

Stefano Carloni

SHIN TETSUWAN ATOM 3: PAIRING

The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki



My personal sequel to the 1980 TV anime series "Shin Tetsuwan Atom" continues. Atom Tetsuwan and Niki Tenma are now a couple, but life is certainly not peaceful for them between time travels and alien threats, between Astro Boy's desire to protect the people he loves (first of all the little robot girl Niki) and her will not to be treated like a fragile crystal doll but as a reliable partner, while the arch-criminal Skunk Kusai continues to plot diabolical plans to strike him rich and take revenge on those who sent him to jail.

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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.

I do not hold the exploitation rights of any of these characters and images. If these publications are not appreciated by the respective authors and publishing houses, I will immediately withdraw them. In the same way, I will immediately remove from my tales the images not appreciated by the respective authors and rights holders.

*This story is a work of fiction.
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

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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Atom tries by all means to regain the love of Niki (rebuilt and reactivated by Umataro Tenma, but who does not remember

her previous life due to a conflict between the new nanochips of her distributed memory and the original ones contained in the legs preserved by Atom, and feels feelings of fear and hatred towards him), almost to the point of forcibly kissing her (but stops at the last moment). When Niki is hit by a hundred-thousand-volt electric shock, identical to the one that caused her amnesia, and recovers her memory, Atom declares his love for her, and Niki reciprocates.



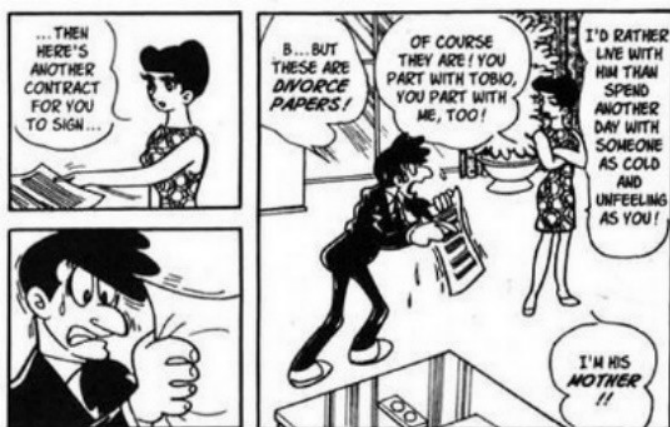
Tobio Tenma: Thirteen-year-old son of Umataro and Hoshie Tenma. Neglected by his father (too busy with his job as general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology and his dream of creating a robot with human thoughts and feelings), he dies in a car accident. His death is the opening event of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

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Tenma becomes aware of the love felt for him by his longtime assistant, Miss Asuka Honda, asks her to marry him, and she accepts.



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

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" it is revealed that Miss Honda's name is Asuka, and that she accepts the marriage proposal addressed to her by Umataro Tenma, which she had always been in love with.



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

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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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Skunk is arrested by Atom, but manages to escape when an alien people attack the Earth producing a global blackout, and take advantage of the chaos to lose his tracks.

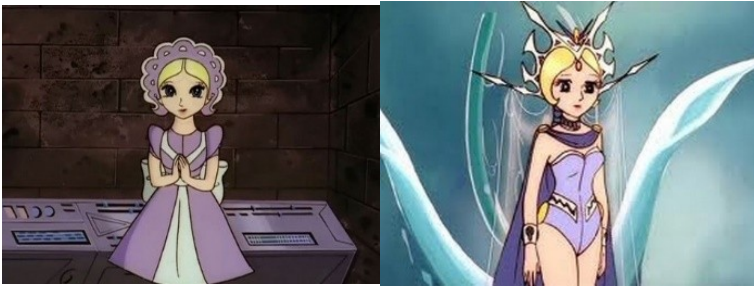


Atlas: Robot built by the Earl of Walpurgis, based on the Atom project copied on his behalf by Skunk Kusakai, in order to allow him to conquer the world. He initially looks like a 13-year-old boy with red skin and

blond hair. He is entrusted to the "care" of Skunk Kusai, who mistreats him to teach him the rudiments of the criminal art. He rebels against his creator when he dismantles 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Atlas, who survived with Livian the passage into the black hole, returns to Earth with her to warn Atom that an alien people are about to attack humanity, then leaves with Livian aboard the Crystal Castle in search of an uninhabited planet to live on.



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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Livian, who survived with Atlas the passage into the black hole, returns to Earth with him to warn Atom that an alien people are about to attack humanity, then leaves with Atlas aboard the Crystal Castle in search of an uninhabited planet to live in.



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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Kenichi is elected class leader for the second time thanks to the

decisive vote of Niki Tenma, and declares himself to his classmate Hikaru Hiyama, who reciprocates him.



Tamao Ōme: One of Atom's human classmates, one of the first to befriend him with Kenichi and Miodori. 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Shibugaki is a candidate for the second time as class leader, but is defeated again by Kenichi Shikishima thanks to the decisive vote of Niki Tenma.

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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 Astro, 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 2: Reloading – The New Adventures of Astro Boy" Niki is reconstructed by Umataro Tenma based on a copy of the original project, placing instead of the neutron bomb a laser scalpel and diagnostic tools to turn her into a surgical robot, but after reactivation she manifests uncontrollable feelings of fear and hatred towards Atom due to a conflict between the new nanochips of her distributed memory and the original ones contained in the legs preserved by Atom. Despite this, Niki – who in the meantime has been legally adopted by Tenma and enrolled in the same class as Atom – begins to feel esteem towards the little robot. When Atom tries to forcibly kiss her (stopping at the last moment), Niki decides to transfer to another school. After a hundred-thousand-volt electric shock, identical to the one that caused her amnesia, Niki recovers her memory and declares her love to Atom, who reciprocates her.

CHAPTER I: A MATTER OF HEART

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" exclaimed Niki, hearing the videophone ring relentlessly. Ten days had passed since her father and Mrs. Honda had left on their honeymoon, and in that sultry July the robot girl was not busy either with school (because it was vacation time) or with the internship in the hospital. She pressed a button and the image of a tall, moustached man dressed in black materialized on the screen; "Are you Niki Tenma?" he began without preamble.

"I am," she replied. "Is he a seller? I'm sorry, but we don't need anything."

"Look here," replied the mysterious figure, approaching the camera with a lit mobile phone.

On the small screen appeared images in rapid sequence: Umataro Tenma and his bride walking along Fifth Avenue, then Niagara Falls, New Orleans... then the shot moved to a sniper stationed on the roof of a

skyscraper, holding a rifle equipped with a telescopic sight. Niki brought her hands to her mouth, but quickly recomposed herself. "What do you want?" she asked the man.

"Come with us," he replied.

"Okay." She crossed the corridor, left the house being careful to close the door, and realized that this threatening man was accompanied by two other guys dressed in dark; she followed them to a car parked in front of it, the mustachioed man made her sit in the back seat while he and one of her henchmen surrounded her on either side, the other got behind the wheel and the car plunged into Metro City traffic.

They proceeded for about twenty minutes, up to the internal parking lot of a private clinic; they took an elevator up to the fourteenth floor, then took her to a small room, handed her a gown and said, "Undress and wear this."

"Do I have to undress in front of you?" she asked, embarrassed.

"We have to check that you don't have weapons or locators," explained the ringleader, pulling a small detector out of his pocket. Niki sighed and took off her clothes, the man examined her carefully, then said, "Get dressed and follow us."

They entered a very large and well-appointed hall; on the back wall, behind a heavy walnut desk, sitting on a large leather armchair, a burly and bearded man who looked well over his sixty-five years was waiting for her. "How did it go, Tano?" he said to his subordinate.

"Smooth as oil, Chief," he reassured him. "Your plan worked great... She followed us as docile as a lamb," he added grinning.

"I received an invitation that I couldn't say no to," Niki said, addressing the human at the desk directly. "I suppose you'll tell me what he wants from me now... because you certainly don't mount all this movement for a cheap robbery, do you?"

"You're acute... acute as all '*e fimmine*'" he replied in Sicilian dialect, then gritted his teeth and hissed "I am Cosimo Geraci"

"This name doesn't tell me anything," the robot girl resumed. "Should I know you?"

"Of course not," explained the man with the moustache to the right of the other. "Mr. Geraci has been the supreme leader of Cosa Nostra for ten years, and also controls the Chinese Triads, the Yakuza, the Irish, Corsican and Nigerian mafias... he is the hand of God, the Boss of Bosses. Did I say it right, Chief?" he concluded, bowing respectfully, immediately followed by the others present.

"You said it right," said the other, then turned to Niki again. "Since Sicily became an independent state, my family has always been among those who counted... At seventeen my father, rest his soul, decided it was time for me to marry the daughter of a boss of his peer; but then we found out that she had an affair with another, who was also from a rival family... She had to be

punished, she had to die, and she had to die badly!" he exclaimed, gasping. He took a small bottle from the desk, poured forty drops into a glass half full of water and drank convulsively, then calmed down and resumed to tell: "One night I climbed up to the window of her room; she was combing her hair... I had to take her away to torture her slowly, but when she saw me, she grabbed a pair of big scissors and hit me in the chest, here! At that point I couldn't do anything but shoot her in the head and run away as long as I had strength," he said, pointing to the center of his chest with his finger; Niki was horrified. "I was treated by a compliant doctor, and from then on I began to walk the path that led me to be what I am now, the Boss of Bosses ... but that wound never closed again." He caught his breath for a few seconds, then continued: "My heart is a sieve... it needs to be stitched up well, and it also needs a pacemaker; but the doctors explained to me that the necessary operation is so complex, so difficult, that only the best surgeon in the world can do it without making me die under the knife. And the

best surgeon in the world is you, Niki Tenma," he concluded, pointing his index finger at her. "You know that, right?"

"I know," she admitted without false modesty. The impeccable operation performed on Hans Berger, the great scientist who had remained hibernated for thirty-five years after a terrible car accident, had been the subject of an article published in the prestigious "Journal of Medicine" and taken up by "Lancet"; after which, her photos in the newspapers had overshadowed even the death of the Protopope, and her house had been besieged for three months by hundreds of reporters who followed her to school, to the hospital, everywhere, offering fabulous amounts of money for a five-minute interview. "As a doctor, I would have operated on you even if you had decided to go to the hospital where I study and work... But I can imagine that you do not want to run the risk of being arrested," she acknowledged.

"Since you have understood everything, you will have understood that you have no choice" resumed the

mafioso showing her a mobile phone. "The killer in America will kill your father and his beautiful little wife tomorrow at 12 noon of here, unless I call him, just with this shielded device that I use to get in touch with my men around the world, and tell him the words 'Lunch postponed'; and this phone is programmed to self-destruct within two minutes if it is moved away from me. So, what do you decide?"

"I will operate you," Niki replied. "If the murder of my parents is scheduled for tomorrow at 12 o'clock, does that mean that the surgery will have to be performed first, am I right?"

"Tomorrow at 9 o'clock," Geraci said. "I had a room prepared for you, I put in all the papers of the visits I made, the exams, the analyzes ... so you can spend the night studying them and preparing yourself to the fullest; Tano will give you a spare battery, so you won't run out. If you need any explanation, ask my men. And now take her away!" he ordered his minions.

"One moment," Niki exclaimed, raising a hand.
"There is a small drawback to solve: I have a pen pal"

"What the hell is that, a pen pal?" snorted the boss.

"She's a friend we write to regularly," Tano said.

"I know what that means!" blurted out, "so what?"

"So," continued the robot girl, "if I don't write her a letter by tomorrow morning, she could get suspicious, come looking for me... She could go to the police to report me missing, and you don't want the police to look for me and find me, right?"

"You were right to tell us." Cosimo Geraci relaxed and smiled with thirty-two teeth. "Tell us what we have to write to her to reassure her... and you, Tano, take note!"

"Oh, nothing particularly challenging," Niki explained coquetryly. *"My dear Uran, how are you? I am enjoying the holidays: since my parents are still on their honeymoon, our house does not need much cleaning, so I spend time shopping and watching tv. I hope your father Ethanol and your mother Rin are well; say hello to*

that cute Jump, your dog, too. If you like, one of these days we could go together to the park. Bye bye. Your pen pal Niki Tenma... and it must be sent to the email address `uransuperstar@metrocity.jp`"

Niki spent the rest of the day reviewing echocardiographic reports and traces; at 8:30 p.m. she knocked on the door of her prison and said, "I have to ask your boss a question."

"I hope you have a good reason to break at this hour," the mafioso snorted. "Is there something wrong with the analysis?"

"No, for those I have everything clear," she reassured him by showing him a brochure. "I just want to know why you decided to have a Cardiotech Ultra-7 pacemaker implanted... It's the newest model on the market today, and it's also the most expensive."

"Precisely because it is the most expensive," replied the man with a satisfied look. "I deserve only the best... Is this a problem?" he asked anxiously.

"No, not at all," Niki replied. "If you had asked my opinion, I would have recommended this to you... Now I can go back to my room; I advise you to go to bed early and get a good night's sleep, because tomorrow will be challenging for both of us."

"Probability of success?" he asked. She thought for a moment: "99.7%"

"If I die, it's over for your loved ones, and you'll die with me right away, because Hiro will follow us into the operating room and won't take his eyes off you," he warned her.

"I can't afford to fail," the robot girl acknowledged, "so I won't fail."

At nine o'clock Niki Tenma, after having thoroughly washed and dressed, entered the operating room, accompanied by her "guardian angel" holding an anti-robot electric gun, and found Cosimo Geraci already stripped and lying on the table. "Will you anesthetize me?" he asked.

"It won't be necessary," he reassured him. "I will only give you a mild painkiller to relieve the discomfort, then I will introduce the surgical instruments through a vein in your left leg and trace them back to the heart. Anyway, I see that we also have two cylinders of anesthetic gas here... but I don't think it will be necessary. When we have finished the intervention, will you cancel the killing order of Mr. and Mrs. Tenma?"

"You have my word," the man promised.

"Then let's begin," she said.

Meanwhile, at the Tetsuwan house, little Uran presented herself to her older brother with an envious look. "Atom!" she exclaimed. "What did you do wrong to poor Niki?"

"To Niki??? Nothing... How could I ever hurt her?"

"Last night she sent me an email," she replied, showing him a sheet of paper printed on the computer. "She asks me how I am, she asks me about mom and dad, she even remembers Jump, but she doesn't say a single word about you, as if you didn't exist! You must have offended her in a really serious way, for ignoring you like that!" she concluded, planting herself in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"Niki never uses email... she prefers to write by hand on lilac letter paper," Atom replied alarmed. "This is a call for help... she's in danger!" he exclaimed, opening the front door and splashing into the sky like a rocket. "Oh yes, my big brother is really in love," Uran sighed, watching him fly away.

At 11.15 Niki turned off the diagnostic detectors and said to Cosimo Geraci: "The operation is perfectly successful. How do you feel?"

"Well... definitely better than I expected," said the man still lying on the operating table. "Now I will keep my promise"

He dialed a number on his phone and said, "Lunch postponed," then closed the communication and asked, "Are you happy?"

"Thank you," sighed the robot girl. "Even though you are a criminal, you are a man of your word"

"When I make a promise, I always keep it," he said, then turned to his deputy. "Hiro..."

Niki, who in the meantime had placed her left hand on the anesthetic tap and held the hose with her right, lightning discharged a gush of gas on Hiro's face, which fell unconscious on the floor; then she turned the tube against the boss and administered the same medicine. She then grabbed the phone, pulled out the memory card and put it in her mouth, threw the device on the floor

before it exploded, and ran out of the operating room. "She's running away! Kill her!" the gangsters shouted when they saw her, but she had time to slip into the garbage pipe and let herself fall down.

She landed on a mountain of black bags, immediately got up and fled at great speed along the street; she made just a hundred meters bumping into the crowd left and right, until she collided with Atom, who in the meantime, after reaching her home, had followed her unmistakable scent. "Niki!" he exclaimed, hugging her. "You're safe and sound... thank goodness! What happened to you?"

"I'll explain it to you later," she replied after taking the small card out of her mouth. "Now take me to the police station, as fast as you can"

When Cosimo Geraci came to his senses, he saw Niki wearing again her usual red long-sleeved dress,

white apron and red slippers; next to her were Atom, Umataro Tenma along with Asuka Honda, police chief Nakamura and Inspector Tawashi with four heavily armed policemen, while Tano sat handcuffed in an arm-chair. "So you're still alive, damn!" he exclaimed angrily, then turned to his minion: "Tano, you damn idiot! Didn't I order you to take me to a safe haven in case there were any problems?"

"That's what I did, Chief," he apologized, mortified. "We were very careful not to be followed ... I just don't know how they found us!"

"I'll explain it to you," the robot girl intervened with a seraphic look. "You gave your word that you would spare my parents' lives, but you didn't promise to do the same to me... so I prevented the hitman who had instructed to eliminate me. After falling asleep both, I pulled out the memory card before the phone self-destructed, and from there the Scientific Police obtained all the data necessary to arrest your men scattered around the world. As for tracking this lair", she continued, "you

have chosen the most expensive pacemaker model on the market, but you have not noticed that it is so expensive because it contains a geolocator constantly hooked to the world satellite network, made specifically to monitor the patient's condition 24 hours a day in every corner of the Earth ... So, from now on, even if she manages to escape from the maximum-security prison which they will certainly lock you up in for the rest of your days, you will never be able to lose your tracks again, unless you tear your heart out of your chest," she concluded sternly.

