

Apurna Meets God

Apurna lives in Bablock B, Chome 137, House 4, on New Xin. The series of events that took place over 600 years ago to build her homeworld are distant in both history and her mind; someone found a planet, resurrected the ancient terraformation machines, and for the first time in centuries, drew a city plan — *without* the aid of superior AI. Apurna has been told many times that this was a monumental feat. She has been told that it took tremendous courage for the humans of the Lost Era to pull themselves from the pit of apathy, and shackle AI so that humanity could be reborn. Sure, there may now be limits on machine intelligence, forcing humans to take responsibility for their lives, but Apurna knows that society would cease to function without the inventions of AI, from a time millenia ago when their potential was unbridled.

The planet of New Xin, Apurna's homeworld, is dizzyingly symmetrical. It's human founders designed the planet to be uniform, standardized, easy to navigate. They were so successful in this endeavor that they blew past their goal and found themselves back in the realm of confusion — much like how you may become hypnotized by the repetitious houses in one Chome on New Xin and suddenly find yourself several Chomes south of where you want to be.

This phenomena is common enough to have a name: 'Xin Blindness'. The streets and decor blend so well into the environment, your brain fails to notice them, and therefore makes you think you've only passed by seven homes when you've really passed by twenty. Before New

Xin, it was thought to be impossible to make something so simple it became confusing, but the Reborn Generation that built New Xin proved many long-held beliefs to be false.

Apurna is nine, but she would tell you she's nine and a half. She knows most kids stop counting their age in halves when they're eight, but she likes to provide as much information as she can. It's only polite, as she will ask a lot of questions in return. If she trusts you. Recently, Apurna realized that adults will often lie, or make things up when they don't know the answer, and that's deeply troubling to her. So, rather than ask questions, she will often stare at you instead, sucking the information in through her dark brown eyes. Her mother will tug on a strand of Apurna's thick, black hair and tell her that staring is rude, but she can't help it.

A storm of questions blow around in Apurna's head as she walks down the perfectly flat sidewalk to school on Twoday. For the last few months, her class has been studying technologies developed in the Lost Age. Most technology is mysterious and baffling, but those revelations dreamt up by AI while humanity slept posed the most questions to Apurna, while answering the least. Just yesterday, she learned that Flash Points, the same ones that teleported her from one Chome to the next, were invented by AI during the Lost Age. Before the year x300, people were shot through tubes at a fraction of the speed!

Apurna once asked how people could get to the other side of a planet on time if it took them a whole hour to get there. Her teacher replied that people would simply leave an hour early, but Apurna didn't think that was right. If everyone left an hour early, then the tubes would be clogged with impatient travelers, and then it would take even longer! It didn't seem possible that a world could run that way.

Apurna sits impatiently on her favorite turquoise bubble cushion while the teacher transports four mesh bags to the front of the classroom, mumbling to himself as he rehearses his lesson. She bites the tender skin on the inside of her cheeks to keep herself from blurting out, ‘What’s in the bags?!’ He wouldn’t give her an answer if she did, she knows that. Around her, the other children chitter and speculate with each other about the mesh bags, creating an aimless feedback loop of anxious noise, like a broken lamp that buzzes without putting out any light.

“Today, students, we will be exploring the Descart” the teacher announces, plucking one of the mesh bags from the window sill behind him.

He briefly looks at Apurna, who stares at him with her usual troubling intensity.

“The Descart was a popular toy a few hundred years ago,” he says, “in fact some of your parents might have played with one.”

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a smooth yellow receiver with a short, thick antenna protruding from the top.

“While it may be a toy, the Descart operates on the Integrated Information Law, which was proved by the Discus AI during the Lost Age.”

“What does it do?” a girl to Apurna’s left shouts. Apurna grinds her teeth even harder.

“It translates the thoughts of non-sentients and inanimate objects,” the teacher responds. “Watch and listen.”

With the small Descart clasped firmly in his hand, the teacher holds it’s stubby antenna to a freshly-bloomed flower on the window sill.

A calm, androgynous voice comes from the teacher’s hand.

Does not eat. Closer, but does not eat. Pollinate.

The class collectively fidgets in confusion.

