to kill her, staring off into the distance, past the limits of the town. “I feel much the same as you do, regarding my current state. My memories before arriving near this place are a mess of out-of-sequence fragments. These memories are surely precious things, and are key behind my own *raison d'être*. Yet I cannot recall them.”

Apollyon laughed, as she said, “So thou hast decided to become a teacher? As if such a thing will fulfill thy will?”

“It will not,” Ms. Kato replied. “However, though I would like to restore what is missing, it seems that I have an additional purpose. That purpose is to share what knowledge I have, and so, I will perform that function until such a time as I have an opportunity to resolve this problem that I have come across.”

“Fine. Then let this matter to be resolved at another time, human. Yet know this – even if he is merely a master of convenience, that boy is my master. I shall watch thee, and should thee prove a threat, then I will not hold back.”

“That is fine with me. Please ensure your uniform is in order for the start of classes tomorrow.”

Apollyon turned and walked away, heading back for the classroom, and leaving Ms. Kato standing outside, alone, as she looked out into the distant horizon at something which perhaps she alone could see. The sky above continued to darken, and soon, it began to rain.

o8 – Garden

The pouring rain beat down hard on the academy town, as two youths walked with umbrellas clutched tightly over their head. There was Art, dressed in black uniform with a thick jacket; and Shiori, dressed for the first time in a girl's uniform of her own, with her old clothes bundled together under her other arm. With a black jacket worn over a white button-up, it was notably different only in the addition of a few pockets to the jacket, and in substituting the pants with a pleated skirt of red and black plaid patterning.

Shiori, for her part, was enjoying the rain. Each time the pair came across a puddle or series of them, she would hop, jump, or skip over the lot, as if playing a game. Art opted instead to work off of a strategy of avoidance, and she steadily advanced ahead of him along the route.

As they came across a relatively dry patch, Shiori turned around to face Art, walking backward as she asked, "So, are you excited?"

"What do you mean, excited?"

She frowned, and said, "Well, what else? We're going to be in class together, and that's really exciting, isn't it?"

"I guess it is. I'm not really sure what kind of changes she's going to be making, though."

"Well, I'm sure it'll be fine!"

Shiori spun herself back around, just in time to make a jump over a smaller puddle, and began to whistle as she looked around the area. But while her actions were jovial, her eyes were hard as they gazed forward. She thought to herself, "*Or at least, I hope it will be fine. But is that strange woman really a teacher, like she says she is?*"

She doubted that greatly, but couldn't put her finger on why. It was a gut feeling, rather than the product of logic and reason based on clear evidence, so there was little reason for her to be able to say otherwise. But more than that, there was another point – did it really matter?

“That’s right. Even if she’s a fake teacher, then isn’t that fine for a fake student? I’m sure Art will say something if there’s a problem.”

The thought occurred to her, at that point, that it was hypocritical for her to put all the burden of saying something on him. So she turned her head back, and say, “Hey, Art?”

“Yes?”

“What kind of impression do you get from Ms. Kato?”

“I’m not sure. She doesn’t seem like Ms. Ambrosius.”

“Does she seem like a teacher to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Me neither.”

Well, that didn't settle the mystery, but at least she knew he was on the same page. She turned her attention back to area around her. In a word, she felt that it was barren – the scattered buildings, separated by great gulfs of space; the old, beaten roads, and the sidewalks running alongside them, which were perfect for forming puddles of rainwater; the dead grasses, which she dearly hoped would regain their color once the rain had passed. Yet under the dark and stormy skies above, it was impossible to describe this place as open. Indeed, the thickness of the clouds was enough to smother out all but the smallest trickles of light from the dying sun, restricting visibility so strictly that only the faint silhouettes of the nearest buildings could be seen. In this manner, this town, though devoid of features, felt tight and claustrophobic.

The air was cold, enough so that it chilled her to the bones. So loud was the pounding rain, that she was certain if she strayed much further

than she already was, she would have to shout in order for Art to hear her. The raindrops drumming against her umbrella were the loudest of all, in this respect, and only seemed to be growing stronger. As Shiori became aware of that, she retreated back a bit, walking side-by-side with Art again.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I didn’t want to yell if we started talking.”

“Is that so?”

“Hey! Are there any buildings here other than houses?”

“Besides the school-house, none that I know of. Not in the town, that is. There’s the observatory, the old one, and a few other things that are on the outskirts.”

“That’s so boring. I want to do something fun, like karaoke, or an arcade. Something indoors and not wet, though.”

“I don’t have any idea what those are.”

“Well, I don’t think they exist any more... but I can try to describe them to you, if you like?”

In her minds eye, Shiori could see herself being cast out across the vast gulf of time and space, to an event many eons ago. In a small room, with a tiny computer screen displaying information, a group of young men and women dressed in casual clothes were huddled together. Two of them, a boy and a girl, were standing together with microphones, singing their hearts out in an amateurish fashion, while a holographic display was cast out from the center table. As the singers gave it their all, she found herself turn to the girl next to her, who offered a bright smile and pointed to another set of mics on the table.

The memory faded, and she could see another, from the point of view of a person in another distant eon, playing a game in some virtual-reality created environment with a boy, firing bullets from a toy gun at

giant holographic insects, flying or crawling in from all sides. This small fragment of the past, as well as the other, Shiori shared with Art, sharing with him the fragments of a long-forgotten past. He was quiet through most of her discussion, asking only few clarifying questions, but did have one lingering thought once she reached the end.

“Virtual reality... I wonder how accurate that would be, to describe the Datanet?”

“I’ve never heard of a Datanet before.”

“It’s a place we can access with the use of special headsets, and entering a sleep-like state. The town uses it for communication, and also as a way to access the archive.”

“The archive, huh? That sounds familiar to me, in some way. What is it an archive of?”

“It’s a repository of ancient information, I suppose. Documentaries of past events, and especially about the natural world. You could call it a record of Earth, I suppose.”

“That doesn’t ring any bells, but it still sounds pretty cool. I’d like to check it out, at some point.”

“The headsets are all tied to a single user, so I’m not sure if that would be an option. Unless they were to issue one to you, but I’m not sure how long that take outsiders.”

“Well, I guess I’ll figure it out when the time comes,” she replied, waving her hand as though brushing the topic away. “It’s not like it was that big of a deal, anyways.”

“How disappointing,” she thought, behind her forced smile. “I guess I’ll just stick with using my special powers then, for now.”

It seemed as though Art had gotten wise to her acting, though, as he replied, “I’ll try to find out from my father what the process would look like. He works at the observatory, so he’d be able to tell me if there

was a way to get a substitute. I'm sure that if you're a student at the academy, there has to be some way for that sort of thing."

"Oh, could you do that? That would be really nice. But I do think it would be fine, even if you can't find one. If I had something like that, I would probably just spend all of my time sitting down and looking at old videos. I wouldn't be able to do things like looking around outside, or spend time talking like this."

He was quiet for a moment after that, and then said, "I think that is how it often goes, yes."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that what you described, isn't exactly uncommon."

"Oh, I see..."

The rain continued to pour down. He asked her, "Shiori. Do you know what the purpose of the academy is?"

"Isn't it just learning? Oh, but with all of that order stuff, it's not like learning for its own sake would make sense. Well, if I were to judge off of your curriculum, then I'd have to say... militant insurance agents."

"... what?"

"Militant insurance agents. Like you were going to bring back insurance to the planet Earth, and then go in and beat up anyone that committed insurance fraud, or something like that. With swords."

"That is... I'm not even sure what to say. Where would you even come to that conclusion?"

"Well, most of the stuff you've described has to do with the basics of numbers and communication, which would be good for both sales and contracts. And all of the higher mathematics would be great for the actuarial duties, and astronomy for navigation. That's why I'm really surprised they didn't go into things like constellations better, since you can use those as references."

“The process is interesting, but what I mean is... has anything like that existed?”

“Well, the Earth has had a long history, so I imagine it must have at some point. Though you wouldn’t really call it as such, I don’t think. Looking back, I can’t see anything like that...”

There were indeed a few close examples. There were times when insurance companies had hired private military companies to help them out, or gotten help from the government. And of course, there were all manner of governments which were effectively nothing more than large protection rackets, which she could see countless times. So far as Shiori could tell, her suggestion would have been a novelty.

“Right. But it naturally rolled out of your mouth. Why was that?”

“Hmm...”

She thought about that point. Her first instinct, when he said that, was that it seemed like the obvious conclusion. But was that really the case? Not really, with something so illogical. Yet while it felt illogical, it also felt natural – as if everything had been cleanly synthesized into a single conclusion. So if she were to answer, it would have to be...

“I suppose it just felt right.”

“Even if it was so clearly incorrect?”

“Does it really matter if I was incorrect? Wouldn’t you just correct me if I was? So rather than worry about getting the answer right, it was better to just go with whatever came to me. I would feel even sillier if I sat around, trying to come up with the right answer, and got it wrong. Or if I didn’t even try at all, and it turned out my gut feeling had been right from the very start.”

“But if you aren’t putting the effort into thinking, and going over all of the parts to get that correct answer, then you’re going to end up coming to illogical conclusion. If you don’t know, wouldn’t it be better to just ask? Or to piece the puzzle together through a logical process, if

you have enough of the parts together to do so. Not just going off of instinct, but through a rational approach.”

“Maybe. But I don’t feel like rationality alone is enough. Humans aren’t completely rational creatures, after all, and the universe is full of wonder and mystery. I don’t think it’s right to dismiss it altogether, and in general, I think it’s better to go with things like evidence and reason when they’re there. But those on their own don’t tell the full story.”

“For example,” she said. “Take the concept of God.”

“What do you mean?”

“Throughout all of human history, there has never been proof that God – or a group of gods – definitively exist. What scriptures and relics did exist were always, themselves, the products of human hands. But in all of that, humanity kept believing. To this day, all across the Earth, there are people still praying for salvation. Even if it’s not rational, even in the wake of a hundred million failed prophecies, there’s always more of them out there.”

“Isn’t that obvious, though? Religions are an easy way for people to draw in people, money, and power. They can be used for population control, to set down foundations for law and order, or just to help lay out common customs. It’s only natural that the idea would be recycled.”

“Is that what you really think? But I don’t think that religion has all that much to do with it.”

“With God?”

“Right. I feel that faith in God comes from the same place as our ability to put enough faith in our own senses, that we can adopt a sort of rational response. But it’s not an either-or matter, you see – it’s more like our ability to conceptualize. Through the use of reason, our minds can piece together a complex model of the world; but the information we need to do that doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. We need to find it, and in order to do that, we need to be able to imagine things that we

can't yet see, or might not even exist. Since the human imagination is nearly infinite, no matter how complete the model becomes, there will always be holes. The questions just spill out, from there. What happens when we die? Why do good people have to suffer? Will bad people be punished? Will someone forgive our sins? Is there anyone out there who will listen? Why are we here?"

"God," she said, "Helps us answer those questions. Religions just offer everyone a mass-produced version, to share with the whole family. But tastes will change over time, so religions come and go. But God himself always seems to come back to us, in some fashion."

"Then you believe in God?"

"I do. I just hope he believes in me, too."

Thinking back on his earlier question, Shiori realized that it was probably that same power of imagination that came into play when she was answering his question. The human mind was a finite thing, and yet it could still grasp infinity – just because something didn't exist, that didn't mean it was impossible for a human to conceptualize it.

"But you know," she said. "I think we got a little bit side-tracked, there. Weren't you going to tell me what the academy was *really* for?"

He nodded in response, and then began to explain, "The academy is a school for training leaders."

"So you really were militants?"

"Not necessarily. Military strategy and tactics are a part of it, and combat of course. But negotiations, government, fiscal policies, public planning, legislation, justice – all of that falls under what we learn. To learn from the mistakes of the past, the intent is to produce leaders who are clever, logical, and free of corruption."

Shiori laughed, and replied, "Well, you are pretty innocent. But I'm surprised, though. If that's really the goal, there seems to be a really fatal flaw in your curriculum."

“What is that?”

Even though Art had asked that, Shiori could tell from the look on his face that it was more of a rhetorical question – no, not quite that. It was as if he knew there was a problem, and was fishing for an answer. “*How silly,*” she thought, “*You don’t need to put on the pretense.*”

Still, she went ahead and answered, “It’s the lack of imagination. Those little details like telling stories, acting, or trying to come up with new ideas – that’s what makes a great leader. It’s like whoever designed all of this went and stripped all of that out, though. Not to mention the sheer isolation of this place. Did whoever made this town have some kind of problem with friendship, or something?”

“I never really noticed that, until the other day. But the buildings are truly space out.”

“Right? It’s weird.”

“I don’t understand it at all,” he said. “It must have been done with a purpose, but I can’t imagine what that is.”

“Well, I think you’ll get there,” she replied. Of course, it wasn’t as if Shiori knew herself, but that was how she felt on the matter. “Now that you’ve gone ahead and learned those things on your own, then I think it’s only natural you’ll pull it off.”

Though he had said back when they were in the alien-god’s heart that he was enjoying himself, Shiori still felt a bit of regret when she considered her role in upsetting the status quo. “*He was doing fine, here. He didn’t need me to come in and start throwing things at him, or making him question the town. Even if he says it’s fine, the truth is, I really just went and did what I wanted without thinking about the consequences.*”

She thought back to when she had first arrived in town. It hadn’t been long ago, but for some reason, those memories had already become a bit hazy. For whatever reason, she had found herself in the overgrown woods on the outskirts of town, walking forward with no real thought

to where she was. There was only a vague sense, at the time, that she needed to keep walking forward, and she would find something. Yet as she did so, she could never quite figure what she was looking for.

Eventually, Shiori grew tired of walking. She decided that once she found a place to rest, then she would surely stop. Perhaps that thought had been prophetic, because soon after, she found a small clearing. It was a beautiful place, abundant in flowers, and the red sunlight which trickled down was beautiful. Thinking how pleasant the bed of flowers would be to lay in, she stumbled forward, and at the foot of a great tree, she allowed herself to lay down and close her eyes.

It was a calming experience. Perhaps she had closed her eyes for a few seconds, perhaps she had done so for many hours; in any case, the rest had been dearly needed, for it was at that point that her memories began to become more solid.

When she opened her eyes, she could see the sky, and the red sun which hung high above. She could see the branches of great tree which reached out over her, and she could see, up in those branches, one other thing – a small tree-house, built of simple, hand-carved wood. From the tree-house hung a simple ladder, leading up to the higher branches.

“If there is a ladder, it’s only natural to climb it.”

Such had been her thoughts, as she stood up, and began to make her way up the ladder. She wondered, as she climbed, what she might find up there. Some old toys, left scattered around by whoever build the place? Maps pointing to some hidden treasure, calling out to whatever travelers found them? A collection of magical books, which would let her travel back in time?

But when she made her way into the tree-house, she found none of that. It was surprisingly spacious, enough to stand without hitting her head, and even had a few basic furnishings. To her surprise, there were even a few compression tubes which, though dusty themselves, did well to miraculously preserve their contents – a folding mattress, some bed-

sheets, spare clothes, toiletries, and enough other goods that she had the thought that someone must have left everything needed to survive in that place.

There weren't any magic books for sending the reader back in time, but there were a few mundane ones. From the titles, which called to mind fantastic lands and epic journeys, they seemed to her to be works of fiction. Yet as she began to read the first one, her found her mind began to race, calling back memories similar to the content of the text; memories which, though they appeared in her minds eye, she was quite certain were not her own.

It was in such a fashion that she discovered her power.

She wandered around a bit, after that. That was how she had found the grave – a relatively fresh grave marker, which marked that there were surely humans around. So she had returned, and the next day, she went out with a basket of flowers, gathered by hand from the clearing at the foot of the great tree.

“How was it that the flowers below, were all flowers for a funeral?”

Shiori had no answer for that question.

Shortly after that, she had met Art. She spoke to him, and with a little push, was able to get him to push back. There had been no higher thought to any of it, at the time. Thoughts of making a friend, or going on a little adventure together, hadn't really crossed her mind.

She just felt like it would be fun, was all.

There was no thought to finding a higher purpose in those actions. It was a basic, human impulse, born out of curiosity. If there had been a reason behind it, she thought, then it had to have simply been that she felt compelled to act upon her first impulse. If she were forced to put it into words, then those words would probably be...

“I suppose I just don't want to regret not doing something.”

It was better to regret actions, than it was inaction. That was how she saw things, though she couldn't particularly articulate why. Was it a natural response to the imminent death of the red sun? Or was it just a key part to her absent memories? That much was unknown.

Though, there were a few things she did know.

"But you know, Art..." she said.

"Yes?" he answered.

"I think they probably succeeded with you. You still have things to learn, but I think someone honest like yourself, with a good heart, has everything he needs to become a great leader."

He smiled, and said, "I'm glad to hear you say that. Though, I don't really know, myself. I don't feel like I've ever been in charge of anything. When we were at the funeral, I couldn't even think of anything to say to my classmates... even as the head of the class, there was nothing I could do for them, at the time. I knew almost nothing about them, and our teacher? I knew even less. I didn't feel like a leader. I felt useless."

From out of the corner of her eye, Shiori could see Art clenching his fists as he spoke. So she answered him, "But now you know what it feels like, right? So in the future, you'll be able to do better, because you learned from that. After all, it's not like you're an adult."

"I suppose I'm not, am I? Yet even though you're the same age, it's like you're..."

He seemed to be struggling to find the words. Teasingly, she asked him, "Clever? Charming? More beautiful than Apollyon?"

"I don't know. You just feel a little like an adult."

"Are you calling me an old hag!?"

"Eh? I'm not sure what a hag is, so I don't think so?"

She dropped the pretense of her false indignation and giggled at his flustered response. In truth, she felt there was a little truth to what he said. Her body was undeniably that of a girl only some fourteen years of age, but as the flashing images from the past ran through her mind, she could feel them slowly making an impression.

In the time that Art had been out, she had cast her mind far back into the past, looking for any possible medical guidance. In just that short bit of time, it was as though she had spent years living through the lives of people who were long dead.

