

Stefano Carloni

SHIN TETSUWAN ATOM 2: RELOADING

The new adventures of Astro Boy



This novel begins where the 1980 anime series "Shin Tetsuwan Atom" ended, i.e. from the return of Atom to Japan after completing his secret mission in the republic of Grotia. The project for the robot containing a neutron bomb, which had been stolen by a spy, was reduced to ashes, and the plant intended for the construction of the robot bombs was destroyed; but Atom has a heavy heart, because he has lost his first and perhaps only love: the little robot girl Niki, who after helping him to defeat her creator, Dr. Rindolph, agreed to let herself be disassembled piece by piece to prevent the explosion of the bomb contained in her body; the only part of her that has remained intact are her legs, which Atom had installed in place of his own to always carry with him the memory of her beloved. But one day Dr. Tenma, creator of Atom, announces that he has a backup copy of the project...

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WARNING

The tales *Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading - The new adventures of Astro Boy*, *Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing - The adventures of Astroboy and Niki* and *Shin Tetsuwan Atom 4: Ultimate - Astroboy: Death and Re-birth* are fanfiction based primarily on characters belonging to the series of *Astroboy* comics and cartoons, whose rights belong to the author Osamu Tezuka, his heirs and Tezuka Production, and secondarily to characters and situations belonging to other comic and cartoon series, such as *Kimagure Orange Road*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Spider-Man*, *Red Sonja*, *Dorothea: Majo no Tetsutsui*, *Legs Weaver*, *Code Geass*, *Gunslinger Girl* and *Cupid's Chocolates*, as well as to the Rai fiction by Cinzia TH Torrini *Fino all'ultimo battuto* [*Until the last heartbeat*]; characters and situations that I mixed and fused together into a unitary and original story. In addition, images

taken from the Internet are included in the work for illustrative purposes, without ascertaining the identity of the respective authors.

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Any reference to real facts,
characters or events
is purely coincidental*

WHO'S WHO: BRIEF GUIDE
TO THE CHARACTERS OF "TETSUWAN ATOM"



Atom Tetsuwan (Iron Arm Atom): Original name Tobio Tenma. Robot created by Umataro Tenma in the image and likeness of his son Tobio, who died in a car accident. Disowned by his creator when he realizes that he is unable to grow in height like a human being, he is sold to a circus where he is renamed Atom Tetsuwan and forced to perform fighting other robots, until Hiroshi Ochanomizu redeems him and takes

VIII

him under his tutelage, striving to integrate himself into the world of humans. He looks like a 13-year-old boy, he is 143 centimeters tall and weighs 40 kilograms; he has black hair, upright on his head like two horns, along with brown eyes. He has a power of 100,000 horsepower, jet engines in the arms and legs that allow him to fly, built-in reflectors in the eyes, two laser cannons in the indexes of both hands, two machine guns in the buttocks, a thousand times greater hearing than humans, he can speak all the languages of the world and understand the good or bad feelings of his interlocutors. From his mentor Ochanomizu he learns a strong sense of justice and the desire to build a peaceful coexistence between humans and robots. He is very affectionate and protective of his younger sister Uran, whom he considers a weak child and easy to get into trouble.



Tobio Tenma: Thirteen-year-old son of Umataro and Hoshie Tenma. Neglected by his father (too busy with his job as general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology and his dream of creating a robot with human thoughts and feelings), he dies in a car accident. His death is the opening event of the “Tetsuwan Atom” series.



Umataro Tenma: Graduated in Physics and Robotics Engineering at the University of Nerima, where he stands out early for his genius, he is appointed general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Obsessed with the dream of creating a robot with human thoughts and feelings, he neglects his son Tobio, who dies in a car accident. Shocked by grief and remorse, he deepens all his knowledge and the resources of the Ministry to build a robot in the image and likeness of Tobio, which he finally activates and takes to live in his home. When he realizes that the robot cannot grow in

height like a human, his affection for him turns into hatred and rejection, and he sells him to a robot circus. After the death of his wife Hoshie, devastated by having lost her son for the second time, he resigns from the Ministry of Science and makes him lose track, but continues to follow the events of his creature from afar.



Hoshie Tenma: Birth name Hoshie Saruta. Daughter and granddaughter of famous roboticists, brilliant university student, she falls in love with Umataro Tenma and marries him, dedicating herself full time to the role of wife and mother of Tobio (as required by

Japanese morality). Initially horrified by the robot created in the image and likeness of her dead son, she later becomes attached to him and comes to love him as much as the real Tobio. When Tenma sells the robot to a circus, she divorces and often goes to circus shows in order to see him. Worn out by the pain of this second loss, she dies of a heart attack.



Miss Honda: Woman of about 35, robotics researcher at the Ministry of Science and Technology. Personal assistant of Umataro Tenma, she is one of his clos-

est collaborators and confidants. She opposes Tenma's decision to repudiate the robot he created in the image of his dead son.



Hiroshi Ochanomizu: Graduated in Physics and Robotics Engineering at the University of Nerima together with his friend Umataro Tenma, he takes his place as general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology. During a trip to America, he witnesses a circus show, and discovers the existence of a robot boy with the likeness of Tobio, the son of Tenma who died in a car accident; so, he decides to redeem him and takes with

him to Japan, where in the meantime he has obtained the approval of a law that recognizes a series of rights to robots. He takes a role as a mentor to Atom, enrolling him in school, creating for him a father, mother and younger sister, and instilling in him his sense of justice and the desire to work towards building a peaceful coexistence between humans and robots.



Yuko Kisaragi: Woman of about 25, Hiroshi Ochanomizu's personal assistant at the Ministry of Science and Technology. Loyal to her boss, hard worker, serious and strict, and that's all about her.



Ethanol and Rin Tetsuwan: Robots created by Hiroshi Ochanomizu to be the father and mother of Atom.



Uran Tetsuwan: Female robot created by Hiroshi Ochanomizu as Atom's younger sister. She has a power of 50,000 horsepower. Lively, outspoken and independent, she is very attached to her brother, but cannot bear to be treated by him like a child. She often gets into trouble, which Atom gets her out of, but sometimes she provides unexpected help.



Earl of Walpurgis: Misanthropic scientist living in a castle in Bavaria. He conceives the Omega Factor (a microchip capable of making robots extremely intelligent and evil) and tries in vain to persuade Umataro Tenma to install it on a robot of his own design; after the creation of Atom, he uses his blueprint - copied from Skunk Kusai - to build Atlas in order to use him to conquer the world. Enraged with his robot-maid Livian for accidentally destroying a statue, he dismantles her, causing Atlas to rebel, forcing him to flee by car and plunging him into a ravine, but he survives. Later, he takes Livian hostage to force Atlas to steal a new experimental weapon for him, and turns the robot woman back

into his maid. After Livian manages to escape, he is killed by Atlas with a beam that incinerates him along with his castle.



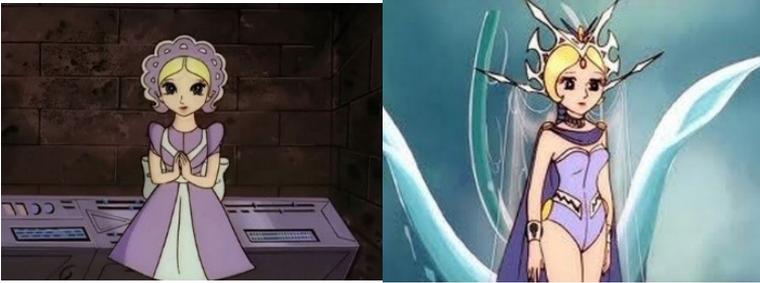
Skunk Kusai: A criminal, purely and simply. Initially servant of the Earl of Walpurgis, he proposes to Umataro Tenma on behalf of this one to install the Omega Factor (a microchip conceived by the earl capable of making robots extremely intelligent and evil) on a robot of his own design, obtaining a refusal; after the creation of Atom, he copies his project and gives it to the earl, who uses it to build Atlas, of which Skunk becomes

the master of the criminal art. After Atlas rebels and apparently kills his creator, he flees to Metro City, where he engages in all kinds of crimes with only one purpose: to get rich. For this reason, he frequently clashes with Atom.



Atlas: Robot built by the Earl of Walpurgis, based on the Atom project copied on his behalf by Skunk Kusakai, in order to allow him to conquer the world. He initially looks like a 13-year-old boy with red skin and blonde hair. He is entrusted to the "care" of Skunk Kusakai, who mistreats him to teach him the rudiments of the criminal art. He rebels against his creator when he dis-

mantles Livian, the robot-maid who had shown him affection, and after apparently killing the earl, he uses the equipment in his castle to rebuild Livian and remodel himself, giving himself a massive body 2.5 meters tall. In addition to having all the powers of Atom, he is able to hypnotize him from a distance, being the two practically brothers. He builds a huge spaceship, the Crystal Castle, in which he lives with Livian. Being equipped with the Omega Factor (a microchip conceived by the Earl of Walpurgis, which makes robots extremely intelligent and evil) he continuously hatches plans to destroy mankind and become the ruler of the Universe; this leads him to collide many times with Atom, whom he tries in vain to bring to his side. After discovering that he is the brother of Atom, while the Earth is attacked by an alien race, he launches his Crystal Castle against the invaders' mothership, producing in the collision a black hole that swallows him and Livian along with the alien ships before dissolving.



Livian: Female robot built by the Earl of Walpurgis to be his maid. She grows fond of Atlas, who rebels against his creator for her. She lives in the Crystal Castle with Atlas, whom she attempts to dissuade from his evil plans; sometimes she secretly helps Atom by revealing Atlas' plans. When the Crystal Castle collides with the mothership of an alien race that has attacked Earth and briefly produces a black hole, Livian is swallowed inside it along with Atlas.



Shunsuke Ban: Former private detective known as "Nothing escapes my quick eye", now a teacher, nicknamed "Master Mustache" by his students. Good friend of Hiroshi Ochanomizu, and like him a supporter of the civil rights of robots, he graciously welcomes Atom to his class. Turbulent, opinionated and all too frank, he tends to overreact, jump to conclusions very easily and express himself harshly. A good citizen lover of justice, he does not hesitate to intervene by shaking his fists against those who create chaos. His hobbies are judo and flower arrangements. In his spare time, he still dedicates

himself to the activity of private investigator, collaborating with Atom and with the police; he has a long-standing feud with Skunk Kusai, who often laughs at him over the phone.



Kenichi Shikishima: One of Atom's human classmates, one of the first to befriend him with Tamao and Midori. He is a very intelligent, outgoing, prudent student very devoted to his friends. He is elected class leader thanks to the decisive vote of Atom.



Tamao Ōme: One of Atom's human classmates, one of the first to befriend him with Kenichi and Midori. Very intelligent and studious, he wears large glasses; his drawing is partially modeled on Osamu Tezuka's childlike appearance. He often berates Shibugaki (the bully of the class) with salacious comments, then seeking Atom's protection when the latter resorts to violence.



Midori Hayashi: Atom's human classmate, she's the first to befriend him. Outgoing and friendly, she wears her hair in two pompoms on the sides of her head, and usually wears a green dress (in Japanese “midori” means “green”).



Shibugaki: Atom's classmate, son of an art collector businessman. Tall, sturdy, rough and violent, he often bullies his weaker comrades. He despises robots, especially Atom since he did not vote for him during the elections of the class leader and is opposed to his arrogance.



Inspector Tawashi: Metro City police detective. Unfriendly and grumpy, old-fashioned law-and-order man, he strongly hates robots, and is extremely quick to blame some crazed robot for major disasters, including Atom if he is nearby, often clashing with Hiroshi Ochanomizu over this point.



Nakamura: Metro City Police Chief, superior of Inspector Tawashi; unlike him, he is an ally of Atom.



Black Jack: Real name Kuro Hazama. Badly injured by a mine explosion at the age of 8, he is saved with a series of surgeries by a skilled doctor, and decides to follow in his footsteps. He calls himself Black Jack because "Kuro" in Japanese means "black". An unlicensed surgeon by choice, he performs very delicate interventions on people from all walks of life, but on the condition of being paid exorbitant rates (which he then secretly donates to charity), which has brought him a very bad reputation. He has an assistant named Pinoko.



Pinoko: 18-year-old woman with the appearance of a 5-year-old girl. Called to remove a teratoma (germ cell tumor) from a teenager's abdomen, Dr. Black Jack discovers the almost complete body of a twin sister inside of the girl, fusing with her in the womb and growing like a parasite; so, he decides to integrate the missing parts of her body with prostheses and bring her to a normal life, but when the family meets her, they reject her in horror. Pinoko thus becomes Black Jack's assistant, which she considers himself the *de facto* wife of, despite he treating her like a daughter. She gets very angry when

they mistake her for a baby, even though she looks just like one.



Niki: Female robot built by Dr. Rindolph (military scientist of the republic of Grotia) on the basis of a project that Umataro Tenma had worked on before creating Atom: a robot with human thoughts and feelings, but with a neutron bomb inside that can be activated at distance. She looks like a 13-year-old girl, she is 143 centimeters tall and weighs 40 kilograms, she has blonde hair,

along with brown eyes like Atom; she wears a red headband with small pearls and a red gem in the center, and her normal outfit is a long-sleeved red dress with a white apron, and red slippers.

Atom meets her during her secret mission to recover the stolen project; initially fearful of him, she then helps him to enter the base of which Rindolph is the commander, passing him under the nose of the guards at the entrance (thanks to the fact that she lives in that base and is well known by all). Once inside, she confides to Atom that she feels alone, because in that place no robot is like her, and asks him to become her friend. When Atom is trapped in a rocket and sent to the Sun to incinerate, she remains attached to the hull and frees him, despite Dr. Rindolph having in the meantime activated the bomb's detonator; returned to base with Atom, she is dismantled piece by piece by the scientist (who had previously burned the project) to prevent the explosion, much to Atom's pain who declares his love for her. In the end, the only part of her body that remains intact are her legs,

which Atom takes with him to Japan and gets implanted in place of his own to always carry her memory with him.

SUMMARY OF EPISODE “ASTRO’S FIRST LOVE”

- Who is there? Oh, a stranger...



- I'm scared... Better to escape...



XXXVI

- I will not allow she to sound the alarm!



- Ah!



- Leave me, please!
- I'm sorry, but I can't let you go!



- But... you are a robot!
- Yes, but you're also a robot, aren't you?
- No... What are you saying? I'm not a robot...



XXXVIII

- Oh, I understood it from the strength which you hold my arms with... Now you might as well tell me what you came here to do



- No, wait a minute: I want you to answer a few questions first! Are you from the place? Do you know the military base that is nearby?
- Of course I know it
- Oh, good... I would like to get in there, but not from the main entrance... would you help me?

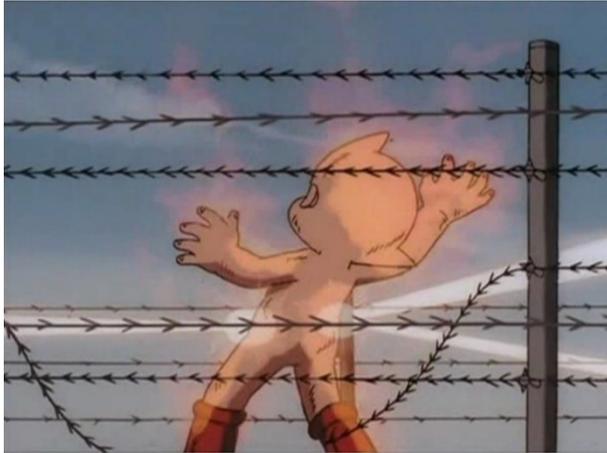


XL

- You can try to enter from here, but if you touch the barbed wire the alarm will go off and the laser cannons will come into action...
- I have to try the same... Ah! There is high tension, my clothes caught fire!



- And now you also put the laser cannons ... they are too strong for me!



- I have to retire! The only way out is underground...



XLII

- Oh, thank goodness! I was afraid you were dead...
- We must escape quickly, before the guards arrive!
Come on!



- Dear me... I will never be able to enter that fort...



- Well, I told you... But if you care so much, I can get you in there...



- And how?
- Simple: we will pass by the main gate



XLIV

- Whaaat? But there are the guards...
- Leave it to me!



- Who is there? Ah, it's you, Niki...
- Yes, I'm coming back
- Wait! What is that robot that you drag behind you?

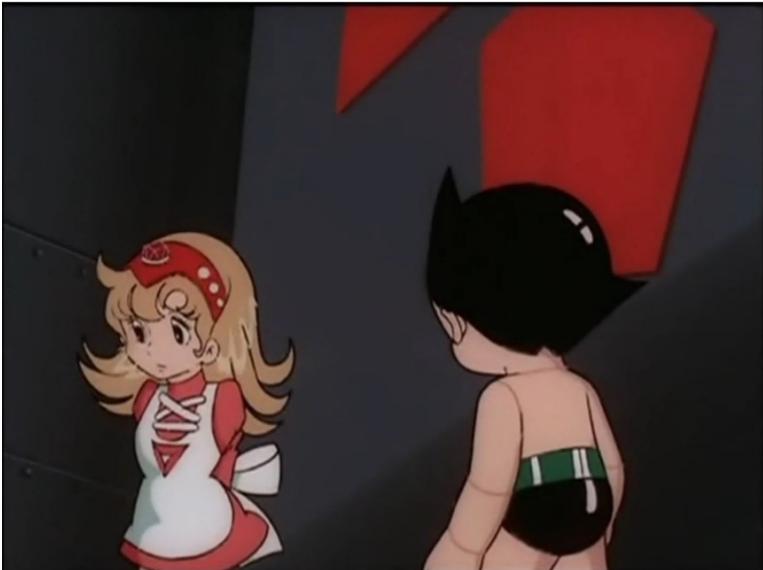


- Here, it's for Dr. Rindolph...
- Yes, for his research... Okay, go ahead

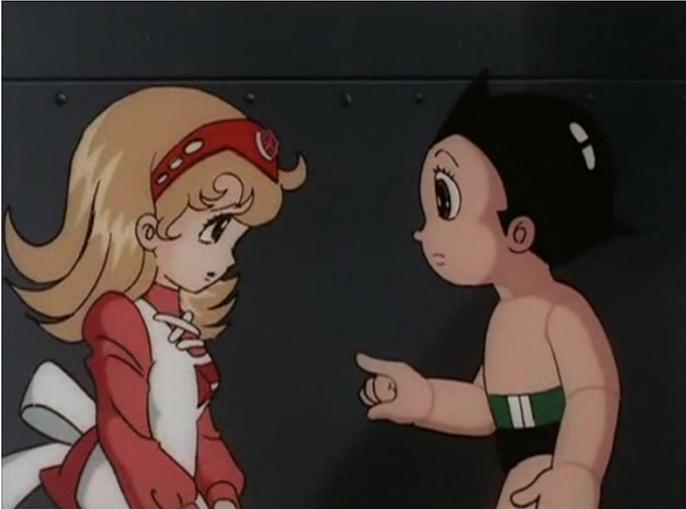


XLVI

- You're really weird... Why didn't you tell me right away that you live in here?
- Sorry, but why do you blame me? You wanted to get in here and I let you in...
- You're right, sorry... Well, now I have to go. Farewell!



- Wait, wait! I have to ask you a favor!
- A favor? Tell me
- Here, I have no friends here, and I feel very lonely...
- I don't understand... in this base there are many humans and many robots...
- Yes, but unfortunately the robots of this base are devoid of their own will, and cannot speak... I would love a robot friend...
- But if you have these feelings, you have to be a very sophisticated robot, don't you?

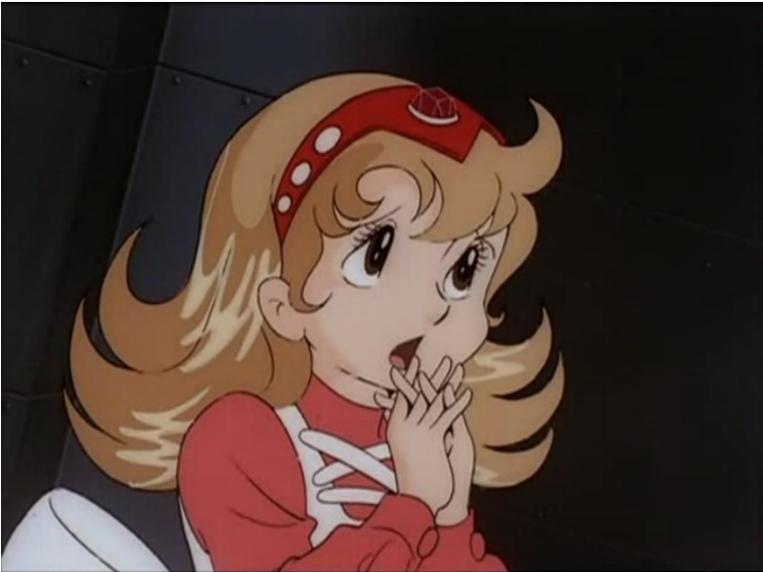


XLVIII

- Would you like to be my friend? Please...
- Of course... My name is Astroboy
- I am Niki, and I was created by Dr. Rindolph, the commander of this base

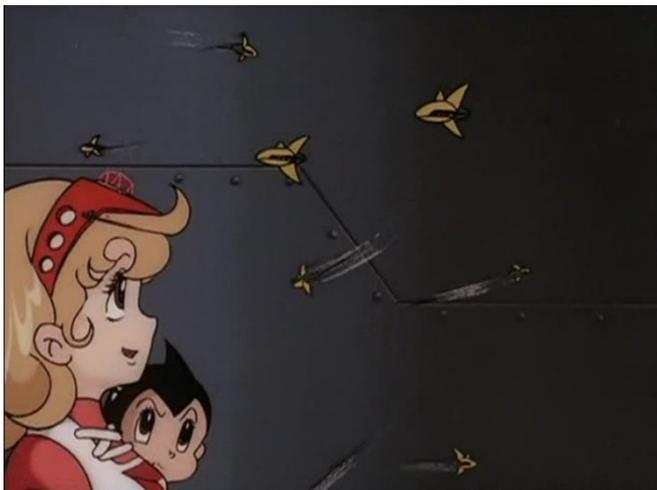
(Guardian robots approach)

- Gasp! Let's hide!



(The guardian robots send flying mini-drones to patrol the area; Astroboy freezes like stone)

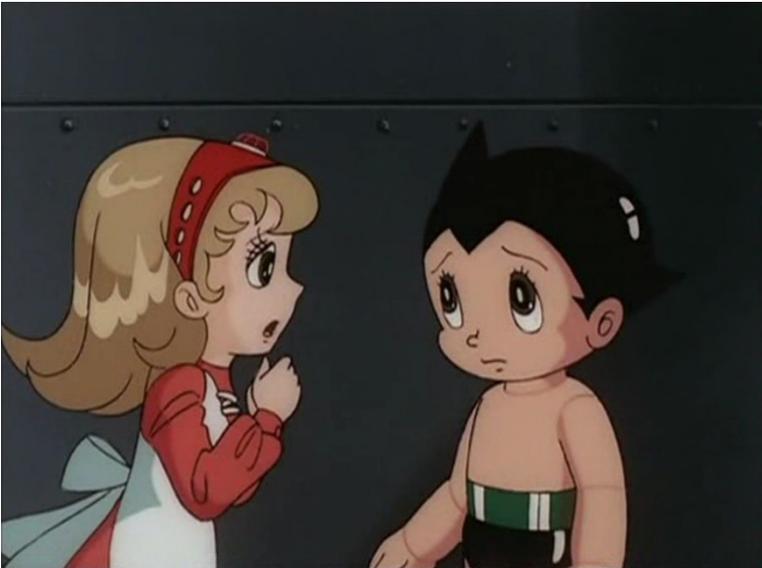
- Hey, it's me, Niki!



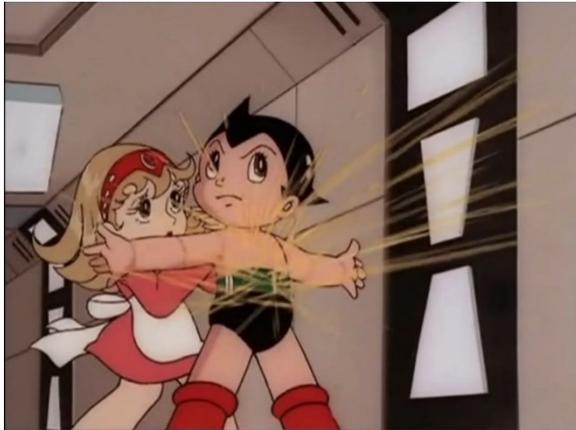
L

(The guardian robots calm down and move away)

- You saw them? I would never be able to make friends with those monsters!
- I have to complete my mission before they find me!
- All right, I'll help you...
- But if Dr. Rindolph finds out that you have helped an enemy of his country, he will punish you
- I don't care, I don't want to leave you!
- All right, come on...



- An automatic machine gun... Shelter behind me, Niki!



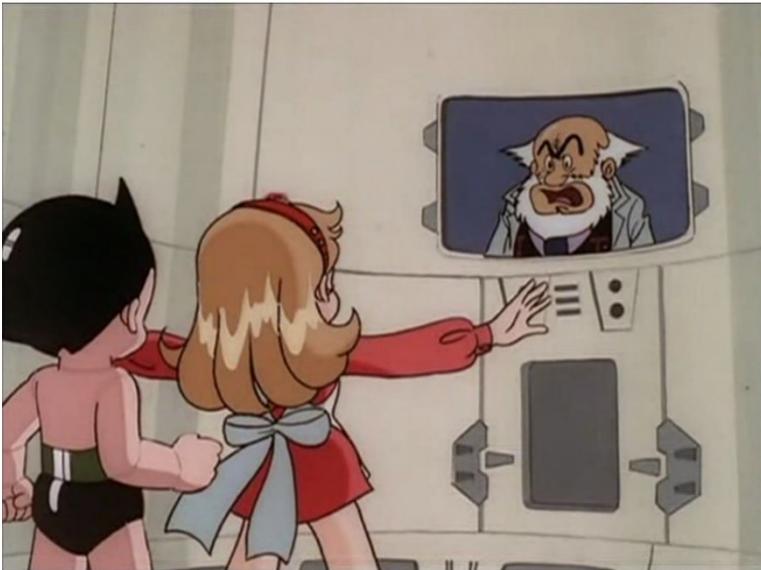
- Ugh... this security door is too heavy...
- The opening command is at the bottom of that wall!
- With my laser beam, I should be able to destroy it...

