The old man who had once been the Grand Technomancer, Most Mighty Mechanician, and Highest of the High Artificier Adepts was cutting his roses when he heard the unmistakable \textit{ticktock-ticktock} of a clockwerk velocipede coming down the road. He started in surprise and then turned toward the noise, for the first time in years suddenly reminded that he was not wearing the four-foot-high toque of state, nor the cloak of perforated bronze control cards that had once hung from his shoulders, both of which had made almost anything but the smallest movement impossible.

He didn’t miss these impressive clothes, but the old man concluded that since what he heard was definitely a clockwerk velocipede, however unlikely it seemed, and that a velocipede must have a rider, he should perhaps put something on to receive his visitor. While he was not embarrassed himself, the juxtaposition of a naked man and the sharp pruning shears he held might prove to be a visual distraction, and thus a hindrance to easy communication.
Accordingly, he walked into his humble cottage, and after a moment’s consideration, took the white cloth off his kitchen table and draped it around himself, folding it so the pomegranate stain from his breakfast was tucked away under one arm.

When he went back out, the former Grand Technomancer left the shears by the front door. He expected to be back cutting the roses quite soon, after he got rid of his unexpected visitor.

The surprise guest was parking her velocipede by the gate to the lower paddock. The Grand Technomancer winced and frowned as the vehicle emitted a piercing shriek that drowned out its underlying clockwerk ticktocking. She had evidently engaged the parking retardation muffler to the mainspring before unlocking the gears. A common mistake made by those unfamiliar with the mechanism, and yet another most unwelcome noise to his quiet valley.

After correcting her error, the girl — or more properly a young woman, the old man supposed — climbed down from the control howdah above the single fat drive wheel of the velocipede. She was not wearing any identifiable robes of guild or lodge, and in fact her one-piece garment was made of some kind of scaly blue hide, both the cut and fabric strange to his eyes.

Perhaps even more curiously, the old man’s extraordinarily acute hearing could not detect any faint clicking from sandgrain clockwerk, the last and most impressive advance of his colleagues, which had allowed modern technology to actually be implanted in the body, to enhance various aspects of physique and movement. Nor did she have one of the once-popular steam skeletons, as he could see neither the telltale puffs of steam from a radium boiler at the back of her head nor the bolt heads of augmented joints poking through at elbow, neck, and knee.

This complete absence of clockwerk enhancement in the young woman surprised the old man, though in truth he was surprised to have any visitor at all.

“Hello!” called out the young woman as she approached the door. The old man wet his lips in preparation for speech, and, with considerable effort, managed to utter a soft greeting in return. As he did so, he was struck by the thought that he had not spoken aloud for more than ten years.

The woman came up to the door, intent on him, watching for any sign of sudden movement. The man was familiar with that gaze. He had been surrounded by bodyguards for many years, and though their eyes had been looking outward, he saw the same kind of focus in this woman.

It was strange to see that focus in so young a woman, he thought. She couldn’t be more than sixteen or seventeen, but there was a calm and somewhat chilling competence in her eyes. Again, he was puzzled by her odd blue garment and lack of insignia. Her short-cropped hair, shaved at the sides, was not a style he could recall ever being fashionable. There were also three short lines tattooed on each side of her neck, the suggestion of ceremonial gills, perhaps, and this did spark some faint remembrance, but he couldn’t pin the memory down. A submarine harvesting guild, perhaps —

“You are Ahfred Progressor III, formerly Grand Technomancer, Most Mighty Mechanician, and Highest of the High Artificier Adepts?” asked the woman quite conversationally. She had stopped a few feet away. Her hands were open by her sides, but there was something about that stance that suggested that this was a temporary state and that those same hands usually held weapons and shortly would again.
The old man couldn’t see any obvious knives or anything similar, but that didn’t mean anything. The woman’s blue coverall had curious lumps along the forearms and thighs, which could be weapon pockets, though he could see no fasteners. And once again, he could not hear the sound of moving metal, not even the faintest slither of a blade in a sheath.

“Yes,” he said scratchily and very slowly. “Ahfred . . . yes, that is my name. I was Grand Technomancer. Retired, of course.”

There was little point in denying his identity. Though he had lost weight, his face was still much the same as it had been when it had adorned the obverse side of millions of coins, hundreds of thousands of machine-painted official portraits, and at least scores of statues, some of them bronze automata that also replicated his voice.

“Good,” said the woman. “Do you live here alone?”

“Yes,” replied Ahfred. He had begun to get alarmed. “Who . . . who are you?”

“We’ll get to that,” said the young woman easily. “Let’s go inside. You first.”

Ahfred nodded shakily and went inside. He thought of the shears as he passed the door. Not much of a weapon, but they were sharp and pointed. . . . He half turned, thinking to pick them up, but the woman had already done so.