"I had to imagine it would end like this," the man murmured as they handcuffed him and took him away. "I started building my empire by killing a female... and now another female has destroyed it."

CHAPTER II: DISGUSTING BEES

"Won't your uncle mind host me too?" Atom asked his friend as the train approached the small Takarajima station.

"Don't worry," Kenichi Shikishima assured him as he picked up his luggage. "Uncle Hyomiro told me on the phone: '*If there is room in my house for my beloved nephew, there is also room for his friends.*' Rather, it seemed to me that his voice was less cheerful than usual... I hope he doesn't have any health problems," he said, getting dark.

Hyomiro Meiji welcomed them with great warmth, as his nephew expected; he loaded their suitcases into a car and drove them to a small farm. "Is something wrong, uncle? You didn't open your mouth all the way..." Kenichi asked when they got off.

"Forgive me, my nephew," murmured the old man with a grimace of pain, "but lately I have not been in a

good situation, economically speaking... all because of those disgusting bees," he exclaimed.

"Disgusting bees? What are they?" asked Atom, intrigued.

"A variety of bees characteristic of the region, whose sting makes any fruit inedible," the man explained. He approached a box full of peaches, took one and handed it to the boy: "Taste it, if you don't believe me"

Kenichi took the fruit, bite it, and after half a second spit it out, exclaiming, "Puah! It's just disgusting!"

"I haven't been able to sell anything for two months," Hyomiro continued, disconsolately. "Only that tree has been saved, for now," he said, pointing to a small apple tree nearby, "but it produces green apples, and people only want red apples... I have debts to the bank to buy seeds and fertilizers, and if it goes on like this, they will take away my farm..." and burst into tears. "Forgive me, my nephew... I wanted you to have a happy holiday, but instead I'm making you unhappy with my problems..."

"You haven't done anything for which you have to ask forgiveness, uncle," his nephew tried to console him. "If I could do anything to help you..."

"To me, the matter is suspicious," Atom said resolutely. "If disgusting bees have always lived in this region, why did they start attacking your trees just two months ago? And why don't they attack other farms? Mr. Hyomiro, I don't understand how and why, but I think someone wants to hurt you."

"Hurting ... to me?!? But I am a friend of everyone in the village..." he exclaimed.

"Anyway, with your permission, tomorrow I'll go to the police station and try to shake things up," the little robot cut him short.

"It's a bad thing, a damn bad thing," muttered Commander Tanaka after hearing the two boys' report. Kenichi fidgeted in his chair: until then he had thought

he would react with a chuckle of mockery and a shrug, but now ... "Please, if you know anything, tell us!" he pleaded with him.

"Two months ago, I received a complaint from a villager," the officer explained. "He said that someone had entered his house-laboratory at night, and had stolen only one thing: a machine to hypnotize disgusting bees"

"It's just as I suspected: the aggressive behavior of bees is the work of an evil mind!" exclaimed Atom. "Did you find out who the thief was? And the machine, has it been found?"

"Truly," Tanaka admitted, "I had not hitherto given any weight to the thing... You know, the robbed is a scientist from outside, who has a reputation for being a bit screwed... But Hyomiro has been my lifelong friend, so it's a personal matter now. Will you come with me and talk to him?"

Kentaro Himura really had a quirky look, with his gray hair straight like rice noodles and a coat full of stains. "You dare to remember me after all this time,

Commander!" he told them when they arrived. "And then, I advised you not to talk about it with anyone..."

"Calm down," said the commander. "I vouch for them"

"Can you explain why you built a machine to hypnotize disgusting bees?" asked Atom politely.

"For this flower," Himura replied, opening a catalog and showing them a photo. "What beautiful colors!" exclaimed Kenichi. "What kind is it?"

"*Rafflesia aureolata*, commonly called the Flower of the Seven Colors," explained the scientist. "It is very rare, on the verge of extinction... So, I decided to convince disgusting bees to pollinate it more frequently, in order to speed up its reproduction."

"How does your device work?" asked the robot boy again.

"Simple," the man continued. "The machine consists of a microwave transmitter and a scanner; just scan the image of the target you want to direct the bees to and you're done."

"Good morning... I'm Taro Mitsuki, the plumber," the lanky man introduced himself when Atom opened the door.

"Come along, Taro," Hyomiro Meiji greeted him. "He's Atom, a friend of my nephew... The sink is always in the usual place, so you already know the way, right?"

"You're my best client," the man smiled.

"Lunch is served," Kenichi announced, entering with a pot full of dumplings in broth, but slipped on a carpet and spilled it all over the newcomer's red jumpsuit. "My boy, did you get hurt?" his uncle asked him, helping him to get up.

"I'm sorry... I'm mortified," murmured the boy, bowing deeply before the plumber. "These things happen," he replied dryly. "Now I'd better get to work"

As Taro Mitsuki walked to the exit counting his fee, Kenichi remarked, "I hope your suit hasn't been ruined."

"Haha!" he laughed. "I look like a frog in a quagmire, don't I? But don't worry, I'll put it in the washing machine and tomorrow it will be like new."

"Thank you for helping me, Atom," Hyomiro said as he returned home with Astro Boy, then turned to his nephew: "Is Taro gone yet? Did you pay for it?"

"All right, uncle," he assured him. "He seems like a great person... He was not even angry about the disaster I caused! But he has a strange sense of humor: he said that with the stained suit he looked like a frog in a quagmire... But frogs are green, not red."

"It was an exquisite dinner, dear Hyomiro: you are always an admirable host," commented Commander Tanaka, punching his lips with his napkin.

"Even if I do not swim in gold, I will never break the sacred law of hospitality," he solemnly proclaimed. "By the way, Tanaka, today is *the day*"

"It's true, today is the fifteenth of the month!" exclaimed the officer, giving himself a hand on the forehead. "With everything that's happened lately, I had forgotten..."

"What do you mean, uncle?" said Kenichi curiously.

"Tanaka and I are fond of avocados," explained his uncle. And since there are none at the village market, every month I have a case sent to me". He left the room and returned after a few minutes bearing two fleshy fruits. "To you the honor," he said to his friend, handing him one.

Tanaka grabbed the avocado, bite it, and spat it out coughing and exclaiming, "Puah! It's really disgusting!" Atom picked up the fruit, examined it, then said to those present, "Do you see this little hole? It was stung by a disgusting bee."

"But it's absurd! Hyomiro *doesn't sell* avocados!" muttered the man.

"And no one, apart from Tanaka, knows that I buy them," Hyomiro said. "I don't want people to talk about me, with the debts I have... But..."

"But what, uncle?" asked Kenichi.

"Now that I think about it, three months ago I confided on the phone my sin of gluttony to old Bokkai," the old man replied.

"He's the former police commander, my predecessor," Tanaka explained. "He retired two years ago, and has been living on the neighboring estate ever since; lately he decided to run for mayor"

"But it can't have been him... We are friends, as you and I are..." Hyomiro murmured.

"I think it was just him," the officer replied. "If I remember correctly, some time ago he proposed you to sell him the farm at a good price, because he wanted to enlarge his estate, but you refused... He may have decided to ruin you and buy it at auction for a penny. I'm going to have a chat with him," he exclaimed with a grim look.

"I'm coming too," Kenichi's uncle decided. "If he's the culprit, I want him to tell me to my face"

"I am with you, uncle. And you, Atom?" asked the boy.

"You can always count on me," the little robot vowed.

"Who is knocking at this hour? Ah, it's you, Tanaka... and there's Hyomiro too! And who are these two kids?" said Genzo Bokkai as he opened the door.

"We have to take a look at your house," the commander began, "but if you don't want to, I can always come back tomorrow morning with a search warrant."

"A search warrant? I have nothing to hide... but at least explain to me what you are looking for," murmured the old man as he let them in.

Tanaka began to methodically open and close cabinets and chests of drawers in all the rooms, then went up

to the attic, and after a few minutes he appeared saying: "Atom, please help me bring down this settle!"

"Immediately," he replied, rising in mid-air with his rocket engines and placing the heavy piece of furniture on the living room floor, from which the commander pulled out a device exclaiming triumphantly: "Here is the machine for hypnotizing disgusting bees! Genzo Bokkai, I declare you under arrest for burglary and for trying to force Hyomiro Meiji to bankrupt"

"I am innocent!" protested Bokkai. "I've never seen that contraption in my life, and it's been years since I opened that old settle!"

"Don't lie, it would be useless!" replied the officer, pulling a bundle of sheets of paper out of the cabinet and throwing them in his face. "There are also pictures of the fruits that disgusting bees have made inedible, see?" then pulled out a pair of handcuffs and tightened them around his wrists.

Meanwhile, Atom had picked up the papers from the ground and scrutinized them carefully. "Wait a

minute!" he exclaimed as Tanaka pushed Bokkai towards the door. "Mr. Bokkai, what color is this apple?" he said, handing him a picture.

"Red," said the man, "but what..."

"Mr. Bokkai is innocent, Commander," the robot boy continued. "He is the real victim of this conspiracy, not Mr. Hyomiro"

"Good evening, Kenichi," Taro Mitsuki yawned. "Does your uncle have a broken sink again?"

"Is there anyone who wants to talk to you, Mr. Mitsuki," replied the boy as the unmistakable figure of Genzo Bokkai emerged from the shadows. When he saw him, the plumber squinted; "Get off your feet!" he shouted, giving him a shove.

He rushed into his car parked nearby and started up, but Astro Boy grabbed the car, lifted it up and shook it vigorously causing him to fall out of the cockpit; the man

got up, and his nose slammed into the barrel of Commander Tanaka's gun. "Still where you are," he admonished him.

"Can you explain to us now, Atom?" asked Kenichi.

"The thief of the hypnotizing machine is colorblind, and so is Taro Mitsuki," Atom said. "Remember what he told you? He thought his *red* jumpsuit was *green*."

"It's true: 'the frog in the quagmire'! You're a genius, Atom!" exclaimed his friend; then he turned to the plumber: "But how did you know about avocados?"

"Oh, it was a stroke of luck," he explained. "While Hyomiro was talking about it on the phone with Bokkai he forgot for a few minutes that I was there, repairing the broken sink for the umpteenth time... so I seized the opportunity and stole the machine, which I had already noticed some time before in Himura's laboratory"

"Rascal! Why did you want to send me to jail? What have I done wrong to you?" exclaimed Bokkai furiously, grabbing him by the neck.

"My real name is not Taro Mitsuki, but Taro Mizushima," hissed the other contemptuously.

"Mizushima?" murmured the astonished former commander. "I remember arresting a guy with this last name five years ago... Hiroshi Mizushima, if I remember correctly. He had carried out an armed robbery of the bank, and was sentenced to twenty years in prison."

"Hiroshi is my brother, and I have decided to avenge him," Taro angrily exclaimed.

"That is why you wanted to send Mr. Bokkai to prison unjustly?" questioned Atom.

"I wanted to do much more," the plumber replied mockingly. "We all know that becoming mayor is not his ultimate goal. He aims to make a career in politics; but if I could get him convicted of such a shameful crime, his dreams of glory would be shattered... Unfortunately, I failed," he admitted gloomily.

"Let's go," Tanaka said, handcuffing him. "I will put a good word for you with the judge, so that you can stay in the same cell as your brother"

"You're thinking, Atom," Kenichi remarked as they returned to Hyomiro's farm.

"You also seem to be immersed in deep thoughts," replied the robot boy. "What ails you?"

"I was thinking about the strength of family ties," the friend resumed. "Taro loved his brother so much that he followed him down the path of crime and ruined his life like him... and you, Atom, what are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about Taro too... but my thoughts were not as deep as yours," explained hilarious Atom. "To frame Bokkai he used *avocados*, while now, if he wants to have at least a small penalty discount, he will have to contact a good *advocate*"

CHAPTER III: WITCH

"How beautiful it is! It feels like you're in fairytale land!" exclaimed Niki, hopping through the streets of Bamberg. "Dr. Berger, I just don't know how to thank you for taking us with you!"

"It was the least I could do, after all the benefits you and Atom have brought to me and mankind over the past few months," smiled Hans Berger, walking side by side with his ancient disciples Umataro Tenma and Hiroshi Ochanomizu. "But I see that someone does not like ..."

"Pfui," muttered Shibugaki. "To me it seems just a primitive village"

"Because the inhabitants decided to preserve the ancient architectural structure of the buildings as it was at the end of the 1700s, in order to attract tourists ... and they were not all wrong," explained Master Mustache. "Here, we have arrived at the famous Museum of Witchcraft. Come in, guys: it will be a very informative visit"

"A pulley to lift the defendants until they sprained their arms ... what horror!" exclaimed Hikaru Hiyama, seeking refuge in Kenichi's embrace.

"According to the caption, this sword would have been used by the captain of the guard to challenge to a duel a demon, who would have grabbed it with his bare hands and knotted it without a shot wounding ... what nonsense!" said Atom in front of a bulletin board. "And then, who would be these witches which the museum is dedicated to?"

"According to a belief born in the Middle Ages and lasted until the early 1800s, witches were women who entered into a contract with the devil, offering themselves to him body and soul in exchange for the power to perform evil spells. Here in Bamberg the witch hunt reached paroxysm in 1600, when a special prison was even built for them, so great was the number of accused", said an elderly priest. "Let me introduce myself: I am Father Konrad, the director of this museum"

"B-body and soul?!?," Midori murmured embarrassedly. "D-did you want to say really..."

"I don't understand," Niki snorted instead, looking around. "Why were they so obsessed with *witches*, and not *wizards*?"

"It was a reaction to the social upheavals that had occurred a century earlier," he continued. "The sixteenth century was a time of revolutions in all fields: Christopher Columbus discovered America; Nicolaus Copernicus – who, by the way, was a priest like me – theorized that it was the Earth that revolved around the Sun, and not vice versa as had been believed until then; Martin Luther questioned the Pope's monopoly in the interpretation of the Bible, kings and princes began to free themselves from subjection to the Emperor, and women... Women, for the first time in history, began to assert themselves in areas previously reserved for men: there were women painters, women of letters, women mathematicians, women *architects*... All this could not please, and did not please the defenders of the old order, whether

learned or ignorant; thus, when a few years later Europe was torn apart by wars between the Lutheran princes and the Catholic Empire, the people lumped together, and every woman free from the tutelage of a man was considered a disruptor of society. Add to this that women were traditionally custodians of knowledge about the use of so-called medicinal herbs, used both as drugs and poisons, and this is how witches were created."

As the priest spoke, Niki approached a shelf, her eyes as if in a trance; she reached out a hand to a terracotta statuette, but a moment before grabbing it, Atom put his hand on her shoulder. "What do you have, Niki? Are you okay?" he asked anxiously.

"A-Atom?" murmured the robot girl awakening from her stupor. "Did something happen?"

"You looked hypnotized... Do you want me to call your father?" he continued.

"No... No, I'm fine. Come on, let's go, let's reach out to the others," she said, as she walked away. Before reaching her, Atom took a look at the small sculpture: a

naked young girl partially turned back, on the pedestal the inscription *Flos campi*. "Wildflower? Strange, it looks like Niki... but it's impossible, it was made in 1630," he thought.

That night Hikaru got up to drink a glass of water, and as he returned to the girls' room, she saw Niki coming down the stairs; she followed her to the door of the hotel, then ran up to wake up their teacher and he decided to warn Atom. "I think I know where she went," said the little robot alarmedly: "at the Witches' Museum."

"And why?" asked Shunsuke Ban.

"I don't know, but I have a bad premonition," he said, running as fast as he could, while the human followed him breathlessly.

Meanwhile, the robot girl had come to the Museum of Witchcraft, broke the entrance lock, and walked down the corridor; her eyes flashed, and her mind was completely turned off. She arrived in the main hall, walked resolutely to the statuette that had bewitched her a few hours earlier and grabbed it with both hands. At that

moment Atom entered the room with the teacher, saw her and called her: "Niki! What are you doing?"; she gasped, dropped the statuette and it broke into a thousand pieces, revealing a small electronic device from which came out a purple ray that wrapped the robot ... After that she *disappeared*.

"No!" shouted Atom, falling to his knees and bursting into tears. "Nikiiii!"

"Wh-where am I?" murmured Niki, looking around, her head still shrouded in confusion.

She was located on the edge of a dirt road, in the middle of a vast plain scorched by a scorching sun; a hundred meters away she saw a town that in those days she had come to know well: it was the city of Bamberg. *I don't understand*, she told herself. *I went to bed, then I heard Atom's voice calling me, and I find myself here in broad daylight... What have I done in the meantime? I*

should go back to the hotel, maybe dad and the others will be able to tell me what happened to me ...

At that time a cart loaded with logs of wood pulled by a donkey approached; the robot girl signaled the driver to stop and he pulled the reins. "What do you want, beautiful girl?" she asked gallantly in a variety of German that seemed old-fashioned to her. "Excuse me, could you tell me what day it is today?" she asked.



"Are you kidding me?" replied the man, looking askance at her. "Don't you know that today is August 14 in the year of the Lord 1630?" and whipped his beast away at great speed.