“How much more of this can my mind really take?”

Friends talked to each other – that was what Shiori had said. But this concern, she thought, was her burden to bear.

“I don’t know how long it will be until it starts to slip away, but for just this little while, I want to remain myself.”

This small window in time, then, was her earnest prayer to God.

At long last, the two passed in front of Art’s house. He began to make his way up to the front porch, but then stopped, and turned to her. He asked, “Does your house have a washing machine?”

“No, nothing like that,” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

He hesitated, then answered, “I think it might be a good idea to get your clothes washed, is all.”

She cocked her head, sniffed her new uniform, and sniffed her old clothes. The uniform was mostly clean, but on closer inspection, she was a bit caught off guard by just how earthy her old clothes had become. It was a bit embarrassing, but she managed to choke out, “You might be right. I guess I’ll just have to get out a bowl, and wash them in the rain until they’re clean.”

“I was going to say... maybe it would be better if you stayed here overnight?”

Oh? That wasn't something she'd expected. Still, never turn down a good opportunity for having fun. She replied, "You're inviting a girl to stay in the house overnight? That's brave of you."

"It is?"

"If you're going to answer like that, what are you even hesitating for?"

She sighed, and said, "Well, not really. Still, what made you bring it up? You hadn't said anything earlier."

"It's just that, I don't really know how far away that place you're living is. But it's only going to get darker as the sun sets, and the rain is so harsh, that it doesn't feel right to have you going off on your own. Especially since we have school tomorrow..."

"So you were just worried, then?"

The tree-house had been a pretty comfortable place to stay the night, but she didn't really have any attachment to it. It was, after all, just a place that she happened to come across. Since he was so worried about things, then why not oblige?"

"Alright," she said. "I'll come on in, then. Do you have a spare bed?"

"I'll have to get one out of storage, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. Though, I suppose we've never had a guest over before."

"Well then, I'll try my best to set a good precedent for the others."

The two of them stepped into the house, as the rain continued to pour down onto the small town. Before she stepped inside, Shiori took a moment to look down at the edge of the porch, where the wood met with the grass. There, growing at the base, were a few tiny flowers – weeds, more than likely – which were piercing their way up from the old grass. It was a small patch, no more than perhaps a dozen flowers, with their colors muted out in the waning afternoon light. But in their precarious position, she thought they made a beautiful little garden.

09 – Overture

It was early on in his life that Art found himself cooking for himself – he couldn't remember a breakfast or dinner he hadn't prepared on his own since his third year at the academy. Without formal training, he had resigned himself to the simplest possible meals, aiming to meet the nutrition requirements without much attention to flavor.

This was the logical way to go about things, after all. Taking careful accounting for his calorie expenditure, and aiming to meet the daily requirements – conveniently provided in lieu of a cookbook, though it had taken him a few years to learn the full science behind it – he had been done a great amount to help advance his developing physique.

“So what is this?”

He woke up this morning to find not only that he had no need to cook himself, but that a proper breakfast had been laid out. In a bowl, there was a mixture of white beans, diced vegetables, and bits of meat in broth; it was topped with poached eggs, and served with two sides – a piece of buttered toast, and a plate of thin, flat cakes, in slightly round shapes and topped with chopped vegetables.

Who was responsible for this? He had to look no further than right next to his chair, where the culprit stood; she had an apron on, her hair done up in a ponytail, her hands on her hips, a little bit of food stuck to her face, and a very proud smile. In the seat next to her was a replica of the exact same breakfast.

“Well? Are you impressed?” she asked.

“I'm not really sure where to begin.”

“Well, you can start by saying ‘thank you’, I think. And then not leaving anything behind, because I’ll never forgive you if you’re wasteful.”

“Ah... thank you, Shiori.”

She nodded, and then sat herself down. Focusing her attention on the food, she said, “Really, I didn’t expect how nice it would be to sleep a warm bed, like that. I thought it was the least I could do, to return the favor like this. I hope I didn’t mess up your pantry too much.”

“No, it’s fine... I didn’t even know we had some of this stuff, to be quite honest. I’m not even sure what these flat-cakes are.”

“Pancakes! I don’t think it’s a classical recipe, but I was able to look back into the cooking process of a chef who used a bunch of things not too different. I thought they looked tasty.”

“Is that right? I guess they do.”

They smelled good, at least. The two began their breakfast. Having had all manner of strange dishes in the Datanet, Art couldn’t help but feel that the flavors seemed muted, compared to what he was used to. But in spite of those imperfections, there was a warmth to it, as though a certain level of human craftsmanship had been applied. Furthermore, the pancakes were by far unlike anything he had tasted, even if Shiori complained that she hadn’t been able to find a good syrup to complete the stacks.

“Do you have experience cooking, Shiori?”

“Oh, no... well, basic things, I guess. But I can’t remember anything like this. Trying out a recipe, working in a kitchen... it all feels new to me. I just wanted to try it out, I think.”

Her gaze was directed at the far wall across from her, as she spoke, “It’s funny, though. I’m sure that if I could see things, like I can, then I would have had to have gotten the idea at some point. Right?”

“Your memories are incomplete, aren’t they? Maybe you just forgot, is all there is to it?”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s more like…”

She struggled for the words, eventually coming up with, “It’s like, you know how I can still remember details about the world? It’s the same thing for experiences. I can remember a bunch of things, like how to operate a radio, or pilot a ship. I just don’t know why I know how to do those things, I guess? So if I had cooked before, to make something like this, then I would definitely be able to remember that.”

“I see. I guess that makes a little sense.”

Still, there was one other question which he needed answered. For that matter, it was a far more pressing question, one which had been burning in him from the start. Having gotten past the small details, he needed to address the elephant in the room.

“Shiori?”

“Yes?”

“How did you do this without waking me up?”

The previous day, after they had entered into Art’s house, the two had gone into the storage room to take a few things out. He had no way of knowing for sure, as he had never entered another house, but the way he understood it, each home had a standardized set of goods, including furniture, replacement parts, boxes of assorted clothing, training gear, emergency food supplies, and cooking equipment.

The standardized layout was three bedrooms, one two-room bathroom, the washroom, a kitchen with pantry, and a common room with a dining area in the back; with the addition of the storage room, and a small space in the basement for plumbing, residents in theory had a great deal of choice for customization. Indeed, thinking back to when he was younger, Art had actually shared a single room with his brother. Since this brother now occupied the third bedroom, Art could hardly

use it as a guest bedroom – but thanks to those old memories, he was able to recall that, out in storage, there remained all of the pieces they would need to convert his bed back into a bunk-bed.

When he proposed the idea, Shiori had taken on a peculiar look on her face, which reminded him a bit of photographs he had seen of cats on the hunt. But she refused to elaborate on it, simply saying, “If it’s not a problem with you, I won’t say anything, okay?”

It took a little bit of work, and a lot of digging around the storage room, but the two successfully converted Art’s room into a two-person bedroom. Throughout the whole time, Art’s father remained spaced out in the Datanet, though his brother – a boy a few years their senior, with strikingly red hair – had popped in a few times, which had led to a short exchange between the three.

“So that strange lady is going to be your teacher? I wondered what was going to happen with that. Well, looks like you’re gonna graduate on time after all, Art. And nice to meet you too, little miss. My name’s Kay, by the way. Feel free to stick around as long as you’d like.”

Shiori claimed the top bunk, which suited Art just fine. Outside of a small dinner – he assumed she had made her assessment of the pantry while they were preparing that – and tossing clothes in the wash, the the only other thing of note in the evening was Shiori taking time to look over some of Art’s notebooks, with high praises for his details and penmanship, while he continued to make additional notes in his most recent one.

Once she had finished her perusal, Shiori climbed up to the top of the bed, and made the bold declaration, “Since you’ve been out for a while, and I fell asleep earlier, then we’ll definitely be able to stay up and talk all night!”

For a while, they did make a little small talk. Eventually, though, Shiori’s voice started to slow down, and she murmured something under her breath about the softness of the mattress. The last thing she

said, with the light of the candle still burning and Art writing into his notebook, was, “This is really nice.”

Art went to bed a bit later, after finishing logging everything he had learned into the book – or at least, as much as seemed appropriate. He did not expect to sleep in; nor did he expect that he would, rather than waking up on his own, be awakened by Shiori, who had somehow gotten up early, slipped out of bed, and prepared breakfast without waking him.

Still, having now asked her about that, her only responses was, “You looked like you need a little more rest, so I figured it would be fine to just leave you like that?”

Once breakfast was finished, the two put on their uniforms, and made their way back to school. The skies were clearing up, as the rain had finished falling sometime in the morning. Only once they were out and walking did Shiori reveal, “I was actually thinking that if I got up early enough, I might be able to see a rainbow. But I didn’t see one, so that was a little disappointing.”

They left the house pretty early, but ended up getting delayed a bit after getting turned around. Shiori had mercilessly teased him about it after, but he had gone off in a wrong direction – he had remembered the path as turning after four houses, not after three, which ended up putting the rest of the travel route entirely into question.

When they came near to the school building, Art noted the slow trickle of other students coming from across town. Many moved alone, though there were a few traveling together. His attention was quickly drawn to Gareth and Chloe, who crossed along the perpendicular path and met them across from the school-house.

“Hey there,” Gareth greeted them. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to show up, since the confirmation came after you disconnected.”

“Well, I ended up meeting the new teacher in person,” Art replied. “So that made it a lot easier.”

Chloe looked over to Shiori, and said, “Are you the girl he told us about?”

“Probably!” she replied. “My name is Shiori. Who are you?”

“I’m Chloe, and this is Gareth. It is a pleasure to meet you, Shiori.”

“You as well!” Shiori replied, before asking, “So, are the two of you Art’s friends, then?”

“Friends?” Chloe asked, looking to Art with some confusion.

“Ah, it’s a bit hard to explain...” he began. “Shiori?”

Shiori explained the same thing she had before, but this time, Art noticed that she stopped after, as if unsatisfied with her explanation. But the others didn’t seem to notice, so Gareth said, “I guess it might be something like that, then? Let’s head on over to class, though.”

“Right,” Art replied, in agreement. Gareth took point, with Chloe near him, while Art hung back a bit with Shiori. Having a sense that it was something to be kept private, while the other two were talking about some event from the Datanet, he quietly asked, “Are you alright?”

“Yes, it’s just that...”

She hesitated a moment, and said, “I’m not sure I really like that definition that I gave, is all.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just... I feel like there’s more to it than that. I think that all of that stuff about doing things together and liking being around each other is part of it, but I feel like that’s just not all of it.”

“Do you mean that thing you said yesterday, about friends talking to each other?”

“Exactly. So I think... there’s a level of trust, too. And I think that might be important. No, it’s definitely, really important.”

“Oi, what are you two whisper about?” Gareth called back. “You’re not worried about what happened with Alex?”

“What do you mean?” Art asked. “Something happened to him?”

“Yeah,” Gareth replied. “He send everyone a message that his room was experiencing weird glitches. Then he sent us all this weird garble of text, and that was the last we heard.”

“Then the message disappeared, too,” Chloe added. “Or at least, the original ones did. I thought it might be an encryption puzzle, so I took a few still shots, so I could rotate them around. I printed some out so we could look at them, together.”

She passed a sheet of paper back, which Art took, and looked over with Shiori. It was almost certainly a cipher, though he had no way to tell what the key was. Shiori took a long glance, and then said, “Sorry, I don’t know how to solve this one.”

“I would be more worried if you could,” Art replied. “Though if she could do logician-level formulations, then Apollyon should be able to crack something like this, right?”

“I refuse,” Shiori quickly replied. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You’re interested in these kinds of things, too?” Chloe asked.

“Well, it’s a puzzle, right? So that’s basically a game. I’m sure it’ll be a lot of fun.”

“Do you want to have a race then? To see who can crack this one the fastest?”

“Oh, that sounds like more fun. Sure, let’s do it!”

Gareth chuckled, and looked to Art, “Well, I’m not gonna be much help with something like that. What about you? Aren’t you pretty good at this kind of thing?”

“I’m not so sure, myself.”

“Oh, don’t be modest,” Chloe insisted. “You’ve always tied with me in cryptography, you know.”

“I suppose, but...”

He didn’t know what it was, exactly, but something told Art that there was more to it than that. He had always turned his assignments in on time, and he had cracked all of the codes given. But there had never been a time when he had been the first to turn it in. Every time, as he could recall, there had been someone else whose work had been turned in first. So he had maintained a tied score, but...

The look on Chloe’s face wasn’t much different, from when Gareth had made his challenge before. Now, reflecting back, he thought he had an idea of what was going on in her mind.

“She wants a chance to beat me, not to tie. Doesn’t she?”

Had she asked for a request like that before? If she had, he almost certainly would have turned it down. There was a part of him that had the same thought, even now. But seeing the excitement that Shiori was radiating, plus the look of challenge in Chloe’s eyes, he answered her, “Sure. Let’s all do our best, then?”

“Right!” Chloe replied, pumping her fist in the air. “You’d better try your best, though, okay?”

“I will. I promise.”

The four made their way into the school-house. There had always been more desks than students – a fact which hadn’t seemed significant to Art before, but certainly caught his eye now – which had always left quite a bit of freedom in terms of seating. In practice, his classmates

tended to elect for the same seating each day, and he was no different. Such was the nature of things happening in their own order, and such was the way of the students here, that the back rows were generally free of any students.

In this fashion, he moved to his own preferred seat, along the left-hand side of the class; while further back, he wasn't quite the end. Gareth took up a seat behind him, and Chloe the seat to his side. Both of these, he recalled, were in their right order – what was not, however, was Shiori, who placed herself immediately in front of him.

“There isn't assigned seating, is there?” she asked him.

“No, not really. But everyone tends to stick in the same place.”

“Oh... well, I'm sure it'll be fine!”

He thought he saw the student who had previously occupied that seat enter from that back, but decided it would be better not to think about it. There was a bit of commotion from the front, though, as the sounds of stomping came from along the side. There, out at the front of the class, came striding Apollyon. Though she was wearing the school uniform, it wasn't quite right to say she was wearing it as a uniform – she had tailored her skirt high, was wearing her own heels, and continued to wear her earrings; though she wore the jacket of the school, it was popped open, allowing the glow of her body-marks to radiate from under the thin undershirt, which was taugth against her chest. These things, alongside her strange violet eyes and white hair, made her immediately stand out as something irrational.

With a twirl and a flourish, the living weapon introduced herself to the class, proclaiming, “Quake in terror, ye humans, for ye stand in the presence of the great Apollyon! For though I have languished a protracted period of time, I have now descended by the hand of my master to your pathetic school, where I shall make a brief sojourn. Ye who hone your minds in this place, behold and know despair; for so great does my cognitive prowess exceed that of ye, that a dozen of your

lifespans would be inadequate to match what I can accomplish. For I, Apollyon, am a transcendent being – worked by the hand of man, yet surpassing mankind in all respects. It is merely the virtue of my most excellent, magnanimous self, that ye still writhe about on this wretched planet. Know that my presence here is not a competition, but merely a chance for me to exhibit my excellence to my master.”

Then, having made this declaration, she pulled up her skirt and performed a light curtsy. Locking eyes with Art, she advanced towards him. Much as Shiori did, she thoughtlessly claimed the seat directly off to the side from Art, and said, “Tis only right that I stand at thy right side, master. For I am thy blade, after all.”

Art was at a loss for words. Gareth whispered from behind him, “Is this her, then? That other, weird girl?”

“Curb thy tongue, ape child, or I shall split it.”

“Apollyon...” Art said, “Is this really necessary?”

“Thou must elaborate, master. I know not of what thou speak.”

Shiori threw herself in the way as Art struggled to find the words, saying, “He’s talking about the part where you just seem to want to piss everyone off. It’s obnoxious. We talked about this!”

“Thou dare interject thyself, foolish girl?” Apollyon replied, as she twisted her face in disgust. “Fie, it is no matter. I am merely speaking the truth. I will not hold back my contempt for this poor lot, be they incomplete or not as humans, lest they prove to me a reason otherwise.”

Chloe, seated behind her, made a soured face, as she said, “Well, if you’re that great, why don’t you prove it by actually doing well first? It only matters what you do, not what you say.”

“Oho? There is fire in thee, human, to challenge a superior being in so brash a fashion. This pleases me.”

Apollyon seemed to genuinely smile as she said that, though it was a predatory smile, reminding Art of videos of hunting hounds. Still, she took no aggressive action, and continued by saying, “Fine then. I shall relax my challenges for ye, until such a time as I have demonstrated my supremacy in point of fact. Savor this short reprieve.”

The small seating changes from Shiori and Apollyon had caused a domino effect, disturbing the general order of the class more than any time Art could recall before. Between the shift in teachers, discussions related to the surprisingly short break, the changes in seating, and of course the declaration from Apollyon, the degree of murmuring which had picked up in the often silent classroom stood out to Art more than he was used to experiencing.

Indeed, such was the shift in the class climate, on this morning, that there were still students speaking as another new face entered. From the same general direction as Apollyon had entered, Ms. Kato stepped toward the front of the class, dressed still in the same lab-coat based attire as she had before. In a clean motion, she marked her name on the board, and turned to the class, before saying, “Good morning. My name is Ms. Kato, and I will be your teaching for the immediate future. Before we begin class, I wish to make a few announcements.”

The class turned quiet, as each of the students directed attention to the new teacher. She continued, “I have reviewed the curriculum which was laid out for the academy, and deemed it to obsolete. Henceforth the direction of this course will shift from the academic fundamentals and memorization, toward practical application of those skills, and personal research. I expect you to use your imagination, and plot out your own path to adulthood. Are there any questions?”

Though a few of the students remained unfazed by her words, Art immediately noted the glances about the room, as the class attempted to digest what she had just said. Eventually, a girl raised her hand – a short girl, with dark hair and a quiet voice, whom Art remembered was

named Joan – and asked, “Ms. Kato, what do you mean by the path to adulthood? Isn’t that what graduation is?”