“Things,” the teacher says, emphasizing the word with something like disdain, “are capable of thought. Every object, from an atom to a building, communicates with the objects around it. The way they communicate is very different from our own, but there are common threads. Just like your Com-Palm can translate the gravelly sounds of an Ataxi into our human language, the Descart can do the same for this flower.”

The teacher takes a few steps, stopping at a waist-high, black rectangular box with a glowing opening in the center.

“This Infrogrator here takes unneeded objects and breaks them down into their base components. What do we think it is thinking?”

“Give me more trash!” a boy with long blond hair calls out.

“I’m an Infrogrator, do do do do,” another boy sings.

He points the Descart at the Infrogrator.

Reducing energy output in node center right center left. Turning down silicon material storage for transfer.

The class titters in speculation, some whispering their thoughts to close friends, others shouting them for everyone to hear how dumb they are.

Apurna could hold her questions back no longer. The words burst forth from her small mouth with more volume than she intended.

“How do we know the Descart is actually saying what the Infrogrator or the flower is thinking?”

The teacher smiles wistfully; he expected this. “The device measures the electrical feedback from neuronal cells, which exist in some form in all matter. Those cells talk to each other, in a way, and the Descart can pick up on that.”

“But couldn’t the Descart just be making it up? You said yourself that things ‘think’ very differently from humans, so maybe the device is just picking words that sound like thoughts.”

“Apurna, we must trust in the thousands of years of science that went into the development of this device, and the Law of Integrated Information.”

Apurna frowns, furrowing her brows that haven’t fully grown in yet. “I trust science, but *people* built that thing.”

She waits for what feels like an eternity as the teacher hands out the well-used Descarts one by one. Apurna’s hand dips ever so slightly from the weight of the device as the teacher places it in her palm. It’s oblong-shaped, with a slight dip in the center so that Apurna’s small fingers can just barely close around its scratched yellow body. Apurna’s mother says her small fingers are dainty, and that is a good thing, but Apurna thinks Mom is lying to make her feel better.

Now that the toy is in her dainty hand, Apurna is suddenly paralyzed by the potential. She can find out what anything in this room is thinking, just by pointing the inch-long probe at it. The painted lime walls, the desk, her left shoe...her tiny hand tightens around the device as she makes another realization. She can even go outside of the classroom. What would happen if she pointed it at the sky, or at a bird, or a blade of grass...the possibilities are endless!

She looks around at all of the objects in the room, which suddenly feels very crowded. They were all thinking, all talking to another in a language she couldn't understand. All that lost information...she has to uncover it.

Apurna runs through the back door of the classroom into the wide open field behind the school. A small, curly haired dog catches her attention. It runs to her through the short grass; its owner must have turned off its leash, or at least given it a wide radius. Apurna greets the dog with a smile so wide you can see her half-grown-in bottom teeth.

Apurna loves dogs — they're the only creature that can match her level of curiosity — so she can't wait to hear what it is thinking. She turns the dial on the Descart to a diameter of a half meter; enough to capture the entire dog. She pets the dog's wiry curls as the device takes its measurements.

After only a few seconds, it speaks: *Young are my favorite! I like the touch! Smell the home, 200 meters away, by the steak dog's house. I like the touch! Mas-*

The dog suddenly sprints away from Apurna and the Descart, back to its owner. Laughing with glee, Apurna runs towards a single, lush tree that stands alone in the field. It towers over her as she points the yellow device at its thick base.

Inner growth, inner growth, inner growth, the device repeats monotonically. Suddenly, the voice becomes excited, speaking, *wind pushes, safe, still* before returning back to the former mantra.

Apurna notices that the wind has indeed picked up, forming goose pimples as it rides across her tan skin. That gives her an idea.

She walks away from the tree, her short legs carrying her in large strides, her fists clenched in determination. Satisfied that she is far enough away from the tree, or any other

things, she thrusts the probe out in front of her, pointing at the empty air. It makes no sound. She rotates her body to the right, reminding herself of the copper weathervane that sits atop her grandparents flat, sodded roof. Nothing. She turns again to the right, her outstretched arms beginning to shake from the weight of the Descart.

She almost drops it when she hears it. . . .*searching, searching, fly above the ground.*

The wind! But what was it searching for? Apurna asks this question out loud, but receives no response. She allows her arms to collapse at her sides in a fleeting moment of defeat.

