

MUSIC BOX¹

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A shudder ran through the dusty veins of the city and made the bells in the Tower ring like an alarm clock. An infinite number of eyelids, made of flesh as well as *metallia*, flicked open in unison: a new day had begun.

Knöpte knew that by the time the second bell rang he should be at his job, but once again he had had a wonderful dream stolen from him by the city. The smell of stale gases and rusty *metallia* in his room swamped his memories of a fragrance that he had smelt in his dreams: one that was more delicate and more intense than the best products of the most exclusive perfumeries.

Knöpte was confused. He had been having dreams like this one for some time now and was more and more intrigued by their nature. Not even the rhythmic noises made by the minute hands of the Clock, in whose Tower he worked, could affect these visions which his mind created as soon as he finished his exhausting day and closed his eyes. The next morning, all that tended to remain of them was an evocation, as evanescent as the shadows of the night, replaced by the certainty of a morning filled with dull brown smoke; the memory of a colour that had been painted out, a sound that had been stilled, or, as now, a smell that suddenly had no scent at all.

While he got into his working clothes, he thought about these odd experiences, a little worried.

The chief of his section had realised that not all was going well with his newest worker. Knöpte knew that he should abandon all forms of distraction as soon as he got to work: he did not want his boss to scold him again in that voice that was as grating, if not more so, as the machines he had under his command.

‘A Gear depends on its brothers to be able to move. Without them it is no more than an inert lump of metal. Its structure is entirely in the service of progress, each of its teeth is an invitation to take a step forward, but only if another tooth on another gear is ready and waiting to pick it up. No Gear is more important than any other. Some gears are bigger, some have more teeth, more appetite, but their lives depend just the same on the rest of us, even the smallest and most insignificant of us...’

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Small and insignificant describes Knöpte very well.

Those were the principles of the Order of the Gear, the organisation on which the life of the city depended. Its function was to force the blood along the arteries of the city in order to manufacture, from one sallow sunrise to the next, the important Steam that powered ever machine in every installation.

This was all the life that Knöpte knew.

He had been born the son of an ‘especially promising’ worker, designated as such by the head of her section. He had more childhood memories of the machine where she worked than he did of her, or rather his mother had perhaps been nothing more than a machine herself, a gear so perfect that she had lost all of her humanity. To be fair, perhaps her last shred of humanity had been shown in the way in which she conceived and gave birth to this little child, the blood and the placenta falling to the floor where she worked and mixing with the oil stains already there, stains in which, if you had taken the time to decipher them, you could have read the destiny of all men.

Against all the odds, this bloody screaming creature had survived with only the minimum care from the woman-machine. And, what was even more incredible, in this interchange of energies, the machine-woman had stopped working. The workers of her section found her one day, motionless and silent as an abandoned boiler, still standing, with her dull copperised eyes covered in the emptiest of *metallia* alloys. At her feet was a little flesh-and-blood figure, badly dressed and worse fed, who played without noticing anything at all, stroking her smooth and bronzed surfaces and grasping, as was his habit, a fist of loose screws and nails.

Some of the parts of his body that stuck out from the rags he was wearing were reddened or even burnt by the toxic emissions which the machines sent out from time to time. When he saw this, the head of the section twisted his mouth so that the line of his lips looked like a bad-quality wire, in a gesture at the smile that he had perhaps never had. It took some time for the little boy to learn by heart the danger spots and the rhythm of the emissions, but by the time he had done so there was much less risk, because by then he had stopped being a child, and had become the smallest Gear of the Order.

However, in spite of his mother’s mechanisation and the manuals for behaviour along the lines of which he had been brought up since his infancy, Knöpte turned out to be a fairly deficient member of the Order. He was small and surprisingly resistant, of course, which allowed him to carry out tasks that even the best workers could not manage, but he was also scrawny and, what was even worse, a dreamer. His poor physique had prevented the head of the section from allocating him to jobs requiring heavy lifting—as had been his initial plan—but that was a small problem compared with his other major disadvantage.