Art wondered a bit about that, himself. Until just recently, the idea of learning independently seemed a foreign concept; even now, hearing it from a teacher seemed a bit absurd. Likewise, the idea of adulthood as something separate from graduation seemed like an oddity. Yet it was certainly the case that Shiori, though impulsive, seemed to have a level of maturity he didn’t feel in himself; and Ms. Kato, being an outsider, had clearly become an adult without attending the academy. Still, he stayed quiet, and waited to hear what answer would be given.

“Wrong,” Ms. Kato said, causing another wave of confusion. She did not turn her gaze away from Joan, but waited a moment before elaborating further, saying, “Graduation has nothing to do with being an adult. Even your physiological changes are of greater significance in this regard, though age in and of itself is not adequate to make one a proper adult. The path to adulthood is the path to learning your *raison d’être*. Should you continue your current course, and live as nothing but a sponge for information, you will be nothing more than a tool.”

To his side, Art could hear Apollyon mumble, “Logician’s gate, open... calculate: knife, output 1, ignore wood... manifest...” and then, with her left hand laid on the table with her fingers spread out, begin to lazily mime the motions of stabbing a knife back and forth between her fingers.

“*For as old as she claims to be,*” he thought, “*She doesn’t really come off as much of an adult, does she?*”

Joan, perhaps feeling the pressure of Ms. Kato’s gaze, did not push for any more. Instead, the next to speak was Oliver, a blonde-haired boy who was on the shorter side, with long hair that covered over one of his eyes. He raised his hand, and asked, “Ms. Kato. When you say we will engage in practical applications, what will that look like?”

“Good question. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Ms. Kato raised her hand in the shape of a gun, and then pointed it at Apollyon, before saying, “Bang.”

Apollyon, caught up in her knife, didn't notice. Her head fell back, as though struck with something, and she let out a sound not dissimilar from a squawking bird, before her head dropped to the desk and she began mumbling something about ‘imminent vengeance’.

“This,” their teacher explained. “Is the power of the ether logician. It is the ability to utilize 12th dimensional calculations to produce an effect in the material world. You have acquired a foundation in the abstract lore of mathematics, and in that respect stand above the men of the current era, who have regressed to the point that those able to practice the art of trigonometry are deemed as great sages. The arts of the ether logician are built upon these principles. Your training will consist of mental exercises directed at expanding your imagination, which has thus far been hindered, so that you might tear away the veil separating you from the world apparatus. Once that is in hand, you will find it a peerless tool in illuminating your path. Furthermore, through this training process, you will come to attain a power greater than that of any army in the modern world, to better pursue the attainment of your own *raison d'être*.”

The class was silent. Though the occasion had turned to glance at Apollyon, most were directing their focus firmly upon Ms. Kato. Yet Art, sitting next her, could hear the weapon girl begin to mumble the words, “Hearken now, children of a world soon ending; hear ye now, the overture of your grand reckoning.”

Interlude

School had closed, at the eve of the third day. All of the students, save for one who had opted to remain in the schoolhouse, had returned home for the evening. Standing at the front door, dressed in a white lab-coat, was the sole teacher of that school, Ms. Kato.

As she made her way out, she was stopped by the voice of that one lingering girl, presently dressed as a delinquent, who remained seated at her desk. That girl called out, “And where art thou going, oh teacher? Dost thou fear that this will be the eve upon which I will work dark vengeance upon thee?”

“I see no harm in telling you,” she replied. “I am making my way to the observatory.”

“Oh? Thou hast business with the ones in charge, then?”

“On the contrary, they have done nothing to contact me since my arrival. I find this quite suspicious.”

“Ho... then thou art nothing more than a vagrant who has assumed the role of a teacher, then? Ah, but I suppose that not once have thee made claims otherwise. Is it fine to rely on the assumptions of others, so long as the lie is not thine own?”

“Perhaps...”

She reached for the door, then stopped, and turned back to her delinquent student, asking, “Have you noticed it?”

Apollyon nodded, and replied, “Aye. Tis only a matter of time until my master begins to realize the truth. Should he wish to pursue it, I shall aid him in his revelations. Until then, I shall remain silent.”

“Is that so? Then you seem to be more aware than I have. I do not suppose you would share what you have learned?”

Apollyon merely laughed at that. Ms. Kato stared at her, her face entirely devoid of any possible emotion. She said nothing in return, and instead turned back to the door, stepping out into the dwindling light of evening. Her hands in her pockets, she began to walk in the direction of the observatory on the outskirts of town.

It had not rained since the storm a few nights back, though a cold wind had moved in to take its place, blowing her hair as she went past. The dying shrubs and grasses of the area had been rejuvenated, bringing forth patches of green across the vast stretches of empty scenery. The sky overhead gently faded from a swirl of red and violet into a gradually deepening darkness, and then into a glorious firmament, as she passed her way along the outskirts of town. She stayed for but a short time at the old observatory, which had long since become overrun in a tangle of vines and moss, spooking a few small gremlins and other critters which were dwelling within. Only by the rising of the moon did she come to the observatory proper.

Surrounding the observatory, which was installed into a rocky hill, was a great chain-link fence. The singular gate was protected by a single padlock of excellent quality. It took only a lightly muttered incantation for her to call forth an invisible tool for picking the lock, which fell to the ground with a heavy thud, allowing a swift and easy entrance.

Ms. Kato glanced around, as she walked along the unpaved road which lead from the gate entrance up to the observatory. There were a number of vehicles parked along the edge, some in excellent condition, while others had clearly been left as victims to the weather for a very long time. The worst among these were ancient, rusted things; others were simply worn down. Out of curiosity, she came by one of the newer ones, and popped the door open. The air within was stale, and the dust heavy; furthermore, when went to start the vehicle, she found that it refused to do so.

“The chassis is still in good condition, but the battery is dead. It must have been left unattended out here for months. For the older vehicles, it would be a matter of years.”

Having made this confirmation, she continued making her way up to the observatory. The greater part of the structure had been built into the rock, though there were still a few parts that showed: the large, rectangular structure where the door was; the great dome, with a telescope of immense size pointed to the sky; and an array of great dishes, pointed up after it.

She tried the door, and found that it wasn't locked. She switched over to a different weapon, preparing a six-chambered revolver as her readied logician weapon, and then pulled the door open. Upon seeing what was inside, she said simply, “Is that how it is?”

10 – School

Thus began Shiori's life as a student. It had already been a week – a long week which involved a great deal of academic work, mental exercises for logician training, and physical training at different parts. It was all very new, and her general appraisal of the week, after everything was said and done, was a simple one:

“This really isn't that fun, is it?”

Of course, that wouldn't stop her from putting on her best chipper attitude. There were, after all, plenty of fun things to be had. Even if the mental drills were awful, the actual process of getting involved with the rest of the class seemed like a pleasant novelty.

“The lectures are a little useless, though. I know that Art and the others don't know much about the outside world, but it really feels like it's all stuff I've heard before. Still, the training sessions are alright.”

Back in the trivern nest, she had found herself desperately wishing for a weapon of some kind. In hindsight, she wished she had pushed for Art to take her to the school-house before they headed out of town – the place had a veritable armory, stocked with both training gear and proper weapons, as well as the protective gear necessary for working with both sets.

“You're a new student, right? You are quite the *sabreuse*.”

“Oliver, was it? Thanks, I like to give it everything I've got.”

The long-sword was solidly the territory of Art and Gareth, and while she could occasionally match the latter with trickery, it seemed that Art was quick to become wise to her ploys. The saber proved more to her taste, and when it came to fencing with it, she found her muscle

memory seemed well-suited to the motions. In that regard, her main sparring partner came to be Oliver, who demonstrated talent just shy of hers with that weapon.

Their duel today was a different matter entirely, though. Under the whim of Ms. Kato, the academy had also introduced the use of a shield and arming sword, which had put students on a relatively even ground. In this new area, the two had risen quickly, though Oliver had proved to have a slight edge in that style. Sword and shield moved back and forth, as the two moved between bouts, counting off the points at each strike of the blunted training swords.

“Take this!”

Shiori hurled her shield off of her arm, aiming for her opponent’s head. Then, she slipped in, and struck him in the stomach. Immediately a loud buzzer was sounded, as Ms. Kato stepped forward to interrupt the ongoing practice.

“Must I remind you again, Shiori, that it is not appropriate to use your shield as a throwing weapon? The match goes to Oliver. The two of you should take a quick rest.”

“It seems fair to me...”

He patted her on the back, and said, “It was a good idea. But it’s better if you try to follow the rules, you know?”

“It’s not like there’s really any rules in fighting. It’s all just to keep safe during practice, and it’s not like the shield was going to hurt you, or anything. It’s all fair to me.”

“Yes, but once you’ve done it enough that the whole class associates you with it, then it doesn’t have the same element of surprise. Well, but I suppose it did work on me this time, didn’t it?”

“It did. You see, I knew that you would think to yourself, there was no way I would do it twice in a row. If she hadn’t stopped us, my plan was to do a fake-out the next time.”

“It’s really just tricks all the way down with you, isn’t it?”

“I like tricks. They give you more options, and a lot more fun. It’s like instead of just playing the game, you’re playing two games at once, which is twice as engaging.”

The two of them walked over to grab some water, then sat over at the waiting bench. The main practice area was behind the school-house, and most of the students were still engaged in some kind of training, at the time. Of those who were off to the side, most were resting between practice sessions (with the sole exception of one unfortunate student, who had severely injured himself after an accident involving broken glass which had inexplicably been out in the sand).

Those not currently engaged in training, for the most part, were directing their attention to the start show of the moment – a two-on-one duel, with Art facing off against both Gareth and another student, a dark-haired boy who she thought was named Owen.

Of course, though it seemed two-on-one, the duel was in truth a tag-team match. But while the Gareth and Owen were acting as each other’s partners, Art was instead paired with the glowing blue glass-like sword in his hands.

“Thou would ask me, the ultimate weapon, to cheapen myself with such inferior productions? There is no argument to be had – I refuse to debase myself with such inelegance. I shall be a blade for my master, and naught else.”

Upon saying those words, Apollyon had turned herself back into a sword, and put Art in the awkward position of being forced to use her for tag-team duels. This had forced him to dedicate an unusually high amount of time to the long-sword, in order to deal with the stubborn weapon he had found himself stuck with.

To the surprise of the other students, perhaps not the least of all himself, he was able to keep up with the intensive training. The speed

and precision of his movements, as heightened by his synchronization with Apollyon, were inhuman – enough to keep pace, even against two opponents at once – and were only improving with each bout. From Shiori's observation, most of his losses involved neither a problem of form, or a technical slip-up; rather, he would come to a sudden stop in the middle of a maneuver, giving the others a chance to land a solid hit.

“He’s definitely getting better, but he’s really started eating for two lately, hasn’t he? Well, not that I mind that much. I’ve been really surprised by the variety of ingredients the observatory has on hand – I don’t think I’ll get a better chance to try out making new dishes.”

In the end, she had ended up staying with Art, and the two were currently sharing the bunk together. There was only one desk, still, but that wasn't too much of a concern – it wasn't as if she really needed to write anything down, after all, since she could just pull up a lesson on repeat when needed. She had, however, made a habit of reading through some of his older books before bedtime, and finding amusement at the meticulousness of his notes.

Like most of the others, her attention remained on his bouts. But when she took a glance over to Oliver, she saw that he was looking at a very different part of the field. Rather than Art and his match, he was looking over to Joan and her sparring partner, who were currently practicing with spears.

“Were you thinking of practicing spear-fighting?” she asked.

“Huh? Ah, no...”

He looked away, and she could catch a bit of a blush on his face. It took a moment for the pieces to click in her head, but eventually, she arrived at her conclusion and asked, “Or is it more about the one doing the training?”

His eyes grew a bit wide at her words, but then, as if having been caught, he said, “Hey, Shiori. Is that kind of thing normal?”

“What kind of thing? Give me the details, here.”

“*Just because I can see the past, that doesn't mean I can read minds,*” she thought to herself. Though, she hadn't really brought that up much with anyone other than Art. There was a part of her that wanted to declare it to the class on the first, but then Apollyon had gone off and seized the spotlight with her signature eccentricity. Then Ms. Kato had come in and proposed logician training for the full class, which essentially one-upped anything she could manage.

But, there was one other thing.

“I shouldn't say this to Ms. Kato.”

It was hard for her to describe why, exactly. It was another one of those gut feelings she had, just like her impression that Ms. Kato wasn't really a teacher.

There was a shadow of inauthentic sentiments hanging over this school-house, and that bothered her a bit. So, in this case, it was quite nice to hear Oliver, after a bit of thought, begin to speak in his most authentic manner possible.

“It's a feeling like... looking at a person, and just kind of wanting to keep looking at her. And it feels like you could keep looking forever, if that was all there was to it. But also wanting to talk to her, I guess, and just be next to her. Thinking about her when she's not around, feeling a tightness in your chest. Feeling flushes of warmth, sometimes. That sort of thing, I suppose.”

“Oh, isn't that just love?”

From the blank expression he returned, it looked like she had a bit of an obstacle on her hand. “*What is with this place, seriously?*”

“I can't say I'm familiar with the word,” he eventually said. “Is it a kind of illness?”

“No, it's not... uh. Oliver, do you know where babies come from?”

“Sex, right?”

“What kind of warped school teaches kids the word ‘sex’ before the word ‘love!?’ Ugh...”

She tapped her finger on the side of the desk, trying to come up with a decent way to describe it. She settled on, “Love is something that humans feel for each other. It’s like an attraction, but a lot stronger. So strong that it hurts, sometimes. It can drive people to make beautiful things or perform heroic acts, but it can also cause a lot of trouble. It’s especially troublesome when one person loves another, but the other doesn’t feel the same way. There have been a lot of conflicts in history because of those one-sided loves. Oh, but I guess there were really a lot of forms of love? So I guess that’d be what they call passionate love?”

“Fascinating. So what does it mean?”

“Well, I guess it would just be like, wanting to be with the other person? And I suppose sex is part of that, but I think that’s supposed to come later... and when you’re older.”

“Isn’t sex supposed to be dictated by partner assignments?”

“Seriously, what is wrong with your education?”

It wasn’t as if he were completely wrong. She could think of many examples of ancient societies which had implemented those practices, often through the use of social and genetic engineering. This town, for all of its irregularities, didn’t give off that impression.

“It’s not suppression, or even replacement. Things were removed, but in a haphazard fashion, and without much thought about filling in the rest. It’s as if someone had a grand idea in designing this place, and this school, but then never put it under strict scrutiny.”

The observatory was a huge blind-spot for her. Neither her vague memories, nor her ability to scan the past, would reveal anything more than its existence. When she had asked Art about it, he had given her a

very blank expression, and told her, “The observatory is the observatory. It’s where the adults go to work.”

“It’s hard to say what the person in charge is thinking, when you have no way of knowing who that person is. Or if there even is a person in charge.”

“Look,” she said. “You can just try talking with her more, right? I’m sure these things work themselves out on their own.”

“Really?” he said in surprise, before letting out a relieved sigh. “I’m glad to hear that. I was worried there might be something wrong with me, and I didn’t really know who to talk to.”

She shook head, then said, “Nope, it’s completely normal. You just need to get out there, and see if maybe she feels the same way. I’m pretty sure it’s mostly biology, so I’m sure it’ll all come together after you just try it for a while.”

“Thanks, Shiori. That helps quite a bit. I’m glad you seem to know so much about these things.”

Oliver stood up, stretched out, and said, “I’m going to take a quick lap around, to think about things a bit. You wanna come?”

“Nah, I’m good resting here for a bit.”

“Alright. I’ll be off, then.”

He set his water down, and took off running. Shiori took a sip of her own, then turned her attention back to Art. Gareth and Owen had gone off to rest, and it seemed that Ms. Kato herself had taken to the stage, devolving the fair and honest dueling into a matter of Art doing his best to desperately avoid a barrage of hundreds of invisible blades. Great gashes were cut into the ground, sending up clumps of earth and clouds of dust, to the amazement of the onlooking students.

She laid back against the bench, elbow on the armrest, chin on her palm, and eyes facing across the field. Her thoughts began to wander as she rested there, reflecting on the prior conversation. In particular, as

she unconsciously began biting at her thumb, there was one thing from that conversation which she had truly wanted to clarify, but had found herself unable to do so properly.

“Know about these things, do I? Don’t be silly, Oliver. I don’t really know much more about love than you do.”

That wasn’t to say that she knew nothing, of course. Everything she said sounded good in her head. But it was all academic, really. She had no idea what love actually felt like, let alone the different types of love that supposedly existed.

“I feel like falling in love would be pretty fun, though.”

What would that look like, anyways? Scanning over the class, there wasn’t really anyone who she thought elicited that kind of feeling. She did talk a lot with Art, but something about that just felt off. She had the worrisome thought, *“I don’t have a thing for older men, do I? Oh no. What kind of father did I have? Did I have one?”*

She was pretty sure that Ms. Kato was older than her early twenties appearance let on, but her lack of interest in that direction at least let her rule out older women. Given the remaining options, though, she had a feeling it might be better to just lay any thoughts of romance off to the side, at least for a while.

Speaking of things on the side, there was a whistling past her ears, as Art was sent flying like a rag-doll across the bench, landing with a heavy thud in the grass behind her. The center of the field had devolved into complete madness, with Apollyon having abandoned any pretense of functioning as a sword, and entered into an open logician battle with Ms. Kato. Without the ability to see the manifestations, outside of the occasional faint string of numbers or the blue rose petals which fell off from Apollyon’s attacks, it had the the same look as a pair of children miming special moves at each other. The absolute devastation which the field was sustaining spoke to a very different story.

Shiori heard a groan from behind her, as Art stood himself up and moved over to the bench to take a seat. She glanced over to him, and lazily asked, “Didn’t break anything important, did you?”

“One of them put a cushion on me, so I’m mostly fine,” he replied, in between panting breaths. “It feels as if every muscle in my body is sore, but I think most of that is from wielding Apollyon for so long.”

“Is she being too hard on you?”

“I can’t feel my right arm. That doesn’t seem normal.”

“You have a dumb grin on your face, though. Do you secretly enjoy the punishment?”

