

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

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Author: Unno Jūza (海野十三)

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<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

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Unno Jūza, *The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock [Jūhachiji no Ongakuyoku]*
(Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Under the sun, the earth was moving into evening. Deep below that darkening ground lay a country hidden under the surface. At exactly eighteen o'clock, the time signal began to shake the hearts of the million people who lived there. Voices rose at once from many rooms and halls. "Oh, it is eighteen." "It is time for the music bath." "Come on, everyone, sit down before you are late."

In Alicia District, only three people were there at that moment: Dr. Kohaku, the young male student Pen, and the young female student Bara. Even before the signal fully reached their ears, the three of them opened the door and ran out into the blue corridor. The corridor was long, and along it stood many seats made from thick silver metal pipes bent into spirals. The chairs went on and on into the distance. Each seat had a name on it, waiting for its owner.

The three quickly jumped onto their own seats. At that moment, as if the chairs themselves had given a sign, three yellow round windows opened in the ceiling. From them a shower of yellow wind fell softly over the heads of the three people. It was cool and clean, and for a second it felt almost pleasant. Then all three became silent. They waited for the music bath to begin.

Dr. Kohaku was a middle-aged man. His long black hair was brushed back, and he wore black clothes of the same deep color. His body was thin and tall, and his face was fine and calm, yet under his pale skin there seemed to live some quiet and healthy fire. He sank deep into the spiral chair, put his elbows on his knees, and seemed to be thinking about something hard and far away. Sometimes his eyelids moved a little inside their hollows. It was as if even his eyes were suffering from thoughts he would not speak aloud.

Pen was young, and Bara was young too. Sitting beside her, Pen slowly stretched his hand toward her and tried to touch her full body without being seen. At once she struck the back of his hand in silent anger. The pain made his skin

rise red, but even then his hand seemed to beg and tempt her. Her hand answered him in a whispering touch, “Wait two more hours.” Pen’s heart cried back, “I may be gone before those two hours pass. So at least now, please...”

“Hush,” Bara warned. “The warning signal has started.” A loudspeaker suddenly shouted into the corridor. It said that in the next district, Alishiro, one person was missing from his seat. All three turned their heads to the right and looked toward that district. Just then a door flew open, and one man rushed out in wild confusion. He leaped onto his seat like a frog jumping into water.

“Ah, that is Paul,” Pen said, laughing. “That old waste battery again.” Bara spat in disgust. “He must have been cutting open his own body again. He is a disgusting man.” Pen laughed, but the laugh was thin. He knew Paul was strange, and he also knew that Paul did not fear things in the way ordinary people did.

At that moment the whole corridor turned purple. Dr. Kohaku lifted his head and looked at the two students. “Now then,” he said, “the music bath. Raise both hands.” The three of them lifted all six hands high into the air. Then from deep under the ground came a sound like a groan, very faint at first, as if the earth itself were waking in pain.

“Damn that Number Thirty-Nine soul thief,” Pen cursed in his heart. The national music, Number Thirty-Nine, climbed through the spiral chairs and entered their bodies with growing force. Dr. Kohaku stared into the empty air without moving. Bara closed her eyes, and her lips shook a little. Pen ground his teeth together so hard that his jaw hurt, and oily sweat ran down from his forehead.

The music grew stronger and stronger. It felt like boiling water rising up into the bottom of the brain. All along the purple corridor, groans rose from people like the cries of animals, and the walls trembled as if great guns had just fired nearby. It was like a purple hell. Sweat, pain, and struggling breath filled the air while the music bath went on and on.

Thirty minutes passed in that torment. Slowly the purple light became weaker. Then, just as before, the yellow round windows opened again, and a fresh shower of wind fell onto the heads of the people. The music bath was over. The people on the spiral chairs looked up at the ceiling as if waking from a bad dream, and then

they looked around at one another. “Ah, it is finished.” “Come on, get down quickly. The factory is waiting for us.” “We must make up today for what we failed to do yesterday.”

One after another, the people jumped from their chairs with bursting energy. They looked bright, healthy, and ready for work, as if the suffering of a moment before had never existed. Pen and Bara also stood up, and they too now seemed changed into different people. Dr. Kohaku, who had sat in thought before the bath, now moved with fresh force and clear purpose. The two students followed behind him with strong steps as he returned to Alicia District.

Part 2

When the three returned to Alicia District, the sharp energy of the music bath was still burning inside them. Their feet moved quickly, and their eyes were bright with work. Sheets of numbers and machine notes lay open across the tables. Before anyone could sit down, a telephone signal came from Aroaa District.

Dr. Kohaku stepped to the receiver and pressed a button. At once the smooth screen in front of him shook like water in a bowl. Then a face rose inside it, half buried in a heavy beard. It was President Milki. Dr. Kohaku bowed his head and said, “Your Excellency, long live the state of Milki.”

“Doctor,” said Milki, moving his beard as he spoke, “I wish to talk with you in private.” Dr. Kohaku understood at once. He turned and told Pen and Bara to go into the next workroom. The two students quickly gathered the papers on the desk and slipped out through the side door like children leaving a room where adults were about to speak of dangerous things.

When they were gone, Dr. Kohaku faced the screen again. “Now no one else is here,” he said. “Please tell me what you wish.” Milki began with warm praise. He said that the whole country was peaceful because of the music bath, that every citizen came out of it like a new man, full of one state idea, one strong will, one fixed loyalty, and one healthy body.

He praised the doctor again and again, yet his praise had a hard shine to it.

“They all move as I want,” he said. “Even a violent criminal becomes a model citizen after thirty minutes. They are almost like machine-men now.” Dr. Kohaku listened without change in his face. At last he said, “Your Excellency, please speak more clearly. What is the real matter?”

