Kino No Tabi

Book one of THE BEAUTIFUL WORLD

Story by
Keiichi Sigsawa

Illustrated by
Kouhaku Kuroboshi

POP
FICTION

STORY Keiichi Sigsawa
ILLUSTRATIONS Kouhaku Kuroboshi
TRANSLATION Andrew Cunningham
ENGLISH ADAPTATION Maya Bohnhoff
BOOK DESIGN AND LAYOUT Jose Macasocol, Jr.
COVER DESIGN Al-Insan Lashley
ART DIRECTOR Anne Marie Horne

SENIOR EDITOR Nicole Monastirsky
JUNIOR EDITOR Kara Stambach
DIGITAL IMAGING MANAGER Chris Buford
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C.E.O. & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER Stuart Levy

First TOKYOPOP printing: October 2006
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the USA

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First published in 2000 by
Media Works Inc., Tokyo, Japan.
English translation rights arranged with
Media Works Inc.

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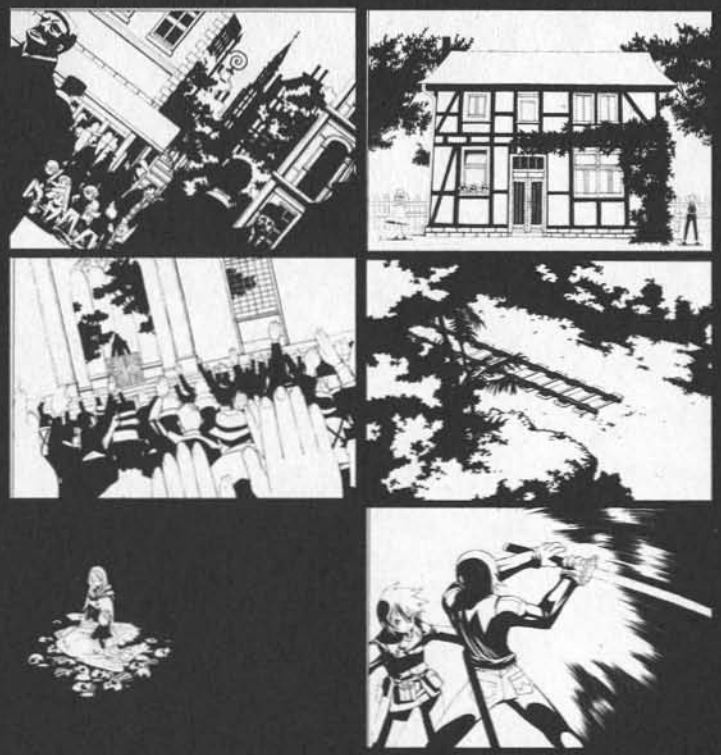
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sigsawa, Keiichi, 1972-
[Kino no tabi. English]
Kino no tabi : the beautiful world / by Keiichi Sigsawa ; [illustrations, Kouhaku Kuroboshi ; translations, Andrew Cunningham].

p. cm.
"First published in 2000 by Media Works, Inc., Tokyo, Japan"--Vol. 1, t.p. verso.
Audience: 13-23.
ISBN 1-59816-455-4 (v. 1)
I. Kuroboshi, Kohaku. II. Cunningham, Andrew. 1979- III. Title. IV.
Title: Beautiful world.
PZ49.31.S47513 2006 2006010360
[Fic]--dc22

The world is not beautiful, therefore it is.

This English edition is presented as a linear narrative. We join with Keiichi Sigsawa in bidding you happy reading.



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Prologue

And then there was darkness.

There was no light. No moon, no stars. Only the sound of the wind in the trees, wafting through the darkness.

"You know . . . it's kind of like . . ." Kino trailed off. A contemplative silence followed. Or perhaps sleep.

"Kind of like what?" Hermes asked.

"I sometimes wonder if I'm really just a terrible person. Sometimes I feel like I am. Sometimes, it actually makes *sense* that I am. Because I can't change things; or worse—I just *tell* myself I can't, so I don't. But whenever I get like that—feeling terrible, I mean—everything else—the world, the people I meet—it all becomes incredibly beautiful to me. I fall in love with it. That's why I keep traveling—because I want to experience *more*. Because sometimes, I get to see some good. Maybe even *do* some good."

Kino paused to entertain another thought. "Still, I know if I keep on moving, I'll always see more sadness, more tragedy—*experience* more sadness and tragedy."

"But if you experience it—if you *know* it's tragic—how can you be a terrible person? Terrible people don't experience other people's pain . . . do they?"

"I don't know. I only know it doesn't mean I'm going to stop traveling. I love traveling, and even though I see so much death—even though I have to kill people sometimes—I want to keep doing it. And . . ."

"And?"

"I can stop anytime." Kino's tone was resolute. "So I keep going . . . You see?"

"Honestly? Not really."

"Oh. Well, that's okay."

"You sure? I mean, it helps if we're of one mind about things . . ."

"How can I expect you to understand it if *I* don't? And I don't. Not really. I'm still confused, Hermes. And in order to find my way out of this confusion, I keep traveling." As if there were a road that led away from it.

"Ah . . ."

"I'm going to sleep. We've got a long way to go tomorrow. Good night, Hermes."

"Good night, Kino."

Thick cloth softly rustled, and then utter silence filled the darkness again.

Grownup Country

When I met the man who called himself Kino, I was eleven years old and still living in the village where I was born. I can honestly no longer remember what I was called then. I do remember that it was the name of a flower, and that if you changed the sound just a little bit, it became a terrible insult. The other children made fun of me a lot.

Kino was tall and very thin when I met him. He came to my village on foot. The young gate guards were not at all sure that they should let him in. They had to contact their superiors and wait for their judgment. While they waited, the guards forced him to apply a powdery, white insect repellent to his head merely to humiliate him. It didn't appear to achieve the desired effect.

I noticed him while he was being forced to wait, watched him as he entered with immense dignity, and never took my eyes off him until he was right in front of me.

By then, the sun was setting, and his long shadow came all the way to my feet and then covered me.

He was wearing a type of boot that I had never seen before. He wore a black jacket and a long brown coat that was so dusty, I wondered if he'd found it in a hole in the ground. He carried a tattered backpack on his shoulder. He was thin, too. So thin, it made me hungry to look at him. His cheeks were sunken, his hair disheveled. White powder still clung to the strands.

I was taller than any of my friends, but he still had to stoop to speak to me. "Hey there, little girl. My name is Kino. I'm a traveler. What's your name?"

I thought Kino was a good name, short and easy to say. Better than some stupid flower name. I told him my name anyway.

"What a pretty name. Tell me, is there a hotel in town? If you know a place that's not too expensive and has a shower, I sure would appreciate it. I'm awfully tired."

At the time, my mother and father ran a cheap hotel. "Sounds like our place," I said.

Kino smiled happily. That was just what he wanted, he told me.

I led him to my home.

Father clearly disliked Kino on sight, but his face showed his disapproval for only a moment before he put on a strained smile. Then he rose from behind his desk to lead my new friend to his room. He did not, after all, disapprove of Kino's *money*.

Kino picked up his bag again, thanked me, and went up the stairs after my father.

I went to my own room. There was a banner on the wall with "Three more days" written on it in big red letters.

The next day, I woke up around noon and washed my hair in the bedroom sink. My father and mother hadn't come to wake me up. After all, it was my final week. The banner in my room now read "Two more days."

I heard a noise at the rear of the house, and went out through the garden.

Behind my house was a big pile of scrap metal with bits of machines that had broken down years before. The village children often played around in it—that is, until the sun went down.

Kino crouched next to the scrap heap, hammering on something. It was a wheel rim. Not the thick kind that goes on a car, but a thin one. There was a motorcycle frame lying next to Kino. I supposed the wheel belonged to it.

Kino noticed me watching. "Good morning," he said. His hair was still disheveled, but the insect powder was gone, so it shined a bit more.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm mending this motorcycle. I asked if I could buy it, but your father said it was an old piece of junk and I could have it if I wanted."

"You can fix it?"

"I can *cure* it." Kino laughed, adding that it would take some time because it was in pretty sorry condition.

When he had finished hammering the wheel into shape, he attached it to the motorcycle. Then he busied himself hammering on things, pulling on them, and putting little pieces together to make bigger, more complicated pieces.

I watched him for a while. Then I got hungry, and went into the house to get something for breakfast.

After breakfast, I went out to check on Kino again. He had about half the motorcycle "cured." It was standing upright now, leaning on a bent kickstand.

"It looks just like a motorcycle I used to travel with a long time ago," Kino said, turning around. He was polishing a rod of some kind.

"How long will it take?" I asked casually. "To finish curing it, I mean?"

"Mm, about another day, I think. He should be moving around soon enough."

He? "Motorcycles can move on their own?" I asked, latching onto Kino's strange choice of words.

"Well, to be completely accurate, not on his own, no. Someone has to sit on top of him, make a pact with him. Then he can move."

"What's a 'pact'? "

Kino looked at me, and patted the motorcycle's gas tank lightly, almost stroking it. "In this case, the contract is a promise to help each other."

"Help each other how?"

"Well, I can't run nearly as fast as a motorcycle can drive," he said.

I nodded. He *was* sort of scrawny and probably couldn't run very fast or far.

"And motorcycles may be able to go fast, but they can't keep their balance unless someone is sitting on top of them."

"Okay." I nodded.

"So I sit on top of the motorcycle and provide balance; the motorcycle provides speed, and we can enjoy our travels together."

"So you help each other. That's a pact," I concluded.

"Exactly. So as soon as he wakes up, I'll ask him what he thinks."

"Will he tell you?"

"Of course!" he said, and winked at me.

I went back inside, made some tea, and brought a cup out to Kino. He sipped it and said it was very good. When he'd finished a little less than half the cup, he said, "We should pick a name for him. What do you think?"

"What did you call your old motorcycle?"

"Hermes."

"Sounds good to me."

"Really? Hermes it is, then." Kino smiled happily.

I believe I smiled back.

After that, Kino resumed curing the motorcycle. I sat behind him, watching for a while, then asked, "What do you do, Kino?"

"Do?" he asked, without turning around. His hands kept on working.

"You're a grownup, right?"

"Well, more of one than you are, at any rate."

"But every grownup has to do some kind of job, right?"

Kino looked a little confused, I thought. Now I understand why. "Um . . . yes, I guess so."

"Then what's your job?" I pressed.

"Hmm, I suppose you could say I'm a traveler," Kino replied. "Yes. A professional traveler."

"So your job is to go to all kinds of different places?"

"Yeah."

"Even bad places?"

"Sometimes. But most places are good, and I have a very good time."

"Well, then that's not a job," I said. Kino's hands stopped working, and he turned around to look at me. "Jobs are hard," I explained. "They're never fun. They're not supposed to be. They're just something you have to do to stay alive. If you have fun doing it, then traveling is not a job."

"Really?" he murmured, tilting his head to one side.

I thought he was laughing at me, so I tried to show him I understood how the world worked. "That's why tomorrow—no, the day after tomorrow—I've got to have an operation."

He looked puzzled. "What kind of operation?"

"To become a grownup. So this is my 'final week.' "

Kino asked me what I meant. At first, I was surprised that he didn't know about the "final week." Then realized I shouldn't be. Of course he didn't know about the final week; he wasn't from around here. I decided I should explain. Even though it would take a long time, I knew he would listen.

In my village, I told Kino, everyone who's over twelve was considered a grownup. Everyone under that age was a child. Grownups were people with jobs and responsibilities.

The grownups would always tell their children, "You children get to do whatever you like. And that's okay. But grownups can never do what they like, because they have jobs. You need a job to live. Your job is the most important thing in your life. When you are at work, you have to do things you don't want to do, even things you think are mistakes. But don't worry. When you turn twelve, you'll have an operation. We'll open up your head and take out the child inside of you. This operation will transform you into a grownup. Then your mommy and daddy can relax, too."

The week before this operation—the week before each child's twelfth birthday—was called the "final week." No one from the village was allowed to speak to that child. They spent their last week in solitude. I don't think anyone ever told us why this was, although every child I knew had a theory.

When I finished my clumsy explanation, Kino said, "I see. That's a brutal system."

"Why do you say that? With this operation, every child can become a proper grownup!" I was genuinely puzzled. *If you couldn't have the operation and become a grownup, what would become of you?*

"I don't really know what you mean by 'proper grownup.' Is a proper grownup someone who does things they don't like? Can you really enjoy life when all you do is stuff you hate? And forcing everyone to have an operation . . . I don't really understand that, either." Kino frowned.

I had to ask, "You said you were more grown-up than me. So did you have an operation or not?"

"No. No operation."

"So you're a child?"

"No."

He wasn't a child, and he wasn't a grownup? I didn't get it. "So what are you?"

"What am I? I'm Kino. A man named Kino. That's all. And I travel."

"You like traveling?"

"Yes, I do. That's why I travel. Of course, you can't make a living traveling, so I sell medicinal herbs I find on the way or unusual items I pick up here and there. You could call that a job, I suppose. But fundamentally, what I do is travel. I do what I like to do."

"What you like . . ." The thought struck hard. I was very jealous. Until then, I had believed that children should have this operation and become grownups. Liking something or hating something were feelings only children were allowed to have.

My childhood was almost over. And now, here was Kino telling me it might not have to be.

"What is it you like the most?" Kino asked.

I answered quickly, "I like to sing!"

Kino smiled at me. "I like to sing too. I often sing while I travel." And he started singing. It was a fast song, and I didn't understand the words, and he was really bad at singing. When he finished the song, he said, "But I'm not very good, am I?"

"No," I agreed wholeheartedly and laughed, relieved that he knew he was terrible and I didn't have to hurt his feelings.

Kino chuckled. "But even though I can't sing, I enjoy trying."

I knew exactly how he felt. I sometimes sang when I was by myself and there was no one around to hear my song except me.

So I sang a song I liked. It was slow, but happy, a very pretty melody. I still sing this song often.

When I finished singing, Kino applauded. "You're really *good!* I'm surprised. You may be the best singer I've ever heard."

Embarrassed, I thanked him.

"You like to sing, and you're really good at singing, so why not become a singer?" Kino asked.

"I *can't* become a singer."

"Why not?"

"Because my mother and father aren't singers."

He shrugged as if to say he didn't get it, so I thought I'd better explain it to him.

"The reason grownups have children is so they have someone to take over their jobs, right? Things have always been that way. It's—"

"Custom? Duty?" Kino supplied.

I nodded.

Kino said, "I see . . . that's the way your village is." He looked very sad about it, but turned back to curing the motorcycle.

I watched the back of his head for a moment, then said, "It's not like that everywhere?"

He paused in his work, then shook his head.

I went back to my room.

That evening, I lay in my bed, thinking. I had always believed that the best thing—the *only* thing to do—was have the operation and become a grownup. Now, I started to wonder if there wasn't something unnatural about the way my village did things. Something unnatural about *not* doing what you liked for the rest of your life, but rather something you hated. And worse—not even being able to *say* you hated it.

I thought about this for some time, and I reached a sort of conclusion. I didn't want to be a child always, but if I was going to grow up, I wanted to do it myself. I didn't want to be forced to grow up the same way as everyone else. Even if I got the order and timing wrong, I wanted to become the kind of grownup *I* wanted to be—the kind of grownup Kino was. And I wanted to find a job that I was good at, and that I liked—both at the same time.

I wanted to be *myself.*

The next morning when I woke, "Last day!" was written on a banner on the wall. I went downstairs to the outdoor patio at the front of the hotel, where my parents were. They were not allowed to talk to me, but they could respond if I spoke to them first.

I rewound everything I'd thought about the night before, and said, "I don't want to have an operation to become a grownup. Is there any other way to grow up? A way to become a grownup and stay myself?" I just asked, not making a fuss.

But those words were to change the course of my destiny. And Kino's as well.

My parents reacted as if they were having a nightmare. They stared at each other, terror leaping in their eyes.

My father shrieked, "Stupid child! How can you *say* that! You wicked, *wicked* little girl! How dare you speak such . . . such treason! Such blasphemy! Do you want to stay a child your whole life and *never* grow up?"

Then he looked at my mother, and she took over—her words lashing out like a whip, stark fear in her eyes. "Apologize, you silly child! Say you're sorry! To your father! To me! To the village! Beg us to forgive your foolish whims! Promise you will never again say such a thing, and we'll . . . we'll forget it ever happened."

"Why would you suddenly say something like that? Did somebody teach you these insane ideas?!" my father shouted.

It makes sense to me now that they reacted as they did—after all, neither of them had been able to resist having this operation. They had convinced themselves it was a wonderful thing. It was a defense mechanism to protect their own peace of mind. But while my mother was eager to believe these were the foolish ramblings of a child, my father could not dismiss my words so easily. He looked for a way to attribute them to someone else. Someone like Kino.

Hearing the commotion, nearby grownups began to gather round the patio.

"What's wrong?"

"I heard shouting . . ."

Their manner was reproachful, since my parents were not behaving the way proper grownups should.

To my surprise, my father said, "I do beg your pardon. My foolish daughter said the most terrible thing! She does not wish to undergo her operation tomorrow!"

I was stunned that he had told them this—that he hadn't tried to cover his shame.

Our neighbors' response was predictable.

"What? Idiot! You raised her poorly! This is *your* fault!"

"Grow up without an operation? The very idea is insane!"

"How can you talk about the great operation that way? You might be a child, but some things are unpardonable!"

Then they began to shriek at me, like something had broken inside and they had to continue until they ran out of words.

"Please forgive us! We have allowed her to stray from moral ground!" my mother wailed.

My father glared down at me. "This is what happens when you say stupid things. You have brought shame upon us! It was that filthy traveler, I tell you. He put these imbecilic ideas in your head!" My father grabbed me by the arm and, dragging me behind him, went looking for Kino.

Kino was outside the rear entrance. Standing next to him was the motorcycle, sparkling like new. It was hard to believe it had been junk just two days before. Kino's oversized backpack was strapped behind the back seat, shaking in time with the engine's vibrations. The back tire didn't touch the ground, but spun in the air, suspended from the kickstand. Draped across the seat was the brown coat Kino had been wearing when he entered the village. It was clean now, but no less worn.

My father screamed at him, shaking me so hard my teeth rattled, "You there! Yeah, you . . . dirt-ball!"

When Kino turned to him with unruffled calm, my father's fury shifted to madness, and he shrieked, sounding more animal than human.

Kino looked down at me and said quietly, "This is what the operation gives you? Perhaps you're better off without it." He winked at me.

I giggled. In an instant, my mind felt clear and calm. I was resolved.

"You! *You!*" My father shook his clenched fist at Kino, spittle and froth flying from his mouth.

Kino regarded my father with the patience of a saint. "Yes?"