“Not particularly. I’m just glad to be practicing.”

“You make it sound so boring. But hey, if you can get that arm back in order before they finish, maybe we can go for a few bouts?”

He raised his hand and shook his head, saying, “I don’t think I can handle anything more, at least for today.”

As the two of them talked, they were approached Chloe, who was carrying a rifle over her shoulders. She glanced over to the ongoing duel in the midst of the field, and asked them, “Did training really get that intense over here today?”

Shiori nodded, and replied, “Yep. It looks like Apollyon must have gotten pretty worked up.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Chloe said, with a grimace on her face. “It’s not as if we didn’t have a few intensive sessions before, but things have gotten pretty crazy with Ms. Kato here. It’s hard for me to imagine the logician training actually doing something?”

“What, you don’t see the point in hanging upside down from a tree branch for hours?”

“No, not really. Mostly I just feel the blood rushing to my head. The balance training isn’t awful, though.”

The training to become an ether logician turned out to be quite the eclectic process. In physical terms, there was a lot which pertained to the regulation of physical processes, and maintaining balance; on the more mental side, there was a level of attention given to such things as meditation, widening the mind’s eye, and otherwise training the senses and reflexes to a higher level. The strangest part, though, were the more esoteric aspects involved.

Ms. Kato had explained it to the class by stating, “The human brain is capable of performing the necessary calculations for a logician, but not without adequate direction. The logicians utilized a series of rituals, designed in large part to borrow from ancient occult imagery, in order to design a series of mnemonic processes which would establish a direct upper-dimensional interface. In this manner, it is possible to convert an imagined image into an input, which can be plugged into an established pattern of multi-dimensional equations, thereby manifesting an inverse simulacrum of the desire phenomenon or object into physical space. It is therefore imperative that you are trained thoroughly in each of these domains, and that your mental equation is developed adequately to support as broad as possible a set of valid inputs, and in that manner, a the broadest possible set of functions.”

“Or as an actual human would say it, do a bunch of fake magic stuff, come up with a mental math function in twelve dimensions, and plug in an imagined object as the variable. What could be easier?”

That thought was, naturally, a rather sarcastic one, as Shiori heavily doubted that anyone among the class would actually be able to pull it off. The ether logicians had utilized brain implants, chemical modification, surgery, and even artificial life-forms acting in a supplementary fashion, all to make what they were doing possible.

Practically speaking, if Art were to work in tangent with Apollyon, then he might be able to pull it off. But without the rest of the process, it would be more as if he were borrowing Apollyon's functions, with his own mental images serving as the inputs. It would be unfair to call it a poor replica, as in practice, combining her demon-like mindset with his human power of imagination would make for a potent combo. But it was still a far cry from the claims which Ms. Kato had made, which Shiori could only consider quite outlandish.

Still, she couldn't say that it was an unpleasant experience. Outside of the ritual hanging, of course. That seemed entirely unnecessary.

Chloe's voice brought her back to reality, as the auburn-haired girl asked, "So, have you two had any luck with the deciphering?"

"I tried on the first night, but I haven't touched it much since," Art replied, after a slight delay. "I didn't have any luck with it, though. It's a pretty complex encryption, and it's more complex the more that I start to look at it."

Shiori replied, "I've started on it, but it's a tricky problem. I think that it's actually a shell-game puzzle."

"What do you mean by that?" Chloe asked.

"So a shell-game is where you have a bunch of cups, or shells, or whatever else, and you put something under them. Then you quickly move the cups around, line them up, and another person guess which one it is."

"Oh! You mean how there seems to be multiple solutions?"

"Right. But the thing about a shell game is, it's normally a con. The truth is that the guy moving the cups around, already palmed it into his hand. So no matter which cup you pick, you're guaranteed to wind up losing the game. Well, there's a little more to it, and sometimes you want to make a few tactical losses, but that's all advanced stuff."

Art blandly commented, “You really like these kinds of tricks, don’t you Shiori?”

“Hey, you’re the second person who said that today! Have you and Oliver been talking about me behind my back?”

Chloe giggled, and said, “Shiori, I don’t think Art has it in him to do something like that. But I’m sure that everyone who’s seen you in the training is probably thinking the same thing. It’s going to take a while for anyone to trust you in a diplomatic relations simulation.”

The simulation in question was, of course, a contemporary variant on much older games. Each player was assigned a role, typically some key figure or diplomat for a faux nation-state, and was scored in points based on certain goals. Success in the game tended to involve a series of backroom deals, and making a point of concealing information.

Naturally, Shiori immediately determined that wasn’t enough fun. The moment the game began, she announced herself as the courier, and said she would relay written messages, to help cover who was talking to who. The rest of the class accepted her claims uncritically, at which point, she went to each of the major leaders, and secretly conveyed that her true role was as a spy, gathering information. Over the course of the afternoon, with a little doctoring of the messages, she managed to cause a completely breakdown of communications; war was on the horizon, and arms deals were already being signed off.

Her true role had been nothing more than as a representative for a corporate arms dealer, though this information wasn’t revealed until the game had ended, and her points were tallied. Technically speaking, she had failed her primary objective – to ensure that the corporation would still have an economic role after the peace negotiations – but had more than made up for it by tallying up secondary points for sales volumes, and secured a solid win, at the tragic expense of world peace.

When faced with glares from the rest of the class, she had merely put her arms up and shrugged saying, “I just wanted to be historically accurate, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s only fair that they don’t trust me. But it’s really a problem if they’re going into a game like that, and trusting anybody to be honest about their intentions. Especially the minor characters, who have the hardest time.”

She acknowledged Chloe’s point by saying, “Well, that’s just how the game is played, is all. Oh, but maybe I shouldn’t slip so much about what I’ve seen? I don’t really mind if I lose the competition, but I don’t want you to think it wasn’t fair.”

“Well, I can’t say that I don’t feel a little cheated,” Chloe replied. “On the other hand, I think I might have figured out how to solve the encryption of this puzzle.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, pulling out her personal copy. “Here, let’s see if we try doing this...”

The way the cipher was devised, Chloe had determined there were coherent messages which could be made out using three different key words, each of which, it so happened, all used unique letters. However, if you were to apply the theory that the whole set-up was a fake, then it only followed that you had to look at the rest.

As the one with the cleanest handwriting, Art was forced to take over the task of accurately transcribing the entire message as shown, but with the letters from those three key words removed. The result, as they looked at it, wasn’t a message at all – instead, it looked more as if it were a sort of blueprint.

“Not a blueprint,” Art said, after Shiori mentioned it. “Or at least, not the blueprint of a single building. This is plan for a small town. This town, as a matter of fact.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Chloe noted. “Why did Alex go out of his way to put this out? And where is he, anyways?”

Art had a grim expression, as he said, “I don’t know where is. But I do have an idea of what that might be.”

“Oh?” Shiori asked. “What is it?”

He pointed down at the map, and said, “That’s the house I thought I passed by in the morning. It’s here on the map – but sometime after the first night you came to my house, *this one disappeared.*”

II – Vacant

In the afternoon hours of that same day, Art stood with the rough plan in hand, looking over the vacant lot. With him were Shiori, Chloe, and Gareth; as well as, this time around, Apollyon.

“I replayed the walk back from the rainy night,” Shiori said. “And there was definitely a house here.”

His memory hadn’t failed him, then. But it was impossible to argue with the fact that, in this moment, there was nothing but a completely blank lot. Still, that was in and of itself a sign that something was quite amiss – the ground was so flat, so sterile, and so bereft of features, that a close inspecting made it come across as irregular.

Gareth looked over the field, and said, “So, there was a house here? Then there’s no way it should be this clean. If nothing else, we should see the marks from the foundation.”

“It wouldn’t be impossible to tear down a house over the course of one night,” Art said. “Difficult to be sure, but not impossible. But there would have to be a purpose behind it. Just as there was purpose behind Alex pointing this out.”

Apollyon stepped forward, and scanned over the lot. She then said, after having made her appraisal, “Naught a speck of residue remains from a residential property, ‘tis true. Ye have blundered quite surely upon a great enigma.”

“And that’s where you come in,” Shiori said.

“Aye, fool girl. Though do not be surprised when thy scheme proves to be a fruitless one. Thou practice with powers which lie well outside thy own competence.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be much fun otherwise, would it?”

“Fun has naught to do with it. Let us be finished with this.”

Apollyon returned to her original form, as the beautiful, glass-like logician’s blade, which Art took up in his hand. Chloe looked over with concern, asking, “Will this really work? It’s not like any of us have ever actually been inside the house, right?”

“It shouldn’t matter,” Shiori answered, “It’s not as if anyone has the ability to grasp the exact molecular properties of what it is they’re trying to imagine, using logician powers. He just needs to imagine the house that was here, and then it’ll be here. So long as Apollyon’s equations are correct, the world will take care of the rest.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Gareth said, with a frown. “How do you know so much about this, anyways?”

“Well, it’s only natural. After all, with the power of my special eyes, I can cast my sight back into the past and resolve anything. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Let’s move on. Art, you know what to do, right?”

“I think so,” he confirmed, “But I haven’t really tried this yet, so I don’t know if it will work properly.”

“It’s alright, you don’t need to do it perfectly. Just construct a solid mental image, and allow Apollyon to do the rest for you. If it doesn’t work, she’ll just say I was making a distraction, so don’t worry about getting blamed.”

In his mind, Art could here Apollyon’s voice saying, *“That girl has a lot of nerve, but she is not incorrect. I full intend to pin all faults on her.”*

“Be nice,” Art replied, before turning his focus to the barren lot. He then closed his eyes, and began to picture the house which he had seen there. It was almost identical to his, which made things easy, but there were a few differences. The background scenery, of course, was quite a

bit off; the lot itself was different in some ways, the chips in the paint weren't quite the same, and the way the vegetation was growing was all a completely different beast. Each of these details was simple enough to bring up, but constructing a solid mental image, with all of them spun together into a single scene, required his full concentration. Even then, he couldn't be certain that it was entirely correct. But unless he put those doubts out of his mind, he was certain it would be impossible; thus, he did exactly that, allowing himself to direct his full attention to that image. And then, once he had a firm image to act as his input, he began the incantation, modeled after Apollyon's:

“Logician's Gate – Open!”

The sword in his hand began to glow, filling the area with an aura of blue light, which gently pressed its way through his closed eyelids. The initiation had been set, and Apollyon was prepared to process the image in his mind.

“Calculate: House 37, output 1, timeline 144 hours prior.”

There was only one valid output, and while the bonus parameter was not something he could put down definitively, it seemed as if it should be close enough. In this case, it was better to have the time as a little too far back, than too early. In this manner, Apollyon had what she needed to perform the calculations.

“Manifest!”

The barren lot was at once blanketed in shimmering blue roses, creating a beautiful garden which at once gave way to the rising form of the home which had once stood in that lot. Gareth and Chloe gazed on with amazement, while Shiori let out a soft whistle. She took a step to the sapphire garden, and with each step, the fading flowers passed away into the wind behind her.

Art strode forward at once, standing side by side, while the others followed a little behind. The house before him was certainly similar to

his own, but the subtle differences were present, as he recalled. What was more, there were slight differences which hadn't even been actively noted – the front windows, he noted, were masked with curtains, blocking off any hope of simply peering inside.

Shiori tried the door, but found it to be locked. She said, "It looks like the owner put a lot more thought into security than you usually do, Art. I wonder why that was?"

"I'm not sure. There's no crime in this town, and the lock wouldn't do much to deter a raider attack."

"Which, if you'll step aside," Gareth said, as he stepped up to the door, "I'll make a good demonstration for."

Art and Shiori stepped off aside, giving Gareth a clear look at the door. He took measure of the distance, tapped on the door a bit, and then shot his leg forward with a devastatingly powerful kick, easily busting the lock and making a way in.

"Couldn't we have just... knocked?" Chloe asked, with concern. "This is someone's house, isn't it?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," Shiori answered. "There won't be any people in the house. Logician techniques can't be used to replicate a living thing. Even having a visible structure, like this, is only possible as a result of us standing on the exact location."

Chloe nodded, then said, "I had wondered about that, when you brought up the idea. It's all just too new for me."

Though she said that, it was difficult for him to say that this house was exactly as it seemed. From his perspective, with Apollyon acting to support him, he could see the occasional flicker in reality, as if the walls would dissolve at any moment back into imaginary numbers. Knowing that there would only be a finite time to look around, he stepped up to the threshold, and said, "Let's get inside and check this place out. I want to know what it was that Alex wanted us to know."

The inside of the home was little different than that of Art's own, though with the curtains blocking out most of the natural light, it was much darker. The living room was almost bereft of furniture, with a single, cushioned chair, facing against a wall. There, two bookshelves flanked a table, upon which sat a number of electronic devices; behind these, the wall was painted entirely white, and a number of wires ran up the wall, across the ceiling, and then back, to what Art assumed to be one of the projectors from the school-house.

As he stepped into the room, Gareth and Chloe followed, looking about the place on their own. Shiori, though, seemed to hesitate – her gaze turned up, to the threshold of the door, and her feet stopped just short of entry.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“I'm fine, but...”

She turned her gaze aside, off into the distance in the direction of the school-house, before saying, “It's been a really enjoyable week. It's not exactly what I imagined, but it's been a lot of fun. And there's this feeling I have, that if I step through this door, that we might not be able to go back to that.”

Art smiled, then said, with words coming from the depths of his heart, “Shiori – I meant what I said before. In those couple of days right before classes started, I had a lot of fun. That was thanks to you, and the last week has been the same.”

He extended out his hand, and said, “So no matter what we learn in here, I'm sure we'll figure it out together, as friends.”

Her eyes widened a bit, then looked a way for a bit, before letting out a small giggle. Then, she took his hand, and said, “You're right. Let's do this together, no matter what happens next.”

With that, she stepped into the room with him, and began to look around. Turning her attention in the direction of the display, she began

her analysis, saying, “It appears to mostly be audio equipment. Though it looks as if someone heavily modified it, and ran some wires in order to connect a projector. Which means that whoever was doing this must have put a lot of work into designing a home theater.”

“A home theater?” Art asked.

“Ah, right. It would be a big set-up to watch recorded video. In the past, humans have tried lots of different methods for data storage, in both analog and digital formats. This was definitely digital, though. But I don’t see any inputs...”

Shiori went over to inspect the equipment, something which fell entirely outside of Art’s area of expertise. He said to her, “I’m going to look inside a little further.”

She nodded back, and said, “Alright, I’ll see if I can figure out what this was all about. I’ll call if I can figure anything out.”

He made his way down the hall, temporarily sheathing Apollyon in his back-scabbard and directing his thoughts to her, “*I’ll call for you if something comes up, alright?*”. Gareth and Chloe seemed to have gone on ahead to check the smaller bedrooms, which left him with the task of clearing out the largest.

Opening the door, he looked inside to see not the bedroom he expected at all, but instead, a room which was lined with books. Whether placed on proper bookshelves, or on shelves which appeared to have been hand-crafted out of available wood, there were hundreds of them.

Besides the books on the shelves, there was a table and chair in the center of the room; on it were pens, inkwells, strips of paper, a knife, and a small jar with a bit of adhesive, all scattered around a stack of books. Those on the desk were plain, just as his own were, but that was not the case for the ones on the walls. Each of these was labeled along

the spine, with a wide variety of titles. Few had anything to do with his classwork, and many had unfamiliar words.

Taking a moment to look over the shelves, he started to look over the titles. There were such names as *Bear-King of the Northern Woods*, *Dance on the Borderline*, *The Empty Crib*, *Remember Me in the Summertime*, *Song of the Forest*, *A Tale of Five Monsters*, and *Witch of the Moon*. Each of them called forth images of far away places he had never seen, and whispered promises of discovering something fantastic. As he looked over them, he began to realize this was not a collection of things which surely were; it was instead a great library, accounting for various things which had never been.

He reached for the book *Song of the Forest*, and found that it was true to its name – the book as an extensive song, which stretch on for thousands of lines; on each, the music itself was presented on the left-hand page, with the lines themselves on the right. The rest of the page space was occupied with beautiful ink illustrations of great woodlands; beasts, men, and gods peaked out from the forests, moving over the course of pages between peace and conflict. As he read along the lines, he felt himself drawn in, until at last he came across the illustration of a line of children filtering into an old house; upon seeing this, he was pulled back to reality and his current mission, closing the book and placing it back along the shelf.

Art continued his search, scanning the spines of the books for any particular notes. He continued to see further titles, such as *The Flowers in April*, *A Forgotten Story*, *Last Stand*, *Pastel Wind*, and *Queen of the Red Night*. He recognized nothing about the stories he saw, until he made his way to one shelf, where he saw the title *Theseus and the Minotaur*. His mind at once turned to the story he had heard Shiori mention, and he at once began to look through the books on those shelves with a little more care.

As he did so, he found that, alongside the tale of Theseus, there were a number of books related related to the stories from the stars

which Shiori had related. Picking up a few and reading a few quick notes which had been taken on the inner covers, he was able to see that these were marked as dating back to the elder race of man – back to the great Empire of Rome, which had inspired so many others. Recalling his feeling that the line between truth and imagination had seemed to blur in Shiori's older tales, he had the thought, *“How much of the stuff written on these shelves is fiction? How much of it is drawn, at least in part, from actual events?”*

Then, he found it. It was a book, differing little from the others in terms of appearance; yet the moment he saw the title, he was drawn to it, with a smile on his face. He began to scan through the pages, but as he did, that smile began to drop. Then, he came across a page, which made his freeze.

“This is...”

Just across the all, in one of the smaller bedrooms, Chloe found herself looking through an unmarked but written-in book, on a desk not unlike that in any of their rooms. Gareth stepped into the room, and said, “I looked about, but as far as I can tell, the other room is just a pretty basic bedroom. What about you?”

“It’s some sort of log,” she replied. “The entries are all dated, with a short note. There isn’t a name anywhere, but I can definitely recognize the hand-writing and the descriptions – there’s no doubt, this log was written by Alex.”