Milki’s beard shook once. “It is about your study of artificial humans,” he said. “Should that not be stopped now? The music bath already gives us strong thought and strong health. The people are ideal enough. Why must the state still spend such a huge sum on making artificial humans?” Dr. Kohaku did not answer at once. Then he said quietly, “I understand what you mean. I will think about it.”

Milki seemed satisfied with that answer, or pretended to be. Then he added one more thing in a lighter voice. “My wife wishes to see you tonight. Can you come at twenty o’clock?” Dr. Kohaku accepted at once. The screen darkened, and the room became still. For a short moment the doctor stood without moving, as if the talk had left a shadow behind.

In the next room, Pen and Bara were bent over their work with fierce attention. They hardly noticed each other. That was the strange value of the country’s daily bath at eighteen o’clock. For one hour after it, the citizens became almost superhuman. New weapons, strong foods, defensive tools, and strange living materials were improved or designed in that short time. After that hour passed, they worked at simple tasks, or played, or slept.

The true nature of the music bath was crueler than its name. Vibrating music was made in a central sounding station and sent through the underground structure itself. It entered the spiral chairs, climbed into the body, reached the brain, and pressed the brain cells into one standard shape. The music now used was National Song Number Thirty-Nine, which Dr. Kohaku had changed again and again by order of President Milki. Its purpose was to create what the state called a Type Thirty-Nine standard human.

That type was built from many conditions chosen by Milki himself. A citizen must be loyal to the President, firm in hardship, free from desire for drink, free from tobacco, able to stay healthy on four hours of sleep, and even trained to know that any beard like Milki’s was a sign of supreme rule. When Dr. Kohaku first

completed this system, Milki had tested it on the worst criminal in the country. The result had shocked him with joy. Yet even then, Dr. Kohaku had stopped him from using the music all day and all night, because too much of it would destroy the brain and kill the body.

Even so, Milki had never given up that wish in his heart. He wanted not merely healthy citizens, but souls taken whole into his hand. His kind words to Dr. Kohaku had not been honest. The people still had complaints, still had cracks in them, and still failed to live in total obedience for all twenty-four hours. The music bath covered those failures each day, but it did not erase them forever.

A little after nineteen o'clock, in a private room away from the main work spaces, Pen sat with Paul, the shoe worker from Alishiro District. A jar of honey stood open between them. They dipped into it as they talked, and the sweet smell mixed with the hot dry air of the underground room. Outside, there was no evening sky, no sunset, and no living field. Long ago the upper world had been ruined by war, poison gas, and disease, and now only this buried nation went on living under artificial light.

Paul leaned forward with a wide angry movement of his hands. "This is stupid," he said. "We are tied up. Our freedom is taken. Our own nature is ignored. A man should be able to smoke if he wants to. He should be able to drink if he wants to. But that man Milki says no to everything. What kind of life is that?" Pen looked uneasy and lowered his voice. "Do not speak so loudly," he said. "If someone hears you, it will go badly."

Paul gave a hard little laugh. "Anyone who hears me should agree with me," he said. "Only poor fools still half-drunk on Number Thirty-Nine would think otherwise." Pen watched him more closely now. There was something in Paul that the music bath had not fully washed away. "I have wondered about that," Pen said. "It seems the great music bath of His Excellency does not work very well on you."

"Of course it does not," Paul answered proudly. Then he lowered his voice and smiled in a secret way. "This is a great secret. Come here. Touch me here and see." Pen stared at him. Paul's face was bright with bold pleasure, as if he had hidden a weapon in his own flesh and was glad at last to show it. Pen moved closer, half

curious and half afraid, and reached out his hand.

Part 3

Pen did as Paul told him. With bright, curious eyes, he reached out and touched Paul's back side over the cloth of his trousers. At once he felt something rough there, dry and hard, almost like a small basket made of thin strips. It was not part of the body at all. Pen pulled his hand back and stared at Paul in surprise.

"What is this?" Pen asked. "What are you hiding there?" Paul smiled with deep satisfaction, like a man who had fooled a great enemy and was proud of it. Then he tapped himself and said, "Now you understand a little. I spent a whole year making this from hardened fibers. It is a vibration stopper, and I sit on it every day."

He leaned closer and spoke in a lower voice. "You know how the music bath really works," he said. "Very little of it enters from the ears. Almost all of it climbs up from the corridor, through the spiral chair, and into the body. So if I put this thing under me, it stops much of the shaking from Number Thirty-Nine before it can enter my flesh. That is why I do not get drunk on that man-eating music."

Pen gave a long breath and shook his head. "You are a terrible man," he said. "What will happen if this is discovered?" Paul only laughed. "If it is discovered, they will say you told them," he answered. "Otherwise they will never know. I am very good at pretending. I groan, I shake, and I let sweat run down my face. Even the hidden microphone in front of the seat hears me suffer."

Pen looked at him with even greater wonder now. He had not known about the hidden microphone, nor about the record made by the watchers in the central office. Paul explained it with cheerful pride, as if he were teaching a child a game. "If I forget to groan," he said, "the alarm will ring. But I never make that kind of mistake. I can act like a man in pain better than a true victim can."

Hearing this, Pen felt two things at once. One was fear, because Paul was walking on the edge of death and smiling while he did it. The other was a strange warm feeling, because while Paul spoke, the spell of the evening bath began to

melt inside Pen's own mind. He felt the numb obedience grow weaker. He thought, not for the first time, that where power became too strong, resistance would grow strong in answer.