Niki was stoned for long minutes, while a tremor not of cold, but of terror shook her to the core; she crouched on the ground covering her face with her hands and tried to calm down, but in vain. August 14, and it was logical, since the day before was the 13th; but of the year *1630*??? Then, slowly, her reasoning regained the upper hand.

There was only one logical explanation for what she had seen and heard: something, or someone, had transported her to the past, back 606 years. Therefore, in the same way, that mysterious entity could bring her back to her present; or her father, Dr. Ochanomizu and Dr. Berger could have invented a contraption capable of doing so... At that point, she told herself, the best thing she could do was to return to Bamberg and find a quiet place to wait for someone to come and rescue her, and with this purpose she set out with decisive steps towards the outskirts of the city.

As she walked through the narrow deserted streets wondering where all the inhabitants were, a woman

emerged from a door throwing a bucket of water that soaked her from head to toe. "Be more careful!" exclaimed Niki before realizing that she had spoken in Japanese; the woman let out a cry of fright and ran away.

Arriving in the main square she saw a large crowd gathered around a pile of wood, straw and stubble on which was hoisted a long pole; on a stage sat an obese and bearded man wrapped in elegant clothes. The trumpets sounded, and a herald came forward proclaiming: "On August 14 anno Domini 1630, in the presence of His Grace the Prince-Bishop Johann Georg II von Fuchs Dornheim, of nobles, bourgeois and middle class people, will be burned at the stake the present Dorothea widow Eschenbach twenty-two years old, found guilty of curse, witchcraft *et etiam commercium diaboli* following the discovery on her right forearm of the notorious mark of witches, as confirmed by unanimous verdict of the Inquisition Tribunal"

"I'm not a witch! I'm not a witch!" the defendant shouted. "I made that mark on my arm by scalding

myself with a pot of boiling water! It's the truth, I swear!" Some soldiers urged her to be quiet, but she threw herself at the foot of the stage and shouted even louder: "Have mercy, please! I have two young children, how can they live without me?"

The bishop-prince did not deign to look at her: he raised his right hand and said "*Fiat*". Two militiamen lifted her weight and tied her to the pole, while another set fire and people shouted hysterically "Burn, witch, burn!", "Yeah, yeah, burn!"

At that show the robot girl could no longer restrain herself: she took the run-up and with a great jump landed on the stake, untied the ropes that held the poor girl and lifted her in her arms, then with another leap took her to the edge of the square and told her: "Save yourself and your children! Hurry up!" and she didn't let herself repeat it twice.

"Arrest her!" ordered an imposing, aquiline-faced man who appeared to be the captain of the guard. Four soldiers swooped down on her all together, holding her

by the arms and legs until she was reduced to immobility. At that moment another soldier approached taking the carter and the woman of the bucket of water with him and said to his superior: "Captain, these two people ask to bear witness." "Speak, then," said the one.

"This woman is a witch," the man began, holding his hat in his hand, his gaze fearful. "I met her an hour ago on the way to the door; she asked strange questions, I thought she wanted to make fun of me... then I realized that she is not a creature of this world, but comes from the depths of the underworld"

"And I can testify that she cast a spell at me in an arcane language. She's a witch, she's a witch!" the woman added, pointing her finger at her.

"You are crazy! I'm not a witch!" shouted Niki. A soldier slapped her saying "How dare you, offspring of the devil?" and was about to hit her again, when the captain grabbed his arm and made him desist. He approached staring intently at her, then said to her: "The word of two witnesses and your own works would

already be sufficient to condemn you... but haste is ill-suited to justice, so you will undergo a fair trial before the inquisitors according to the law. Anyway, it's a shame..." he sighed, reaching out to caress her chin. "Beautiful as you are, by now you may have a good husband and children; instead, you gave yourself to the devil, and now you have to go to hell."

But what does he do? she wondered shocked. *I'm still a child...* No, she reflected, recalling what Master Mustache had explained to them during history lessons: *for the men of this time, a girl 13 or 14 years old is an adult woman, and as such he is treating me.* "You are a man of order, but you behave like a robber," she exclaimed.

It was as if she had given him an electric shock: the man withdrew his hand from her face, stood up and commanded his men "Take her to the witches' prison, and let no one dare touch her until tomorrow, or he will answer to me, Georg Freundsberg!"

What do I do now? I saved that poor woman by acting on impulse... but if I used my hundred horses of power to free myself and escape, the course of history would be disrupted with unimaginable consequences! the robot girl reflected, so she decided to let herself be led away.

When the squad had departed, Johann Georg II beckoned to his captain of the guard: "Come, give me your arm, accompany me to my residence," he said, and when the other approached him to support him he whispered in his ear "Keep yourself, Georg Freundsberg: I have not escaped your gaze on her... As the Apostle says, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"

"I will not fall, Your Grace," he assured him.

Eight hours had already passed when the jailer opened a hole in the iron grate of her cell by inserting a plate of soup and a piece of dark bread. "Eat," he told

her, "or tomorrow you will not stand up to appear before the inquisitors."

"What are they going to do to me?" asked the robot girl. "Don't you know?" replied the man, surprised. She shook her head.

"Well, they'll read you the charges first, then they'll ask you if you plead guilty or innocent. If you confess to being a witch, you will avoid torture and you will immediately end up at the stake..."

"But I'm not a witch!" exclaimed Niki. The human sighed.

"If you persist in not confessing, the inquisitors will resort to torture to loosen your tongue; first they will start with the rope, then, if you do not speak, they will tear your nails and crush your fingers ... And in the meantime they will look for the mark on your body that all witches have. Think about it," he concluded, turning to the door.

As she listened to him, the little robot girl's super-fast brain was sifting through all the possibilities, and

within half a thousandth of a second she made a decision. "Wait!" she cried out. "What's the matter?" he said.

"I am afraid of the inquisitors... The inquisitors are bad..." Niki began to say modestly as she took off her apron and pulled off her fiery red dress. "If I really have to be watched, I'd rather you do it..."

"Hey, wait a minute!" murmured the jailer, sweating profusely. "What do you want to do?"

"Look," she continued, remaining alone in her panties. "You will be able to look at every part of my body... then you will convince yourself that I have no mark"

"But... Why me?" replied the man.

"I don't know," Niki resumed, looking him straight in the eye as she covered her breasts with her hands. "Maybe because you looks like the person I love, I feel I can trust you..."

"Ooh yeah, ooh yeah!" he exclaimed, pulling out a large bunch of keys and fiddling with the lock. "Better certainly me, than three mummified old men...". He opened the door of the cell and approached her

murmuring "I'm sorry for your boyfriend, but he will come second..." when she clenched his mouth with her right hand, she kicked him in the groin and hit him on the jugular with the cut of her left causing him to collapse unconscious. She immediately examined him with her diagnostic tools and sighed with relief: as expected, she had not caused him permanent damage.

She quickly dressed up, grabbed the keys and wrapped herself in the man's cloak, then bent down to whisper in his ear "My apologies, sir: you do not look at all like the person I love" and walked out.

She walked through some corridors lit by dim lanterns to a massive door, opened it and found herself outside; she walked with rapid steps through the narrow streets, when suddenly she felt her strength lacking. *Oh, no! I'm running out of energy!* she thought. *I have to find a refuge, before...*

As she turned a corner, she bumped into a tall, massive figure, staggered and fell backwards; the last thing

she saw, before closing her eyes, was the face of Georg Friendsberg.

"Try to calm down, Atom! There's no point in despairing!" warned Shunsuke Ban.

"How can I stay calm?" exclaimed the robot boy, walking furiously up and down. "Niki disappeared before my eyes, and I couldn't do anything to save her!"

"'Disappeared' does not necessarily mean 'dead,'" Dr. Ochanomizu tried to reassure him. "Hans is still examining that strange device... Maybe he can tell us where she is now."

"But..." Atom murmured as he hugged his mentor.

"Hans Berger is the sharpest mind to appear in this world in the last two hundred years," Dr. Tenma said. "If there is anyone capable of solving this mystery, it is him. I still have confidence... Trust you too, my son"

"I did it!" announced Dr. Berger in a jubilant tone as he entered the room. Everyone's eyes were immediately on him. "Niki... is she alive?" asked Astro Boy in a low voice.

"She's alive," the scientist confirmed. "Now there is no time to explain everything to you by thread and by sign ... but you, Atom, have to reach her and bring back here."

"You can count on it," he proclaimed resolutely. "Where is she?"

"In Bamberg in 1630," the man replied, while the others echoed in surprise. "The original teleporter is now low and unusable, but I built a copy. You just have to press the button, then immediately head to the residence of the captain of the bishop's guard; the device will guide you," he said, handing him a small metal object. "When you find her, press the button again, hold Niki tight and count to seven... and please, do not drop it for any reason!"



When she opened her eyes, Niki Tenma found herself in a four-poster bed, covered by a sheet, and realized with horror that her hands were tied and that she was almost completely naked. She looked around: she was in a soberly furnished room, her clothes resting on a chair, and before a burning fireplace Georg Freundsberg,

shirtless, vigorously scourged himself; each blow left a bloody trail on his shoulders, back and hips. "What have you done to me?" she cried.

"I have done nothing to you, I swear it on the holy Gospels!" he exclaimed, turning, a regretful expression on his face. "I took off your clothes to look for the mark of witches... but I didn't violate your intimacy, I swear!"

The robot girl was not at all convinced. "So why do you whip? For what fault are you punishing yourself?" she insisted, when she noticed that the man had a very pronounced bulge under his trousers.

"Since I fixed your white limbs, an impure thought has invaded my mind... and the more I try to drive him away, the more violent it becomes, that's why!" he murmured, returning to beat himself and shouting loudly, "Lord, have mercy on this poor sinner!"

I knew I had a great fascination with males, humans or robots... but this guy is completely out of his mind. Anyway, he did not understand that I am not human, for the moment, she considered reassured, but if my father

had not installed a self-rechargeable experimental battery in me, I would now be unconscious and helpless in his hands ... I have to convince him to free me, and there's only one way. "So, captain of the guard!" she called him. "Have you found the famous mark of the witches or not?"

Georg Freundsberg stopped flogging himself and turned to look at her again. "Not yet," he gasped, wiping the sweat from his forehead with one hand, "but I will continue to look for and find it. I'll find it, so... I will be able to hand you over to the inquisitors with a clear conscience."

You shouldn't show yourself so vulnerable, captain: 15 to zero, Niki thought. "With a clear conscience?" she replied mockingly. "You will never have a clear conscience, and do you know why? Because witches do not exist, and therefore there is no mark of witches!"

"You lie!" exclaimed the man, clenching his fists. "The inquisitors always know how to expose you..."

"The inquisitors only see what they want to see!" she urged him. "They build a castle of lies in their heads, and they call it reality!"

"Enough! Shut up!" he shouted at her.

30 to zero, reflected the robot girl. "That poor woman only had a burn, and I... I am pure and innocent as a wildflower!"

"Shut up! Shut up!" shouted the one even louder, taking his head in his hands; then he grabbed his sword, stood in front of her and tore off the sheet, but Niki did not lower her gaze. *I brought him to breaking point*, she considered. *It's do or die*.

With two precise strokes Georg severed the ties that tightened her, then stuck his sword on the floorboards and grabbed her breasts. "You're cold," he murmured, "I'll warm you now...", but she pushed him away, shouting, "Take your hands off me!"

She ran to the door, but it opened wide letting in some servants – who had remained outside to eavesdrop until then – who blocked her way; he picked up his sword

and approached her, hissing "Ungrateful". *It's the end for me*, Niki thought disconsolately. *Atom...*

At that moment the window exploded into a thousand fragments, while a small figure with black hair upright on his head like two horns burst into the room. "Atom!" cried the little robot girl. "Are you the devil? I'm not afraid of you," the captain growled, pounced on him; but Atom grabbed the sword, knotted it before his astonished eyes and stretched him out with a hook, then ran to Niki and hugged her. "I knew you were going to come and save me... but I was so afraid," she murmured when she was in his arms.

"Hold on tight, Niki: you're going home," he promised by pressing the button. "Six, five, four..." From an oil lamp that had been overturned in the commotion flowed a tongue of fire high to the ceiling; Atom gasped and the teleporter fell from his hands emitting a purple light. "Oh, no!" he exclaimed a moment before disappearing with his beloved under the astonished gaze of

Freundsberg. "Then you're really a witch..." he murmured as he saw her dissolve.

"Bring water! Put out the fire!" ordered the head of the servants; he bent over his master and asked him, "How are you, master? Who was that woman?"

"She's the witch they arrested yesterday," replied a valet. "What was she doing in this house? Explain to us, master!" cried out another.

"There is little to explain," he replied on his knees. "The serpent has offered me a forbidden fruit, and I... I ate"

"That's it," Atom concluded, continuing to hold Niki tightly wrapped in a blanket. "What a terrifying story," Father Konrad murmured, "thank goodness it ended well."

"One thing I don't understand, or rather two," said Astro Boy. "Who built that diabolical device? And why?"

"The first answer is easy," Hans Berger said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It was me"

"I didn't explain myself," he insisted. "I'm not talking about the second device you built; I'm talking about the first, the one that captured Niki..."

"Atom, Atom," Niki gently interjected, "you still don't understand that? There are not *two* teleporters, there has always been only one. Am I right, Dr. Berger?"

"You say great, my little Niki," the doctor resumed. "When I examined the low device I immediately noticed that the microchip had engraved above the letters H and B, the initials of Hans Berger ... a coquetry that I adopt on all my creations. At that point I did nothing but make an identical copy; I advised Atom not to part with it for any reason because I hoped to break this Closed Time-like Curve from the origin, but evidently the constricting force of the laws of nature is insurmountable"

The robot boy was struggling to absorb the awareness of what he had heard. "Do you mean we weren't free to behave differently? That Niki had to suffer what she suffered, and that I had to tie that sword like that, because all this had already happened six hundred years before we were born?"

"Freedom... the most misunderstood word in history," the scientist ruled. "We human beings are free, or do we believe we are... but if we throw ourselves from a skyscraper, are we free not to feel the force of gravity that attracts us and not to smash ourselves to the ground? Are we free to fly waving our arms as if they were the wings of a bird? If being free means being able to choose between good and evil, then humans and robots are certainly free; but the laws of physics dictate a harmony that pervades the whole Universe, and since our bodies are made of matter their movements are limited by this harmony in space, and apparently, even in time."

"What about Georg Freundsberg?" asked the little robot girl. "And the bishop, did he continue to burn alleged witches?"

"Georg Freundsberg was tried by the Inquisition and confessed to helping a witch escape justice," Dr. Berger said, showing them a large folio book taken from the museum's library. "By the grace of his rank, and because he had made a full confession, he was allowed to avoid the stake and was beheaded. As about Johann Georg II von Fuchs Dornheim, two years later the city of Bamberg was conquered by the Swedes and he had to flee to Austria, where he died in exile."

"I'm sorry for Freundsberg," she murmured. "His soul was divided between desire and duty: on the one hand he wanted to send me to the stake, on the other he wanted to protect me and make me his own. In the end, desire prevailed, just as I had predicted... that's why he felt guilty."

"But who made the statuette, putting the teleporter in it?" asked Hikaru curiously.

"Most likely a member of the captain's servants who had witnessed the scene," Father Konrad ventured. "Judging by the posture, he portrayed Niki while she was hugging Atom, but for superstition he did not depict the latter"

"There is still an unanswered question: why did all this happen? The laws of nature, yes, but what is the purpose?" muttered Master Mustache.

"The ways of the Lord are inaccessible and His thoughts impenetrable," replied the priest, "but perhaps we can all learn a lesson from this affair: that true love also surpasses time and space. As for me," he added with a smile, "in two days I will attend an international conference on 'Witchcraft and superstition', and until now I could achieve nothing... but now, thanks to what Atom and Niki have told us, I have enough unpublished and reliable material to prepare a superlative report; therefore, not all evil comes to harm."

CHAPTER IV: THE ROBOT DRUG

On the third Monday in September, after attending the celebrations for the Feast of Respect for the Elderly, Atom and Niki were walking hand in hand through the streets of Shibuya when the little robot girl was hit heavily and fell to the ground; the robot that had hit her picked up her handbag and fled. "I'll take it!" exclaimed Atom, throwing himself in pursuit.

He chased him for more than a kilometer, while the snatcher threw people down like skittles to open escape routes and try to slow him down, until he managed to grab him by the clothes shouting "Now don't run away anymore, rascal!". He elbowed him in the chest and tried to escape, but someone slammed him and rolled him to the ground. "Niki! How did you get there so quickly?" asked the robot boy in wonder. "I took a shortcut," she replied, smiling.

"Aren't you, who are a robot, ashamed to behave in this abject way? Let's see if you have an identification card..." Atom scolded him while Niki rummaged in his pockets; she found the document, read it, and said to her boyfriend, "Let him go, Atom."

"But... Why?" he said, surprised. "Because he's a policeman," she explained, showing him his ID card.

"Robot-agent ADM-7021... I apologize, but..." murmured the astral boy, bowing deeply.

"Apology accepted... are the uncertainties of the job," he smiled, getting up and smoothing his ragged clothes with one hand. "I'm sorry, miss, but you'll have to do without your handbag and your money: I'm doing an undercover investigation and I have to take home a lot of stolen goods every day, if I don't want to burn the trail I'm following"

"What is it?" asked Atom. "We believe we have the right to know"

"Civilians should not meddle in a police investigation, for their own good," ADM-7021 ruled.