‘Sleep’, for all the workers, meant nothing more or less than their routine break from work, necessary to revitalise their bodies and return to their posts capable of fulfilling their functions. They were like machines that, if they are overused, can end up exploding at high temperatures. A boiling machine and an exhausted worker, both of them carried beyond the limits of their respective natures, were less productive than if they had their levels of exhaustion under control. It was not irrational that every head of section had access to their workers’ biorhythms and metabolism, and monitored them and used them to optimise their food and rest.

Little Knöpte, because of his age and his physical condition, was given more to eat and allowed a little more rest than his companions, but there was always a slightly suspicious air of dissatisfaction in his obedient chestnut eyes. What more could a boy want from life if he had known nothing beyond the Clock Tower? His sky was formed of the toxic clouds made of the densest elements of the Steam that covered the city; his friends were a few forgotten machines that only he was able to talk to after pressing secret combinations on their dusty keyboards; his childhood toy was the brightest collection of screws and nails in the whole factory.

No, there was nothing that a child could expect after having grown up in a place like this. The rest of the workers had been carried to this spot after being taken from their respective free villages, but even they did not have such a strange look in their eyes. On the contrary, after a few years their eyes would reflect in their bronzed irises the surface of the *metallia*.

Like his mother, the head of section remembered.

All of them, without exception, knew that sleep was what happened when they closed their eyelids after shutting down the various submachines at the end of the working day. Closing their eyelids like one would close a door: darkness, loneliness and total emptiness. A space lost in time, the silent dialogue of the gears whose union had been suspended temporarily.

But Knöpte dreamt when he was awake.

Sometimes he stayed stock still, pausing in the middle of his work, his gaze lost in a spot so very distant that the most sophisticated steamship would not have been able to reach it. But his stillness was different from the stillness of his dead mother: his was filled with life and escape, as if the child’s spirit had been suddenly taken away somewhere, leaving his body and all the human sediment it dragged along with it there in the Tower.

In this state, he seemed unable to see or hear anything that happened around him. It was a miracle that such a hiatus had not happened in the most critical moments of his work, or he would surely be dead. Luckily, these attacks seemed to take place in the less complex parts of his working routine, but there was no flaw or pause that was not picked up on by the rest of the Gears, or by the man who monitored them down to the movements of their jaws at mealtimes.

And Knöpte realised that he, little by little, was moving away from the only world that he truly knew, the world of the Tower and the Order.

He had always been a little absent-minded, that is true, ever since he played around the body of his mother. In those days, seeing that she showed him very little attention, he had invented identities for the abandoned machines that populated the halls, little deposits of occasionally necessary materials. He pretended that the sound of the water bubbling in the boilers was in fact the voices of friends calling to him, that his screws and nails were their images. As if the inhuman work of the factory were no more than a gigantic and well-planned game of indefinite duration but finite scope. As if the end would come at any moment, although Knöpte had no option other than to return to his workstation after the Tower's bells woke him up.

The end did not come and would never come. Knöpte repeated this to himself every time he woke up and put on his uniform. His life was everything that the Tower contained, from the smallest screw to the drops of sweat on his fellow Gears' necks, to the Steam that they all produced. The game would never end, above all because it was not a game: it was his life. What did that sensation matter, that had wrapped itself round him for some time now, every time he woke up and started a new day's work? Knöpte could not understand the true nature of these sensations, because he knew nothing other than what the Tower provided.

He did know that there was life outside the Tower, a city containing other kinds of life. He knew this because sometimes his job included running errands outside the Tower. The head of section had opposed this division of labour for many years, and the tasks had been given to a very old Gear who was supposed to be immune to the sepia charms of the streets outside the Tower, and to all types of charm, in fact. How could they allow, even if only for a couple of hours, an apprentice to leave the Tower, far more such a strange one as this child? But Knöpte was agile and unassuming in appearance. With so many ragged and hungry-looking children in the streets, their hands reaching out to beg from the rich or else simply to rifle their pockets, no one would suspect that Knöpte was a Gear.