"Yes? *Yes?* I'll give you 'yes!' On your knees! Beg for pardon! From me! From everyone in this town!"

Cocking his head to the side, Kino asked, "Forgiveness? Whatever for?"

In answer, my father howled again. His face was red, and his whole body shook. I looked up into this proper grownup's face. He didn't look any different than I did when I'd had a fight over something stupid with a friend and run home crying.

He was about to yell something else, or possibly just howl again, when a voice cut in, "I think that's enough." It was a village elder.

I didn't exactly know what his proper title was at that time, but I knew he was an important man. His manner was as different from that of these frenzied adults as could be. Was there, I wondered, an operation for that too?

The village elder spoke to Kino. "Traveler, in every village, in every home, there are different customs. You know this."

It was not a question, but Kino answered, "I do."

"In this village too, we have our own customs. These customs are ancient and are not to be altered by any actions you take. I'm certain you see that."

Kino's shoulders slumped. "I do. I was just leaving your village, Elder. If I stay here any longer, I'm liable

to be killed. Are there protocols I must observe in order to leave?"

The elder said there were not. "If you go straight that way," he said, pointing in the direction that the motorcycle was facing, "you'll reach a gate. Use it. But I don't believe your life is in any danger. You entered this village properly, following the procedures. I guarantee your safety until you are through the gate. This is the Land of Grownups, after all."

Kino turned toward me, crouched down, and looked into my face. I became dimly aware that my father no longer stood over me. "Goodbye, little flower," Kino said.

"Do you have to leave?" I wanted him to stay longer. I wanted to know him after my operation. I wanted to talk to Kino as an adult.

But Kino said, "I only stay three days in any one place. You can learn almost everything about most places in that length of time. Besides, if you stay longer than that, you won't be able to visit as many new and different lands. Goodbye. Be well."

I waved at him, and Kino was about to climb aboard the motorcycle when my father reappeared, carrying a long, thin carving knife. My mother was behind him, weeping and wringing the front of her blouse.

Kino turned around.

My father looked at the village elder, holding the knife up for his inspection. The elder nodded.

I gazed at my father, thinking only how strange it was that he had a carving knife outside. It was just so out of place.

Kino asked the village elder why my father had brought a knife.

The elder, in the same precise and detached tone of voice he had been using all along, spoke the most dreadful words, "He will use the knife to dispose of the girl."

All color drained from Kino's already pale face. "What?"

"She has denied her need for the operation and disobeyed her parents. A child like that can hardly be left to run wild. Children are at all times, for very good reason, the possessions of their parents. Parents made their children, and they have every right to dispose of a flawed one."

That was when I realized that my father intended to kill me. I didn't want to die, but there was nothing I could do about it. I looked up and saw an expression on my father's face I had never before seen.

"Good for nothing," he whispered, and his words held pure hatred.

"Traveler. Please step aside. It is dangerous here," the village elder said.

My father came at me with the knife. I saw the silver blade glisten, and thought, *How pretty.*

Then the world went silent and time slowed down to a mere crawl. I saw Kino dive toward me from the side, trying to stop my father's lunge. But the knife was coming at me too fast.

Thank you, but you're too late.

The blade was inches from me when my father twisted it to one side and caught Kino in the chest as he dove between us. It slid into his body.

Sound returned, and I heard a strange cry. Kino stood as if embracing my father, the end of the carving knife protruding from his back. He fell at my feet, the knife still stuck in him. His body hit the ground with a dull *thud* and lay still. I knew he was already dead.

There was a gasp from the gathered villagers, followed by a long silence.

Unable to think, I took a few steps backward and collided with the motorcycle. It wobbled on its stand but remained upright.

Then my father laughed. He looked around him, and said, "You saw it! You saw how this man leapt between us. There was no time for me to turn away. I meant to kill my daughter, you know that. But I killed him instead." He turned to the village elder. "What should we do about such a horrible accident?"

I knew what my father said was absurd. Every grownup there knew it as well. They all eyed each other. They looked at my parents, then at the elder.

After a moment, the elder said, "Well, the traveler did jump in the way of the knife, so I suppose there's nothing to be done. It's not as if you *tried* to stab him. It was, as you've correctly said, an accident. A very unfortunate accident. You are guilty of nothing. Does everyone agree?"

The grownups around them nodded, their eyes blank and wide. "Yes, of course, it was an accident. Very unfortunate. Very sad," they kept saying.

My father bowed to the village elder. "And this wicked child?"

The elder turned his dark eyes to me. They were like chips of onyx—flat, black, silent. "You may dispose of her. If there is anyone to blame for the traveler's death . . ." He shrugged and turned away.

My father bowed a second time and said, "Your wisdom brings me much contentment."

My mother merely stood behind him, staring at me with her hands over her mouth. She said nothing, this woman who had once called me her "little flower," just as Kino had . . . before he died.

Even though I knew they would kill me, at that time, I was happy that at least I was to die without the operation—without becoming a "proper grownup."

My father reached down and tried to pull the knife out of Kino's body, but it resisted. My mother bent down to help. The hilt was covered in blood, so she pushed my father's hands aside and grasped it through the sleeve of her white blouse. He put his hands around hers and slowly, they pulled it out—inch by inch—with a horrible grating sound.

Thinking back, this delay was Kino's final gift to me. As if, somehow, he held onto the blade of that knife to buy me time. For as my parents worked at the knife, struggling for control of it, a little voice whispered in my ear.

"Can you ride a bike?" it said. It sounded like the voice of a little boy, younger, even, than me.

"Yes," I whispered back.

The voice continued, "If you stay here, you're going to die."

"I'd rather die than stay alive and have the operation. That operation's worse than dying if it makes me like them."

Again, the horrid grating of metal on bone. About half the knife was out.

"But honestly, do you want to die?"

Honestly? "I'd prefer to live."

"Then," the voice said quietly, "time for a third choice."

"What's that?"

Almost all of the knife was out.

"You can ride a bicycle, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then, climb up on the seat of the motorcycle behind you. Grab the handlebars. Twist your right hand toward you and lean your body forward. It'll be just like riding a bicycle—a big, heavy bicycle."

With a horrible sucking sound that I still hear some nights in my sleep, the knife slid out of Kino's corpse, and my father and mother fell over backward. My father had the knife. The grownups around them cried out in alarm, and then laughed nervously.

"And then what?" I asked, too loudly.

The grownups looked around at me strangely, as if they'd forgotten I was there—as if they'd forgotten what this was all about. My father held the horrible carving knife in his bloodstained hand and grinned at me. He was terrifying, but I felt no fear.

"We drive away!" the little voice cried.

I spun around and leapt onto the motorcycle's seat just as my father rushed toward me, waving the knife. My mother screamed.

As I had been told to do, I twisted the right handgrip and leaned forward. The motorcycle fell heavily from its

stand and the engine roared to life. My body was thrown backward, and I clung desperately to the handlebars and gripped the gas tank with my knees.

The cluster of grownups was suddenly behind me.

I was riding the motorcycle. And it *was* just like riding a big, heavy bicycle. I steadied the handlebars lightly as we crossed uneven ground. Once on the flat road, we sped away.

"Good work! Keep it up!" the voice cried. "Keep a firm grip on the tank with your thighs. That'll keep you steady. I'm going to tell you how to change gears now."

I followed the voice's instructions. The wind was in my face, making my eyes water. Through my tears, I could see the gate ahead of us getting bigger and bigger, then suddenly it was behind us too, and we were out on the open road, running through seemingly endless fields of green, green grass. It was the first time in my life I had ever been beyond the village gates.

I thought of nothing as I drove, concentrated on nothing except keeping my balance. Not of my parents, not of Kino, not of the cold, onyx eyes of the village elder. Not even of the life I'd left behind.

The wind stung my eyes, but I paid it no mind. I drove on, sobbing.

I don't know how long I drove. Minutes, hours, days. Then the voice said, "Right, I think that's enough of that."

I came back to myself, blinking, and sat up straighter on the seat.

"Do what I tell you."

As instructed, I carefully pulled on a lever with my left hand, and moved my right foot against a pedal, and the

motorcycle gradually slowed down. When it seemed about ready to stop, I stuck out my feet.

On a bicycle, my toes would have bounced lightly off the ground and I would have glided to a stop, but this was different. My feet hit the ground hard, and the heavy motorcycle toppled over.

"Eep!" my patient instructor bleated. Still holding the handlebars, I hit the ground and rolled, ears ringing with the sound of metal on dirt.

"Well, that was perfectly terrible! Who taught you to ride a bike, what's-your-name?"

I ignored the voice and lay on my back, looking up at the sky. It was empty, and blue. I turned my head and saw nothing but grass and flowers bobbing in the breeze. I stood up and looked around. I was in the center of a field of red flowers. The field was so wide that when I glanced back along the rut that the motorcycle's tires had made in it, I could no longer see my village. But just for an instant, I flashed back to the traveler lying there, in the yard behind our hotel, with the knife through his heart, dying.

"Kino," I whispered. Oddly, I was not sad. I could no longer cry. I had cried out every tear in my body and given them to the wind. But neither was I happy. I just stood there, numb.

"Hey!" said a voice from near my feet. I looked down, and saw the motorcycle lying on its side. "I said that was perfectly terrible!"

"What?"

"Your driving, is what. Would it be too much trouble for you to set me upright?"

As odd as it seemed—as unexpected—the voice was coming from Kino's motorcycle.

"Motorcycle? Is that you?"

"Of course it is! There's nobody else here, is there?" The voice sounded a little angry.

There wasn't anyone else around. We were alone in the field of red flowers. "Right, sorry."

"I don't need your apologies, little girl, I need you to put me upright. Please," the motorcycle added, sounding needy.

I found that tone more charming than the demanding whine. I did as it asked, crouching down, pressing my chest against the seat, and pulling it upright with all my strength.

We had crushed a good many red flowers.

I put my foot on top of the kickstand and pushed down on it while pulling the motorcycle upward. The bike moved backward over the stand and didn't topple over again when I let go.

"Thanks," it said.

"You're welcome," I replied.

"That was close back there." It sounded relieved.

For a second I had no idea what it meant. Then I remembered the sunlight gleaming on the blade of the carving knife. It was as if I'd watched it happen to someone else. As if I were no longer that little village girl.

"Thank you for saving me," I said automatically.

The motorcycle answered, "Right back at you. If I'd been left there, who knows what would have happened to me? I'm glad you rode me out of there, Kino."

"What did you just call me?" I asked.

"Kino."

"Why?"

"A moment ago, I asked you your name, and you said Kino."

"But I'm . . ." and I started to say my name, but that name was no longer mine. That was the name of a child who'd lived in that village without a care in the world. Who believed you had to have an operation when you turned twelve to become a "proper grownup." That child had died today, or perhaps she had merely grown up all on her own. In any event, she no longer existed.

I took a step closer to the motorcycle and said, "I *am* Kino. It's a good name, isn't it?"

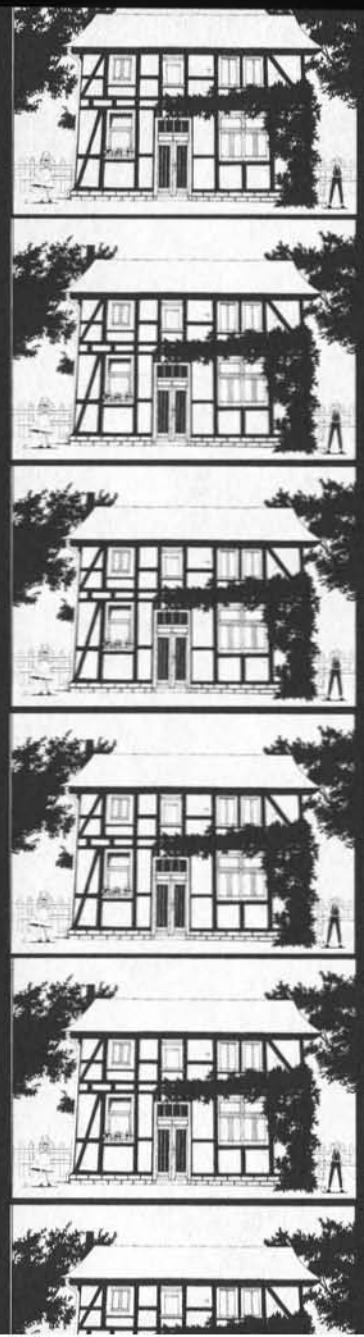
"Yeah, I like it. Say, what's *my* name? Do I have one? I don't remember."

I remembered the name the other Kino and I had chosen the day before. "Hermes. Your name is Hermes. After an old friend of . . . someone who died.

"Hm . . . Hermes. Not bad," said Hermes, trying his name out a few more times, evidently pleased. Then he asked, "What's next, Kino? What do we do? Where do we go?"

We stood there in the center of a sea of red, the soft perfume of flowers and grass rising up around us. I had no answers for him, and he had none for me.

So, we began our travels knowing nothing, least of all where we were going.



The Land of Shared Pain

A brown line stretched through a sea of green.

It was a simple road made of packed earth, running east-west in a straight line. It was surrounded by knee-deep grass that billowed with the wind. There was not a tree to be seen, near or far.

A single motorcycle darted westward down the center of the road. It was a sleek thing with an equally sleek and petite rider dressed in black leather. Behind the rider was a gleaming chrome carrier. Strapped to the carrier was a crumpled duffle bag that exuded a puff of dust whenever the bike hit a bump.

Beneath her black leather jacket, the driver was young, trim, and girlish. At odds with her youth was the sidearm holster at the back of her thick belt. In it was a semiautomatic handgun, the grip pointed upward and within easy reach. On her right thigh was a second holster, this one holding a revolver. The holster's thumb break had

long since disintegrated; to keep the gun from falling out, she'd clamped the hammer onto a bit of string that was tied down at both ends.

She wore a sort of pilot's hat with a brim at the front and fleece-lined flaps covering her ears. Goggles drawn down over the earflaps held the hat in place. Below the goggle's band, the flaps fluttered in the wind; the image in her rear-view mirror looked like a jaunty puppy, but the eyes behind the goggles were weary and a little unfocused.

"What are you thinking, Kino?" The motorcycle's voice cut through the hypnotic thrum of its engine. "You have food. You should eat."

Kino's eyes cleared, sharpened. She glanced down at the bike, then up the road to where the outer walls of a town thrust above encircling trees.

Ten minutes, she thought, *tops.*

"We're almost to a town. I don't wanna use up our food reserve if I don't have to." She wrinkled her nose. "Survival food should be eaten only as a last resort . . . like when you're near death."

At that moment, the front wheel hit a bump in the road. Kino lost her balance and the motorcycle tipped dangerously.

"Yikes!"

"Sorry, Hermes." Kino hurriedly got back on track and throttled down.

"Honestly," Hermes muttered. "We don't even know if that town has food. What do you plan to do if it's deserted?"

"If it is . . ."

"If it is?"

Kino shrugged. "Then it is."

Kino brought Hermes to a standstill as they reached the town's outer walls. Between them and the wall was a culvert with a drawbridge over it, like a medieval moat. A rather diminutive moat. She'd noticed a small building just to one side of the bridge—a guard shack, perhaps—and dismounted, albeit unsteadily.

She let go of his handlebars and set off for the building . . . without dropping his kickstand. He toppled over with a squawk of surprise. Kino wheeled around and grabbed the handlebars, but they only twisted in her hands and the bike keeled over onto his left side.

He wailed like an injured child. "Now look what you've done! You let me fall over! I can't get up, Kino! Get me up! Oh, this is gonna scratch my paint job all to pieces."

Kino leapt to raise the bike, but his weight was too much and her legs gave out. She sat down hard on the ground.

"What?" asked Hermes.

"I'm too hungry," Kino murmured. "No strength . . . woozy . . ."

"I *told* you to eat lunch! How many times do I have to repeat myself before you'll listen? Driving a motorcycle is a sport! It may not be as strenuous as riding a bicycle,

but just handling the road vibration takes energy. You tire and your mind goes all numb with the drone of my engine and after that it just plain stops working and things you can normally do become extremely difficult, which results in simple mistakes—such as forgetting to *eat*—which can cause accidents." He paused. "Are you listening, Kino?"

There was nobody in the building.

A device like a giant vending machine dominated the foyer. It activated the moment Kino entered, asked her a few simple questions in a clipped but not unpleasant voice, and granted them entry. The drawbridge lowered.

"That was fast," said Hermes, leaning contentedly on his kickstand.

"Strange," said Kino, mounting and starting the engine.

"What is?"

"There was no one in there. Only a machine."

"You ate?"

"I ate," replied Kino with satisfaction, stepping back out onto the sidewalk. She glanced back into the restaurant as she reached Hermes' side.

"Was anyone there?"

"No one," she said, mounting the bike. "It was weird. Kind of like those old automats they used to have. Serve yourself . . . sort of." She looked around.

One-story buildings lined the street. To the west was an intersection with a traffic signal. The road beyond it ran straight, flanked by broad sidewalks, trees, and streetlights. In the distance, it disappeared into a forest. Beyond the forest, Kino assumed, lay the western wall and presumably another gate.

They were still nearly in the shadow of the eastern wall, so close they couldn't see the ends of it in either direction. Even from this vantage point, it was clear the town was extremely large and flat. A small and very quiet city.

Too quiet. Kino felt an unsettling itch building up between her shoulder blades, as if someone were watching, unseen.

"Sort of serve yourself, you said. What's that mean?"

"What? Oh . . . machines did everything. The food was amazing."

"Weird."

They'd not gone far on the long, straight road when a car pulled around a corner and drove toward them. Kino stopped the bike and waited. The car pulled to a stop no more than ten feet away. After a moment the door opened and a humanoid robot emerged. It was metallic, with very little pretense of humanity, really, but it spoke—in the same voice as the machine at the gate—welcoming them to the city and providing them with a map. Then it returned to its car and sped away.

Kino and Hermes explored the city for the better part of the afternoon, driving this way and that, up this street and down that avenue. By early evening, she was hungry again and went in search of another restaurant. She found one easily, but the interior—though spacious and immaculate—was as empty of people as the first had been.

Kino's order was taken by a machine that looked like a wheelchair with a computer sitting in it—it also had mechanical arms. The food that arrived was a dish like spaghetti (but not quite), a steak of unidentifiable meat, and fruit of a color she had never seen. Each course was served by a different machine, and yet another machine took her money after the meal was finished.

It was incredibly cheap.

The machine that had taken her order escorted Kino out of the restaurant, bidding her a pleasant stay, but didn't tell her the city's name.

Kino followed signs to a gas station to refuel Hermes. On the way, they saw neither people nor anything that gave the city a name. They did see another vehicle and chased it down, but it was only an unmanned street cleaner.