It's done! You saved me!



LII

- The flight of stairs has turned into a slide... Where did we end up?
- I marvel at you, Niki: you are helping an enemy. I'll deal with you later: now get out of there, because I have to destroy that spy!
- No, Dr. Rindolph! Please don't hurt him! I don't want to!



- Don't say nonsense! Astroboy, I know you, I know why you are here: you have come to take back the diagram of the robot carrying a neutron bomb inside... but you arrive late, because I have already built that robot. It's in front of you, it's Niki!



- Niki... it is true that you...
- Sorry, Astroboy...
- Now get out of there, Niki! Get out now!



- Little Astroboy, to spies like you I reserve a special death: this rocket will take you to the Sun, whose heat will melt you ... and you will not be able to get out of it, because the inside is covered with a magnetic barrier that even you will not be able to pierce. Ha ha ha ha!

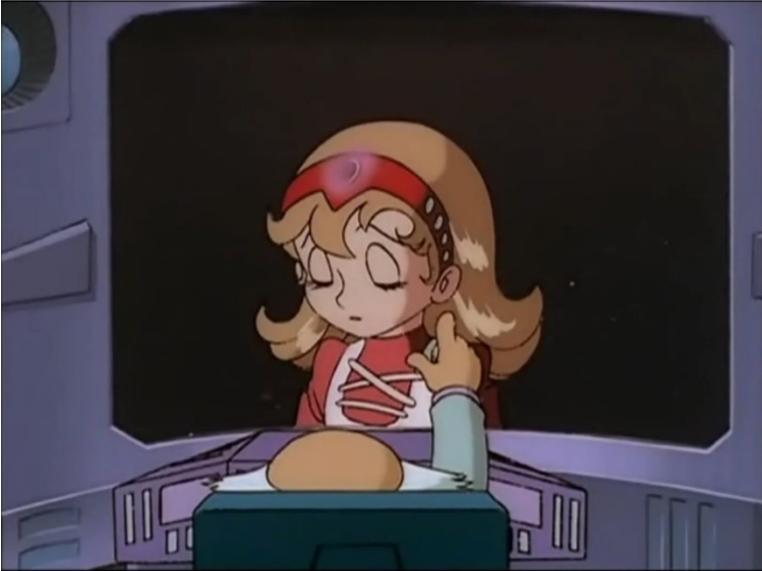


- It's true, I can't... but... this looks like Morse code... N-I-K-I... it's Niki! She remained attached to the hull of the rocket!



LVI

- Niki, traitor, you want to free Astroboy! With that project I can build hundreds of robots like you; I don't need you anymore! So I will activate the detonator of the neutron bomb that is inside your body. In an hour you will explode with him!



- If I tear this electrical cable, the magnetic barrier should turn off...
- The barrier no longer exists! Hurray, I'm free!



LVIII

- Thank you, Niki: I owe you my life
- We have to leave, Astroboy: the rocket will explode shortly!
- You're right. Hold on tight!



- That damn Astroboy is coming back here... Sound the alarm! Shoot them!



- Help me, Astroboy! I'm falling!
- Don't be afraid, Niki, I'll save you!



- Now I will silence those cannons!



LX

- Dr. Rindolph, give me that project now!
- Here... I don't need it anymore!
- He destroyed it!



- I've built so many robots like Niki... Is she the one you want? Take her away with you!
- Yes, but first I will destroy them all!
- Aaah! Help, someone help me!



- Let's go away, Niki!
- No, Astroboy, I can't come with you! Dr. Rindolph has activated the detonator of the neutron bomb that is inside me... it will explode in thirty minutes, and no one can prevent it! For me there is no hope, but you can still save yourself!

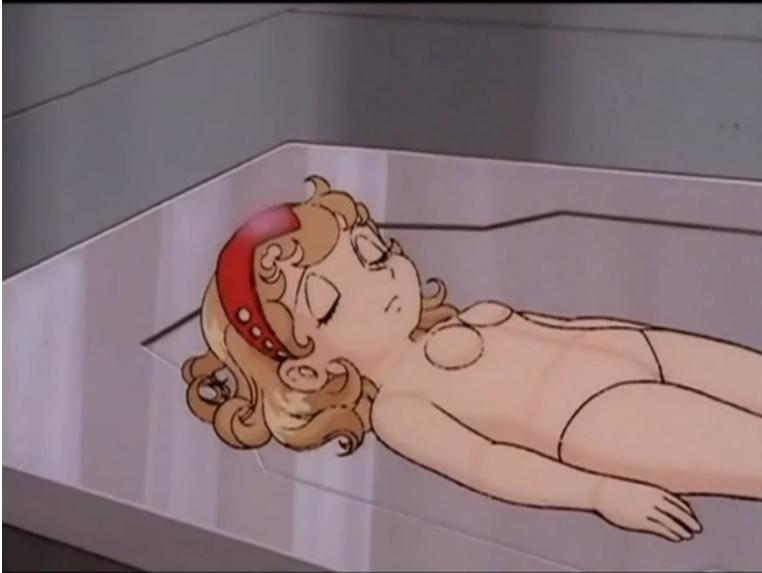


LXII

- Dr. Rindolph, I will help you if you deactivate the bomb detonator!
- It's impossible... Niki's whole body is a neutron bomb! The only way to stop the countdown is to disassemble her piece by piece... but then I will not be able to rebuild her, because I destroyed the project with my own hands!

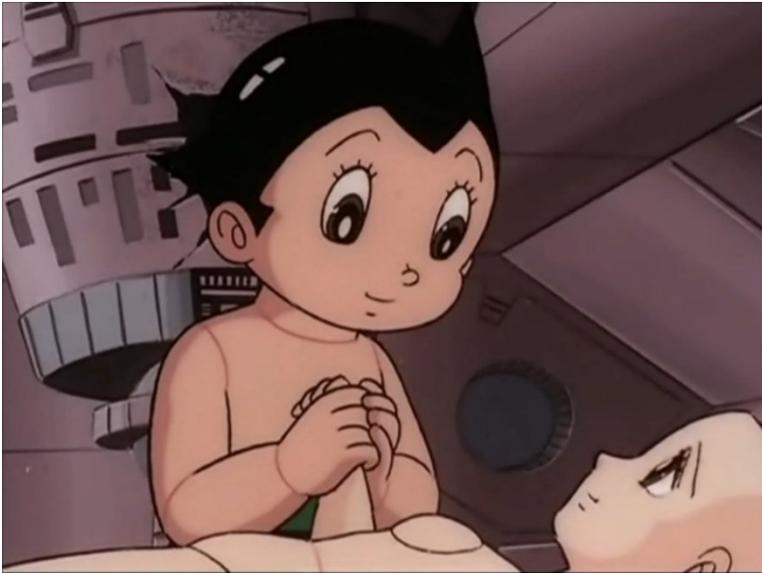


- I don't want people to die because of me... Dr. Rindolph, do what you have to do!
- Okay, Niki... lie down on that operating table



LXIV

- You won't have time to escape anymore, Astroboy... you'll die too... why?
- Why? I don't know either... I just know I don't want to leave you... I think humans call this "love"... I love you, Niki
- I love you too, Astroboy, I will love you forever...



- ...



- Ooh, it's only a minute left...



- ...



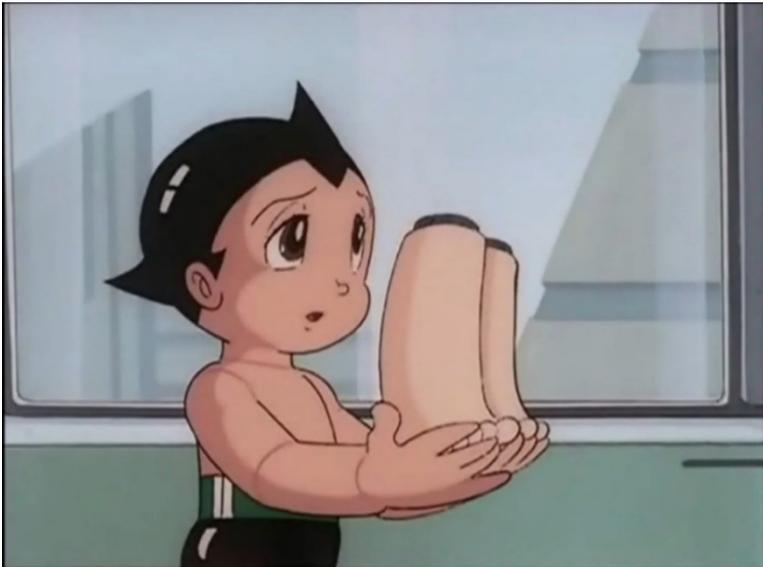
- There are two seconds left... One... Uff, I made it!





LXVIII

- You did a great job, Astroboy... and for this you deserve a prize: ask me everything you want!
- Dr. Ochanomizu... I would like him to mount Niki's legs on my body, instead of mine... so at least a part of her will stay with me forever...



CHAPTER I: FAREWELL OR GOODBYE?

Niki ... From the first moment he saw her, she had seemed to him the most beautiful creature in the universe ... her wheat-colored hair, her eyes that scrutinized him with fear as he got up from the ground after throwing himself off the train that it was approaching the border with the republic of Grotia ... "I am so alone in this base" she whispered to him in her persuasive voice, "no other robot is like me... do you want to be my friend? My name is Niki." Ah, what an agony it had been to discover that she was the robot built according to the project he had been commissioned to recover: a robot containing a neutron bomb inside! And when Dr. Rindolph had activated the detonator, there had been no choice but to dismantle her piece by piece, and with no more possibility of rebuilding, because her construction scheme was now burned ... "Don't leave me, Niki!" he

begged, shaking her hand. "I love you, Atom," she replied. "I love you too, I will always love you" ... Niki, Niki ...

"Hey, brother, wake up!" Atom opened his eyes and saw Uran, his younger sister, who was shaking him staring with a worried and curious air at the same time. "Good morning, Uran ... What time is it?" he asked.

"Half past nine," she said, opening the window; then she looked under the bed, went to the wardrobe, opened it and searched inside. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Your girlfriend," replied the robot girl, rummaging in a trunk.

"Whaat? I don't have a *girlfriend*, least at all hidden in the closet!" Atom exclaimed.

"You can sell your lies to mom and dad, but not to me," replied the sister planting herself in front of him with her hands on her hips. "I have been hearing you talking at night for two weeks, 'I love you, Atom', 'I

love you too, Niki ' ... Why don't you introduce her to us?" she asked mischievously.

"You are fantasizing as usual," he snapped launching his pillow on her. "Leave me alone now, I have to get dressed!"

"Okay, okay," Uran chirped, hopping away.

Atom sat on his bed for a few more minutes, brooding; how could his sister have heard Niki's voice? She really had a vivid imagination ... But it was true that he had dreamed of her: until two weeks before, the night was for him a period of unconscious rest, while now his sleep was shaken by visions in which she spoke to him, and called him ...

These are just fantasies, he told himself: Niki was dead, and he would never caress her hands again, they would never look eye to eye ... Maybe it would be better for him to forget her ... but the mere thought of losing the memory of the few hours spent together made him suffer even more. What could he do, anyway?

Enough of these gloomy thoughts, he decided; he took off his pajamas, pulled a t-shirt and a pair of shorts out of a drawer and put them on (unlike humans, robots didn't feel cold or hot, and they could choose clothes more freely), then went down into the living room. "It's late," his mother told him with loving sternness. "You must follow a healthy and regular lifestyle, otherwise in ten days you will be too tired to start school again"

"Okay, Mom," the robot boy promised.

"This year you will go to seventh grade" his father reflected, interrupting his reading of the newspaper. "Ah, I forgot: Dr. Ochanomizu called, he wants you to go to the Ministry of Science and Technology"

Atom winced; ever since he had returned from his secret mission the world had seemed quite peaceful. "Did something serious happen?" he asked the parent.

"No, nothing at all, " he reassured him. "There is a person who wants to meet you"

As soon as he saw him from behind, sitting on an armchair, he recognized him immediately: he was Umataro Tenma, his creator ... and also the one who had abandoned him giving him to the owner of a circus, until Doctor Ochanomizu had redeemed him from his condition of slavery by taking him under his own protection. For an instant mixed feelings struggled in his mechanical heart, then a single word came out of his mouth: "Father"

"Tobio, my son" murmured the man embracing him.

"I'm not Tobio," replied the little robot boy on the defensive, "and I've never been. Now my name is Atom"

"Okay ... Atom," he replied darkly, then cracked a smile. "Ochanomizu told me about you ... how are you?"

"I can't complain," Atom replied. "Dr. Ochanomizu gave me a father, a mother and a little sister, and he enrolled me in school; he takes great care of me ... but why are you here?"

"He came to talk to me about his project ... something that interests you too," Dr. Ochanomizu explained. "Please, you speak," he said to the other. Tenma took a USB pendrive out of his jacket pocket and plugged it into a socket on the monitor on the desk.

"Before creating Tob... Atom" he began, "I worked on another scheme: a robot with intelligence and heart similar to human ones, but with a neutron bomb inside. After Tobio's death I was angry with the whole world... but now I'm here to make up for it; that's why I pulled out of my private archive, and I decided to get back hand". He pushed a button, and the building plans Atom knew well appeared on the holographic screen. "If you put the Ministry's means at my disposal," he said to

his old friend, "I will radically modify the project: instead of the bomb I will insert diagnostic tools and a laser scalpel, and I will create a medical robot"

"A medical robot?" Ochanomizu exclaimed. "But, Umataro, there are already many robots who carry out the profession of doctors and nurses!"

"Mine will be more perfected than those that exist today ... it will be a surgeon robot, the best surgeon in the world!" Tenma replied, getting excited. "You know that I am not satisfied with half measures... I have made Atom a masterpiece, and I will do the same with this new robot. You will help me?" he asked hopefully.

"For me it's fine", the other conceded "but on one condition: you will have to realize it as ..."

"No!" Atom exclaimed, jumping up and clenching his fists. "Don't ask him!"

"But ... Atom" said the elderly scientist in pain. "I just wanted to ask him to build the new robot with the likeness of Niki ... so ..."

"But don't you understand, doctor?" answered the astral boy. "Even if you built a robot identical to Niki down to the smallest detail, she would have no memory of me, of the moments spent together, and for me to see her would be an even greater pain!" and ran away, while Doctor Tenma, stunned, asked Ochanomizu: "But who is *Niki*?"

After leaving the Ministry building, Atom stopped after a hundred meters, and for the first time he doubted the goodness of his mentor: did he really think he could settle for a copy? *Humans*, he said, *consider robots as being all the same, as machines made in series ...* No, no copy could ever give him his Niki. All what remained for himself were the sweet memories of a past lost forever ... And then, Astro Boy set the automatic navigation function, closed his eyes and immersed himself in the

chaotic traffic of Metro City, unconsciously avoiding cars and passers and abandoning to memories, walking aimlessly for hours and hours ...

"Help! Somebody help me!" That faint whisper woke him up; he looked around, and found he was next to an old disused warehouse in a long-abandoned industrial area. He adjusted his superhearing by amplifying it a thousand times, and was sure of it: there was someone in danger! He slipped in, walked down a balcony, and saw below a little girl tied like a salami to a pillar, and four men drinking and smoking. "Free me now, you ugly bad guys!" she screamed with the breath in her throat.

"Shut up, brat!" one of the thugs barked. "How long will we have to endure her, boss?" another asked to his chief.

"Until her daddy has paid the ransom," he said. "In the meantime, though, you can cut off her finger ... so she'll have a good reason to scream"

"Hey, guys, are you serious? I'm afraid!" the little girl exclaimed as her carrot-colored hair stood on end.

"Don't touch her!" Atom shouted, throwing on them and putting them to a carpet one after another punching and kicking. The ringleader, who was only grazed, grabbed an electric rifle - one of the latest anti-robotic arms - and pulled the trigger: three long black wires spewed from the barrel wrapping the body of the little robot boy and imparting an alternating current to one hundred thousand volts.

"Aaaahhhh!" Atom yelled as the darkness closed on him, and from that darkness emerged the image of Niki calling him: "I love you, Atom" she whispered holding out her arms. "Come with me, Atom ... come with me ..."

No! He exclaimed. If he gave up, what would become of that little girl? Niki was dead, was dead forever; instead, she was alive, and she needed help. *As long as the world needs Astro Boy*, he told himself, *I'll keep fighting!* He tore off the wires, reached the criminal and spread him out with a hook to his chin; then he turned to the hostage and saw that her eyes were shining

and her lips quivering. "You are safe" he tried to reassure her as he untied. "Please don't start crying right now"

The little girl's expression hardened suddenly. "I never cry, do you understand? Never!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"So much the better," he replied. "Now I'll take you home," he said, taking her in his arms; then he remembered that, since he had had installed Niki's legs in place of his own - the only part of her body remained whole – he could no longer use the atomic rockets to fly. "Sorry," he said putting her back on the ground, "but we need pick us up from someone"

"Take them away," Inspector Tawashi ordered his agents, then turned to Atom. "How the hell did you know the car king's daughter had been kidnapped? We have silenced the media so that they do not interfere in

the investigation ... but yeah, you always know everything! " he muttered. "By the way: Dr. Ochanomizu asked me to look for you, and to take you to the Ministry as soon as I found you ... so get in now," he said as he opened the door of his car.

"But ... soon the anti-robot curfew will start ... I have to go home ..." he murmured.

"This time I'll turn a blind eye," replied the policeman. "Now let's go, we have already lost too much time"

In the Chief Director's office, Ochanomizu and Tenma were waiting for him. "Atom, there is something you absolutely must know," the first informed him.

"Still with your new robot project? I already told you I don't care," Atom warned them.

"There's one thing you don't know," Dr. Tenma interjected. "The robot I designed before you had a distributed artificial intelligence system"

"Distributed ... and what does that mean?" asked the little robot boy, looking bored.

"The robots made up to now" Dr. Ochanomizu explained "have an artificial intelligence centralized, that is enclosed in a computer placed in one single part of the body: the head, or, as in your case, in the chest. Tenma, on the other hand, had experimented with a completely different system "

"In my project" continued the other "intelligence, memory and feelings are distributed in a large number of nanochips placed in every part of the body. In this way, even if the head or chest were damaged, the robot would not lose consciousness "

"In every part of the body ... you mean that ..." Atom murmured looking down at his legs.

"That's right," the man confirmed. "In the legs of that robot, which have been part of you for two weeks, her memories and her personality are still preserved. If you agree, we could use them as the first element to start from ... so the new specimen would be equal to the previous 100% "

“If I agree? Of course, I agree!” Astro Boy exclaimed doing somersaults. “Niki will come back to life! Hurray! Yuppie!”

CHAPTER II: THE RESURRECTION OF NIKI

"Are you going to Doctor Ochanomizu? Also, today???" Uran asked incredulously while his brother was tying his tie. "And you go there ... dressed like that?" she exclaimed, looking him up and down.

"Sure," replied Atom smoothing a crease of his pants with his right hand. "Today is a special day"

"A new concept robot will see the light of day today," Ms. Rin explained. "It is logical that your brother wants to attend the event"

"Maybe ... but it doesn't convince me," muttered the robot girl, tapping her foot nervously. "I've never seen him so dressed up ... he looks like he's going on a date, not turning on a new robot"

"Please, son, come back before curfew," the father warned him.

"All right. Good day, mom, dad, Uran" he greeted them as he left the house. *He didn't even react to my digs,* Uran thought. *No, he's definitely not my usual brother.*

Atom had a good reason to be over the moon: After Dr. Ochanomizu removed Niki's legs from his body, he and Tenma had been working day and night for a week, and finally the big day had arrived. "She will be perfect, just perfect, like all my creations" Dr. Tenma began, inebriated by his own words. "She will have two latest generation pulsed light laser scalpels installed in her hands, a device to perform ultrasound scans instantly and a heart rate monitor," he explained to those present.

"What will her physical strength be?" asked the Minister.

"One hundred horsepower" replied the scientist.

"Only?!? If I remember correctly, Atom has a power of one hundred thousand horsepower ... "

"You can't put everything and the opposite of everything in the same body," explained Dr.

Ochanomizu. " We have chosen to sacrifice power to efficiency ... and after all, a doctor does not need to be very strong"

"This is true," the politician admitted, "but will she at least be polyglot?"

"Sure," the two said in unison; then Tenma went on: "She will be able to speak all languages like Atom, and we have also enhanced the language circuits to make her able to argue with patients ... she will have a good gab, you'll see!" he exclaimed satisfied.

"Doctor Ochanomizu, we have finished the last checks" intervened Yuko Kisaragi, his assistant. "We can start when you want"

"Well ... then everyone to their seats!" he ordered. From the window, Atom could see the technicians connecting long cables to the inanimate body of his Niki, reassembled as he remembered her; control lights went on and off, then Dr. Ochanomizu pointed to a lever to his colleague and friend. "To you the honor," he said.

"Thank you, Hiroshi." Tenma lowered the lever, and the room below lit up with glow; Niki opened her eyes, blinked twice, raised herself on her elbows, then got off the table and took a few steps forward.

"She is alive! Niki has come back to life! Thanks, Dr. Ochanomizu, and thanks to you too... Dad! "Atom was no longer in his skin with joy. "Can I go to her?"

"A little calm, boy!" Ochanomizu said amused. "At least wait for her to wear a dress!"

"A dress? Ah, yes!" he murmured embarrassed.

A quarter of an hour later Tenma introduced them to her new creature. "Ladies and gentlemen, here is the ASX-20001 model, Niki!" The robot girl, wearing the same red headband, the same long-sleeved red dress, white apron and red slippers she wore the first time they met, curtsied and said solemnly: "Nice to meet you," then flashed a splendid smile.

"Ooohhhh," all those present exclaimed in chorus. "How cute she is!" said many women (and some

men). "Doctor Tenma, you are truly a genius!" the female doctor Honda said; Dr. Kisaragi glared at her and she murmured "I mean ..."

"Don't worry," Ochanomizu reassured her. "Umataro and I have always been in friendly competition since university ... but he has always been one step ahead of me, and once again he hasn't proven wrong"

Due to his short stature, Atom took a while to make his way through all those people; when he finally reached the front row he approached her, smiled and simply said: "Welcome back, Niki." Niki saw him, fixed her charming brown eyes on him, and suddenly her face became a mask of pure terror; with a shove she pushed him away from herself and hid behind Dr. Tenma's legs shouting: "Dad, please, send him away! Send him away!"

Atom felt the world collapse on him. "Niki..." he murmured, "don't you recognize me? It's me ... I'm Atom ... ", but she kept screaming, "Dad, send him away! "

"If you want me to send him away" Tenma asked bewildered "at least tell me why"

"Because he wants me dead," Niki said starting to cry.

The man leaned over her and hugged her tenderly. "Come with me," he said, and the two left the room to the amazement of those present.

Three hours later Tenma, Atom and Ochanomizu found themselves together again in the latter's studio. "How are you?" he asked.

"He's sleeping now," Tenma replied. "I'm sorry, Atom, but at least for now she absolutely doesn't want to see you"

"But how is it possible?" asked the robot boy. "I would never hurt her!"

"She didn't say you want to hurt her," he observed. "She said you *want her dead* "

"But what difference does it make?" Atom replied.

"Niki has a more refined linguistic circuit than yours, and therefore she chooses the words very carefully," the man explained, then placed his hands on Atom's shoulders. "Atom, now you have to tell me everything that has happened to you in the last three weeks; every little detail, however insignificant it may appear to you "

"All right". For forty minutes he exposed every detail of his days, from the nocturnal dreams in which he saw her to the confrontation with the kidnappers of that child. Finally, Dr. Tenma folded his arms, closed his eyes, and was silent for long minutes.

"So?" Doctor Ochanomizu asked fearing he had fallen asleep. Tenma opened her eyes. "I think Niki has suffered a memory block," he said gravely.

"A memory block? That is, amnesia?" exclaimed the other. "But how, why? We had just activated her ... "

"While her legs were attached to Atom's body, their minds somehow hybridized," Tenma explained. "When

Atom was asleep and his brain was inactive, Niki's nanochips took over; this is the reason why you saw her in the dream, and she spoke through your mouth ... in a certain sense, in those moments you were her "

Atom was flabbergasted. "Then Uran was right ... But what does this have to do with ..."

"The hybridization process is always two-way," he interrupted him. "When you were hit by the electric discharge, your mind 'wrote' in Niki's memory what you were thinking at that moment ... and you were thinking that Niki was dead"

"Do you mean that ... I was the one who blocked Niki's memory?" Atom murmured in a trembling voice.

"You did not do it consciously " concluded Tenma disconsolately, "but now that's the way it is ... In the next few days, I will subject her to further tests, but the technology of distributed nanochips is new to me too, and for now I don't know if she will ever recover her memories "

"It's not right! Why did you bring her back to life, if she is no longer the same?" cried the little robot boy, punching the man's chest; for a moment Dr. Ochanomizu feared he would kill him, then realized that Atom still had enough self-control to moderate his superhuman strength. "It's not right! It's not right!" he repeated as tears streamed down his face.

CHAPTER III: NEW FRIENDSHIPS

At 8 o'clock on March 21 2235, punctual as clockwork, the 1,500 students of the Fukuyan Institute gathered in the main hall to sing the Kimigayo, the Japanese national anthem, and to celebrate the beginning of the new school year; after which the students each went to the class indicated to them.

"Atom!" Kenichi Shikishima exclaimed hugging him. "How nice, we will study together again!"

"It's a pleasure for me too, Kenichi" answered Astro Boy looking around. "Are you there too, Tamao? And you, Shibugaki..." he addressed the other two ex-classmates from elementary school.

"Yeah ... apparently I'll have to put up with you again this year," said the latter with his usual contemptuous attitude.

"The principal has decided to keep all the previous classes together," Tamao observed. "Too bad he's no longer there ..."

"Good morning everyone, guys!" interrupted a deep voice well known to them. "Ma-Master Mustache, are you here ?!?" they exclaimed in unison.

"Well yes" confirmed the teacher/detective." Shun-suke Ban, named 'Nothing escapes my quick eye', asked to be transferred to the junior high school ranks... so I'll be with you for another three years! But now sit down: I have to introduce you to two new students," and he went to open the door.