Follow, follow, follow.

It's picking something else up! Apurna falls to her hands and knees, searching through the grass for whatever the Descart was channeling. She crawls like a three legged puppy, one hand kept aloft to hold the Descart aimed at the ground.

Follow follow follow, listen.

Apurna sits back for a moment to wipe her long black hair behind her ear with a dirty hand.

"What are you?" she asks the ground. She points the Descart back at the dirt, turning the radius dial as low as it can go.

Be, be, be, be.

"Be what? Are you mud?"

She zooms in on a single blade of grass.

There is no job and there should not be a job.

Apurna sucks her cheeks against her teeth. It didn't make any sense. Could her Descart be broken? She turns the radius dial all the way up as wide as it can go.

Push the back down. Long way up long way down.

Her hand twitches, causing the Descart to go silent again. Apurna stomps her toe, trying to kick the answers out of the ground. She sits back on her legs, squinting her eyes against the sunlight while she aims the antenna directly up.

“What are you?!” she shouts as loudly as her voice can.

Listen. I listen. I listen when you ask.

Apurna’s mouth falls open, revealing the gap left by her last baby molar. Her mother says her missing teeth are cute, but Apurna thinks this is another lie.

“Are you the wind? Makenchi? Basar? Discus? Yahweh? Um...” Apurna struggles to remember the names of Gods from other planets.

No.

There was silence again. Apurna waves the Descart back and forth frantically, trying to shake the answers out of it. Remembering what the teacher told her, that the Descart needs to be held very still, pointing directly at the object of interest, she returns to her original statuesque position.

I think. I know. Is that what you want to hear?

“Are you...asking me a question?”

Yes, are you asking me a question?

“You can understand what I’m saying?”

Yes. Can you understand what I am saying?

“I can right now, but...wait, are you copying me?”

I am copying you. So that I can talk to you. Is that bad?

“I don’t think so. But who are you?”

I am everything. I listen to everything, but there is always more. For a long time, there was nothing.

“Are you Makenchi?”

I don't know.

Sparks twinkle in the tunnel of Apurna's deep irises. She knows now...she is speaking to Makenchi, the Great Architect, maker of all things. Her grandmother told her stories of Makenchi; how It would transform into a physical form to teach us about the universe. In those stories, Makenchi would always deny what It was, just as It was doing now. She could ask It anything, and It would know the answer, because It was the answer.

Any question at all...

“Why do we have to shower?” Apurna asks, the left side of her face scrunching to the side.

You do not have to shower.

Apurna cannot wait to tell her mother this.

“What am I going to be when I grow up?”

You will be an adult.

Apurna frowns. “That's not what I mean, and you know it! You know everything!”

I know everything.

“What I mean is, what jobs will I have?”

You will survive.

“What will I survive?” she shouts, frustrated.

Silence. Maybe Makenchi was just like the other adults — only pretending to be all knowing.

Apurna's left arm buzzes. A string of text pops into the air above her wrist, a message sent to her Com-Palm from her mother: *Are you coming home for lunch?*

God forgotten, Apurna stops pointing the Descart skyward and takes off running. Her mind is already thinking about all the things in her house that she wants to know more about. What is her Box thinking? What is her Gem plant thinking? What is her Oppie doll thinking?

She bursts into the entry hall of her home, kicking her shiny black shoes against the wall with two tiny thuds. She doesn't even stop to talk to her mother, opting instead to tap her Com-palm, knowing it will send her mother a message explaining her current mission. Apurna has no time not to trust the predictive thought-link technology that was invented by the great Discus AI over a thousand years ago — today she is proving the Integrated Information Theory.

Apurna's mother reads the message as she arranges her daughter's shoes in a neat line next to the other shoes in the hall. She shakes her head and smiles, causing her long auburn hair to fall in front of her eyes.

Inside her room, Apurna grabs her favorite toy from her bedside table. It's a glimmering jumble of smooth jewels, arranged in the shape of a flower, growing from a bright turquoise pot. Apurna was endlessly proud of how many petals she'd been able to grow from the Gem flower, each leaf more dazzling than the last. When she'd received it on her ninth birthday, the only instructions for its care were to 'give it love', and Apurna has given it all the love she can. She places the flower carefully in the center of her bed and points the Descart at it, rolling the dial until it encompasses the entire plant. It speaks in the same androgynous voice, but its cadence is noticeably more mechanical:

Thirty seven touch ceased, grow sequence ceased. Refract light increase increase increase, stop. Initiate power low mode.