When they reached the deserted gas station, Kino filled Hermes' tank. The price per gallon was close to nothing.

They looked for a hotel after that. When they found one, it too was empty.

Big surprise! Kino thought.

It was also luxurious—spotless, outside and in. Marble statues lined the entry hall. A machine enshrined at the front desk handled the necessary business briskly. Like the restaurant, the hotel was modestly priced.

Kino pushed Hermes down the hall and into their room. The machine escorting them didn't blink at the idea that his guest wanted to keep her motorbike in her room instead of in the conspicuously empty parking lot.

It was by far the most magnificent room Kino had ever been in. "Are you sure this is the room?" she asked the attendant machine. "You didn't confuse my rank? You do know I'm not royalty? I'm not even rich. If you try to charge me extra later, I won't pay."

The attendant assured her that everything was quite in order, then left after noting that room service was available at any time of day or night.

"Tourists!" muttered Hermes. If he'd had eyes, he would have rolled them.

Kino showered in a needlessly large bathroom, donned new underwear and a camisole, and was about to do some laundry in the sink when she noticed a sign that indicated the hotel provided this service for free. She called the front desk, and a machine came, received her clothes, and promised to have them clean by morning.

Kino and Hermes spread out their map on the carpet. The hotel was quite close to the city's eastern entrance, in an area the map called the "East Gate Shopping District." The city was circular and so large that they had covered only a fraction of its breadth that day. Nowhere on the map was it named.

In the city center was the Central Government District, also circular. To the south was a large lake. To the north was an industrial district, labeled—appropriately—Industrial District. Everything else—fully half the area of the city—was labeled Residential Area.

"People *must* live here," said Hermes. "Somebody's got to be doing all that shopping and governing and research. Not to mention the *residing*."

"And someone had to make all these machines and maintain them."

"Then why haven't we seen anyone?"

Kino shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they can't go outside for . . . for religious reasons, or it's a holiday, or maybe they all come out at night and sleep during the day."

"That doesn't sound good," said Hermes with a mechanical shiver. "I've read things about people who only come out at night. None of them cheerful."

Kino hid a smile. "Maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe nobody lives in this area of town."

"You mean, they're all in the residential area?"

"Probably."

"Then let's go there!"

Kino shook her head. "No, not today. We wouldn't get back until after dark. We may be in a walled city—an *empty* walled city—but I don't want to drive in the dark."

"Ah! So, you think there might be someone or some*thing* that comes out at night, after all."

"I do not!"

"I saw the way you smirked when I suggested it. You

Kino went to the chair on which she'd dropped her jacket and gun belt. She removed the guns from their holsters and walked languidly toward the bed, jacket in hand.

"Hermes, when I see such a beautiful bed, such a *soft* bed, such a *cozy* bed, it makes me want to lie right down and sleep."

And with that, Kino draped the jacket across the foot of the bed, tucked the guns under the pillow, and toppled over into the billowy comforter.

"Bliss," she murmured, and was sound asleep a moment later.

"Tourists," grumbled Hermes.

Kino woke at dawn. Her clean laundry was waiting in a neatly folded pile in the vestibule. All the clothes looked like new.

She began the day by cleaning her handguns. She had named the semiautomatic that nestled against her back the "Woodsman" because she'd once used it to take down a highwayman by shooting and severing a tree limb just above his unprotected head.

might think you're headed west, but suddenly you realize you're actually going south. You can't see the sun."

"You have a compass, Kino."

She ignored him. "And the forest perfume—trees and earth—it's like incense in a shrine. You fall into a state of . . . prayer."

"Hello," said Hermes. "Places to go. People to meet."

Kino smiled and gestured up the road with her chin. "If we head due north, we'll be out of these giant trees, and we should find a real road soon after."

What they were traveling on now stretched the definition of the word *road* significantly. It was a track of hard-packed earth, strewn with pine needles and dead leaves.

"Should we?"

Kino removed her compass from the breast pocket of her black leather jacket and checked it. "Yep. North. Let's go."

Out of long habit, she checked their rest stop to see if they had forgotten anything. Just in case, she also made sure the luggage and coat strapped to Hermes' rear carrier were secure. Then she pulled on her gloves and goggles, mounted Hermes, and off they went.

A few minutes later, they stopped so Kino could dismount and verify their orientation again on the compass.

A few minutes later, they repeated the process.

And again.

And again.

"I hate this," complained Kino, after about the fifth time. But she kept doing it.

After she'd checked their direction for what she was certain must have been the hundredth time, she realized the filtered light was growing brighter. Ahead, it peeked between the tree trunks in vertical bands of pale gold. They were reaching the edge of the forest.

They proceeded slowly now, the light growing brighter still, the bands of gold widening. By the time they'd cleared the last of the trees, Kino's eyes had adjusted to the light.

There was no road at the northern edge of the forest. There was nothing before them but a perfectly ordinary, dense, low, overgrown scrubland.

"No road. Did we go the wrong way?" asked Hermes.

"No . . . I think this is right. Look," said Kino, pointing at the ground.

There were two thin rust-colored strips peeking out from beneath the overgrown grass.

"Rails? Train tracks!"

"Exactly." Kino kicked at the ground around one of the tracks revealing a bit more of its corroded surface.

"The man who gave us these directions said, 'A motorcycle can make it. You'll reach a clear road soon enough.' He must have meant this. People must be using this as a path through the brush."

"Makes sense. As long as there aren't any trains."

"The rails are all rusted and covered in grass. There haven't been trains this way for a very long time."

Kino rolled Hermes between the rails, pointing him west. Grass lined the tracks evenly, forming a sort of green path through the scrubland.

"Well," said Hermes, "at least we won't have to stop every five minutes to read a compass."

They moved forward slowly so as not to run into the rails. When the sun was at its highest, they met a man.

Hermes noticed him first. They had traversed a long, gentle curve, when the motorbike said, "People alert."

Kino, who'd been spacing out, looked up to see the figure on the tracks ahead of them. She applied the brakes sharply, drawing a grunt of protest from her mechanical partner.

The man was crouched down, facing them, intent on something between the rails. He glanced up at them, his face displaying neither surprise nor unease. Behind him was a handcart fitted with train wheels and loaded with unrecognizable cargo.

Kino stopped just in front of the man, cut Hermes' engine, and dismounted. "Hello," she said, bowing.

The man stood. He was old and very short. His face was a collection of wrinkles that all but hid his gray eyes. His long hair was almost perfectly white, and his beard had clearly not been trimmed for decades. He wore a small, black pill-shaped hat. His shirt and pants—of the same black—were now worn to rags and patched here and there.

"Greetings, traveler," said the man amiably.

Kino was about to speak further, when her eyes moved beyond the wizened figure. "Wow!"

The old man looked over his shoulder, then turned back to Kino and Hermes. He smiled. "Yep, I did all that."

Behind the little old man, the rails had been cleared of grass. Between them, thick crossties had been laid at regular intervals in a bed of white pea-gravel. The rails

themselves shone as if they'd just been delivered from the foundry. The sunlight turned them to gleaming silver as they stretched away into the distance.

"Sorry," said their new acquaintance, "but I can't take the cart off the tracks. Afraid you'll have to take the motorcycle 'round them, traveler."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. No problem," said Kino, flustered.

The old man crouched down again, and Kino approached him, bowing down to speak. "Excuse me, but there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Well, if I can be of any help . . ."

"Did you . . . pull the grass and polish the rails all by yourself?"

"Yep. That's my job," replied the man matter-of-factly.

"Your . . . job?"

"Yep. Been doing this awhile now," he said, pulling a fistful of grass from the ground.

Kino looked at the handcart, which was filled with the old man's possessions plus a variety of gardening tools. She glanced back at Hermes and asked the question on both their minds.

"How long exactly?"

"Hard to be exact, but I reckon fifty years."

"Fifty years?" cried Hermes.

"That ought to be about right. Only counted the winters, you see."

"You've been polishing the rails for fifty years," repeated Kino.

"Yep. Joined the railroad company when I was eighteen. They told me they had some tracks that weren't

being used now but might well be used again in the future, and said I should go out and polish them up. Nobody ever told me to stop, so I'm still working."

"You've never been back home?"

"Nope. Had me a wife and child at the time, and I wanted to make sure they had enough to eat. Don't know what happened to 'em. Should be getting my wages, though. So they ought to be living comfortably. I expect I have grandchildren by now. Maybe even great-grandchildren." The idea seemed to please him.

Kino and Hermes could only stand and stare.

"So, where are you headed, traveler?" asked the old man.

Hermes plowed on between the two bright rails. They'd been moving since the break of day, pausing only to refill their water bottles at a small stream. The tracks wound gently onward through the jungle, the gray gravel road beckoning them on.

"Thank God for that old man yesterday," said Hermes, for the umpteenth time. The polished rails made their journey much easier than it had been the day before. Except for the fact that Hermes found himself being lulled into a stupor by the rhythmic shudder of his tires on the crossties.

Just as Kino had begun to complain of feeling hungry, and the imminent possibility of having to eat protein bars, they met the second man. Kino first noticed him as they

came out of a tight curve. She slammed on the brakes, making Hermes squawk. His indignant commentary was forestalled by the sight of the cart parked atop the tracks, and the man beside it, wielding something that looked like a pikestaff.

This man turned around, surprised but not alarmed. He leaned the staff against the cart and spread his hands, gesturing for them to stop.

Kino halted Hermes a short distance away, cut the engine, and dismounted. She bowed politely. "Hello."

"Hello indeed, traveler."

Like the first, this man was old. He was slightly taller than Kino and very thin. He had a short beard, and his balding head was protected from the sun by a black pill-shaped hat. In fact, he wore the same type of clothing as the man they'd seen the day before, and his were equally threadbare.

Hermes noticed something beyond the man. "Kino! The rails!"

Kino leaned sideways to peer around the cart. There were *no* rails behind the cart. No crossties either. There was nothing but gravel leading away into the scrubland as far as the eye could see.

"There *are* no rails," she whispered.

The old man heard her. "Yeah, I'm taking them up," he said.

"You're taking them up," Kino echoed.

The man continued as if she hadn't spoken, "I'm afraid this cart doesn't come off the rails. You'll have to go around." He picked up his iron staff and moved behind the cart.

Kino started Hermes' engine and followed him. When she reached the other side, she found the old man hard at work, wedging the bent tip of his staff beneath the rightmost rail. With a grunt, he threw his weight into it, and a section of the rail lifted free and tumbled down beside the raised gravel mound. The old man then moved to the leftmost rail and repeated the operation.

"There's something I'd like to ask," said Kino.

The old man turned toward her, his expression friendly.

"Why are you tearing up the rails?"

"It's my job. I've been doing it for a long time now. I'm tearing up the crossties as well."

Hermes said softly, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"How long have you been doing this?" Kino asked.

"Must be getting on fifty years now."

"Oh my," murmured Hermes.

Kino was silent.

"I joined the railroad company when I was sixteen years old. They said they had some tracks they no longer used, so I should go out and tear them up. It was my first job, and I was eager to do it right. But nobody ever told me to stop."

"You never went home?" asked Hermes.

"Nope. I got five little brothers back there, and I needed to earn enough to feed them. I can't afford a vacation."

"I see," said Kino. Then, casually, "They sure have a high polish, for abandoned rails."

"Always have. Strangest thing. But it makes them easier to tear up."

Kino stood in silence, while Hermes contemplated whether to tell the old fellow about the old man polishing the abandoned tracks ahead of him.

"So where were you headed, traveler?" asked the old man pertly.

Hermes and Kino had labored along the pale gravel path since the break of day. The narrow trail was relatively straight, and the only break from the unchanging vista (brush, brush, and more brush) was the occasional pile of torn-up rails and crossties or an orderly little stack of spikes.

The bike hadn't used the "B" word ("I'm *bored*, Kino!") for some time. Kino was pretty sure he understood that would mean another detour into the nasty tangle of underbrush along the trail, which might result in scratches on his polished metal surfaces. For once, she was glad of the motorcycle's vanity.

"So hard to drive," complained Kino for the umpteenth time that day.

Without the crossties, the tires couldn't get a decent grip on the gravel road. The front wheel veered this way and that, and they nearly lost their balance on every curve. Kino kept their speed to a minimum and maintained a nervous grip on the handlebars.

Hermes had just proposed a rest, when they met the third man.

Kino and Hermes saw him at the same time, standing in the middle of the gravel road. This time, Kino gently

slacked off the accelerator, so Hermes had no reason to squawk.

They approached slowly. The man was sitting in the gravel, apparently resting. When he saw Kino and Hermes, he waved in greeting.

Kino stopped Hermes a short distance from the man, cut the engine and dismounted. "Hello."

"Hey there, traveler," said the man, coming to his feet.

He was old, but robust. His torso was bare, and his arms and shoulders rippled with muscle. Were it not for the wrinkles carved into his face, he could have passed for a hard-working, middle-aged man. Hatless, he wore the same black pants as the men from the previous two days. The hems were ragged.

Kino peered past the old man with some trepidation. Beside her, she heard Hermes whisper, "Rails."

Behind the old man was a cart piled high with baggage and tools. It sat at the very edge of a set of gleaming rails that stretched away into the woods.

Hefting a massive hammer that had been lying on the ground beside him, the man said cheerily, "Yep, I done that."

"You're replacing them?" Kino realized she was stating the obvious.

"That I am. So a train can cross over 'em. Layin' down the crossties, placing the rails alongside, and hammering the spikes down to keep 'em there."

"All by yourself?"

"You get used to it. I got all the materials right here. See?" he pointed at the spikes, rails, and crossties that lay beside the tracks.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," murmured Hermes.

Kino asked, "Is this your job?"

"Of course it is. Always has been," said the old man with a chuckle.

"For how long?"

"Hmmm . . . must be coming on fifty years, now. Can't quite figure it."

"Fifty," repeated Hermes.

"I joined the railroad company when I was fifteen years old. Told me they might start using some old tracks again, so I should go out and fix them. Never told me to stop."

"You haven't been back home, have you?" asked Kino.

"Nah. My parents were sick, you see. I've got to work for them as well. They'd probably be dead now," he added, scratching his head.

Casually, Hermes said, "Well, keep up the good work."

"Thank you kindly."

Kino started Hermes' engine.

"Where were you headed, traveler?" asked the old man, smiling.

The Land of Peace

Hermes and Kino raced through a brown wasteland. There were mountains to their right and mountains to their left. All were bare of trees and seemed to shiver under the blue-gray sky. The road they traveled was the same unrelieved brown as the wasteland, and were it not for the occasional large cans that dotted the shoulder of the road, it would have been impossible to distinguish their path from wilderness.

Kino was chafing to leave this stretch of their journey behind them. So much so that she pushed Hermes along at a fast clip despite the unevenness of the road. He raised so much dust that Kino couldn't see the tracks behind them in the rear-view mirror. Which was just as well; there was nothing to see.

Hermes' carrier was stuffed with baggage. Kino had acquired a sleeping bag and a large square of strong netting to tie down her things. And she had a new silver cup that reflected the sun and the color of the sky.

It was chilly, so Kino wore her long brown coat. Her pilot's hat was snug beneath her chin, the earflaps down. Beneath her goggles, her cheeks and chin were so cold she was sure her expression must be frozen on her face. She could only hope it was a pleasant one.

They had just passed one of the painted cans when Kino saw something new along the roadside. She allowed the motorcycle's speed to drop. When the cloud of dirt that danced behind and around them had lessened considerably, she stopped the bike, dismounted, and wandered a bit off the road to inspect what looked like piles of dry wood almost buried in the dust.

But they were not piles of wood, Kino realized as she drew near. She stopped and took an involuntary step backward.

"What is it?" Hermes called.

"Bodies."

"*Human* bodies?" Hermes' voice was a thin metallic squeak.

"Yes." She made herself stand there and study them. Most were in pieces, little piles of hands here or a row of torsos there. All of them had been dried by the arid weather—a heap of mummies lying in the wasteland. Big and small and even tiny, there were so many of them that in some places she couldn't make out the ground beneath them.

"Why . . . why are they here? Why would anyone leave so many mummies lying in a place like this? Isn't that . . . strange . . . even for human beings?" Hermes asked.

"Yes, it is strange. But we've seen many strange things in our travels. We've even seen graveyards that seem to go on forever."

Hermes rattled as if he were trembling. "Oh, no, Kino. This isn't a graveyard. It's a larder. In a graveyard, they *bury* the bodies to make them inaccessible. These bodies are just lying around."

"A larder?" Kino echoed.

"Exactly. Dried meat. When they get hungry—whoever or whatever *they* are—they come here and grab a snack. It must belong to the next city down this road. Just like the junky in your bag, Kino."

"You mean . . . *jerky?*"

"Yeah, that." Hermes fell silent. He perked up again a minute later, and made an attempt at humor. "Better be careful, Kino, or they'll catch you and eat you! Of course, you're probably a little tough and sinewy, but if they boil you long enough, I'm sure you'll make a fine meal."

"Thanks."

He sighed. "So, this is the end of our travels. And I wanted to go so much farther!"

There was a long pause before Kino said, "Hermes, you must be really desperate if you're making up stories like that. I almost half-believed you for a moment."

"Yeah, well, I do what I can with the materials at hand."

"Mm. Hang in there just a little longer; we're almost at the next city," Kino said. She returned to Hermes, mounted, and started him moving again.

They continued to see the piles of mummified bodies for some time before they stopped.

"I can't take it much longer . . . my front wheel . . . It's noon!" muttered Hermes, as the walls of the city finally came into view.

Soon after, they pulled up in front of the eastern gate, where a sign read: *Welcome to Veldeval.*

"Welcome to Veldeval," the guard at the gate repeated, smiling as he saluted. "It's been a long time since we had any visitors."

"I'm Kino. This is my partner, Hermes. We'd like to request entry."

"Business?" asked the guard.

"No. Just sightseeing and relaxation." Kino handed over her pass card. The guard took it and put it into the card reader mounted on his belt. The card re-emerged quickly, and he handed it back to Kino.

"No problem at all. How long would you like to stay?"

"Three days," said Kino. "We'll leave the day after tomorrow."

"Stay as long as you like," said the guard, entering something on the card reader's keypad. "Do you have any guns?"

"Yes," said Kino, taking off her coat, and draping it on top of Hermes. Underneath, she wore her black jacket and, over it, her gun belt. She removed the Cannon from the holster on her thigh, and placed it on the table at the guard's station. Then she reached behind her with her left hand, and produced the Woodsman.

The guard's eyes widened. "This *is* a surprise," he said, looking the guns over with evident admiration. "You've got some impressive weapons there, Kino. Are you . . . are you ranked, by any chance?"