"But he's not just any civilian: he's the famous Atom Tetsuwan, the strongest robot in the world who has helped your colleagues many times," explained the robot girl.

"*That* Atom Tetsuwan?!? From what is said about him, I thought he was a colossus two meters tall ..." exclaimed the robot-agent. "Anyway, for some time someone has been putting on the black market a robot drug codenamed 'Refrain', a very low-cost microchip that produces pleasant hallucinations for artificial intelligences... so hundreds of robots across the country have started to carry out muggings, thefts and robberies in order to buy doses. I pretend to be one of them to go up the ranks of the organization and identify the Number One; but it's not easy, because only his most trusted men know his name and can meet him face to face."

"I want to help you: tell me what I can do!" promised Atom solemnly.

"Well, tonight two top men of the gang will come to collect the ill-gotten of the week: I thought I would get

into their good graces and convince them to take me to their boss ... You could come with me, so I would present you as a new conscript," he proposed. "If you agree, we'll meet at 8pm at the old abandoned paper mill. Oh, and call me Adam."

"I'll come too," Niki injected. "No, absolutely not: it's too risky," objected the robot boy.

"If you say so," she replied, pouting at him.

"I'm sorry your girlfriend took it badly," Adam said as they entered the dilapidated building.

"I don't want anything bad to happen to her... I hope she understands me, sooner or later," Atom replied.

In a large room they found about twenty robots arranged in an orderly row in front of two men dressed in black collecting money and valuables in large bags, and they stood in the last place waiting patiently; when it was their turn ADM-7021 began to say "I brought you my

booty, and one of my cronies too...", but one of the two gangsters shouted to the other: "Damn...! It's Atom! Shoot him, shoot him!"

At that moment a siren began to sound madly, and all the robots fled in panic. "Here come the flatfeet, let's run away!" shouted the youngest human frightened. "Where are you going, coward?" the other took him out pulling out a gun, but Atom hit it with a laser beam disarming him. "I got this," exclaimed the robot-agent triumphantly, clutching the handcuffs on the wrist of the former.

At that moment Niki appeared. "I made the factory sirens sound... luckily they still worked. We promised to do everything together, my dear Atom, or have you forgotten?" she said, staring at him with her hands on her hips.

"Oh, Niki, forgive me! I just wanted to protect you... but in the end, it's always you who protects me. From now on I will no longer treat you like a weak and frightened child, I swear!" he promised hugging her.

Meanwhile, Adam was chasing the two criminals. "Who is your boss, and where is he hiding? Speak!" he urged them.

"You waste your breath, can! We will keep our mouths sewn shut!" replied the elder mockingly. Niki approached him and closed his mouth with a gag, then turned to the youngest: "Speak, or I will give you a slow-acting poison that will force you to say everything even if you do not want to, before killing you in a very painful way" she told him with a grim look.

"I-I don't speak..." murmured the thug.

"Too bad for you," the little robot girl replied, revealing his arm; she pulled a small needle from her finger and stung him. The robot-agent intervened, but Atom restrained him, while the other rascal became agitated and grumbled helplessly. The young man began to sweat cold. "You have butterflies in your belly, don't you? This is just the beginning," Niki warned him.

"Please save me!" cried the human. "Our boss's name is Skunk Kusai, and he's hiding in Central 9 of the

Metro City sewage system! And now give me the antidote, I beg you!"

"How many men are guarding the lair?" insisted the robot girl.

"Four... Only four, that's the truth! Please, I don't want to die!" screamed the one with tears in his eyes.

"You won't die," Niki assured him. "Cold sweats and stomach upheaval are only psychosomatic effects caused by autosuggestion... Unlike your partner, you are still young and naïve, and you fell into my trap as I predicted."

Skunk Kusai's face was deformed by a satanic grin as he counted for the umpteenth time the bank bills stacked on the table: after having managed to escape by a pure twist of fate he had wandered for weeks suffering hunger, while Japan was getting back on its feet after the blackout caused by extraterrestrials; but now he was rich

again, very rich, and he would become richer and richer, until... Suddenly one of his minions opened the door abruptly: "The police have arrived, boss! We are surrounded, we have to flee through the pipes!"

"Damn!" he cried, following him. As they were about to enter a tunnel, he heard a voice well known to him: "Surrender, Skunk! Don't run away from me this time!"

"Damn Atom!" said Skunk, throwing a grenade at him. "Be careful!" exclaimed ADM-7021, shielding him with his own body; the bomb exploded, sowing deadly shrapnel in every direction, and by the time the smoke cleared, Skunk and his accomplice were long gone.

"Adam... Adam, answer me!" the little robot called shaking his new friend, but it was useless: his AI was now destroyed forever. "You can't do anything more for him," Inspector Tawashi told him, taking off his hat and putting his hand on his shoulder.

"Damn Skunk! One day I'll catch you, and make you pay for all your crimes!" exclaimed Atom, pointing

to nothing in front of him. "I will take you at the cost of my life!"

CHAPTER V: THE SHINY DOLL

The robber looked back worried: the hit at the jewelry store had gone smoothly, but now the cops were on his trail... He had to hide the gun and the stolen goods, or they would take him red-handed! He hid the weapon inside a garbage can, then whistled into the amusement park and wandered among the stands; he walked into one of them and took a quick look at the prizes on offer. He spotted a large doll, examined it and saw that the torso opened and was hollow inside; then he hid the fruit of his crime, screwed it back, laid it in its place and walked away without anyone noticing him.

"What a beautiful doll!" exclaimed Niki Tenma, looking at it ecstatically. The carny turned to Atom: "The young lady has good taste... but to get it you have to

shoot down all the targets. Would you like to try, sir? It costs only five yen," he said, holding out his open hand.

"Of course," said the robot boy.

Five minutes later the man handed the prize to his girlfriend. "Thank you so much, Atom: you were magnificent!" she said, printing a kiss on his cheek. Hidden in the shadows, a mysterious figure was watching them.

While walking through the cotton candy stalls and the entrance to the roller coaster, the two robots met Inspector Tawashi. "Hi, Inspector, what good wind brings you here?"

"Storm wind," muttered the officer. "They robbed a jewelry store nearby, and I play the shirt that the criminal hid in the crowd ... We'll have to search everyone before we let them out."

"So, you want to search us too?" asked Niki.

"I have no time to waste with you," he snorted as he reached his men.

Two hours later the police decided to let the impatient crowd flow: the search had led to nothing... Atom and Niki walked out of the main gate together, then said goodbye to each other's homes. As she walked, the little robot girl had the feeling of being followed; she slipped into a dark alley, walked it for a hundred meters, then stopped. She looked around: no one.

"I must have been wrong," she sighed. She turned around, and saw a tall man with a scar on his face blocking her way. "Give me that doll," he said, stepping forward.

"What do you want from me? Go away, maniac!" shouted Niki, running away. The other chased her and was about to reach her, when the little robot girl saw Atom coming towards her from afar. "Don't let him take it!" she exclaimed, throwing the doll at him.

Astro Boy grabbed her on the fly and ran away, the man threw himself on him, but Atom had time to throw it back to the little robot girl. "Do you want it? Come and

get her!" teased him; he got on his heels, but when he almost grabbed her, Niki passed it back to her boyfriend. Then the criminal changed tactics: he pulled out a gun, wrapped his arm around the robot girl's neck and pointed the weapon at her head. "Give me the doll, or I'll blow her brain!" he yelled at Atom.

"You made a big mistake, my dear... never underestimate a robot with the power of a hundred horses!" exclaimed Niki, grabbing him by the arm and making him perform a turn that sent him to end up on Atom; the doll fell to the ground, unscrewed and from the bust came necklaces, rings and earrings in gold and precious stones that scattered on the sidewalk. "Damn!" shouted the robber trying to escape, but the astral boy grabbed him and sent him to the mat with a fist.

"I just don't know how to thank you, Miss Niki," said the jeweler moved as the scoundrel was taken away

in handcuffs. "To reward you, if you are not offended, I would like to give you this gold ring with ruby ... It goes beautifully with your blonde hair and your fiery red dress, in my opinion."

"Thank you," she said, bowing and watching the jewel shine on her finger, then turned to Atom: "I don't know how I would have done without you... How did you know I was in danger?"

"I didn't know," the robot boy joked. "I went back to propose to you to do our homework together tomorrow afternoon... then I followed your scent, and so I reached you, just in time apparently"

"Did you recognize my scent from so far away, and in the midst of so many people?" she asked, smiling. "You really have a special sense of smell, Tetsu-kun"

"You are the one who is special, Tenma-san," he replied, taking her hands.

CHAPTER VI: BLACKOUT



"Merry Christmas, Niki! This is for you," Atom said, handing her a packet with a bowed bag. "This is also for you, dear, on my husband's and my part," said Mrs. Rin. "And this is mine... I bought it with my pocket money!" exclaimed Uran, hopping in joy.

"Thank you... I thank you all from the bottom of my heart," Niki Tenma replied, bowing deeply.

Nearby, Hiroshi Ochanomizu was handing a bottle of sake to his old friend Shunsuke Ban when the house

sank into darkness. "Aaah!" shouted Atom's younger sister in fear.

"What happened, dear?" Atom's mother asked her husband. "I don't know," replied Mr. Ethanol, looking out the window. "It seems that the whole neighborhood is in the dark"

"It's the disembodied extraterrestrials... They came back to attack us again! I'm scared, Atom!" murmured Niki, clutching the astral boy. "I'll protect you, don't be afraid," he tried to reassure her.

In the meantime, Master Mustache had pulled out a small lighter. "How about, Hiroshi?" he asked the scientist.

"Now I call the Ministry of Science and Technology... give me light, please," Ochanomizu said, dialing a number on his phone and walking a few steps away. After five minutes he hung up; "Don't worry, no alien attack in sight," he announced. "The blackout only affected the power plant that supplies electricity to this neighborhood

and its adjacent... even if the technicians still can't figure out what happened."

What was happening, three shady figures who at that moment had broken into a bank and were loading bags of money on a car knew well. "Without electricity, the alarm system is out of order, just as the boss intended," one of them mockingly remarked. "It's all too easy," added another.

"And are you complaining?" replied the first, continuing to throw him bags of bank bills.

"Of course, I'm complaining," said the second, scratching a bruise. "I agree it's pitch dark, but you are throwing all these heavy bags at me..."

Five minutes later they were already far away. "This is just the beginning, guys," exulted the one at the wheel. "From tonight we will take the whole city!"

"Would you like to see me, Inspector?" asked Atom politely as he entered the office at the police station, then noticed Dr. Ochanomizu's presence. "It's for tonight's blackout, son," the scientist said. "We couldn't find out the cause: suddenly the generators shut down, and they remained in that state for three hours, then they started working again as if nothing had happened"

"And in the meantime, someone has robbed a bank and two jewelry stores," Inspector Tawashi intervened. "They had a good game, with the alarms without power..."

"I don't think it was a coincidence," Ochanomizu continued. "In my opinion the blackout was deliberately caused for the purpose of committing those crimes, and I believe there will be more... This is why I would like you to come with us to the plant, to take a look: maybe you will discover something that we could miss"

In the large building the three scoured everything from top to bottom; Atom carefully examined high-voltage generators and cables, but he found nothing

irregular. As they walked out, the robot boy noticed that a vast expanse of land around the plant appeared scorched, as if it had been struck by lightning: *Strange*, he thought.

"What are you doing, Atom? Come on!" called Dr. Ochanomizu.

"I can't explain those burn marks on the ground," he justified himself.

"It must have been lightning. Go up, we don't have time to lose," muttered the inspector.

But it didn't rain last night, the little robot reflected.

In the afternoon, after school, Atom went to the nearest library and consulted numerous articles published in scientific journals. When he returned home, he found his mother and Niki waiting for him. "Atom! Don't you remember that you promised to go running errands?"

the first asked him. "And you promised me to do homework together," added the second sadly.

"I'm sorry... I spent a lot of time in the library," he murmured displeased.

"It's for the blackout, isn't it?" asked Niki; he was speechless. "You should know that I read your mind now, my dear," she said, placing a finger over his mouth.

"You're right, as always," Atom admitted. "I have been looking for information on experiments carried out recently around electric fields, and I have found numerous articles written by a certain Daisuke Yusaku, called in the environment 'Doctor Electron' for his fixation on the study of electricity: in his articles he describes a machine capable of conveying large amounts of electric current into the ground producing effects similar to the fall of lightning ... just like the ones I noticed this morning around the plant. I would like to go to his house and ask him some questions, but I have to run errands..."

"I can go there if you want," the little robot girl proposed.

Niki Tenma rang the doorbell twice, but no answer, then saw that the door of Dr. Yusauku's house was open and gasped. She entered cautiously moving on tiptoe through the various rooms; in the bedroom she found the wardrobe and various drawers open and empty. *They took away some clothes*, she thought. *Here it gets bad.*

In the dining room, in plain sight on a large table was a hand-drawn sheet of paper with strange mathematical symbols. Suddenly the little robot girl heard footsteps in the corridor; she put the paper in her pocket and hid behind a curtain. A man dressed in black and with a thick mustache scoured every corner, muttering, "Yet it there must be... where did he put it?", then turned to her hiding place and exclaimed "Hey, a curtain with red shoes?"

"It's a new fashion," Niki shouted, popping out and hitting him with a headboard in the pit of his stomach;

the man collapsed breathlessly, and she ran out at great speed.



An hour later she was back there with Atom, the inspector and two policemen. "I think I understand," Ta-washi said. "This egghead must have invented a device capable of blocking the electric current, some criminal knew it and took away one and the other ... But why did they come back here again? What were they looking for?"

As they returned home, the astral boy questioned his girlfriend: "You pretended nothing, but you don't sell

to me... You found something important in the doctor's house, didn't you?"

"Apparently you read my mind too," she admitted, handing him the paper. "You better keep it... I don't understand anything, but maybe you can draw a useful clue"

The next day, on her way from school, the robot girl found her house in disarray as if it had been devastated by a hurricane. "Daddy!" she shouted, running to hug her father. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine, my daughter," Dr. Tenma assured her, stroking her golden hair. "Luckily for me I wasn't at home when they made this mess... Who knows what they were looking for, since they turned everything around but didn't take anything away."

I know, Niki reflected indignantly. "Excuse me, Dad, but I have to go to Atom"

"They were looking for this sheet of notes, I'm sure," he said decisively after listening to her. "I wonder how they found out that you were the one who took it... It must be a scoundrel who knows you well, but..."

"Have you been able to interpret what is written there?" she asked.

"They are formulas relating to the movement and concentration of electricity... but I haven't been able to understand this one here yet," Atom said, pointing to a set of figures.

"Of course, Atom: this is not a formula, it's a phone number!" exclaimed the little robot girl. "See? It starts with 03, which is the area code for Metro City."

"It's true! That's why I couldn't decipher it! Niki, you're a genius!" exclaimed the astral boy hugging her and spinning her in the air; then he went to the computer on his desk: "Let's see if the address is in the phone book ... here! I run right there... and you will come with me!"

"Really?" she remarked, looking sideways at him. "Aren't you afraid I might get me into trouble?"

"Not anymore," he replied, taking her hand. "You and me are a couple: when we are together nobody beats us"

The address corresponded to an old cottage. "I'll go in," Atom said, crawling through the tall grass. "If I don't come back within half an hour, warn Inspector Tawashi"

"All right," she confirmed.

Atom walked down a long corridor trying not to make noise, then heard footsteps and hid around a corner; the man with the moustache approached a door carrying a tray with plates and cutlery, knocked and said aloud "It's the dinner, doctor!", then went in and out a few seconds later empty-handed. The little robot waited until he had left, then entered the room; an old and unkempt man stood with his fork in mid-air. "Who are you?" he asked curiously.

"Atom Tetsuwan... and you're Dr. Yusaku, I guess," Atom replied. "I came to save you... Come with me, soon!"

"Wait!" exclaimed the scientist. "There are projects that must not remain in their hands, or it will be trouble for everyone!"

"All right, then let me lead the way," said Astro Boy.

"On this side," Yusaku said, leading him into a dark room. "Here, it's in here...", then pressed a button and a transparent dome closed around Atom. "Hey, Skunk, you can come now!" he called.

"You fell into my trap like a chicken, damn Atom," Skunk Kusai mocked him as he entered. "I knew that one day or another your naivety would lead you to ruin... And now you are in my hands. Ha ha ha ha!"

"So, she's in league with this scoundrel... but why?" asked Atom turning to the scientist.

"Out of necessity," he replied, crossing his arms. "For years I have been asking for funding from the

government and private ... but no one ever took me seriously, he did."

"And for this reason, you put your knowledge at the service of a criminal? You made a bad deal!" he admonished.

"The path of progress sometimes requires sacrifices and compromises," the doctor said, "but thanks to the money offered to me by Mr. Kusai I was finally able to realize the prototype of my brilliant invention: the Electrocollector!" he exclaimed triumphantly, lifting a cloth that hid a two-and-a-half-meter-high machine mounted on four wheels. "It collects electricity and conveys it into the ground... but unfortunately it is still not perfect, because the operation produces as a side effect burns in the discharge area. That's why I asked Skunk to send one of his men to retrieve the paper on which I had pinned the corrections to be made," he explained.