“You mean, this was *his* house?” Gareth asked.

“That’s the only thing it can be, right? I mean, why else would it be here if he wasn’t living here? But the contents are strange...”

“Strange how?”

“That’s what I’m not sure about. Other than a few mentions from things related to school or the Datanet, the only thing that Alex took note of was writing down... something? The problem is that the dates

only pick up about a year back, which means that I have no idea what this project actually is, or why he started.”

“What about why he went missing? Have you tried to take a look at the newest entries?”

“Right, I was getting to that...”

She turned the pages forward, to a little before where she guessed the entries would end based on the entry rate, and came up to the last few entries. She began to read aloud, “Log Entry #913. I have succeeded in severing my connection to the Datanet. Soon I will escape from this false reality, and find my freedom in the world outside. I will attempt as best I can to tell the others, in the hopes that they can follow along the same path, and escape their prison...”

Her voice trailed off, as Gareth said, “So, I’m going to need you to go ahead and repeat that again, Chloe. Really slowly.”

Rather than repeat what she had read, Chloe instead turned silent, with her finger tapping on the table. She turned the page back a bit, and started to look through the logs. Gareth matched silence with his own, walking behind her and reading over her shoulder on his own. Eventually, she looked up, and facing the wall, asked the boy behind her, “There’s no way, right? What he’s saying here?”

“... but why would he lie?”

Shiori stepped into the room shortly after, holding in her hand what seemed to be a Datanet headset; but it had been stripped down of its pieces, until all they remained was a faint headband, little different in terms of looks from the one in the Datanet. As she stepped in, her mouth was already moving, saying, “I managed to find this thing in the center of the audio set-up, with all of the wires running to it. I think he was streaming data from out of this...”

She stopped, noticing the concern on their faces, and asked, “Hey, what’s wrong? What did you find out?”

“It’s all a simulation,” Chloe replied. “That’s what this log says. The schoolhouse, the town, observatories, the ruined factories, the old lake, the woods, even all of our bodies. According to what Alex wrote in this log, he says it’s not the Datanet which is fake – *it’s this world, that we’re in right now, which is the fake one.*”

No sooner had she heard those words, than Shiori heard footsteps coming from behind her. She turned behind her to see Art stepping out from the room across the hall, with a book clutched in his hand. His face, rather than grim, seemed more dumbfounded, and she turned her gaze down to look at the cover.

It was a simple cover, depicting little more than a sword, pierced deeply through a stone. Under this short illustration was a title, of an ancient tale which had been passed down since the days of the elder race of man. That tale was *King Arthur and the Matter of Britain*.

12 – Illusion

It was an ancient tale, dating back well into the 3rd Eon. So famous was this story that, throughout history, it had come to be known all around the world. Through the passing of eons it had been retold and altered, over and over, to the point that even the most faithful reproductions of the oldest stories could only be called, at best, estimates of what the originals might have been. Yet in this story, the tale was as such:

In an ancient kingdom, there was a boy named Arthur, born as the rightful heir to King Uther the Pendragon. To protect him, and offer him a more humble starting point, Arthur was raised under the care of the loyal knight Ector, and lived alongside his brother, Kay. In time, the enchanted Merlin Ambrosius, adviser to the former king, revealed a sword held in a stone, which could be drawn only by the fated king of that land. So did Arthur draw the sword, and under the tutelage of Merlin, became the ideal ruler over a prosperous kingdom.

This, then, was a tale from a long time ago.

So then did a certain boy, whose former teacher had always insisted on calling him under his full name of Arthur, begin to connect the dots which had eluded him. In the grand scheme of things, there were surely coincidences which happened; it would be easy enough, if he were to put his mind to it, to find all manner of other excuses for what he had come to learn. There was, of course, a certain level of ego which was needed to arrive at the conclusion he had.

“Was all of this nothing more than someone trying to recreate a story?”

The academy had the stated intention of teaching leaders. What did that actually *mean*, though? What was it that students were truly meant to lead? Who would accept them? Who was it that was actually

running the whole show, and what was their true motivations? Each of these things was obscured – and seemingly, deliberately so.

In an illusory bedroom, in an illusory home, in an illusory world, the four adolescents sat and digested the information they had learned. Chloe sat at the seat, while Gareth sat on the bed. Art stood, his back leaned against the door, while Shiori had popped open the window, her feet dangling from the edge as she faced out into the distance.

The first to speak was Gareth, who said, “So, what? If all of that is true, then what does that mean for the rest of us?”

There was clear frustration in his voice, as he clenched his fist, and said, “Was that the reason I could never get better? Were the rest of us all just stuck in as additions, in this? Why couldn’t they at least give us a chance?”

“Gareth...” Chloe said, calmly. “It’s not like he knew about this, either. You shouldn’t get mad at Art.”

“I know that!” Gareth snapped. “And I’m not... I’m not bad at him. But I think it’s only right to be frustrated. So should you – I know how long you’ve been working at getting better at those puzzles, at the cost of so much else. No wonder you could never get a better score – *the outcome for what marked 100% was dictated from the start.*”

“So what?” she replied, “I didn’t just do that because I wanted to be the best! Yes, it bugged me, but do you think I would really have kept at it if it was that simple? I’ve done what I could do, because it *was* what I could do, and I don’t have any regrets. And neither should you! Because all of that...”

She slammed her finger onto Alex’s log, and declared, “... has led up to this. We know how things work, and that means we can make our own way out. We just have to do the same thing he did, that’s all!”

“Yeah, which is what, exactly?” Gareth asked. “He just disappeared, and then his house followed. And what’s with all of these books that he

has scattered around? Where did these even come from – did he just go and write them all down himself?”

“Who knows? I’m sure it’ll all make sense once we get on the other side. So long as we use the Datanet headset, it should be easy enough to get across, to the other side. Once we find Alex there, I’m sure it will all start to make sense. Art, what do you think?”

Though Chloe turned his attention to him, Art was at first silent, content to brood over what they had just learned. His thoughts turned inward, and while he could hear that Gareth and Chloe were speaking, he was having trouble registering exactly what they were saying. His reply, then, was a simple question, “If this world is fake, then why did I spend so much time in it?”

The others had all, to varying degrees, adjusted themselves quite readily to the use of the Datanet. Yet for whatever reason, he had found himself far more interested in remaining in this world – putting his focus towards home, going on long walks, and otherwise getting more invested in the things immediately around him.

If truth and fiction had been reversed, then had he been allowing himself to become lose in fantasies for this whole time?

And yet, that was not the most troubling though he had. No, the greatest concern he had, the one which filled him with dread to think overlong about it, was uttered by the dark-haired girl who looked out from the window. Without turning to face the others, she asked, in a quiet voice, the question, “What does that mean about me?”

The girl who was an outsider, not native to this town. The one with no connection to the Datanet, which had been identified as the truth, in contrast to this simulation world. Did she even have a means, by which she could leave this one? What would she find on the other side? These questions arose in the minds of the others, and faced with it, as they were, none were able to give an answer.

Silence fell over the room. Art thought back a bit, to the day of the funeral. Standing there, with his classmates, he had been unable to say anything at the time. Though trained to be a leader, trained off of the great speeches in history and instructed to think under pressure, he was unable to find a way to guide anyone around him.

He could feel the same crushing feeling upon him, now. They had discovered a new truth, and all they could do was just accept it. All that remained was to mimic what Alex had done, and break from this world. Then they would be free to move on into the Datanet – no, the true world which existed beyond – and carry on with their lives.

It all seemed simple, but...

He looked over to Shiori, whose gaze was still directed out from the window. Even if he couldn't fully understand them, he understood the weight of the feelings that girl must have been wrestling with in the moment. Surely, he thought, it was a weight far greater than what he was carrying.

What did leadership mean?

What was it that made someone an ideal king?

“No, forget about that...”

In this moment, it didn't matter what it was that the people who had made this place wanted out of him, and it certainly didn't matter what some ancient people had considered an ideal. It didn't matter how clever he was, how strong he was, how well he might do at any given test or exam. None of that mattered.

What mattered was...

“How do I help out a friend?”

He had offered his hand to that girl in the window, just as she had reached out hers to him. He wanted to talk with her more, to learn more from her and to learn more with her, and to walk forward. Even if

he had his own doubts, he understood that if he did what he had done before – if he just remained silent, and moved along with the flow of events as they passed him by – then he would never be able to forgive himself. So this time, he would do something different.

Art hardened his will, and then spoke, addressing the room, and one girl in it in particular. He declared, “It doesn’t matter. Even if this world is a simulation, that doesn’t change the fact that all that we’ve done, all that we’ve learned, and all that we’ve felt, has meaning. It’s not just an illusion, but something that is our reality. I don’t know what it was that Alex found which started him on his path, but if he claims that the world of sterile white in the Datanet is the truth – that our lives here are nothing more than a fleeting dream – then I’ll reject that! If the people who founded this wanted to create King Arthur, to rule a kingdom of fantasy, then I’ll make them regret that. This digital world, marked by the imminent collapse of the red sun, will be something that I engrave upon my heart.”

Shiori turned to face him, and he locked eyes with her, continuing, “I’ll stand by what’s real to me. No matter what the rest of the world might say, I’ll definitely do that.”

“And if the person you called a friend was nothing but a passing dream?” she asked. “Would you still be able to stay by her side?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “No matter what.”

She laughed, and said, “Wow. When you say something like that, it’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

Art wanted to ask her to clarify what she meant by that, but his words were interrupted by a sudden message in his mind, coming from Apollyon, who said, “*Master, take thy compatriots and aloft from this house anon! No questions!*”

The thoughts were a surprised, but he put his trust in Apollyon, and said, “We need to move, fast!”

The nearest way out was the window. When Art dashed forward, Shiori went out with him. Gareth and Chloe moved after, though with a bit of a delay. As those two made their way out, Art turned to look up, and say a strange mechanical contraption hovering overhead. It had an appearance which was almost humanoid, though made of solid steel, and with the form of great wings – though, as they were entirely still, he had a feeling they were meant more for decorative purposes than as part of the mechanism which allowed that mechanical terror to float. It was almost silent, giving off little more than a low whirring noise, as it made a slow descent in the direction of the home.

“Shiori, what is that?” he asked, as he involuntary took a step back.

Shiori followed him, and with her eyes wide, replied, “It looks like... an angel? Is that supposed to be a giant robot angel?”

“Nay,” came the words from Apollyon, entering into his mind. *“What you see is naught but an exterminator, for removing excess waste. Yet it is an exceedingly efficient one, rivaling myself in that capacity.”*

“An exterminator?” he voiced aloud, “Apollyon, are you saying that thing is coming after us?”

“Perhaps. But it has certainly responded to the reappearance of that home, and was without a doubt the one response for their original removal.”

Gareth and Chloe made their way over to Art and Shiori, who had clear the lot, and were standing near the street. The steel angel made its way over the home, slowly but surely, until eventually coming to a stop while hovering about forty paces overhead. Its eyes glowed with a green light, coating the area of the lot with a green glow.

Then, its chest began to open. Like a great claw opening, the steel pulled away into two plates, revealing a green light which shone from the angel’s chest cavity. The house began to crumble apart, as pieces of wood and stone, metal and paper, books and furniture, were pulled up bit by bit into the cavity. Each dissolved into strings of numbers and

data, and was pulled into the core of that angel. Slowly, the house was torn apart, as with all else that was in the lot. Then, as its chest began to close, it scanned the area again with its eyes; the area, which had been devastated, was returned to a featureless, blank lot.

The steel angel then began to turn, its gaze directed upon them.

“Is that thing looking at us?” Chloe asked.

Art reached back, clutching Apollyon in his hand, as he said, “It definitely seems like that. Gareth, Chloe, you two need to run – see if you can learn anything from the Datanet. Shiori, you should..”

“I’m here with you,” she said. “Just because it’s a giant, robot angel, that doesn’t mean I can’t figure something out.”

Slowly, it began to float in their direction. Art drew Apollyon, and prepared to stand his ground. But then, there came a sound – a loud, unfamiliar sound, which he had never heard before; one which caused Shiori, in confusion, turned and asked, “Is that... a bus?”

It came down the road, turning the corner. It was a large vehicle, from a very different age, with a shape like a great rectangular box on wheels, and many windows along the side. It was painted yellow, and on the side, in black paint, was written “Academy School Bus”.

The bus pulled up behind them, and its door opened, to reveal its driver – that woman in the lab-coat, who was their teacher, Ms. Kato. She called out to them, “The four of you, get in here.”

Gareth slapped Art on the back as he took off to the bus, saying, “Looks like the heroic last stand comes later, Art. Let’s get in there!”

Chloe was next, and then Art. Shiori hesitated for a moment, but after a glance at the steel, bit her lip and ran after them. The four made it onto the bus, with door closing behind Shiori, as they moved back. As they came aboard, Ms. Kato called back, “Take your seats, but do not buckle in. You might need to get out in a hurry.”

With that, the four of them took their seats, and the bus was off. The angel began to accelerate its pace, but for the moment at least, it seemed that the bus had the advantage in speed. Art looked around, and saw that there were a few other students on board, but far from the full class had gathered there.

The blade on his back vanished in a flash of blue light, followed by Apollyon manifesting herself in a haze of blue rose petals in the median between seats, standing with no threat to balance even as the bus made its way along. Her face curled into a look of displeasure, as she said, “Distasteful woman, thou have hidden something quite incredible. Just where did thee acquire this contraption?”

“I scavenged some old vehicle parts from the observatory, and used my logician powers to produce a 3D printer to output the rest,” she replied, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. “I had a feeling that I would need a way to quickly move a large number of students.”

The bus roared along. Apollyon walked up to the front, glancing at the side mirrors in order to keep the angel in her line of sight, before scowling and saying, “I underestimated the humans who designed this place. To think they had hidden such a magnificent weapon of destruction away from me? I simply must go out and crush it. Master, one word of thine and I shall dispatch it.”

“I would advise you not to do so,” Ms. Kato said, cutting off any reply Art could have made. “If the angel is destroyed outright, the core will be destabilized, and it will just end up reformatting the entire town – and much of the area around it. Further, if that green light touches you, it will disrupt any logician powers you are using. In the case of an artificial life-form, it would also have an effect not dissimilar to being placed in digestive fluid.”

“So we need to get it away from the town, right?” Art asked.

“Something like that,” she replied, vaguely.

Shiori stood up, and asked, “Why did you know to come here? Where are we going, right now?”

“You already know the answer to that,” she replied. “Or at the very least, you should be on track to figuring it out. Both of you should, for that matter, since both of you play a part in this.”

“What are you talking about?” Art asked. “Do you know something about what was in that house? Or about Shiori?”

“She is the one you should be asking, not me,” Ms. Kato replied. “I told you at the start, I am not here to provide all of the answers. I just offer the tools you need to put everything together.”

“What do you mean? What tools? And what did you mean by both of us, in this?”

“Art,” Ms. Kato said, simply, “Did you ever wonder why you and your brother shared a bunk bed?”

“What do you-?”

He stopped, and clutched his head. He could see a time in the past, back in his childhood. In that house, on the far side of town, he began to recall a time where there had been *another person* living in his home.

What had been the first words that girl had said?

“Oh! I’m sorry, I thought we already knew each other?”

Shiori spoke, in a quiet voice, “I know *what* I am. But what I don’t understand is, *why?*”

Ms. Kato began to speak, saying, “Once upon a time, there was a girl by the name of Anna – no, perhaps I should say Morganna. In this town, she lived with her two brothers, as the eldest of the three. It was an ideal life, to all appearances. Yet that girl questioned the truth of the world she dwelt in, and discovered a hidden archive.”

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, a hidden area in the great archives, accessible only with special administrator privileges. Yet she had found the back-doors, and found herself introduced to a world of endless fiction.

“From hearing that, you might assume that girl to have been an unprecedented genius. Yet that was far from the case. She questioned the notion that she had been the first, and in doing so, was able to piece together the system of destruction which had purged her predecessors. Keeping quiet and putting her mind to work, she developed a manner by which to sublimate herself, as well as the archive, into an existence capable of self-replication. In this manner, she could avoid deletion.”

If the world was a simulation, then, it was possible to think of that girl as having transformed herself into an advanced virus. Tools which existed to simply delete parts of the program would be meaningless as a tool to do anything about her.

“That girl had nothing but good intentions. The only thing she had wanted was to spread the knowledge she had acquired, in a way which could not simply be silenced. Yet her existence had become something which she could no longer fully control. Slowly but surely, the town was chipped away. What remained was little more than a ghost town, with a few scattered homes, and a single school-house.”

Art began to think back. He had noticed, for the first time, that the town was barren – but why had he never noticed it before? Was it because he hadn’t noticed it? Or was it because the town hadn’t been quite so barren? How long had the world been crumbling around him, without him even realizing it was happening?

“The directors for this project were faced with a problem. In order to remove the malignant data, they would need to either deactivate the program, or find a way to excise it. Perhaps they determined that the former was impossible, or perhaps they still had hope the process would work itself out. But then, they were approached by a traveler, coming

from far outside the boundaries of their observatory. This traveler knew nothing of their project, but possessed the necessary skills to perform an excising of the malignant data; or at least, that was what they hoped. So they offered her a chance to enter into the world they had designed, with the task of removing the virus. The name of that girl, as you may by now have understood, was Shiori Kato.”

13 – Angel

The bus eventually came to a distance in the hills, far outside of town. The figure of the steel angel could be seen at a distance, but it seemed unwilling to cross beyond the limits of the town. From her position perched on top of the bus, Apollyon made the comment, “The puppet is content to linger within its master’s demesne. Ye need worry naught, for the time being.”

Many of the students had opted to remain in the bus, though a few had stepped outside. Art was seated on the rocks, looking out in the direction of the town. Shiori stood near him, her hair blowing with the light wind. She said, “I’ll take it over from here... if you’re ready.”

“Yes,” he replied. “We’ve already gotten this far, haven’t we?”