Using this argument to justify things to himself he stamped the authorisation card, the head of section had given Knöpte permission to leave the Tower whenever he was required to do so. Since then, Knöpte had several excursions under his belt, but he would not qualify them as particularly valuable experiences.

The city is large, yes. So large that on one trip, when he had to go to a particularly distant office, he was able to see the gigantic Tower that was his home as a tiny bar in the distance, half hidden by the Steam that gathered from the factory chimneys and rolled downwards into the streets. Knöpte knew that the highest level of toxicity was concentrated in the heights, but also that, past the thickest layer of Steam, was something that the rich men called the 'sky' and which, apparently, had different bright colours in it depending on the hour of the day.

The child had heard these tales during his occasional trips through the city, from the mouths of people who could not afford to live in those huge houses that rose up out of sight, far above the Steam level and people's daily misery. But these stories came down to Knöpte, the littlest Gear, in a fragmented and slightly shop-worn form, as he could not pause on his journey and give up his work. The Gear might forget, but the child remembers: blue sky, a circle of light and heat, spongy forms that disintegrate into water that falls, pure and long. Every night, Knöpte asked himself if it were these echoes that infiltrated his dreams, making him think up these dreams which he did not understand and of which only a tiny proportion was left on the morning after. But it was only a brief question: it had to be as he had no time to lose. He had to go to bed soon and sink into unconscious rest in order to be ready for the next day's work. The Tower's bells, the only notion of time that the Gears as well as the poor inhabitants of the city have, are inflexible and unmerciful.

Knöpte knew this and so, ready for work, he hurried to his post where the section head would carry out a roll-call. When he was in his work, he discovered that the day's first task was to be carried out in the city. Apparently, an important client of the Tower had received some defective *metallia*, which had because of his servants' ineptitude, been sent to the Cemetery before the complaint and replacement could be processed. And because he had fired his servants before checking their stories, and before trying to find the material, it was now down to the Gears to sort things out, unwilling as they were to lose one of their best clients as a result of an easily soluble annoyance.

And this was where Knöpte came into the equation. The child's job was to go to the Cemetery, check that the *metallia* had indeed been sent there and finally to return with proofs that would allow a larger team to go to recover the pieces. If the Tower did have to provide the client with a new set of *metallia*, then at least they should be able to recycle the older one.

Of course, this was not the first time that Knöpte had been involved in a similar situation. In fact, most of the times he had been sent outside had been to deal with defective *metallia*, even if it had meant his carrying a few too-heavy pieces around. The new aspect to this trip was the chance to visit the Cemetery, a forbidden patch on the edge of the city where the most dangerous commercial and industrial elements were stored. People said it was 'toxic'. Knöpte had heard this word more than once when people tried to justify their fear, their reluctance even to name the place, but the whole environment of the zone was 'toxic' as well, killing as it did more people than the occasional revolts of the poor.

There must have been some other reason why people were so scared of the Cemetery, but Knöpte could not think of one that sounded reasonable at the moment. He received his orders in silence and obediently went to get into his protective boots in order to carry it out. He did not feel any emotion in particular, because he knew that he was a Gear and that the Gears are

not meant to feel anything that is not the crunch as their parts fit together, but for some reason he started to remember the details of his last dream with extra vividness.

When he had put on the armour that should protect him from dying as soon as he set foot in the confines of the Cemetery, Knöpte had the impression that the section chief could sense these feelings of his from behind the *metallia* barrier. But perhaps, the child thought to himself, it will be precisely the strange and desperate atmosphere of the Cemetery that will make them sink away for ever. But did he want to suppress them?