“For the roses?” she asked.

Ahfred nodded again. He had been trying to forget things for so long that it was hard to remember anything useful that might help him now.

“Sit down,” she instructed. “Not in that chair. That one.”

Ahfred changed direction. Some old memories were coming back. Harmless recollections that did not threaten his peace of mind. He remembered that it didn’t matter what armchair he took; they all had the same controls and equipment. The house had been well prepared against assassins and other troubles long ago, but he had not restarted or checked any of the mechanisms after . . . well, when he had moved in. Ahfred did not choose to recall what had happened and preferred in his own head to consider this place his retirement home, to which he had removed as if in normal circumstances.

Even presuming that the advanced mechanisms no longer functioned, he now had some of the basic weapons at hand, the knives in the sides, the static dart throwers in the arms. The woman need merely stand in the right place . . .

She didn’t. She stayed in the doorway, and now she did have a weapon in her hand. Or so Ahfred presumed, though again it was not anything he was familiar with. It looked like a ceramic egg and was quite a startling shade of blue. But there was a hole in the end, and it was pointed at him.

“You are to remain completely still, your mouth excepted,” said the young woman. “If you move, you will be restrained, at the expense of some quite extraordinary pain. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Ahfred. There had always been the risk of assassination when he was in office, but he had not thought about it since his retirement. If this woman was an assassin, he was very much puzzled by her origins and motivation. After all, he no longer had any power or influence. He was just a simple gardener, living a simple life in an exceedingly remote and private valley.

“You have confirmed that you are Ahfred Progressor III, the last head of state of the Technocratic Arch-Government,” said the
woman. “I believe among your many other titles you were also Keyholder and Elevated Arbiter of the Ultimate Arsenal?”

“Yes,” said Ahfred. What did she mean by “last head of state,” he wondered. He wet his lips again and added, “Who are you that asks?”

“My name is Ruane,” said the woman.

“That does not signify anything to me,” said Ahfred, who heard the name as “Rain.”

He could feel one of the control studs under his fingers, and if his memory served him correctly, it was for one of the very basic escape sequences. Unlike most of the weapons, it was not clockwerk powered, so it was more likely to have remained operational. Even the chance of it working lent him confidence.

“Indeed, I must ask by what right or authority you invade my home and force my acquiescence to this interrogation. It is most—”

In the middle of his speech, Ahfred reached for a concealed knife on one side of the chair and the escape stud on the right-hand arm.

Something shot out of the egg and splatted on Ahfred’s forehead, very like the unwelcome deposit of a bird. He had an instant to crinkle his brow in surprise and puzzlement before an intense wave of agony ran through the bones of his skull and jaw and—most torturously for him—through his sensitive, sensitive ears.

Ahfred screamed. His body tensed in terrible pain. He could not grip the knife, but his fingers mashed the control stud on the chair. It rocked backward suddenly, but the panel that was supposed to open behind him slid only halfway before getting stuck. Ahfred was thrown against it rather than projected down the escape slide. He bounced off, rolled across the floor, and came to rest near the door.

As the pain ebbed, he looked up at Ruane, who had kept her place by the door.

“That was the least of the stings I could have given you,” said Ruane. “It is only a temporary effect, without any lasting consequence. I have done so to establish that I will ask the questions and that you will answer, without further attempts to derail the proceedings. You may sit in the other chair.”

Ahfred slowly got to his feet, his hands on his ears, and walked to the other chair. He sat down carefully and lowered his hands, wincing at the faint ringing sound of the escape panel’s four springs, which were still trying to expand to their full length.

“I will continue,” said Ruane. “Tell me, apart from you, who had access to the Ultimate Arsenal?”

“There were three keys,” said Ahfred. “Two of the three were needed to access the arsenal. I held one. Mosiah Balance V, Mistress of the Controls, had the second. The third was under the control of Kebediah Oscillation X, Distributor of Harm.”

“What was in the arsenal?”

Ahfred shifted a little before he remembered and made himself be still.

“There were many things—”

Ruane pointed the weapon.

“All the weapons of the ages,” gabbed Ahfred. “Every invention of multiple destruction, clockwerk and otherwise, that had hitherto been devised.”

“Had any of these weapons ever been used?”

“Yes. Many of the older ones were deployed in the War of Accretion. Others had been tested, though not actually used, there being no conflict to use them in.”
"The War of Accretion was in fact the last such action before the formation of the Arch-Government, twenty-seven years ago," said Ruane. "After that, there was no Rival Nation, no separate political entities to go to war with."

"Yes."

"Was the absence of military conflict something you missed? I believe you served in the desert—in the Mechodromedary Cavalry—during the war, rising from ensign to colonel."