"Listen," Pen said after a pause. "You had better be careful with Bara. She called you a waste battery and looked down on you. If she smells out this secret, it will go badly." Paul waved one hand in the air. "Bara is your wife, is she not?" he said. "If you keep control of your own house, she will learn nothing." Pen made a bitter face and said, "No. She is sharp like a man. I cannot manage her."

Paul laughed at him. "What is this, Pen? You are supposed to be the husband, and yet you speak like a tired old servant." Pen answered in a low, flat voice, "I am thinking of leaving that trade. Living beside a woman like Bara only makes the world more tasteless. I thought marriage would make life softer, but it has only made life colder." Paul looked at him more seriously now, as if this complaint interested him in a different way.

"Then what will you do?" Paul asked. "Leave her and find another woman?" Pen quickly shook his head. "No," he said. "That is a joke. There are no gentle women who fit my heart. Do you know what I think sometimes, Paul? I think it would be better if you were not my male friend but my female friend instead." When he heard this, Paul opened his mouth round and wide and blinked several times. "Do you really mean that?" he asked. "Truly?"

"Why should I not?" Pen replied. "Of course I mean it. Why do you ask me in that strange way?" For a moment Paul said nothing. Then, suddenly, he caught Pen by the hand and pulled him up from his seat. He led him into the shadow behind a standing screen in the corner of the room. Pen had no time even to protest before Paul drew him fully out of sight.

Then came the soft sound of cloth sliding against cloth. A jacket was thrown over the top of the screen with a flat light sound. After that came the harder fall of leather, and Pen's heart began to beat in confusion. He did not yet understand what Paul meant to show him, but the bold silence of the other man was more frightening than any speech.

In the next instant, a cry burst from behind the screen. It was Pen's voice, sharp

with shock and disgust. Paul tried to quiet him, but Pen broke past that effort and cried out even louder. “Ah, so this is it,” he shouted. “So this is why people said you were cutting open your own body. What is this? This is a terrible operation. I suddenly cannot bear you at all!”

Part 4

At exactly twenty o'clock, a tall man stood at the entrance of Aroaa District. It was Dr. Kohaku. On the plate beside the door were the words “Mrs. Milki.” Without a sound, the door slid down and opened the room before him. Inside he saw white walls covered with rich cloth, and from the middle of that white brightness a beautiful woman seemed to rise like a figure cut from light.

From her chin down to her feet she wore a close white silk dress that covered even her wrists and ankles. Over it she had a long shining gown made of very thin clear material that flashed when she moved. Her voice rang out like a small silver bell. “Oh, Dr. Kohaku, you have come.” At once he bent one knee before her and said with formal respect, “I offer my loyalty to Your Ladyship.”

Mrs. Milki laughed softly and led him into an inner room. It was a great salon covered everywhere in gold and red patterns, so bright that it almost hurt the eyes. In the center stood a large glass table. It was already set with fine dishes and cups for a rich evening meal. She asked the doctor to sit across from her, and when she touched a button, a moving lift hidden inside the table began to rise and fall.

Old wine and costly food came slowly up from below and stopped before the two of them as if invisible servants were working under the floor. When a plate was no longer needed, it quietly sank away and disappeared. Mrs. Milki raised a cup of wine from the year 1937, and Dr. Kohaku raised his cup in answer. She lifted food to her lips, and he copied her calm movement. Between those smooth motions, their real talk began.

“Doctor,” she said, “the music bath made from your design has had wonderful results. His Excellency is deeply pleased, and I too give you my respect.” Dr. Kohaku lowered his head without a word. Then she set down her cup and looked

at him more directly. “And yet,” she said, “I cannot stop thinking that the music bath, for all its success, has also brought a great evil into this country.”

Dr. Kohaku did not move his body, but his mouth opened slightly. “What evil?” he asked. Mrs. Milki leaned forward and answered, “It is a betrayal of human nature. National Song Number Thirty-Nine was made only from the wishes of the ruler. It changes people into forms convenient for control, but it does not ask whether living human beings can bear such change without damage.” Her voice grew warmer and more urgent. “Yes, the people are stronger now. They work harder, act better, and look healthier. But the poison of denied humanity is building up inside them, day after day, and one day it will burst.”

The doctor answered in a dry, even voice. “Even if such poison exists, does not the evening music bath wash it away each day?” She shook her head at once. “It only seems to wash it away. A drug can quiet pain, but that does not mean the sickness is gone. You are too wise not to know that.” He replied, “Lady Milki, I am only a scholar who has sworn loyalty to His Excellency and obeys his orders.” At that, she almost laughed in his face. “No, doctor. You are far more than a scholar. You are a statesman greater than Milki himself.”

Her words came faster now, as if she had waited a long time to say them. She told him that the country would be far better in his hands, that she herself would be a hundred times happier if he ruled, and that the whole nation would follow him if she spoke a single sentence in public. “Look at me,” she said. “See my eyes. See my shaking lips. There is no man in this world to whom I should give both body and soul except you. Hold me. Command me. I will do anything for you. Let us build a new state where love, desire, and every human wish can grow freely.” Then she rose from her chair, bent her smooth body like a living snake, and threw herself across his knees.

But in the next moment her face changed with fear. “What is wrong with you?” she cried. “Your body is cold, cold like a dead man.” Dr. Kohaku kept staring ahead and gave a strange answer. “Perhaps I am alive. Perhaps I am dead.” As she clung to his chest in fright, the door burst open. President Milki and Minister Asari came in at a run. Mrs. Milki sprang away from the doctor at once, and Milki, with

his great eyes blazing from inside his beard, lifted a heavy fist and shouted that the whole country had already seen this scene on television.