When he saw her, Atom was stunned. "N-Niki!" he murmured. She ignored it on purpose, went to the electronic board and wrote her full name on it, then introduced herself: "My name is Niki Tenma. Nice to meet you," she said with a smile, and made a deep bow.

"How beautiful!" many male students exclaimed; "What a strange accent ... will she be for-

eign?" some of their female companions asked themselves, while others commented acidly: "She wear a really picturesque dress..." "Niki is a robot, like our Atom" explained the teacher. "It was created by Dr. Umataro Tenma, who legally adopted her under the law on the civil rights of robots"

"So she's a robot ... what a disappointment!" was the unanimous response of the male pupils; "But she is very pretty all the same" observed some of them; "It seemed to me she was too perfect ..." the female students murmured instead. *So, Doctor decided to adopt her, Atom thought. Maybe he wants to amend himself for abandoning me ... Anyway, I think he will be a good father to Niki; in fact, I'm sure,* he told himself, and felt relieved.

"There are many free places, Niki; where do you want to sit? Look, there's a free seat right next to Atom..." Shunsuke Ban observed.

"Thank you, teacher ... but I prefer to sit there" Niki replied pointing to an empty desk next to a girl which

had her hair in high-set pigtails and wore a green dress. "My name is Midori Hayashi ... nice to meet you" she welcomed her.

"Okay ... now I'll introduce you to the second new student" the man said sorry. The newcomer scrutinized those present with her hazel eyes and began to say: "My name is Hikaru Hiyama ..."; then she saw Atom and ran to meet him, hugged him and exclaimed joyfully: "My savior!"

"Y-you here ...?" murmured the little robot boy, very embarrassed. "But look at them ... they look like two lovebirds!" his companions insinuated maliciously. "Do you already know each other?" asked the teacher.

"He saved me from a bunch of criminals who had kidnapped me," she trilled with heart-shaped eyes. "You should have seen him... he was a real hero! And now we find ourselves in the same class... it's just a sign of destiny! Don't you think so too, Atom?"

"I don't know ..." he shielded himself, glancing at Niki, but she showed no sign of interest.

"Come on, now pay attention to me!" said Master Mustache, clapping his hands twice. "First of all, you will have to elect your new class leader ... who is applying?"

"I have already held this position last year" Kenichi stepped forward, "and if you vote for me again, I will continue to defend the weakest students from the bullies"

"Pfui," Shibugaki retorted. "If you vote for me, you can get into my father's playground for free," he offered, puffing up his chest.

"Don't touch this button," Tamao interrupted. "Last year you took us on a roller coaster with you, the mechanism broke down, and if Atom hadn't intervened, now we would all be in the afterlife"

"Mind your business, four-eyed!" he threatened raised his fist.

"Calm down, calm down! You have two candidates before you, then. Vote!" ordered the teacher, then

counted the green and red lights on the blackboard. "Incredible!" he exclaimed, "perfect parity again this time ... Atom, but did you vote?"

"Sure" he said "for Kenichi, like last year"

"I also voted for Kenichi" added Hikaru, "he seems more sympathetic than the other"

"There is a student who has not yet voted ... it's you, Niki" observed the old man. *Oh no!* Atom told himself. *If Niki hates me, she'll give her vote to Shibugaki...* Niki thought about it for a while, then hit the green button.

"Kenichi is the new head of class" proclaimed the teacher. "I knew ... robots are all the same!" muttered Shibugaki.

"Well, now let's start the lesson" Shunsuke Ban interrupted them. "In 2021, while the Great Pandemic was raging, most of the countries of the world decided to create a military-medical Expeditionary Force to ..."

“Why did it take you so long before you decided to vote for Kenichi? Was it such a difficult choice? ” Hiroko asked at the end of the lessons.

"I'll tell you ..." Niki answered as she put books and notebooks in the folder. "The fact that Atom had voted for him earlier didn't work in his favor ... then I thought that, compared to that arrogant bully Shibugaki, Kenichi was the lesser evil"

"Really?" said the other in amazement. "I mean, you and Atom are both robots, so ..."

"Do you think robots are made with a stencil?" she froze her. "We robot are all different from each other, just like you humans. Atom is Atom, Niki is Niki” and left the classroom.

In the corridor Atom met her. "Niki, would you like to come and do your homework at my house?" he asked hopefully.

"My father warned me that we would end up in the same class," replied the robot girl, pulling away. "I decided to accept his decision, because I love him ... but outside of school I don't want to have anything to do with you"

"But Niki ... I didn't do you anything wrong ..." he tried to justify himself, when Hikaru Hiyama approached. "Sorry, did I interrupt an important conversation?" she asked curiously.

"Not at all" replied Niki walking away. "He's all yours"

"Atom ... would you like it if I came to do my homework at your house today?" the girl began without many preambles. " If you like ..." he murmured still in pain.

"Really? Hurray!" she exclaimed throwing her arms around his neck.

"Do you want another cookie, dear?" Atom's mother asked politely.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mom... but I've already eaten four; I have to contain myself, otherwise I will become as fat as a balloon!" said Hikaru, while in a corner of the living Uran stared at her askance.

"Do not make compliments, Hikaru" Mr. Ethanol urged her kindly. "After all, you're only thirteen, it seems too early you go on a diet"

"My mother always says that good habits are learned as a child and are preserved throughout life" she proclaimed virtuously, "so I decided to prepare myself right away, to be ready for the big day"

"The 'big day'? And what would it be?" Ms. Tetsuwan asked.

"The day I, Hikaru Hiyama, will become Atom's wife," she replied.

"W-wow??? Atom's w-wife?" Atom's father and sister cried out in unison. "B-but y-you are

..." "Atom! What did you put into your head?" his mother said in turn.

"I didn't put anything into my head!" Astro Boy tried to explain by spreading his arms. "You tell it, Hikaru ..." he pleaded.

"Don't blame him, please," the girl interjected. "Atom doesn't know anything about it, because I hadn't told him yet... He, I already told you, saved my life; and when I found him at school, I realized that fate wants us to be together forever ... I do not pretend you to like me right now, but I'm sure knowing each other better, you will judge me worthy to marry your son," she concluded bowing. "Give me a chance, Mr. Dad, Mrs. Mom ..."

"Well, it will take at least five years before you are of marriage age," Ms. Tetsuwan would consider pragmatic. "You have plenty of time to reconsider"

CHAPTER IV: DOUBLE DATE

Two months had passed since the beginning of the school year, and as always happens in such contexts, the first hierarchies were beginning to take shape. "Your assignment is perfect, Niki: you deserve full marks. And you people, take an example!" Master Mustache barked at the human pupils.

"Niki is very good at studying," Tamao observed. "She is even better than me ... and besides she is very nice to be a robot"

"You guys are naive," Kumiko said sarcastically. "You let yourself be duped by her foreign accent and her peasant dress, and you don't realize that she is haughty, unpleasant and without a shred of a friend"

"Don't talk about her like that!" Kenichi intervened. "You don't know her, so you can't judge her!"

"Why, do you know her well, instead?" she retorted. "It's useless, you males only look at the external beauty ..." she concluded resignedly, walking away.

Atom paid no attention to that scuffle; his thoughts were entirely focused on one question, always the same: how to get Niki's memory back? How to unblock her mind, and make her remember she had saved him when the missile he was locked in was launched into space, to incinerate in the sun? How could he persuade her that he could never hurt her because he loved her? Dr. Tenma had subjected her to many thorough examinations, but achieving nothing; and in the meantime, she did not even allow him to come near, such was her fear and distrust ...

After school, as usual, Niki walked through the park that separated the Fukuyan Institute from Tenma home, when she saw on her way a girl by the apparent age of 17 who wore the high school uniform. "Stop, Niki Tenma! Don't go any further! " she apostrophized her.

"Do we know each other, senpai?" Niki said politely, using the title with which the young students addressed their older classmates.

"I'm Chihiro Ozawa, president of the Anti-robot Student League," the mysterious figure introduced herself.

"The Anti-robot Student League?" Niki repeated in amazement. Her father, Dr. Tenma, had told her about it: it was one of the many associations that opposed the recognition of the civil rights of robots.

"Robots were not created to go to school with humans, but to work in the fields and factories," ruled Ozawa. "Leave your studies, it's better for you"

"You know nothing about me, my feelings, my desires, my dreams; therefore, you do not have the right to decide my life! " cried the robot girl, and started to pass by.

"Too bad for you," the other hissed.

Suddenly two other female students - one short and stocky, the other tall and thin - emerged from behind a

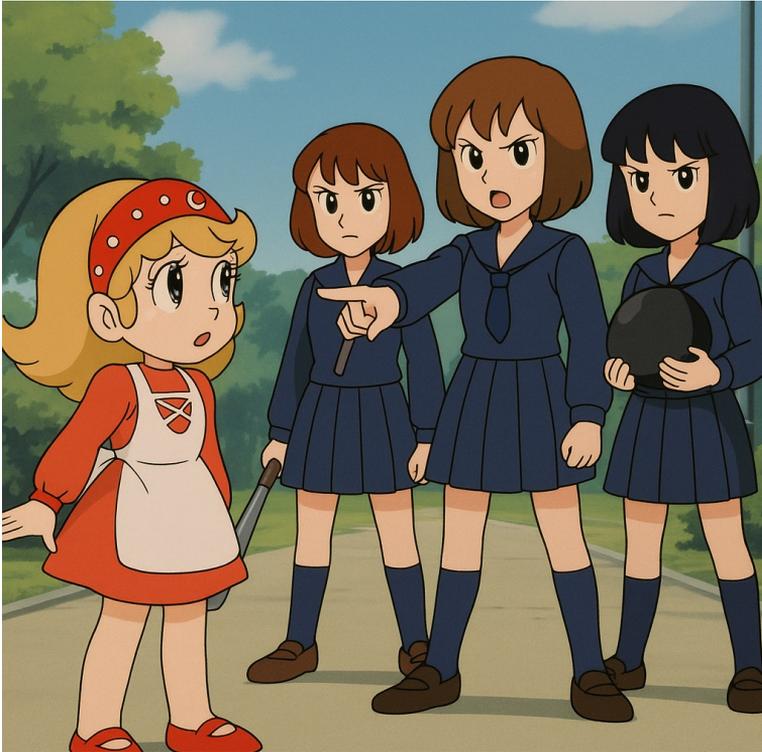
fountain and grabbed her arms and lifted her off the ground. "We hold her tight, president!" they said satisfied to their leader.

"Leave me, you ugly witches! Leave me, I said!" Niki shouted with all her strength, but in vain. Chihiro Ozawa pulled out a stiletto and approached her with a grin. "Now I'm going to leave an indelible mark on your pretty plastic face," she announced.

Now or never! she told herself; she rocked, took the momentum, and jumped backwards on the shoulders of the two girths who were forced to leave her, then kicked Chihiro's wrist causing her to fly away the weapon; finally, she jumped, spun around, propping herself up on the girl's shoulders, landed behind her and kicked her on the backside sending her legs in the air on her companions, but suddenly she felt very weak. *Oh no! I'm running out of energy!* she thought shocked.

In the meantime, the three assailants got back to their feet quickly and were joined by four other girls

armed with bowling balls, scythes and steel-tipped sticks. "Let's tear her to pieces" ordered the leader, when the air was torn by the unmistakable sound of a two-tone siren.



“It's the police! Here comes the police!” exclaimed a hooligan. “What do we do, president? I don't want to go to jail!” another begged.

“You are very lucky, brat... but you won't be lucky forever. Let's recede!" the president exclaimed running away together with her kohai.

When they disappeared from her sight, Kenichi Shikishima approached her. "Are you okay, Niki?" he asked anxiously. "We have to go away before they come back ..."

"Go away? I don't think about it at all! " she retorted. "When the police arrive, I'll tell them in detail ... "

"The police will never come" interrupted the classmate.

"What are you saying?" Niki replied indignantly. "I heard the siren, soon a patrol will be here ..."

"Did you hear *this*," the boy explained: he put his hands over his mouth and let out several times that same sound, then added smiling: " My father works as a doctor in the hospital located near our house; I've been listening to ambulance sirens since I was born, and so I learned to imitate them"

The little robot girl was beside herself with wonder, then she composed herself. "You saved me ... you were truly heroic. Thank you" and she kissed him on the cheek; then she took a few steps, turned to greet him and ran straight towards the house, while Kenichi's face turned red as a pepper.

“*The little great Atom, the Astro Boy, defeats the gang of the hole*’ repeated aloud Master Mustache reading the nine-column headline in the newspaper. "Bravo Atom, we are proud of you!" confirmed his classmates clapping their hands ... all except Niki.

At the end of the lessons the robot boy tried yet another sortie. "Niki" he began, keeping four steps away, "this afternoon they inaugurate a new amusement park, and I would be very happy to go there with you ..."

"No, thank you," she replied cold as ever, and started to walk away. Atom ran after her and stood in

front of her. "Well, why do you hate me?" he blurted out. "You heard what the teacher said, I'm not exactly a bad subject ..."

"I heard, I heard" Niki snorted. "The great Atom, the Astro Boy, the national hero ... but when I was about to be killed by a gang of thugs yesterday afternoon, where were you?" she addressed him pointing her finger at him.

"Have you been attacked by a gang of thugs?" he asked in amazement, but she paid him no further attention; "Kenichi, wait: I have to talk to you!" she shouted to their companion as she ran after him. *What does Kenichi have to do with it now?*, Atom wondered, and decided to follow them without being noticed.

Meanwhile Niki had joined the boy. "I still wanted to thank you for helping me yesterday," she said, then realized that Atom was spying on them hiding around a corner; then she folded her hands and looked at her companion with her charming brown eyes. "This afternoon

they inaugurate a new amusement park ... would you like to accompany me?"

Although he didn't need to breathe, Atom felt like he was going to die of suffocation. With his superhearing he felt the rapid beating of his companion's heart, and in his mind the words spoken by the teacher during the biology lesson rang out: 'Male animals are irresistibly attracted to females of the same species. It is a law of nature, which also applies to human beings.' Now, Kenichi was a male, Niki a female, and although his friend knew well that she was a robot, he seemed to be irresistibly attracted to her; and Atom ... Atom was irresistibly jealous. "I agree," the boy finally said.

"Perfect" said the little robot girl satisfied. "Then see you at 5.30 pm in front of the ticket office. And don't worry about the money, I'll pay," and she walked away.

Atom stood leaning against the wall for long moments, heartbroken; then he realized that Hikaru had approached him and was scrutinizing him with curiosity. "Atom, are you feeling sick?" she asked.

"I have nothing," he tried to reassure her, then he had an idea. "Hikaru, would you like to come with me this afternoon ..."

"To the new amusement park? Of course!" she trilled gleefully. "I was looking for you just to ask you... this is a sign that we are truly soul mates! What time will we meet? "

"At 17:30, before ... well, no, a hundred meters before the ticket," said the little robot boy ashamed of himself. "And don't worry about the money, I'll pay"

"Of course," Hikaru replied. "Are you or are you not my knight?"

"Well, Atom, what have you got?" Hikaru exclaimed sadly. "We went to coffee, karaoke, photo camera, roller coaster, horror tunnel, and you didn't hug me even once, not even when I screamed in fear ... you don't act like a lover ..."

Because I'm not in love with you, but with Niki, he would have liked to answer her; instead, he replied: "I'm sorry... I have no experience of these things". *Liar*, he told himself, *with the right person you would know what to say and do ...*

For two and a half hours he followed Niki and Kenichi step by step, going to the same places, doing the same things, and dragging poor Hikaru with him, unaware of everything. *I'm a worm*, he thought. At that moment he saw them walking towards a bench and said to his classmate: "Stay here, Hikaru, I'll be right back"

"But where are you going?" she asked surprised.

"Get you candy floss," Atom replied.

Kenichi sat on the bench and took a long breath. "I'm tired ... I think we've seen everything there is to see," he exclaimed.

"Kenichi, I have to tell you something" Niki murmured. "It's something that will hurt you, but I can't keep myself in it"

He smiled at her. "Do you want to tell me that you came with me to spite Atom?"

She put her hands to her face. "You ... you knew ... I guess I am a horrible person in your eyes ..."

"No, just a girl in love," he assured her. "You know, when I was little my father, to make me fall asleep in the evening, used to read me medieval novels that told of samurai, princesses and geishas ... and in those stories there was always a woman who tried to make her lover jealous by pretending to try interest in another. So, I went along with your game to see how far you would go"

"L-look you're wrong!" Niki exclaimed. "I'm not in love with Atom at all! I hate it, I can't stand it; indeed, I hate him, I hate him with all my strength! "

"I don't understand why" the boy commented philosophically. "Anyway, Atom is my friend; so, please, if you don't want to have anything to do with him, tell him openly, and don't use me or others as a screen anymore "

"Here's the candy floss, Hikaru" said Atom handing her the stick. "Sorry for the delay..."

"I'm not hungry anymore" she replied depressed, "and I don't want to stay here anymore ... Take me home, please"

"Kenichi, wait! I have to talk to you!" Astro Boy exclaimed the next morning as they walked towards the school entrance. "Tell me well," he said.

"I just wanted to tell you ... I'm proud to be your friend," Atom proclaimed with tears in his eyes, and hugged him.

CHAPTER V: THE ANDEAN FLUTE

"Niki Tenma" said Karen Minamino solemnly, adjusting her glasses, "after reviewing your application and evaluating your impeccable school record, I have decided to admit you to our glorious Journalism Club"

"Thank you, president," Niki replied, bowing deeply. "I will not disappoint you"

"Have you studied the rules of the Club, dear Niki? What does Article 5 say? "

"I learned it by heart," replied the little robot girl proudly. "Article 5 says: Every member of the Club must submit to the unquestionable judgment of the President, for publication, at least one article a year "

"Excellent, excellent" the president complimented. "And article 2, what does it say?"

"Every member of the Club must obey the orders of the President," Niki rattled.

"Well" said the senpai, "then I will give you immediately a job that will allow you to fulfill your annual obligation: I want you to write an article about an auction house in Shinjuku district. The place opens in three hours. Ah, and bring with you a friend who is a good photographer: an image is worth a thousand words" she concluded, handing her a bag containing a camera and four interchangeable lenses.

"It will be done, president," the robot girl said as she took her leave.

A good photographer? And where do I find it? She mused as she walked out from the school. Shibugaki is crude and arrogant... it goes retro! Kenichi, he is a gentleman ... but I have already exploited him once, I don't want to make him suffer again. Tamao is too skinny to carry such a heavy bag, and she smiled at the thought of her little classmate grappling with that big load. Sigh... I'll have to ask Atom for help... but if he tries any advances, I'll give him a slap on the face that he'll remember for a lifetime, she finally concluded. Of course,

Niki, you have to be respected! And with that determination, she made his way to the Tetsuwan home.

"Good morning, baby," she smiled and bowed. "I'm Niki ..."

"Aaaah, I get it!" Uran exclaimed, widening his eyes. "You are Atom's gir ... Mmmmmhfff!"

"F-forgive her, she says everything that goes through her head," Atom murmured holding her mouth shut with both hands. "Can I do something for you?"

"Nothing special ... " she replied with feigned nonchalance. "I just have to write an article about an auction house in Shinjuku; so I thought I'd give you the honor of accompanying me, and taking some pictures ... but if you don't feel like it ... "

"Of course, I feel it!" exclaimed the robot boy. "I'll do whatever you ask me!"

"An auction house? Wow! I want to come, too!" his sister interjected.

"It's not a game, Uran, it's a serious thing!" he scolded her.

"I know it's a serious thing," the little girl snapped. "Don't always treat me like a child!"

"How do you mean?" Atom replied. "You *are* a child!"

"No, I'm not!" she retorted.

"Yes, you are!" he remarked.

"Why don't you want him to come with us?" Niki interjected with her common sense. "For me there is no problem ... on the contrary, she could keep the bag while you take the photos and I interview the buyers"

Atom sighed. "Well, if that's okay with you ... then you can come, Uran"

Along the way he asked her curiously: "So you joined a journalists' club? But wasn't your dream to become an excellent surgeon? "

"So? One does not exclude the other" Niki replied with a sure air. "I will be an excellent surgeon and a talented reporter, I will save lives with the scalpel and I will inform people with the pen ..."

"Okay ... as long as you do not reverse the tools of the trade" he remarked jokingly, but the joke did not get the desired effect.

"Ugh, you are always the same judgey!" she snapped. "Oh, it's starting to rain ..."

"That's normal, since we're in the rainy season," Atom explained. "And anyway, a journalist must be ready for any eventuality"

"That's true," the robot girl confirmed. "In fact, *I* brought an umbrella, and it's big enough for *two* persons ... come down here, Uran"

"I'm sorry, brother" she said showing him her tongue, " but this time you really are looking for it"

"Hook up to lot number 5," the auctioneer announced. "An Andean flute dating from the 16th century, still intact... It starts at ten thousand yen; who offers more? "

"Eleven thousand" said a big man in a raincoat with his face half hidden by a wide-brimmed hat.

"Twelve thousand" added a sprightly old man. The first bidder was surprised, then said: "Thirteen thousand"

"Fourteen thousand" said the elder. "Fifteen thousand" continued the other. "Sixteen thousand", "Seventeen thousand", "Eighteen thousand" ...

"The competition is getting interesting," Niki whispered to Atom. " Quick, take a picture of the exhibit!"

"Immediately". Atom aimed the camera, snapped the photo, and the flash of the flash dazzled the bidder for an instant; then he recovered and proclaimed: "Sold for eighteen thousand yen!"

"Hey, that's not right!" the big man exclaimed. "I made a sign and offering nineteen thousand!"

"I'm sorry, sir, I haven't seen you" he said, "and now the auction is closed"

"It's your fault, brat" muttered or the man giving a shove to Atom and leaving the room. "What a rude guy " Niki murmured, then approached the buyer: "Can I ask you a few questions, Mr. ..."

"Kentaro Homura, to serve you, beautiful young lady, " said the old man gallantly.

"Mr. Homura, why did you spend so much on this flute?" asked the robot girl.

"It's very simple, my dear," the human replied, stroking the instrument. "This is a very valuable piece, which will further enrich my already well-known collection of pre-Columbian finds"

"Do you have a collection?" she resumed curiously. "And is it accessible to the public?"

"Not even for a dream, impertinent young lady!" the old man stood up. "It took me time and effort to put it together, so I only enjoy it!" and he walked away muttering to himself.

While they were already a hundred meters away, they heard a thud coming from an alley. "Let's go see," Atom said. In the alley they found Mr. Homura lying on the ground; Niki examined it with his instruments: "He has a bump on the back of his neck, but it doesn't look like a serious injury," he said then. At that moment the old man recovered, looked around and exclaimed crying: "My flute! My precious Andean flute! They stole it from me! Oh, dear me!"

"Calm down, please," she murmured helping him to get up. "You have to go to the police and report the theft ... do you want me to accompany you?"

"No, thanks ... I can do it myself" he replied picking up the stick and walking towards the police station.

"Okay ... then we go to the Fukuyan Institute: I have to deposit the bag with the equipment, print the photos and write the article, before I can go home" concluded Niki.

At 7.30 pm Niki was still busy drafting the article when the man in the raincoat entered the Club headquarters with an electric pistol. "Stop and shut up, brat, or I'll fry your brain!" he enjoined.

Niki raised her hands; the big man rummaged through the papers on the desk, located the photos and let out a grunt of satisfaction. "I knew it ... you and the other guy who was with you framed me really well," he said by stuffing into the pocket of his coat. He picked up the camera and pulled out the card, then turned to her and mumbled: "But you ... are flesh and blood, or a robot? Because I can't stand robots at all...", and he pointed the weapon at her head.

Niki decided to take advantage of the man's hesitation. "I-I am a real girl," she lied in a tremulous voice. "Please, d-don't hurt me ... otherwise I'll start crying, sniff!"

"Of course you're a real girl," he said, pulling the barrel away and lifting the hat from his eyes to see her

better. "A damned robot wouldn't be afraid of it ... Come with me, and don't try jokes!" he said grabbing her arm and dragging her out. He led her to a car parked in front of the school entrance, let her in through the back door and ordered "Sit down and shut up", then started the engine and headed out of town. "The boss will be pleased with me," he muttered satisfied, pulling the Andean flute out of the dashboard.

I did well to pretend to be a terrified brat, Niki told herself as she looked out the window, trying to figure out where they were. This is just someone much more important's henchman; I have to find out who he is, and why he cares so much about that flute

After half an hour the car slowed down and pulled into a large estate. "What strange trees," she murmured.

"They are olive trees" explained the big man softening up a bit. "Mr. Capone produces the oil here which he sells throughout the country. He comes from Sicily ... but maybe I spoke too" He concluded frowning again.

They stopped in front of a large villa-farmhouse; the man got out and led her upstairs, where Tano Capone was waiting anxiously for him. "It took you a long time, Rufus," he apostrophized seeing him. "Do you have the flute? And this little girl, why did you bring her here? "

"I had to, chief," he apologized, handing the artifact, photos and memory card to his boss. "She saw me in the face, and also photographed me ... I couldn't let her blurt out to cops that I was the one who scratched the flute "

"You're the usual idiot, Rufus" scolded the other. "Lock her in the cellar and come back here immediately"

At 20.30 Atom answered the videophone. "Good evening, Dr. Tenma," he said, "how can I help you?"

"Is Niki with you?" the man asked without preamble.

"No," replied the little robot boy. "How could it be with me? She can't stand me ... "

"She hasn't come home yet, and she's not even in school," Niki's adoptive father explained. " In an hour it will start the anti-robot curfew ... Please, Atom, look for her"

"I flight," he replied, starting like a rocket and breaking through the window. He went to the Fukuyan Institute - the last place Niki was seen -, landed in front of the entrance gate, now closed, and immediately felt a sweet fragrance. *This is Niki's perfume... I would recognize it among a thousand!* he thought. He sniffed the ground like a hound, spotted the trail, and followed it.

The large, high-ceilinged cellar was cluttered with large wooden barrels, some full of oil, some empty. Rufus clambered up the narrow stone staircase and said to her, "Shut up and good, otherwise you'll get it" then closed the heavy door behind him.

Niki looked around: on one wall, very high up, there was a small slit closed by an iron grate. *I have to go up there and find out what you see from there*, she thought. But how to do it? She couldn't fly... She rolled an empty barrel under the peephole, then put a second and third on top, and climbed up them until she reached the slit.