"I did not miss it," replied Ahfred, suppressing a shudder as the memory, so long forgotten, returned. The mechodromedaries had joints that clicked, and the ammunition for their shoulder-mounted multiguns came in bronze links that clattered as they fired, even though their magnetic propulsion was silent. Then there had been explosions, and screaming, and endless shouts. He had been forced to always wear deep earplugs and a sound-deadening spongiform helmet.

"Did Distributor Kebediah miss military conflict? She, too, served in the Accretion War, did she not?"

"Kebediah was a war hero," said Ahfred. "In the Steam Assault Infantry. But I do not believe she missed the war. No."

"Mistress Mosiah, then, was the one who wished to begin some sort of war?"

Ahfred shook his head, then stopped suddenly and gaped fearfully at his interrogator.

"You are permitted to shake your head in negation or nod in the affirmative," said Ruane. "I take it you do not believe Mistress Mosiah was the instigator of the new war?"

"Mosiah was not warlike," said Ahfred. A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of his mouth, quickly banished. "Quite the reverse. But I don’t understand. May I… may I be permitted to ask a question?"

"Ask."

"To what war do you refer?"

"The war that approximately ten years ago culminated in the deployment of a weapon that killed nearly everyone on Earth and has destroyed all but fragments of the Technocratic civilization. Did it start with some kind of revolt from within?"

Ahfred hesitated a moment too long. Ruane pointed the egg weapon but did not fire. The threat was enough.

"I don’t think there was a revolt," said Ahfred. Small beads of sweat were forming in the corners of his eyes and starting to trickle down beside his nose. "It’s difficult to remember. . . . I am old, you know. . . . quite old. . . . I don’t recall a war, no—"

"But a weapon of multiple destruction was used?"

Ahfred stared at her. The sweat was in his eyes now, and he twitched and blinked to try to clear it.

"A weapon was used?" repeated Ruane. She raised the egg.

"Yes," said Ahfred. "I suppose. . . . yes. . . ."

"What was that weapon?"

"Academician Stertour, its inventor, had a most complicated name for it. . . . but we called it the Stopper," said Ahfred very slowly. He was being forced to approach both a memory and a part of his mind that he did not want to recall or even acknowledge might still exist.

"What was the nature and purpose of the Stopper?" asked Ruane.

Ahfred’s lower lip trembled, and his hands began to shake.

"The Stopper… the Stopper… was a development of Stertour’s
sandgrain technology,” he said. He could no longer look Ruane in
the eyes but instead stared at the floor.

“Continue.”

“Stertour came to realize that clockwerk sandgrain artifices could
be made to be inimical to other artifices, that it would only be a
matter of time before someone... an anarchist or radical... designed
and constructed sandgrain warriors that would act against beneficial
clockwerk, particularly the clockwerk in augmented humanity....”

Ahfred stopped. Instead of the pale floorboards, he saw writh­
ing bodies, contorted in agony, and smoke billowing from burning
cities.

“Go on.”

“I cannot,” whispered Ahfred. He felt his carefully constructed
persona falling apart around himself, all the noises of the greater
world coming back to thrust against his ears, as they sought to
surge against his brain. His protective circle of silence, the quiet of
the roses, all were gone.

“You must,” ordered Ruane. “Tell me about the Stopper.”

Ahfred looked up at her.

“I don’t want...I don’t want to remember,” he whispered.

“Tell me,” ordered Ruane. She raised the egg, and Ahfred
remembered the pain in his ears.

“The Stopper was a sandgrain artifice that would hunt and
destroy other sandgrain artifices,” he said. He did not talk to Ruane,
but rather to his own shaking hands. “But it was not wound tightly
and would only tick on for minutes, so it could be deployed locally
against inimical sandgrain artifices without danger of it...spreading.”

“But clearly the Stopper did spread, across the world,” said
Ruane. “How did that happen?”

Ahfred sniffed. A clear fluid ran from one nostril and over his lip.

“There were delivery mechanisms,” he whispered. “Older weap­
on. Clockwerk aerial torpedoes, carded to fly over all significant
cities and towns, depositing the Stopper like a fall of dust.”

“But why were these torpedoes launched?” asked Ruane. “That
is—”

“What?” sniffled Ahfred.

“One of the things that has puzzled us,” said Ruane quietly.

“Continue.”

“What was the question?” asked Ahfred. He couldn’t remember
what they had been talking about, and there was work to be done
in the garden. “My roses, and there is weeding—”

“Why were the aerial torpedoes launched, and who ordered
this action?” asked Ruane.

“What?” whispered Ahfred.

Ruane looked at the old man, at his vacant eyes and drooping
mouth, and changed her question.

“Two keys were used to open the Ultimate Arsenal,” said Ruane.

“Whose keys?”