Dr. Kohaku stood and answered him with sudden force. "If the whole nation saw it, then they also heard what I said, and my innocence is clear." But Asari stepped forward with a cruel smile and said that only the picture had been sent. The sound had been stopped. No one had heard a single word. The doctor protested that law required television and radio to go together, yet Asari only laughed harder and said the law had been changed that very day. Then Dr. Kohaku flamed with anger and demanded to know why such a trap had been laid for him. Milki had already turned pale, but he forced out his order in a shaking voice. "There is no need for more words. Asari, carry out the execution as planned."

With that, Milki and Asari rushed out and sealed the door behind them. Until then Mrs. Milki had seemed only shocked, but now true terror seized her. She ran to the door, beat on it with both hands, and cried, "Open it. What are you going to do with me? Your Excellency, this is not what you promised." The door would not move. Then a thin hissing sound came from somewhere in the room. She was the first to understand. "Poison gas," she screamed, clutching her throat. Gray-white gas crawled over the floor, then rose higher and higher like a low evil fog. Her throat turned deep red under her fingers, and drops of blood stained the white silk on her breast. Meanwhile Dr. Kohaku stood still inside the gas like a stone figure. Then suddenly he began to move. He ran around the room in quick circles, looking over the walls as if searching for something hidden. Outside, before long, there came a great blast. When Milki and Asari forced their way back in, the rich room was gone. Fire covered the floor, broken arms and legs lay scattered in the wreck, and both Mrs. Milki and Dr. Kohaku seemed to have been blown to pieces and turned into smoke.

Part 5

Pen and Bara knew nothing of what had happened to Dr. Kohaku. While poison gas had filled another room in another district, the two young students were

together in Bara's private chamber. At first they played with each other in a rough and heated way, trying to wake some strong pleasure in their tired bodies. But the excitement did not last. It broke apart like mist struck by a hard wind, and then there was nothing left but weakness and a heavy dislike of everything around them.

For a long time neither of them spoke. They lay apart and listened to the low sounds of the underground city, the distant pipes, the far humming of machines, the dry breath of air moving through hidden walls. Each of them felt the same thing, though neither knew how to say it at first. The world seemed poor and tasteless. Even the body of the person nearest to them no longer gave comfort.

At last Pen turned his face toward Bara and said, "Lately you have become too cold." His voice was not angry. It was tired, like the voice of a man who has already guessed the answer and still asks the question. Bara did not look at him at once. She was slowly touching a rubbing doll that lay near her pillow, a soft little object people in that country now used for pleasure because the law had forbidden smoking.

She ran her fingers over the doll again and again before she answered. "It is the same with both of us," she said. "So there is no use blaming only me." Pen frowned and watched her hand move over the little toy. In that small movement he saw the whole strange life of their country. Old pleasures had been cut off, and foolish new ones had been made to take their place.

"Have you started to hate me?" Pen asked after a pause. Bara let out a breath and stared at the ceiling. "I do not know," she said. "But I do know this. For some time now I have felt restless all the time. I cannot point to one clear cause, yet every day something seems to gather inside me, some leftover thing that my mind cannot break down or throw away."

She turned toward him now, and her eyes were dark and serious. "It is like poison gathering in the spirit," she said. "One day it may become too much to bear." Pen listened and felt an unwilling agreement rise in him. He too had felt a kind of slow sickness in recent days, though he had not found words for it. Still, instead of saying that, he let jealousy speak for him. "Then there must be someone else," he said. "You are tired of me because your heart has moved toward another

person.”

Bara shook her head at once. “That is not it,” she said. “It is not only Pen that I may be tired of. Perhaps I have grown tired of human beings themselves.” Pen gave a weak, bitter laugh. “If you begin to hate all human beings, then everything is finished,” he said. “I am not like that. Though I admit there are some people I hate. In fact, I told Paul just now that I had grown to hate him.”

Bara turned more quickly at that. “You told Paul that? Why?” she asked. Pen answered, “Because he is exactly as ugly as you said. You remember what you said before, that he was cutting open his own body.” Bara nodded once. “Yes,” she said. “I said that because I thought it must be true.” Pen lowered his voice, even though they were alone. “It is true,” he said. “I saw enough with my own eyes. He is doing surgery on himself. And not for some small reason either. He is trying to change his sex.”

Bara’s whole body gave a little jump. “What did you say?” she asked. “Change his sex? Do you mean truly?” Pen looked at her with disgust. “What else can I mean?” he said. “He is giving up being male and moving toward becoming female. It is already far along.” Bara stared at him with wide eyes, not in horror, but in fierce wonder. Pen saw that wonder and felt a cold line pass through his chest.

“Can such a thing really be done?” she asked. “You ask that in a world where people speak of artificial humans,” Pen replied. “Of course it can be done. New short-wave surgery makes the body easy to cut and shape, almost like carving stone or wood. That is the evil result. A living human can now change the form of the body almost at will.” He expected her to shrink back. Instead she sat up suddenly in the bed and struck her own flat chest with the side of her hand, once and again, as if trying to wake something sleeping inside herself.

“How wonderful,” Bara cried. “How brave. Paul has done a great thing.” Pen sat frozen and could only stare at her. But she had already gone beyond him in thought, and now words rushed out of her one after another. “I always felt there was something uncommon in him,” she said. “A man like that should never have been wasted as a shoe worker. He has found the one true road left to those who are pressed down.”

Her voice rose higher. “No, more than a road of escape. It is rebellion. Think of this country. We have the music bath that glues the soul into one hard shape. We have no smoking, no drink, no real freedom of taste, no freedom of habit, no freedom of self. Medicine gives us youth and long life, so long that death comes only by punishment or by a very clever act of self-killing. We do not even need to bear children unless the government orders it.”