He looked through: it overlooked the study in which Mr. Capone and his minion were. The boss cut the laces that wrapped the flute with a knife, opened the pipes and took out a small folded sheet of paper; he opened it with feverish hands and read in Castilian: "*The treasure of Atahualpa, the last emperor of the Incas, is hidden in this place ... and below, you see, there is a detailed map ... We did it, Rufus, we finally found it!*"

"That's great, chief" the big man exclaimed clapping his hands with joy. "So, all these years spent scratching flutes around the world weren't useless! I was beginning to think that that manuscript bought from a second-hand dealer told only nonsense ..."

"Domingo de Arata, the amanuensis, didn't tell nonsense," explained Capone. "He was the official reporter following Francisco Pizarro ... As I always say, with patience you get everything"

"Now we just have to go to South America, get the treasure, and we'll be rich, very rich!" Rufus cheered.

"*I will be very rich*" corrected the boss. "I'm the chief, remember... You will get a slice of the loot, but a small slice. In the meantime, this is no longer needed," he said, throwing the pieces of the flute into the lit fireplace.

"What do we do with the brat, chief?" asked the henchman. "We certainly can't take it with us ..."

"We'll leave it locked in the cellar," Capone ruled. "Sooner or later, someone will find it ... maybe"

Leaning too far forward, Niki lost her balance and fell tumbling to the ground with all the barrels; seconds later Rufus opened the door. "I told you not to make noise, brat!" he barked. "This is the last warning!"

The robot girl curled up on the floor, her arms around her knees. What could she do, with only a hundred horsepower? "Father, why did you make me so weak?" she wept softly. "And you, Atom, why are you never there when I need you? ". *Hey, wait a minute!* she told himself. *Why on earth would Atom come to my aid? When have I ever done anything kind to him, to put his stratospheric strength at my service?* Then she remembered what Dr. Tenma had told her: 'It is better to be ingenious than strong; because the force is nothing, no wit and intellect', and stood up muttering to herself: "Soon I'll have much more noise, Mr. Rufus"

She took two long ropes, passed over a ceiling board and she secured them to two empty barrels from which she had removed the lids; then she wielded a hammer and stared at a series of nails along the contour of the covers, he poured oil down the steps, arranged the

first barrel just down the scale, and finally kicked in a shelf, by dropping a large number of objects and causing a hellish crash.

"What's that stupid doing?" exclaimed Mr. Capone. "I'll take care of her," said Rufus; he opened the door shouting "Now take it, little girl ...", he took a step forward, slipped on the oil and rolled down the ladder ending up in the barrel unconscious, just as Niki had foreseen. "Off one, under the other," she whispered as she set the second barrel in place. The boss entered with the gun drawn; "Where the hell are you, Rufus?" he cried, then he too slipped and ended up stunned and imprisoned. At that point the robot girl sealed the barrels with the previously nailed lids, lifted them in midair and knotted the ropes; then he left the cellar and headed for the door that gave on the outside.

Once outside she turned the corner and collided with Atom, who in the meantime had come this far. The two fell to the ground, but Niki was the first to get up. "Atom! What are you doing here?" she exclaimed.

"Don't you understand? I came to save you," the robot boy replied. In the meantime, she had resumed her usual demeanor.

"You arrive late, I saved myself," she said. "Rather, call the police ... and Mr. Homura too"

"I have dealt with many 'fish in barrels' in my work " Inspector Tawashi joked, "but this is the first time I have ever arrested thieves in barrels ... Rather, you two" he addressed Atom and Niki. "This time you pass, but the anti-robot curfew must be respected. Clear?"

"*Oui, mon général!*" she replied, snapping to attention and saluting.

"I'm not a general, witty one, I'm a police inspector!" he muttered as he got into the car and turned on the siren.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Homura," Niki said contrite to the elderly, handing him the paper. "Your flute is now

in ashes ... but in this map the location of an immense treasure is marked, with which you will be able to enormously enlarge your collection"

The old man smiled. "Maybe... it's not just mine anymore," he said.

A week later Atom and Niki, together with the family of him, and Tenma and Ochanomizu, were watching and listening to a report on TV. "Today, at the National Museum of Metro City, the new 'Niki Tenma' room was inaugurated, destined to house thousands of precious finds from the pre-Columbian era, including the treasure of the last Inca Atahualpa," the chronicler began. "We have with us Mr. Kentaro Homura, the author of the very important discovery... Mr. Homura, why did you decide to have the room where the treasure you discovered will be kept named in this way? Why didn't he want to give her his name?"

" I wanted to pay homage to a beautiful and courageous girl who taught me the importance of and make

available to all of the common heritage of our humanity," said the nice old man.

"Did you hear, Niki? Your name will be famous forever," Atom said cheerfully. "And as if that weren't enough, your article was published in the school newspaper, and taken up by the main national newspapers ... In addition to being a surgeon and a journalist, you could also be an archaeologist"

"You're the usual fool" Niki replied sourly crossing her arms. "You never take what I do seriously"

"It's not true!" he retorted painfully, despite remembering well that Dr. Tenma had warned him: It is very likely that the paranoia, that is, Niki's false idea of you, extends from the trivially material meaning of the term 'mortify' to one more nuanced, metaphorical and 'moral'. I tell you now so that, when it happens, you will have the strength to bear it; he knew that would happen, but it was too difficult to bear. " Niki, I have great respect for you, and I take everything you do very seriously," he insisted.

"Then why are you always making fun of me?" resumed the robot girl, pointing her finger at him.

"I'm not making fun of you," the astral boy defended himself.

"Yes, you are!" she cried.

"No, I'm not!" he shouted louder.

"Quarrels between lovers?" observed Uran mischievously.

"No way!" Niki silenced her.

"Where are you, Umataro?" Doctor Ochanomizu asked softly.

"Deadlocked," Dr. Tenma whispered lovingly, "but I won't give up. *I can't stop myself* "

CHAPTER VI: THE FAIRY FOREST

"I don't understand what the hell he came here for," muttered William Smith III, taking a drag on his branded cigar. "The works are progressing well, we do not need help from the Ministry of Science and Technology"

"I'm not saying you lie, sir," Atom said kindly, "but Dr. Ochanomizu has received an anonymous report that some accidents have occurred at the dam construction site ..."

"Little thing, little thing" the entrepreneur shook his hands as if to throw away some crumbs. " A fuel tank that exploded, a collapsed scaffolding ... these are events that can happen when a pharaonic work is built, and in fact occur regularly, without searching for supernatural causes ... He made a futile trip, Mr. Atom; return to Metro City, and report that the dam on Semaikawa will be completed on schedule" and dismissed him.

Astro Boy came out of the office sighing; maybe that man was right... "Pssst! Hey, little guy, come here!" whispered a male voice from behind a shack. Atom followed her and found a tall, robust man in overalls and a protective helmet in front of him: "I'm Tanaka, the chief engineer" introduced himself. "I have to talk to you ... but in private," he said, looking around.

"All right," he said. He followed him to behind a large rock, then the human resumed: "Smith is an idiot rich man: he ordered the workers to keep their mouth shut, under penalty of dismissal; but I'm not afraid, not of him, at least ... The truth is that very, very strange things are happening in this place"

"Was it you who sent that anonymous letter? I'm listening to it," Atom replied suddenly interested.

"It was not accidental accidents, but real acts of sabotage," Tanaka continued, nodding. "To me, the workers said that the tank exploded because a small creature from the woods had thrown a blaze of fire at it, and that the scaffolding collapsed due to a whirlwind of wind thrown

out of nowhere by another tiny being ... and among the workers present there were also robots, who certainly cannot get drunk or hallucinate "

"Small creatures ... but how small?" asked the robot boy.

"So". The engineer raised his right hand with four fingers joined.

"It's impossible," Atom replied. "There are no such small intelligent creatures, much less capable of throwing fire and flames"

"The world is richer and more varied than we can imagine" the man ruled before leaving. "According to a thousand-year-old legend, the wood upstream of this construction site is populated by sacred goblins ... for this reason the locals had opposed the construction of the dam. I myself had proposed to build it further downstream, so that the forest would not be flooded ... but Smith decided it would cost him too much"

Atom was walking for half an hour, when he felt a hidden presence among the dense foliage. "Is there anyone?" he said aloud. "Show yourself!"

"Go away," whispered a voice with a feminine tone coming from a bush. The robot boy walked over, rummaged in the branches, and suddenly a small winged creature came out exclaiming, "Get out of here while you have time, I don't want to kill you! "

Atom was flabbergasted, but still took a step forward. "Too bad for you," she said; she raised her tiny hand upward, a bolt of lightning came down from the sky on the tip of her finger, and she threw it at him; but being a robot, the only effect of the lightning was to burn his clothes. "You're tough," the creature murmured creating a globe of fire and throwing it at him, but in vain. Then he turned back and fled in flight, but the little robot boy was faster: he caught up with her and clenched her in his fist. "Aaaah!" she cried. "Leave me, you hurt me!"

"I'll leave you alone if you promise not to run away," Atom pledged. "I came here to *understand* "

"Promised" she said. He opened his hand: "To begin with, tell me who you are, and why you want to hurt the people on the construction site"

"My name is Mina" replied the little creature "and as for the rest, what can I tell you that you don't already know? My people live in this forest from time immemorial, protecting plants and animals from hunters and tree-cutters ... and now you, Big Uglies who are nothing else, are building that immense wall to block the river and sweep us away! This is why we and you are enemies, and I have nothing more to say" he concluded, crossing his arms.

The robot boy was putting together the various pieces of the mosaic. "Why do you call us Big Uglies?" he asked. She shrugged: "You're not beautiful, not even small ..."

“Where do your powers come from? How did you learn to manipulate the elements?” he questioned her again.

"What a silly question!" she snapped. "You wonder how you can breathe? You just do it ... We feel the power of Nature flowing in our bodies and we use it as a weapon, because it is the only way we have to fight you, given our small size ... "

She doesn't know I'm a robot, Atom thought. "I believe there is another way to resolve disputes " he said. "Do your people have a leader? I want to talk to him"

"What on earth could you tell him?" she replied skeptically. "But you seem wiser than your fellow men, so I will trust you. Follow me!"

She led him along a long path to a clearing where many little beings like her were holding council. "Mina! Why did you bring our enemy here?" the queen addressed her.

"Queen Azure" explained Mina, "this Big Ugly has something to tell you"

"My name is Atom," he introduced himself. "If the dam were built further downstream, and this wood was not flooded, would you stop attacking us?"

"Yours is a deceptive question," replied Azure. "*If* you really wanted to build that wall somewhere else, we wouldn't have anything to complain about... but you are building it right here because you want to exterminate us! For thousands of years, ancient legends have passed on the memory of the struggles my people waged against your people, whenever you have violated the sacred quiet of the forest to kill an animal or to cut down a tree ... you Big Uglies want destroy our home, and we will stop you! For this reason, all together we will attack your construction site and destroy it once and for all"

"No, please! If you use violence, humans will respond with equal violence!" Atom pleaded. "Let me act as an ambassador of peace ..."

"It is no more time for words" concluded the queen; she moved her right hand, and long, stout branches emerged from the bowels of the earth, immobilizing the robot boy. "Follow me, my people," she said then moving away, followed by all the others.

"What the hell is going on?" cried Smith, awakened in the middle of the night by a series of deafening roars. "They attack us!" Tanaka said, bursting into the cabin. "The people of the forest are attacking us!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" muttered the entrepreneur, but his words were covered by another explosion. The chief engineer grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the window: "Look for yourself if you don't believe it," he urged.

Outside, the construction site was devastated by hundreds of small flying creatures that hurled fire, lightning and jets of water at each thing or person, while

workers and robots were fleeing here and there in panic. Smith bit his lip. "Fire is fought with fire," he said. He ran out, picked up a flamethrower from the ground and aimed it at the Queen Azure. "Crack!" he grinned as he started the jet.

The queen was petrified seeing the incandescent blaze rise towards her, but at the last moment she was grabbed and taken to cover by Atom, who in the meantime had freed himself from his bonds. "Y-you saved me ..." she murmured.

"Now you owe me," he said. "Order your people to stop"

Things are getting bad," Smith mused, throwing the flamethrower away and running away. At that moment a fire-blackened trellis leaned menacingly towards him. "No!" the man cried, closing his eyes; when he reopened them, he saw Atom supporting the huge metal structure in front of the astonished gaze of fairies and humans.

"Mr. Tanaka told me everything, Mr. Smith," Astro Boy said angrily when the situation calmed down. "He explained to me that the dam can be built further downstream, where it would flood an arid land without hurting anyone ... You have endangered your employees and these creatures out of greed, you should be ashamed!"

"The little guy is right," Tanaka added. "If you agree, we can dismantle the site and build the dam according to my original plan ... otherwise we will look for a new chief engineer"

Smith looked around bewildered: all his workers surrounded him, staring at him with indignation. "Okay," he finally murmured.

"Thank you, Atom, on behalf of all my people," said the Queen Azure solemnly. "Our future legends will sing about you, because you have brought peace between us and the Big Uglies... that's why I will give you a gift",

and she handed him a green sphere. "This is a Gem of Light, and it can release a great deal of energy. Use it wisely"

"I'll never forget you," Mina added gratefully. "Come back and visit us whenever you want, you will always be welcome"

"Goodbye," Atom greeted them, and took off heading towards Metro City.

CHAPTER VII: THE RETURN OF SKUNK

"Oh, no!" the pupils of class 1-E exclaimed in chorus, reading the sign posted at the entrance to the showers. "We will have to take turns! "

"Well, I'm tired and sweaty after the gym hour," Shibugaki muttered, "so it's up to us boys first ... do you agree, guys?" he concluded by obtaining the unanimous approval of his companions.

"It's not right!" Kaoru answered. "We girls have worked as hard as you ... and then, no matter how much you wash, you boys stink anyway, so it's up to us to wash first!"

"Where is the equality of the sexes?" he retorted.

"And the cavalry, where did it go?" she replied backed up by her companions.

"So, let's do this," the class bully decided. "Let's have a duel: one of you against one of ours, and whoever wins will use the showers first"

“A... duel? We have to think about it,” Kaoru said uncertainly, walking away a little with the other girls in the class and forming a small group. "What do we do? They are stronger than us ... "

"Let's send Niki forward," Yoko offered. "She is a robot, so she is stronger than a boy"

"But ... I don't need to take a shower ..." objected the robot girl. " I don't sweat and I don't get dirty ..."

“But you're a girl like us, aren't you? It's time to show your solidarity,” she replied. "True, true," "Please win for us," the others pleaded.

"Okay" Niki finally decided.

The girls stepped forward again. "Our challenger will be Niki Tenma," Kaoru announced. "Whaat?" the boys chorused. "T-then our champion will be Atom!"

"I-I?" murmured the little robot.

“You are a robot, aren't you? And you are also much stronger than her... so you are the only one who can defeat her. Please, Atom, win for us,” his companions pleaded.

When we first met, Niki realized I was a robot after I grabbed her and wrapped my arm around her neck to keep her from running away and sounding the alarm, he told himself. Perhaps, if I again used a little strength to defeat her, her memory would be unlocked ... "All right," he announced, stepping forward.

The students formed a circle around the two. "All fighting techniques are allowed. Begin!" Yuriko exclaimed. Atom charged, reached out to grab Niki, but she grabbed him by the sleeve of his suit and made him turn around and knock him down. "Very good, Niki: a great Aikido move!" her companions exulted.



"What are you doing?" Master Mustache intervened. "Stop fighting now!"

"But ... teacher, we have to decide who is to use the showers and first ..." murmured his pupils contrite.

"Men are distinguished from beasts because they resolve their disputes with reason, not brute force!" he barked. "If you can't agree, cast lots! And you two" he said to Atom and Niki "as punishment you will stay out of the classroom for an hour, each holding a bucket full of water"

"But ... master ... it's not our fault ..." they protested in unison.

"Then let's do *two* hours!" Shunsuke Ban concluded. "And if you say another word, I'll send you to the principal!"

"What a shame!" Niki sighed. "This punishment will be an indelible stain on my school curriculum ... so

far I had all credits in order, and full marks in all subjects"

"This episode will be forgotten soon, if we behave properly in the future," Atom tried to reassure her. "However, we shouldn't have gotten involved in such a futile dispute"

"It's the humans' fault," she said bitterly. "They consider robots as objects to be used at will, like a hammer or a saw ... or as a weapon with which to fight and prevail over each other"

"Not all humans are that selfish," he replied. "Doctor Ochanomizu fought for the approval of the law on civil rights of robots ... and Doctor Tenma also thinks the same, otherwise he would not have adopted you"

"It's true," mused Niki softening. "Tell me, Atom" she added, "what do you want to do, when you have finished your studies? My great dream is to become the best surgeon in the world, to save people's lives... and you, do you have a dream for tomorrow?"

Atom was struck by the fact that for the first time she addressed him in a non-aggressive way. "My dream" he said after a while "is to persuade humans and robots to stop despising each other, to work together to build a better world for everyone"

"I didn't think you had such a noble soul," Niki murmured. "Maybe you are not as detestable as you seem ..."

"Niki, I ..." Atom said approaching her, but she drew back sharply pouring a bit of water on the floor. "No, please ... don't get strange ideas into your head," she admonished.



"Why did you summon me, Dr. Ochanomizu? Is there a danger in sight?" Atom asked as he entered the office of the general director at the Ministry of Science, then became aware of the presence of Inspector Tawashi and Chief of Police Nakamura. "If you are both here, it must be a very serious matter"

"More than you can imagine," the inspector replied, biting the stem of his pipe. "Skunk has escaped"

"What? And how did he do it?" he asked him stunned.

" He circumvented the robot who watched him day and night, and convinced him to open his cell door and not to report for twelve hours ... this man is a true demon" explained Tawashi.

"It all happened ten days ago," Nakamura continued. " We believed he had fled abroad, so we alerted the Interpol ... but this morning we received this message on

the police inbox". He pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket, opened it, and read: *Very soon I will take revenge on those who got in my way, starting with that damned Atom. The world will tremble on hearing my name. Signed: Skunk Kusai.* "It is very explicit, how could you hear ... have you, or your family, received threats in recent days, or seen suspicious people around your home?"

Astro Boy shook his head. "Nothing at all"

"Anyway, we can't just ignore such a cheeky warning" Tawashi interjected, "so we decided to put you under protection, and to take you to a secret location until we catch him"

"I disagree," Atom exclaimed. "I have to go to school, and so does Uran; I can't allow the lives of my loved ones to be turned upside down for who knows how long ... If Skunk wants revenge, look for me: I'll face him and defeat him, as I have done in the past! "

"You underestimate him ... " the inspector retorted, but was interrupted by a roar that shook the whole building. "What is happening?" Ochanomizu asked the videophone. "Doctor, a hundred meters tall robot is blowing up the cisterns of the port!" an alarmed operator answered.

" I'll take care of it!" said the astral boy opening the window and starting off like a rocket.

When he arrived on the spot he was horrified: a terrible fire was devastating the goods warehouses, while around many skyscrapers had been gutted. The author of the destruction was a huge robot, the largest that Atom had ever seen; but what left him speechless was the sight of an ignoble human figure on his right shoulder. "You!" he exclaimed.

"Well yes," he said, taking off his hat and bowing mockingly. "This orgy of destruction is kindly offered by Skunk Kusai, the emperor of crime. Do you like my new slave? I called him Damdam 2" he said then stroking the robot's head. "It was the last creation of the Earl

of Walpurgis, before he was killed by your brother Atlas... I found him, activated him, and now he obeys only to me. Ha ha ha ha!" he concluded, laughing.

"You're just a scoundrel," Atom said resolutely. He rushed at the enemy at full speed, but the latter punched him sending him crashing into a building. *He's too strong*, he told himself, struggling to get up, *I'll never beat him*. Then he had an intuition: he looked around, flew around Damdam 2 so as to have the sea behind him, and challenged him: "If you want revenge, Skunk, come and get me!"

The criminal's face turned red. "Take it and destroy it!" he ordered his mechanical servant. The latter took a run, reached out to grab the robot boy, but he used the speed of the opponent to make him make a turn that sent him straight into the water, while Skunk fell tumbling to the ground. "Now you will have it with me," Atom announced grabbing him.

"No, no! Damdam 2, save me!" he shouted in terror. The huge robot clenched Atom in its fist, then hurled

it away; he picked up his master with both hands and strode away. "You got away with it this time, damn Atom, but soon I'll put an end to your days!" Skunk shouted before Damdam 2 fired the flares in his legs and disappeared from view.

The astral boy got up half bruised, saw Niki bending over a teenager spilled on the ground among the rubble and approached; she was exanimated, her right arm had been mangled and separated from the trunk. "I have to stop the bleeding, otherwise she will die" said the robot girl, tearing off her dress and making bandages with which she wrapped the stump, then he turned to Atom: "Take her to the hospital as soon as you can!"

"It will be done," he said, picking her up and dashing off into the sky as she stared at him.

"Senpai Ozawa ... can I enter?" Niki asked timidly at the door of the hospital room.

"Come in, Niki ... and call me Chihiro" said the other, pulling herself up and showing her the plastic prosthesis. "That's cool, right? So now we will be a bit similar ... You know, I've had a lot of time these days to reflect on how stupid I was ... so I decided to resign from the Anti-robot Student League "

"It is magnificent, Chihiro!" exclaimed the robot girl. " I knew you are better than you wanted to believe ... And so, all is well what ends well"

"We are not in the world of fairy tales, happy little lady!" Ozawa scolded her. "Didn't you wonder why my parents don't know no here? My father is the League's main financier; when he learned that his beloved daughter would have a synthetic arm for the rest of life, he disowned me. His latest 'concession' was to register a studio apartment in the suburbs for me, but when I get out of here, I'll have to work to support myself ..." she concluded sadly.

"I'm sorry" Niki murmured in pain. "I wish I could do something for you ..."

“Yes, you can do something for me; indeed, you must!” Chihiro said resolutely, shaking her hand. “You have to continue your studies, you have to make your dreams come true, and you have to prove to all racist idiots like me, that you robots are not heartless and brainless appliances! Promise me!”

"I promise you," she replied.

In the corridor, waiting for her, was Atom. "Let's go home," she said quietly.

CHAPTER VIII: FORBIDDEN LOVE

"To you, Niki!" Kaoru shouted. Niki jumped with all her strength and hit the ball, but Hikaru Hiyama rejected the dunk and the match continued with uncertain outcome. "Hikaru was good," Kenichi noted pleased from the sidelines. "Yeah, and she's very pretty too," Shibugaki added. "Coming from you it's almost scary," Tamao interjected. Suddenly the subject of their conversations staggered and fell to the ground, a bloodstain spreading beneath her.

"Hikaru! Hikaru!" shouted her playmates. "Call the doctor!" Kaoru urged as the boys huddled around too. Niki made her way and exclaimed: "Move away, let her breathe!", then examined her with the diagnostic tools contained in her body. "I have not found any injury" she said to the gym teacher who had approached in the meantime "and her health conditions are good, apart from a slight anemia ... but she is losing blood from ..."

"I'll take care of it," she said, taking her in her arms. "Niki, do you want to come with me? So, you will learn something very important about human physiology "

"Okay," replied the robot girl accompanying her.

Before leaving the gymnasium, the teacher stopped to chat with Shunsuke Ban. "What happened to you, Master Mustache?" the students asked him in anguish.

"Nothing serious" he replied, "on the contrary, it's an event to celebrate: our Hikaru has become a woman"

"Eeeehhh ???" those in chorus exclaimed.

"So, Hiyama", concluded the doctor, washing her hands in a basin, "you have nothing to worry about: you can continue practicing any kind of sport, and doing everything you did before. You will just have to eat a little more meat, red beans, and other iron-rich foods,

and wear suitable sanitary pads... but yours is not a disease, it is the normal condition of women of childbearing age. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, doctor" Hikaru said as she dressed, "but it doesn't matter to me whether I am fertile or not: I will marry Atom, and if he wants to have children, we will adopt robot children"

"Don't be silly," the woman retorted, adjusting her glasses to her nose. "First of all, the law prohibits marriages between humans and robots ..."

"Then we'll go away from Japan" she interrupted, getting hot. "My parents are very rich... I inquired, what do you think? In America, even two men can marry, so they will have nothing to object to if a human woman marries a robot; we could go and live there ..."

"How naive you are, little Hikaru" continued the doctor. "How can you think of marrying a robot if you can't mate?"

"W-What do you mean?" the girl murmured, blushing. "A-Atom doesn't have the...?"

"I suppose no one ever thought of giving the robot genitals ... that's why, you know, that the laws of most countries prohibit this kind of marriages. Well, now rest a little" she concluded, pulling the curtain and exiting the infirmary.

"Girls are just weird," Tamao commented along the way.

"My sister was there six years ago ... I thought she was going to die" Kenichi recalled, "instead it's a natural fact, something that has been happening since the dawn of time "

"What do you think, Atom?" asked the first.

"I don't know what to say," he murmured with downcast eyes. "We robots distinguish ourselves between males and females for the deep or high-pitched

voice, for the robust or slender body ... female robots have breasts ... but we cannot mate, let alone reproduce ... We have thoughts and feelings like you humans, but we are not human ... we are not even living beings, strictly speaking ... "

"You robots are luckier than us humans," Tamao ruled. "Do not get tired, do not get sick, if you have a breakdown, they will repair you or change a piece ... A robot could live for centuries, while we humans ..."

"Sorry, but I've made it home. See you tomorrow" Atom interrupted him greeting them.

"Welcome back, son. Mrs. Hiyama, the mother of your Hikaru companion, came to visit us," said Ms. Tet-suwan, introducing him to a woman in her fifties who wore a precious silk kimono. "Good morning, Atom," she greeted him warmly with a slight bow.

"Would you like some more tea, Mrs. Hiyama?" Mrs. Rin asked the host.

"Thank you ... If you don't mind, while I'm drinking it, I'd like to have a few words with your son"

"Okay," she said. "Atom, you make tea for the lady. If you need anything we are there. Come dear, and you too, Uran "

"You know perfectly the tea preparation technique, Atom ... but I guess, being a robot, you can't drink it, can't you?" the woman asked when they were alone.

" It is true, madam: I cannot drink or eat ... but I can taste it, and I am able to distinguish a variety of tea from another according to the molecules that make up it ... But I guess you do not want to talk about this, true?" he replied.