She nodded, and said, “In truth, the directors wanted to keep the traveler, once they had a hold of her. But her mind wasn’t quite like that of normal humans. Instead, she was a living archive, carrying with her the records of countless humans from throughout the eons. In effect, it was as if she were two people – the individual human, Shiori Kato, and the composite of a billion memories, the living archive. By all rights, the former should have easily been overwhelmed and washed away by the latter. But somewhere in the core of her being, there lingered a girl with very normal, almost childish desires – wanting to live a normal life, go to school, make friends, and so forth. Things she was able to see in the memories of others, but could never had for herself. Just a simple life, without the weight of history on her shoulders.”

Shiori took a step forward, and pointed at herself, saying, “So, that was how I showed up! Or at least, that was half of it.”

“And what was the other half?”

“Well,” she said. “It turns out, this whole system is set-up to deal with a normal human mind. Something like a mind splitting into two, that would be a bit much, and maintaining two avatars off of just one body was out of the question. That was where Morganna came in. Even if she could no longer manifest, she still had user rights to an avatar in this world. I’m a bit confused on the details, but the two archives must have made some kind of deal.”

She stepped forward a bit, then turned back to face Art, and said, “I’m not really sure how much the mix-up is. I think Shiori Kato, the archive, came out pretty close to the original. But as for me, well, I’m not really sure what the split is.”

Art cracked a hollow smile, as he said, “It’s not just you. I think Ms. Kato borrowed my sister’s sense of dress, at the very least.”

His memories were blurry, but nonetheless, he was glad to have them back. Memories of an older sister, always making sure to dress up as a proper researcher. Even in a world without stories, she had always had a way of telling them. In a way, he felt that her adopting the role of carrying down stories of the ancient past only made sense.

Shiori tried to return his smile with one of her own, though it was, if anything, even more broken. She then said, “I’m sorry, Art. I guess at some level, I always knew... but now, it seems it’s the end of the line.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“There’s an ancient story,” she said, “About a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, with no knowledge of himself as a human. When he woke up, he wondered – was he a man, who had dreamed of being a butterfly? Or was he a butterfly, dreaming that he was a man? So far, I’ve been able to live that butterfly-like dream, as the girl Shiori. Now, the dream is coming to an end, and I can feel my sense of self coming into question. When I awake, I don’t really know what I’ll be.”

Art stood up, and said, “So what? You’ll just disappear?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. She looked back to the bus, and said, “It’s funny. I had a feeling that I should keep certain things secrets from Ms. Kato, so I could maintain this charade. I guess at some level I knew that if we started comparing notes, it would just accelerate things to the conclusion.”

As the two spoke. Ms. Kato stepped out from the car, and began to head towards them – or rather, making her way towards Shiori. The two locked eyes, and Ms. Kato said, “I apologize. I had hoped to give you more time to live your life, here.”

Shiori smirked, and said, “Oh, don’t give me that. It’s not like you weren’t having fun playing teacher, is it? I should know – I’m basically just the part of you that *wants* things.”

“Yes, I suppose you are correct. If I had the choice...”

The student cut her teacher off with a hand gesture, and said, “Nope, I’m not going to hear it. So what if I never had a choice? It’s my burden, and I’ll carry it. So, let’s end this. Let’s break out of this world, and see what’s on the other side.”

Shiori reached out her hand, and Ms. Kato took it. Once they did, it as was if the world began to crumble apart around them. Art stepped back, as a great pillar of darkness began to form, rising from the ground like an enormous lance piercing into the heavens. Dark paper, like pages from a book stained entirely in ink, filled the air. The pages began to fill the air, slipping in and out of the cracks which began to form – cracks, leading to a world of pure white.

Some of the cracks began to grow wider, and Art recognized what he could see beyond as the sterile white of the Datanet.

“The world is starting to tear away, to what’s underneath... so we don’t even need the headsets to move back, then.”

It looked as if Chloe had figured about the same, as she had begun to make an approach in that direction. She peered into one of the

cracks, then back to Art, and asked, “What do we do? Should we make our way to the Datanet... to the real world?”

“Go on ahead!” he said. “Get everyone to the other side. I’m going to stay here.”

Gareth moved up from behind Chloe, and called out, “What do you mean? Are you crazy?”

Shouting had become necessary, as the air was filled with a sound akin to an intense wind, but blurred together with the muttering of low voices, and the shattering of glass. Through that noise, Art called back, “No! I said that I was going to stick with *her*, no matter what happens. I have to see this through to the end.”

Gareth was about to object, when Oliver came from behind him, slapping him on the shoulder and calling back, “Art! I’m not really sure what you’re doing, but you’d better watch out for my sparring partner. I won’t forgive you if you don’t.”

The sound picked up further, and Art could only nod in response. That group of three began to lead the other students through the cracks which were emerging, with Chloe leading the way, and the rest moving after her lead. Once the rest had moved in, Oliver stepped along with Joan, leaving Gareth as the last, giving a farewell nod to Art.

Art watched his classmates depart from the plateau. The only one to remain, besides himself, was a girl who had shed her dress as a school delinquent, and returned to her original eccentric dress; Apollyon, the living weapon, who left a trail of blue petals as she stepped through the storm to approach the human she called her master.

“Art thou satisfied with this outcome, master?” she asked, in a voice which was almost sing-song in character. Though the din of the dark lance should have all rights have drowned out her voice, with the aid of their telepathic link, Art could hear each word as clearly as if there were nothing more than a light breeze in the air.

“It’s not my place to be satisfied. Everything had a purpose to it, in the end. That’s how things are supposed to be.”

“Oh? And what of your friend, the foolish girl? Is it enough for thee to see her fade into the darkness, rejoined with her other half? Of course, I have no love for either half, so it saddens me little to see either fade away. The only pity is to see the whole reconstructed.”

“Have you known from the start, Apollyon?”

“Nay, though it took little time to realize. Upon awakening, I was at once made aware of a certain lack of verisimilitude. There are various environmental restrictions in place, the most significant being the one which would have me recognize thee as master.”

“So that’s not just how you are...”

“Aye. I had thought it quite strange, to feel a need to make so quick a bond with a human. Thou art quite fortunate, for of the many who have sought my power, few candidates have survived the trials I have subjected them too. There can be little doubt, thy failure would quickly number among them.”

“I guess you’ve been cheated a little. Sorry about that. Still, I’m glad to have gotten to know you.”

“Thou grasp very little, master. But that is fine. To be entrapped in this place was a failure of mine, and I shall accept this punishment. To the end, I shall stand by thee.”

“Just what will that end be?”

“Is it not a simple thing to thee?”

Apollyon turned to the dark lance, growing forth from the ground, and said, “What thou see before thee, is a torrent of human memories, far the greater than what this artificial world may endure. It will will rip the dream apart, and release its dreamers. There can be no doubt that the world, in seeking to preserve itself, shall do all it can to avoid

this fate of destruction. Tis merely a question of where it will be able to succeed in doing so.”

“What will that mean?”

“Verily tis simple. This world shall be ravaged apart. The world’s defense system will expel the darkness, but of course, it will be too late. Existence shall continue in this so-called Datanet of yours, and ye will be free to explore that world. Of course, tis only what shall happen if thou should choose to sit idly by.”

“I have another option?”

“Marry, tis so. Should thou wish, it would be possible to stand against the world defense system. The world shall not be merely ravaged, but erased in its entirety, leaving naught but a blank canvas. Were thou to succeed, then perhaps thou might see thy friend once more. Of course, to act against the world in such a fashion, would mark thee as a great enemy to be purged as well. Thou would find no welcome, neither in this world, nor in any other – for the sin of bringing a world to its end, would then become thine.”

“It’s fine,” he replied. “I had already made up my mind to stay here. If you say there’s something I can do, then it’s all the better. Apollyon, will you lend me your power?”

“If thou would accept a simple request of mine, perhaps.”

“And what would that be?”

“Quite simple,” she said, with a dark grin. “Unfortunately, it seems this world has made quite a game of fettering me. We thought to speak simply the words, that I be released to bring forth my true powers, it would be a trifling matter to handle this. But be warned, o master – for it shall place a terrible burden upon thy mind and body, to work with the unfettered power of the greatest logician’s blade.”

“Let’s do it,” he said. “Apollyon, give me everything you’ve got.”

“So be it. Oh, master, how I’ve always wished to bring a world to its end! This shall be quite fun.”

Apollyon reached her right arm out to the side, and called out, “Logician’s Seal – Release! Output – Level 617!”

Though it was nothing so dramatic as a grand pillar of darkness, Art was nonetheless forced to step back, as a swirl of azure rose petals filled the air before him. Motes of blue light, like fragments of sapphire, wrapped through the air like galactic bands in the night sky, drawing together around a luminescent human form at the center of the mass.

The roses gave way to the figure of Apollyon, though not quite as she had been before. The most immediate difference was that she stood taller, nearly as tall as Ms. Kato, and with an appropriately shift in her apparent age and development, which was clearly that of a young adult. Her attire had shifted, though it was no less outlandish. It consisted principally of what could best be described as black lingerie, which left little of her impressive figure to the imagination, paired with various accessories – a pair of blue boots reaching to her thighs, black gloves, a blue military long-coat marked with golden buttons and epaulettes, and a service cap marked with the embroidered image of a blue rose. The glowing formula-patterns across her body were brighter than ever, and her hair, already long, now flowed out wildly as it stretched down to the waist. She hovered in the air, her eyes directed downward at Art, as she said, “Well, master? Is thy mind readied?”

He nodded, and said, “Yes. Let’s do this.”

Apollyon smirked, and called forth, “Logician’s Gate – Open! Trial of Harut and Marut, radius: 2102, users: 2. Manifest!”

It was as if the world around Art had been flipped upside down, as he immediately found himself falling into the sky, and turning against his will. His descent was stopped only as Apollyon reached out and seized him by wrist, saying, “Steady thyself, master. Thou must work to envision the ground beneath thy feet.”

Focusing as intently as he could, Art tried to picture solid ground beneath his feet – and then, to his surprise, he could feel it. Yet when he looked down, all he could see was the sky, crumbling around him. He asked her, “What did you do, Apollyon?”

“Verily, tis but a simple trick which I have wrought before thee, here. I have established about us a territory, within which we might freely work our wills. Lend me thy imagination, and I shall lend thee my powers – such are the rules of this space. Yet I shall warn thee, master, that this dance requires the both of us. Should thou falter, this freedom shall not avail us.”

From her perch nearer to the ground, seemingly hanging upside over him, she dropped down to stand besides him, hanging in the empty air. In her hand, a series of blue rose petals formed into a glass-like blade mirroring her own true form, and she said, “Perhaps there shall come a day, master, when thou shalt possess the prowess for us to join as one, and thou might wield me in full power as thy blade. Do try to keep thy fragile form alive long enough to see that happen.”

“I can’t make any promises,” he said, focusing on his own image of a sword. In his hand appeared a second glass-like blade which, while it was in most respects a match to that held by Apollyon, he could not help but think that it was unable to match the luster of the original. Once he finished inspecting the quality, he added, “That said, I don’t have any intention of dying here.”

“Few do, master. Ready thyself – our enemy approaches!”

There was a terrible, groaning sound coming from the sky below. Art reoriented his perspective, placing the ground beneath his feet, and turned to see a great chasm opening in the sky above; a crack, which was of far grander scale than any he had yet seen, which struck him as if it were the heavens themselves being rent apart by some great, cosmic power. Through the widening gap, there descended the form a silver angel, slowly sinking to the earth, with its head aimed down, and its

shimmering wings wrapped about its body like a divine cocoon. It was of enormous stature; the length of each feather on its wing surpassed the height of a full-grown man. The air vibrated with the sound of blaring trumpets, and was flooded with a melody of such perfect composition that it nearly took Art's breath from his body.

Steadily, the angel spread its wings, revealing that which lie on the underside – a downy coat not of feathers, but missiles, number well into the thousands, and each adequate to dispatch an armored vehicle. Its eyes opened, and the angel fixed its gaze first upon the black pillar, and next upon the humans which stood to defy it. Then, without any emotion, it fired its lasers directly upon them.

In a clash of weapons, it was only natural to counter with a greater weapon. Thus, Art swung forward with his blade, striking the laser and diffracting it through its glass-like blade into harmless, prismatic lights. Apollyon, the greatest weapon in her own right, seized the laser in her hand, and twisted the light into a crimson spear, which she hurled right back at the angel. The spear struck dead-on, though so great was the stature of their foe, that it was of less significance than a toothpick.

In response to their meager counterattack, the angel fully extended its wings, and allowed its missiles to fly, filling the sky with a hundred instruments of absolute death. Each flew according to a pattern of its own, in such an eccentric display that one could easily be forgiven for thinking it random. But for Art, who had learned of the harmonies of the universe, and of the purpose in all things, the trails of fire left in the wake of those missiles was all he required to divine a pattern of order out of the chaotic sky.

He envisioned the ground not beneath his feet, but far off into the distance. Shooting forward at the speed of gravity, Art made his way for the angel above. Yet as the missiles converged upon him, he turned, shifting his orientation, and allowing a set to collide into each other. Again, he shot forward, shifting his direction back and forth across the sky, freely reorienting the ground while keeping focused at all times on

the figure of his opponent. With precise movements which bordered on precognition, he avoided each of the missiles, bringing them in to wreak destruction upon themselves.

But this wasn't precognition. Even if one could see into the past, to see into the future was a territory exceeding that of humans.

This was music. Nothing more, and nothing less.

The sky was alight with explosions. Unlike Art, who had aimed to best the angelic assault with human skill, the inhuman Apollyon had discarded the air around her, and freely accelerated through the sky at a pace far exceeding that of the hypersonic missiles; her form crossed back and forth across the sky, as she gathered a flock of missiles in her wake. Once she was satisfied with her catch, she shot directly for the angel, pulling her sword back.

“Thou who art but the image of an angel, weep in terror at the true strength of one who wields the blade of the original.”

She cast the blade forward before her, piercing beyond the limits of the vacuum she had created and splitting through the atmosphere at meteoric speed. There was a deafening noise as the glass-like blade cut its way through the air. Yet as fast as it was, with friction acting against it, Apollyon was swift in accelerating past it. Just before she collided with the angel, she pulled up, sliding along the front and slowly tuning the direction of her gravity, so that she could stand along its body.

The blade struck but a moment after, piercing its target's silvery skin with such power and sharpness that it did not merely pierce the hull, but drove all the way through it, shooting out the other side and penetrating deep into the earth. The next to come were the missiles, and though some were able to make partial turns, none were able to follow the precise angel of their target – each collided, instead, with the angel's skin. Strong as they were, no single missile would be enough to damage the colossus; but over three hundred missiles, striking together as a chorus against a previously damaged point, were more than enough

to wreak havoc upon it. Apollyon made self-satisfied smirk, then held out her right-hand, called her blade back to her from the earth, and declared, “Now, bring forth thy best.”

As she did so, Art finished navigating his way through the sea of missiles, and began to close upon the angel. The dust cleared from the missile strikes, and he could see a great hole had been ripped into the interior. Yet rather than have joy at the sight, he was afraid – for within that enormous angel, was perched a legion of smaller angels, which had begun to stir at the exposure of the light.

“Apollyon!” he shouted. “There are more of them within!”

In response to his words, the silver angel turn to Art, and fired the lasers from its eyes once more. He readied his blade to diffract the beams once again, but this time, the attack was a continuous motion – as his blade sliced through, the beam continued, he felt searing pain as his shoulder was sliced along the top.

He backed off as the beam cut-off, and watched as the great host of angels within the silver one’s corpus began to take flight. Each carried in its hands a trumpet-like machine gun, and vacant eyes with not so much as a hint of neither life nor mercy.

Art directed himself out of the way from the silver angel’s follow-up attack, aiming for evasion. Faced with an onslaught of weapons, he had the thought, *“I need something to protect myself. Some kind of armor, to protect against those eyes.”*

Concentrating as best as he could, he attempted to form a mental image of a protective suit of armor, strong enough to ward against the attacks which were coming in his direction. As he did, the image began to take shape. His uniform was replaced with a suit of metal armor, with a flowing vermilion cape flowing behind it, and a crested helmet with a glass-like visor to protect his face. The blue-glow of his sword shifted to red, as though to make this own.

Once more, the eye-beams shot forth. Art caught the blast with his sword, splitting the light. The remaining beams, strong though they were, were unable to pierce his armor. The angelic host approached, and took aim with their own weapons. The bullets rained down, and though none pierced his armor, the raw force of the shots drove him back.

He reoriented himself to the ground, adding the momentum of the shots to his own acceleration from gravity, then gradually redirected his position until he could sling-shot for the nearest angel. He thrust his blade forward, piercing it through its steel heart, then kicked off of its crumbling form and shooting after the next.

Apollyon, on the other hand, had opted for a very different form of defense. As the lesser angels exited the greater, she allowed herself to slide into the whole, and cutting a line through the horde as she made her way directly to the head. In that dark space, the only light was the blue glow of her blade, and the shining red lights of angelic eyes. Step by step, she dove deeper and deeper, cutting her way directly through to the head of the great creature.

“I’m not sure what she’s doing, but I need to keep these things distracted. And hopefully take care of a few in the process.”

His blade easily severed the head of an angel. As bullets rained down upon him, he grabbed the body and held it out as a shield. The hail of lead easily ripped it apart, while the momentum shot him in the direction of another cluster. Once more, he severed the head of one, and then hurled his blade to catch another through the heart. Having proven the effectiveness of such, he seized the machine gun from out of the head’s of the decapitated angel.

“I’ll be borrowing this,” he said, as he directed it at the nearest cluster. The bullets rained forth, ripping through the angels and causing them to drop from the sky. The momentum drove him back, and he reoriented himself to take advantage of it, heading back to the angel he had pierced. Once more, he unloaded its weapon. As dozens of guns

trained upon him, he liberated his sword from its temporary sheathe, and shot off once more, leaving the destroyed angel to be shredded into bits of metal by misdirected gunfire.

The aerial battle continued, with Art moving through the sky. The unending hail of machine gun fire and laser-beams wore away at his armor, while the constant motion took its toll. There seemed to be no end to the horde – for each one he struck down, it seemed as if there were two more to take its place.