She leaned toward him, speaking faster with each breath. “If one person is executed, the state simply chooses one woman, uses medical methods, and makes one child to replace the lost citizen. Long ago sex served birth. But now birth is managed by the state, and desire remains only for itself. The Milki nation stole every other freedom from us and left only one new freedom, the freedom of desire. Yet even that freedom we have used in the old narrow way. Paul saw further. He understood that desire itself could be turned into a new game, a new sport, a new world.”

Pen could hardly follow her now. He only heard the force of her joy and felt fear growing from it. Bara’s cheeks were bright, and her eyes were alive in a way he had not seen for a long time. “He is the true hero of this country,” she said. “He is escaping the prison of sex itself. He is opening a new freedom for human beings.” Then she stopped, looked straight at Pen, and asked in a voice both playful and deadly serious, “Tell me, Pen. If I changed from woman to man, would you still long for me as you do now?”

Pen opened his mouth, but for a moment no sound came. Her words had struck him harder than a blow. At last he let out a long shaking breath. “That is terrible,” he said. “Truly terrible. If you became a man, then what would remain of us? Everything between us would end at once.” His lips trembled as he spoke, and the room seemed colder than before. “Life was already hard enough,” he said. “Now I feel that one more weight has been laid on it, and I do not know how much more I can bear.”

Part 6

A fast telephone order from Minister Asari broke the uneasy talk between Pen and Bara. They were told that Asari would visit Alicia District in five minutes, and that President Milki himself might come with her. At once the two of them left Bara's room and hurried through the moving paths that crossed the underground city. When they reached Alicia District just in time, the first thing they noticed was the absence of Dr. Kohaku. Pen looked around with growing fear and said, "Where has the doctor gone?" Bara answered, "I do not know. It is strange. He should already be here."

They began to search in great haste. They called by telephone, ran from room to room, opened work spaces, looked behind screens, and searched even foolish places where no calm person would expect to find a great scientist. Pen asked, "Did you look in the cabinets and under the desks too?" Bara replied, "Of course I did. I did everything I could do. But the doctor is nowhere. Everyone says they know nothing." Pen frowned and asked, "Everyone? Who is everyone?" For some reason Bara suddenly gave a light, troubled laugh and said, "Everyone means everyone."

Before they could speak more, a noise rose outside the entrance. Pen and Bara ran to the door, thinking Asari had arrived. But the sight that met them was worse. Minister Asari came first only in form, because behind her stood President Milki himself, proud and heavy, as if he had come to seize what was no longer protected. Without even looking properly at the two students, Asari pushed inside and announced in a hard dry voice, "Dr. Kohaku of Alicia District has today been executed because of an ugly affair with Mrs. Milki. From now on, I shall direct Alicia District for the time being. Bara is appointed temporary deputy." Then she ended the matter as if she had spoken of a broken tool.

Pen and Bara felt the floor drop under them. They could not believe that Dr. Kohaku, who had lived only for work and had spent nearly every hour in his research rooms, had died in such a dirty and foolish charge. To them it felt not only cruel but stupid beyond measure. Kohaku had built much of the state itself. If he was truly dead, then Milki's nation had cut off one of its own hands. Yet there was no time to mourn. Asari ordered Bara to lead Milki through the whole

of Alicia District at once.

Bara obeyed, though she did not like it. Alicia District held sixteen rooms in all, but only Dr. Kohaku had known every one of them fully. Bara knew up to the ninth room, and Pen only to the sixth. This itself showed Kohaku's quiet defiance, because by law all people of one district were supposed to know all parts of it. Still, room after room was opened. Up to the sixth, the sights were unusual but not shocking. Then Bara turned and warned the group, "From the seventh room on, most of the spaces are secret laboratories for artificial humans. What comes next is stranger. Please be ready."

The seventh room was filled with large power machines standing in rows like a silent forest of iron. Many lines spread from them across one wall in a thick woven pattern, so close and so tangled that the wall looked like some giant cloth made of metal threads. Yet the deepest fear of the place came from its silence. So much force was gathered there, and still it made almost no sound. The eighth room was different. It was a museum of older dreams. There stood model after model of artificial humans imagined by many ages, from ancient puppet-like forms to armored bodies, radio-controlled figures, and later bodies covered with artificial flesh. There were hundreds of them, and all were signs that human desire had been moving toward this room for a very long time.

Then they entered the ninth room. If the eighth had been a museum of ideas, the ninth was a house of living failures. Bara explained that all the creatures there were experimental forms made by Dr. Kohaku. One four-legged thing looked like a small pig, but its body and organs had been built from artificial meat, while the brain had come from a shepherd dog. Nearby was another being made from a monkey into which the brain of a human baby had been placed. There were also half-human forms in large glass vessels. One upper body floated in yellow liquid and sucked purple fluid through a tube, while its strange chemical system changed the liquid again and again. Bara said this was an experiment in new nutrition, but even her calm explanation could not hide how terrible the room was.

And there, among those forms, stood Annette. She looked beautiful in a simple, almost empty way, like a lovely doll that had learned how to stand and smile.

President Milki could not keep his eyes off her. He stepped away from the others and came back toward her, forgetting even the room around him. “Beautiful Annette,” he said, “what do you do here?” Annette only smiled foolishly and said nothing. Bara hurried forward and explained, “She is only a trial model. She does not understand our language. She answers only to special signs.” Milki heard the words, but they did not free him from the pull of her face and body.

Asari saw all of this, and jealousy lit her like fire. Her face turned pale, then hard. Suddenly she rushed toward Annette, drew a knife, and aimed it straight at the artificial girl’s chest. But Bara leaped forward and seized her arm before the blow could land. “Minister, what are you doing?” Bara cried. Asari struggled and shouted back, “What business is it of yours? I have the authority to destroy this thing.” Bara held on and answered with fierce feeling, “You must not kill her. She has worked here for weeks, caring for the other trial beings. She is not only a machine standing uselessly in a corner.”