"You're right" Mrs. Hiyama answered sipping her drink. "Atom, my daughter fell in love with you; did you understand? For her you have become a constant thought: at home she does nothing but talk about you, about when you will get married ... We tried to make her think, but she became impatient; she even rebels against her father, she who was his darling as a child ... Don't get me wrong: I have nothing against robots, but I think such a relationship is ... inappropriate "

"I never encouraged your daughter to feel love for me," Atom objected.

"Then do something to discourage her!" the woman snapped, taking her face in her hands. "Atom, e-every mother only desires the good for their children ... even your mom, I'm sure, wants you to have a happy life ... You are a good boy ... but I believe that Hikaru, with you, does not would be happy. Can you blame me for this?"

"No, I understand you," the robot boy admitted.

"So please help me," she begged, taking his hand.

"I'll find the best time to talk to her," he promised.

“No, no and again no! I will never perform such an operation on a young girl in good health! It is an act contrary to medical ethics!" shouted the elderly gynecologist.

"Not even for a fee?" Hikaru insisted. "I can afford any price ..."

"Only a bad guy would agree to do it for money," he replied, pushing her out of the office and slamming the door.

The girl sat down disconsolate on a chair in the hospital waiting room when a little voice inquired: "You want to undergo surgery of a special kind, is not it?". She looked up and saw a little girl in front of her. "Are you talking to me, baby?" she asked.

"I'm not a baby, I'm eighteen!" she was indignant, then repeated: "You want to be operated on, right?"

"It is a little ... particular intervention, yes" Hikaru admitted. "Do you know a surgeon?"

"Of course," made the mysterious figure. "Dr. Black Jack is the best surgeon in the world. He can perform any type of surgery perfectly... as long as you pay well for it. You can pay with cash, jewels, rare stamps, anything of value "

"Okay" she said relieved, and went to her ear whispering "Now I'll explain ..."

"What's going on, mom? Why did you wake me up so early? Today is Sunday..." Atom murmured, yawning.

"Mrs. Hiyama is worried about her daughter," his mother explained, handing him the phone.

"Hikaru ran away from home," said the woman in distress. "She brought with her a necklace of cubic zirconia, cheap stuff, and she left a note that says: *Mom, Dad, don't worry about me, because I will become like Atom and we will be happy ...* I don't know what she has in mind, but I have a terrible presentiment ... please do something! "

"Has your daughter met any suspicious people these days? Think about it, any detail could be important" asked Astro Boy also uneasy.

"No, nobody ... Ah, yes: yesterday I accompanied her to her first gynecological examination, and I saw her talking in the ear with a strange little girl ..."

A strange little girl who attends hospitals... it's Pinoko! "It is not necessary to notify the police, Mrs. Hiyama: I will take care of bringing Hikaru home," Atom concluded before taking off.

Black Jack's home/studio was located on the top of a hill, fifty kilometers from Metro City. The astral boy broke down the door and shouted: "Hikaru! Hikaru, where are you?"

"Hush," Pinoko said from behind a desk. "She's in the operating room"

"Oh no! I arrived too late! " Atom exclaimed. That's when Dr. left the operating room taking off his mask. "What have you done to her, rascal?" he addressed him, taking him by the coat.

"Nothing ... absolutely nothing" replied Black Jack imperturbably. "She came to me asking, indeed, begging to be subjected to infibulation. She begged me

for so long, she cried so hot tears, that I decided to please her ... but after anesthetizing her I realized that the necklace she wanted to pay me with is a piece of jewelry worth a few yen ... and you know that I work only for those who pay me the right, is my ethics. So, take her and take her away with you... and take back this glass too” he said, handing him the necklace. "I should ask you for compensation for the broken door, but this time I'll turn a blind eye"

"How are you, Hikaru?" Atom asked when he saw her wake up.

"Atom ... what are you doing here?" the girl asked back, rubbing her eyes; then she realized she was naked and covered herself with the sheet. "Your clothes are here" he reassured her handing her a bundle "and this is your mother's necklace"

"I knew it," she snapped, clenching her fists. "That cowardly doctor pulled back ..."

The robot boy slapped her. " I'm sorry... but you would feel worse if your parents were punishing you" he said.

"I-I never cry ..." Hikaru murmured in a broken voice. "I have not cried since I was six years ... but you ... you are unfair ... " and she began to sob by pouring a river of tears. Atom decided to let her vent.

"You don't feel anything for me, do you?" she asked when she had calmed down a little. "You like Niki ..."

"You are a good girl, a classmate, you are a good friend" he replied, "but with Niki it's different"

"But she hates you, don't you know?" she retorted.

"I know" Atom admitted sighing "and maybe she will hate me forever ... but *I* love her, and I can't help it"

"Please go away and turn around: I have to get dressed" she asked him; and after a few minutes: "Now take me home ... and do not worry about me: I will pass. I

don't know when, I don't know how, but I'll get back on my feet"

CHAPTER IX: THE MASTER CANTOR

"I'm sorry, doctor" confirmed Yuko Kisaragi, "but the artificial otoliths were already worn out, and the spare parts will arrive only in four days"

"You have to be patient, Atom," Dr. Ochanomizu sighed looking him straight in the face. "In the meantime, you will have to be content with reading lips"

The next day the middle school classes were summoned by the principal to the main hall. "From today we will have a new teacher with us: Reverend Adam Zaucker, a prized master cantor, former director of the Regensburg cathedral choir..." and he introduced them to a tall, thin young man with blue eyes and long ash-colored hair. "I asked Don Zaucker to select the most in tune of you, to form a mixed choir that will perform at the summer festival" concluded the man before taking his leave.

"How beautiful he is!" some female pupils whispered among themselves. "But he's a priest ..." some boys objected. "So what? He's nice," they replied. "What do you think of him, Niki?" one of them asked.

"I am a robot" she replied dreamily "but if I were a human being and he was not a man of God, I would ask him for an appointment"

Atom was so engrossed in his dark thoughts that he didn't notice the new teacher frowning at him. "Are you deaf, Atom?" he addressed him.

"Really yes" he replied hesitantly, "at least until the day after tomorrow"

"If you don't hear the music, you can't be part of a choir," he said, indicating the exit.

"It's a pity you can't practice with us, Atom: the choir master really has an angel's voice," Kenichi said,

punctuating the words well. "Maybe, when you can hear again, he'll admit you too ... Do you understand everything?"

"Perfectly" confirmed the little robot boy "but now I have other worries: yesterday in Shibuya there was a series of thefts with dexterity, and this afternoon I have to go there for an errand. I hope to run into one of those scoundrels, so I'll give him the lesson he deserves! "

A few hours later Atom was walking home when he heard a woman cry: "My purse! Give me back my purse, thief! " He ran in that direction, and saw Niki coming towards him from a distance carrying a shoulder bag and a handbag in her hand. "Get out of the way!" she cried, pushing him and continuing to run away. From that brief encounter, the astral boy was impressed with a detail that was insignificant to others: the robot girl had dull eyes.

I have to follow her unnoticed, he thought, fortunately, her scent is unmistakable. Niki arrived at the Fu-

kuyan Institute, which was deserted at that hour, and entered the gymnasium; Atom cautiously approached and peered inside.

"Humans are really silly," Adam Zaucker was saying aloud, surrounded by his dazed pupils. "It was enough to falsify an electronic document to win their trust... Come forward, my servants, and show me the fruit of your robberies!"

One after another Kenichi, Shibugaki and the others deposited in front of him wallets, chains, bracelets and handbags; the most conspicuous booty was that of Niki. "Very good, my dear: you are the best, as I had guessed," he finally said; he bent his knee and stood at her height. "Tell me, who is your lord and master?"

"You are my lord and master, Don Zaucker," Niki replied in a colorless voice.

"And tell me, Niki: who are you loyal to?" he continued stroking her chin.

"I'm only loyal to you, Don Zaucker," the robot girl repeated.

“Then give me a sign of your loyalty. Kiss me” he ordered. She reached out her face, her lips towards his ...

"Get your hands off her!" Atom exclaimed breaking into the room. "A-Atom?" she murmured turning to look at him. "Damn brat ... I should have expected you would get in my way sooner or later," barked the teacher.

"Yep ... you knew that, being deaf at the moment, I was numb to your hypnotic influence," replied the robot boy.

“Kill him! Kill him now!" Don Zaucker shouted to his slaves; they drew daggers and launched an assault. Atom looked around, pulled some rubber donuts out of a box and threw immobilizing them: they fell to the ground one after the other shouting "Hey, I can't move!"

Niki struck him a blow; he dodged and hit her with his cutting hand making her drop the weapon, then he put a donut on her and released her as she screamed in tears “Free me! I have to obey Don Zaucker! I love it!"

The boss pulled out a gun: "I'll kill you personally ... so Skunk will be happy", but Atom kicked him and pierced his neck with a karate shot; he pulled out a microchip and pressed it in his hands. Suddenly the boys came to their senses. "Bingo," Astro Boy exclaimed triumphantly. "The throat was the most logical place for a device that works through the voice ... Now tell me where Skunk is hiding!" he intimated.

"I'll never tell you," the evil robot growled as a red light began to pulsate on his forehead. "No ... no ..." he murmured. The astral guy lifted him with both hands and threw him out of the building just before he exploded.

"It's a real shame that part of your recording is illegible," Inspector Tawashi commented. "Anyway, what we saw clearly shows how things went ... Nice work, Atom"

When they were alone, Niki asked: " Atom, in the part of the video that you didn't show the inspector, I said and did something ... inconvenient, right? "

"What you said and did under hypnosis doesn't count," he replied. "You weren't yourself, that's all "

"Forgive me, Atom," she pleaded.

"I already told you that ..." he repeated.

"I do not ask your forgiveness for what I did under hypnosis ... but for everything else" interrupted Niki. "Atom, I strive every day, every moment to be kind to you, not to be afraid when I see you, not to feel a shiver down my spine if you are close to me... but no matter how hard I try, I can't; even now that you've saved my life and my honor, I really can't. For this, if you can, forgive me "

She turned away from him and went out; and Atom, who wanted to run after her, hug and console her, could not help but watch her go and stand there, motionless and helpless as a pillar of salt.

CHAPTER X: ANATOMY LESSONS

"Your theoretical knowledge are impeccable, my dear Niki" said Dr. Kikunosuke, "but now you need to practice ... so I took the liberty of making your name to Dr. Gustav Larsson, a luminary of biomedicine which will spend a few months at of us, who immediately offered his willingness to give you some lessons "

"Thank you very much, Doctor," said the robot girl, bowing. "Where can I find this Dr. Larsson?"

"We have made available to him a villa with an adjoining laboratory, in a wooded region with no railway stations about a hundred kilometers from here ... you know, he wanted to stay in a place that reminded him of his beloved Sweden" replied the chief of Surgery. "He waits for you tomorrow at 10 o'clock"

"A hundred kilometers from here? And how do I get there?" she wondered in amazement.

"I can take you," Atom offered. "Forget it! I'll call a cab ... " Niki retorted furiously.

"For a round trip of a hundred kilometers, to be repeated for who knows how many days? It will cost me a fortune..." Doctor Tenma intervened, hoping to change her mind.

"Better than letting him touch me!" she replied.

"I have an idea," the little robot boy exclaimed. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at 9, with a safe and cheap means of transport"

The next morning, on time, Atom rang the doorbell of the Tenma house. "Look," he addressed to father and daughter.

"But it's ... a laundry basket!" Niki exclaimed seeing the large and deep wooden tub.

"That's right... a *cheap* means of transport, because I borrowed it from my mother, and *safe*, because it will allow me to fly you without even touching you. You just have to get inside and make yourself comfortable," he invited her.

Niki thought about it for a while, then accepted the offer. "You're resourceful, I recognize it," she smiled as she curled up inside.

"You are even better than what Dr. Kikunosuke described to you, my dear young lady" greeted Gustav Larsson welcoming her into his home. "If you prove to be as intelligent as you are beautiful, we will already be halfway there ... You, Atom, can also go if you want: we will have to do all day"

"Thank you, Doctor... but we are still at the beginning of the summer holidays, and I have already finished my homework; so I can wait for you here in the living room, if you don't mind "

"Take it easy, boy," the doctor replied jovially. He led her into a large laboratory cluttered with microscopes, shelves with test tubes and operating tables; on

one of them was placed a cage containing a hen. "She will be your first testing ground," he told her.

"T-testing ground? What do you mean?" Niki asked confused.

"Dr. Kikunosuke explained to me that you need to practice anatomy ... and that's what we're going to do," he explained in amazement. "You'll have to anesthetize her first, so she won't suffer; after which you will vivisect it "

"I cannot tear a living being to pieces! I cannot!" she protested.

"Then give up your dream," the doctor replied. "Do you think that someone would entrust the life of a human being to a person who cannot distinguish a heart from a gallbladder by eye, who cannot put his hands in the abdominal viscera and is afraid of cutting into living flesh?"

"I-I ..." Niki murmured shaking.

"For thousands of years, doctors from all latitudes have dissected frogs, chickens, pigs and human corpses

to learn the shape, size and arrangement of the various organs, with a single goal: to save as many lives as possible," the man continued harshly. "If you don't feel like taking the same path, and putting your feet in their footsteps, you can become anything, good or bad, but you will never become a great surgeon"

The robot girl was silent for a long time, her eyes cast down, her face agitated by conflicting passions; then she reached out, moistened a cotton ball with ether, carefully opened the cage and placed it on the animal's beak until it was asleep.



"At first it was very hard, but then I got used to it," sighed Niki sitting at the end of a park bench illuminated by the sunset light. "In these ten days I have greatly extended and deepened my skills ..."

"Your dream is beautiful and noble," said Atom sitting at the other end. "I think it is worth making sacrifices and renunciations, just to make it happen "

"So why do I feel so cold inside? All those animals killed ... all that blood ... ". She walked over to him and placed her head on his chest. "N-Niki ...?" Astro Boy stammered, surprised and embarrassed by that sudden confidence.

"It's weird... your heart beats at the same rhythm as mine... it's like a sweet lullaby..." she murmured. "Do you mind if I stay here for a while?" she said, narrowing her charming brown eyes.

"Of course ... no problem" replied the robot boy, blessing the foreign visitor for giving him that fragment of pure, absolute spiritual intimacy with his beloved.

"Is it allowed, doctor? It's me, it's Niki ..." the little robot girl said politely, knocking, but she realized that the door was already open. "Wait for me here," she said to Atom. She walked into the corridor and saw from afar the old man on the balcony, intent on arguing with a mysterious figure dressed in black. "I'll give it to you for the last time, doctor" he hissed, "give me the test tube"

"W-which test tube?" murmured the other falling from the clouds.

" But the test tube of the virus you discovered six months ago in Africa, of course!" exclaimed the first, lifting the visor of his hat. Niki recognized his face reflected in a mirror: it was Skunk! "The virus that causes Progressive Necrotic Degeneration, or the disease that is

slowly killing you ... as you see, I have my good sources of information," he grinned.

"What do you want to do with it?" Larsson asked, still trying to buy his time.

"Of course: I'll produce it by the ton, and I'll spread it over all the cities on Earth... unless the various governments give me their gold reserves. So, I will finally make my dream come true: to become the richest man in the world. Ha ha ha ha ! " he concluded with a coarse laugh.

"Your dream would be the nightmare of all mankind," the doctor burst out, raising his fist. "I will never give you that virus!"

"Don't make me angry, old man, or I'll throw your neck like a turkey!" growled Skunk grabbing him by the throat. Niki took a run and jumped on his back; but the criminal, taken aback, gave a push to the scientist who fell into the void beyond the balustrade, then shook off the robot girl and sent her against a wall. "Damn!" he

cursed looking at the lifeless body on the floor. "He took his secret to his grave!"

"Stop where you are!" Atom exclaimed breaking through the wall, but suddenly the roof of the building was uncovered like a can of tuna. "Damdam 2, punctual as clockwork!" Skunk exulted taking refuge on the iron giant's right hand. "This time I'm leaving empty-handed, damn Atom, but next time we meet I'll be done with you!" he shouted as his mechanical servant carried him away.

"Doctor Larsson ... please answer ... " Niki murmured shaking the old man; then he barely opened his eyes: "N-Niki ..." he murmured.

"Doctor, my diagnostic tools can't go wrong ... Y-You are ..."

"Yes," said the man with growing breathlessness. "I knew I still had a few months to live ... so I came to this country to undergo extreme experimental therapy ... but fate wanted it differently ..."

“No, please! Don't give up! ” she exclaimed, though aware of her own helplessness.

"You have two great gifts, my girl" he said, taking her hand: "the precision of an electronic computer and the sensitivity of a human being ... make good use of them ..." then closed his eyes forever.

"He was a very good person ... he didn't deserve to die like that" Niki sobbed, seeking refuge in the astral boy's arms. "Swear to me you will avenge him ... for what is dearest to you in the world, swear to me that you will hunt down Skunk until you have brought him to justice ... Swear!" she shouted.

I have nothing in the world dearer than you, Atom thought, stroking her blond hair. "I swear"

CHAPTER XI: A REVERED TEACHER

"Hiroshi and I have summoned you here, my boys, because we want to talk to you about an extraordinary man: Dr. Hans Berger, our robotics teacher at the University of Nerima" began Dr. Tenma with an inspired attitude. "He was nicknamed the Leonardo da Vinci of the third millennium: three degrees with honors in three years and in three different disciplines, Mechanical Engineering in Heidelberg, Electronic Engineering in Berkeley and Quantum Physics in Moscow ... He was a true teacher of school and life: it was he who taught us that brute force counts for nothing without intelligence, otherwise nations would be ruled by the wrestlers ... "

"Ah, so he was the one ..." Atom and Niki exclaimed in unison, then they turned to each other: " Eeeh? Did they tell you too???" "

“His dream was to make an interstellar propulsion system faster than light; he called it 'space warp engine’” added Dr. Ochanomizu.

"Unfortunately, while he was traveling on a mountain road, his car was hit by a landslide," Tenma resumed, saddened. "His wife and little son, who were with him, died instantly ..."

"Poor things ... and him?" Niki asked.

“He was found in the body of the vehicle, still alive... but a metal splinter had pierced his skull, sticking in a region of the brain that was not operable at the time; so, the authorities decided to put him in suspended animation until the advances in medical science allowed him to save his life ... and today that moment has come. Niki, you will be the one to carry out the operation” the man exclaimed to his adopted daughter.

"I-I?" she murmured embarrassed. "But ... I'm not worthy ..."

" The anatomy lessons given by the late Dr. Larson have completed your preparation," commented Dr.

Kikunosuke, the chief of Surgery. "There is no one else in the world capable of such a task ... we are all counting on you, my dear"

"Then I will not disappoint" she promised resolutely.



Niki Tenma put her clothes down in the locker room, wore a white suit that covered her from head to toe, and passed through an X-ray shower that sterilized her inside and out; then she entered the operating room where her assistants were waiting, looked at the watch and said aloud: "11:47 hours. Anesthesia?"

"Completed," said the anesthetist.

"Vital signs?" she then asked.

"Stable, normal" confirmed the first assistant.

"Blood oxygenation?"

"Regular," said the second assistant, raising his thumb.

"So, let's get started," the robot girl announced, activating the laser scalpel in her right hand.

In the waiting room everyone did their best to pass the wait: Tenma and Ochanomizu paced nervously up and down going in opposite directions and colliding every thirty seconds, Kisaragi and Honda consulted their

tablets, and Atom read the biography of the illustrious patient on the computer. *To a life of research, he alternated with success an intense competitive activity: a talented fighter, he won the World Champion of Indiscriminate Martial Arts five times in a row, then retiring from competitions, he officially said, 'in order not to deprive the spectators of the thrill of uncertainty', or, according to rumors, because he found no more opponents at his height. At the time of his retirement, he was awarded the Saotome prize, consisting of a gold and diamonds orchid worth ...*

"What a phenomenal man," Astro Boy muttered to himself as he scrolled down the page. *Another sport in which he excelled was free climbing, which he practiced above all at night with contempt for danger. "I like to see the sun rise from behind a chain of snowy mountains" was one of his favorite phrases; "It's worth risking your life to see such a spectacle"*. Niki went through the door and announced: "The patient is out of danger"

"You are great, Niki!" Atom exclaimed hugging her, but she dodged him immediately. "I knew you would succeed, my daughter: I am proud of you" Tenma said, shaking her hands.

"When will we be able to see him?" Dr. Ochanomizu asked.

"Now he's in intensive care," the little robot girl explained. "If everything goes smoothly, we will stop sedation in twelve hours, and the day after tomorrow you will meet him ... but only one of you, we must not stress him too much"

"You go first," Ochanomizu conceded to his friend. "He was particularly fond of you ... if I remember correctly, he even helped you to kindly dump a female student who was buzzing around you, and who you weren't interested in "

"You remember well, Hiroshi" Tenma said amused.

"Miss Honda" Atom asked curiously to Tenma's assistant. "Am I wrong, or was my father very much wanted by girls when he was young?"

"You're not wrong," she admitted. "Dr. Tenma has always had a special fascination for women, even if he never noticed who he really cared about... apart from poor Hoshie, of course," she sighed.

"Please, father: do not make him understand in any way that he spent thirty-five years in hibernation, or that his loved ones have died: his body and his psyche could be affected" Niki warned him.

"Okay, dear ... but if he were to ask you questions, what will you answer him?"

"Don't worry about that," she assured him. "When I want, I can lie very well"

The man opened his eyes and blinked. "Good morning" Niki said softly, pointing a light first on one pupil, then on the other. "Do you remember your full name and date of birth?"

"Hans Michael Berger, born on 8 August 2157," he answered diligently. "I remember the accident ... I lost control of the car ..." he murmured.

"One step at a time, please," she warned him auscultating him with its diagnostic tools without him noticing. "Can you raise your right hand and shake mine?"

Dr. Berger did it perfectly. "Where are my wife and son?" he then asked anxiously. Niki swallowed.

"Your wife and son are fine," she said. "They asked me to tell you that they will wait patiently for your recovery, and they invite you to do everything you can to get back to them soon"

"You can swear I'll give it my all," he said, reassured. "What's your name?"

"I'm Niki," the robot girl introduced herself.

"I didn't know Japanese nurses were so young... and so pretty," he winked.

The next day she entered the room announcing: "There is a visit for you ... Umataro Tenma. Do I let him in? "

“That filibuster? Sure!” he said in a good mood. Tenma went to the bed, smiled and said: “Welcome back, master”

“Tenma, my friend... what happened to you? You seem to have aged thirty yea ...” murmured Hans Berger; then he turned pale, jumped unexpectedly, and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. “You *have* aged at least thirty years!” he shouted. “How long has it been since the accident? And what became of Flora and Thomas? Tell me!”

Niki put her hands to her face. *How could I have made such a mistake?* she wondered. It was inevitable that he would understand: unlike robots, humans aged; their bodies, their faces were like clocks showing merciless the passage of time. How had she not thought about it before? “We are in 2235” Tenma murmured, looking away. “Your wife and son were crushed by the landslide ... I'm sorry, Hans”

"No ... noooo!" he yelled, taking his head in his hands. "Calm down, please!" the robot girl intervened making him lie down. "Go away... go away! Let me alone!" he groaned.

"It's been four days, and there has been no improvement," Niki sighed as she walked with Atom in the hospital garden. "He doesn't eat, he doesn't drink, and he's completely apathetic; we are forced to feed him intravenously ... He decided to let go, and it's all my fault "

"There must be a way to shake him," he said pragmatically. Suddenly the sky was darkened by a colossal figure who threw a punch against the wall of the building, shattering glass and steel beams. "Stay down!" he shouted at Niki, shielding her with his body.

The giant grabbed Hans Berger from his bed and flew off. "I must stop him!" exclaimed the robot boy. "There are many wounded under this rubble... and

I am too weak to lift them. I'm sorry, Atom, but they take precedence." she stopped him.

"We've stabilized all the wounded," Dr. Kikunosuke announced three hours later. "Now we have to save poor Dr. Berger"

"And how? That robot could be at the end of the world!" Ochanomizu exclaimed.

"The last word is not said," replied the doctor. "In this hospital, we apply a microchip under the skin that degrades in forty days to patients in 'fragile' psychic conditions, equipped with a position detector and a radio transmitter, to prevent them from losing their tracks. If he is still alive, we can detect the coordinates of the place where he is currently ... "

"I'm sure we'll find Skunk there too," Atom said resolutely. "It's time for him to pay for all his misdeeds"

While the little robot boy flying over a mountainous region of Hokkaido, Damdam 2 came against him and struck him by surprise causing him to fall to the ground. "SYSTEM MALFUNCTION - POWER FAILURE" appeared in transparency before his eyes, then it was dark.

Skunk opened the heavy gate and threw Atom's limp body in front of Hans Berger, barking: "So ends up who gets in my way." "Who are you, and what do you want from me?" asked the doctor.

"I'm Skunk Kusai, but you can call me Emperor of Crime," he introduced himself smugly, "and I want you to put your knowledge of quantum physics at my service. I want to invent a teleporter, or something, that allows me to enter the National Bank of Japan and take away all the gold is deposited! This is why I have made this beautiful modern laboratory available to you, with all the tools that can be useful to you ... aren't you happy, doc? " he concluded mockingly.

"You are crazy" the other replied imperturbably. "Even if it were technically feasible, and I stress *if*,

I would never put my science at the service of a miserable fool like you"

“If you don't do what I want, you are free to die of hunger and thirst. Think about it” concluded the rascal, laughing and closing the gate behind him.

When he was gone, Hans Berger stared thoughtfully at the little robot boy for a few seconds; then he picked him up, placed him on a work table, opened the door on his chest, and began fumbling with the screwdriver and welding machine. Twelve minutes - and eight seconds - later, Atom opened his eyes and sat up; all his systems worked perfectly. "Thank you for fixing me, Dr. Berger," he said solemnly.

"You are the most sophisticated robot I've ever had in my hands," he said. "Who created you? And do you have a name?"

"My name is Atom" he replied "and Dr. Tenma created me"

“That young daredevil! So, he managed to make his dream come true!” the doctor exclaimed, then showed

him the heavy chain that gripped his ankle. "Can you do anything about this?" he asked.

"Sure". Atom knelt before him and broke the iron ring without the slightest effort; then he pointed his index finger at the gate, fired a series of laser shots, drawing a circular opening three meters in diameter, and with a kick he knocked the grate to the ground. "Let's get moving," he told him.