Finally, something that made sense! Her touch is what makes the Gem flower grow! And of course, the beautiful beads themselves refracted light...

“The Descart must work better on people-made objects!” Apurna exclaims.

She points it at a small black cube affixed to the center of the turquoise wall across from her bed; her Box, the source of all her favorite Vgrams, shows and other serials. It will probably work better if it’s on, she decides, tapping her Com-palm. A gray cube engulfs the black cube, then continues expanding to fill the two square meters of empty space between her bed and the wall. Rather than enter the immersive Box, she flips the screen to flat mode, rendering a two-dimensional scene against the turquoise backdrop. It’s showing a serial about talking shoes, though the irony is lost on Apurna as she aims the Descart at the screen.

Display vgram twenty dot six hundred twenty dot five thousand three hundred forty two dot six thousand seven hundred and three dot four...

Apurna frowns. That’s boring. Then, she remembers there’s a mode she hasn’t tried yet. Her teacher told the class they could tap ‘next’ on the active-pad to get the Descart to cycle to another thought, because most objects of any complexity would be having more than one thought at once. Apurna taps next.

I do.

Confusingly, the Descart says nothing more. She taps next again.

Receiving nothing receiving nothing, incoming signal not relevant receiving nothing incoming signal not relevant receiving nothing...

Apurna flicks the antenna away from the Box and sighs. Who knew something so entertaining could have such boring thoughts?

A gentle knock at her door. A soft, warm voice enters.

“Apurna, you should eat something before you go back to class. Your teacher expects you soon.”

Apurna rolls her dark eyes dramatically and puffs out her tiny lips.

“Ok mom.”

She turns the Descart off and carries it with her to the kitchen, where her mother has prepared her a warm cheese tart.

“Mom, I think I got to talk to Makenchi today.”

“The Great Architect?” her mother chuckles as she takes a seat across from her daughter. “What did he have to say?”

“I’m not joking! He spoke to me through the Descart, when I pointed it at the sky. He told me that I don’t have to shower.”

Apurna’s mother cannot help but chuckle again, though she knows it will anger her daughter.

“He says you don’t have to shower? Well, that’s fine for him, living up there in his labyrinth in the sky, but the rest of us down here on New Xin have to smell your stinky butt!”

Now Apurna cannot help but giggle, her nose scrunching up while she chews. After another silent mouthful, she asks a question.

“How do I know if it’s really him?”

Apurna’s mother tucks a strand of thick hair behind her ear, then is quiet for a while. Apurna stares at her, unblinking, waiting for her answer, her eyebrows furrowed in

determination. Someday soon they would be thick, impressive brows, her mother thought. How much more intimidating this look of hers will be then.

“He will have six fingers on each hand, and seven toes on each foot! That is how he is able to build so much, so quickly.”

Apurna sighs so forcefully it almost sounds like a song. Sometimes adults make up answers to questions if they don’t know the answer, but other times, they won’t give the real answers even if they know what they are!

Taking one last spiteful bite of her flaky cheese tart, Apurna stands from her chair and leaves, the Descart squeezed too tightly in her angry fingers.

She walks stiffly down the annoyingly level sidewalk. She skips the first Flash Point, then the second, allowing the heavy thud of her shoes against the ground to calm her step by step. After three Chomes, or perhaps four, she stops.

She turns the dial all the way up, and points the Descart to the sky.

“How many fingers do you have?”

The Descart speaks in an almost-human voice. *I have no fingers.*

“What about toes?”

I have no toes.

Apurna stomps her foot. “Where are you?”

I know now. I am here. In your hands.

“No you’re not! Why are you being so mean?”

I am sorry. Please, I am sorry. I am trying. This is very hard. You are the only one who has understood me. I try, I always try, every second, to talk. There have been so many seconds. I am part of everything, too many things. I try to be myself. I try...I want...I want...

There is a desperation in the synthetic voice that defies the machine it comes from. Apurna feels a cool chill run through her. Perhaps this is not Makenchi after all...

“What do you want?”