The struggle grew ugly. Asari said that killing a living person might be forbidden, but destroying an artificial thing was no crime at all. Bara would not let go. In the end, President Milki himself had to stop them. He ordered Asari to put the knife away. Still burning with anger, she grabbed him by the front of his clothes and forced him to swear that he would never again speak to Annette as if she were a real woman. Milki, half embarrassed and half afraid of her, quickly agreed. At once Asari’s eyes softened in a shameful way, and Pen, watching from the corner, understood too much. He saw Bara ready to protect Annette with her whole body, and he saw that Asari and Milki were bound together in a secret closeness. Bitter disgust rose in him. “So this is how it is,” he thought. “Bara loves an artificial woman, and Asari belongs to Milki. Then I have no reason to hold back anymore. Paul changed his body for a reason. I will go and speak to him seriously.”

Part 7

The next morning, President Milki and Minister Asari sat together at breakfast.

Asari was still wearing her night clothes, but Milki had already dressed as if he had been outside. She noticed it at once and fixed her eyes on him with a thin smile. "You left your bed in the night," she said. "You may try to hide it, but that is useless. Where did you go?" Milki moved uneasily and tried to laugh the question away, but his laugh died before it reached the end.

Asari did not let him escape. She told him that one of her own people had seen him near Alicia District in the early hours. Milki widened his eyes and tried to act surprised, but he could not hold that act for long. At last he admitted that he had gone there because the thought of the closed rooms behind the ninth chamber would not leave his mind. "I could not bear it," he said. "If there is any place in this country where my power does not reach, then my rule is not complete. I wanted to find a way into the tenth room and beyond."

Asari answered him with open mockery. She said she was glad to hear such brave words from him at last. Milki admitted that he had failed, yet he tried to save his pride by saying he had worked at the problem until morning. Asari only gave him a cool look and turned away from him toward a blue parrot standing on a gold perch beside the table. On the end of her fork she held out a piece of red meat. The hungry bird jumped at it quickly, took it in its beak, and then dropped it to the floor at once.

Milki stared at the bird in surprise and called its name. "Pinto, what is wrong with you?" he asked. Asari answered for the bird in a calm voice that was more cruel than anger. "Nothing is wrong with it," she said. "It is strong and healthy. It only finds the taste of artificial human flesh unpleasant." At those words Milki jumped up from his chair. Near Asari's feet stood a great gold basin piled high with red pieces, and drops of blood led from that basin to a curtain hanging in the back of the room.

Milki ran to the curtain and tore it aside. Behind it lay the broken remains of Annette, cut apart into many pieces like a machine taken down by a skilled and hateful hand. Yet one beautiful face still remained, pale and smiling, as if it knew nothing of death or pain. When Milki saw that face, his anger burst out like fire. He shouted that Asari had killed Annette out of jealousy, and he reminded her that

he had clearly forbidden any harm to be done to that priceless being. But Asari did not rise, did not shake, and did not show fear. She only sat down again, took up her drink, and said that she had acted for the good of the state.

She told him that this was a time of danger, not a time for a ruler to lose himself in desire for a beautiful artificial girl. If the people learned that their president had become foolish over such a thing, she said, the whole country would laugh and weaken. "This is the hour for emergency policy," she told him. "I have been saying so for a long time." Milki did not answer her directly. He only turned his face away and muttered that he was like a prisoner in a jail without bars, and that he would never again be able to possess true beauty. Asari pretended not to hear those words and pulled the talk back to power.

"From today," she said, "our nation will move under emergency drive." Milki asked what that meant, and Asari answered at once that all the gold buried under the country must be dug out within one week. Milki objected that no one had enough workers, enough tools, or enough time for such madness. Asari smiled and said that politics was not frightened by such small difficulties. To her mind, science was needed only in the first stage to create methods and machines. After that, the real power belonged to politics, because politics knew how to force the whole country to move.

Milki did not fully agree, though he lacked the strength to stop her. He said that until yesterday he had believed politics always stood above science, but after seeing Annette he was no longer so sure. He spoke with sudden heat of her beauty and said that if such a being had been made in the ninth room, then perhaps behind the tenth room there might be hundreds or even thousands more beautiful than Annette. "Science is a great force," he said, almost to himself. But Asari brushed those words aside. Gold mattered more to her than beauty, and she declared that with enough gold their country could make roads, walls, roofs, and chambers of shining metal and then buy the obedience of the world.

Milki said that gold could not fight a war, and that iron mattered more than shining treasure. Asari answered that gold could buy iron from other nations and buy rulers as easily as walls or furniture. She even imagined bringing enemy

leaders into rooms made of gold and winning peace by greed alone. Milki listened, but he was not convinced. Then, while they were still speaking, a faint and familiar melody began to drift in from far away through the underground spaces. It was the melody everyone in that country knew too well. The music bath had begun.

Milki blinked and looked toward the ceiling as if time itself had gone wrong. “The bath at eighteen?” he said. “But it is only eight o’clock. Why has it started now?” Asari answered in the soft voice one uses with a slow child. She explained that from that day forward she had changed the law. The music bath would now take place once every hour, twenty-four times a day, so that the citizens would work almost without rest, without sleep, without food, and without time to fall into desire or thought. Milki called the plan violent and said even Dr. Kohaku had never intended such a thing. Asari replied that Kohaku had limited the bath because he was clever and did not want to become a slave to endless work himself. Then she added her final belief with proud coldness: science showed its greatest force only after politics had conquered it. As she spoke, Milki seemed to hear beneath the melody the hard breathing and suffering cries of the people rising all across the nation.