They walked down a long corridor lit by neon lamps, stepped outside and found themselves in a kind of natural amphitheater, where Skunk and the steel colossus awaited them. "You are too predictable, doc ... Damdam 2, tear Atom to pieces!" he ordered his mechanical servant. He tried to grab Atom, who escaped him and fired his laser; but the opponent had too thick armor. "A fight outcome for granted ... how could a flea defeat an elephant?" Skunk exclaimed.

As Astro Boy continued to move around Damdam 2 without a construct, Hans Berger noticed that a gem on the giant's forehead lit up and pulsed at different rates

depending on the movements he made. Suddenly he had an intuition: "The gem, Atom! Destroy the gem!" he shouted.

"Got it," Atom said; he swooped down, punched the control device into a thousand pieces, and Damdam 2 took his head in his hands as a series of fires erupted throughout his body; then he fell to the ground and didn't move anymore.

"Damn!" growled Skunk. The astral boy stood before him: "Stop where you are!" intimate. The criminal pulled out a small sword murmuring "I'll sell my skin dearly"

"Stop it, Atom," said Dr. Berger, taking off his shirt and stepping forward. "This man is mine"

"As you like," he said, backing away. Skunk rushed at him shouting, "You're in a hurry to die, aren't you? Then I'll fix you first ... " He struck a few shots that all failed, while Atom watched from the bleachers wondering if it was not necessary to intervene.

"I will kill you ... I will open you like a chicken and ..." the rascal kept repeating, when Hans Berger hit him in the stomach leaving him breathless for a few moments. "Bastard!" the one yelled, rushing forward, but the doctor broke his nose with a fist, staining his dress with his own blood, while Atom jumped up startled, suddenly aware of the tactics that the scientist was using.

"You are too slow, Skunk Kusai" the latter addressed him, "you leave too many openings ... you waste too much energy unnecessarily ..." and in the meantime he threw a hook to his chin. "But above all, emperor of my boots" he continued giving him a shiner, "you really thought that a very vulgar blade was enough" - and here he dropped the weapon from his hand with a karate blow - "to defeat a five-time world champion martial artist?" And having said that, he knocked him out with a flying kick, wiped the sweat from his forehead and said to Atom: " Now get yourself this sack of potatoes"

"I'll think of him later" replied the little robot boy grabbing him and taking off. "Now hold on tight, there are a few minutes left," he said.

"A few minutes to what?" asked the doctor in amazement.

"At sunrise," he replied.

He placed him on the edge of a precipice overlooking a valley surrounded by a wide range of mountains, and pointed to the eastern horizon. "Here we are ... here it is!" he announced. The sky, black until a moment before, first began to turn a dark red, then lit up with all shades of pink, and after twenty seconds the star of the day made its appearance, making the snow-covered slopes shine with a dazzling whiteness. "Light and color; isn't it magnificent?" Atom exclaimed clapping his hands; then he turned to him and asked: "So, doctor, was it worth living to this day to see such a spectacle?"

Hans Berger had tears streaked down his cheeks, but he smiled. "Yes" he said then "it was worth it"

"Hello, Dr. Berger ... can I come in?" Niki asked politely. Hans Berger took the screwdriver out of his teeth. "Of course, little Niki ... oh, you are there too, Atom" he greeted them.

"I thought I'd bring her a snack, since he's always busy," said the robot girl, placing a basket on a table. "How do you feel?"

"Much better, thanks," he replied. " I am not yet used to the idea of looking younger than my former students ... but I am making progress. What happened to Skunk? "

"He was sentenced to forty-eight life sentences, plus 1,300 years of hard prison ... I think we won't hear about him anymore" the robot boy reassured him, then he turned to Niki: "As you can see, I kept my oath ... now you find me less detestable? "

"You've only done your duty, don't freak out," she replied keeping to herself. "For the rest, my feelings towards you have not changed"

"Really?" he retorted. "I thought they had already changed ... less than a month ago you weren't resting your head on my chest and saying that my heartbeat felt like, as you said, 'a sweet lullaby'?"

"Do you dare to blame me for a moment of weakness? You're an upstart! " she exclaimed walking away and leaving him, as usual, with a long face.

"Do robots quarrel like sweethearts?" Dr. Berger asked Tenma.

"Hans, I can't achieve anything in this story," he said, and explained the whole question to him in detail. "I was always one step ahead of all my classmates... but you were ahead of me by a mile. Can't you do something for me, for them?" he pleaded bowing deeply.

"I am indebted to those kids," replied the revered teacher. "Let me have a copy of Niki's construction plans ... but I can't promise you anything"

CHAPTER XII: LOVE AND VIOLENCE

"Like every year, it is time to prepare for the autumn festival" Master Mustache announced. "This year we will stage *Sleeping Beauty*, and in order not to harm anyone, the parts will be randomly assigned by a computer." He pushed a button, and after a few seconds the terminal spit out a list. "So, let's see: Hikaru Hiyama will be the princess ..."

"How lucky you are, Hikaru! You will receive the kiss of Prince Charming!" her companions congratulated, except immediately add: "... unless it's that Shibugaki barbarian". "Why, would you have something to say?" he teased.

"Hush, I have to continue" Shunsuke Ban signaled, nicknamed 'Nothing escapes my quick eye' (only when he was still a private investigator). "Well, the prince will be ... Atom"

"What? B-but I don't know the story of this Sleeping Beauty..." he shielded himself.

"It's simple to tell, boy," explained the teacher. "A princess falls into a deep sleep due to a witch's spell, and only the kiss of true love can awaken her"

"And I'll have to kiss ... Hikaru?" the robot boy wondered, embarrassed.

"And you'll have to kiss that Hiyama?" his sister asked in shock that evening. "You should kiss Niki, rather ... she is much nicer!"

"Uran! These are not suitable speeches for a child!" Ms. Tetsuwan scolded her. "But I'm no longer a child!" she replied piqued.

"Niki would never let me kiss her, not even on stage" Atom pointed out, "and anyway, it's just a fairy tale"

"How simple you make it, brother" Uran snorted. "Don't you know that fairy tales always have a grain of truth?"

Hiroshi Ochanomizu held out his hand to the stranger who had joined the Minister of Science and Technology, the Chief of Police Nakamura and Inspector Tawashi. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. ..."

"Dilloughby ... Ralph Dilloughby," he introduced himself, curling his thick handlebar mustache. "I know your fame, Dr. Ochanomizu, and my professional respect for you is immense ... this is why I insisted on setting up this meeting, so that you can express a judgment on my creation"

"You called him ... Cratos, if I'm not mistaken," ventured the scientist.

"That's right, like the Greek Titan," confirmed Dilloughby. "I came to Japan to offer you a contract for the production and purchase of a contingent for your metropolitan police force. He is equipped with two machine guns from thirty millimeters capable of shoot twenty thousand rounds per minute, has a power

of three hundred thousand horsepower, one X-ray scanner and an automated self-destruct device: if he suffers damage to more than 50% of its systems is activated a time bomb, and after ten seconds... boom! "

"I always mistrust robots, especially when they are too powerful," the inspector irritated. "How could we stop him if he decides to hurt someone?"

"I understand your concern, which is also mine, Inspector Tawashi" he commented, "but my Cratos is programmed to destroy only robots, not humans." That said, he pulled from his pocket a USB pendrive: "Do you want to look at the video of one of the many tests to which we have subjected him?"

"Let's see". Ochanomizu inserted the pendrive into his computer and pressed a button; in the video, Cratos effortlessly attacked and defeated an army of twenty heavily armed robots, carefully avoiding grazing the human volunteers confused among them. "So, what do you think?" Dilloughby urged them.

"That's enough for me," said Dr. Ochanomizu, raising his hand. "I give my favorable opinion on the agreement"

"I am in favor too," said the chief Nakamura.

"Well, the majority wins ... I agree too," Tawashi sighed.

"Well, very well" concluded the Minister, daring to rub his hands. "If you agree, the media presentation ceremony will take place on 23 September"

"How about celebrating with a good tea and pastries?" Ochanomizu proposed.

"Music to my ears," the visitor agreed as Miss Kisaragi entered with a cart full of food.

"Come on, Atom! Bend over her and kiss! What are you waiting for? " Tamao urged him in the role of prompter. "This is the fifth time you get stuck ... we have to go on with the tests!"

Astro Boy approached the bier set up in the gym, then stopped. "I'm sorry, Hikaru, but I can't kiss you," he murmured.

"Why don't you love me, right?" she sighed, getting up. "I would be satisfied even with an insincere kiss ..."

"You could give her a kiss on the forehead; from the audience no one will notice the difference" Kenichi proposed engulfed in his armor.

"No, no and again no!" Kaoru intervened. "A kiss is not a kiss if it is not on the mouth! Hikaru, like Princess Aurora, has the right to receive it, and we have the right to attend the event; so, get busy!"

"Kaoru is right, we want to see the kiss!" said another. "Yes, the kiss of true love!" a third one went up, and the entire female ward of class 1-E it was all a "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! "

"Stop this fuss!" roared Master Mustache. "If a kiss has to be, kiss let it be ... but in two days, not here and not now! And now go on, start rehearsing from the first scene!"

"It is for me a pleasure and an honor, esteemed fellow citizens, to give baptism to the new guardian of law and order ... the robot Cratos!" exclaimed the Minister, discovering a giant of chromed steel and super-reinforced plastic thirty meters high. "To its illustrious creator, Ralph Dilloughby, the privilege of activating it ... please!"

Dilloughby pressed the power button; Cratos opened his eyes, took a few steps and said in a metallic voice "I have to ... I have to ..."

"What's wrong with him, Dilloughby? It seems... strange ..." Dr. Ochanomizu asked. "I do not know ... perhaps a programming error ..." he muttered.

"I have to ... destroy ... robots ... destroy all robots" repeated the colossus as he stepped off the stage and walked along the avenue. "He's gone crazy! Shoot him!" Tawashi ordered his agents, but their blows did

not even tickle him. Cratos raised his right arm and fired: the robot policemen were reduced to crumbs, while their human colleagues were relieved that they had not even a scratch. "Robots are enemies of humans ... I have to destroy robots ..." the giant said continuing to advance. "Damn!" the inspector cursed, throwing his cap to the ground. "Where is Atom, when is he needed?"

Meanwhile Cratos continued to advance, littering every robot he encountered in his path. He logged into the city registry database, scanned it in a few picoseconds, then changed direction and strode towards the Fukuyan Institute.

"On her sixteenth birthday Aurora will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel, and will die" Maleficent announced, casting her spell on the cradle ... Suddenly the north wall of the gym erupted into a

deafening roar, while a giant thirty meters high mechanically repeated "Find Atom ... destroy Atom ..."

"Were you looking for me? I'm here!" exclaimed the robot boy stepping forward as actors and spectators evacuated the building. "Who are you, and what do you want from me?" he questioned him.

"I am Cratos" he said extending his arms "and I must destroy you"

Atom just had time to dodge, while everything around him was riddled with bullets. He threw a punch at the colossus, but he parried it easily and with a blow sent him eight meters away. "FUEL SYSTEM DAMAGED - PROCEED WITH THE REPAIR - MAXIMUM TIME: 12 5 SECONDS" announced the self-repair routine. *I won't make it in time*, he thought, *I have to distract him*. "Cratos" he murmured "why do you want to destroy me? What have I done?"

"I have to protect humans from robots," he replied. "I have to destroy the robots ... You are a robot ... I have to destroy you"

"TIME LEFT TO COMPLETE THE REPAIR: 48 SECONDS" ... "Listen to me, Cratos" begged Atom trying to reason with him, "robots are not all a threat ... There are good robots and evil robots, as there are among humans ... Look rather yourself: you entered here destroying everything, sowing terror... I'm not the threat to humans, it's you!"

"Destroy robots ... destroy Atom ..." Cratos repeated as a basketball hit him on the back. "Hey, pile of junk, look at me! I'm a robot too!" Niki exclaimed after stripping off her witch clothing. The mechanical killer scanned her with his X-ray scanner, declared "You are a robot" and opened fire; the robot girl just had time to hide behind a metal desk, which deformed under the blows but protected her.

" REPAIR COMPLETED, " the routine announced. "Rocket on!" Atom shouted as he charged; he grabbed Cratos' arm and pulled until it broke, then he used it as a club hitting it several times, finally severed both legs with his lasers. "Damage higher than 50% ...

activated self-destruct sequence ... less than 10, 9 ..." the giant announced.

"I carry him away," exclaimed the astral boy lifting him up to break through the ceiling and getting lost in the blue; seconds later the sky was illuminated by a blaze of lights. "Atom!" Niki yelled. "He's dead ... Atom is dead ..." murmured his companions; then Midori pointed her finger up, exclaiming: "No, he's coming back! He's alive!", and a few seconds later Astro Boy alighted in the courtyard, greeted by cheering applause.

"I have sinned of excessive pride," sighed Ralph Dilloughby in front of the wreckage of his rebellious creature. "Next time I'll be much, much more careful," he promised walking away in companion of Dr. Ochanomizu.

"Too bad" sighed Hikaru Hiyama instead, "I wanted so much to be kissed by Atom ...". "We see that it was not the will of Heaven" Uran ruled behind him.

"What do you know, meddlesome?" she screamed chasing her, while the robot girl screamed: "Help! Save me, brother! "

"Uran, stop playing! Time to go home!" said Ms. Tetsuwan. "Are you coming too, Atom?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Shunsuke Ban objected, "but Atom and Niki have to clean the school. Today's up to them, and the rules are rules"

At sunset the two robots found themselves in what was left of the gym. "Niki, I have to tell you something very important," Atom told her.

"Couldn't we talk about it tomorrow? I'm very tired," Niki replied, but he persisted. "Niki, this is not your first life" he burst out, and he told her in detail all the events from their first meeting until she had been dismantled to defuse the bomb inside her body. "And that's it," he concluded.

"It's absurd... it's just absurd," muttered the robot girl. "I don't believe a single word ... this is yet another trick you invented to impress me!"

"I told you the truth, Niki, " Atom retorted. "My sister is right: fairy tales have a grain of truth ... you are the victim of a spell, and I will wake you up with the kiss of true love"

"Do not touch me!" she cried in panic; she stepped back and fell onto a mat. The robot boy leaned over her. "Niki, I love you," he murmured. She raised her hand to slap him, but he pinned both of her wrists. "I love you, Niki" he repeated. "No!" Niki yelled with how much breath she had in her throat. "This isn't love, it's rape!"

At those words Atom was paralyzed; she took advantage of it to give him a double kick that threw him to the ground, then got up and ran away. "What ... what was I going to do?" he murmured.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, what a hurry!" exclaimed the teacher hearing a thick ringing: he left his frugal dinner halfway and went to open the door. "Oh, Atom, what a good wind!" he said. "You look very bad, son ... what happened to you?"

"I did a horrible thing, Master Mustache," Atom confessed sadly. "Come inside and tell me", the old man said.

Almost at the same time, Niki returned home and took refuge in the arms of her adoptive father. "Atom did a despicable thing" she began to tell "and to justify himself he even invented a shameless lie ..."

"Niki, my daughter" interrupted Dr. Tenma, "if Atom has told you what I suppose he told, you must know that it is all true, unfortunately ". She widened her eyes in shock. "Sit here, I have to explain many things to you," he added.

CHAPTER XIII: RETURN

"Although I hate violence, especially on a woman, I can understand how Atom felt," said Dr. Tenma at the end of that long night. "Having your beloved next to you every day, and feeling her distant, alien, after what you have been through together ...I am amazed that he has not lost control before"

"I believe you, father ... to you I cannot believe," murmured Niki still shaken by those revelations. "But even though I know that Atom has been telling the truth, I can't reciprocate his feelings ... it's stronger than me"

"So, what do you want to do, Niki?"

The robot girl stood up. "I will leave the Fukuyan Institute, and continue my studies in another school. When Atom no longer has me around every day he will forget about me, and stop suffering. Grant this request of mine, father; it's the best thing for both of us, and you know it"

He will never forget you, Tenma thought, but all he could do was bow his head and answer: "Okay"

"Bad, Atom, you behaved very badly" grumbled Master Mustache with folded arms. "Women are not to be hit even with a flower, says the proverb, and it says well ... thank goodness you stopped in time"

"I wish I could undo what I did, but it's impossible," sighed the robot boy. "What should I do, master?"

He looked at him fondly and put a hand on his shoulder. "If you're really sorry, you have to go to her and tell it ... and endure as a man what follows"

At the school entrance, Atom spotted Niki from afar and ran to meet her. "Niki, I have to tell you ...". "I have something to tell you too, Atom ..." she replied coldly, when she saw her adoptive parent enter out of breath. "Father, why are you here?" she asked him.

"Niki, the Prime Minister has summoned you ... you have to come to the government building, now!" the man answered. "I already spoke to the principal, so today you will be justified... but now come!"

The robot girl found all the ministers gathered in plenary session to welcome her; there was also Dr. Ochanomizu. "Niki Tenma," the Prime Minister began, "have you ever heard of Pashtunstan?"

"Pashtunstan? Yes, it is a Central Asian state, mountainous and desert ... but what ..." she said uncertainly.

"Leave to me explain for good," the man continued. "In the 21st century, in that country a religious fanatic came to power, called the Black Caliph, who, not satisfied with having enslaved women, destroyed the monuments of the past and the discoveries of modern science branded as witchcraft, claim to subject the entire human race to his crazy superstition; for this reason, after having indoctrinated his followers, he ordered them to wear

vests padded with TNT, and sent them to blow themselves up in the largest metropolises in the world, killing thousands of innocent people ... "

Niki was horrified. "The UN decided to send an army to overthrow his regime of terror, but the Caliph transformed every gorge, every ravine of his country into a place of deadly ambushes ... so the coalition decided to change tactics" intervened the Minister of Defense. "The Pashtunstan was blanket-bombed from the air for forty consecutive days, after which its borders were sealed so that no more could enter or exit ... and then no more was heard of the Black Caliph"

"For two hundred years we have been keeping an eye on the country with our spy satellites," added the Minister of Health. "Basically, Pashtunstan has gone back to the Stone Age: people live in huts or in the rubble of old cities, raise goats, and die from diseases that have long since been eradicated in the rest of the world, such as polio, smallpox, Sars and Covid ..."

"I'm sorry for them ... no matter how terrible their misdeeds have been, I think they received too much punishment," Niki said. "Can't you do something to help them?"

"After long discussions, the United Nations General Assembly has decided to send a humanitarian mission made up of robot-doctors and robot-nurses to Pashtunstan," continued the Prime Minister. "They will have to care for the sick and administer vaccines for younger children ... and we thought to put you at the chief of the team that will go on site, Niki Tenma"

The robot girl was stunned. "Me !!?" she exclaimed.

"We have been looking for a candidate for some time, but the excellent way in which you have returned Dr. Berger to the world has convinced us that you are the most suitable person ... All countries already agree: the mission 'Pashtun Aid 2235' is done with you at the head, or *it's* not done" the man concluded.

"You can trust in me," she replied.

The humanitarian mission was initiated by a week, and still in the Fukuyan Institute the images of the inaugural speech given by the illustrious pupil were broadcast. "It is an honor for me to have been chosen to lead this international mission, aimed at bringing the light of civilization and progress to a population abandoned too long in misery and abjection ..." Niki repeated once again from the screen in the classroom 1 -E. "What a great speech," Kaoru exclaimed. "Who knows who wrote it to him ..."

"Nobody," said Atom: the only one who could grasp, with his ultra-fast brain, the infinitesimal uncertainties in the robot girl's speech. "She composed it on the spot ... Niki is very good with words, and can be very persuasive"

"We know, we know ... she could melt even a piece of iron with her words. A piece of iron ... hee hee hee

hee!" Shibugaki burst out laughing, then he felt the cold gazes of his companions and murmured: "Well, what did I say wrong?"

"Student Tetsuwan Atom must go to the government building immediately," croaked the loudspeaker. "I repeat, the student Tetsuwan Atom ..."

"The team has missed two radio appointments in the last forty-eight hours" explained the Prime Minister, mortified, "therefore, according to the established protocol, the alarm was raised"

"It's your fault!" Dr. Tenma exclaimed furiously, banging his fist on the table. "You sent them into disarray in what you yourself have called a den of cutthroats, and without a rag of military protection ... but yeah, they were just robots, right?"

"I will not stay here without doing anything" announced the robot boy addressing directly to the head of the government. "Authorize me to leave Japan to look for them... anyway I will go there with or without your permission"

"Calm down, boy," said the man. "Getting them to safety is in your interest as well as ours; but Pashtunstan is a black hole, we don't know what weapons they have... we will have to move with caution. Indeed, *you will have to* "

While the Superfortress was flying over the eastern region of Pashstunstan, Atom went over in mind the instructions he had received once again: " You will have to launch yourself down from 13,000 meters of altitude, go down to the ground with your atomic rockets and wear the disguise that you will find in the package we launched with the parachute ... If you find them, you will have to contact us on this encrypted frequency, and we will send a helicopter to exfiltrate you ... "

"Two minutes to point X," the pilot announced. Suddenly the little robot boy heard a well-known voice

coming from one of the boxes in the hold: "Hey, I'm here too!"

"Uran!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Niki is my friend too," explained the robot child as she came out. "Please, brother ..."

"Okay," he said hugging her. "Hold on tight"

The hatch was opened, and a green light came on; "Rocket on!" Atom shouted, shooting at full speed towards the ground. Once they landed, thanks to a GPS detector they quickly identified the package with the clothes. "Wear this" he said handing her a burqa, "it's the traditional dress of the local women"

"Well, it's a very ugly dress," she snorted.

"According to the last report received, they were heading towards a village located in that direction" said the astral boy looking at a point on the horizon. "We should get there in five or six hours"

They had been walking for three hours when they met two Bedouins accompanied by five dromedaries

loaded with fabrics. "*Salam*" he greeted them affably. "My name is Ahmed, and this is my sister Noor," he lied.

"Allah is great, brother!" exclaimed the eldest. "I am Selim, and this is my cousin Ali... where do you come from? I've never seen you around here"

"In fact ... we come from the western provinces," Atom replied.

"Ah, I understand ... and are you traveling on foot?". He shrugged.

"Says the wise: damn the poor, if there were no other poor to give them a hand" ruled Selim making place on the back of an animal. "Get in here, so you can rest ... your sister will follow us on foot, our march is not very fast"

Upon reaching the village, Atom pretended to drink a sip of water from the goatskin he had with him, then handed it to Uran who took off his heavy cloak to imitate him. At that moment the two men approached them. "Brother Ahmed, we want to make you a proposal," Selim began. "It's time for Ali to get married ... and your

sister Noor is beautiful and well educated. We will give you a hundred pieces of gold, if you accept" and with this he opened a chest full of coins, making them jingle with his fingers.

Astro Boy had been warned about the customs of the Pashtuni people. "I thank you, but I cannot accept" he replied with a bow.

"I can give you two hundred pieces ... even three hundred ..." he insisted. "It's not a question of price, Selim," Atom resumed. "My sister is only ten years old"

"Our great prophet, peace and blessings upon him, married a six-year-old girl and lay with her when she was nine ... so your sister is more than ripe to be a wife" Ali intervened with a lewd smile. "Come on, don't be begged ..."

"My answer is always no" he cut it short, turning his back on them.

"Too bad," said Selim laying down his treasury and extracting a scimitar, while the cousin grabbed Uran from behind and clamped her mouth with one hand.

"Die," the man exclaimed preparing to strike. Atom spun around, grabbed him by the right arm and punched in the stomach that sent him flying six meters farther while her sister raised the other and sent him to keep company with the its relative. "Are you okay, Uran?" asked her brother, shedding his heavy cloak and placing himself back-to-back with her. "Never been better," the robot child confirmed.

The commotion had attracted about twenty shepherds from a nearby farm. "Kill him! I will share the woman with whoever kills him!" Ali yelled. The two brothers stretched out their arms and began to turn on themselves, paired, generating a whirl of wind and sand that made the attackers roll to the ground; then Atom rose in midair, opened a hole in the enclosure with the machine guns placed in his backside, and with a laser blast he frightened the animals causing them to flee through the gap.

"Goats! They're running away!" shouted the villagers as they ran after them. "Listen to me, men of Pash-tunstan!" he exclaimed. "We are looking for a group of foreigners who passed these parts three days ago; do you know where I am? If you don't tell me I will kill your animals and destroy your wells, so you will die of hunger and thirst!"

"No, out of pity, spare us!" they begged, bowing to the ground and weeping; Selim and Ali were the ones who cried the loudest. A man with a long gray beard, leaning on a gnarled stick, stepped forward. "If we tell you the whole truth, will you leave us in peace?" he asked.

"You have my word," Atom promised. "Now speak"

"You called them strangers ... but they were demons, iron demons like you" began to tell the man, visibly upset. "They arrived on magical chariots, chariots without wheels, I mean, moving in mid-air; they were commanded by a female, a sensual demon with golden

hair, who wore a dress as white as snow outside, but red as fire inside". He spat on the ground and uttered a superstitious formula: "Adam, Eve, drive away the voluptuous Lilith"

He's talking about Niki... "And then? Keep it going!" he urged him.

"They asked us to bring our sick people and our children, to impose their charms on them... we asked them to leave. Then came a strange very little man, carrying an instrument to make music; the demons, upon hearing the music, obeyed the little man, and walked with him"

"Where did they go?" Atom asked again.

"In the White Mountains, a place of jackals and evil *jinns*," the man replied, pointing to a mountain range a few kilometers away. "I told you everything I know, now go away!"

"Brother," Uran asked as they climbed up a mountain path, "would you really have done all those bad things?"

"Of course, not" he reassured her, "but they didn't know"

"You would do anything for Niki, right? But she can't stand you..." the little sister observed disconsolately.

"It does not matter. Whether she loves me or hates me, Niki is always Niki ... and I will save her, whatever the cost" swore the robot boy.

"Look, Atom! An electric wire!" she said after a while pointing to the tall building overlooking a reservoir. Atom walked over and checked the wear on the material. "It was built a few days ago" he concluded.

"There are others over there ... let's follow them!" Uran urged him, pointing to a chain of similar installations that made high-voltage cables run down the slopes.