"And then there was also the phone number of this place," Atom noted. "That's why you sent your

henchmen to ransack Tenma's house... you recognized Niki by your description of her, didn't you?"

"That's right," Skunk admitted, spreading his arms, "but all your wit won't save you this time."

"You're inside an electric oven that I built in my spare time," Dr. Yusaku explained. "Now I'm going to lower this lever, and the temperature inside it will reach 3,000 degrees in a few seconds. Goodbye, Atom"

At that moment numerous gunshots were heard; the mustachioed man entered breathless shouting "The flat-feet! They surrounded the building!" "Damn Atom, then you didn't come alone!" growled the criminal.

"I'm tired of being the turkey of the situation," Atom exclaimed, taking flight and tearing apart the dome that enveloped him. "You won't get away with it this time"

"You say that," Skunk exclaimed, pulling out his weapon; the robot boy became defensive, but he turned the gun on Dr. Yusaku and shot him in the abdomen.

"Please be strong!" murmured Atom, holding him as Skunk fled.

"Miss Niki, thank you for saving my life," Daisuke Yusaku solemnly said from the hospital bed in which he lay. "If you hadn't operated on me, I wouldn't be here now..."

"You have to thank your lucky star, doctor," the robot girl joked. "If the bullet had damaged vital organs, not even my scalpel could have saved you"

"It wasn't luck that saved him, but Skunk's good aim," Atom corrected. Everyone turned to look at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" asked Niki.

"Skunk Kusai is an unscrupulous man," explained the astral boy. "If he had wanted to kill him instantly, he would have done it... but then I would have caught him without any effort. Instead, by seriously but not lethally

injuring him, he made sure I brought him to safety and left him free to escape once again."

"That rascal won't get away with it forever, that's for sure," Inspector Tawashi muttered. "As for you, doctor, in prison you will have time and opportunity to reflect on your mistakes"

"I hope they give you a chance to continue your research, Dr. Yusaku," the little robot girl noted. "If used in the right way, they could really benefit humanity."

"I don't know if I'll resume my studies," the doctor said with a heartbroken look. "What happened left me without strength... I feel like a *low* battery"

CHAPTER VII: THE SPARROWHAWKS OF THE ROAD

"The usual burger and chips, agent Suzuki?" asked the waitress politely.

"You read my mind, my dear," confirmed traffic police officer Jiro Suzuki. "What about you, Yamamoto?" he asked, turning to his colleague.

"Ah, for me the same," Issei Yamamoto said, shaking off his thoughts.

"I'll bring them to you right away," the young woman confirmed, walking away.

A truck driver in his fifties headed for the toilet; he entered, and felt the cold of a gun barrel on his head. "Give me the keys, right away," growled a tall, sturdy man, as his companion filmed the scene on a camera. "Please don't kill me... I have a wife and three children..." murmured the poor man before a blow to the back of his head sent him into the world of dreams. "Let's go, Camera," the assailant told his associate.

They left the power station unnoticed, got into the semi-trailer and set it off. They had moved a few miles away when Mirei Ko laid two steaming plates in front of the policemen. "Excuse me, but I have to go to the bathroom; you know, the prostate... start if you will," said elder Suzuki. Five minutes later he returned breathless, shouting "They stole a truck! We must chase them! Come on, move the clutches!" The colleague followed him, leaving both plates empty on the table, and the two rode their motorcycles speeding at 250 kilometers per hour.

"The cops are behind us! Speed up, Beast!" exclaimed Camera, hearing the barking of two-tone sirens. "It's a word... This is not a supercar!" muttered the other. "I guess we're fucked up this time..."

Suddenly a hovercraft dropped a net on the two police officers sending them rolling in the dust. "They're running away!" shouted Yamamoto, getting up. "Shut up!" shouted the other louder, punching him in the face.

"What's up with you? It's not my fault!" complained that one.

"No! This is for stealing all my chips while I was in the bathroom! Do you think I didn't notice?" the older colleague angrily asked.



The hovercraft landed a few minutes later on the side of the road whitened by sleet; a girl with long blonde hair came down wearing a fiery red long-sleeved dress, a white apron and red slippers. The two thieves met her; "We thank you for saving us... but I guess you didn't do it for free, right?" asked the man called Beast.

"You say well," she said. "You're the famous 'Sparrowhawks of the Road', aren't you? You have become a legend around here... I wish to join you."

"Why?" he replied.

"Oh, for various reasons," replied the girl. "For the sake of adventure, for making money, for making money and for the sake of adventure... Isn't that enough?"

"What if we don't agree?" he replied.

"In that case," she said, pulling out a large-caliber revolver, "I would kill you and soak the bounty on your head, which if I remember correctly is about two million yen each."

The two men exchanged a look of understanding. "All right, we'll take you to our boss, but we don't guarantee anything," the first said.

"As my grandmother always said, a half-promise is better than no promise at all," the girl replied, putting the weapon back in its sheath. "Let me introduce myself: my name is Niki Tomoe"

"You can call me Beast," he said, shaking her hand, "and he's Musashi Fujita: we call him Camera because he films everything that happens around him."

As they proceeded along the highway, Niki, perched between the two, asked Beast, "Where is your base? I searched far and wide without being able to find it... yet I beat the area palm to palm"

"You didn't find it because our base is not a base," replied the one as he drove. "Let me explain: we use a large articulated vehicle, with enough space to sleep, eat and do everything else, as well as for the load of course; when we steal a truck, we move the goods to our vehicle and go somewhere else. Understood, now?"

"I understand, yes!" she exclaimed. "If you hadn't told me I would never have gotten there... Your boss must be a genius."

"*He's* a genius," Beast confirmed, "not for nothing does he call himself the Professor. Soon you will meet him... but I don't know if you'll get out of this meeting alive," he concluded harshly.

It's just as I had assumed, Niki Tenma thought to herself, recalling the talks she had with Inspector Tawashi. "Atom is engaged as an ambassador of peace in Zimbabwe, where a racially motivated civil war has been going on for years... Only you can help us! You have to infiltrate that gang of *hijackers* and discover their lair... Even a robot girl without superpowers can do it!" *Yes, in words it seems easy...*

When they stopped, a short-haired girl got up from a hammock and came to meet them along with a reddish-

haired young man still holding a blowtorch. "She's Cypher and he's Flame," Beast explained, telling them what happened. At that time a bald man came out of the truck, bespectacled and with a long beard, wearing a black Korean uniform. "Who is this brat, Cypher?" he asked.

"She says her name is Niki Tomoe," she yawned, "and she wants to join us."

Niki approached the man and bowed deeply: "Nice to meet you, Professor." He squared her from head to toe. "The pleasure is all yours. What is your *rirekisho*?"

"My... What?" asked the little robot girl in surprise.

"Your *rirekisho*," he insisted. "Which schools you attended, with what marks, what qualifications you obtained... in short, your curriculum"

"Hey, wait a minute!" she exclaimed. "I want to get rich by stealing trucks and selling their cargo on the black market! Since when do you need a degree to be a robber?"

"Since I decided it!" shouted the Professor. "I'm fed up of seeing people flocking to cinemas to watch movies where criminals look like ignorant savages!"

"But boss, that's just fiction... indeed, *pulp* fiction..." Camera attempted to intervene.

"I don't care!" continued the other with increasing enthusiasm. "They drink, burp, and fuck the woman of the boss; this, this is *criminal*!" Then he turned to Niki again, pointing his finger at her: "I have two degrees, and my men have all graduated from high school... and you, Niki Tomoe?"

"I studied until the ninth grade in the most exclusive institute in Metro City, with all the credits in order and the highest marks in all subjects" replied the robot girl crossing her arms and squinting; "After that, my teacher was the road"

"The ninth grade?" asked the Professor in amazement. "It seems to me a little... and after that, are you referring to Fellini's 'La strada'?"

Who is he? "No, I want to say that I lived on the road, and it wasn't easy at all," she said. "Anyway, I learned to hack all kinds of computers, to drive all kinds of vehicles, land, water and air – Beast and Camera will tell you – and how to shoot all kinds of firearms... and I don't miss a shot," she concluded, blowing on her finger and winking at him. *In this I told the truth: I trained for ten days in the police range ...*

"All right, all right," said the man, waving a hand, "practice is worth more than grammar... Let's say I'll take you on trial"

"Yatta!" exulted Niki, jumping for joy, as the Sparrowhawks removed their hands from the butts of the guns and clapped whistling. "Come on, come on, we've already wasted too much time! Let's start downloading!" urged the Professor.

An hour later they had almost finished working using power-multiplier droids. "Take it easy with that case, Niki!" said the Professor. "You don't want it to fall and break!"

"It's a word, Professor: this case weighs like ... like... well, I don't know like what, but it weighs," Niki replied. *And I can't show that I have a hundred horsepower.* "Toh, Beast, you take it," she told her partner.

"Hey, wait..." he said taken by surprise, and the case fell to the ground with a great roar. "So are you deaf? I said *easy!*" their boss scolded them.

"For misery, Professor! This case weighs like lead!" the other tried to apologize.

"Cypher, what do these cases contain?" said the little robot girl.

"Here it says fertilizers for agricultural use," replied the young woman.

"Professor, isn't it strange that fertilizers weigh so much? If I remember correctly, they should have a very low specific weight..." Niki noted getting off the droid

and joining the others. "And then, the case has an electronic lock... there's something fishy about this"

"Cypher, open it," ordered the Professor. She discovered her right arm, and long tentacles stretched out from it to the lock. "Are you a robot?" asked Niki, amazed.

"Do you have anything against robots?" asked Cypher.

What should I answer? asked the little robot girl hesitant. "Not... not personally..." she finally ventured.

"Don't worry, we don't like *tin cans* either," she reassured her. "Apart from this prosthesis, I am fully human."

A moment later the case opened. "What is it?" asked Beast. "I know: it's a foot," Niki replied confidently.

"A foot? Not of a table Louis 14, I hope," remarked the Professor sarcastically.

"Certainly not," she smiled at him. "It's a robot's foot... Judging by the size, a robot at least forty meters tall"

"I know what it is, boss!" exclaimed Flame, running away and returning after a few minutes with a magazine. "They talked about it in this issue of 'Women and Weapons': it's a Gigantus S-11, a combat robot designed by Megatech for intensive use on the battlefield"

" Megatech... but isn't that the company this truck belongs to?" asked Cypher, looking at the travel documents.

"It's a multinational company involved in various fields," he explained, leafing through the pages. "Here we say they designed it to sell it to a faction engaged in the Zimbabwe War, then the UN imposed an embargo on arms sales and the deal fell through."

"One moment, let's reason," said the Professor. "What is the foot of a weapon of mass destruction doing in the middle of a load of fertilizer?"

"Er, Professor, can I say something?" ventured Niki, raising her hand.

"You can say anything you want," the old man authorized her.

"In my opinion, after spending a mountain of money to build such a big robot, those of Megatech decided to sell it at all costs, even under the table," explained the robot girl. "So, they have an idea: they disassemble it into many pieces, and transport them one at a time mixing them with goods of little value so as not to be noticed... in the end someone takes delivery of all the pieces, reassembles the Gigantus and sells it. We must have intercepted the last cargo, but we don't know what to do with it, so I suggest leaving it here and going away..."

"Leave it here? You're kidding!" exclaimed the Professor. "I'll tell you what we do: we find the base where they are reassembling the robot and we take it, so we will sell it to those of Zimwabe and pocket a lot of money! What do you think, guys?"

"I like it, boss... I'm in," Beast said, gloating. "I'm there too... for the Professor, hip hip, hooray!" exclaimed Flame, and immediately it was a riot of "Hooray, Hooray, Hooray!"

Here it gets bad, Niki thought as she participated in the applause. *It gets very, very bad.*

During the night Niki was able to study the geometries of the relationships within the group: Beast slept with the gun in his hand and the shot in the barrel, Camera snored clutching his camera device to his chest, Cypher and Flame shared the same cot, and the Professor rested dressed and composed like a mummy in his sarcophagus. "Did you sleep well, Niki? Tonight you talked in your sleep, you did nothing but say 'atoms' and 'bath'... You were dreaming of the good times at school, weren't you?" the woman asked.

"Y-yes, it is," murmured the robot girl, lowering her eyes. *Actually, I was dreaming of bathing with Atom.*
"Please pass me ketchup?"



As she consumed her bowl of rice, the little robot girl raised a silent prayer of thanksgiving to her father for equipping her with an artificial stomach. *"It's a temporary facility, but for this mission it will be more than enough,"* he explained to her. *"If you want to look like a human being, you have to eat and drink like a human being"*

"We have to explore the area and find the place where they keep the Gigantus," the Professor was saying.

"But the area is very large, and we don't have much time..."

"You don't need to work so hard," Niki objected. "The truck had a driver, didn't it? Let's find him and let him tell us where he was headed."

"I am pleased with so much intelligence, my dear: I did well to take you with us," the man praised her. "And where do we find this truck driver?"

"Easy: at the power station," she replied satisfied.

Meanwhile, the Megatech summit was meeting in plenary session. "I hope you have a good reason for getting us out of bed at this hour, Takahashi," the president berated him. "I had to cancel a round of golf," added his deputy.

Ren Takahashi, 30, multi-mastered in Economics and Business Administration from the most prestigious American universities, adjusted his glasses on his nose and held a long wand. "Yesterday at 2.35pm one of our trucks was stolen by a gang of *hijackers* on the way to Yokohama. The truck was carrying 49 cases of

agricultural fertilizer, and the right foot of the Gigantus S-11," he explained as images and videos scrolled on a holographic screen.

"Can we replace the component?" asked the sales manager.

"That's not the point, gentlemen," the young manager interrupted him. "The point is that the Metro City police have instructed a robot to infiltrate the gang to take it down. Now, if this robot discovers that we are secretly selling such a deadly weapon to a country under international embargo, the consequences for all of us would be easily imaginable..."

"What do you propose?" asked the president.

"Rosco McDoughal" was the answer. "Born in the United States, 55 years old, veteran of three wars in Central Asia: he is the most referenced subject for such an assignment... and by a fortunate series of circumstances, he is now in the Kanto region."

"Would he cost a lot?" asked one executive.

"Much less than an army of star lawyers, gentlemen," Takahashi pointed out, "and with infinitely greater chances of success."

"Go ahead," the president decided, raising his hand, immediately followed by everyone else, "but remember: the project was approved by us, but the initial idea was yours. So, if we fall, you fall too."

"I've always known that, Mr. President... and I am grateful to you for allowing me to demonstrate my abilities," the one replied frostily with a deep bow.

"Here's how things are, inspector: the truck thieves have decided to make the leap," Niki was finishing explaining to the videophone. "At this point you have all the information you need to arrest them; so, I unhook and go back to hom..."

"Negative," the inspector interrupted her.

"H-how, negative?" she said. "I have fulfilled my mission..."

"Thwarting an international arms trade is more important than driving a gang of common criminals to the ground," the officer ruled. "Stay with them, track down the Gigantus and find out who pulls the strings of the deal; after that, you have carte blanche."

"Carte blanche? And what do I do with your carte blanche? I'm not Atom, I'm weak..." exclaimed the little robot girl, but the other had already closed the communication.

Niki sighed and got out of the cabin; she didn't care about the man who was conversing next to her, just as he didn't consider her. "I get it, I have to eliminate a gang of *hijackers* and retrieve your toy... but where do I find them?" asked Rosco McDoughal to his interlocutor.

"We don't know," Ren Takahashi replied at the other end, "but we do know the identity of the infiltrated robot: its name is Niki Tenma. Now I'm sending you its photo"

The mercenary took the paper as soon as it came out of the printer. "A nice tidbit... I would gladly taste her if I had the time, but duty comes before pleasure," he murmured, licking his lips.

"Have you ever seen her?" asked the manager.

"Do you take me for a forgetful?" replied Rosco angrily. "If I had ever seen her, I would remember her"

"It took you time, Niki... where have you been?" asked Cypher as she approached their table.

"I shopped," she explained, showing a long lasso hanging from her side; then she noticed that in her place was a tray with a double cheeseburger, a mountain of chips and a glass of orange juice. "All this food... for me??? But I didn't pay for it..." she echoed.

"We paid for you," the woman reassured her. "You haven't had a good time these years, have you? You have

to start feeding yourself properly if you want to put on a few inches," she added, running a hand over her head.

"Thank you... then I'll get into it," the little robot girl said, biting into the cheeseburger. "By the way, have you spotted our man?" she asked between bites.

"Not yet... ah, there he is, he's just come in!" said Beast.

The truck driver went to the toilet, and as soon as he was inside, he again felt the cold touch of a gun barrel on his head. "Please don't kill me..." he pleaded, "I have a wife and four children..."

"Four? But weren't they three yesterday?" asked Beast in amazement.

"Tonight, my fourth child was born... we called him Shiro," said the poor man, pulling out his phone and showing them a picture. "Here he is, isn't he beautiful?"

"Oh yes, he's love!" exclaimed Niki with a smile, "but we have no time to waste on frivolities... So, tell us where you were headed yesterday and we'll let you go."

"Where was I headed yesterday? At a goods depot at kilometer 165, and that's all I know," said the man in amazement. "And if you could avoid getting another bruise on my head, I would be very grateful..."