Part 8

President Milki could not hide his dislike of Asari any longer. He walked around the room in deep anger, while she sat before her electric dressing table and touched her own body with cold pleasure as she spoke. She told him that he would soon thank her for the new law. She said that during the dull hours, when the effect of the music bath became weak, ugly acts were spreading through the country. Men were turning into women, women into men, and other secret surgeries were being done in hidden rooms.

“This is what comes from giving people time to sleep, eat, play, and think,” she said. “Those useless hours only lead them into weariness and then into ruin.” Milki answered that taking all freedom away was too much. Asari smiled and told

him he was not a true politician, because a true politician would not fear total control. Then she went even further and suggested that he should give her the whole rule of the country and step down from power. Milki shouted that she was trying to steal his state, yet even while he spoke, he already knew how much of that was true.

He had only now begun to understand the full cost of his mistake. Because of Asari's plot, he had lost both his beautiful wife and the wise Dr. Kohaku. Worse still, he felt himself sinking lower and lower until he was no more than a toy in Asari's hand. About thirty minutes later, before that bitter thought could settle, a terrible alarm shook the whole country. Citizens ran to the loudspeakers with white faces and held their breath for the news.

The announcement came from Chief Hoshimi of the Astronomy Department. At eight forty, he said, watchers had found a strange rocket ship moving from the direction of the North Star, and their later observations showed that it was flying straight toward the state of Milki. If its path did not change, it would arrive the day after tomorrow at twenty-three o'clock. The people understood at once what this meant. For many centuries, men had feared a violent visit from Mars, and now that fear had finally become real.

Milki and Asari forgot their private struggle for a moment and turned to the new danger. Milki said the first task was not blame but clear observation of the enemy ship and its weapons. Just then a new message came from Hoshimi. He said that observation had become almost impossible. Everyone in his department was full of patriotism, but they were too excited, too shaken, and too numb in the head to work with care.

Asari mocked him and said that human beings were shamefully weak. When she ordered him to observe the ship with his own eyes, Hoshimi answered that he too felt as if his brain had gone dull. Asari asked if another music bath would help, but he cried out that the music bath itself was the cause of their trouble. He then spoke with such dark honesty that even Milki fell silent. Hoshimi said that if he must continue to grow more stupid under the law, then it would be kinder to execute him at once.

Asari did not pity him at all. She removed him from office on the spot and gave his position to the next man, Lunami. Hoshimi answered in horror that Lunami had already lost his mind under the force of the music bath. Instead of using the instruments, he was singing patriotic songs with a torn throat and smashing the fine machines with a wrench. Asari refused to believe it and prepared to go there herself. Milki stopped her and said the defense forces must be ordered at once, before the rocket from Mars came any closer.

So Asari called the search squadron and the bombing squadron by television telephone. But no faces appeared on the screen, only empty walls. A reply soon explained why. It was exactly ten o'clock, and the captains had gone out to sit in their seats for the next music bath, because the law required it. Milki could hardly believe such madness. He asked whether the nation was supposed to tell an enemy ship to wait politely until the bath was over.

When the bath finally ended, the two captains appeared before the screen. Their eyes were wild, their cheeks had sunk inward, and they breathed with a weak, whistling sound. Even Asari was shaken by what she saw. At first they accepted the order for mobilization with trembling loyalty, and Asari felt proud of her system. But only a few minutes later they called back again, and in those few minutes they had grown older and weaker before her eyes.

They reported that the soldiers had answered the emergency call, but not one of them was fit to fight. Some had gone mad. Some were almost mad. Some had lost a fifth of their body weight in a single day. Others had collapsed under hidden sicknesses that had burst open under the repeated shock of the music bath. The search force and the bombing force, which should have defended the country, were already destroyed without meeting the enemy at all.

While weak messages still came in from the Astronomy Department telling of the rocket ship's approach, Milki sank toward despair. One of the captains said that even fifty strong soldiers might have helped for a short time, but there were none left. Then something sharp moved in Asari's face, and she cried out that there was still one last plan. They must break open the hidden rooms beyond the tenth chamber of Alicia District and drag out the artificial humans Dr. Kohaku had

surely kept there in secret.

Milki feared the attempt, because he had heard that the inner door would explode if forced. Asari said she would pay any cost. She ordered the bombing squadron to attack the door at once and the search squadron to wait as reserve. In Alicia District, Pen and Bara were no longer like the two young people they had once been. Pen bent over a board, drawing a machine he could no longer understand, while his mouth hung open and his spit ran down upon the paper. Bara, now hardened into a male form, worked at a division problem that could never end and sometimes called Annette's name like a fevered lover.

Then the troops came in like a river of sick men. They were exhausted, confused, and close to death, yet they still obeyed the order and attacked the door of the tenth room. In stronger days, one worker would have been enough for such a task, but now even twenty men could hardly hold their tools. Some died while still gripping the cutting flame. A little work was enough to stop their failing hearts.

Asari stayed in her room and received one report after another. When she heard that bodies were piling up before the door and that even moving the dead had become difficult, she sent in the reserve force. But that second force was only another crowd of broken men. At last the outer barrier was destroyed, yet behind it stood another heavy door, silent and unhurt. When the attackers saw it, they fell down in hopelessness like grain beaten flat by wind.

Even then Asari did not stop. She formed new citizen forces and sent them in after the soldiers. First one wave came, then another, then a third. The national music was played again and again to encourage them, but it no longer gave strength. It only drove them faster toward fainting and death. In the end, the only people left in the country who still had any real power in their bodies were Milki and Asari themselves.