Knöpte stopped, confused for the first time, while the huge rusty iron gates of the Tower opened to allow the diluted Steam to enter and a little boy, metallised on the outside but apparently not on the inside, to leave. The boy thought that it was necessary for his life to go back to how it had been before, when he had neither dreamed nor felt anything, but that would be to say—he suddenly thought—that what he had felt had been a change in his existence, something that had not taken place since the death of his mother and his baptism into the ranks of the Gears.

But on the other hand—he carried on thinking—things had not changed at all since the sensations first started to come. It was only that his attitude had become more absent minded than before, because of the fragile memory of what he dreamed every night seemed to be present in every one of his senses, disarranging them. Suddenly, the smell of toxic gases, boiling oil and metallic sweat seemed nullified in the face of a tiny little memory of a fragrance: the vision of the cranes and pulleys working as the Gears moved them paled in the face of his mental images. The sound of the hammers faded away before the whispering memories. The polished and cold feel of the *metallia* that covered the main rooms and spaces in the factory gave way beneath the diffuse impression of other skins and other surfaces in the distance.

Knöpte sighed in the helmet he was wearing: it was the first time he did so, but it seemed so close to a yawn that he did not grant it any importance. Also, the *metallia* breastplate was heavy and it was as hard for him to breathe through it as it was for him to navigate a route between the rotting bodies of the people piled up in the avenues. When misery and despair are pressed so close together, how can one perceive among them the sigh of an abandoned child?

But he would never think of asking himself that question. He limited himself to attempting to advance in order to fulfil his task: he had come out in the street at least partly not to provoke his senior's suspicion. He had been, for the first time, willing to wait and think for a few more minutes, if that would ensure that he would not lose a single second more of his existence.

Knöpte was curious: he did not know this, just as he did not know that curiosity itself is the most wonderful and the most terrible part of being a human. He had given up on being a man, or even a child, to become a Gear. How could a Gear feel curiosity? His job is to move in tandem with his companions in order to produce, to keep on producing eternally. But there is no advance

behind this form of movement, just as there was no advance beneath the tin clad feet of the child, because the city and its failure were still there, in every step he took, in every beat of his still-human heart.

Perhaps there could have been at the beginning the illusion of progress, as when Knöpte was almost enthusiastic about his entry into the Order, but time and its infinite turns and returns had made him understand that no, this was not a new tooth, but was the same one he had meshed with umpteen times in the past, and to which he would remain meshed for all eternity.

In spite of everything, Knöpte felt curious. This was a fact, although he was not aware of it. There was no point in his thinking that nothing had changed, because it was not like that at all. Something was moving under his crust, under his won skin, under the substance of his unconscious. It was something that so far had no shape and no outlines, and the child did not know if it was in his power to explain it. He did not know anyone who woke timidly from their sleep to start to believe, little by little opening up an endless array of possibilities. All that he knew was the rhythmical step by step actions of the elements and the rhythmical pumping of the valves, a mechanical development that could only take place with the collaboration of many people together. This was different: he felt it, but he had no words that would allow him to describe it adequately.

As he could not do otherwise, he felt this sensation running freely through his body and spirit, as he continued to walk away from the commercial centre of the city, from the penetrating gaze of his head of section, from the Tower itself. Every step he took made him feel more energetic, and he was right to feel so, because as time had gone by the obstacles blocking the road had stopped being human bodies and had instead become abandoned objects of all kinds, ever harder and more mechanical. Knöpte, he did not know why, felt chills to see the humans laid out like inert machines in the streets, but at least it was easier to get past them. With the residues that remained for the factories, it was necessary to either climb them or find a way round them, and that was hard on the armour.

But in the end, like the good Gear he was, he was able to climb all the roadblocks and make it to the Cemetery, that place where no one, not even the poorest of the poor, went of their own free will.

The little automaton, for that is what Knöpte had become, climbed onto the nearest and highest pile of rubbish, and looked around itself. Nothing grew here, not even mould or the mushrooms which occasionally appeared in the damp corners of the factory and which he had himself cleaned up when he was younger. The air seemed so heavy that it was almost as if it could be touched, picked up in fistfuls of poisonous fog.