"Fourth-rank black belt," replied Hermes, before Kino could speak.

Kino smiled. *Ah, the pride of ownership Hermes takes in me.*

The guard bowed slightly at the waist. "I stand in awe. Since you're ranked, feel free to take these in with you. I'm sure you won't need them, though. This country is perfectly safe. At any rate, we welcome you both with all our hearts, Kino . . . Hermes. Please enjoy your stay. Here's a map. I hope it will be of use to you."

Kino thanked the guard, holstered her guns, and took the map. The guard saluted again, and the gate rattled open. She pushed Hermes through.

The moment they emerged into the town, they were surrounded by smiling people. Kino flinched backward. Young and old, man and woman, everyone there took one look at Kino and Hermes and shouted a variety of greetings, each one delivered with a big smile. Some people even played instruments, and others danced as if to entertain them.

Hermes whispered, "I'm telling you, they're going to eat you, Kino. They look hungry!"

They didn't, though. Each person looked well-fed, well-dressed, and happy.

After some pleasant conversation, the welcoming villagers gave Kino directions to an inexpensive hotel with a shower and a place for Hermes. The hotel stood

next to a large and obviously ancient building with a sign proclaiming it to be the Museum of Local History. The first thing Kino did after checking in was shake the dust from her coat and bags and give Hermes a much-needed bath.

"While you're at it," Hermes suggested, "you could change my spark plugs."

Kino ignored him, opting instead to take a shower, change her clothing, and eat. The hotel cook prepared and served a kind of fish she'd never seen before, and it was delicious. She told the cook as much, and the poor woman was seemingly overwhelmed by Kino's praise.

Sometime later, Kino pushed the baggage-free Hermes around town. The two of them still seemed to be the center of attention, and nearly everyone who greeted them recommended things for them to see and do. More than one person suggested a trip through the museum. The curator, she was told, knew more about the history of Veldeval than anyone alive, and the exhibits were supposedly amazing.

Since it was so near their hotel, Kino and Hermes visited the place that very afternoon. The building was of traditional folk construction, Kino noted, as she rolled Hermes up a ramp from the street. Its interlocking arches reminded her more of a shrine than anything else, and she wondered if perhaps it had once been a holy temple.

When Kino and Hermes had passed beneath the arches into the bright and airy interior, a woman came out to meet them. She was an elderly white-haired woman, but her figure was slim, and her back was straight. Her eyes were kind, and seemed to look through Kino—to her very core.

In a musical voice, with no hint of age, the woman said, "Welcome to the history museum. I am the curator."

"Good afternoon, curator. I'm Kino. This is my partner, Hermes."

The curator guided Kino and Hermes around the museum. They were the only visitors. The interior was outfitted with wheelchair ramps, and the height of the exhibits had been carefully thought-out for people of varying sizes. Kino was able to push Hermes around everywhere.

The exhibits were well-crafted and included detailed models ranging from the first settlers in this wasteland through the gradual evolution of the city. A number of artifacts from the various eras, including the first issue of the Veldeval newspaper, accompanied the exhibit. Kino relaxed and enjoyed herself as she read the easy-to-follow explanations on the plaques and the curator cooed many colorful details.

Eventually, they reached the modern history section. And there, the tone of the displays changed. Where the focus of the earlier displays had been on lives lived, cultural artifacts, and artistic, humanitarian, or scientific accomplishments, most of these newer exhibits featured weapons and protective gear, diagrams of battlefields, and everything connected with war.

The sign at the entrance of the new section read: *The History of Slaughter: War with Relsumia Begins.*

"After this, everything is war," said the curator, expression unchanged. She led Kino and Hermes to view the more recent history of Veldeval.

For many years, the city-state of Veldeval had been sporadically at war with the neighboring state of Relsumia. The two cities had different religions, customs, and dialects. It was easy for each to view the other as an enemy—and once war broke out, the conflict escalated quickly.

Each city had vowed to destroy the other. With that simplistic goal, war broke out again and again. But their forces were too evenly matched; neither side was able to annihilate the other. Wars raged out in the wasteland, but the victors never had enough resources left to pursue the retreating forces back to their city and capture it. The opposing armies would eventually cut their losses and drag themselves back behind their respective walls in tatters.

After a brief suspension of hostilities, both sides would start to build up their military again, eventually lining up their armies in the wasteland. They would exhaust their resources once more, and stop fighting before either side succeeded in obtaining any sort of strategic advantage.

This cycle of war had continued between the two city-states for nearly two hundred years.

"I see," said Kino as they exited the exhibit. She looked at Hermes wryly.

"Surely those mummies in the wasteland weren't soldiers in the war?" he said. "Kino said there were . . . children among them."

"No, we cremate our dead," said the curator. "Our adversary does the same."

Before Hermes could ask what they were, Kino pointed to a plaque at the very end of the exhibit and said, "Curator,

according to this, this exhibit ends fifteen years ago. Your city today looks very prosperous and peaceful. In fact, it's been a long time since I've visited a place so peaceful, with citizens that are alive, communicative, and not attempting to slaughter each other."

The curator's eyebrows rose gracefully. "An odd way to put it, but you're right. For the last fifteen years, we've known a stability we'd never thought we'd achieve. People have been able to pursue their work, raise their families, and live free of fear. I suppose you could tell that much just looking into the faces of the people."

"What happened fifteen years ago?"

"We stopped fighting each other. We ended the old war." There was a definite hint of pride in her voice.

Rightfully proud, Kino thought, *if it is true.* "That sounds miraculous. How were you able to do it?"

The curator's gray eyes fixed on Kino as if reading her, then she said simply, "That's covered in the next exhibit, Kino. But there's not much time left before the museum closes. How long are you staying?"

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow. Does that matter?"

"Then you will have the answer to your question tomorrow. Are you free all day?"

"Certainly. Right, Hermes? You don't have plans, do you?"

"Who, me? I don't have plans; that's your deal. What will we be looking at that takes all day?" asked Hermes.

"The New War," replied the curator.

"What?" exclaimed Hermes, with obvious distaste. "I don't want to see a war! New, old, or middle-aged. I thought you said you'd *ended* the war."

"I should be more specific. We call it 'war,' but we do not kill each other. We fight without shedding each other's blood. If you watch, you will understand how we made peace and how we have been able to maintain it."

The next morning, Kino woke at dawn. She cleaned and practiced with her guns. As she ate breakfast in the hotel café, she noticed that the street outside seemed unusually noisy. Looking out through the front window, she saw a parade of hovercraft passing up the broad avenue. She was the only guest, and the wait staff seemed to have disappeared, so since there was no one to ask about the procession in the street, she finished her breakfast, collected Hermes, and returned to the museum as promised.

"Tell me, curator," Kino said when the woman had greeted them, "what's happening today in the street? Is it some sort of parade?"

"That question will be quickly answered," the curator told her, then introduced them to a young soldier—Corporal Yasuo—who was to serve as their guide. He took them not to a new exhibit within the museum, but into the center of the city. There, in the town square, they found about three dozen gray hovercraft of various sizes lined up in ranks. About half of them were equipped with rows of guns on both sides of the open decks—all machine guns

with ammunition belts fed into them. Besides the driver or pilot, there seemed to be enough soldiers aboard each craft to man the guns twice over.

Kino was puzzled, for the ammunition certainly looked real.

Four gigantic, unarmed barges hovered overhead, each easily three times as large as the sparsely manned craft. There was also a single elegantly decorated craft that looked as if it were populated with dignitaries. The rest of the transports were labeled "Spectators" and seemed to contain rank-and-file citizens.

Corporal Yasuo invited Kino and Hermes aboard one of these "airboats." As the onlookers applauded, she drove the motorcycle up a ramp and onto the vehicle.

"Where are we going?" she asked their guide. "To the wasteland?"

"No. Far beyond that, to a place midway between Veldeval and Relsumia."

The war- and pleasure-craft took off from the town square with great fanfare and set off in a long caravan across the brown wasteland, crossing over the northern mountain range before they stopped at the southern edge of a high plateau. The armed craft arrayed themselves in neat ranks and waited.

Watching from her spectator airboat, Kino was about to ask what they were waiting for, when another row of hovercraft appeared in a cleft at the other side of the plateau and also organized themselves in ranks.

Even from this distance—about a half-mile—Kino could see that the craft were also well-armed and that the

gunners' uniforms looked different from the kilts that the Veldevalian soldiers wore.

"That is the Relsumia defense force," Yasuo said and added, "late as usual."

"Defense?" repeated Hermes.

"Veldeval won the last engagement. So, they're considered the defensive force."

"Then your weapons aren't real?" asked Hermes. "What—you use paint balls or flags?"

Yasuo laughed. "What an interesting idea. But no, the weapons are quite real. You're about to see them in use. Don't worry, though," he added pertly. "We are completely safe. In fact, everyone is completely safe. Not one soldier on either side will die. This is not the war of our fathers."

"How long are you going to just sit here and stare at each other?" Hermes asked.

"Until the sun reaches its zenith." Corporal Yasuo pointed to the sky where the sun was, even now, climbing to its highest point.

To Kino, the bright disk seemed to click into place in the firmament, like the minute hand of a clock. Then the New War began.

From both groups of combatants, the armed craft emerged, forming two parallel lines—one from each city—in the center of the plateau. The Veldevalian craft with its elegant trappings hovered at the western end of the formation. On it stood a man dressed like a priest, his multicolored robes brushing the deck of his carrier. He spoke, and his voice was amplified for all to hear.

"The One Hundred and Eighty-Fifth War between Relsumia and Veldeval will now commence! The rules are the same as always. No amendments have been posted in the preceding five years."

His hovercraft began to move in a northeasterly direction, and the two rows of combatants followed after like mechanical sheep.

"We're going too. Hang on tight," Yasuo told his passengers.

They rose up with the other spectator vehicles and pursued the armed forces. Moving more briskly, they overtook the two columns and the priest, flew ahead for a little bit, passed over a small hill, and then stopped, hovering in the air.

"See that?" The soldier pointed.

It was a small village, an oasis of simple wattle and daub huts, built willy-nilly on the shore of a small lake. There were no roads, merely footpaths leading in and out and around the cluster of rough buildings.

A number of people were moving about the village. They wore simple clothes and carried or used simple tools. Some scratched at vegetable plots; a few tended a herd of goats. They seemed not to notice the hover vehicles in the air nearby, which considering the noise the craft made, surprised Kino.

"This is a local tribe, the Tatana people," Yasuo explained.

The words had no sooner left his mouth than the priest's vehicle crested the hill and bore down on the village. It flew due north, straight over the collection of

cottages and dumped a quantity of red dust as it went, effectively drawing a giant red line across the center of the ramshackle town.

A number of Tatana reacted with obvious shock, rushing out of their houses, leaving their tasks. Some poked at the red dust with whatever tools they were carrying; others looked up as if to locate its source.

"Now the 'war' begins. We have the western side, and the eastern side is Relsumia's 'battlefield.' "

Kino felt cold to the core. She turned her head to the southwest to see the twin columns of warcraft speeding toward the village. They fanned out gracefully, and the gunners began to fire.

Kino could only watch in icy horror as the shrill rattle of the machine guns filled the air and the bullets struck those who had come to examine the red dust. The warcraft floated just high enough to avoid touching the huts beneath them, shooting any Tatana people in the open, regardless of age.

A young man came running out of his house and went down in a blossom of crimson. The next shots leveled his house. A woman and four children scrambled from the debris into the street. They fell like a row of ducks picked out of the sky.

Suddenly the village was full of terrified people—men, women, children—even infants. All were mowed down indiscriminately, children killed by the same bullets that murdered the mothers and fathers who desperately tried to shield them.

Kino thought none of them would fight back when, from out of hiding, a man ran at the lowest Veldevelian

hovercraft, a thick spear in his hands. His mouth was open in a howl of rage and anguish that Kino heard echo in her own heart. But the vehicle he sought to attack spun around, its gunners firing a quick burst. The man fell in mid-stride, his body torn nearly in two by the fierce barrage.

"Oh, *score!*" shouted Yasuo, pumping his fist in the air. Then he laughed, embarrassed. "Ah, excuse me. The gunner was my brother. He's always been good at 'war.' " Seeing Kino's narrowed eyes, he added, "Should we fly a bit lower? You'll be able to see better."

Kino shook her head. "Here is fine, thank you," she said through clenched teeth.

The corporal nodded. "Wise. It wouldn't do to have our guest hit by a stray bullet." He turned his eyes back to the battlefield then and listened happily to the chatter of machine gun fire.

Now they shot the Tatana who had escaped into the grove of fruit trees near their oasis. The red line went through the heart of the grove, and each armed force was very careful to shoot only on its side of the line. Soon most of the trees had been leveled, and bodies were visible between the fallen trunks.

Other villagers had attempted to use a nearby lake as a means of escape or concealment, but soon—too soon—the waters danced with bullets and went red with blood.

But not all the Tatana fled. A number of them slung rocks at the hovering warcraft, and some even hit their mark. One young man popped out from behind a half-crushed hut to throw an axe at an airboat that had drawn low. It hit one of the gunners in the thigh. The soldier rolled

off his seat, howling in agony, and a different soldier took over the vacated gun. The young Tatana was dead less than a second later.

It was the closest Kino had come to cheering since the spectacle began. She stole a glance at Corporal Yasuo. His face was ashen.

Behind her, Hermes whispered, "Score a point for the good guys."

The warring parties worked hard to bring down anyone fleeing the village, picking them off one by one. But there were too many, and it was impossible to kill them all. Several people, some with children wrapped in their arms, managed to dodge the bullets raining down around them, escaping into the rocky hills. The "warriors" did not pursue them. Instead, they concentrated their firepower on the people still inside the town; some even fired on fallen villagers they suspected of playing dead.

Eventually, there was nothing left moving in the village, and the sound of gunfire died away. Smoke drifted across the ruin—gray amid the brown and green and splashes of red.

Kino looked up into the sun until her eyes stung. It was now only a fist-length away from its noonday zenith. So many dead in such a short time.

The priest flew through the town again, blowing a whistle that was amplified as his voice had been. Fire ceased completely and the hovercraft gathered at the edge of the village, forming ranks once more.

"Time limit," explained Corporal Yasuo. "The 'war' is over."

The four barges moved from among the spectator vehicles and descended to the torn ground at the edge of the village.

"They're the counters. They'll collect the hits from each side of the battlefield, and sensors aboard their craft will measure the weight of the kill. The victor is the side with the most wounded or killed Tatana. Spectators must wait at the campaign grounds—the plateau. We'll have to go there now. Is that okay?"

Kino nodded, unable to speak—afraid of what might come out of her mouth. The smell of blood drifted up, and for a moment she saw a long knife blade gleaming in the sun as it protruded from a twisted body that lay at her feet. But the hovercraft moved away and the moment was gone.

The soldiers were in good cheer as they rallied at the campaign grounds to hear the counters' tallies. Until then, they had not exchanged a word with their adversaries, but now they were laughing, men from one column calling out to those on the other side.

The craft settled, still in their columns, and the soldiers spilled out onto the plateau where tents had been set up with refreshments.

The soldier who'd been hit in the leg with an axe reappeared, limping, his thigh wrapped in a bandage. He was showered with applause and cheers from both sides. He laughed, embarrassed, and was given

a badge of some kind by the priest, which earned him more cheers.

At last, the counters returned. Each barge bore a mountain of corpses. Blood dripped from the decks.

The war-priest moved to the foredeck of his own craft, and announced, "The results of the measurement have been verified. The victor of the One-Hundred and Eighty-Fifth War is Veldeval—ten to nine!"

The Veldevalian soldiers exploded with good cheer, while the Relsumians showed their disappointment with bowed heads. But they soon recovered, and gave the victors a salute, which was returned with great camaraderie. Then, waving their hats at each other, the proud soldiers returned to their hovercraft and headed home.

Corporal Yasuo, piloting his spectator craft back to Veldeval, was unable to contain his excitement. "We did it! We won! Again! There'll be a victory celebration when we get back! Say, if you need any supplies for your travels, you should buy them today. Everyone will be in high spirits and give you great bargains."

"Can I ask one thing?" They were the first words Hermes had uttered since the battle ceased.

"Anything!"

"What do you do with the bodies of your . . . victims. You don't bring them home with you, do you?"

"We refer to them as 'the kill.' No. We dump 'em to the east of the city. Out in the wasteland."

"Thought so. I guess that solves the mystery of the mummies."

Kino hardly cared. And the questions she wanted to ask could not be so easily answered. *I can't do anything about it,* she told herself and remembered the words of a village elder who had once spoken to the other Kino: *Traveler, in every village, in every home, there are different customs. You know this. In this village too, we have our own customs. These customs are not to be altered by any actions you take. I'm certain you see that.*

"I do see it," Kino murmured. Corporal Yasuo gave her a questioning glance from beneath his lashes.

As Yasuo had predicted, Veldeval spent the balance of the day in celebration. The town was flooded with laughter and music, wine flowed like water, and people danced in the streets. Also, as predicted, when Kino tried to buy rations, the drunken shop owner had given them to her for next to nothing. Kino bought supplies until Hermes nearly buckled under the weight. Then they returned to the hotel. There was nobody else there.

The next morning, Kino woke, as always, at dawn.

Veldeval was silent.

She showered, practiced with her guns, checked her baggage, and raided the hotel kitchen for breakfast. When the sun was well over the horizon, she woke Hermes. He was groggy; he seemed to need more sleep whenever he sensed Kino was "in a dangerous mood." She had to acknowledge that she was in such a mood now.

He came wide-awake when she said, "We're going back to the history museum."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" he asked.

"No. But we're going."

"And what are we planning to do when we get there?"

"I don't have a plan."

"Okay . . . and I thought 'I *have* a plan' were the scariest words I'd ever heard you say."

In the unnatural quiet of early morning, Kino pushed Hermes to the museum. They found a young soldier sleeping in the entrance, a bottle wrapped in his arms like a baby. Kino thought of the Tatana mothers who had died cradling their children in just that way. But those mothers and their babies were now dumped coldly on a distant plain; this man would wake and live. Someone had even stopped to put blankets over him.

Kino pushed Hermes up the wheelchair ramp into the museum, and the curator came out to meet them. She had not joined in the celebration; her eyes were clear and bright, her face composed.

"Good morning, Kino, Hermes."

"Good morning, curator. We've come to finish the tour."

The curator led them to the final exhibit. The corridor was quite dark until she pressed a switch, turning on the lights above the displays.

The sign on the wall read: *The Evolution of War: Peaceful Coexistence.*

"You watched the 'war' yesterday?" asked the curator.

"Yes," answered Hermes. "And we solved the mystery of the mummies in the wasteland."

The curator nodded and looked at Kino, as if waiting for a response, her gray eyes watchful.