“Oh, I took Mosiah’s key while she slept,” said Ahfred. “And
I had a capture cylinder of her voice, to play to the lock. It was
much easier than I had thought.”

“What did you do then?” asked Ruane, as easily as asking for a
glass of water from a friend.

Ahfred wiped his nose. He had forgotten the stricture to be still.

“It took all night, but I did it,” he said proudly. “I took the sample
of the Stopper to the fabrication engine and redesigned it myself.
I’m sure Stertour would have been amazed. Rewound, each arti­
”
that it might travel so much more easily!"

Ahfred smiled at the thought of his technical triumph, utterly divorcing this pleasure from any other, more troubling, memories.

"From there, the engine made the necessary ammunition to arm the torpedoes. One thousand and sixteen silver ellipsoids, containing millions of lovely sandgrain artifices, all of them sliding along the magnetic tubes, into the torpedoes, so quietly... Then it took but a moment to turn the keys... one... two... three... and off they went into the sky —"

"Three keys?" asked Ruane.

"Yes, yes," said Ahfred testily. "Two keys to open the arsenal, three keys to use the weapons, as it has always been."

"So Distributor Kebediah was present?"

Ahfred looked out the doorway, past Ruane. There were many tasks in the garden, all of them requiring long hours of quiet, contemplative work. It would be best if he finished with this visitor quickly, so he could get back to work.

"Not at first," he said. "I had arranged for her to come. A state secret, I said, we must meet in the arsenal, and she came as we had arranged. Old comrades, old friends, she suspected nothing. I had a capture cylinder of her voice, too. I was completely prepared. I just needed her key."

"How did you get it?"

"The Stopper!" cackled Ahfred. He clapped his hands on his knees twice in great satisfaction. "Steam skeleton, sandgrain enhancement, she had it all. I had put the Stopper on her chair..."

Ahfred's face fell, and he folded his hands in his lap.

"It was horribly loud," he whispered. "The sound of the artifices fighting inside her, like animals, clawing and chewing, and her screaming, the boiler when the safety valve blew... it was unbearable, save that I had my helmet...."

He looked around and added, "Where is my helmet? It is loud here, now, all this talking, and your breath, it is like a bellows, all a-huffing and a-puffing...."

Ruane's face had set, hard and cold. When she spoke, her words came out with slow deliberation.

"How was it you were not affected by the Stopper?"

"Me?" asked Ahfred. "Everyone knows I have no clockwerk enhancement. Oh, no, I couldn't stand it, all that ticking inside me, that constant tick... tick... tick... It was bad enough around me, oh, yes, much too awful to have it inside."

"Why did you fire the torpedoes?" asked Ruane.

"Tell me who you are and I'll tell you," said Ahfred. "Then you may leave my presence, madam, and I shall return to my work... and my quiet."

"I am an investigator of what you termed the Rival Nation," said Ruane.

"But there is no Rival Nation," said Ahfred. "I remember that. We destroyed you all in the War of Accretion!"

"All here on Earth," said Ruane. The lines on her neck, that Ahfred had thought tattoos, opened to reveal a delicate layering of blue flukes, which shivered in contact with the air before the slits closed again. "You killed my grandparents, my great-uncles and great-aunts, and all my terrestrial kin. But not our future. Not my parents, not those of us in the far beyond, in the living ships. Long we prepared, myself since birth, readying ourselves to come back, to fight, to regain our ancestral lands and seas, to pit the creations of our minds against your clockwerk. But we found not an
enemy, but a puzzle, the ruins of a once great, if misguided, civilization. And in seeking the answer to that puzzle, we have at last found you. I have found you."

“Bah!” said Ahfred. His voice grew softer as he went on. “I have no time for puzzles. I shall call my guards, assassin, and you will be... you will be...”

“Why did you fire the torpedoes?” asked Ruane. “Why did you use the Stopper? Why did you destroy your world?”

“The Stopper,” said Ahfred. He shook his head, small sideways shakes, hardly moving his neck. “I had to do it. Nothing else would work, and it just kept getting worse and worse, every day—”

“What got worse?”

Ahfred stopped shaking his head and stood bolt upright, eyes staring, his back rigid, hands clapped to his ears. Froth spewed from between his clenched teeth and cascaded from his chin in pink bubbles, stained with blood from his bitten tongue.


Suddenly the old man’s eyes rolled back. His hands fell, but he remained upright for a moment, as if suspended by hidden wires, then fell forward and stretched out headlong on the floor. A gush of bright blood came from his ears before slowing to a trickle.

It was quiet after the Grand Technomancer fell. Ruane could hear her own breathing and the swift pumping of her hearts.

It was a welcome sound, but not enough, not now. She went outside and took a message swift from her pocket, licking the bird to wake it before she sent it aloft. It would bring her companions soon.

In the meantime, she began to whistle an old, old song.