Upon reaching a hundred meters from a valley, they saw some humanoid figures carrying materials under the

guidance of one of them. "They are robots ... and Niki is there too!" Uran exclaimed. "Hide here and don't move for any reason" Atom ordered her, reducing his hearing to a thousandth and walking towards them.

"Niki, it's me ... I'm Atom," he told her when he was near; she put two fingers in her mouth, emitting a whistle, and immediately all the robots on the team jumped on him and pinned to the ground with their weight.

"I knew you were coming ... you fell into my trap like a tawny owl" said a man of incredibly short stature stepping forward; over his shoulder he wore a kind of piano whose keys he continually touched. "Who are you?" the astral boy asked him.

"I'm Shintaro Minagata ... but everyone calls me Doctor Minimini" he introduced himself. "For years, students and colleagues have laughed at me, at the little body that nature has given me ... but soon they won't laugh anymore! Do you see those caves?" he said, pointing to a maze of caves on the sides of the mountain. "In there the Black Caliph hid his arsenal: thousands of

chemical, bacteriological and nuclear weapons I will install on these robots, and others who I will build thanks to the work of my servants, sending them to blow themselves up in every city on Earth. So I, the great Minimini, will reign over the Apocalypse! " he concluded with a satanic laugh.

Brother! I have to do something, Uran told herself. She placed herself behind the last pylon and pushed as hard as she could, but to no avail; then she decided to use her legs, and finally the pylon tilted, fell and began to roll down the sides of the mountain.

"Damn!" Doctor Minimini exclaimed, taking cover. "Step aside, Niki!" Atom yelled, but she didn't move; the huge mass of steel struck her, and a very high voltage cable hit her, burning her clothes. "Nikiiii!" Atom cried in desperation.

"That pylon was badly mounted ... but I will raise others," muttered the evil scientist as he approached again and continued to play his haunted music. "Time to

do away with you," he grinned as he gripped an electric gun.

At that moment Niki stood up, naked and scorched, and approached the doctor. "You are still able to move, I see ... well, you take care of it," he said, handing her the weapon. I couldn't save her, Atom thought closing his eyes and preparing to receive the lethal discharge.

Niki took the rifle, looked at the little robot boy, then pointed the weapon at the piano and fired. The instrument broke into a thousand pieces, and all the robots that kept Atom property returned to him murmuring: "Wh-where are we? What happened?" as she broke the rifle in two, throwing the fragments to the ground.

"I-I do not understand what's happening, but it is better to cut and run" stammered Minimini escaping, but the robot boy reached him in a moment and tied like a sausage using an electric cable. "You saved me ... thanks" he then said to Niki.

"You're getting used to being saved by me, my dear Atom, " she replied, smiling sweetly. "The first time

when Dr. Rindolph wanted to send you to the sun, and now this ..."

"N-Niki, but then ... you remember ..." Atom exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes," she said coming over and taking his hand. "I don't know how and why, but when the current crossed my body, I recovered every little detail of my previous life ... starting with the fact that I love you"

"Oh, Niki! Niki, Niki, Niki!" he repeated full of joy; he hugged her and spun in the air several times. "I suffered so much when I lost you ... and when Dr. Tenma promised me you would come back to life, I felt like I was touching the sky with a finger ... and when I discovered that you didn't recognize me, I ..."

"Now it's all gone," she assured him placing her mouth on that to him. Trillions of petabytes flowed from one to the other, as they became one; then, after a very long minute, they parted.

"Forgive me, Niki ... I was going to ..." he began. She stroked his lips with a finger. "Just say you love me,

Atom ... and we'll be together forever, and I'll forget that bad episode," she forestalled.

"I love you, Niki ... forever" he promised, holding her close. At that moment, in Metro City, Dr. Berger came out of breath into Umataro Tenma's office shouting: "I did it, I did it! I figured out how to unlock Niki's memory!"

"Are you really mean, Hans? And how?" he exclaimed.

" I should have thought long before ... it's as simple as Columbus's egg!" the other explained triumphantly. " You see, Niki's nanochips resonate when they are traversed by an alternating current of one hundred thousand volts, like that which had been hit Atom ... ergo, to awaken her is necessary to subject her to a current equal ... "

"Hey, brother, this is no time to rest on our laurels!" exclaimed Uran approaching the two lovebirds. " We must communicate our position so that they can come and recover us ... and then we'll have to pull out of the

caves all those bombs and neutralize them ...", then she decided to let them coo a little longer and directed her gaze elsewhere; after all, she was still a child.

CHAPTER XIV: THE ENCHANTED TYPEWRITER

"They're catching up with me," the man driving the stolen car muttered to himself, looking in the rearview mirror, and cursed his bad luck: he hoped to find money and jewels in that big villa, but instead he had time to take only that wreck, before they found out... but they shouldn't have pinched him with the body of the offense. He opened the window, grabbed the typewriter and threw it out, then continued his flight.

After a couple of kilometers, he lost control and crashed into a light pole; the chasing car caught up with him, a washed-out man got out and opened the door, fumbled meticulously with gloved hands, ignoring the driver stunned by the impact, and turned back. "Found it, Sasha?" asked one driving in a Romance language.

"Nothing," he said. "The boss will not be happy"

“Atom, what a pleasure to see you! Do you need something?” Kenichi Shikishima asked, approaching his friend who had rung the doorbell.

"I wanted to propose that we prepare together for the next exams" replied the robot boy. "Are you alone at home?"

“My parents and my sister went to visit their grandparents in Hokkaido,” he explained. "Do you have news about Niki?"

“She's accompanying Dr. Tenma to a meeting in the United States,” Atom replied. *Tick, tick, tick-tick-tick...* “What is it? A bomb?” he cried out in alarm.

"It comes from the bush" Kenichi murmured in fear.

"Take cover," Atom told him. He approached cautiously, rummaged in the branches, then said in amazement: "It's just an old typewriter, but ... it writes by itself"

"Will it be enchanted?" the little boy asked himself, looking at it with curiosity. He pulled out the sheet of

paper and read it: "It contains chemical formulas ... I don't understand anything"

"Spells don't exist," Atom replied turning it in his hands. "It's a Magnum 777 ..."

"Look, Atom: there's a seal here, but it's written too small," observed his friend. "I'm going to get a magnifying glass"

"I don't need it," the robot boy said, peering at it with his superview. "It says: *April 18, 2232 - property of Dusan Ylich*"

"This Dusan Ylich must be the owner," Kenichi concluded. "What do we do, Atom?"

"It's best to hide it in my house, it will be safer there ... then we 'll find his address, and we'll go talk to him," he decided.

Dusan Ylich's "house" was a large two-story villa located in a very elegant neighborhood. "Though!" Kenichi whistled. "He must be a very rich man"

"The computer says he came from Romanja, a central European country that produces flowers, antibiotics and fireworks, " confirmed Atom. "There he was a very successful businessman: he was nicknamed 'the swordsman of finance' ... then, sixteen years ago, he abandoned everything and moved here, to Metro City"

A liveried robot butler opened the door for them. "Who should I announce, gentlemen?" he said haughtily. "Show your master this," Atom said handing the printed sheet.

A minute later a distinguished-looking man showed up very agitated. "I recognized the characters... they are from my Magnum! Where is it? I will pay you any amount to get it back!"

"We don't want money, Mr. Ylich," Astro Boy warned him, "but we want to understand... Why

does your typewriter write by itself? And what are those formulas?"

"Say absurd things ... the Magnum 777 was built at the beginning of the 20th century, before the birth of electronics ... it can't write itself!" muttered the man balling up the paper and throwing it in a basket. "Anyway, it's *my* ... so if you don't give it back to me, I will have to call the police and report you, boys!"

"Do it ... we'll tell our side of the story," Atom challenged him. "And for you to know, my name is Atom, Atom Tetsuwan"

"And I'm Kenichi Shikishima ... it was I who found his typewriter in my garden" added the other before taking his leave. Ten kilometers away, a nervous hand turned off a switch. "I was right to order you to place a bug in that villa ... you heard his name? Kenichi Shikishima ... Go therefore; and if you fail this time too, I'll kick you in the back home!" a mysterious figure said to his minions.

As the two boys crossed the corridor, a girl of about sixteen came to meet them. "I am the daughter of Dusan Ylich," she introduced herself. "I've heard your speeches ... I just wanted to tell you that my father is a good and honest man, and he wouldn't hurt a fly ... do you believe me, Mr. Shikishima?" she said staring at the boy.

Kenichi looked at her in delight: her body was as supple as a reed, and her hair smelled of violets. "Of course I believe you, Miss Ylich ... you can call me Kenichi if you want," he murmured.

"Very gladly, Kenichi" she replied smiling at him. "Then say 'you' ... and call me Oldrin"

On his return Kenichi found the door open; he came in, and saw that the interior had been ransacked: cupboards and drawers had been emptied, the floor was covered with all sorts of objects thrown in bulk. *They took*

neither Dad's money, nor Mom's jewels... he considered after searching around. So, what were they looking for?

Someone behind him dropped a sack on him; then four hands immobilized him and lifted him off his weight, loading him into the back seat of a car that started off at breakneck speed, to stop half an hour later in front of a pyrotechnic plant. There the boy was released from the sack and found three men with ugly faces before him. "Where is the Magnum 777?" asked a man with a neatly shaved skull.

"Was it you who devastated my home? I'll never tell you!" Kenichi exclaimed. The bald one slapped him growling: "Don't waste our time, brat!". "You can even kill me, but I'll never give you that typewriter!" he boldly proclaimed.

"Uncover his arm," the boss ordered, extracting a small vial and a syringe from a bag. "With the truth serum you will tell everything we want to know", he grinned.

He sucked in the liquid and approached him threateningly, but at the last moment the syringe was hit by a laser beam and shattered into a thousand pieces. The gang leader turned and saw him: "It's Atom! Shoot him!", he ordered his men, when a squad of policemen burst into the large hall. "Hands up, cowards!" Inspector Tawashi ordered.

"How did you find me?" Kenichi asked his friend.

"We were supposed to do our homework together, remember?" he answered. "When I got to your house, I saw that disaster, and I found a business card on the floor showing the address of this factory ... so I called the police and I rushed here," she said showing him a little rectangle of plastic-coated paper.

"Piotr, Sasha, you are two idiots!" the boss barked at his henchmen. "Handcuff them and take them to the cooler", said the inspector.

"You cannot: they are agents of the Romanian embassy in Japan, and are therefore covered by diplomatic immunity," a short, plump man who emerged from the

shadows warned them. "And who are you to say this?" asked the suspicious inspector.

"Maxim Smirnov, the Romanjan ambassador: these are my credentials" replied the man, handing an electronic document which Tawashi checked with his portable scanner. "I have been a good friend of Dusan Ylich ever since he came to live in your country," the diplomat began to tell. "Every month we get together for a family dinner with my wife Vera and his daughter, Oldrin ... once with me in the embassy, once with him ... The day before yesterday, as I was taking a break to smoke a cigar, I saw an old typewriter spit out a printed sheet and read it out of curiosity: it contained the secrets of oxomycin manufacturing ... "

"What is oxomycin?" Atom asked.

"An almost universal antibiotic of which Romanja has the world exclusive, and which forms the basis of our prosperity ... its production techniques are a state secret, and whoever steals them abroad is punished with death" he continued. "I sent my agents to Villa Ylich to

collect the typewriter, in order to use it as a source of evidence to accuse him; but he, or someone else, preceded them ... you know the rest"

"Your men have committed serious crimes against a Japanese citizen, so it does not end there" ruled the inspector; then he turned to the two boys: "Come with me", and made them get into the car.

"Where do we go?" Kenichi asked.

"Have a chat with Dusan Ylich," he said grimly.

"Are you, Kenichi?" Oldrin exclaimed coming towards them wrapped in an impalpable nightgown, then covered herself convulsively with her hands. "O-Oldrin ..." the boy murmured, blushing.

"We have reason to believe that you are exporting top secret documents from Romanja using the Magnum 777, Mr. Ylich," Tawashi began.

"I already explained to the guys that my Magnum *is not* a teleprinter!" the host burst out angrily.

"But you have teleprinters, don't you? I see you have a nice collection of mechanical and electronic devices ..." the inspector replied, observing the stacked shelves.

"Well, yes, I have one, that's there ... but I don't understand what relevance it has ..." Dusan Ylich answered confused.

"Now we will see it" said the policeman, grabbing the device.

"Careful, you don't handle it so roughly! It could damage her..." the man warned him, but the inspector didn't listen to him; he opened the chassis and found that the interior was completely empty.

"Now I understand everything! You transferred the teletype components inside the Magnum 777, and used it to receive the formulas from her contact in

Romanja! You believed that no one would have paid attention to an old device ... but the devil has put its tail" he triumphantly concluded.

"I ... I am innocent ..." Ylich stammered, turning to look at her daughter.

"M-my father ... my father is a traitor!" she murmured bursting into tears; Kenichi handed her his handkerchief. "How good you are, Kenichi" she thanked him. "You remind me of a dear friend I met last year, during a vacation in my country ..."

"Dusan Ylich, I declare you under arrest," the inspector said, handcuffing him. "You will be extradited to Romanja as soon as possible"

"What happened to the Romanjan agents who kidnapped me?" Kenichi asked his friend.

"They were expelled, forbidden to set foot in Japan for the rest of their days," Atom replied. "I would have

preferred that they were put in prison, but it's better than nothing... Look here” he said then, showing him the documents relating to a holiday for two in Romanja, all inclusive. “It is a gift from Ambassador Smirnov, as a sign of gratitude for the services rendered to his country ... he even made me grant an authorization for expatriation for three days, just think! Come with me?" he proposed.

"I'm sorry, Atom, but I have offered Oldrin to help her take care of the flowers in her garden," the boy explained. "You know, these days she's so sad ... and so sweet ..."

“Did you fall in love with her, Kenichi? But she's at least three years older than you!" exclaimed the little robot boy, then corrected himself: "I'm sorry, sometimes I think like a human being ... but I'm happy for you"

“So you go on vacation in Romanja, huh? The usual lucky...” Inspector Tawashi greeted him sitting at his desk. "What time are you leaving?"

"At 3 pm," Atom replied. "Were you able to locate the source of the broadcasts?"

" I knew you weren't going on a pleasure trip, " he replied, handing him a paper. "Here are the coordinates: Romanja, Grand Town, 31 Rose Avenue, staircase C, interior 13 ... good hunting"

"A taxi to Grand Town, tourist?" a sprightly uniformed gentleman asked, taking off his hat. "Yes, thank you," Atom said.

The yellow car took off at full speed. "It can go even slower, I'm in no hurry," Astro Boy murmured feeling himself tossed. "Oh, but I 'm going slow," replied the taxi driver. "Don't you have guardrails?" he asked, looking out the window. "Guard-what? I don't know what they are," the man muttered.

After half an hour of travel, the taxi plunged into the chaotic traffic of Grand Town without slowing

down. "Be careful, it went red!" Atom warned him. "So?" he said. "Here, red means go-ahead ... where do you want to get off?"

"31 Rose Avenue" replied the astral boy.

When they got there, Atom asked for the bill. "Wait ... there are 4,981 dinars for you, with my compliments," said the cabbie handing him a pile of bills and coins. "I don't understand ... do you pay me?" he stunned.

"Romanja is very welcoming to tourists... have a good stay" the man greeted him.

Atom entered the building, went up the staircase C and identified the interior 13; "Dragu Vassili," he murmured as he read the name. He listened with his super-hearing, discovering that the tenant was at home; then he made a call with the radio placed inside his chest, and put himself on hold.

Fifteen minutes later he rang the doorbell and hid; "Who is it?" a male voice inside asked, then silence. Atom rang again; this time a young man of about twenty-five opened. When he saw him, the little robot

boy was stunned: he was the adult copy of Kenichi! "Who are you?" the man asked with an unfriendly air.

"I'm Atom ... and you must be the 'dear friend', don't you?" he addressed him.

"I do not know what you mean ..." the other mumbled, when five Romanian policemen emerged from the stairs and aimed their weapons at him. "Vassili Dragu, you are under arrest for espionage and betrayal of the homeland!" announced the highest ranking. "Just in time ... thank goodness!" exclaimed the robot boy.

"I did nothing ... hey, where do you go?" shouted the arrested as Atom entered the house followed by the officer. "I hope you have told the truth, otherwise we'll have to release him and we'll get in trouble," said the human. The search was short: the teleprinter was on display on the kitchen table, next to piles of confidential documents.

"I have been betrayed," Vassili exclaimed as they carried him away. "It's over for me ... but I won't go to the other world alone"

"The execution will take place in two hours," said the chief of Romanjan police. "Are you sure you want to leave immediately?"

"I do not wish to attend the executioner's work" replied Atom walking toward the taxi that was waiting for him in the central square of Grand Town.

The journey to the airport was, if possible, even more hectic than the outward journey. "12,328 dinars? How, this time I pay?" Astro Boy asked upon arrival.

"What did you think?" the old man replied, pocketing the sum. "On return, the two trips are paid, and the loan is repaid ... with interest"

As the craft was preparing to fly over China, Atom begged to arrive in time, and pondered the unpleasant truths he was supposed to reveal.

"Back already, Atom? We are to deliver Ylich the agents that will bring him back to Romanja" Inspector Tawashi marveled. Accompanying the prisoner in handcuffs, in addition to the inspector and Smirnov, were Oldrin and Kenichi. "Don't tell me you've already found out the contact's name!" he exclaimed.

"He's called Vassili Dragu ... indeed, he was called, why he was hanged to 10, Grand Town time," he answered pulling an electronic document out of his jacket. "Before the execution he revealed the name of whoever hired him ... Miss Oldrin Ylich"

"Damn!" she cursed opening her purse; she took out a handful of magnesium powder which she threw on those present producing a flash and a cloud of smoke,

and turned back. "Get out of my way, brat!" she said to Kenichi giving him a shove, but he grabbed her by the legs making her fall to the ground. "Nice shot!" Atom exclaimed.

"B-but what have you done, my daughter?" Dusan Ylich exclaimed.

"I'm not your daughter!" she cried trying to free herself. "I am Oldrin Zevon, daughter of Orpheus and Magda Zevon, whom you murdered!"

"What is this story, Dusan?" asked the ambassador. Ylich bowed his head.

" I was once a young financier thirsty for money and glory ... I decided to take over Chemintrax, the national company that produces the oxomycin, and since Orpheus Zevon, the owner, did not want to sell, I resorted to unfair means ..." he told. "I paid some dishonest journalists to falsely accuse him of holding company funds for himself, and of being unfaithful to his wife ... In the end, poor Magda died of a broken heart from grief, and Orpheus, desperate, killed himself ... So I got his

company for a little money... but then I found out that the Zevons had left a few months old daughter, and everything I had done appeared to me for what it was: a monstrosity..." he continued through tears. "So, I adopted Oldrin, gave up all my businesses and moved here with her, trying to give her the happiness she couldn't get from her parents ... But how did you find out?"

"I wanted to take the measurements of your tie, to make you a birthday present," she replied, staring at him with hatred, "so I rummaged in your drawers, and discovered the documents relating to my adoption; I searched for news on the Internet, and I found out the truth ... You killed them to be true to your reputation as a 'swordsman of finance'!" and spat on him.

"Take it easy!" Tawashi exclaimed, holding her back. " Why did you choose Vassili Dragu as an accomplice?"

"I met him last year during a vacation in Romanja," Oldrin explained. "I found that he worked at Cheminrax, and that he had access to the most confidential

documents ... That fool was in love with me, so I easily convinced him to pass on the information at the most suitable time for Ambassador Smirnov to notice ... When the Magnum was stolen, I feared that my plan would go wrong, but then Kenichi found it ... and I thought that fate was offering me a second chance to carry out my revenge"

" The Romanjan justice will also consider your position, Ylich" ruled the Ambassador, then turned to his men. "Bring her on board and go"

"No! I don't want to die, I don't want to die! Have mercy on me, please! " she began to cry out in despair; she turned to Kenichi and begged him: "Please, Kenichi, save me!" He said in a trembling voice, "Good-bye ... Ice Princess" and turned his back on her.

"Nooooo!" she moaned collapsing. The Romanjan agents grabbed her, dragged her up the ladder of the private jet into the cockpit, then closed the hatch and the plane headed for the runway; two minutes later it was a white dot in the sky, getting smaller and smaller.

"Kenichi, my friend," Atom murmured, hugging the boy's shoulders.

"Take me home, Atom, please," he said, wiping his tears with the back of his hand.

"Okay ... hold on tight" said the little robot boy before taking off towards the Shikishima home.

CHAPTER XV: RED SONJA

At 22:40 the New Year party was already in full swing: while at the karaoke corner Kaoru and her companions sang *Tatta Hitotsu no Omoi*, Shibugaki made his entrance in the ballroom. "I'm in great shape, folks! I will amaze all the girls with my dance technique!" he announced, swinging his pelvis.

"The only technique you excel at is cleaning up the buffet," Tamao commented.

"Now I'll fix you, big mouth!" the one exclaimed running after him. "Help! Save me, Atom! ", shouted the four-eyed know-it-all.

At that moment Atom had eyes only for Niki: when the orchestra started a slow, he bowed deeply. "Milady, will you grant me this dance?" he murmured.

"Gladly, Mr. Count ... indeed, I grant you all my carnet" she smiled at him, holding out her hand.

"Atom and Niki are now together, and I'm happy for them" sighed Hikaru Hiyama watching them spin around the floor, "but I, will I ever find a guy who loves me?"

"Hey, Hikaru" Kenichi Shikishima urged her. "Forget Atom, I have to talk to you"

"I'm listening to you," she said, turning around.

"Hi-Hikaru, there ... " he began to say stammering, "it's been m-more than a month that we do our homework together, every day ..."

"Are you tired of me?" Hikaru asked.

"No, no, far from it!" Kenichi exclaimed waving his hand. "I just wanted to tell you that... yes, I wanted to tell you that...". He swallowed, took courage and said in one breath: "I like you, Hikaru Hiyama!"

She was speechless. "Sorry, I shouldn't have been so blunt ..." he continued. "The fact is that ... I consider you an intelligent, pretty and very, very sweet girl ... I am alone, you are alone, so I thought that, if we put our loneliness together, we could form a great couple ..."

"But how dare you?" she screamed, raising her right hand. The boy closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, preparing to receive a loud slap that never came; he opened his eyes again and found that she was staring at him intensely. "All things considered, you're not bad at all," she said, stroking his cheek. "Shall we dance?". In the karaoke corner, the girls sang *Taiyou No Rakuen-Promised Land*.

Meanwhile, in the National Museum, a robot guardian felt the irresistible impulse to terminate her patrol around and get close to a crystal showcase; he smashed it with his fist, took the heavy gold and black opal collar that was inside it, and put it on ...

Around 1.40 am Atom and Niki were picking up the rubbish making their way through the sleeping bodies when Tawashi made his appearance. "Sorry to bother

you tonight too, Atom, but something is happening at the National Museum that doesn't bode well"

"Unfortunately, evil never sleeps, Inspector ... but I'm wide awake too" replied the robot boy, taking off his tail.

"I'm coming too," Niki said. "Two robots are better than one, aren't they?"

"Okay, but let's hurry" the man said.

From the ceiling of the museum - an elegant neo-classical building - came a tongue of fire that was lost in the darkness. "Keep curious and journalists away!" the inspector ordered his men.

"I can sense an evil mind," Atom murmured. "It must be very powerful, if I can hear it from here ... Inspector, hold Niki until I return!" he said climbing over the barrier and going inside. "No, Atom! I want to come with you! I want to help you! Please, Inspector, let me go!" the little robot girl implored, but in vain.

As he walked along a dimly lit corridor, the astral boy was attacked by two gelatinous creatures who

wrapped him with their tentacles. "They're sucking my energy ... if I don't free myself within two minutes, I will run out ... Niki ..." he murmured.

"Okay, Inspector, I won't try to enter" Niki said, raising two fingers and showing off her best smile, "but at least let me go to the bathroom ... you know, I have to pee"

"I did not know that robots had become so sophisticated" Tawashi commented surprised, loosening his grip and looking around. "So, the nearest public bathroom is ... Hey!" he shouted as the robot girl ran into the museum.

We're at the usual, she told herself sadly. "We will not be over", "We'll be together forever" ... then as soon as there is a danger, you load all the weight of the world on your shoulders ... Suddenly she saw him from afar fight those blobs. She had to help him, but how? She wasn't strong... A glow from a crystal case caught her attention: it came from a long, heavy sword.

"What a strange light ... it shines like the sun, but it doesn't hurt ..." she murmured; she opened the case, took up the weapon, and raised it up ...

Astro Boy was almost devoid of energy when he heard a female voice shout: "Retire, offspring of hell, or you will taste the blade of Red Sonja, the she-devil of the Hyrkanian steppes!" He opened his eyes and saw a short, red-haired girl, dressed in leather boots and a mesh bikini, slicing up the creatures that held him; immediately he felt the energy return inside him, while the gelatinous fragments were drying instantly.

Where did this girl come from? he wondered. *Either way, she saved me ...* A tall, hieratic figure appeared out of nowhere in front of the swordswoman. "Kulan Gath!" she exclaimed with hatred.

"You won't hinder me this time again, she-devil!" the priest hissed, forming a globe of fire in his

hands and hurling it at her. "Be careful!" Atom shouted grabbing her just in time and fleeing through the halls.

"Leave me now or I'll cut your throat! Leave me, I said!" screamed the fiery-haired girl, beating him with fists and hitting him with the hilt of her broadsword. *She is speaking in ancient Persian*, the little robot boy considered. "Take it easy! I returned you the favor, didn't you notice?" he said landing in a place he thought was safe. "You said your name is Red Sonja, didn't you? Where do you come from, and who is that kind of mad priest who is angry with you?"

"I'll only answer you because you saved my life," she said. "I come from a northern kingdom near the coasts of the Great Inland Sea. On my seventeenth birthday, the mercenaries of Kulan Gath - the mad priest, as you called him - stormed our house and burned it down; my father, my mother and my two little brothers were massacred without mercy, and I was... but you are small and you cannot understand" she said with a sad look.

"I'm small in stature, but I understand very well ... and I'm sorry for you" replied the astral boy, thinking back to the violence he was about to commit when he was desperate ... when Niki had not yet *returned*. "And then, what happened?" he questioned her.