Kino schooled her face and voice to show no emotion and hold no inflection. "I didn't see a war yesterday. What I saw was the massacre of the Tatana people. Not soldiers, but civilians—men, women, and children. People who could not defend themselves against any aggressor. Especially not one so technologically advanced." There was no edge to her words, no anger evident behind them, not even any astonishment, though she felt both.

The curator said, "Well, based only on your experience yesterday, I imagine you would see it that way. But that is the way we conduct 'war.' "

"How did it get like this? Could you tell me?" Kino asked.

The curator turned on the lights inside the final display case, which featured current history. "As you saw the other day, our two states could no longer sustain the war. We were impoverishing our people and wasting our greatest resource—our children."

The curator pushed a button on the monitor, and a video began. It was titled: *Two Minutes on the Battlefield.*

Shapes and colors slowly faded. Several frightened soldiers were huddled in a trench in the wasteland, long guns clutched in their hands. There was a whistling noise, and the soldiers ducked. The sound cut out for a second, and the image shook, dust flying. One of the soldiers screamed something, his lips moving silently. Then sound returned, and all the soldiers leapt from the trench, moving into a charge. The camera followed them, the wide shot

lingering on their backs as they ran. Their screams were audible now, as was the whizzing sound of the black objects flying toward them. One of these landed on the ground, ricocheted from the earth, and hit a soldier in the chest, cutting his body in two.

The curator said, "For many years, this kind of warfare continued, killing countless soldiers. The man you just saw cut down just now was my husband."

The image suddenly twisted; the sound melted into a roar. Then both sound and picture were lost as if in a sandstorm. The screen went black.

The curator continued slowly, "I can never forget the old wars. I can't forget anything about those days. I had four sons once. They were my pride and joy. After I lost my husband, I lived only to raise my children into fine men."

"Men who went to war?" Kino guessed.

The curator nodded. "When the One Hundred and Sixty-Ninth War began, my sons vowed to avenge their father's death. One after another, they volunteered for the army. My second son, Sotos, was shot by a sniper. Then my third son, Datos, stepped on a land mine and was blown to pieces."

The wall of the display room had been shrouded in darkness, but now soft lights warmed a large photograph. It was of the curator, when she was young, with thick dark hair. She was surrounded by her four sons. All four children had big smiles and white teeth like their mother. They ranged in age from a man almost grown to a small boy of about seven or eight.

"My eldest son Utos stayed on the frontline to help a fallen comrade and was blown apart along with the enemy by

friendly fire. The last survivor, my baby, Yotos, tried to play a man's role as well, and ran away, leaving a note. It said: 'I love you, Mama. And I'll come back to you. I promise.' But he never came home. He was nine years old."

The curator's tone never wavered from its relentless detachment. In the dim light, she almost appeared to be smiling. "As always, the war ended without any clear victor. But we knew it would start again soon enough. We could no longer see the point of this cycle of war. Why continue killing each other again and again with no results? I sent four sons to the battlefield and lost them all, and because of that I achieved a certain measure of fame. I used this position to appeal to everyone. 'Let us end the war,' I said."

"Did anyone listen?" asked Hermes.

"Not at first. Of course, I knew my appeal was never going to stop war completely. If wars could be stopped that easily, they would have ended long ago. I knew there had to be a realistic alternative to war, so I proposed one."

"*You* proposed the slaughter of the Tatana people? That was *your* idea?" The words left Kino's mouth before she could stop them.

"Yes. The Tatana are a proxy for the enemy, and whichever side kills the most is the victor in that war. This way, our competitive spirit, our animosity, and our brutality can all be released. By a staggering coincidence, at the same time that I proposed this plan, a woman on the other side proposed a remarkably similar plan."

The curator walked forward a short distance, beckoning Kino to the next display case. Kino's feet were reluctant, but she followed.

"I met her fifteen years ago. She showed me a picture of her children. They were all beautiful, handsome boys. You could see they were her heart's delight. They too had all died in the war."

On the monitor was a newspaper photograph of the curator, much thinner then, embracing another woman of roughly the same age.

"Our plan was tested and put into practice. That was fifteen years ago."

The next monitor the curator switched on showed Veldeval as it was now — a very peaceful town with happy residents like the ones Kino saw when she arrived.

"Since that time, our two cities have not had a single *real* war. They have developed, and our populations have expanded. Young mothers today need never again experience the loss I suffered. They can bring children into the world and raise them in happiness, without ever fearing that they will have to attend their children's funerals. People die in the order in which they are born. This is the meaning of peace; this is what our country has today, Kino. And this is the end of our tour."

The curator folded her hands at her waist and smiled. "Thank you for visiting."

Kino said, "May I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"What about the Tatana people you kill? Don't they have lives and families? Children as innocent and as beautiful and as full of promise as your sons?"

"I imagine they do. But there is a cost for peace. There must be some sacrifice, or true peace can never be reached.

In the past, that sacrifice was my precious children. Young soldiers would fight on that hellish battlefield, and die to protect their country. But things are different now. The Tatana people are unable to fight back. Our children no longer need to die on the battlefield. This is a wonderful thing. If we did not sacrifice the Tatana, Kino, Veldeval and Relsumia would go to war with each other again, and the number of victims would be far greater than the number of Tatana who die now."

The curator had clearly chosen each word carefully. Now she repeated, "Peace *requires* sacrifice. We will not allow that sacrifice to be our children. If our peace can be achieved through the death of a few Tatana, then we welcome that with open arms."

Kino thought about this for a moment, then said, "Curator, I don't understand your reasoning. Perhaps in the new version of war the combatants don't die but innocents do. At least with the old way, those who died were those who fought. And their deaths were, in a way, of their own choosing. The Tatana people have not chosen to fight or to die."

The curator's brows had drawn together in a frown, but now she smiled. She stooped slightly, put her hands on Kino's thin shoulders, and said gently, "No, clearly you don't understand. But when you're a little older, you will."

"Will I? How so?"

"When you bear your own children, Kino. When you feel that life growing inside you . . . then you will know the impossibility of sentencing them to die in war. You will understand."

The girl called Kino looked up into the face of the curator and saw another mother, her eyes wide and her hands over her mouth, as she watched her husband attack her only daughter with a knife. That girl could never have understood or responded.

"What I understand," said Kino, "is that it would be impossible for me to sentence *anyone's* children to die in war."

Kino and Hermes left Veldeval with a grand sendoff attended by everyone in the city. The sun was still fairly high in the sky as they drove straight across the prairie, a trail of dust rising from beneath Hermes' wheels.

They kept a high speed from the time they left the walls until late afternoon, but the scenery did not change at all. Brown earth, bare mountains in the distance, and the occasional large metal can that whisked by, were all left behind. So Kino was greatly surprised to see a gathering of people on the road ahead of them.

Hermes spotted them as well. "Welcome party up ahead."

Kino slacked off the accelerator. They were the Tatana, and they looked far from welcoming. A number of sturdy young men had blocked the road. They carried staffs taller than themselves, and hefty axes hung from their belts. A group of about twenty unarmed villagers clustered behind them, minding the camel-like animals they had apparently ridden there.

Kino brought Hermes to a stop several yards away from them and dismounted. She unbuttoned her coat to quickly access the Cannon, and pulled off her goggles and hat.

A young Tatana with a staff took a few steps toward Kino. He said, "You will come to our village."

"Why?"

"So we can cut you into pieces and watch you die."

Kino looked at the gathering behind him. There were women, children, and even elderly people. Their faces wore expressions of rage, anguish, and fear.

"Why?" asked Kino again.

"Revenge. We must have some kind of revenge, no matter how insignificant."

"I am not from Veldeval or Relsumia," Kino said calmly.

The young man spoke slowly, holding back strong emotion. "We know. You are a traveler. I don't know if you're aware of our hatred for the inhabitants of that city. They kill us without reason. They throw our dead where we cannot reach them to honor them. We can't even bury our loved ones. But we cannot fight the city-dwellers. We have not the means. They are too powerful. And we are like animals before them."

"Yes," murmured Kino. "Yes, you are."

"So anyone who passes this place—it doesn't matter who—we torture to death to appease our rage. We have no hatred for you. You were just unlucky to have come from that place to this."

With their talk apparently at an end, the young man slowly approached Kino. He was a handsome boy and reminded Kino of the curator's second son.

Hermes said, exasperated, "Good grief, Kino! Are you gonna let them eat you?"

Kino did not answer. Instead, she raised her voice, addressing all the Tatana people. "I understand how you feel. I was sickened by what I saw in Veldeval. But if you kill me without reason then you are no better than those you despise. I don't wish to die here. I don't *deserve* to die here. But as I go on my way, I will not forget you. I promise you that." She bowed to the Tatana and turned toward Hermes.

The Tatana came after her, swinging his staff. Kino spun around and their eyes met. He might have touched her, if he'd only reached out his hand, but instead, he swung the staff at her head.

Kino twisted out of the way, pulling the Cannon from its holster with blinding speed. She fired. There was a sharp crack as the bullet broke the staff. A puff of white smoke from the liquid explosive spread out on the breeze and was gone.

The young man froze, staff raised before his face. And then he fell over backward, slowly, raising a cloud of dust around him when he landed. Blood oozed from his chin, staining his chest red.

She had meant only to break the staff, but the bullet had deflected. She started to say something, to deny that she'd intended to kill, but she could only watch silently as the thirsty earth swallowed up his blood.

The other Tatana swiftly mounted their animals and fled. Kino watched until they were out of sight, the Cannon still in her hand.

"What should we do with him?" asked Hermes after a while. "Bury him?"

Kino replied, "No, they'll want to come back for him. To honor him."

She put the gun back in its holster, then stood and looked at the body for a moment. When she moved, it was to pull something out of the netting around Hermes' overloaded carrier.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A gift . . . for the spirit of the dead."

Kino knelt by the dead man and placed her silver cup on his breast. Then she mounted Hermes again and put her goggles and cap back on. Leaving the body behind them, they drove away.

A cloud of dust rose in their wake. It covered the body of the young Tatana. Kino gave him a parting glance in Hermes' side mirror.

Which side gets to count this one? Kino thought, as she drove Hermes due west.

Coliseum

The river's clear water cut cleanly through the center of a dense forest. The river boasted a levee, the top of which doubled as a road. On the left, the levee fell away toward the water, which reflected Kino on her motorbike.

It was a cool morning. Kino wore her long brown coat, the excess length wrapped around her thighs. She had her hat on, earflaps down; the damp air buffeted her face.

"This is a great road, but you're driving too fast!" shouted Hermes.

"What?" Kino laughed, the sound trailing behind her on the sunlit air. "Hermes, when did you become an old man?"

She forced him into top gear, his engine roaring so loudly that he knew they weren't making any friends among the forest creatures. Then they hit a gentle rise in the road and he was airborne. The unhappy lump of metal sailed through the air for several yards, landing with a thud, his rear end fishtailing.

"Kino!" he shrieked. "Cut it out!"

Kino released the accelerator, still laughing. "What—you've never wanted to fly?"

"Fly?" fumed Hermes. *"Fly?* I'm a motorcycle, for goodness' sake! I belong on the *ground.* Fly, my tailpipe. I thought my frame was going to bend!"

Kino slowed him further. "Nothing's bent but your stodgy sensibilities. We hit a hundred back there! Haven't done that for a while, and loaded down like this, too. You should be proud of yourself, Hermes."

"You're clearly proud of *yourself.* Know what the other Kino said about a motorcycle's top speed?"

She paused a beat, then asked, "No, what did he say?"

"He said that a motorcycle's top speed is the speed at which it comes apart. As in, at the seams. A broken, twisted pile of scrap metal . . . You still wanna find my top speed?"

Kino didn't respond at first, then said soberly, "Sorry, Hermes," and patted the motorcycle's gas tank.

"Why are we in such a hurry?" he asked.

"No reason. I think if you don't test your limits, they get harder to reach."

"When did you make that up?"

"About the same time you made up that nonsense about a motorcycle's top speed. Oh, by the way, we should hit the next city any moment now."

"Oh, I'm all a-tingle."

Kino's version of *any moment now,* Hermes knew, was not terribly reliable.

"See? There it is." A tall outer wall of gray stone encircled the city that she pointed to. Inside, a bristling

array of buildings surrounded an enormous elliptical structure with walls nearly as high as the city's protective outer curtain.

It reminded Hermes disturbingly of a bull's-eye.

"I've wanted to come here for a while," said Kino, sounding entranced.

Given their recent experiences, Hermes was not nearly so enthusiastic. "I hope you let me rest awhile when we get there," he muttered. "Some place cool, dark, and not too damp."

"What did you say?" cried Kino, shading her eyes in an attempt to see the guard's face. She stood in a narrow, cobbled entranceway between a guard station and a gatehouse, the sun falling blindingly between the eaves overhead.

The young man replied, "I'll say it as many times as you like. You've been admitted to this city-state. Which means you are automatically entered into the contest. That's how things work here."

Kino stared at him with a mixture of surprise and horror. "So you're telling me I have to participate in this . . . this contest?"

"Yes, I am. Did you really come here without knowing that, boy?" taunted the guard.

"Don't call me 'boy.' I'm not a boy. I'm Kino." Illustrating the point, Kino parted the lapels of her coat and set her hands on her slim hips, careful not to reveal the revolver strapped to her right thigh.

"Okay, *girl,*" said the guard with a rakish grin. "One more time, for good measure: You're automatically entered in the contest. You know what happens to people who choose not to participate?"

Kino snorted. "How could I? I've never been here before. And there are certainly no signs on the road that advertise your so-called contest."

"Then I'll tell you what happens. Just punishment for a coward—you get to live the rest of your life as a slave."

"Why?"

"That's the way things are. The law of the land. You don't obey it, it'll be your head." He smirked.

Kino looked down at the tag the guard had clipped to Hermes' handlebars. On it was the number twenty-four. Their "contestant" number.

Once every three months, so the guard said, this city held a contest for the right of citizenship. Anyone who wanted to live here had to fight it out in the coliseum, and the victor would become a citizen.

The contest lasted three days. Two rounds of fighting on the first day—which started, apparently, when a visitor was issued a number—two rounds on the second day, and a final deciding round on the third day.

There were no restrictions on weapons, but you couldn't watch the other participants' fights. You could attempt to surrender, but that was only effective if the opponent chose to recognize the capitulation. Otherwise, the loser was whomever was unable to continue. In most cases, "unable to continue" meant "dead." If you refused to fight, you embarked on a life of slavery; if you attempted

to flee, you were charged with cowardice under fire and executed on sight.

Almost all the residents of the country crammed into the coliseum to watch. Even the ruler, King Yukio, observed the contests from a special bullet-proof box seat. All other spectators, of course, were at risk of being wounded or even killed by stray bullets or other ordnance.

"That just ups the suspense and excitement," the guard said eagerly, then concluded, "The last man or woman standing receives a medal of citizenship from the hand of the king. At that time, he or she is also permitted to make one new law. As long as it doesn't contradict any existing laws, it can be just about anything."

"What—no one's asked to stop the contest?" asked Kino sarcastically.

"Most people," said the guard, as if he hadn't heard her, "make laws like 'There shall always be a house for me to live in' or 'I shall marry the most beautiful and richest woman in the land.'"

"Selfish things, in other words."

"I suppose. Anyway, today is the final day for entry. Anyone who passes through the gates before the deadline is automatically entered. Congratulations. You're in."

"But I don't *want* in. I don't *want* to be a citizen of this . . . place."

The guard shook his head. "Kidding, right?"

Kino glanced around her. Her audience had grown since she had revealed herself to be a mere girl, and guards with nothing better to do had come from every corner of

the gate area to ogle and scoff. She sincerely regretted not letting them believe she was a boy. Every man there wore a vulgar grin and rattled his gun as if to say, "Just look at *this!*"

She took stock of her situation: she was quite literally on their turf—standing in the shadow of their station house. The half-dozen shiny, white helmets that hung from pegs just outside the station house door reminded her eerily of polished skulls.

"How about it?" asked another young man, peering at her through narrowed eyes. "You gonna participate? Or you gonna head straight for the slaves' quarters? You'd be the first person ever to do that, Kino. Or should I say Number 24?"

"When did this game begin?" Kino asked, addressing the original guard and ignoring the others jockeying for her attention.

"About seven years ago. But please don't call it a game. Citizenship in our glorious city is the prize."

"Glorious?" Kino glared at the guard. "I heard this city was surrounded by green forests and fields that provided plenty for everyone. I heard the people were modest and led simple, splendid lives."

"That's still true," another guard said defensively. "Don't act like it's ancient history. There's enough for everyone to eat even if you don't do any work. It's a paradise on Earth. It'd be wasted on the likes of you."

"What happened seven years ago?" Kino asked, ignoring the insult.

The young gate guard turned to his compatriots, singling out a grizzled veteran to answer the question. "You tell her, Taro."

Taro seemed quite pleased to lecture on the subject. He assumed an almost professorial air and said, "Seven years ago we got a new king. Yukio—long may he live—killed the old king and made the realm much more exciting. Since then, lots of people want to live here, but we can't just let anyone in. So we have them fight in the coliseum to prove their worth and their devotion. We keep only the strongest and most clever. The rest . . ." He shrugged eloquently, then put his face right up to Kino's. "You get my drift, little girl?"

Kino did not allow her expression to change. "I understand perfectly. I have one more question: Has everyone who participated been willing? Have they been aware that they would be fighting to the death? Or have there been people like me, ordinary travelers who stumbled in without knowing the rules? Who didn't even want to stay here, let alone become permanent citizens?"

This made all the guards snort and cackle. Finally, Taro collected himself and said, "There are a few, yeah—idiots like you. They usually get killed in the first round. They cry and beg, trying to surrender—as if their opponent is gonna let them. I remember one couple drove in with a horse and cart, and in a beautiful stroke of luck got to fight each other in the first round! The wife surrendered and survived 'cause he let her, but the husband was killed in the next round. It was *so* romantic!"

Taro doubled over with laughter and the other guards cackled at the memory. None of them noticed that Kino's eyes had narrowed dangerously.

"Lead me to it, then," she said.

"Oh joy," murmured Hermes.

One of the guards stopped laughing long enough to gasp, "Did you say something?" His eyes met Kino's and he swallowed his laughter.

"I said lead me to it." Her gaze, cold and hard as ice, did not waver.

The guards' laughter tapered off. There was a long silence, punctuated by the shuffling of booted feet and the creak of gun belts.

Finally, one of the guards spoke up. "Hey now, little boy-girl, you really want to fight? You think you can win? Do you even have a weapon? Or were you planning on using that cute little face to your advantage? Ain't that many fighters go for your type, you know."

"Yeah," chortled Taro. "It's like with fish: most folk throw 'em back if they're too small."