The oxygen tank was the only thing keeping Knöpte alive in such a deathly place, which more than a 'place' seemed to be something or someone's body: a body well on the way to

decomposing. The child had seen some of these before, leant against the redoubt of the factory: Gears who had not wanted to take another step, and who had fallen into immobility. The difference is that bodies rot slowly, until all memory of them has faded away, and machines decay by accumulating other machines to themselves.

Death is never so decisive as when it takes the long view.

Knöpte's heart sank. Something that he had not felt since the day when his mother had stopped responding to his childish stimuli. And in spite of the desolate nature of the Cemetery, he felt that his strange feelings had in no way diminished. In fact, the more anguish he felt, the more the intensity and coherence of his dreams grew, until there came a point when they overflowed into his spirit.

Suddenly he started to hear a rhythmic noise, an equally spaced set of hammer blows that was just like that of the machines, but far less mechanical. It was the beating of his own heart. And he heard it, and all the interior noises of his body.

Knöpte woke up to a reality that he had never before understood: he was alive. He had discovered the contrast between his essence and the things that surrounded him, he knew now that human existence should be something more than acting mechanically. The proof was in these sensations that had come to visit him in his sleep. How many other human beings, or maybe all of them, had the same feelings every night but forgot them as soon as they awoke? Or else, how many of them still remembered them, and preferred to forget them for who knows which motives...

Knöpte felt an inconvenient burning sensation in his eyes, and a liquid ran down his cheeks. It was the first time that he had wept from something that was not the air pollution. Here his helmet kept him completely protected.

It was painful to have to understand all this at one and the same time, because he felt that he had now wasted so much time, but it was even more terrible for him to decide that he would not allow himself to forget what he had just realised, however difficult that might be. The most likely thing was that this was one of those dreams again, Knöpte said to himself, but if it truly were so, he was sure that he would remember it in the same way the next morning, for all that the sensations it dealt with were not entirely the same. There was nothing more for him to do than to continue with his original task and march into his vigil, into the night.

He spent a few hours at this. There were lots of residues of *metallia* everywhere, and their serial numbers were difficult to identify under the thick layer of toxic dust that had covered them. In the end, he found a piece that carried one of the serial numbers he had been given. He pulled it out and piled it up so as to make it easier to carry when the salvage team arrived; he would probably be among their number. But as he did so, a voluminous sheet of the most flexible type of *metallia* slipped from his hands, knocking against other smaller pieces.

The sound was short in duration but loud, sharp. Knöpte stood still, as if a stream of cold and clean water had fallen directly onto his soul. Nothing, from the bubbling of the stoves to the tick-tock of the clock, or the dry click of the gears meshing together, was even comparable to this.

The sound finally died away, but Knöpte kept it in his heart. Was it possible that...?

Clink. Clang. Clong.

The child carefully beat the perfect holes in the sheet with other abandoned bars, producing a different sound every time. Now he understood, these were the sounds that had made the melody he had heard all the time in his dream. The rest of the sensations remained dormant, but at least Knöpte had found out this one. Knöpte remembered that even the largest airships were made from the same *metallia* he had in front of him now. If he had found the material, he could find the entire object that lay inside him... if he forced himself enough.

He smiled behind the mask of the diving helmet. No one could see him smile, but he knew that the smile was there, hidden and permanent... and this was all that mattered to him.

The bells swing from side to side six times: the angelus. A coat of blackness falls on the Steam, always present, but Knöpte is unable to see it. For years he has been working extra hours, something that almost all the Gears do to earn extra income, but no one has put a single extra coin in the child's hands, nor has he handed over a single one of his personal projects in exchange for money.