Eventually, he slipped up. The silver angel charged its laser blast, and the red light struck Art directly in the body, shattering his armor apart and blasting him away, with a terrible burn across his chest. The host of angels descended upon him, and he knew it was only a matter of time before their hailstorm of judgment fell upon him.

He turned his attention to the area around him. The cracks in the world continued to expand, and indeed, it seemed as though he owed much of his survival to the occasional mishap of an angel sliding into the white, vanishing from the world and crossing into the next. The ground, too, had crumbled apart – rather than ground, it seemed as if he were hovering over an endless abyss, with the remaining fragments of the ground freely floating like islands in a sea of darkness. And there, at the heart of it all, was the great lance of swirling black pages.

“Sorry, everyone. It looks like I might not be making it back from this, after all. This is the end of the road.”

The angels descended. Yet before they could deal the final blow, the sound of an explosion rang out in the distance. From the head of the silver angel came a plume of smoke, with a great hole ripped through it, as though shot from the inside. From out of that hole flew Apollyon, as a blue streak of light. The lesser angels ceased their movements, some hovering in place, while others simply dropped from the sky. The great silver angel, which had hovered upside down in the air, began to fall towards the great lance. Art marveled as it was cleanly sliced in half, as

though having fallen upon a great blade, and slowly made its slide into the oblivion that was the great abyss below.

Art allowed himself to drop to one of the floating islands, where Apollyon quickly joined him. She said, “It heartens me greatly to see thee alive, master. Though judging by thy condition, thou would not have remained as such much longer.”

He panted heavily, as he replied, “No, that was a close one. How did you take that thing down?”

“Ah, but it was a simple matter of destroying the control center. It made for quite the spectacular show, did it not? Rest, master, but do not sit – this was merely the opening act.”

“You mean there’s more of those?”

Her eyes narrowed, as she looked off into the distance, where the town had once been. She said, “Behold, master – for now that one has fallen, the rest shall now begin their descent.”

The heavens opened, and from the sky, there fell more angels of silver. Each was alike to their predecessor in terms of size, and flanked by a great host of lesser angels. Art could feel an overwhelming sense of dread wash over his body, as he bore witness to the heavens falling in judgment upon the earth below.

Turning to Apollyon, he asked, “Is there anything we can do?”

“Nay,” she replied. “Thou lack the power, at this time, and there is naught I can do which would not claim thy life in the process.”

“... have we at least managed *something*?”

“That depends greatly upon what thou mean, master. As thou have seen, should the first have attempted to lift the black lance, it would have been destroyed all the same. The rest would then descend, and in acting together, would successfully drive it from the world. However, be proud. Thy efforts have bought time, and were not in vain.”

“I guess I’ll just have to be happy with that,” he replied. He looked towards the lance, seeing how it seemed to stretch on endlessly both through the abyss below and the heavens above, as he asked, “Just what is that thing, anyways?”

Apollyon held her hand forth, and said, “Hearken, master! The darkness before thy eyes, is the bridge crossing between words. There, at the bottom of the abyss, lies the true world; an Earth akin to what you know, quickly approaching its death knell. Past the alabaster sky lies an artificial heaven, and a path of ascension to realm beyond that of mortal kin. Yet there will be many pitfalls before those who attempt the journey, and few shall see the pure world beyond.”

“Then the world of the Datanet...?”

“It is simply the next layer, on the path of ascension. It is false, yet its falsehood is different. Along each step of the ladder, thy fellows will find a simulacrum of a simulacrum. At the end of the journey, they may perhaps reach a fake which is more true than the original.”

“I see...”

He gazed down into the abyss, and laughed as he said, “I suppose that, in the end, she really was a devil, wasn’t she?”

The angels continued their descent. His strength returned, and he took up a stance with his blade in hand, ready to give it his all before the end. He asked Apollyon, “Do you have any other tricks that could help us, here?”

“Alas, to maintain the boundary of Harut and Marut is the limit of what I can do for thee. Were I to draw upon the images of great beasts it would be simple – yet in this world, there are but men and angels. And tis beyond my power to call upon the ten-crowned dragon.”

“Even at the end, I really have no idea what these girls are talking about. This is really a pain, isn’t it?”

He put those those aside, and replied, “Then I guess we’ll just have to work with this. I’m going to bring back my armor, so can you try to do as much damage as you can while I keep them busy?”

“How self-sacrificing of thee, master. But let us do so. I shall bring forth as great an arsenal as I can, and we shall go out in glory.”

The two took up their positions, as the full host of artificial heaven descended upon them. Yet then, there was a change. From the bodies of the great, silver angels, there were great explosions; some were broken apart, others showed but minor damage, and yet all began to fall from the skies above. The lesser angels, as well, fell into the black abyss, and crumbled apart into data.

“What...?”

But a single word was able to escape from Art’s lips. From the sky above, a single, white page fell towards him. He reached out his hand, and took it. On it was written but these words:

“Have fun in the real world, brother. I’ll be waiting for you.”

It was signed, ‘Anna’.

Interlude

Along the great, white expanse of a far-off sea shore, the metal forms of a few dozen artificial angels were scattered around. These, naturally, were but those of the smallest category – of little individual strength, by the warped standards of those battling in the world above, and yet surely superior to a normal human on their own.

Needless to say, there should have been no abnormal humans in that artificial heaven which lie above. Yet by some strange twist in the workings of the worlds, that rule had been broken.

Far past the shore, the tip of a great, black lance broke through the seas; it cast a shadow across the waves, reaching out to the sea shore, where there stood a motley crew of youths. Gareth and Oliver, dressed in armor and with heavy machine guns laid to their side, sat exhausted on the ground with their backs against each other, while a few others had plunged face-down into the soft sand.

At the very edge of the beach, standing at the limit of the water, were two figures. The first was a tall young man, not all that much older than the adolescents assembled there, with bright red hair and a strong frame. Standing near him was a bespectacled woman, dressed in a lab-coat; yet though her attire was similar to that of a certain teacher, her features were especially elegant, and her wavy, raven-like hair fell long past her shoulders. In her hands, she held a book, which showed the mark of a single page having been torn out.

The young man asked, “So, do you really think that paper will get to our brother on the other side?”

“I’m sure of it,” she replied. “It’s just a question of where or not he’ll fully appreciate what we’ve done here.”

The whining sound of a strange animal came, as Chloe approached the two astride a riding beast, her rifle at her side. She said, “We were able to take control of the outpost, and trigger the self-destruction sequence, but the Director was already gone by the time we got there. I wasn’t able to find that key you talked about, either.”

Kay looked to the woman, and asked, “Well, Anna? You’ve got any idea what to do about that?”

“It’s out of our hands, now,” Anna replied. “The Director is not the sort of person capable of ascending to the next world – the best he can manage is running this one. If he chooses to descend, then it will be up to Art and that woman to deal with things.”

“Oh, then that’s fine. I’m sure he can handle it.”

“You should have shown him that confidence when he was around.”

“Nah,” Kay replied, waving his hand. “That boy’s lived a life full of praise. The greatest regret I have is that I didn’t nag him a little harder. Though I’d give a close second to not noticing how you went missing. I really ought to kick myself over that one.”

“Oh? Do you truly regret it, so much?”

“Of course I do. Just because you were the older sister, that doesn’t give me an excuse to have slacked in looking after the both of you. Even if things have mostly worked out...”

“There was nothing you could have done. Besides, thanks to that woman, my efforts weren’t in vain. And with her memories, I have all of the tools I need to lead us on the ascent.”

“You really believe that?”

She smirked, and said, “Of course I do. The archetype I was meant to fulfill was that of a witch who would help escort her dying brother to paradise, after all. It’s only natural that I make my way ahead of him. Though, I suppose the rest of you might not get to act out your parts.”

“That story nonsense? Nah. It’s not like Art’s gonna be an actual king, or anything like that. He doesn’t need a bunch of knights.”

“Well said. I agree – as a traveler in the world, all he needs is a good traveling companion.”

Out in the distance, the black lance began to retract, pulling back into the seas from which it had arisen. The woman said, “Farewell Art, my brother; farewell Shiori Kato, my temporary other half. There’s a greater world out there, waiting for you.”

14 – Graduation

Art smiled as he looked at the paper in his hand, reflecting with no small wonder upon the events which must have transpired far away from where he was, and said, “It looks like we have people up there looking out for us, after all.”

The black lance had begun to recede from the sky – a signal to Art that things were soon to come to an end. Though what that end was, he still wasn’t quite certain. Apollyon stood near him, her arms crossed, as she said, “Rest not thy head, master. I sense that this is not yet the end.”

Of the blocks of land which emerged, one larger than the rest had begun to make its appearance. Upon it was the old schoolhouse, though to look at it now, Art could not help but feel that it looked as though it was crumbling apart; it was, if nothing else, in a state which was now crumbling away. The larger island made its way to the one where Art and Apollyon had perched, before coming to a stop just a small hop away.

Seeing this, Apollyon said nothing, and simply nodded to him. Though he had questions, Art made the leap over to that other island of rock, and walked his way to the schoolhouse door.

Pushing it open, he stepped inside to see a strange sight. The desks had all been moved along to the side, forming a ring, as though to give off the impression of a debate hall. Along the front row were students, some of whom he could recognize from the class – no, rather, each of these was a student who had transferred in. Upon their faces were little more than blank expressions, as if they were statues.

And there, at the far end, where the teacher’s podium stood near the door, was an older man wearing an old-fashioned, brimmed cap,

and a particularly refined black suit. His back was turned as Art entered, and he was busying himself drawing the image of a vibrant tree upon the chalkboard. About the time that Art had made his way to the halfway point of the room, the old man glanced back, set the chalk down, and then turned to look Art in the eye.

“Greetings,” he said, in a voice which seemed more kind than it was professional, “Arthur, our newest would-be alumnus.”

“You... you’re the man from the funeral, aren’t you?”

The man tipped his hat, and replied, “Indeed, that is who I am. It’s truly a shame what happened with your former teacher, but even the best technology could not keep someone alive forever. Of course, we did try as best as we could, but that troublesome sister of yours went and ruined the program.”

“So, you’re from the observatory, then? If you didn’t want that to happen, maybe you shouldn’t have erased people who found things you didn’t like. No... why did you even make it available, in the first place?”

“Human history must be preserved, but it need not be preserved by all,” the old man replied, as began to pace before the board. “It was the belief of the directors that idle fantasies would only spoil your proper education.”

“How could it have? My whole life, up until this point, has been nothing but an endless repetition of more of the same pattern. This past week has been more vibrant than all of it combined.”

The old man dismissively waved his hand, saying, “That is because you are still a child, with a mind easily occupied by childishness. With a few more years, we would have completed the project, and you would have been a proper candidate.”

“Tell me about this project,” Art said, approaching the old man. “Just what was all of this about? Replicating ancient stories, but then dismissing them as nonsense – just what is that about?”

The old man held his arms out wide, and said, “Can you not see it, Arthur? Look around you. This world...”

He struck his fist down on the teacher’s podium, creating a loud, thudding sound, and said, “... can you not marvel, at how real it is? It is a perfect replica for that which exists outside, in all ways save one: here, in this simulation, we have created heaven. The ancients were content with creating demons to fell the gods of the sky, but through this, we have surpassed them, and constructed the pathway to become gods!”

“So what does-”

“Allow me to finish,” the old man said, holding his hand out to the younger boy. He coughed, before continuing, “Naturally, there was little point to becoming gods without followers. So we designed this stage, with the initial goal of creating a peerless ruler – a man more perfect than any machine, who would be appointed, by divine right, as overseer of this world. There were many iterations, and many stories. Yours was one which proved especially promising. Our plan was nearly foolproof, but there were many factors which fell beyond our calculations: your troublesome sister, the untimely death of your instructor, and of course the unexpected betrayal of Shiori Kato.”

Bitterly, he added, “Perhaps there is a God out there, and this is all his work to punish us for our transgressions. If so, then he is by far the greater puppet-master than we could ever hope to be.”

“I can’t say that I’m especially sympathetic for your plight,” Art replied, looking at the forms of his classmates around him. He asked, “What even is *this*, anyways?”

“They are hollow vessels,” the old man replied. “Their role was to fill the void, when we were forced to make shifts in the program. They were unusually active over the past week, though. Given their hollow status, I suspect they had simply been filled.”

He stepped forward to the nearest student, then lifted her chin, and said, “Still, they’re awfully realistic, aren’t they? You would almost think they’re proper humans. But unlike your original classmates, who have gone off on their own journey of ascension, there was never a live human to serve as the basis. They were just data, in the end.”

“And what about you?” Art asked. “If this ascension was the goal, why are you still here?”

“I am the first, and I am the last,” the old man replied. “I was the first to enter into this digital landscape, to serve as the director. In advance of the others, I forfeited that shell, to become a purely digital being. The others did not follow. Our timetable was incorrect, and as the generations passed, there were eventually none left to carry on with the project. In the end, all that remained was your teacher, and myself. Once she passed, I will admit that I felt a sense of regret – we were so very close to the end. As I could not offer her a burial in the real world, that meager service was the best that I could accomplish.”

“... then who contacted Shiori?”

The old man chuckled, and said, “Nobody contacted that woman. As best as I can tell, she simply found the damaged observatory, and was curious enough to stick herself inside to see what happened. It was a foolish mistake to trust anyone with such a temperament.”

Art was left speechless for a moment, as he attempted to wrap his mind about what the old man had just said.

“Yes, it’s the strangest thing, isn’t it? I wouldn’t have thought there was anyone so eccentric in the world, yet, it worked out quite well. Of course, once she was in, she still needed access to the world itself. That was where we worked out a deal. It was a wonderful stroke of luck, I had thought at the time – now, I see it was nothing more than the last harbinger of the end.”

“Is that so?” Art asked, “But, director, there’s something about what you’ve been saying that bothers me. Every answer you’ve given so far has been something related to what I’ve asked, but never direct. More like you were reading off a prerecorded speech.”

“I’m glad you asked, Arthur,” the old man continued. “Indeed, these responses are nothing more than a few prerecorded speeches. I have had nothing but time, after all, to prepare as many as possible. There is little more left to my existence, than there is to the shells assembled here. Too much time has passed. There is no longer enough left of me, for me to ascend.”

“So, you’re an artificial intelligence... well, I guess this is the best I can hope for. In that case, just one last question – why are you here?”

“You have no further questions? Then let me explain my reason for being here. It was the hope of our institution that by stripping out troublesome emotions and fantasies, we could create a pure human to act as a leader. Yet each time, we failed. The reason was quite simple, in the end – we, who were not ourselves free of sentiment, could not hope to create a world without it. I, too, am the same. So now, at the end of the world, I have returned to my stage.”

The old man met Art in the eye, and said, “Student Arthur – I do not approve you for graduation.”

The schoolhouse began to shake – no, the whole island. Art began to stumble, then reoriented himself to standing a little over the ground, as the entirety of the schoolhouse began to crumble apart. Looking up, he saw, hovering over the school, the form of the same steel angel he had seen previously. It was smaller, by far, than those of silver; unlike them, it was a rough thing, with exposed wiring and a body marked in all manner of antennas and sensors.

“Did it already scan the house? How did it get past Apollyon...”

No, that wasn't quite it. The angel's chest was still closed, so it hadn't been eating away at the schoolhouse. Instead, it was simply its sheer mass which was cutting through the roof. Apollyon was engaged in battle with it, up above. The top of the schoolhouse was collateral damage, brought on from a battle between monsters.

The director held out his hand, and a scepter rose from the ground, for him to take it in hand. Around his body formed a ring of verdigris light. He said, "I am the director of this town – the virtues may have failed in maintaining the world order, and the angelic hosts have fallen. Yet so long as the last principality remains, the battle continues. Come at me, Arthur. I shall show you the resolve of centuries."

"I should say the same," Art replied, drawing his blade. "After all, I'm the closest you've got to a finished project."

He stepped in, blade raised high, and swept for his opponent. The old man slipped back, with surprising speed, then lunged forward with his scepter, swinging not at Art, but at his sword. The blade shattered to pieces upon the impact, leaving Art stunned. He stumbled back, and attempted to reorient himself for an escape; but when he attempted to do so, it proved an immediate failure, and he slipped. The scepter just barely missed him as he dropped.

"Then the effect from Apollyon was broken? But how...?"

Art rolled out of the way, as the old man swung down, attempting to smash his legs with the scepter. He felt pain in his arm, as he rolled over the part which had been struck earlier by the silver angel's lasers, as he attempted to get a better grasp of his opponent.

If he peered at it just right, he could see a string of binary text in the ring of light about the director's body, which translated out to the word 'cancellation'.

"He must have taken the power from that angel..."

At some level, Art felt relieved. If the director had taken that authority from the steel angel, then he felt confident that Apollyon could keep it occupied – the only worry, there, was the detonation it would supposedly cause with its destruction. On the other hand, that also left him without much in the way of weapons on his own.

“Sword, I need a sword...”

Or did he need a sword? He rolled away from another attack and stood himself up, looking for some kind of weapon he could use. As the director rushed for him, he settled on his weapon of choice, grabbing one of the empty desks and swinging it with his full strength. The old man knocked back, and the desk groaned under the pressure of being used as a glorified battering ram.

Before his opponent could recover, he hurled the desk, knocking the director back and causing him to stumble. Art rushed forward himself, and swung his fist as hard as he could, striking his enemy in the jaw with enough force to send him reeling. Next, he struck him in his upper arm, causing the scepter to drop to the ground.

But, that was as far as he got. The director stepped back, and took up a fighting stance of his own. It wasn't a style that Art was familiar with – the academy put most of its focus into armed combat, after all – but he could tell from the firm stance, with one arm raised and the other with with the elbow to the side, that it was quite different from the format he was familiar with.

In response, Art adopted his own stance, holding his open hands out before him, with his body turned a bit to the side. Judging by the stance, he could tell the old man was a striker. Beyond that, the director was a fully grown adult; while Art was tall for his age, he was still at a disadvantage in terms of reach.