The guards guffawed, but their laughter was silenced by a deafening and prolonged roar. Six white helmets leapt from their pegs and the narrow access filled with white smoke.

It took the startled men several moments to notice the gun in Kino's right hand.

"Will this do?" asked Kino, returning the Cannon to the holster on her right thigh.

"You little—!" The young gate guard leapt at her, hands going for her throat. He froze when he felt the muzzle of a semiautomatic pressed into his forehead.

"Say 'hello' to the Woodsman. D'you think it qualifies as a weapon . . . *boy?*"

Silence.

"I'm entering your contest," Kino said, then turned and walked away.

"What a mess!" exclaimed Hermes, as they moved deeper into the city.

Everywhere they looked there were piles of garbage. But this wasn't the dump; the entire town was filled with trash. The buildings and roads were filthy and had obviously not been maintained for years. A number of citizens were lying in the road, sleeping, dressed in filthy clothes. The town was quiet. A number of fat dogs were picking over the trash heaps. The whole place stank.

"See the town, know the people, right, Kino? Or is it the other way around?" Hermes was hyper-aware of the pair of guards following close behind.

Kino pushed him forward in silence, never glancing back.

After several turns down streets of unremitting squalor, they reached the coliseum. This was the elliptical structure they had seen from a distance. Close up it looked like a broken bowl. Great cracks had opened up in the limestone facing, exposing the rusted metal framework underneath.

"I don't know when this place was built or by whom," Kino said, covering his unease with sarcasm, "but they did a terrible job. The designer had as little talent as the builder had skill. Shoddy, shoddy workmanship."

The guards ignored this, leading Kino and Hermes to a room beneath the coliseum, telling them it was the contestants' "lodgings." It was hardly worthy of that grand title and was only marginally better than a dungeon. There was a tiny window high in the wall, above a bed so worn

that the springs protruded here and there. But the sink and toilet had running water, at least.

Hermes couldn't help but note that it was cool, dark, and not too damp. *Which only goes to prove the old saying that you should be careful what you ask for.*

"What a dump," he complained aloud the moment the guards left them.

Kino took off her coat and rolled it up. "It wasn't always this way. It used to be a great country, one no traveler should miss." She sounded wistful.

"How do you know?" Hermes asked. "You been reading travel brochures or something? *I* never get to read anything interesting."

Kino sat down on the bed, drew out the Woodsman, and laid it on the blanket next to her. "You remember that couple the guards mentioned?"

"The one with the cart and—Oh! We met them . . . somewhere . . . didn't we?"

Kino smiled weakly. "Getting old, Hermes? Yes, that couple. To tell you the truth, I don't remember where or when we met them either, but I do remember what the woman told me about this place. They were looking for it because of what they'd heard. Little or no poverty, wise leadership, work and food for all."

"Sounds nice . . . Oh, I get it. That's why you were so happy on the way here. You thought this was going to be *fun.*"

"Yeah. Fun. You remember fun?" Kino rose and unloaded the baggage from Hermes' carrier, then pulled out five empty magazines for the Woodsman and laid them out on the bed.

"You serious about this, Kino?"

"About what?" Kino took the Cannon out of its holster and dismantled it, pulling the barrel away from the grip.

"The contest. I know you were insulted, but there's no reason to play along with this city's crazy laws. Maim your first opponent—just a little, of course—and when he's about to give up, surrender to him instead. Then we can leave this place behind."

"I could do that."

Kino removed the Cannon's cylinder, then produced two empty cylinders from one of the pouches.

"But you're not gonna, are you?"

Kino loaded one of the empty cylinders into the Cannon and said, "Only as a last resort."

"*Last* resort? Good grief, Kino, what's the *first* resort? You aren't seriously going to participate?"

"Why not? If everything wraps up in three days, I might as well finish it."

Using something that looked like a veterinary hypodermic, Kino proceeded to pour a green liquid explosive into the Cannon's six empty chambers. After this, she put in a piece of felt wadding and a bullet.

Kino reassembled the gun. Then she slid each bullet into its chamber, being careful not to pack them too tightly. She greased the tops of the bullets to prevent sparks spreading from one chamber to the next when the gun was fired. She used a loader to place a percussion cap on the back of each cylinder so that when the hammer struck it, it would ignite the liquid explosive in the chamber.

Watching Kino's grave expression as she prepared the gun gave Hermes a serious case of the willies. "Once you make up your mind, there's no talking to you, you know that?"

Kino checked to make sure the Cannon's cylinder was rotating smoothly. Then she smiled girlishly. "Well, you know what they always say: 'If you don't test your limits, they get harder to reach.' "

"You made that up."

"So-o-o," said Kino, exhaling slowly, "*that's* the king."

Striding toward the center of the field of battle—alone, as she'd left Hermes behind in the underground room to guard their belongings—she gazed up at the man sitting in conspicuous, tawdry luxury in his bulletproof royal box. He wore a crown and ostentatious clothing. The crown, oddly, was of a simple and elegant design, which made it clash all the more with the king's gaudy outfit. On either side of His Highness were young women clad in equally flashy costumes that reflected colorfully in the encompassing glass.

"And these must be the glorious citizens." Kino gazed around at the audience. Young and old, men and women—the seats were filled to the brim with spectators revved up and calling for blood.

She smiled grimly, remembering Hermes' last words to her when she'd been taken from their cell. "Try not to die."

I'll do my best, she thought.

Except for the circular clearing she now approached, the elliptical field was scattered with wrecked vehicles and rubble from demolished buildings, apparently intended to offer "cover" to contestants.

The fight would begin when both challengers stood at the edge of the central clearing. Approaching from the opposite side of that clearing was her opponent—a huge man, more like a slab of muscle with a head attached than a human being. His torso was bare, his head shaved so close that it reflected the sun. He held a thick chain, at the end of which was an iron ball as big as a small child. A mace without spikes.

When baldy reached the edge of the clearing, he tugged at the chains, urging the iron ball to catch up with him. He saw Kino out of the corner of his eye and gaped at her. "What the—? They put me up against a *kid?*"

His voice was loud enough to be heard over the crowd, and got a ripple of laughter. The king's teeth flashed white in his bronzed face.

"Excuse me," Kino said politely. "I have two questions for you before we begin, noble opponent. First, why did you come to this city?"

Her "noble opponent" responded with a questioning grunt.

"I asked: Why did you come here?"

"What're you, stupid? I came here to live. And to kill . . . you, as it happens." He chuckled, a sound like gravel rattling in an iron pot.

Kino nodded and said, "Question number two: Will you surrender?"

"Will I what?"

"If you surrender now, you may leave here unharmed. I have no wish to kill you."

In response, the other contestant shortened up his chain and began to swing the naked mace above his bald head. Slowly at first, then gradually faster, the iron ball whizzed through the air, with a sound like the wings of a gigantic dragonfly.

Kino's hand slid down her right thigh and found the Cannon.

The audience fell silent. A half-hearted trumpet fanfare signaled the start of the fight.

"DIE!" shouted baldy, his muscles rippling with effort. The iron ball suddenly left its orbit and flew in a deadly arc . . . to crush a burnt-out car several yards behind him.

The crowd gasped in unison.

For a long moment, Kino's opponent stared down at the limp chain, then he hauled it in hand-over-hand as if it were a fishing line. He held the last link in front of his face and squinted at it. It had been severed by a single bullet.

"Um . . ." he said. He scratched his head and looked at Kino. The Cannon was in her right hand . . . still smoking. His expression changed from puzzlement to astonishment. He pointed at the end of his chain. "You did this?"

"I did."

He pointed to where the iron ball had landed. It had rolled off the roof of the car to make a small crater in the sand. "And it flew over there?"

"Would you like to surrender now?" asked Kino.

"Oh, yes, please," baldy said quickly.

Kino bowed and holstered her gun.

The tall, thin young man with the cockscomb of purple hair who faced Kino in the evening round taunted her in much the same way as the first man, but added a sinister chuckle.

If they awarded points for style, Kino reflected, *I might be in trouble.*

Her new opponent had no weapons in his hands. He was dressed in some sort of loose, black garment, with a thick cummerbund covered in thin metal scales, each about the length of his palm.

Kino thought it was armor until he pulled a scale from the collection and tossed it away. It spun through the air, then turned and started back to him like a throwing star or boomerang. At this point, he raised his left arm, holding it straight out from his body. From his wrist to his left ankle, a swath of cloth stretched, like the wing of a flying squirrel.

The little throwing star flew into the cloth and stuck.

Kino blinked. The cloth was actually *absorbing* the little bit of razor-sharp metal. As it vanished from sight, the young man put his left hand to his right shoulder, and with his right hand tapped his belly. The two gestures together looked like some sort of comical salute, but when he moved his right hand away from the cummerbund, the metal scale had reappeared among its fellows.

He chuckled, watching Kino's face. "See? I invented these throwing stars myself. Handmade. And very obedient; they all return to their master."

Ooo, thought Kino. *Scary.* Aloud, she said, "Please surrender. I will accept your submission in good faith and will cause you no harm."

"No, I don't think I shall. *You* could surrender, of course, but I will only accept . . . from your ghost." He laughed again, the same sinister, obviously well-practiced laugh that he had greeted her with. He pressed both hands against his belly, crouched, and glared up at her.

Kino's right hand glided down toward the Cannon. She released the thumb break without taking her eyes from her adversary.

The fanfare sounded on cue.

Purple Cockscomb made an elegant gesture with his left hand, and with his right, grabbed one of the metal scales, and flicked it at Kino. He threw another and another.

Kino leapt to the right, dodging the throwing stars, knowing they would reverse direction somewhere behind her. The man continued to throw, aiming now to Kino's right. She dodged again to the left.

But Purple Cockscomb didn't throw all of his scales at once; about half their number were still attached to his strange sash. Reading Kino's wariness, he began a gyrating dance, thrusting his hips this way and that and taunting her, "They're behind you. Now turning. Now heading back. If I throw the rest, can you dodge them coming from *both* sides?"

Kino glanced behind her, and saw that he was right; the scales had turned.

"DIE!" the man screamed, and hurled the rest, his hands a blur. They flew straight for Kino.

She dove flat to the ground.

Purple Cockscomb snarled in disbelief.

Kino looked up as the throwing star whistled over her head. They returned obediently to their master, who curled his lip and unfurled his cloth wing to reabsorb them—

—Just as Kino fired the Cannon from the ground.

There was a terrible roar and a puff of smoke. The bullet struck the man squarely on the one metal scale still clinging to his sash. The force of impact drove the scale deep into his belly. He uttered a horrid, strangled cry and froze, mouth open, eyes wide and blank. He staggered, swaying from side to side like a metronome, gasping for air.

From behind her, a whisper of sound tugged at Kino's ears. She shot her opponent a second time in the right thigh.

He shuddered and fell over, bleeding from his leg, as the second wave of metal scales passed harmlessly over him.

Kino returned to her underground room, lit a candle, put her guns on the narrow bed, and took off her jacket.

"Ah, Kino. When did you get back?" asked Hermes groggily.

"Just now. We're staying here tonight."

"Meaning you didn't surrender. Thought so. Sweet dreams." Hermes fell asleep again.

He's sleeping a lot, even for him, Kino thought. But she had little energy left to worry about Hermes' laziness now.

The next morning, Kino woke at dawn. She stayed abed until the room lightened enough for her to see her hands in front of her face. Then she rose, washed her face, and cleaned and reloaded the cylinder she'd fired the day before.

Breakfast was more survival rations. Followed by limbering exercises. Afterward, she did some training with the Woodsman, and then with the Cannon.

A little while later, the guards came to take her into the coliseum.

Hermes slept.

Her first opponent that day looked at her in inscrutable silence. He was an older man, short and sturdy, with long brown hair and a beard so full it was hard to tell where it ended and his hair began. Deep lines were etched around his eyes.

He wore a baggy and filthy robe, which made him look like a mendicant monk. There was an odd bulge beneath his robe, behind his right shoulder. Kino couldn't tell whether this was a disfiguring hump or something artificial. He had no visible armor or weapons. Instead, he carried a gilded trombone.

Okay. A mendicant musician, then. She could almost imagine him playing on street corners for his meals.

She looked him over carefully, then called out, "If you surrender now, I will accept."

The mendicant musician did not verbally respond, though his right fist tightened.

Kino flipped off the Cannon's thumb break.

As the trumpets sounded, the mendicant musician snapped his horn upward, so that the bell pointed directly at Kino.

Kino drew the Cannon and fired. The bullet struck the flared rim of the horn's bell, knocking it sharply to the right. Instead of sound, the trombone spewed a purple, gelatinous liquid. It arced through the air and burst into flame, collecting on the ground in a small, fiery lake.

Kino didn't allow herself to be impressed. She pulled the Woodsman from her back holster, flicked the safety off, and aimed it at the trombonist's head. He had just enough time to blink before she shifted her aim slightly and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp report, and a bullet whizzed past the man's face, missing him by less than an inch. He smiled and aimed his instrument at Kino again.

Suddenly, a purple geyser erupted from his right shoulder.

He halted in mid-puff and stared at the leak. The contents of his "hump" were escaping through the neat little hole Kino had drilled in the hose that carried the incendiary fluid to the trombone. The liquid rained down onto the surprised combatant and the surrounding ground.

Kino stood calmly, a gun in each hand, and said, "That's not a big hole, so I'm going to guess that

there's a lot of pressure building behind it, which means that if you don't close the valve, it will rupture. Will you surrender now?"

The man glanced from his saturated clothing to Kino's face. "I refuse."

"You can't win," said Kino, aiming the Woodsman.

The man did not budge. He just glared at her. "Kill me."

"Why?"

"*Kill* me."

Someone in the stands yelled, "Finish him! Kill him!"

And that brought the entire audience to their feet and set off a rhythmic chant, "Kill! Kill! Kill him *now!* Kill! Kill! Kill him *now!* Kill! Kill! Kill him *now!*"

Kino turned very slowly, looking at the audience as they screamed happily, crazily, for this man's blood. Then she raised the Cannon over her head and fired it once into the air. The audience fell silent, savoring the drama.

Kino turned to the king.

Resplendent in his finery, he grinned down at her from the safety of his box. Their eyes met, and Kino forced a polite smile.

Behind her, the mendicant musician said, "What are you waiting for? His permission? You have it. And you have mine. We bet our lives on this fight. The winner survives; the loser dies. That's the law. I've lost today. So I die, and you, girlie, get to live. Shoot . . . me . . . now."

Kino grimaced, glancing back over her shoulder. " 'Girlie?' Don't make me gag. I'm Kino."

"Kino? Good name. I'll remember it in Hell."

"Thanks . . ." She turned on her heel, strode up to the man, and paused just in front of him.

The crowd clamored again, demanding his death.

She placed the Cannon against his forehead, and cocked the hammer. "Surrender."

"No."

"Then I have no choice."

Kino lowered the hammer slowly back into place.

"What game are you playing?" he whispered savagely. "They'll kill you if you fail to satisfy them."

Kino spun the Cannon in her hand, shifted her grip to the barrel, and dealt her opponent a glancing blow to the temple with the butt of the gun.

The mendicant musician toppled over into the sand, unconscious.

"A cutie pie like you this late in the game? What on Earth were your opponents thinking?"

Kino's second adversary of the day accompanied her words with a look of pure scorn. She was a young woman with long, blonde hair pulled back severely into a ponytail. Tall, with sharp, fox-like features, she wore cargo pants and a camp shirt, both of which looked like some sort of uniform. Over her shirt was a vest covered in little pouches. The thigh pockets of her pants were unusual, divided into long, narrow pleats, as if to hold short arrows or darts.

She hefted her gun with its wooden stock braced against one hip and its slender muzzle aimed at the sky. It

was a bolt-action rifle that ejected the spent cartridge and loaded a new bullet after each shot. Not very efficient for this type of contest.

"They must have underestimated me," Kino told her blandly.

The other woman nodded. "Yeah . . . I use that trick all the time. Works like a charm, huh?"

Kino asked, "Do you really wish to become a citizen?"

"Me? I certainly do. Wanna know why?"

Kino didn't answer, but blondie told her anyway, her mouth twisting in a strange half-smile. "When I came through the woods just outside of town, I met a beautiful little boy playing in a brook. A darling child. A precious child, but he told me he had no mother or father. If I gain citizenship, they'll let me adopt him."

She seemed to read Kino's amazement and added, "You don't understand, do you, little girl? It's just a woman's nature, I suppose."

A woman's nature. Perhaps she *should* understand. Perhaps she merely *wanted* to understand. She thought of her own mother and shrugged.

"I suppose you'll refuse, but would you surrender?"

"Hey, that's *my* line," the blonde snapped.

"I was afraid you'd say that," whispered Kino, her right hand brushing the Cannon's hammer.

Blondie cocked the rifle as the fans began chanting; Kino dove for cover as her adversary fired from behind the base of a broken statue, narrowly missing her. The bullet pierced the thick metal above Kino's head as if it were made of air.

Armor-piercing bullets?

Kino waited a beat, then moved again, diving from behind the scrap iron to roll toward the cover of a masonry block.

"You're pretty good," her opponent shouted. "But not good enough." With blinding speed, she spun the rifle bolt; the spent cartridge leapt from the breech and the next bullet chambered.

Kino rolled to her left, drawing the Woodsman as she went, and flicking off the safety. She came to a stop beneath a slab of iron plating and peeked out, catching the glint of the woman's golden hair as she moved behind her cover. Kino took the opportunity to dive from the plating into a shelter of piled rubble.

She had just rolled onto her belly when a bullet burrowed into the stone. *Blondie must have incredible peripheral vision.*

That volley was followed by three more in rapid succession, as if the woman were trying to chip through Kino's concealing wall. The stones rattled with each impact. Kino kept her head down.

The silence was quickly broken by the delicate *rip* of a Velcro pocket. The fox was reloading.

Kino's eyes seized on a fist-sized rock near her right elbow. She picked it up and hefted it, noting that many more lay close by. She holstered the Woodsman, popped to her feet, and threw the rock as hard as she could. It connected, sickeningly, with something softer and more yielding than masonry. The other woman cried out in pain and outrage. Something metallic bounced and scraped over the stone.

Blondie had dropped her clip.

Kino snatched up two rocks in each hand and zigzagged from one scrapheap to another, heading toward her opponent. Just before she reached cover, Kino heard the sound of a clip being loaded. A second later, the other woman poked her head out of concealment, saw Kino coming toward her with her arm cocked, and jerked backward. But she was too late—the stones had already left Kino's hands.

Kino slid to her knees behind a pile of desks and chairs, but not before she'd heard the impact, and seen the sudden splash of blood on the blonde's face. At least one stone had caught her in the head.