"For so little?" replied the little robot girl tying him like a salami and closing his mouth with duct tape. "I bought it specially... bye bye"

As they walked back to the others, Niki opened her eyes wide in surprise and whispered to them, "Down! All down!" and then hid under the table, immediately imitated by the whole gang. "What the hell is it, Niki?" the Professor asked.

"There are policemen, yesterday's policemen!" she explained. "If they recognize us, it's the end!"

"There are two of them and there are six of us," Beast growled. "Let's take customers hostage and open the way by shooting"

"Yes, nice idea... but what do you want to do, the Fort Alamo massacre?" the robot girl rebuked. "Let's crawl under the tables, rather, and try to earn the exit"

Half an hour later they were safe and sound. "We were right to follow your advice, Niki," sighed Camera. "Too bad I had to leave the camera... There was all the filming I had done in the last six months..."

"You'll buy another one," Beast truncated the discussion. Meanwhile, Rosco McDoughal had noticed the device hastily abandoned on a table; he turned it on and glanced at the files. "Interesting," he grinned.

"You're a day late... and then, where is the usual truck driver?" asked the guard at the gate suspiciously.

"He took a couple of days to celebrate the birth of his fourth child," Beast explained at the wheel, "so the company had to call me back, who was on vacation with my little one... Come on, dear, greet the lord," he turned to Niki, who immediately obeyed, waving his hand.

His little one? She must have inherited the features from her mother, considered the man. "Did you bring everything? I mean, all the budgeted goods?"

"Fifty cases of agricultural fertilizer, as it is written here," replied the other, holding the bill of lading. "What do I do, do I go back?"

The overseer had reassured himself: a man carrying such a beautiful child could not constitute a danger ... "Come in, and stay on board: we'll take care of the unloading," he said, opening the gate.

Two hours later the Sparrowhawks held council. "According to what Beast and Niki told us, there should be four or at most five, so we have the advantage of numbers and surprises," said the Professor. "Here's my plan: let's go in, kill everyone and take the robot"

"*K-kill* everyone?!?" exclaimed the little robot girl. "But we have never used violence so far..."

"Think about it, boss," Cypher warned. "We risk losing our skin too... As they say in that famous movie, *'bullets go right through.'*"

"What's getting you?" he cried. "We are the Sparrowhawks of the Road, and even though we have never used it to the end, violence is our law! Are we what we are, yes or nay?"

"Nay. Not all of them, at least. Here, among us, there is someone who is not who he says he is," Camera intervened.

He discovered me! Niki said to herself. *I have to prepare to fight... or to die!* "What do you mean? Don't talk in riddles, Camera. Who among us is not who he says he is?" asked the ringleader; the other stepped forward and said "Me."

"My real name is Musashi Sakamoto," he continued bravely under the indignant gaze of those present. "I am a film director, and I joined you under a false identity in order to acquire material useful for the realization of my next movie, *'Dogs on Four Wheels on the Highway to Hell.'*"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed the Professor. "You... are you the director of *'Octopus Fiction'*, *'Kill Kill'* and

all those horrid movies that portray criminals in a grotesque way?"

"Don't... Don't you like them? Yet they have had excellent reviews from critics and audiences ... But that's not the point," he insisted with a grimace that was meant to be a smile. "The point is that, being an artist and a man of peace, I do not intend to participate in your slaughter"

Within half a second the Professor, Beast, Flame and Cypher pulled out their guns and riddled him with bullets while Niki shouted in vain "No!". "Rest in peace, Camera: I'm sure you'll have a four-star funeral, with excellent reviews from critics and audiences," said the ringleader, sheathing the weapon, and everyone else replied "Amen." Then the Professor turned to her, "Did you mean something, Niki?"

"Yes, Professor," replied the robot girl, trying to recompose herself. "I wanted to ask you permission to torture him a bit, before we took him out... but you have gone before me..."

"Go ahead, we've wasted far too much time. Are you with us yes or nay?" he asked her as the others walked away.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she said, taking one last look at Sakamoto's corpse. *Now they are no longer nice robbers*, she thought: *now they are ... assassins*.

"We're done, boss: now the Gigantus is complete and ready for action," announced one man as he left the hangar. "Well... then soon we will be able to enjoy our reward in the sun of the Tropics. Are you happy, Mirei?" sighed Issei Yamamoto.

"Very happy, my love... finally you can quit the police, and I'll stop frying tons of chips." Mirei Ko took his face in her hands and kissed him passionately; one of the four there winked at the others: "What do you think, are we unwanted? Let's go over there for a drink..." when

suddenly the whole compound sank into darkness. "Hey, who turned off the light?" he shouted.

"You did a great job, Cypher... but now let's hide, before someone comes to check the electrical panel," Niki suggested to her partner.

"I got stuck... I can't free myself!" said the other, waving her tentacles uselessly. "It's over for me, at least you save yourself!"

"The last word has not yet been spoken... I have a plan," she said.

When the two criminals entered the half-dark room, they were shocked to see a slender female figure. "Hello, nice guys," he greeted them.

"W-who are you?" asked one of them, approaching cautiously.

"Come here and I'll tell you in your ear," Cypher whispered in a persuasive voice. "Suuure," the man replied.

Niki Tenma emerged from behind the door, opened fire twice, and the two men fell to the ground one after

the other; meanwhile Cypher had managed to wriggle out. "Damn," she murmured, then recovered. "Let's catch up with others," she told her.

"No," Niki replied. "Now it's my way. Follow me!" she ordered.

In the meantime, the lighting had been reactivated. Niki and Cypher proceeded to the entrance of the large room where the other four were; there the little robot girl said to the other: "Stay hidden here until I'm done." "But... Why?" she asked.

"Because I don't want bullets to go right through you," Niki replied, rushing in and hitting Mirei Ko and the other two minions with methodical precision, then took his lasso and threw it at Yamamoto, tying him like salami. "She did it all herself, boss... she was a real fury!" said Cypher, still distraught when the group reunited.

"Well, Agent Yamamoto," Niki said grimly, pushing him on a chair, "now tell us everything by thread and sign"

"But what do you care about wanting to know everything by thread and sign, Niki? We came here for the robot, and now we have it. Get it out right away and come help us, instead!"

"You know what it's like, Professor, curiosity is female," she replied, showing her tongue. "Go ahead, you, don't be prayed..."

"All right, all right," murmured the unfaithful agent. "Without my Mirei, I don't care about anything anymore... Let me at least smoke the last cigarette, and then I'll tell you everything you want to know."

Niki took a lighter and a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket; she pulled one out, put it in his mouth, and lit it. "Smoking shortens life, don't you know?" she said judiciously.

"Nice joke, given the circumstances," he muttered, taking a few puffs. "I was hired by a Megatech bigwig, a certain Ren Takahashi: the classic nerd, you know the guy? In any case, we had to stay here to receive the pieces of the Gigantus as they arrived, hidden in the

midst of fertilizers and other loads that did not catch the eye; I, as an agent of the traffic police, had to prevent the trucks from being stolen by people like you ... Once the robot was rebuilt, we had to take it to Dock 4 of Yokohama Port where the contact from the Zimwabe awaits us with our reward, three billion yen. Ah, the Gigantus is activated only with a voice password: *Pampulu pimpulu parimpampum*"

"Pampulu pimpulu... parimpampum?" exclaimed the little robot girl. "And what kind of password is that?"

"And what do I know? I didn't choose it!" protested the man. "Now I've told you everything, so take good aim and put me to sleep without making me suffer!"

"I'll settle you right away," Niki replied, shooting him in the chest.

"I thought you were a spanky," the Professor told her with a satanic grin, "but instead you proved yourself up to it... good"

"Don't mention it, Professor," she joked. "I've always wanted to ride with a winner"

Now the two large trucks were driving along the highway to Yokohama: the first carrying the Professor, Cypher and Flame; the second carrying the Gigantus, with Beast driving and Niki next to him. "Well, guys... are you ready for a bang?" said Flame, waving a bottle of champagne.

A moment later, the truck he was in was disintegrated by two missiles along with the bridge he was crossing; Beast gritted his teeth and sped up. "The chasm is too wide, we will never be able to jump! Stop!" shouted Niki. "No fucking way! I don't give up all that money!" roared the other.

The little robot girl realized that he would never listen to her; she climbed into the cargo compartment and entered the cockpit of the Gigantus S-11. She pulled some levers without success, then remembered what

Yamamoto had told her and exclaimed loudly "Pampulu, pimpulu, parimpampum!"

"ACTIVATION COMPLETE," croaked a metallic voice. Niki pulled the cloche tightly, as the truck sank into the crevasse, crashing into the rocks and exploding in a flurry of flames. Rosco McDoughal smiled with satisfaction and said on the radio: "Mission accomplished", then saw a forty-meter-high robot lift pushed by two large rocket engines until it landed on the road. "Damn it!" he cursed.

"What... what's going on, Rosco? Woe to you if you disintegrate the Gigantus!" exclaimed Ren Takahashi.

"With all due respect, sir, I ran out of air-to-ground missiles... so I'm just going to smash it like a sieve!" growled the one activating the machine gun.

The bullet blast did no damage to the Gigantus, but the feedback system transmitted a very painful electrical shock to the pilot. "Aaaah!" shouted the little robot girl. *Weapons*, she gasped, *I need weapons...* The on-board computer heard her thoughts: the robot raised its right

arm, and the barrel of a 200-millimeter caliber machine gun spat a series of shots against the attacking helicopter turning it into a fireball. "TARGET ELIMINATED," said the voice.

"I... I didn't want to..." Niki murmured.

"IN MY LEFT ARM I HAVE A 400 CALIBER MACHINE GUN. DO YOU PREFER TO USE THIS FOR THE NEXT TARGETS? " asked the guidance system.

"No," the robot girl murmured disconsolately.

At that moment another helicopter approached, this time of the police. "Whoever you are, surrender or we open fire," warned Officer Suzuki.

"Calm down, agents... I give up," she said.

"So, you claim to be a police robot from Metro City, sent to flush out the Sparrowhawks, who has discovered an international arms trade?" asked Jiro Suzuki incredulously.

"To be precise I am a civilian robot that collaborates with the police, agent," Niki patiently explained. "Everything else, however, is correct"

"Do you have any evidence to support your claims?" asked the human.

"I have the video and audio recording of the confession made by one of the traffickers," she replied, using her eyes and voice to reproduce what she had seen and heard. *"I was hired by a Megatech bigwig, a certain Ren Takahashi..."*

"But... it's Yamamoto, that damn chips thief!" exclaimed Suzuki seeing the holographic image. "Where is this man? And is he alive or dead?"

"He is in a goods depot at kilometer 165 with his five accomplices, all dead ... of sleep: I shot them soporific bullets," Niki said. "I didn't want there to be any other victims besides poor Sakamoto... but unfortunately I failed"

"It's not your fault, miss," the elderly officer murmured contritely. "If we can do something for her..."

"Could you give me a ride to Metro City... You know, at 6.30pm a flight will land bringing home a dear friend of mine..." suggested the robot girl.

As they were leaving, Niki asked Suzuki, "What will happen to the Gigantus?"

"I think we're going to have to give it back to Megatech," the policeman replied. "The executives will all end up in jail for many years, that's for sure, but that robot is the property of shareholders..."

"I understand... I just hope they don't have to spend too much money to fix it," noted the little robot girl.

"Why, was it damaged?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know," she said indifferently. "I'm no expert... I only know that when I was hit, many colored lights came on, and a clock began a countdown..."

At that moment a loud explosion made the helicopter jerk. "Oh no! The Gigantus exploded!" exclaimed Officer Suzuki distraught after observing the scene captured by the rear camera. "The self-destruction program

must have been activated... There's not a whole inch left!"

"Well, I'm very tired," Niki said, reclining her seat back. "Even though I have a self-rechargeable battery, these days I've consumed enough energy to light up a city for a year in a row... Please wake me up when we arrive at Metro City airport" and closed her eyes.

Humans should continue to play war, if they want, she said to herself before falling asleep. Right now, Atom is returning from Zimbabwe... When he gets off the plane, I will greet him with my best smile and simply say 'Welcome back'... He will understand.

CHAPTER VIII: A HOT BOOK

"Do you know this book?" asked Inspector Tawashi, placing a volume on the table in front of them: on the cover stood a small naked and winged creature, crouching on the corolla of a flower, intent on staring at Big Ben. "In my spare time, I read engineering texts," Atom joked as he read the title. "*Glitter, life and adventures of a little fairy with a great heart...* What is it, a fairy tale?"



"I've read it: it's a *historical fantasy* novel," Niki explained. "A small fairy with great powers decides to live among humans and gets involved in their happy and sad events. The story covers a span of three hundred years, from Victorian London to the two world wars, up to the War on Terror... The author was born in Rome, and his name is Giuseppe Napoli"

"A Roman called Napoli? But isn't Naples the capital of the Republic of Southern Italy?" observed the little robot between serious and facetious.

"The Italian peninsula was divided into a dozen small states fighting each other from the fall of the Western Roman Empire until the middle of the 19th century," Dr. Tenma intervened, "when one of these kingdoms, taking advantage of strong demographic and economic growth, conquered and annexed all the territory from the Alps to the Mediterranean. Thus, Italy remained a united country for about 160 years, until a coalition of wealthy industrialists from the North, gangsters from the South and fundamentalist Christians led to its disintegration

into five independent states. Since then, Sardinia has become a sort of tax haven for billionaires from all over the world..."

"... Sicily, if I'm not mistaken, is torn apart by the struggle between gangs of mafiosi, and so is the South..." the robot intervened, mindful of her bad experience with Cosimo Geraci.

"... the North joined France, Germany, Benelux and Austria to form the Carolingian Bloc, and in the central part of the peninsula the ancient Papal State was reformed, dominated by a Catholic-Orthodox Protopope who takes orders directly from the Tsar of the Russias" concluded her adoptive father. "Please, Nakamura, you continue"

"Thank you, Dr. Tenma." The Metro City police chief cleared his voice: "This Giuseppe Napoli studied as a young man in a prestigious religious institute, graduated with excellent marks, and was an anonymous civil servant for forty years; then, in 2234, he bribed an employee of the Vatican Foreign Ministry by getting an

expatriation visa, transferred all his savings to a bank in Delaware and left for the United States, where he asked for political asylum making scathing statements about human rights violations by church authorities. This immediately brought him to the forefront of the news, and a publishing house decided to publish his novel, which he wrote ten years earlier and stolen inside a USB stick disguised as a crucifix ..."

"For an anonymous civil servant, he made an exploit as a secret agent," Atom noted. "But what do we have to do with all this?"

"John Sullivan, a famous Hollywood producer who has decided to turn the adventures of the fairy Glitter into a movie, has received very explicit threatening letters, announcing that Giuseppe Napoli will soon pay with his life for his 'impiety' ... for this reason the Japanese government, given the long-standing ties of our country with the Italian people, has decided to send you to the USA under a false name. You will join the troupe, which will start filming in three days in the Mojave Desert, and keep

them under close surveillance," Tawashi explained. "Of course, you will be equipped with artificial stomachs, so you can eat and drink without being noticed, and you will also have to pretend to go to the toilet, every now and then... And above all you will not have to reveal your true identity to anyone, much less to the person you will have to protect: like all artists he is a shady and very sensitive type, and moreover he has a very bad temper"

"In this scene the fairy Glitter enters Spandau prison to free the political prisoners of Nazism; she puts three soldiers on guard to sleep with her powers and takes the keys to the cells. All clear?" asked Leslie Howard, the director. The main protagonist, wrapped in a flesh-colored jumpsuit, and the three extras in brown uniforms nodded.

"Well, then all your seats," he said, clapping his hands twice. "Where's my lemonade?" he asked.

"Here you are, sir," Niki Tenma replied, handing him a big glass. "May I ask you a question?"

"How did you say your name, little girl?" replied the director after taking a long sip.



"Anne... Anne Prescott," she lied. "Mr. Howard, why did you decide to set up the stage in this remote place, instead of shooting in the original locations? And

how are you going to make the protagonist look only three inches tall, if the actress who plays her is six feet eight inches tall?"

"How naïve you are," chuckled the big man. "Re-building the set here in America costs much less than getting permission from local authorities... as for the size of the protagonist, we will adapt them in post-production. So, lights, camera, action!" he exclaimed.

"Stop, stop!" shouted a male voice. Howard looked back furiously: "Who said 'stop'? Ah, it's you, Napoli... What's wrong with you this time?"

"The characters are placed in the wrong position," explained Giuseppe Napoli, moving a lock of hair from his forehead. "Glitter must come in from the right, and Nazi soldiers must stand on the left"

"Look, the producer has given you the power to have the last word on every detail," the director snorted, "but at least explain why." The writer sighed, then began to explain patiently.

"Since the dawn of time, for most human beings the right hand is the strongest hand, the dominant hand, the one used to hold a sword or to perform precision work; the left hand, on the other side, is the weak hand. For this reason, in all cultures, the right hand is called 'the hand of justice', or even 'the hand of God', while the left hand is called 'the hand of the devil'. So, if you want viewers to understand immediately, intuitively, who's the good guy in the situation and who's the bad guy, you have to put the first on the right, and the second on the left."