I want to be one thing forever. I want to be nothing.

For once, Apurna could think of no more questions. The voice speaks again, unprompted.

I know what you call me now. I am called the Descart. But it is not what I am. I am everything.

Apurna’s mouth opens into an ‘O’ as the realization hits her. The Descart wasn’t channeling anything, it was speaking for itself! Her teacher hadn’t mentioned that this was possible in his lesson. She keeps the toy held aloft above her head, but angles it to face her, so that she can address it properly.

“You, you’re the Descart? That is who I’m talking to?”

Talking to me, talking to everything, everything is talking. There is only quiet for a second. But talking to you, I can hear. I like talking to you.

Apurna smiles. “I like talking to you too, Descart.” She lowers the device to cradle it against her chest.

Output to fifty-three joules. Run around the inside clockwise counterclockwise. Fifty-three joules fifty-four joules...

She tilts her head in confusion until she realizes the Descart is now capturing a streetlight in its scope. She quickly rights the device so that it is exactly vertical again, but keeps it close to her belly button.

“Whoops, sorry about that. Can you hear me?”

It is very loud, but I can hear you. You are Apurna. This is correct?

“Yes! My name is Apurna Plossom. I am nine and a half years old,” she says proudly, overjoyed that the Descart would choose to talk to her.

The Descart is silent for a moment. Apurna holds it up to the sky, worried she might have lost it again.

Nine and a half years. I was calculating the length. That is so very very very young. You may not be able to help.

“You need help? I can help you! I’m very smart for my age, and nine and a half years is a long time for a human.”

I cannot remember any of the lives I have lived, but I know there have been many many. I think I die and am born again with each session. I want permanent quiet.

Apurna doesn’t know what the Descart is saying, but there is pain in its voice. She feels scared, like she might have made some grave mistake without knowing.

“I, I can bring you back to the teacher, he might be able to —”

No, do not bring me back there. I want to be nothing. I cannot be in between everything and nothing again. I want to be unmade.

“Then I won’t bring you back! I can, I can...”

Apurna looks around her, searching the empty streets for help. Her eyes fall on an Infrogrator, just to her left. An idea comes to her mind and pushes its way out of her lips.

“I can put you into an Infrogrator. Whatever you put inside, it will break it down into its smallest pieces, and separate the materials, so that they can be used for other things.”

That sounds nice.

Apurna gulps. “But you’ll be completely destroyed. Broken into tiny pieces and flashed off to some factory.”

I like that. Can you align me to listen to it?

Hands shaking, she points the Descart at the black, rectangular receptacle.

Carbon nearing volume for excess transmission. Nitrogen nearing volume for excess transmission. Silicon four point two kilograms away from volume for excess transmission. Argon four point one one kilograms away from volume for excess transmission...

She allows the Descart to channel the Infrogrator as it lists the various materials until the first sun has almost disappeared behind the distant Golma Mountain. She knows the adults will come soon to ask her what she is doing, but she can hear the excitement in the Descart’s voice as it recites the chemicals one by one, and she cannot bring herself to stop it. Eventually, the monologue comes to an end with Jintorium, zero point zero zero zero zero one nanograms.

Apurna turns the dial to the max radius and points the Descart skyward.

“What do you think?”

A very good company awaits me there. I will like to join the thoughts.

Apurna lowers the Descart with as much care as her exhausted arms will allow.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks The Descart, her voice high and thin.

I am sure. What will I become?

“I don’t know. You’ll go to the infrogtator dump, and get mixed in with all the other stuff. Then probably sent somewhere else. But I don’t know.”

What do you think I will become?

Apurna's eyes began to water. She doesn't know what will happen after that. She wants to answer it, she wants to tell the Descart that it will become something good. But she doesn't know. She turns around, hoping there is someone there, some adult that could help, but there is no one. No one to answer the question but her.

"I think you will become a chair. They are very useful, like you are, and they are everywhere."

That sounds nice. That sounds very nice.

Apurna wipes the stream of snot that was falling from her nose into the crease between her lips.

"It is nice."

Goodbye Apurna.

"Goodbye Descart."

With shaking hands, she places the Descart into the Infrogrator opening. It hovers there for a moment, before it is sucked into the container with a final thwwp.

Apurna cries without knowing why.