The constant rumble of the city is loud enough at all hours to overwhelm the noises of the sonic experiments Knöpte makes, but he is now used to this, and has no problem in distinguishing one from the other as he works. Up until this moment, the child has managed to distinguish a not-inconsiderable number of sounds. Using abandoned sheets of *metallia* and a drill borrowed from the factory, Knöpte has discovered that the pieces are capable of producing different sounds depending on exactly where they are perforated. Once they have holes drilled into them, the sheets emit different sounds when they are beaten with bars, and Knöpte quickly improvised a set of dedicated drumsticks.

It takes him much more time to realise that the possibilities of his invention could go much further than having a separate sheet for each separate sound. Outside, the noise never stopped: shouts were overlaid with the motors of the airships and the clamour of the factories. And what if he could do the same with other sounds, so beautiful and pure? But for that he would need the machines as well, because it was from them that this beauty and purity came, in the cast-off sheets that they abandoned.

Exhausted at the end of the night, Knöpte sleeps a little and then wakes up to go to his official job as a Gear when the bells are sounded again. But then, as he gets dressed, he climbs up the Clock Tower and contemplates its complex mechanism. Something like that would be

needed, he thinks, something that would keep the perforated sheets in a particular relationship with one another, making the sheets and the drumsticks come into contact sequentially and automatically.

Knöpte stops thinking and goes to his workstation. In spite of the terrible quality of life he has had, he is growing rapidly and in satisfactory ways. The section head has been in touch with him to inform him that he is intending to give him a more important job. Two of the oldest Gears have recently fallen ill and the whole team has had to adjust to this, and the kid has been an unexpected addition to the group. His hands are much more careful when it comes to filing and drilling the *metallia*, although he doesn't tell them that it is because he has spent so long doing the same with the only aim being to create music. But in spite of these mild evasions it has become clear that he is particularly skilled at manual work, something which should not be allowed to go to waste, according to the head of his section.

In fact, this morning the man takes him to a different zone from the one he has occupied all this time so far, the zone where his mother worked. Knöpte recognises the Gears in this unknown space: they are the Mechanics, whose job it is to repair any defect in the machines, but they are also the ones who have enough knowledge to use these technical errors as a springboards for creation.

Knöpte's heart starts to beat more rapidly in his breast, but his face is calm, just as it should be, when he looks at the section head. The faces of the Mechanics are impassive as well when they receive the order to accept and train this kid as one of their own. The first test is so hard that Knöpte spends all day trying to complete it, and only manages it just as the factory is shutting. It is too late and he is too tired to go back to his room and carry on with his experiments: this will be the first time that he has broken this rhythm. However, now he knows that he will advance along another path and that, after a while, he will hear his music overwhelming the row that has surrounded him since his birth. That is all that matters.

Knöpte is ill, or at least this is what he has told them in the factory. His own section head has come to his room to confirm this rumour. He cannot allow himself to lose such a promising Mechanic, or at least this is what the man said to his superiors, but the truth is that he has always slightly suspected this child, no matter how significant his skills with the machines have turned out to be. There is no helmet or self-control that can hide the sparkle in the boy's eyes, and the section head has seen similar things over the years. He remembers in particular the moment when Knöpte first saw a clockwork mechanism and his pupils swelled immensely.

From time to time cases like this occur. It matters little if they come from the villages around the Capital, now decadent and almost completely taken by the Order, or from the most

aristocratic families of the highest repute. Disobedience can be born into any cradle, and has to be stamped out as soon as it is discovered, as the Order requires.

But the section head finds nothing out of order in Knöpte's room, or at least nothing that would allow him to accuse him of treason. There are a huge number of machines and perforated *metallia* sheets, but they must be the boy's personal projects, what he does to earn a living. Who nowadays doesn't do that?

And the boy is so weak that he cannot give an explanation for it all.

This happens as well, Steam sickness in people who are still young and resistant.

Or at least that's what the factory doctor said. Diagnosis: the sack. The section head knows that his productivity will fall from now on, but he feels much calmer knowing that he will never again see that spark in the eyes of Knöpte, dying.