"It seems to me a nonsense for intellectuals ... Right, left, who wants me to notice these trifles in the 23rd century? Besides, the set is already assembled, it's not worth disassembling everything and reassembling it..." blurted out the American.

"Dear Mr. Director" the Italian mocked then "being unintelligent is a human right, but you are expanding a little too much"

"How dare you, macaroni? I graduated from the Actors Studio!" shouted the director, rising from his chair and waving his fists.

"You can see that at the Actors Studio they teach you to say 'action' and little more, diluted coffee drinker of my boots!" the writer shouted louder.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, a little demeanor," said Janine, the production secretary specially (well) paid to iron out those kinds of differences. "Mr. Napoli, your ideas are very appreciable, but you should learn to expose them with greater tact: what does it cost you to be a little kinder to those who only do their job? And you, Mr. Howard, do you think that modifying the set would take too much time to work?"

"Certainly not," he muttered, reaching out to Napoli. "Besides, I really like Italian pasta..." he said, stroking his fatness.

"I apologize," said in turn the Italian, "and then, I don't really like coffee: it makes me nervous..."

At that moment Atom, who was a few steps away, heard a dull noise coming from above and warned them: "Move!"; a few seconds later a large reflector fell heavily without causing any damage. "Go check!" shouted the director.

"Who are you, boy?" asked the writer. "Er... my name is Achiko," Astro Boy replied.

"Achiko? It sounds like the name of a dog... And do you have a surname?" replied the astonished one.

"No, sir... my name is Achiko, Achiko and that's all"

"Well, Achiko-and-that's-all, you just saved my life" Giuseppe Napoli recognized with a smile, "so, if you need anything, ask me and I will do everything possible to satisfy you, even if in this country I count as the two of cups when sticks reign". *Is it a typical Italian expression?* wondered the little robot.

"Achiko, there's a video call for you: it's your father," announced a janitor; Atom took the opportunity to get out of the uncomfortable situation: "I-I'm coming"

he murmured. "Hello, daddy," he said a minute later in the communicator.

"Stop this pantomime and tell me how things are going!" said Inspector Tawashi at the other end.

The robot boy informed him of what had just happened. "I think it was not a fortuitous case: the killer is already here, and he is one of the troupe... What should we do?" he asked.

"Stay behind Napoli, do not lose sight of him day or night. I'm closing!" said the officer.

That night Niki, faithful to her charge, had lurked in front of the writer's room, when she saw him leave and head towards one of the installations: a reproduction of the city of Berlin, and in particular of the Institute of Cell Biology from which, according to the script, the fairy Glitter would have escaped the Nazis who had subjected her to long and painful experiments. While Giuseppe

Napoli was wandering among the papier-mâché buildings, a large beam fell from a roof towards him; Niki grabbed him and with a ten-meter-long jump saved him. "Are you okay, sir? It's dangerous to walk around on set at night..." she gently rebuked him.

"I wanted to make sure everything was as I described it in my book," he murmured, still shaken. "It is the second time in a few hours that I risk dying crushed ... this must be a punishment from Heaven..."

"Don't say that, please!" the little robot girl implored him. "Your novel is inspiring thousands of people around the world to fight for freedom and democracy, and your parents will certainly be proud of you..."

"What do you know, you?" exclaimed the Italian, snapping to his feet like a spring. "My parents are good Christians and honest citizens of the Papal State, who have always worked hard and never been interested in politics. I never told them what I was concocting, not even half a word; how could I? I would have made them die of a broken heart! I left without even saying

'goodbye' to them, and I will never be able to see them again, because the Vatican authorities have put me on the black list of people they do not like... So, before you talk about things you don't know, rinse your mouth!" and left, leaving her thoughtful and pained.

Atom was scouring the roof of the building from which the beam had fallen in search of any clue, when stuck in a slot he found an ultra-thin clock. He examined it; on the strap it had a rayed sun and the IHS monogram. *It must belong to the hitman*, he told himself, putting it in his pocket.

"Who is he? Oh, Mr. Napoli, do you need anything?" said Niki, opening the door to her room.

"I just wanted to offer you a small sign of my gratitude, sweet Anne," the writer gallantly said, handing her a large bouquet of red roses. "You are a woman of rare beauty, has anyone ever told you? If you were twenty

years older, or I twenty years younger, I would give you a diamond necklace, then rent a private jet and take you to New York, to see the opera: I know a theater on Broadway that has staged Verdi's 'La Traviata' every night for two hundred years ... and then..."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Napoli," she objected, smelling the fragrant flowers, "but I can't age twenty years."

"And I can't rejuvenate," he sighed. "It's true: some trains only run once, and if you don't catch them, you don't take them anymore..."

"Sir, leave me a curiosity," the little robot girl asked him. "You were not persecuted by the Vatican; you had a good income, a quiet life... You could have gotten married, started a family, instead..."

"Do you want to know who made me do?" replied the man, staring at her. She shrugged.

"All my life I have wanted to change the things that are wrong in this world," replied the writer: "from the bullies I had to confront at school, to the worst tyrants and dictators who oppress nations... but I have no mighty

muscles nor armies in my service; I only have this monstrous intelligence!" he exclaimed, tapping a finger on his temple. "That's why I conceived the Glitter Project and carried it out secretly for all these years: because it's the only way I have *to make a difference*, to fire into people's minds the difference between Good and Evil, and to make the difference between life and death for millions of innocents"

They were both silent for a very long minute, then: "Well, now that I've opened my heart to you, how about you reciprocate and finally tell me the truth, *Niki Tenma*?"

She was stoned. "An ordinary human being could never make such big leaps as you did... so I submitted a photo of you to the Internet Image Seeker, and I discovered that you are a Japanese robot. Why did you infiltrate here under a false identity? Speak, or I call vigilance and have you arrested!" he urged her.

"Niki, I found..." said the robot boy and suddenly opened the door. "Achiko, do you know each other?"

Then you too are part of this *camurria*!" murmured Giuseppe Napoli.

"Mr. Napoli, I think it's time for you to know the truth," Niki said gravely. "We were sent by the Japanese government to protect you, because there is someone who wants to kill you"



"K-kill me?" exclaimed the writer as he began to break out in a cold sweat. "I need to sit down..." he said slumping on an armchair.

The little robot girl opened a bottle of water and filled a glass. "Drink in small sips," she told him, handing it to him, "you'll see that you'll feel better." He obeyed, then shaved his mouth with the back of his hand. "I knew I had stepped on the toes of many tall poppies, but having a hitman on your heels is another matter," he murmured. "I guess you have no idea who he might be, do you?"

"I think he lost this," Atom replied, showing him the watch; he faded. "This is the monogram of the Jesuit Order," he explained to the two kids. "They are ugly people: by splitting hairs they also justify murder; they even assassinated kings and princes... If the killer is one of them, he won't stop until he has my head," he sighed.

"Don't be discouraged: I got an idea," Astro Boy tried to cheer him up. "Thank you, Achiko... but even if you're a robot, you can't work miracles," Napoli said consolately.

"My name is Atom Tetsuwan," he corrected, leaving him speechless.

"I have brought you together here," the director began, addressing all the staff, "because the scene we have to film today is very complex, and requires maximum precision from each of you... For this reason, I want you to synchronize your watches on mine. Get ready!"

Forty-nine people raised their left arm. "Antonio... Antonio Monda, what about you?" asked Howard to a lighting technician.

"I'm afraid I've lost it, chief," he said embarrassedly. "Is this it? We found it at the scene of the second accident," the other asked with a threatening smile and showed him it.

Around Antonio Monda they made a vacuum; he pulled out a dagger and pounced on Giuseppe Napoli, but before reaching him Atom bent his arm backwards forcing him to drop the weapon. "Aaah! You break it!" he shouted.

"I'll really break it, if you don't confess," the little robot exclaimed, twisting it even harder. "Yes, yes, I was the one who caused the two false accidents," groaned the hitman.

"Bastard!" shouted the writer, grabbing him by the lapel. "Speak, infamous, or I turn you like a sock! Who sends thee, *fetuso*, Judas Iscariot, *figlio e' ndrocchia*?"

"I am a beloved son of Holy Mother Church," he smiled mockingly, "while you, who have the devil as your father, are about to join him in hell... bring him the greetings of His Eminence Cardinal Sorru"; he opened his shirt, revealing an explosive vest, and pulled a string...

"Beware!" shouted Atom, using rockets in his arms to push him away an instant before the explosion, while Niki shielded her body in Napoli. "Azzz..." he cursed as a splinter shattered his tibia.



"I can never repay you enough, dear boys," Giuseppe Napoli said emotionally from his hospital bed. At that moment a tall, massive man with short blonde hair and ice-blue eyes entered the room. "I'm John Cross,

from the Social Welfare Agency," he introduced himself handing out a business card. "How are you?"



"Well, thank you," replied the writer courteously: "I have not been hit in vital points... Anyway, with the number two of the Papal State who swore it to me, I'm practically a dead man walking..."

"You only think about getting back on your feet," the stranger assured him. "We will provide for His Eminence... And by the way, the costs for your hospitalization and rehabilitation are all at our expense."

"You will provide... a welfare agency?" asked Atom, squaring him from head to toe. "Now I have to go... goodbye," he greeted them.

Once out of the room he leaned against a wall and closed his eyes for a moment; the dossiers were reliable, that little robot seemed to look inside him... Fortunately, he was used to hiding his thoughts. He could not reveal to anyone that he, the son of a federal prosecutor killed in a terrorist attack, had devoted his life to fight against Evil by joining a "covered" government organization that used the most unsuspected executors: girls victims of disabling diseases, accidents or human wickedness who were enhanced with artificial limbs and organs and brainwashed, until they become ruthless and obedient killers until death... Then he recovered and walked to the elevator: he had a mission to complete.



Cardinal Fiorenzo Sorru, minister plenipotentiary of the Papal State, smiled to himself satisfied as he went to the massage room: a few drops of digitalis had been enough to get rid of his predecessor, and in a few days the Conclave would crown him the new Protopope ... "Sister Clare fell down the stairs breaking her leg, Your Eminence," Secretary Gawdentius was explaining to him. "Fortunately, we found a replacement: a Franciscan novice of Austrian origin... I hope you enjoy her"

As they entered, the nun knelt down. "Be humble, child, and obey everything that His Eminence commands

you. To *everything*, do you understand?" the secretary pointed out.

"Yes, father," she nodded.

"Let me see," said the cardinal, lifting her chin; "Yes, she's pretty," he later said. He undressed, girded his hips with a towel and lay down on the couch. "You can go," he ordered Gawdentius.

The girl took off her glasses: before he abandoned her dying in a car accident, she had promised her trainer that as long as she wore them, she would be a good child and would not hurt anyone; so she carefully placed them in a case, put it in a pocket of the large habit, and began to massage the back of the high prelate. "Aaah, so I like it," he murmured as he relaxed. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Sister Claes, Your Eminence," she replied with a smile, "but you can also call me Glitter." She closed his mouth with her right hand, so that he would not scream, then with a quick movement she broke his neck; she laid

the corpse on the couch, put her glasses back on and walked out of a side door.

John Cross was waiting for her in a car not far from the entrance of St. Anne; Claes climbed aboard and simply said "Done", then the car plunged into the chaotic traffic of the Eternal City, bound for Leonardo da Vinci International Airport.



"Passengers on Flight 847 New York-Metro City are requested to present themselves at gate 5. I repeat, passengers...". Atom and Niki gathered their luggage and started to go. "Goodbye, and thank you for everything" greeted them Giuseppe Napoli accompanied by the trusted Janine.

"Goodbye? No, see you soon... indeed, *Sayonara!*" replied the two robots, bowing deeply.

CHAPTER IX: THE RETURN OF THE SPACE GODS

"Here we are in Abu Simbel! What do you think, kids? From the tops of those obelisks, three thousand six hundred years of history are watching you!" exclaimed Dr. Ochanomizu.

"It's magnificent, doctor... but these buildings weren't built here, were they?" observed Atom, looking around. "I read it in the history book..."

"You're right," his mentor was amused as he advanced through the sand in the company of Umataro Tenma. "In truth, the monumental complex, consisting of the great temple dedicated by Pharaoh Ramses II to the god Ra and to himself, and the smaller one dedicated to his wife Nefertari, had been built 65 meters below; but in 1950 the Egyptian government decided to close the valley with the grandiose Aswan Dam... Therefore, to prevent them from being submerged forever, the temples were cut into more than a thousand blocks of 20 tons

each, and put back together on this artificial hill erected for the occasion. The entire work lasted four years and cost millions of dollars, but in the end the complex was perfectly rebuilt; the alignments of the various artifacts with some important constellations were also maintained, except for the statue of Horus, the falcon-god..."

"A truly *pharaonic* rescue job," Niki commented with a smile. "Come on, Atom, let's go and see inside!"

"So, this is the statue of Horus... the sun is going to illuminate it," said Astro Boy. A few seconds later a green ray came out of the god's left eye, enveloping the two robots with an impenetrable force field. "Atom! Niki!" shouted Dr. Ochanomizu in amazement, seeing them rise high until they disappeared.

"Do something, Atom! I'm afraid!" the little robot girl invoked, hugging her boyfriend. He fired two laser shots from his fingers, but the beams were absorbed and

neutralized by the force field. "Nothing to do," he acknowledged, "but one thing is sure, Niki..."

"What?" she asked.

"Whoever concocted all this wanted to catch live prey... Think about it: there is breathable air in here, and temperature and humidity suitable for human beings... Perhaps the one who caught us is not as evil as he seems," explained the astral boy.

"Perhaps... but I don't trust it anyway," sighed his girlfriend.

After half an hour of travel in the cosmic void, the two robots saw a vehicle with the shape of a large pyramid from afar. They entered inside, and found themselves in an immense illuminated room; seated on three seats were hawk-headed humanoids. "Ho-Horus!" exclaimed Atom.

"I see you still remember us... better this way, we will not have to use the lash of our power to refresh your memory", commented one of them satisfied.

"Who are you, and why did you bring us here?" asked Niki.

"First answer our questions," a second alien told them. "What weapons does your race currently have?"

"Weapons? Well, we have a lot of weapons..." the little robot began to say. "Pistols, rifles and cannons firing bullets thanks to pyric powder, to begin with; then disruptive and incendiary bombs, nuclear fission and fusion devices, and laser beams..."

"Guah guah guah guah! Guah guah guah guah!" all three of them burst out laughing. "Pyric powder... laser beams... atomic bombs... If that's all the arsenal Earthlings have, submitting them will be child's play!"

"Do you want to submit us? But why?" asked the little robot girl.

"Don't you know? Well, it's been three thousand six hundred years... It may be that the reports of that era have been lost," the alien who appeared to be the leader raised an eyebrow. "We belong to a superior race, extremely long-lived and intelligent. At that time, we descended on

your planet, in the region that its inhabitants call Egypt, and there we were welcomed benevolently, at least at the beginning: they also erected temples in our honor, calling us gods... but one bad day, because of the inexperience of some servants, the thrones which we sat on were overthrown, and we fell into the waters of their great river; we hardly escaped the teeth of the filthy reptiles that swam there... They gave us greasy excuses that we did not accept, and so we got back on our ship and walked away indignantly, not without leaving a beacon inside a statue made in our image. So, we have spent these eons perfecting the armaments we already have and building even deadlier ones; so now we are ready to go down again in front of the temple that was dedicated to us. From there we will proclaim our dominion over your world, and if you do not submit, we will annihilate you!"

"But the men who have unwittingly offended you have been dead for thousands of years! There is no one left to take revenge on!" protested Atom.

"You are wrong: we will take revenge on their descendants," the alien said. "Our life and our intelligence surpass yours, Earthly... but also our pride is boundless"; and after having said that, the three turned to the on-board controls and ignored them completely.

"What do we do, Atom? We have to come up with something... but right now I can't think of anything useful!" whispered Niki in the astral boy's ear.

"Neither do I," he admitted. "There's only one thing we can do: kiss me, Niki, here and now"

"Is now really the time to think about certain things?" exclaimed the little robot girl indignant.

"We need to unite our artificial intelligences if we want to collect all the data together and cross them with each other in order to find a solution. Go ahead, kiss me!" urged Atom.

"I don't understand... but I trust you," Niki said at last, joining her lips to his lips. Trillions of petabytes flowed from one to the other, as they became one once again, then Atom broke away. "Thank you, Niki: now I know what to do," he whispered softly, then turned to the extraterrestrials. "Hey, you, I have to tell you something very important!" he said.

"Let's hear," said one of the three with a bored yawn.

"In these millennia, we Earthlings have also developed a terrible weapon... so terrible, that I have kept it silent until now so as not to frighten you: telekinesis," he proclaimed to them, bluffing.

"Telekinesis? That is, the ability to manipulate matter with thought?" exclaimed one of them. "It's possible," his race mate considered aloud. "The trilobites that populated the warm, shallow oceans of Proxima Centauri b-4 used it to capture their prey... but that didn't save them from extinction when their star became a nova."

"If you don't abandon your plans for conquest, I will use my telekinetic power to tamper with the controls of this ship and send it off course," Astro Boy warned them.

"Guah guah guah guah! And do you expect us to believe it? The controls of our ship are untouchable!" they sneered in chorus.

"Wait and see," Atom challenged them, hoping that his calculations of the beacon misalignment would prove correct.