Kino pressed her back against a twisted metal desk and shouted, "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I can hear you."

"Are you sure you won't surrender?"

"Are you kidding? I have my pride, little girl."

"That gun puts you at a big disadvantage this close . . ."

Silence.

Heaving a sigh, Kino drew the Woodsman again, vaguely aware of the crowd's murmured approval. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down her cheeks. She listened then, trying to determine what blondie was doing behind her chunk of fortress. Metal scraped against metal and then clanked against wood.

Was she dismantling her gun?

Again, the sound of Velcro parting. Kino wished desperately that she could see what was going on. Did she dare take a chance that the fox was disarmed, at least for the moment?

Kino rolled to her left, trying not to upset so much as a grain of sand. She peered around her pile of junk from the bottom left, eyes on the heap of scrap metal that hid her adversary. There was a twisted lump of steel about the size of a serving platter balanced precariously at the top. Kino fired the Woodsman at it. The bullet ricocheted, and the scrap toppled over, taking several other pieces of metal with it.

"Crap!" Blondie broke from cover, racing not *toward* Kino, but *away*. She fired the rifle once and dove.

Kino rolled away from the edge of her rock pile. An uninterrupted stream of bullets ripped at the dirt where she had lain seconds before, spraying sand into the air. Somehow, blondie had altered her gun, transforming it from a single-shot weapon into a machine gun. Kino's plan to use her opponent's reload time to get close enough to force surrender was literally shot.

A hail of bullets struck the right side of her cover. Chips of rock danced, forcing her back to center.

Then, blondie pulled her clip to reload.

Kino was momentarily puzzled; surely she had rounds left in her magazine. *The element of surprise?*

A moment later, she heard the crunch of feet on sand.

"You fought well," the blonde said. "But I'm about to end things. If you come out now, I won't shoot. I'll accept your surrender."

"Let me think about it."

Blondie laughed. "Sure, girlie."

Hair stood up on the back of Kino's neck as the soft footsteps circled slowly toward her left. She pressed herself against a bent steel door that jutted out of the rubble. Her

adversary would very soon reach the extreme left end of the rock pile.

Suddenly, the woman opened fire, bolting around behind the pile. The air filled with bullets, spent shells, and noise. Bullets sprayed the ground behind the rubble, but Kino was no longer there. Instead, they found the steel door and ricocheted back.

Blondie screamed and hit the ground, crouching until the last ricochet had spent itself. She started to rise.

"Liar." Kino aimed the Woodsman around the door and fired three quick shots into the blonde's shoulder.

She dropped the rifle.

Aim unwavering, Kino emerged from behind the door.

The woman laughed and shook her head. "Okay, I'll surrender."

"Thank you," said Kino.

Blood oozing from her shoulder, the woman smiled and said, "You know, you're pretty cute. I could adopt you, too."

"Sorry," said Kino, "one mother was more than enough for me."

Hermes, who'd slept through the morning, woke when Kino entered the room carrying a hefty bundle wrapped in paper.

"Welcome back, Kino. Still safe, I see. No less than expected. What's that? Consolation prize or something?"

Kino carefully lowered the package onto the bed. "No, something I need for tomorrow."

Kino opened the package and lifted out a bottle filled with the green liquid explosive that the Cannon used. Next to appear was a small cardboard box filled with .44 caliber hollow-point bullets. From their luggage, she produced a small portable stove, placed a few chunks of solid fuel into it, and lit them. Then she washed a teacup.

She didn't make tea. Instead, she put some liquid explosive into the teacup and put it over the flame.

Hermes trembled slightly. "Are you sure you should be doing that, Kino?" When she didn't answer he pressed, "What *are* you doing, Kino?"

Frowning in concentration, Kino answered without turning around. "Boiling it down."

"Wow. Gee. That . . . that sounds . . . dangerous, that's how it sounds. Why would you do something like that?"

Kino removed the cup of thickened explosive from the fire before she answered the question. "This concentrates the explosive, which creates a stronger blast, which propels the bullet from the gun at a higher speed."

Kino gently stirred the contents of the cup, which had boiled down to a dense syrup. Then she filled the sink with water and cooled the bottom of the cup. By now the stuff looked like mint jelly.

Kino picked out one of the hollow-point bullets and carefully loaded the concentrated liquid explosive into the hole at the tip. She filled it almost to the rim with gel, then placed a single percussion cap over it. She covered the percussion cap with epoxy she usually used to mend minor damage to Hermes' parts—screw heads, bolt holes,

and the like. It grew very hard when it dried, and it dried very quickly.

"Uh . . . isn't that stuff technically mine?" he asked.

She smiled grimly. "May I use some of your epoxy to try to remain alive tomorrow, Hermes?"

"Oh, sure. No problem. Take as much as you want. Just tell me why."

But Kino's attention was on her task. She incised a deep cross in the nearly hardened epoxy with the blade of a knife.

"Done!" She picked up the altered bullet, happy as a child.

"You're not going to tell me why, are you?"

"Go back to sleep, Hermes, and dream of both of us driving away from here tomorrow. That is . . . if motorcycles dream."

He did go back to sleep. But if he dreamed, he didn't remember.

On the third morning in this city, Kino woke at dawn, keenly aware of the day. What would she have done, she wondered, if their contest had lasted four days or five? She didn't know, and didn't waste time thinking about it. One way or another, she vowed, she would be free of this place by sunset.

She dismantled, cleaned, and reloaded the Woodsman, and then practiced with it as always.

Meanwhile, Hermes slept.

After breakfast, Kino asked the guard at the door for information about the history and laws surrounding the contest. The guard obligingly found a book on the subject and brought it to her. She sat down on the narrow bed and went through the text, being careful to read between the lines.

As the guards had told her, the contest had started seven years earlier, when the previous king, who had been loved for his firm but compassionate rule, died quite suddenly and under suspicious circumstances. Court doctors examined him, and one suggested he had been poisoned. Oddly, that doctor, too, died a premature death.

The king's son, Prince Yukio, had assumed his father's throne and immediately set about replacing the dead king's ministers and courtiers. They were too old, he argued, too stodgy.

Too dangerous, Kino suspected, and perhaps too likely to oppose their new ruler.

Disturbingly, the purges even extended to the king's own family; brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, everyone was accused of unspecified treachery and either executed or exiled.

Sounds familiar, Kino thought ruefully.

Of his family, only King Yukio's wife survived, albeit briefly. The new queen was so overcome with grief that she killed herself. Their only child disappeared, and his whereabouts were unknown to this day. Rumor had it that he had been killed or exiled or imprisoned underground.

Once Yukio was crowned King, he began to lead a life of debauchery, imposing arbitrary laws on this naturally

bountiful kingdom. Of course, at first there was some resistance. But the citizens soon adjusted to lives of heedless pleasure, or at least recognized the need to *appear* as if they had adjusted. Clearly, a failure to do so was unhealthy and unwise. They were trapped.

According to the history, there were enterprising souls who went mad and disappeared into the countryside; others ran away like the abject cowards they were.

Curiously, it was these self-exiles who prompted the creation of the contest. They, the history said, had spurned the blessed gift of citizenship, thereby proving themselves unworthy of it. Citizenship, King Yukio decreed, must therefore be earned so that only the most worthy should own it.

If by worthy, Kino thought, *you mean murderous.*

It was almost noon when Hermes finally woke; Kino had just been summoned to the final battle. He watched her as she placed an empty cylinder in the Cannon and loaded one of the chambers with liquid explosive, cramming in at least twice the usual amount. She did not add wadding, but instead loaded her doctored bullet directly atop the explosive gel. Finally, she fixed a single percussion cap to the back of the chamber containing the bullet.

Hermes uttered a metallic cough. "So, what's the plan? The way you've got that set up, you can only fire once."

Kino smiled. "Once is all I need."

Spinning the cylinder so it was ready to be fired, she placed the Cannon in the holster. Then she rose and loaded Hermes with all their baggage, laying her long, brown coat across his seat.

"Let's go, Hermes. I'd like you to watch this round."

"Why?"

Kino took him off his stand and pushed him out of the cell. He seemed to be dragging his tires, but that might have been her imagination. "I have a plan. And the moment the fight is over, I want to leave for someplace that has showers."

She left Hermes standing at the contestants' entrance in the care of a couple of middle-aged guards. Directly opposite him, up in the stands, the king sipped refreshment in his private box.

Kino strode to the center of the coliseum, accompanied by a roar of applause. When she had reached the center of the arena, her final opponent emerged from the opposite side. As he walked toward the clearing, Hermes looked him over carefully.

He was a young man—perhaps in his late teens or early twenties—tall, slender, and well-proportioned. His collar-length hair was black like Kino's and swayed gently in the breeze. He wore blue jeans and a green sweater with cloth padding on the shoulders and elbows.

The two contestants stopped face-to-face. The man's expression and bearing were completely different from that of Kino's previous opponents. He seemed . . . peaceful, at ease, detached. His lips curved in what was almost a smile—like a martyr on his way to execution. His only weapon was the *katana* at his side, the sheath shoved directly into his belt.

"Excuse me," said Hermes to the guard. "That nice-looking young man with the sword is the final opponent?"

"Yep. He hasn't been hurt yet, either. So I'd say they're well-matched. Your buddy's clever, but this guy's clever *and* strong. Your little guy might be in trouble this time."

"Girl," said Hermes absently. "Kino is a girl."

"No kidding? Huh? Imagine that. You don't sound very worried about her."

"Why worry? Worrying won't make Kino any stronger. And she's damned clever, as you said yourself."

"You've got a cold heart."

"No. I just know Kino can win. More important, I get the feeling there's more at stake here than the fight." Hermes paused to consider his own words. "Actually, now that you mention it, there is one thing that worries me."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Kino's got a plan. I always find that . . . a little scary."

"My name is Shizu," said the man with the katana. His tone was polite, his manners, impeccable.

"I'm Kino."

"Kino." He bowed slightly. "I have a request."

"And what might that be?"

Shizu said the same words Kino had used four times before. "Please surrender now. I will accept."

She was surprised. "Shizu, do you really want to be a citizen of this . . . cesspool?"

His eyes widened on the last word. He had clearly not expected it. He stared at Kino for a moment, his eyes searching her face. "Yes. Yes . . . I do."

"It's rotted to the core."

"You know that, you say that, and yet you're still playing this ridiculous game—and playing to win, it appears—even though you don't want to live here?"

"Yes."

Shizu glanced back over his shoulder. After a moment, he returned his gaze to Kino and said, "There's something I have to do . . . after I become a citizen. I hope you will surrender. I wish you no harm."

His tone was solemn, almost humble, and Kino's curiosity was piqued, but she stood her ground. "I don't know what that something is, but I must refuse. I, too, have something I must do after I have won."

"Why? Why do you fight when you stand to gain nothing you want?" Shizu's calm was ruffled, if only slightly.

"The answer is simple. Right now, I want to fight. And to win." Kino's fingertips danced lightly across the top of the Cannon's grip.

Shizu shook his head. He glanced behind him again, then soundlessly gripped the hilt of his sword with both hands and pulled it from its sheath in one fluid motion.

The trumpets announced the beginning of the contest.

Kino reached behind her, drew the Woodsman, released the safety, and aimed at Shizu, but did not fire.

Shizu didn't flinch. He held his sword at middle guard, the blade only slightly angled. The gentleness he'd

seemed to possess mere moments before had vanished, and Kino could now see and feel the tension that ran through him.

Shizu took one step toward her. Then another.

She fired the Woodsman once. The bullet passed well to the side of Shizu's head.

Shizu did not so much as blink—he took another step.

Kino aimed closer to his head and fired again. Again, Shizu didn't react, and as soon as the bullet whistled past his ear, he took another step.

Kino breathed out gently, aimed for Shizu's right shoulder, and fired. Shizu's katana met the bullet with a sharp, musical *ping*. Kino could not suppress her admiration and amazement.

"You're very good," she told him. "Or very lucky."

She fired off several more rounds, aiming for Shizu's arms and legs. With blinding but effortless speed, his blade moved, knocking each bullet off course.

"Very good, apparently," she conceded.

Shizu smiled and took another step closer.

"Now, you see that? That's what I'm talking about," the guard said enthusiastically, clearly impressed with Shizu.

Hermes had to allow that he was also impressed. "Knocking a bullet aside with a sword is pretty amazing. How does he know where Kino's going to shoot?"

"Tilt of the barrel; movement of the eyes. He did this in two of the previous fights as well, took down a couple

of professional gunfighters. This is one opponent who can't be intimidated."

Kino often said how beautiful the world was. Hermes questioned its beauty, but never its unpredictability. Here was an opponent who might prove to be her match in more than the obvious ways. Hermes had seen Shizu's mouth form the word *surrender* a number of times, and found himself hoping Kino would consider it.

"But he hasn't killed anyone," the guard added after a moment of thought. "Kind of like your buddy . . . er, your . . . Kino."

"Really?"

"Not a one. He'll hurt them, sure, but doesn't kill. I never heard of both contestants making it to the final round without killing anyone. I mean, what are the odds?"

Refreshingly, the guard seemed more impressed than disappointed.

Kino had now fired eight times without hitting Shizu once. There were two bullets left in her magazine, but she let it drop and loaded a fresh one.

Shizu was only a few steps away.

"Will you surrender?" he asked calmly, almost gently, sword still at mid-guard.

"No, thank you," replied Kino, gun aimed at Shizu's blade. She flicked the barrel to one side; the blade followed. She flicked it back and fired. The bullet was deflected.

"Impressive!"

Shizu moved like lightning, closing the gap between them in an instant. Shifting the katana to his right hand, he sliced diagonally upward, the blade moving too fast for even Kino's sharp eyes to follow. The top of the blade struck the Woodsman's barrel, and flung it from her hand.

Now with the sword in both hands, Shizu reversed the blade and swept it downward, aiming for Kino's left shoulder. But Kino was quick. Crossing her leather-clad arms, she stepped into Shizu's attack and caught the blade where it met the hilt, scissoring it between her wrists. There was a sharp *clang* of metal on metal and sparks flew.

Before Shizu could do more than gasp aloud, Kino shoved his blade aside, spun around to his right flank, and slammed the heel of one palm into his temple. He half-fell, half-tumbled from the blow, slashing with his blade as he went down. He was aiming for Kino's side, but she took the blow on her wrist. He rolled to his feet a yard away, his weapon once again at mid-guard, his eyes questioning.

Kino straightened, watching him warily. She let the tension flow from her body, and shook her arms as if they'd gone to sleep. Metal gleamed from beneath the cuts on her jacket.

"You're good," Shizu told her. "Unexpected. You know many ways to surprise and intimidate. I'm impressed." Shizu flipped his sword so that the point of the blade was aimed at Kino. "But I would really prefer it if you surrendered."

Kino lowered her arms, knowing she looked relaxed, defenseless. "I refuse."

"When I become a citizen, I'll make a law that allows you to live here, too."

"No thank you. I told you—I've no interest in becoming a citizen here."

"Oh, right. How could I forget? But if we keep on like this, you'll die."

Kino smiled. "You don't have to kill me. *I've* gotten this far without killing anyone."

Shizu frowned, curiosity giving way to bafflement. "What . . . what do you mean?"

"Ah, of course. You've seen none of my battles; just as I've seen none of yours. I've entertained the crowd by winning without killing. They seemed to like it—you heard the applause when I entered the arena. But apparently you want to wrap things up by showing them a really good killing. Am I right?"

Shizu didn't answer, but his eyes softened—with what, Kino was not exactly sure. Perhaps it was compassion. Then he moved, crossing the distance between them in a second, his blade at shoulder height.

Kino drew the Cannon.

Both fighters froze as if caught in ice. Shizu's arms quivered above his head, the blade's hovering tip aimed at Kino's throat. Kino, her right arm outstretched, aimed the Cannon's muzzle at the spot between Shizu's brows. The gun's hammer was raised; all Kino had to do was pull the trigger and Shizu would die.

Their eyes met.

"You're quick," he whispered.

"It's easier to tell where a sword blade is coming

from than where a gun is going to fire. You just have to be quicker than your opponent. You're a little too obsessed with winning, Shizu. It may be naive of me, but I think this contest should be for fun, not for killing."

Tension drained out of Shizu's face, leaving behind the earlier peaceful expression. Sword still raised above his head, he said, "It appears I've lost. What now? Will you let me surrender? Or am I to die here?"

"Neither." As the word left her mouth, Kino knew this was the moment. She had not chosen it; *it* had chosen *her*. She kept her smile carefully in place, but knew from the sudden flicker of wariness in Shizu's eyes that her gaze had gone cold.

With her left hand, Kino pulled down on the rod beneath the Cannon's barrel, using it to position the chamber that held the explosive bullet.

Shizu's eyes flickered to the movement of her hands. "What . . . are you doing?"

But they had been immobile for too long. The restless crowd exploded with blood-frenzy.

"Finish it! Kill him!" came the screams. They soon settled into a simple, primal rhythm, "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Her expression frozen, Kino edged a little to the left, the Cannon still aimed at Shizu's head.

Shizu took a tentative step to his right. "What are you doing? If you're going to kill me . . ."

Kino lowered the Cannon, pressing the cold muzzle into Shizu's throat. She glanced up into his eyes. "Who's behind you in the stands?"

"What? Oh . . . you . . . my God!"

"I'm no one's God," Kino murmured, then shouted, *"Duck!"*

Shizu's knees folded, and Kino pulled the trigger.

The hammer hit the percussion cap and the bullet leapt from the barrel. It passed harmlessly over Shizu's head, but the discharge created a shockwave with enough force to knock him flat on his back.

Kino was thrown backward as well, pain coursing through both arms. *Cannon, indeed,* she thought, as she hit the ground and rolled.

But the bullet's aim was true, and it headed straight for the private box seat in the center of the stands. The epoxy-packed head of the bullet hit the glass, which was not all that thick, and passed through it. The glass shattered in its wake, tumbling like a waterfall behind it.

The force of impact peeled back the four sections of the glass case. The remainder of the bullet continued onward into the face of the man who wore the crown. Piercing his skin, tearing through the muscle, and shattering his skull, the bullet entered his head. Its metal rim was torn away, crushed by the impact. The percussion cap fired; a small spark was born; the concentrated liquid explosive ignited.

The king's head exploded.

Shizu saw the glass shatter as the shockwave from the Cannon's blast threw him backward. From the ground,

he witnessed the scarlet explosion—watched as everyone in the box was showered with the debris of a life suddenly snuffed out.

Then, the stands erupted in chaos.

As the red mist cleared, Shizu realized that the king was dead. He clutched his head, looking dizzy and sick.

"Long live the king," he whispered, then pretended to be unconscious.