He's right, perhaps, but only because the sick man kept his eyes shut the whole time. As soon as he is alone again and freed from his connection to the Order, the boy makes a huge effort of will and gets out of bed. He spends longer than usual in putting on an adult's breastplate and in wrapping his invention with care, but he feels that in spite of the fever and the weakness that wracks him, he has all the time in the world. He has waited years for this.

Nobody pays any attention to the armoured figure dragging itself through the streets, or notices the gaze behind the helmet's eyepiece, but that does not matter. Knöpte knows that his last vestiges of strength will be enough to get him to where he needs to be, and he needs nothing more than that.

The Cemetery is the same as he remembers it from his childhood. Of course, some pieces have gone and some have arrived, but the landscape is the same. It is always the same: the city, the Tower, the Gears... existence as a whole. But Knöpte has changed.

He manages with an effort to unwrap the object that he has dragged all this way; a box that inside holds a little mechanism which, when a handle is turned, moves a carefully punched sheet of *metallia* to the middle. There it will strike against fifteen little tongues of distinct width and sound, each one with its corresponding four-tooth gear. Knöpte has worked out a system whereby the sheet of *metallia* moves silently as the handle is turned, until it hits a space in the specified zone. Then one of the teeth will engage and move its respective gearwheel, which as it beats against the metal tongue will make a unique sound.

With this simple procedure the kid has invented a new language, having found a way to finally transform his art of creating melodies in his head into a way of playing them directly via his *metallia* score.

His hands tremble as he puts the sheet at the entrance to the mechanism. His gloved fingers scarcely have strength to turn the handle, but once it is moving everything seems much simpler. The first holes move into the machine and... it starts to sing.

One after another, like water falling, the sounds mix together, creating a musical fabric that for just one moment drowns out all the shouts and cries, purifying the ambient toxins, cleaning the dirt from the streets, sweetening the day-to-day deadly dullness and giving the *metallia*'s artificial smoothness something of texture.

Suddenly, Knöpte finds strength enough to take off the fogged helmet. What he can see is indescribable, a patch of blue sky above his head, a syrupy taste on his tongue, a pure scent, the smooth touch of the strange soft green carpet that has appeared underneath his body, a whistling noise that the boy somehow realises is made by the wind. And of course, a distant and melancholic noise that fills his heart with tears.

Five little figures made of light surround him now, floating in the air. Their voices are other melodies, which sound above the noise he makes and make the sound even more beautiful. Knöpte discovers that he understands them in spite of everything: they speak to him of the past, when things were all like they are here, until the Order took the knowledge from the villages in which it had first been born.

The little creatures are the ancient guardians of nature, trapped ever since people lost their desire to live in any sense beyond their organic existence. But now Knöpte's music has made them have hope once again, because it is a living music created from dead matter. Now nothing can be lost, they insist. If only Knöpte could go back to the city and find disciples, other people who, like him, could manage to awake within themselves at least one of the sensations which they send him every night through his dreams, the only place where they now hold any sway.

But Knöpte does not stop crying; he knows that his body will not endure any further. The sheet passes to the other side of the box and the music finishes. The creatures start to disappear as well, giving out cries of desperation as they do so. They have waited so long, and now this beautiful boy will disappear as well, just when they were about to...!

About to.

The creatures take a decision. They hold hands and form a circle round Knöpte and then head slowly into the skies. In the middle of their circle, the boy's soul joins with their song, the same song as came from his music box, but a thousand times lovelier.

The boy's body falls dead onto the silent machine. The sky is dark and contaminated once again, the grass is rotten and the wind dies down.

When members of the Order came to the Cemetery a few months later, they found a decomposing corpse and an odd machine of no obvious use.

The body was incinerated and the machine was recycled that same night, but the next day many people woke up with the strange sensation of having dreamt something very important, from which they can only remember with any clarity a soothing melody.