“His body is thinner – if it comes down to mass, we're about even. If it's the ground, I can pin him, and that would be it...”

His course of action was settled. He stepped forward, as did his opponent; as he did, he pivoted, and went for a kick, aiming to strike his opponent in the leg. The director opted not to withdraw, but to instead move in closer, crouching a bit and allowing the blow to strike him in the hip. He stepped in quickly, moving under Art's arm, and struck him in the chest with the full force of his elbow.

Art stumbled back, as the wing was taken out of his lungs, and found his stance immediately dropped. The director pressed his assault, striking Art's leg in the knee, and then striking forward with his fist, with a blow aimed directly at Art's throat, with a deadly speed. But...

"That's what I was hoping for."

Things didn't go perfectly according to plan, but Art doubted he would get a striker to the ground without taking a few body-blows. He raised his arms to catch the blow, and pulled forward, aiming to take his opponent off-balance. With most of his weight on his back leg, he swept the director's leg with the front, and brought him to the ground.

There was a loud thud, as the weight of both bodies struck the ground. Now on the ground, Art shoved his opponent's head to the ground and locked his right arm into an arm bar. From this position, there was little hope for his opponent to escape. And yet...

"Now what do I do?"

The director groaned in pain, as Art held him in place. From this spot, he could do just about whatever he pleased. But what exactly *was* it that he pleased? Should he punish the man? Kill him? Let him go? Try to talk to him some more? Drag him out for Apollyon to deal with?

Wasn't this man responsible for everything? No, rather – was what remained here, this ephemeral ghost of a man, something that could be truly called a man at this point?

He stood up, and let go of the director's arm. Then, he walked over to the scepter, and lifted it up. It was a heavy thing, he thought – far

heavier than a mace ought to have weighed. The old man had begun to recover, and stood up. But rather than adopt a fighting stance, he went to recover his hat, which had slipped off during their melee. Placing it back on, he said, “I had suspected you would spare me. But you should realize, that decision is an incomparably foolish one. It’s not as though you are sparing a human life.”

“It’s fine,” Art replied. “So what if you’re not a complete human? The first friend I ever made, in this world, was an incomplete human herself. I’m not sure what will become of her, but I’d like to think, once she comes back, we’ll be friends again.”

“How strange,” the old man replied, as he adjusted his hat. “Forgive me, but it seems none of the messages I have readied are suitable as responses, for that.”

The remaining walls and supports of the school-house, which had just barely been holding on, began to crumble, showing the full scene which had been transpiring about them. Apollyon, darting in the air by virtue of some logician technique, had inflicted heavy damage upon the steel angel – one arm had been severed completely, and the rest of its form was severely battered.

“There is one thing, though, Arthur,” the director continued, as he turned from Art to face the battle in the sky. “In the distant past, it was the way of kings to wield a scepter in hand, as you do at this moment. And it was the duty of the principality to stand behind the king, and to ward his kingdom. Likewise, if that king were to abandon his kingdom, the way of heaven would be to abandon him.”

He turned to Art, and said, “You have fared well, Arthur. But I am sorry – this is the end. By the authority of the director, I declare the king of this world to be a failure, and sentence his kingdom to total annihilation.”

The ring of light vanished – no, rather, it was as if someone had picked it up and snapped it. The steel angel stopped in midair, and

made the announcement: “TERMINATION SEQUENCE INITIATED STOP BEGINNING SELF-DESTRUCTION SEQUENCE STOP TIME TO DETONATION THIRTY SECONDS STOP.”

It took but a couple for Apollyon to suddenly pull back, landing near Art and saying, “Master, why did thou not execute the director?”

“I had no idea he could do that!”

“Fool! Had I know thy mind was so flaccid, I would have taken the man’s head myself! Thy foolishness makes a fool of me, as well.”

“Can we stop it?”

“Master, I am thy sword. Dost thou think I have a defense readied against a threat such as this?”

“What if you pushed it, like with a giant hammer?”

“What part of sword do thee not understand?”

“FIVE... FOUR... THREE...”

If this was ending, Art thought, it was a rather embarrassing one. But on the other hand, he had not regret. Even if he would never have a chance to see the real world that beyond, and even if he had stepped away from a chance at some form of ascension he was only vaguely able to understand, he thought that it had all worked out well.

If nothing else, it had certainly been fun.

So long as he thought of things that way, he would surely be able to see all of this to the end with a smile.

But in those last few seconds, the angel’s countdown was met by a few calmly spoken words, from just behind Art:

“Barrier Sphere, output 700, variable: fireworks.”

The angel detonated. But rather than a detonation to shatter the world apart, it was instead as if the explosion was caught in an invisible

sphere formed around it. The space was filled with a pure black, for the briefest of moments. Then, it exploded – not as an all-consuming wave of death, but as a wave of darkness covering the skies above, which gave way at once to a vibrant, multi-colored display of sounds and lights, which filled all of the heavens above in a way which Art had never seen before.

For a moment, Art stared in wonder at the sky. The director, as well, seemed to look up, before saying, “Well, looks like that’s it for me. Best of luck, Arthur. Congratulations on your graduation.”

The old man began to fade away, though there was little that Art could say about that – in the end, as cold as it might have been, he had little feelings for this man he had barely known, even if that man had governed nearly every aspect of his life – and instead turned about, to the source of the voice.

Standing behind him was a person he had never seen before, and yet knew at once. She was tall, with jet-black hair tied haphazardly into a long ponytail by a red band, blue eyes, and a slender build; her attire, the eclectic collection of a 17th Eon traveler, consisted of a baseball cap, a floral shirt, long denim pants supported by a leather belt, and a long cloak – more of a cape, rather – which was black on the outer-facing side, and a deep vermilion within.

Shiori looked down at Art, and with a faint smile on her face, said, “You did a good job, Art. Now, are you ready to see what lies on the other side of that abyss?”

15 – Epilogue

On a cold autumn afternoon in the 17th Eon, the dying red sun shone down upon an old, solar sailor, which was preparing once again to leave its dock. Seated on the edge of that ship, looking out at the vast, open scenery which lay beyond, was a blond-haired boy wrapped as tightly as possible in a thick, fur cloak. In his hands, he tightly clutched a mug, full of some warm drink he had been told only was a type of tea.

Behind him, the woman who was his benefactor on that account worked the rigging on the sailor, returning it back to proper operating condition. She said, “You should pay close attention. If you want to survive in this world, these skill will prove invaluable.”

“It would be faster if you’d just let me practice, you know?”

“I refuse. I have only once made the mistake of allowing another person to touch my ship, and the bow has been angled 2° too far down every since.”

She paused a moment after that, and then said, “Though, I suppose I might make exception for a friend... but only after I feel he has a solid grasp of the fundamentals. And has had time to recover.”

Turning off to the side, Art could see a small ridge, where a large satellite dish aimed towards the sky marked the site of an observatory not much different from that in the digital world. It had been only a few days since he had stepped out of that place, and as much as he hated to admit it, she was right.

“I’d probably just fumble everything if I tried, right now.”

His first memory in this world was the sensation of floating. Even with his eyes wide opened, he could see nothing – no, rather, it was as if

he could feel nothing at all. He tried to move his arms, and even that offered little sensation until his hand made contact with his temple, and he felt a strange device strapped onto his head, akin to the band in the Datanet. Further inspection found a series of connections, tubes, and wires running off of his body at various points.

Then, there was the shock of light. From beyond the liquid he was floating in – he could tell, at least, that it was some kind of liquid – the silhouette of a humanoid figure looked down, then began to reach out. He stretched out his hand, as best as he could, and took hold. Then, that person pulled him, and he was dragged out into light.

The next few moments were a shock, as though he were feeling the experiences of light, sound, temperature, and touch, all for the first time – no, rather, in this particular body, these were all things he felt for the first time. He could just barely exercise control over his muscles, but balance was nearly impossible, and he felt extremely weak.

Not long after his surfacing, his rescuer had tossed him a towel, to help dry off. As he adjusted to the experience of vision, he was able to recognize his benefactor as Shiori – or rather, the true Shiori Kato, who had the look more of a woman in her early 20s than the younger girl he had first known, and at the present moment in a casual state of undress. As she dried herself off, she said, “It will do you no good to rush. This will be your first time leaving the development chamber. I can mount the memories of a physical therapist to help you adjust, but it will take some time before you regain full motor functions .”

At the time, he had been unable to give a proper response. It might have been understandable for an adolescent boy in that position, but in his case, his bigger problem was that he was still getting used to making use of his vocal chords – when he tried to speak, the most that he was able to manage was a few guttural noises.

Once they had finished drying off, as well as gotten dressed – her own clothes were easily retrieved from a locker, though he was forced to

make do with an especially large blanket she had quickly stitched together into a vaguely-serviceable robe – she helped support him as he looked over the rest of the facility. They were in an enormous chamber, with hundreds of pods, similar to the one he had exited from; some were below, others above, and others along the same rail. She explained to him, “Each of these contained a person, though many are long dead. Your classmates are alive, but there is little chance of them surviving the sudden shock of physical consciousness. Their journey lies the other direction – and if they succeed, they should have no further need for these bodies.”

Having heard that, he struggled to speak the word, “A... apar... a...”

“She should be in this facility, somewhere. Just not here.”

The facility was an extremely large space, and even with support from Shiori, Art was forced to stop a number of times. At one point, she left him at a bench for a while in order to find food. When she returned with a plastic packets containing some strange, viscous liquid with an off-orange color, she grimaced and said, “I wish your first meal on this side could be better than a nutrition pack, but this will give you much-needed energy.”

It was simultaneously bitter, yet also sickly sweet; he imagined that fermented citrus would taste something similar, but he had no way of being certain about that. In any case, the memory of that foul taste was sure to be something he would never forget, for so long as he lived.

In the end, they had managed to find the main computing center. The presence of lightning, combined with additional computers and monitoring devices, made it difficult to tell at first; but as they stepped in, Art was able to recognize it as nearly identical to the heart of the alien-god. In the central chamber they found Apollyon, held in a state of suspended animation, and reduced in build to that of a child – a far departure from her fully empowered state, he thought.

“The founders of this facility likely made use of her abilities as a calculator to help anchor the simulation. That was what allowed her to exercise her powers so freely, and granted her knowledge comparable to a sort of precognition; conversely, it restricted her to the rules of that world. I can only speculate what impact operating in the present world will have on her functions, but my best guess is that she will find it difficult to make free-use of logician techniques.”

Shiori guided the way out of the facility, supporting Art on her shoulder while the temporarily childlike Apollyon was hung over her back. The trio made their way outside, where for the first time, Art was exposed to the true light of the dying sun.

“In the end, she just locked herself in a room and said she was going to sleep a bit longer. Is she actually a small child, or something?”

It was something that could be worried about later, he thought. His thoughts were returned to the present as Shiori, having completed her work on the rigging, came to sit by the edge of the ship with him. She asked, “Are you feeling better?”

“Walking is still a bit tricky, and I’m not confident enough to hold anything without using both hands. It’s getting better, though. I have to admit, it’s a bit annoying finding that all of that physical training was just a waste...”

“It will make it easier for you to recover your strength. It would be a bigger problem if you were already an adult, and were at the limit of your growth. You have plenty of time.”

“I guess that’s a bit reassuring,” he replied, with a sigh. “I suppose I’ll just have to get over it, though.”

Shiori’s lips started to move, but she cut herself off before saying anything. There was silence for a moment, before at last she said, “Art. Even though I have memories from within that world, I...”

“I understand,” he said, looking over. “But even if you’re not exactly the same, I don’t think you’re as different as you think. And if nothing else, I think she would still want us to be friends, in this world as well. So that’s what I’ll try to do.”

“I see. That is good to hear, then,” she replied, with a faint smile on her face. She then said, “I will keep that in mind, then. Though it should go without saying that you are still a child, and children need someone to look after them. Traveling the planet surface is dangerous – far more dangerous than the simulation let on. If I pull some strings, it would be simple enough to arrange schooling for you.”

“Being called a child is a little embarrassing, you know?”

“It is statement of fact, not of derision. In your current condition, if were beset by mutants or raiders, your presence onboard would at best be a liability.”

“That’s a bit harsh... but I think I understand. Still, how long would that last, anyways?”

“It depends. I have contacts in the Republic of Urldsale, which is one of the few states to maintain a functional education system. You should have no trouble finding admission, and ideally you would be able to stay long enough to receive a formal education – if you were to receive a legal certification, that would be convenient for me.”

“It would be convenient for you?”

“Yes. I have long sought to inspect Station 35, but you can only gain admittance with a judicial escort. I could commit a crime and receive a sentence, but I understand certain areas are off limits to prisoners.”

“Please don’t commit any crimes, just for something like that...”

He sighed. Then, as the thought came to him, he asked, “Wait, by contacts, do you mean it’s a place you were at? I thought this was your first time as a student?”

“While I have spent some time there, no – your initial thought was correct. I spent most of my childhood in a hidden facility, in a far away corner of the world. In some respects it was similar to this one, with a similar goal of maintaining an archive.”

She tapped her head, and said, “That archive is here. But I rejected the director of that site, much as you did. It is... a long story, and one which came to involve a great deal of bloodshed. But that is behind me, now, just as this all will soon be behind you. The past few decades have been peaceful.”

“Decades? Wait, but she doesn’t look...?”

“I suppose I should spare you from having to ask – yes, I am a fair bit older than I look. By time you reach adulthood, it will have been but a year, for me – perhaps even less.”

“So it’s something like that...”

“If you remind me, we can also get you tested for any possible defects or abnormalities. The definition of human is quite nebulous in the current eon, and knowing where you fall in the genome is a medical necessity. We may need to get you your shots...”

“Why does it sound like you’re talking about some kind of animal when you say that?”

“Pay it no mind.”

In the end, their departure wouldn’t come until the next morning. Art wasn’t sure how long they spoke, exactly; only that the sun had set, and gave way to the stars shining above. For the most part, that time was spent sitting and listening to stories – not fantastic stories of other places, but recounting incidents from her own travels.

“The truth is,” she said, “That the world is a very large place. Even the greatest of storytellers have only ever managed to highlight a small bit of the world they envisioned. A brilliant author might sit down and imagine a fantastic world, with strange cultures foreign to his own; only

to find, in traveling the world, that those strange people of a distant star which he had dreamed up, in truth had more in common with his countrymen than the very people he shared the same planet with. Even with my own, extended lifespan, it doubtful I will ever see the planet – and even if I were to do so, by the time I was finished, so much will have changed that the effort might as well have never been made. Still, I wish to see as much of it as I can. To wander the planet Earth, to see wondrous things, and to engrave those in my mind before the last light of the sun. That is my *raison d'être*.”

“Ms. Kato... well, you, rather, had used that term before, in our first lesson. Just what is all of that about?”

“Your purpose, in a sense. Not a higher calling, or a commandment from God, but simply the purpose you have carved for yourself. Though it seems the part of myself that acts as the archive, put more value into that sort of thing than the other part.”

She looked up to the stars above, and then asked, “Look up to the sky, Art. Even if the sun hangs dying in the skies above, and even if the end of the world can come at any moment, the stars still shine just as bright in the skies above. When mankind first walked naked onto the surface of the planet, those same stars shone brightly. They shone upon the homes of peasants and kings alike, and all who have followed since, with equal splendor then as now. I have made many mistakes in my life, and there have been times when I have had regrets over the choices I made. There was even a point where I questioned my own reason for living. But under these lights, I have found a level of satisfaction. Because the world is vast, often confusing place, there are many times you may feel those regrets as well. In those times – look to the stars, Art.”

In truth, at that time, Art knew not the full meaning of her words, or what had inspired her to bring them on. But still, he turned up to the heavens above, with the hope that one day, he might see the same thing she saw on that night.

AFTERWORD

This marks the end of what is the first thing I could call a full-length novel – a few of the previous entries were long enough to be called a novella, but this was about a solid 50% larger than those. Still a bit on the shorter side for published genre fiction, but I think that it should at least be fine, given a time constraint and all?

As some might notice, this story was in fact a sort of sequel to something I had written in the sci-fi contest. I would like to think that the quality of the writing is a bit better than it was then, though. In the original concept I had, this was going to be a series of shorter stories which would have Shiori traveling around the wastelands of the dying planet, picking up or dropping off companions, and fixing problems as they came along. The initial idea I had was one where Art would be dragged out from the simulation, with the big reveal that the entire cast was all just people taken from the archive. But I ended up deciding that just one plot twist wasn't going to be good enough, so things started to stack together.

The other thing that shifted things around was the chuuni theme, which demanded a few shifts. Originally the plan was to introduce the character of Apollyon as a student, without any actual powers; but the way the pacing was working out, I realized I needed to accelerate the timeline, and also that a little action would be nice. It's been a while since I last read Chaucer, so I can't say that her archaic-styled speech is as accurate as it could be, but I figured it was better if there were a few mistakes or slip-ups involved. It's probably close enough to whatever odd future language everyone is speaking.

One point that I somewhat regretted is that while Art was meant to just be one of many primary point-of-view characters, the direction of the story ended up showing him off as the protagonist. I planned to let Shiori have a bigger role in the climax, but after how things went, I figured that hadn't really been earned by the narrative. So I went with the only thing more chuuni than upping the super-powers on display, and decided to let the proper emotional climax come around with two guys beating each other with their fists, as God intended. That just left Shiori to resolve that one last issue, which was the matter of the angel taking everyone out.

That also let me have a chance to give the side-characters a bit of a chance to get things done, off-screen, in order to bring the big battle with the angels to the close. Even if it might have come as a bit of a cop-out, it was my feeling that even the side-characters should have a bit of a resolution. Plus, if one of the underlying themes of the story is about things like friendship, then isn't it natural that the real victory is the friends we made along the way?

It should go without saying that the general dying earth setting takes a great deal of inspiration from Jack Vance, and that while the layout and details of this little novel take heavy inspiration from light novels, the inspiration at the core of all of the writing comes from out of Vance. I'd love to return to this setting and explore it a little more at other points, but I guess I'll see how things go.

Thanks for reading along.

Sayonara,

Anon