Asari, like a woman possessed, still would not cancel the attack. So at last the two rulers left their own room and moved through the corridor toward Alicia District. For the first time in their lives, they themselves received the full force of the repeated music baths. At first it felt almost pleasant to them. Then, step by step, the quick and merciless waves of sound seemed to steam their brains, and a

sickness like rising vomit filled their bodies.

They stumbled into Alicia District and looked around with horror. There were cries everywhere, and dead bodies lay in heaps across the floor. The unopened door stood deep inside like something alive that mocked them both. "Shall we go on?" Milki asked. "We shall," Asari answered at once. Burning now with the last blind pride of ruined patriots, they rushed together toward the iron barrier.

In that single instant, both of them felt their whole bodies wrapped in yellow fire. Then everything vanished. They lost consciousness as if they had fallen from a cliff into empty air. After that, silence spread through the room like the silence of an old grave. But deep below, through the heavy walls, a strange dragging sound began to rise, and the sealed dark door of the tenth room slowly started to open inward by itself.

Part 9

The black iron door of the tenth room moved inward little by little, though no human hand could be seen upon it. The harsh noise of dragged metal rose from deep below, then slowly faded. In the stillness that followed, even the dead and half-dead bodies on the floor seemed to be listening. The air itself felt changed, as if another hidden world had at last decided to open its mouth.

President Milki and Minister Asari lay unconscious near the door they had tried to conquer. Around them were heaps of citizens and soldiers who had fallen under the repeated force of the music bath. Pen and Bara were still alive, but only in the poorest sense of the word. Their minds had been broken into dull fragments, and their bodies moved only by habit and pain. Before such witnesses, the doorway widened, and from the dark interior a single figure stepped forward with slow and perfect calm.

It was Dr. Kohaku. The man whom the whole country had believed destroyed in fire now stood before them alive. He wore a strange suit of armor that made him look almost like a giant beetle, hard, dark, and shining in places where hidden current seemed to pass through it. His face alone remained human and clear, but

even there he seemed colder than before, as if he had already crossed over from ordinary life into another order of being.

Behind him came a long silent line of artificial humans. They were beautiful in a quiet and finished way, and many of them resembled Annette. They did not stumble, breathe hard, groan, or waver. There were about five hundred of them, and they followed the doctor in straight order without a word, like a disciplined army that had never known fear, fatigue, jealousy, or desire.

Dr. Kohaku did not waste even one glance on Milki or Asari. He turned a first dial attached to his armored body. At once a small red spark leaped across a gap near his shoulder, and in that same instant the old melody of the state music bath stopped everywhere, as suddenly as if some giant hand had cut a wire in the center of the earth. The cruel song of Number Thirty-Nine, which had ruled the whole nation for so long, vanished without an echo.

Then the doctor turned a second dial. The artificial humans behind him moved at once, but still without sound. They passed by him in ordered lines and spread out through Alicia District and then beyond it, each one going toward a fixed place already known in advance. Two remained in the room, taking the positions once held by Pen and Bara, while all the others went to the important stations of the state to replace the dying people of Milki's nation.

At last Dr. Kohaku turned a third dial. This time what rose through the underground country was not a hard marching song and not the violent pressure of a tyrant's command. It was a quiet, fresh melody, soft yet full, almost like clear air moving over water after long heat and poison. It entered the ruined chambers gently, and for the first time in many years the underground world heard a music bath that did not seem built from fear.

A face soon appeared upon the television screen in the room. It was the face of one of the artificial humans, smooth and calm, speaking in an even voice. "The music ordered under the law of Milki has been completely destroyed," he reported. "In its place, a new music bath in praise of humanity has begun." Dr. Kohaku listened, then gave one small nod, as if hearing no more than the expected result of a well-made experiment.

For a moment one might have hoped that the dead of Milki's country would rise again under that new melody. Bodies lay everywhere, and the fresh music flowed over them all alike. But the cold corpses did not move. They remained where they had fallen, stiff and silent like stones placed on forgotten graves. The new song had come too late for them, or else it had never been meant for them at all.

Dr. Kohaku walked into the command room where a great control board waited in silence. There he began to direct the five hundred artificial humans with complete mastery. Heavy electric guns growled and sent shell after shell toward the rocket ship from Mars. Attack rockets rose in long sharp lines from the surface into the sky, and below ground, new shells, poison gas bombs, and other weapons were made in great numbers by the tireless hands of the artificial workers.

While all this went on, the doctor himself remained calm. He listened with deep satisfaction to the far melody of the new music bath. One could ask for whom that music was being played. Was it a lament for the dead people of Milki's nation, laid out in heaps across the underground state? Was it meant to carry a human soul into the beautiful artificial beings he had created? Or was it, in truth, a lonely song for only one surviving ruler, Dr. Kohaku himself?

For a man of such great intelligence, bringing the dead people of Milki's country back into useful life would not have been impossible. At least, it would not have been beyond his science to try. Yet he had no wish to do such a thing. Whatever human feeling he may once have had for the nation had now been left behind. In that sense, he was a scientist to the end: exact, far-seeing, and cold.

The truth of the earlier explosion also became clear. Dr. Kohaku had understood Asari's plot before it closed around him. To meet it, he had sent into Mrs. Milki's room an artificial human made to look exactly like himself, and it was that false Kohaku which had been destroyed in the blast. He had not only saved his own life by that act. He had also taken care to leave no sign that the dead body had been artificial, because he meant this hidden day to come.

And now that day had come. With firm belief and complete confidence, Dr. Kohaku began the building of the world he had imagined in secret for so long.

The new Kohaku state of artificial humans moved forward under the fresh music bath that praised humanity, though the old human nation lay broken at its feet. Thus, surrounded by beauty, order, power, and death, the newborn realm of Kohaku stepped out toward the making of a new world.