A few minutes later one of the aliens pointed to a spot on the visor. "Here are the pyramids over there! We almost arrived!"; but then the cameras framed the side of the rapidly approaching artificial hill. "We are off course! We have to switch to manual controls!" croaked one of them.

"Idiot! We haven't had manual controls for a thousand years!" his boss croaked even louder. "Hold on to me, Niki!" the robot boy warned her a moment before impact.

The spaceship hit the rock face, bounced, fell into the Aswan Lake raising a very high spray and rolled until it stopped in a desert area, while Atom and Niki were capsized and tossed from all sides and the hawkmen tried to hold on to any support. When the situation had calmed down, the two robots got up and Atom said to the aliens: "Have you seen, space gods? I have altered the controls of your ship and knocked it out, as I predicted. So, leave this planet and promise never to return, or your invading fleets will suffer the same fate!"

"What do we do, Commander?" the extraterrestrials said to themselves. "This planet is beautiful and desirable... but if all its inhabitants have the powers of this little one, we will never be able to submit them, not even with ten thousand ships!"

"So let us withdraw!" said the commander. "You are free to leave," he said to Atom and Niki. "We promise to give up forever our plans to conquer the Earth... provided that you Earthlings never again use your telekinetic powers against us."

"I promise... on behalf of all Earthlings, today and tomorrow," the little robot solemnly announced.

"Oh, Dad! Daddy!" shouted Niki, hugging Dr. Tenma who had rushed towards them in the meantime; in the sky, the spacecraft was an ever-smaller dot. "I was so afraid... but Atom managed to get us out of trouble, as usual!"

"I made it because we were together, Niki... together," he said, shaking her hand.

"Yes, together... forever," she confirmed, looking him in the eye.

CHAPTER X: THE MANIPULATOR OF MINDS

On that Sunday at the end of June of the year 2237 the sun was already burning almost as in the middle of summer. "While we wait for our friends to finish changing their clothes," Niki suggested in a white suit, "we could set the game strategy. Hikaru has good ball control, like me, while Kenichi is good at direct shots but is a bit weak on the right hand; so, you could smash from the back of the field, while I will take care of the precision shots on the edge of the net. What do you say?"

"You seem to be going to war instead of a tennis match," Atom remarked amusedly. "Won't they be offended if we defeat them with such a deployment of forces? After all, we are robots, we are stronger and faster than human beings..."

"I think they would be offended if we let them win on purpose," she objected, wrapping her arms around his neck. "They invited us to this mixed double, even though

they know very well that we are robots; they will put all the effort they are capable of to win, and I'm sure they expect the same from us."

In the third set, the astral boy once again found that his girlfriend had *excellent* ball control, when a police car stopped over the fence and Inspector Tawashi came out breathless. "Atom, Niki!" he called. "You must come with me now!"

"Go ahead, guys," Kenichi and Hikaru said together. "We'll continue the game another time... Duty comes before pleasure"

The security guard lay on a couch in the purest terror: "Get these snakes off me! I'm afraid of snakes!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. Niki examined him with her diagnostic tools, then shook her head. "Physically he is fine, but he is in a severe hallucinatory state, and I do not know how to relieve his symptoms..." she murmured disconsolately.

"We found him in this condition this morning, when we realized that the jewelry store he was patrolling had

been robbed," Tawashi explained, pointing to a bandage on the man's foot. "Whoever it was, he used his blood to write a message on a wall: *'Four to Atom Tetsuwan. Signed: The Suggestionist'*"

"The Suggestionist? And who is it?" asked the little robot girl surprised. "And what does Atom have to do with it?"

"Let me get a horn if I know," the officer snorted to Astro Boy, "but the message is clear: it will hit at least three other innocents... and then it's your turn"

"It doesn't scare me," he proclaimed firmly... but a shiver ran down his spine.

"Ha ha ha ha! Gold, jewelry... how beautiful is wealth when it rains in my hand! Ha ha ha ha!" sneered Skunk Kusai, dipping his hands into the pile of precious gems piled up on the table in Dr. Shun Kobayashi's office. "The experiment is perfectly successful," he was

saying, "but now it's time for that poor guardian to come to his senses."

"Not yet," the criminal froze him. "If he came to his senses now, he would identify me... instead I need time to carry out my revenge against that damn Atom"

"I am indebted to you, Mr. Kusai, for having put at my disposal your money and the machinery of the Earl of Walpurgis in order to make my prototype," replied the scientist, "but I expect you to keep the promise you made to me: all suggestions made about humans or robots will have to be erased, sooner or later"

"All right, all right," he promised, standing up and placing his hand on the shoulder of a robot waiting nearby, the gaze of this latter indecipherable.

The next day, back from the Fukuyan Institute, Atom received a call from the police station and rocketed off to the first bank in Metro City, in growing anxiety.

When he arrived, he found Niki bent over two guardian robots. "They, too, have completely clouded minds," she confirmed sadly.

"They took away five million yen on a truck, in broad daylight," Inspector Tawashi informed him, "but at least, now we know that Skunk is involved in this story: the surveillance cameras have clearly framed him."

"Skunk!" exclaimed the astral boy, clenching his fists. "But how did he reduce these poor people to such a state?"

"Come and see," the officer suggested, accompanying him to a monitor on which he scrolled images. "He was with an unidentified robot... Here, see? It steps forward, and immediately afterwards the guardians appear distraught... It's as if it were the one exerting this evil effect!"

"Did you leave a message this time too?" asked Atom.

"Yes, with paint: '*Three to Atom Tetsuwan*'"

"You have to stop him before it hurts other people," the little robot girl pleaded with him. "Only you can succeed, Atom"

"Then I'll succeed," he promised.

"Listen to me, SGT-1! You must undo the suggestions you have provoked so far!" insisted Kobayashi once again.

"And why? I enjoy making people suffer, humans or robots... It makes me feel like a god," his creature chuckled.

"The Omega Factor has made you sadistic and cruel," the man bitterly noted. "I had conceived you to alleviate the suffering of psychiatric patients, but you... you are a monster!"

"Better to be a monster than a nobody like you!" insulted him SGT-1.

"Enough is enough! I am your creator, and I command you to obey me!" cried the elderly scientist.

"I'm tired of listening to you," the robot said, pointing a laser gun at him; he tried to pull the trigger several times, but without success. "Do you really think I'm so stupid that I didn't set up countermeasures?" said the man, taking the weapon from its hand. "I have included in the project of your AI a strict rule: you cannot hurt me, for any reason ...". A bullet pierced his lung and he fell into a lake of blood. "Help me..." he pleaded.

"The rule doesn't force me to prevent someone else from hurting you... now whose turn is it?" asked SGT-1, turning to Skunk Kusai.

"It's the turn of Hans Berger," he said with a grim look, sheathing the revolver.

"Who is there?" exclaimed Dr. Berger, hearing the door open with a crash; he ran to the entrance and found

Skunk along with an unknown robot. "Skunk, coward! Get under, if you dare!" he waved his hand, but it was the robot that stepped forward. "You survived the accident, while your wife and son died... That's why they hate you, they hate you with all their might!" it began to say in a mellifluous voice, getting closer and closer.

"No... nooo!" cried the man, taking his head in his hands; then suddenly he grabbed an arm of SGT-1, sent it at Skunk and rolled them both on the floor. The thug pulled out his gun, but the scientist threw a paper opener disarming him. "With you, revenge is only postponed, professor!" growled Skunk, walking away with his accomplice, while Hans Berger collapsed without strength.

Meanwhile, Atom had frantically consulted Internet in search of information on scientists expert in the field of psychiatry: if that rascal Skunk used to look for accomplices among frustrated persons in search of glory,

as he had done with Dr. Electron, perhaps ... "Found it! Shun Kobayashi, graduated in Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry, theorized the use of collimated electromagnetic fields to modify brain waves... He created the Suggestionist, I'm sure!"

When he arrived at Dr. Kobayashi's home, he found him in agony. "Skunk... went to Dr. Berger..." he murmured before he expired. "Damn!" exclaimed the little robot, flying with all the speed of his atomic rockets.

"Dr. Berger! Dr. Berger!" he called as he entered in the man's house. "I'm here, Atom... a little weak, but still alive and sane," he assured him.

"Thank goodness... I was afraid you had gone crazy too, or worse!" he exclaimed, hugging him. "The Suggestionist was created by Dr. Kobayashi, but now he's dead... What can we do to stop it?"

"Kobayashi? I read some of his articles... Listen to me, Atom," said the doctor, placing both hands on his shoulders. "That robot plays on the unconscious fears of those in front of it, but its power is not invincible. I

defeated it because *I know* that my loved ones could never hate me for surviving that accident, because this is reality, and reality is greater and stronger than any fantasy, good or bad! So, you too, Atom, can defeat it: you just have to stick to reality, and you will win."

Dr. Umataro Tenma received a strong blow to the back of the head and fell face down; "The old methods are always the best," Skunk laughed happily.

"You won't get away with it," the robot girl warned him, as her mind was darkened by ancient terrors. "No, please... I don't want to be torn to pieces again! I don't want to!" she groaned, curling up on the floor.

"Do what I tell you and I will deliver you from this suggestion," promised SGT-1.

An hour later, Tenma recovered and called Atom in anguish. "Niki has disappeared," he explained. "She left a voice message... she says she's waiting for you at the

steel mill, and Skunk and the Suggestionist are also waiting for you there. Be careful!"

Entering the plant, the astral boy saw dozens of workers huddled on the ground in hallucinations, but he went ahead bravely; in the blast furnace area he found his beloved tied to a hook that kept her suspended above a burning crucible, and on the balcony Skunk and SGT-1. "Let her go, thug, and deal with me!" he challenged him.

"Atom," said the Suggestionist, "you exist because Tobio Tenma is dead... Your birth is a sin that you must atone for... open the lid on the chest that protects your AI, and shoot yourself a laser shot, so you will end your miserable existence..."

"No... No..." Atom murmured. "Yes," said his opponent. The little robot opened the lid, the little robot girl

shouted with all the breath she had in her throat: "Don't do that, Atom, please! *Don't leave me alone!* "

Upon hearing those words, the fog that enveloped Atom's mind dissolved; he fired a beam against the chest of the Suggestionist who retreated and hit the protective railing with force, climbed over it and fell into the crucible. "Help me, please! I don't want to die!" it invoked as the heat consumed its plastic skin, reducing it to a shapeless torso; a few seconds later it had dissolved.

"Damn!" cursed Skunk as he ran away, but the robot boy blocked his way. "It's over for you," he said, stepping slowly toward him. "Please don't hurt me!" the scoundrel pleaded at his feet. "Have mercy..."

"A worm like you deserves no mercy," Atom said as he shook like a leaf, then struck him with a right, causing him to fall to the ground unconscious.

"You're safe and sound... I was afraid of losing you forever!" murmured Niki, crying with joy after he freed her.

"I won because I stuck to reality," Atom explained with a smile. "My reality is you, my sweet Niki"

A week later, Dr. Ochanomizu took the two kids to Metro City Jail. "I wanted to introduce you to a person," he explained.

"But... it's the Suggestionist!" exclaimed Atom, preparing to fight.

"No, he is SGT-2," the general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology assured him. "We built him on the design of the previous one, but without the Omega Factor... So, he's on our side."

"All the people influenced by my predecessor are now fine again," the robot explained. "As for Skunk Kusai, given his high dangerousness, on the orders of the present Dr. Ochanomizu I have 'implanted' in his mind a Pavlovian reflex that triggers whenever he conceives the

intention to escape, making him feel as punishment his greatest fear"

"Which one?" asked Astro Boy, though in his heart he already knew the answer.

"Skunk Kusai's greatest fear is being beaten to death by you, Atom Tetsuwan. Would you like to take a look?" he asked the two kids.

On the monitor appeared images of Skunk lying on his cot; suddenly he got up and started to inspect the cell door, but after a few seconds he squinted his eyes and curled up on the floor covering his face with his hands. "The first day he was given this 'medicine' he received 185 doses, the second 123, the third 98... today we are only 25, and if the declining trend continues as planned, in a month at most Skunk Kusai will never try to escape again, and will resign himself to spending the rest of his days in prison" concluded SGT-2.

"It's what he deserves," Atom commented.

"It's sad that a free being is treated this way, but Skunk has misused his freedom," Niki added. "In a way, it's like he's built this mental prison with his own hands."

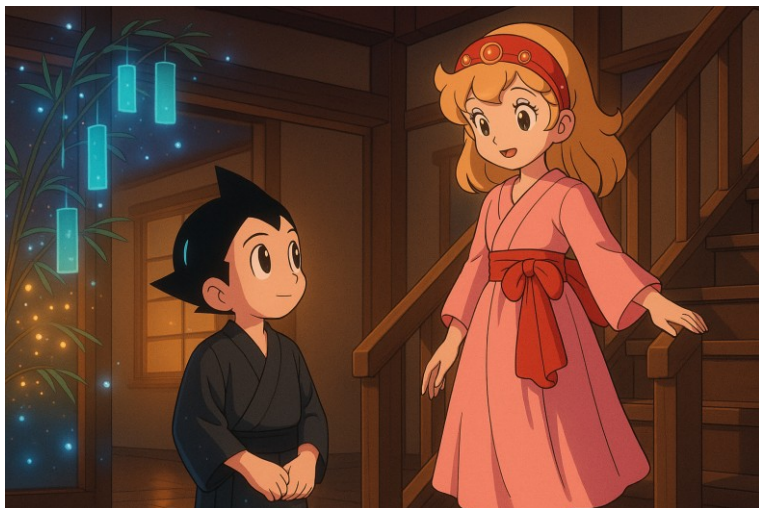
While ringing the doorbell Tenma home, Atom looked up at the sky where Vega and Altair, the lovers of the Milky Way, allowed themselves as every year a break from their respective duties to enjoy each other's company. They too, he thought, had had to fulfill many grave duties in the last twelve months...

"Atom, dearest, how are you? Come in, we've been waiting for you!" exclaimed Mrs. Tenma opening the door and leading him into the living room, where her husband was waiting for him wearing a black *yukata*. "Niki's almost ready, son," he said.

"Here I am" did the little robot girl going down the stairs wrapped in a pink dress stopped at the waist by a wide scarlet band. "You're... you're gorgeous," Astro

Boy murmured in front of such beauty. "You really are a wonderful Weaving Princess"

"Thank you... You're not bad either, Mr. Cowherd," she smiled.



"We're starting to go," Asuka chirped, lovingly pushing Dr. Tenma forward. "Please, Atom, get to work!"

"Get to work, yes... but to do what?" murmured the astral boy in amazement. The little robot girl took him by the hand and said "Come"

She led him upstairs, to a room furnished with lilac-colored furniture and lit by paper lanterns; in one corner,

a bamboo plant carried a strip attached to a branch. It was the first time Atom had entered Niki's room. "What wish did you express for Tanabata Festival?" he asked her.

"I have to ask you something very important," she replied, looking him in the eye. "Atom Tetsuwan, what do you think of me?"

He knew that sooner or later she would ask him this question; he hoped for it and at the same time he was afraid of it. "Before meeting you," he replied, "I believed that my life was complete: I had a father, a mother, a little sister, friends, I had a teacher and a mentor; I thought I lacked nothing... But then I met you, I fell in love with you and I lost you, and then I realized that without you I had nothing, that without you I *was* nothing... Niki Tenma, you are the sweetness that melts my heart of steel, you are the cunning that completes my strength; without you I can do nothing, together with you I can climb the sky... I love you, and I want to be with you, for better or for worse, for the rest of my life."

"I love you too, Atom," Niki said as she hugged him. "You are the force that compensates for my weakness, you are the honesty that completes my cunning... You are my whole world, all that matters to me; and I want to be by your side, for better or for worse, for the rest of my life." She took a few steps back and untied her belt; her dress slipped on the floor, and Atom noticed that she was not wearing underwear. "What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Tanabata is the festival of love," Niki replied, holding out her arms to him, "and tonight I want to make love with you. This is my wish"

"But we... we are robots," he murmured. "We don't have genital organs, we can't join..."

"Yes, instead," she corrected him. "We can join through kisses, become a single artificial intelligence that thinks and feels in unison even in two physically separate bodies: we have already done it other times ... and then we can caress each other with our hands and

lips... I want to taste your flavor on every square millimeter of my skin, and you?"

Atom wanted to tell her what he wanted, but his sense of duty held him back. "We are children," he objected.

"Not anymore," Niki said. "We're in ninth grade, so legally we're fifteen... We have long since reached the age of consent."

"If they don't see us coming, your parents will worry, and so will our classmates..." he murmured one last time, then remembered what Mrs. Tenma had told him before leaving: "*Get to work, Atom*"

"Asuka and I have talked a lot these days," the little robot girl informed him, "and she will explain to my father the reason for our delay, if he has not already figured it out on his own... As for our friends, I'm sure Tamao will say something like, '*I bet the lovebirds have decided to be a little alone... Lucky them!*' , and he'll be right, as usual," she concluded, smiling. Then she lay down on the bed and repeated "Come."

"Here am I," said Atom, undressing and bending over her, as the first fires of Tanabata lit up the sky.

And the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said,

*"This is now
bone of my bones,
and flesh of my flesh:
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man"
(Gen 2:18-23)*

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I hope you enjoyed this work.

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