"Then Scathach, the great red-haired goddess, appeared to me," Red Sonja continued with an inspired air. "He promised to give me enough strength and courage to do justice, as long as I used them to defend the weak and the innocent, and do not give myself to any man, if not to the man who had defeated me in a fair duel ... so don't get strange ideas in your head, if you care to life!" she exclaimed brandishing her weapon.

"That's the last thing I think about ..." Atom started to say, but two nets fell on them immobilizing them. "I feel... weak..." she murmured. "Me too ..." he said, then they both fainted.

When he opened his eyes, Astro Boy heard a mellifluous voice address him in Japanese: "It took you a while to wake up, iron man!" He found himself tied to X-shaped gallows suspended between two columns of an Akkadian-style temple; Red Sonja was similarly bound. "You are Kulan Gath ... do you speak my language?" he asked.

"A little spell, iron man," replied the priest. "I have never met a being like you ... I will have fun studying you for a long time, tearing you apart a little at a time" he laughed.

"Kulan Gath, scum of the world! Talk to me, not him!" exclaimed the swordswoman in the meantime recovered. "How did you survive our last fight? I had ripped your heart!"

"My science is superior to that of mere mortals, Red Sonja," he replied, stroking the gold and black opal collar he wore around his neck. "Before taking my last breath, I enclosed my mind in this jewel from which I

never separate, and I waited for a favorable astral conjunction to allow me to find hospitality in a new body ... But now your end has come." He reached out and two other hideous creatures began to crawl out of a crater below them, scrambling towards the tawny-haired girl. "Your sacrifice will mark the beginning of my millennial reign," Kulan Gath prophesied. "I will subdue the cities of Sumer and Assur, the kings of Babylon and Egypt will offer me tribute of blood; my kingdom will extend from the Phoenicians to the Medes, and from the Hittites to the sea!"

This madman thinks it's 3000 BC... or maybe even earlier, the little robot boy thought. *I have to free Red Sonja, before those blobs suck the life out of her...* He tested the resistance of the chains and saw that they gave way.

"You made a mistake, Kulan Gath," he exclaimed. "These chains can bind a sacrificial bull ... but they cannot hold a robot with the power of a hundred thousand horses tight!"; and having said this, he freed

himself, rose up to detach the lintel of the temple and threw it on the creatures, throwing them back into the abyss from which they had come out and closing it under a ton of rubble. "No!" yelled the evil priest.

"I underestimated you, little guy," she said brightly as he freed. "You are strong as a Cimmerian who was not indifferent to me ... but he was three times taller than you" and she chuckled.

"Do not joke! You are as short as me, do you see?" Atom retorted, waving his hand to her forehead. *We are actually the same height, he reflected. If she didn't have a different hair color, she would be the perfect copy of ...*

Kulan Gath had recovered from his astonishment. "There are only three Dark Portals on earth, and you have sealed this one perhaps forever ... The whole universe is not big enough for you to escape my revenge!" he broke out angrily as Astro Boy flew away taking the swordswoman with him. "Where are you taking me? I want to fight!" she protested.

"We need to reach Doctor Ochanomizu," Atom replied. "He will know what to do ... maybe"

"You will not reach anyone, iron man ... except the dead!" exclaimed the sorcerer blocking their passage. "Hide here, I'll take care of him" said the astral boy pushing the girl behind a column.

"Fool! Do you think you can win with your bare hands against a powerful magician like me?" sneered Kulan Gath. He fired a series of lightning bolts at him, but Atom avoided them by getting closer and closer. "With spells you are good, priest ... but how do you get it in a melee?", and pushed him against a window that shattered making them fall into the courtyard.

Seeing the flashes of telecameras and cameras, and the skyscrapers of Metro City sparkle behind the thronging crowd, the sorcerer was stunned. "Mighty Baal! Where has the city of Uruk gone?" he exclaimed.

"I'll be damned if I understand something!" Red Sonja in turn raised his sword as if to protect himself. "But where are we? In what *time* are we? "

"Your world has been dead for thousands of years, priest ... and you with it" said the astral boy indignantly, grabbing him by the neck. "Your end has come"

"No ... no ... leave me, iron man ..." he pleaded.

"Don't call me 'iron man' ... call me Astro Boy!" he replied hitting him with a colossal punch that made him fall back into the museum.

"What did you do, you idiot? You should have given him the coup de grace!" she addressed him, following him inside. "Now that damn will absorb energy from his collar and stand up ..."

"Are you talking about this, swordswoman?" Atom asked her, showing her the necklace he held in his hand; he leaned over the robot guardian, patted him on the cheek, and he opened his eyes. "When he spoke of 'host bodies' I understood what I had to do to defeat him... no collar, no Kulan Gath ..."; then he heard a metallic clang and turned back.

Red Sonja had dropped her sword. "Good job, little guy" she said, and vanished like smoke, leaving in her

place the little robot girl that collapsed in his arms. "N-Niki!" he exclaimed, holding her up.

"We examined the collar," Dr. Ochanomizu later explained to him. "It contains a very advanced microchip, which is activated when all the planets of the Solar System align with the Earth, as happened last night ... I spoke to the Prime Minister, and we agreed that, for the safety of the world, it is better to destroy it"

"What about Red Sonja? What will become of her?" asked the robot boy.

"In the sword handle there is a similar microchip too" said the scientist, "but that is activated only by reaction to that of Kulan Gath ... We will keep the weapon in the armored archive of the Ministry of Science, but I really believe that, once the collar is destroyed, the swordswoman will never appear again"

"I'm on the spot, Doctor," Atom said into the communicator as he hovered in midair over the crater of an active volcano. Suddenly the sorcerer's voice came out of the collar in his hand. "Wear me!" he ordered. "Wear me and I'll give you the power! I'll give you the whole world if ... "

The astral boy opened his fingers and the jewel fell into the void emitting an inhuman cry, until it vaporized in the fiery magma. "I don't know what to do with the whole world ... I have Niki" he said.

CHAPTER XVI: THE WARNING OF ATLAS

"What beautiful flowers!" exclaimed Hikaru kneeling by a flower bed; she picked one up and stuck it in her hair. "You are much more beautiful" Kenichi said.

"Thank you," she replied, getting up, and the two continued their walk in the park.



"Thank God! They are happy now too... as we are", Niki murmured looking at them from afar. "It's been a long year full of happy and sad events for everyone, but

we managed to get through it... because we were together. Do you think so too, Atom?" he asked the robot boy.

"You're right, my sweet Niki," he replied, staring at her tenderly. "Now that Skunk is in jail, the world seems to have become a quiet place ...", then he stopped abruptly.

"Atom ... hey, Atom, what's the matter with you?" asked the astonished little robot girl; she looked him in the face and saw that his eyes flashed red. Suddenly Atom started off towards the woods and she followed him worriedly.

They went deep into the forest, to a clearing where the little robot boy came to his senses. "Where am I?" he asked Niki.

"If you don't know ... you seemed mesmerized," she said back.

"After a long time, we'll see each other again, my brother ... I'm glad to see you're okay" said a tall, sturdy

robot, with red skin and a golden helmet on his head, appearing from behind a tree with a woman with blond hair and an elegant appearance. "Atlas ... and Livian!" Atom exclaimed as he recognized them.

"Who is this girl?" Atlas asked curiously.

"She's Niki, my partner," he replied, acting as a shield for her and aiming his laser at his brother. "We thought you were forever swallowed by that black hole along with your Crystal Castle, Atlas ... how did you survive?"

"Lower your weapon: I'm not here to fight, but to warn you," he said, then began to tell. "After reemerging from a white hole located ten thousand light-years from here, we drifted unconscious, until we were captured by a spaceship of aliens, who interrogated us ..."

"Aliens? What do they look like? And why didn't you run away?" Atom asked in amazement.

"We have never seen their faces: we have only met robots, and heard voices from a loudspeaker. And we

couldn't escape ... we were no longer masters of ourselves" explained Atlas, still shaken by his memories. "The aliens used a hypnotic wave... the words came out of our mouth against our will! We had to tell them everything we knew about the Earth, its position, the humans who inhabit it and their civilization ... then they let us go, thanking us for directing them to their new homeland"

"Who tells me you're not lying to me, Atlas?" said Astro Boy suspiciously. "You have always had a penchant for twisted intrigues ... like when you took a subway train hostage to convince me to ally with you in your plan to become the ruler of the Universe"

"Atlas told you the truth, Atom," Livian interjected. "If you don't believe him, at least trust me ..." she pleaded.

"After we were released, we followed the alien ship without being discovered," Atlas continued. "They stopped around Alpha Centauri to build a large container using material taken from the asteroids, so we

managed to get ahead of them... but they will soon come here to conquer Earth. Come with us, bring your partner too, and save yourself, before it's too late!" he concluded.

"I could never leave my friends," Atom said resolutely, declining the offer. "If the Earth is attacked, I will fight to defend it ... but thank you for warning us"

"I knew you would refuse, Atom: your sense of justice is too strong, but I had to try anyway. Livian and I will go to an uninhabited planet, to turn it into a suitable home for us... Goodbye forever, my brother," he greeted as a teleporter beam lifted them beyond the atmosphere.

"I find it hard to believe Atlas's words," said Dr. Ochanomizu. "He tried to deceive us too many times"

"But he seemed sincere ..." objected the little robot boy.

"I had never seen Atlas before" argued Niki, "but I think he really wanted to make a last attempt to save his brother from great danger"

Suddenly the light on the scientist's videophone went on. "Doctor Ochanomizu, you have to come to the lab right away!" exclaimed an alarmed operator.

"A large unidentified flying object has entered the Solar System, and is approaching at the speed of ten million kilometers per second!" Dr. Kisaragi excitedly explained when they were there.

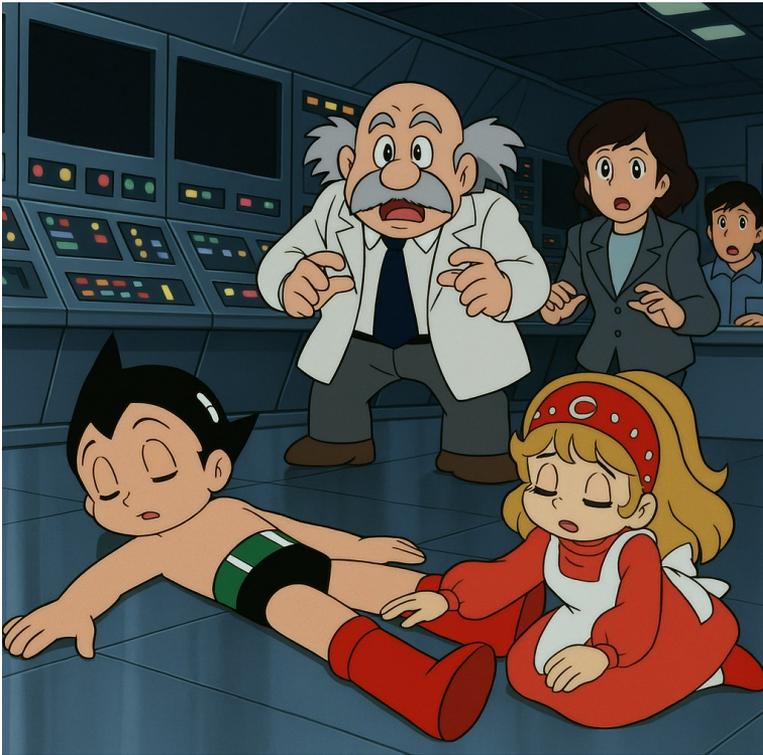
"But it's more than thirty times the speed of light!" Ochanomizu exclaimed. "It's them... it's the aliens! I'm afraid, Atom!" exclaimed the robot girl, hugging him.

"How soon will they arrive in Earth's orbit?" asked the doctor.

"Seventy seconds," replied his assistant.

"Frame them with the telescope!" the man ordered. On the screen appeared the image of a vehicle consisting of a main body about twenty kilometers

long and a secondary body four times larger, joined through a corridor; from the mothership sprang out a long cylinder pointing towards Earth. "It looks like a cannon," murmured Atom, when a flash of light came out of the mouth of the instrument ... and he went out.



When he opened his eyes, he heard Miss Kisaragi exclaim in disbelief: "He's recovered, doctor!" "Niki woke up too," confirmed an assistant. "All systems have reactivated ... it's unbelievable!" murmured another. "I'm receiving messages from New York, Berlin, Moscow, sir ... they confirm that everything is returned to run: robots, computers, power lines, all at the same time!" confirmed a third man with a sigh of relief.

"Atom!" Niki exclaimed taking refuge in his arms. "What happened, Doctor Ochanomizu?" Astro Boy asked, still bewildered.

"A terrible thing," the doctor explained disconsolately. "The electromagnetic wave emitted by the weapon has turned off all electronic systems in every corner of the planet, and soon after that, thousands of flying drones came out of that ship and spread everywhere, and they started to kidnap humans left and right! We could not make an exact count because computers and telecommunications were blocked until a minute ago, but there are so many ... and as if that were not

enough, thousands of detainees took advantage of the blackout to escape, and among them there is also that Skunk rascal!" he sighed.

An hour later the war council met, in electronic connection with the best scientists on the planet and with the heads of government of the various countries. "Let's take stock," Ochanomizu began. "The total number of humans abducted amounts to 2,398,584,275 ..."

"With what criteria did they choose them?" Atom asked.

" We do not know ... they took people of all kinds: whites, blacks, Asians, men, women, rich, poor ... even 43 offenders on probation!" the Japanese Prime Minister explained confused. "We dumped all their data in here, Atom: maybe your ultrafast brain can find a connection ..." he said handing him a USB pendrive that he inserted into his chest concentrating; two minutes later he said: "The only thing common to all the abductees ... is that they are between the ages of twenty and fifty, and are in perfect health"

"Between twenty and fifty years the human body is in the midst of development" murmured Dr. Kisaragi biting her nails in a panic. "Maybe the aliens are cannibals ... and they ate them!"

"Please Yuko!", Dr Honda, Dr Tenma's assistant, intervened. "We will not get out of this nightmare if we let ourselves be overcome by despair! We have to think positively!"

"In words it is easy, but ... what can we do?" Tenma asked disconsolately.

"Let's try to solve the most immediate problems" proposed the robot boy. "Where is the alien ship now?"

"It is always thirty-six thousand kilometers above sea level, fixed above the South Atlantic" replied Ochanomizu, "evidently those damned are preparing to make another load ..."

"First we need to destroy their cannon before they can use it again, " Atom said. "We will need an atomic bomb ..."

"You will have it," promised the President of the United States. "You will have everything you need ... but we will also have to find out what happened to the people kidnapped"

"Maybe they were locked up in that big container, " Niki ventured. "If so, we could try to free them ..."

"What if the aliens run away? If I understand correctly, their spaceship can travel faster than light ... we would never find them again!" the German Chancellor intervened.

"We can, instead" announced Hans Berger, who had hitherto remained brooding; everyone turned to look at him in amazement. "I was about to call a press conference, before this pandemonium happened: I finally managed to build a prototype of a space warp engine ... and if, as you said, among the abductees there are criminals on probation, we can hook the signal transmitted from their electronic bracelets and follow them wherever they go, even to the other side of the Galaxy"

"You are truly a genius, doctor!" exclaimed the little robot boy, trying a new hope. "Have you already tested the engine?"

"I didn't have the chance," the man explained. "On paper, the odds of success are 70% ... which means there is a three out of ten chance that the engine will explode upon ignition, killing the crew"

"I'll be the crew," he decided. "I am a robot, I am expendable"

"I will go with you" Niki said. " Don't try to dissuade me this time, because you won't be able to"

"All right," Atom replied, taking her hand. "We will go all the way together"

CHAPTER XVII: BATTLE FOR EARTH

"We are about to land at Leichester military base," announced the pilot of the large cargo plane carrying the prototype of the engine designed by Dr. Berger. "The British Empire was very kind to put the spaceship they were building at our disposal," Niki pointed out as she looked out of the window at the expanse of grassy meadows that flowed below them.

"They did the only logical thing right now," Dr. Ochanomizu replied. "We are all in the same boat, and we will only be saved if we all work together"

After disembarking, a female officer met them. "They didn't send one of their own to greet us" muttered in Japanese Inspector Tawashi. "I have known an English female cop, years ago: she had white skin, blond hair, wide hips and a bulbous nose ... this one here, instead, is tall and thin, has black hair, dark skin and even a nice face"

"Britannia welcomes people of different ethnic groups and cultures ... my father was South African, my mother Jamaican, and I speak eight languages very well, including yours" she retorted as the inspector made himself small; then she saluted and introduced herself: "Major Antonia Thompson, of the British Aerospace Forces. Follow me, please"

Down a corridor they were approached by an assistant. "Toto, you should sign this ..." he said to the major handing her a tablet and an electronic pen.

"I already told you that I don't want to be called by that nickname ... I hate it" she answered coldly as she continued on her way. "But ... until three days ago you liked it ..." he murmured in amazement.

"The ship is ready for take-off," Antonia Thompson announced to the guests from the Rising

Sun. "We named it *Ikaruga* in your honor ... I hope it makes you fly very high, Atom"

"Is the nuclear warhead ready?" Dr. Ochanomizu inquired.

"Affirmative. It has a power of 25 kilotons - it should be more than enough to destroy that cannon," she replied. She pressed any of the buttons on the screen table and continued: "The instruments detected a growing accumulation of energy in that weapon: they will be ready to shoot again in ten hours ... We will attack them en masse at 6 o'clock to create a diversion; you will take the opportunity to approach without being noticed, throw the bomb inside the barrel and save yourself before the detonation"

"Try to get back safe and sound," the robot boy recommended.

"Don't worry," the officer replied. " The soldiers of Britain do not die even if they kill them"

That night Niki had no desire to sleep at all; she wandered aimlessly around the base, and saw the major

intent on convulsively pressing the keys of a mobile phone. "Answer ... please let me answer ..." she muttered to herself and then gave up on her attempts. "Who is there?" she exclaimed hearing a noise behind her.

"I'm Niki, don't be afraid" the little robot girl came forward trying to calm her down. She looked at her angrily. "Didn't your robot nanny teach you not to eavesdrop?" she asked provocatively.

"Are you trying to communicate with one of the kidnapped people? Who is it?" Niki asked in turn. Antonia Thompson crouched on the metal floor.

"His name is Leo ... Leonhard Steiner". The words began to flow out of her mouth like a raging river. "He was the one who nicknamed me Toto ... he said that my hairstyle reminded him of Dorothy's puppy, the protagonist of *The Wizard of Oz* ... He was taken away before my eyes, and I couldn't do anything to save him ... I try to show myself strong in front of others, to give them courage, but I would just ... " and she burst into tears like a child.

“We will bring him back to you... we will bring them all back home. Don't lose the hope,” the robot girl promised, hugging her.

Supporting the heavy device Atom headed towards the alien ship following an oblique trajectory, while five thousand meters below him the British shuttles faced the enemy drones. Suddenly a laser beam severed both wings of the vehicle piloted by the major. "Don't let me down, super boy!" she cried as the craft crashed.

"Major Thompson!" he exclaimed in anguish.

"Call me Toto ... and say hello to your partner" she replied before jumping off with the parachute.

Astro Boy had now achieved his goal; he activated the detonator and threw the warhead straight into the barrel, exclaiming: "Eat this candy!", then he headed for Earth. Four seconds later the cannon exploded into

a thousand pieces. "I've done it!" he exulted landing in the English base.

" The alien ship is moving away, Atom ... and is taking its load away with it" warned Dr. Ochanomizu. "Get on board and leave now, and good luck!"

CHAPTER XVIII: TOGETHER FOREVER

"*Ikaruga* has 1.3 times the speed of the alien ship... evidently the container weighs them down! They'll reach them in about two hours," the radar technician announced.

"Let's hope they will do," Dr. Honda pleaded. Doctor Tenma approached her: "Asuka, I have to tell you something," he began.

"This is the first time you call me by my name ... are you okay?" she asked.

"Asuka, for fifteen years you have been a precious collaborator for me ..." the man continued, taking his courage gradually. "You always encouraged me to continue my work, even when I wanted to give up everything ... you were the first to believe in my project to create a robot with a human heart, and you defended Atom even when I repudiated him ... You have always been able to see beyond my gruff rind ... "

"Umataro ... what do you want to tell me?" murmured Dr. Honda, looking him in the eye.

"Ever since I lost Hoshie I've been... and I am, very alone," he said, taking her hand. "Asuka, if Atom and Niki would return victorious, and mankind had a future, would you marry me?"

"For fifteen years I have been waiting to hear these words, " she said, and kissed him.

Ikaruga had joined the alien ship. "That appears to be an access hatch ... let's go!" Atom said putting on the autopilot.

The two robots entered and drew into what appeared to be a decompression chamber; the hatch closed behind them, and the room was filled with a mixture of gasses similar in composition to the Earth's atmosphere. "Now we know they're humanoids," the little robot boy mused.



They found themselves in a huge room occupied by an endless number of capsules, many of which had within them an inanimate human being; among them Atom recognized the young Polynesian woman who had once cut off his head to worship it as a fetish. “They're alive, Atom... they're all alive! They are in suspended animation!” Niki explained after examining them with her instruments.

"Is it possible that they really want to eat them?" he wondered when two large anthropomorphic robots appeared from a corridor. "Follow us" they said in Japanese with a metallic voice.

"How do you know our language?" asked the astral boy.

" We learned it from two of your companions who we captured in space long ago," replied a voice coming from a loudspeaker. "Now go with them, we are waiting for you"

"We can't fight in the midst of all these hibernating people," Niki warned him. "We have to play their game for the moment"

They found themselves in front of a large computer. "I'm Atom, and she's Niki ... Let me see you!" Atom exclaimed.

"Here we are, Atom: we are right in front of you" said the voice from inside the computer leaving them stunned.



" Why did you attack us? I want to know it! " Astro Boy asked.

" Well, we'll answer your question," another voice said. "Our people lived on a planet in the center of the Galaxy, in a binary system made up of a yellow sun like yours, and a blue sun. One unfortunate day our astronomers discovered that the blue sun would become a supernova within a few decades, exploding and erasing our

world forever; so, we used all our knowledge to build this space ship, and since our bodies were unable to withstand interstellar travel, we enclosed our minds inside this supercomputer, and we departed ... "

"So, you are artificial intelligences," he murmured in amazement. "And why did you kidnap all those people?"

"We 've been wandering the cosmos for a million years, Atom, and we're tired ... very tired," the alien continued. "We want a new planet to live, and we want to have again a body, we do not want to be the pure minds ... for this we have developed a very advanced technology in order to cancel the personality from living beings, and to plant ours in its place. So we can colonize the Earth, and return to life as before"

"But you will kill them! It's not right!" exclaimed the robot boy.

"We cannot do anything else, Atom ... and you will not be able to stop us" ruled the voice, while an antenna popped out of the ceiling projected on them a wave that

gave rise to murderous intentions towards each other in their minds. "Now you will fight each other until you kill yourselves ... it will be a lot of fun to watch you," she said smugly.

"A-Atom ... I ... I don't want to hurt you, but *I have to* ..." Niki murmured taking her head in her hands, while one of the alien robots handed her a halberd.

"Hold on, Niki ... please hold on!" Atom moaned as he bent to the ground, then he had an idea: he pulled the Gem of Light that had been given to him by the little people of the forest from his pocket and threw it at the antenna. The small sphere exploded in a blinding glow, and Atom and Niki felt their own masters again. "Now we will deal!" exclaimed the astral boy, destroying the robots with machine gun shots and laser beams.

"Spare us, please ... have mercy!" the aliens pleaded from inside the big computer. "I will only spare you if you return all the prisoners to us," he pledged.

"We can't ... they are our only chance to get a body back!" they replied.

"Then I'll destroy you," Atom replied preparing to strike, but Niki intervened. "Listen to me, please!" she said to the extraterrestrials. "If you want to have a body so much, why don't you make them yourself?"

"Make ... bodies?" they exclaimed.

"Your minds are already working thanks to electronics" continued the little robot girl. "You could make your own mechanical bodies and implant in them ..."

"But so ... we would become robots ..." murmured the doubtful aliens.

"And with this? Better than waging war on Earthlings to steal their bodies and their planet," she argued. "Look at us: we are robots, but we have thoughts and feelings as human beings have them; we can walk, lie down in the meadows, feel the warmth of the sun on our skin, and we can live much longer than a creature of flesh and blood ... You could create new artificial minds, and have robot children; and you could colonize any of

the many worlds of the Galaxy, modeling it however you like. Please, listen to me! " she begged them.

"We will have to discuss it among ourselves," said the voice. On the big computer a series of lights went on and began to flow more and more rapidly, while the two robots remained in spasmodic waiting, then the lights went out and everything was silent for an interval of time that seemed to them interminable; finally, the alien spoke again.

"We have examined your proposal, Niki... and we have unanimously decided to accept it. You are all free"

"We'll go into orbit in twenty minutes," Atom announced, "then we'll have to start waking them up ... what happened to Toto?" he asked Niki.

"She was recovered in the Kalahari Desert ... she has a fractured arm and leg, but she is alive, and she sends you this" the robot girl reassured him, showing

him a photo of Major Thompson in a hospital bed while making the victory sign with the hand still valid. "That girl is indestructible," he commented relieved.

"What will become of us, Atom?" she asked, resting her head on his shoulder as they watched the Earth grow bigger and bigger on the monitor. "Skunk is free again, and all the cities of the world are either still in chaos, due to the general blackout ... "

"The cities will be rebuilt, and life will flow again ... as for Skunk, we will catch him back, sooner or later" he replied, taking her hand and glancing into the future. "Now that they have the space warp engine, humans will begin to explore the cosmos, and we robots will follow to help them ... We will colonize new worlds, and discover new civilizations, some good and some bad ... maybe there will be star wars someday. ... It will be a long and bumpy journey, full of happy and sad moments; but it will be a light weight to bear, because we will carry it together ... you and me"

"Oh, Atom ... you get it, finally!" exclaimed the joyful robot girl.

"I love you, Niki ... I will always love you, and I don't care if one day you don't want to hear me say it again" promised the boy of the stars.

"I love you too, Atom ... and I'll never get tired of telling you," Niki replied, and the two joined again in a long, sweet kiss.

The woman came out of a man's rib.

Not from his feet to be walked on.

Not from his head to be superior,

but from the side to be equal.

Under the arm to be protected,

and next to the heart to be loved

THE END

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I hope you liked this work.

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