Kino watched pandemonium sweep the stands, spreading from its bloody epicenter like a tsunami wave. *It is,* she thought with detachment, *just like a child's game of Telephone.*

As she watched, she put the now-useless Cannon back into its holster and picked up the Woodsman. She checked to make sure it wasn't damaged and then holstered it as well. Then she folded her hands demurely at her waist and waited.

When the wave of realization had completed its course, and people's attention had begun to return to the arena, Kino held her arms wide, stepped forward, and shouted, "Everyone! The king is dead. Killed by a stray round meant for my opponent! I share your grief!" She paused, then added, "But I have won! I am one of you now! And as the victor, I claim my right to make a new law!"

Stunned and falling silent, they were listening now, even those wearing the king's blood.

"Without a king," Kino told them, "this land will have no order! So I will decide the new king! Here is my law: starting now, you will compete to decide the next ruler! Let any adult citizen who wishes to take the throne come forward and do battle for it. The last one left standing will be king or queen! Those of you who will not fight must leave this city and forfeit your rights of citizenship! This is now law!"

For a second, the coliseum fell totally silent as the crowd worked through the logic of Kino's Law. A few were quick to realize that if everyone fought to the death, there would eventually be a king or queen with no subjects but children, the aged, and the infirm. And were everyone to choose *not* to fight, again, there would be a ruler without a kingdom. And among those few, some came to the conclusion that their city would remain intact only if they did not fight to the death.

Most did *not* think, however. They merely reacted with fear, or anger, or relief, or any one of a thousand emotions, all expressed loudly.

The renewed roar of the crowd in her ears, Kino moved toward the entrance where Hermes waited. On the way, she stepped over Shizu, accidentally kicking him.

"Ow!"

"I beg your pardon. I'm pleased to see you're not dead. I assume you're not concussed. I'm leaving now. If you want to be a citizen of this hole, go right ahead."

Kino left Shizu to look after himself. She returned to Hermes, sweeping her coat from his seat.

Hermes simply said, "Welcome back. That was even more terrifying than usual."

The guard standing next to Hermes nodded at Kino and said, "You're something, little girl. Clever, that's what. How about we team up? You ought to be king . . . or queen, I guess, right? I could be captain of the guard."

Kino put her coat on, looking disinterested. "No thanks. I'm out of here as fast as his little wheels can carry me." She flung her leg over Hermes' seat and mounted.

The guard looked at her quizzically and then swept his gaze over the rabble in the stands.

"If you don't want to get killed, you should probably leave too," Hermes suggested.

"You think?"

"You have a family?" Hermes asked as Kino started his engine. The rumble echoed from the concrete walls.

The guard nodded.

"Then, I think you really ought to leave. Your family will thank you."

"He's pretty wise for a piece of machinery," said Kino, and put Hermes in gear.

In a second, they were gone, disappearing into the corridor beneath the stands.

Shizu climbed through the stands one step at a time, moving slowly, his expression blank. Many people had

fled, but among those who remained, brawls had broken out, and arguments both raucous and philosophical were in full swing. He ignored them all.

A man recognized him and tugged at his shoulder. "You're pretty good, swordsman. Join me in this fight—we can show them who's boss. What do you say?"

Shizu ignored this too, shoving the stranger's hands away.

"Hey, show some respect, loser!" the man snarled. His beckoning gesture brought several other men to his side. They came at Shizu from every direction, wielding pieces of iron railing they had ripped from the rusting stands.

Shizu turned and drew his katana. He stabbed the man behind him over his left shoulder, and, on the return swing, left a long cut in the face of the man in front of him. The other would-be attackers fled.

Still holding his sword aloft, Shizu kept climbing until at last he reached the field of shattered glass. As he stepped into the box, he tried to ignore the squish of the bloody carpet beneath his feet.

He regarded the king, still slumped in his chair, a head shorter than he used to be. The royal jewels were gone, stripped by scavengers. Even his outermost robe had been plucked bare of any prizes. The crown was nowhere to be seen. Shizu did not imagine it had fared any better than the head it sat upon.

He smiled, ever so slightly, and let out a long, slow breath. "We meet again."

Some distance beyond the walls of the city, Kino and Hermes found themselves on the shore of a broad, glittering lake. It was beautiful, serene, a scene begging to be savored. Kino, who had enjoyed so little of late, brought the motorcycle to a halt to watch the sun sparkle on tiny ripples.

"I'm in no hurry," Hermes said.

She glanced down at him, then dismounted wordlessly and plopped down on the grassy bank. Kino took a deep breath, held it a moment, then exhaled as if to expel the last breath of the Coliseum and its stagnant city.

"Beautiful," murmured Hermes, gazing at the peaceful surface of the waters. The ripples mirrored the sun, the blue of the sky, and, along the water's fringes, the fresh green of the forest.

Kino threw a pebble. It landed in the water with a little *plop,* waves spreading out across the surface. They quickly subsided and the pastoral picture was restored, the trees seeming to lean out over the water as if to catch their reflections in it.

"Say, Kino . . ."

"What is it, Hermes?"

Hermes did not answer immediately. They simply listened to the birds singing around them. After a while, he went on, "Remember that couple we met? The ones with the horse-drawn carriage?"

"Yeah."

Kino tossed another pebble.

"You said they told you about this place."

Kino nodded. "They did."

"But as I recall, we met the wife again later. And she was alone."

Yes, she was. "I remember," she said aloud. Another pebble went into the lake, this time skipping across the surface.

"Now, if I'm remembering things correctly, the woman smiled at you and said, 'It was a wonderful country. You should make sure to visit it, Kino.' "

"Yeah, that's what she said."

"Okay. I'll admit it. I don't get it. I'm stumped. What did she mean? We saw what that 'wonderful country' was like."

Kino picked up a rock the size of a baby's head and hurled it. With a great splash, it sent ugly ripples racing across the water, and the world reflected on the surface shook. But it didn't last forever, and eventually the lake was a tranquil mirror once more.

Is that the way of the beautiful world? Does serenity always return even after the most devastating of shockwaves?

"I don't get it either," Kino admitted. She stood and dusted off the seat of her pants, glancing briefly down into the water. A young, thin face with disheveled black hair looked back at her. She looked away.

As she was mounting Hermes, she heard the sound of an engine in the forest behind them. It was getting closer.

"It's a dune buggy," announced Hermes. "Engine rhythm is a dead giveaway."

Suddenly, a low-riding dune buggy broke from the verge of the woods and drew to a stop in front of Kino and Hermes. Sitting in the driver's seat was Shizu. Next to him

was a big dog with thick, white fur. It had large, almond-shaped eyes and a pert face that appeared to be smiling.

"Hello again, Kino," said Shizu, his smile matching his canine companion's.

Kino carefully schooled her expression. "Hello."

Shizu turned off the engine of his vehicle and got out, taking off his goggles. His katana lay on the passenger-side floorboard.

When he reached Kino, Shizu said, "I hoped I would see you again."

He had surprised her. "Did you? Sorry you couldn't become a citizen. Or King."

"I wanted neither, remember? I did want to thank you, though."

"Thank . . . me?" asked Kino guardedly.

"Yes," said Shizu, bowing his head. "I wanted to win so that I could do . . . what you did for me. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you," he looked Kino right in the eye, "for killing my father."

Kino said nothing, *could* say nothing. *How could I not have known?*

Hermes cried, "You're the prince?"

"I was. Not anymore . . . my plan was to win, and when the king tried to pin the medal on me, to strike him down. I'd been planning this for seven years. And thanks to you, Kino, I'm finally free." Shizu chuckled awkwardly and glanced down at the goggles in his hands as if they had done something amusing.

Kino said, "Revenge . . . is a bad idea."

Shizu nodded, still smiling. "Yes, so it is."

Both of them fell silent for a time.

"What will you do now?" Kino asked Shizu, as he climbed into the buggy.

"Wander, I guess. As you do. Until I find something I want to do. Someplace I want to stay. For the moment, I'll head north. We're used to cold places, right, Riku?" he said, patting the dog sitting next to him.

Hermes expected the creature to bark, but instead it said, "If you say so, Shizu."

Hermes was stunned. "No way! That dog just spoke!"

Riku raised a white brow. "Got something against talking dogs? A little uppity for a motorcycle, aren't you?"

"The nerve!" Hermes hissed.

"What kind of self-respecting sidekick needs a driver anyway? Go on, just try and catch up with us by yourself. Bet you can't do it."

"Oh, bite me! That's all you canines do, isn't it? And you're one to talk—pack animals, the lot of you. Pack animals with a congenital compulsion to be leader!"

"*Pack* animal?" The dog sneered. "Look who's talking! You're the one with a—what do you call that thing—a saddle?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"I know what you meant. You see any other dogs around here? Any *talking* dogs? I'm unique."

"Well, so am I!"

Shizu and Kino shared a swift glance before speaking simultaneously.

"Stop that, Riku."

"Enough, Hermes."

Riku looked about ready to leap at the motorcycle, but he fell silent and gave Kino a look of obvious respect. "I am Riku, loyal servant of my master, Shizu. I was honored to watch your performance in the final round. All things considered, Shizu survived today because of you. I, too, thank you."

Kino's smile was humble. "You're welcome. What a wonderful dog! May I pet you?"

The dog wagged his tail eagerly, and Kino moved to hug him, running both hands through his thick fur. Riku licked Kino's cheek.

Hermes watched Riku enjoying this hug with extreme annoyance. "Suck-up," he muttered, too quietly for anyone to hear.

Kino petted Riku for a moment, then reached down and drew something from under the passenger seat. It was the crown, twisted and torn, that had recently sat upon King Yukio's head.

Seeing it, Shizu grimaced. "I couldn't believe there was anything left of it. It took me the better part of half an hour to clean it up and beat it back into shape . . . sort of. I took it to remember my grandfather by."

Kino rubbed Riku's head one last time, kissed his muzzle, then turned to Shizu. "I suppose I'm really not the person to say this, but are you sure you won't take the throne?"

He nodded. "Very sure."

"Why not?"

"A man who tried to kill his own father has no right to rule a kingdom."

"You think so? What about a man who tried to undo a great evil?" Kino took the crown in both hands, and—silently, gently—placed it on the young man's head.

Shizu grimaced. "Looks terrible, doesn't it?"

Kino gazed at him for a moment, then smiled and said, "Maybe so."

"Ahem," said Hermes. "I hate to interrupt this touching moment, but I believe we were leaving, Kino?"

She gave him a narrowed glance, then moved back to his side, where she knew she belonged. She put on her hat and goggles, flung her leg over the seat, and started the engine. Hermes could feel Shizu's eyes on them—on her—as he sat in his vehicle, the broken crown still on his head.

"Kino," he called. "Sure you won't come with me to the north? I know the way."

"No, thank you. There's somewhere I have to go. And . . ."

"And?"

"They tell me it's unwise for a girl to go off with strange men."

Shizu blinked and glanced at Riku. In response, the dog whispered something to him that seemed to surprise him. For a moment, the two engaged in a quick round of furious whispers, at the conclusion of which Shizu looked back at Kino again and shook his head, smiling.

"Well, that's a relief. Okay, then. I guess this is goodbye . . . for now, at least. I hope we meet again someday, Kino . . . Hermes."

"May you be well. Riku too." Kino bowed.

"Thank you," said Riku.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Hermes chimed in, "Bye-bye, suck-up!"

"Next time, derelict."

"Hmph!" The motorcycle carried Kino away, aware that Shizu and Riku watched them until they were out of sight.

Shizu didn't drive away as he'd intended. Instead, he got out of the buggy and walked down to the edge of the lake. He looked down into the water. A young man wearing King Yukio's twisted crown looked back at him. Before he could decide if it looked like it belonged on him or not, Riku began to lap the surface of the water at his feet. Tiny waves spread across Shizu's reflection, breaking it into a million pieces.

Shizu turned around, looking back at the forest from where he'd come. He could no longer see his homeland beyond the trees. "What do you think I should do, Riku?" Shizu asked his companion.

"I'd rather stand on my head than tell you what to do, master," said Riku easily.

Shizu felt . . . contented, at peace. "Yes," he whispered. And he looked one last time back toward the city beyond the forest.

Epilogue

It was night in the forest.

A row of thick trees formed a leafy canopy overhead. In daylight, the leaves were bright green, but now they were black.

In a circle of great, entwined roots, the last flames of a dying campfire flickered. Kino sat beside the fire, wrapped in her coat, eyes closed, cradled by the massive roots as if in her mother's arms. A short distance away stood Hermes, their baggage unloaded on the soft earth beside him. Firelight danced and played over his gleaming chrome.

"You awake, Kino?" he whispered.

"I am now."

Hermes said in a lower tone than usual, "Motorcycles are happiest when they're moving. You may have noticed that I'm not moving right now."

"So? You're not at your happiest?" Kino guessed.

"Not really, no. I'm not exactly *un*happy, I'm just not really thrilled to be . . . not moving. In this big dark forest."

Kino opened one eye. "Something you're not telling me?"

Hermes said professorially, "Kino, you ever heard of a *syllogog?*"

"Is that like a goblin or something?" She sat up. "You're not afraid that there's something lurking in the forest that eats motorcycles?"

"No! You know, a syllo-something. It's a sort of argument. You know: all penguins are birds; birds fly; therefore penguins can fly."

"Penguins can't fly," Kino observed.

"Okay. So, it doesn't work so well for penguins, but you get the idea. What's that called a—a syllo—"

"A *syllogism?*"

"Yeah, that," said Hermes, and fell silent.

Kino waited a moment for him to continue. He didn't. *Good grief.* "What of it?" she asked.

"Well, I was just wondering. Why do humans travel?" He sounded uncharacteristically serious.

"Humans? Or just me?"

"Let's start with humans."

Kino thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know too many other humans all that well, you may have noticed. But I'd say it's because they want to go somewhere they've never been. See things they've never seen. Eat things they've never eaten. Talk to people they've never spoken to before. Something like that. Pretty simple, really."

"Yeah. It is. Pretty simple." He sounded satisfied with the answer.

"Well, it might be a bit more complicated in practice, but I think that's a safe generalization."

"Okay, so what about you? Why do *you* travel, Kino? I mean, I know you've got nowhere to go back to. But we keep running into trouble, you keep almost getting killed, and being on the road isn't easy for you. Why is it you never find some place to settle down? You're smart. You're good with guns; you could find a job anywhere. You could even have gone with Shizu," said Hermes all in one breath.

Kino considered his words. "Yeah, I think you're right about all of that."

After a moment of silence, Hermes asked again, "Then why do you keep traveling?"

Kino didn't answer. Instead, she stood up, drawing the Woodsman out of her coat where she had held it in her sleep, tight against her side. She never knew when she might encounter something in the dark of night, especially in the great, leafy, whispering woods. *Maybe even a motorcycle-eating syllogog.*

Kino smiled wryly at the thought and kicked dirt on the fire.

The last embers vanished, bathing the girl and the motorcycle in darkness, silent but for the whisper of the wind through the trees.

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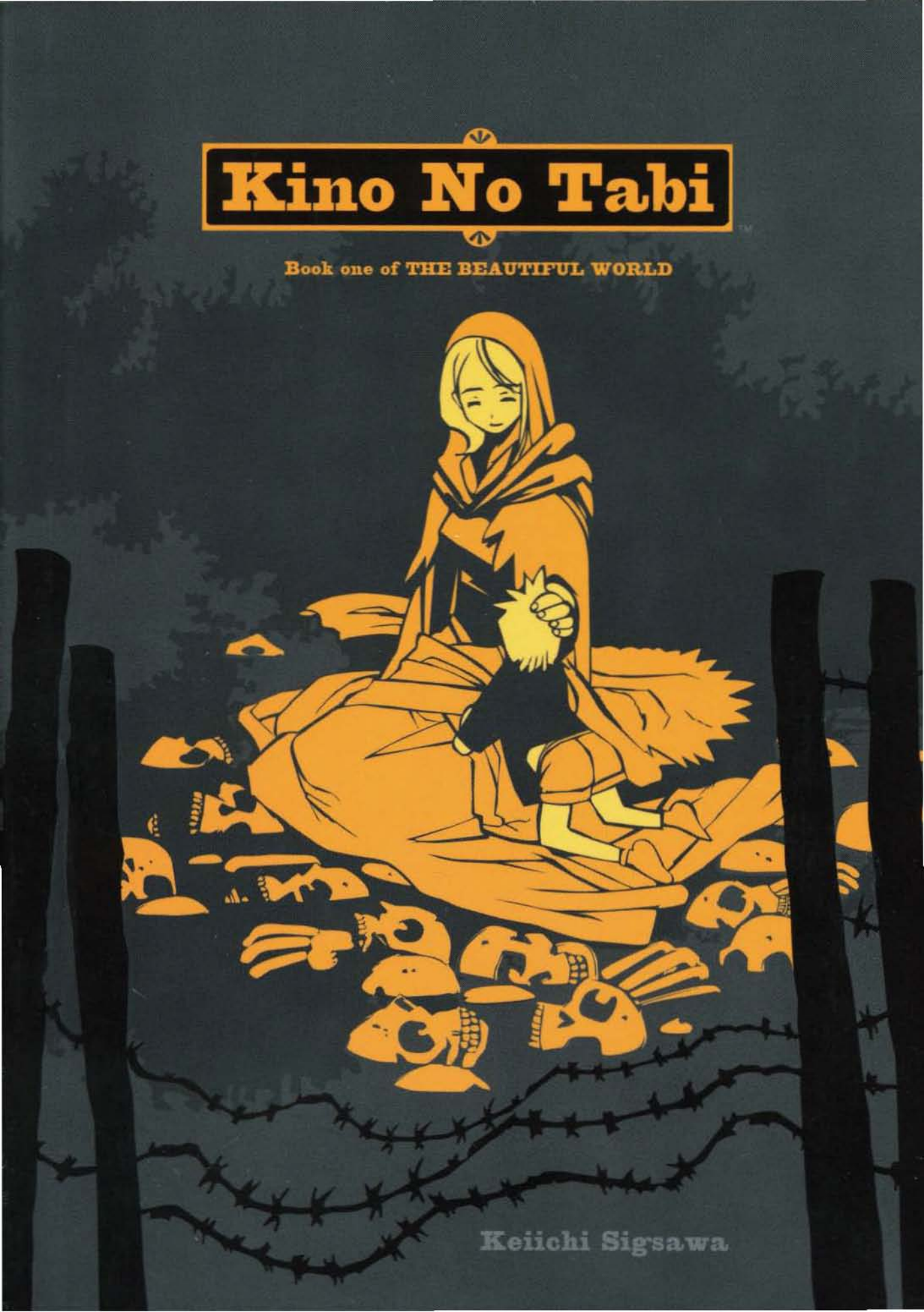

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