

Stefano Carloni

SHIN TETSUWAN ATOM 4:
ULTIMATE
Astroboy: Death and Rebirth



Last chapter of my personal retelling of the 1980 anime series "Shin Tetsuwan Atom". This time Astro Boy will have to face the two greatest threats ever: the Tsar of the Russias, who has declared war on all the free peoples of Eurasia, and his girlfriend, the robot girl Niki who has gone over to the side of the enemy.

Stefano Carloni

SHIN TETSUWAN ATOM 4:
ULTIMATE
Astroboy: Death and Rebirth



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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing – The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki" the bond between Atom and Niki grows and strengthens, until the two spend the night together during Tanabata's Festival.



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.

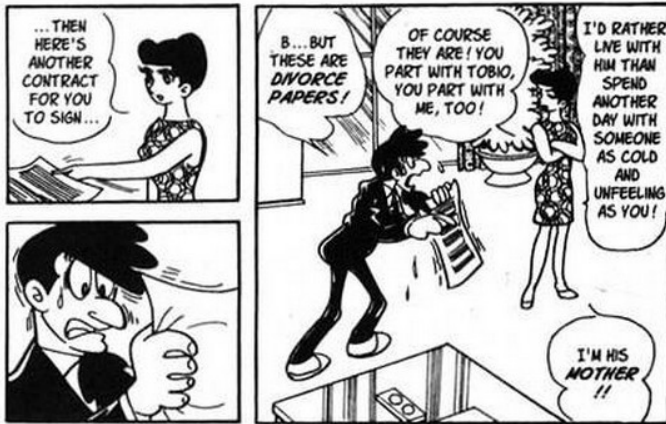


Umataro Tenma: Graduated in Physics and Robotics Engineering at the University of Nerima, where he stands out early for his genius, he is appointed general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Obsessed with the dream of creating a robot with human thoughts and feelings, he neglects his 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing – The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki" Tenma and Honda go on their honeymoon in America.



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, devoting herself full-time to the role of wife and mother of Tobius (as Japanese morality requires). 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 attend circus shows to see it. 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing – The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki" Honda and Tenma go on their honeymoon in America.

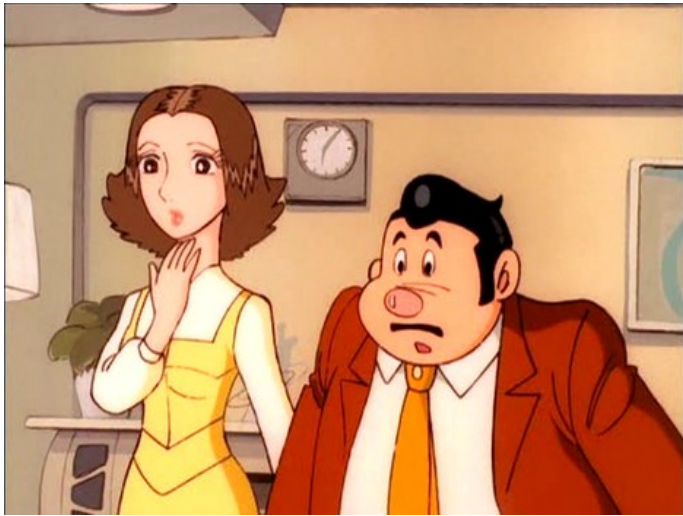


Hiroshi Ochanomizu: Graduated in Physics and Robotic Engineering at the University of Nerima together with his friend Umataro Tenma, he takes his place as General Director of the Ministry of Science and Technology. During a trip to America, he attends the spectacle of a circus, and discovers the existence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

takes him with him to Japan, where in the meantime he has obtained the approval of a law that recognizes a series of rights to robots. She mentors Atom, enrolling him in school, creating a father, mother, and younger sister for him, and instilling in him her sense of justice and desire to work to build peaceful coexistence between humans and robots.



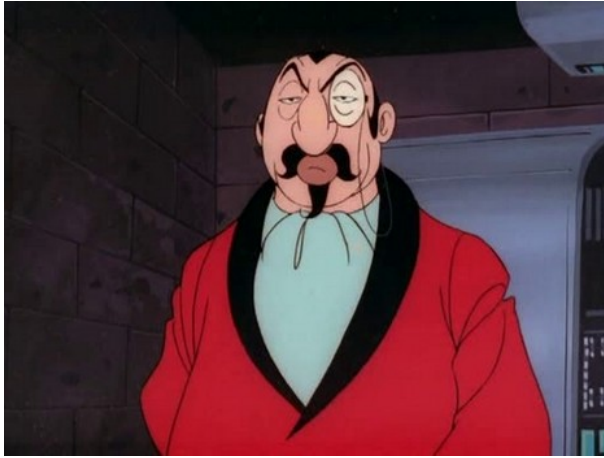
Yuko Kisaragi: Woman about 25 years old, Hiroshi Ochanomizu's personal assistant at the Ministry of Science and Technology. Loyal to her boss, hard worker, serious and rigorous, and that's all about her.



Ethanol and Rin Tetsuwan: Robots created by Hiroshi Ochanomizu to act as father and mother to Atom.



Uran Tetsuwan: Female robot created by Hiroshi Ochanomizu as Atom's younger sister. It has a power of 50,000 horsepower. Lively, outspoken and independent, she is very close to her brother, but can't stand being treated by him like a child. She often gets into trouble, from which Atom pulls her out, but sometimes provides him with unexpected help.



Count of Walpurga: Misanthrope scientist who lives in a Bavarian castle. 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 design; after the creation of Atom, he uses his project – copied from Skunk Kusai – to build Atlas in order to use it to conquer the world. Enraged with his maid-robot Livian for accidentally destroying a statue, he dismantles it, causing Atlas to rebel, forcing him to flee by car and plunging him into a ravine, but survives. Later, he takes Livian hostage to force Atlas to steal a new experimental weapon for him, and turns the robot-woman back into his maid.

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

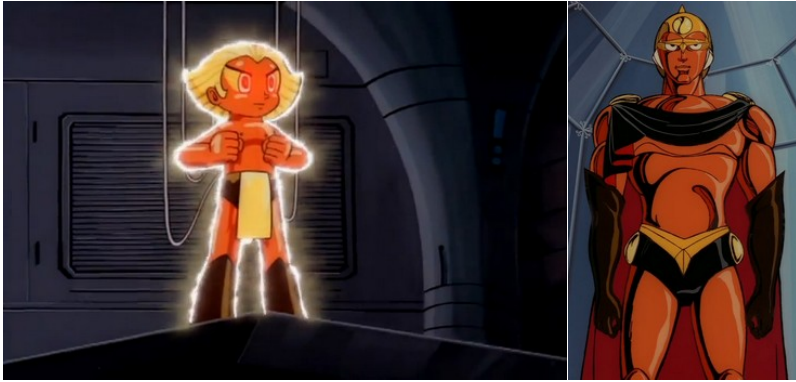


Skunk Kusai: A criminal, purely and simply. Initially servant of the Earl of Walpurgis, he proposes to Umataro Tenma on behalf of this one to install the Omega Factor (a microchip conceived by the earl capable of making robots extremely intelligent and evil) on a robot of his own design, obtaining a 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.

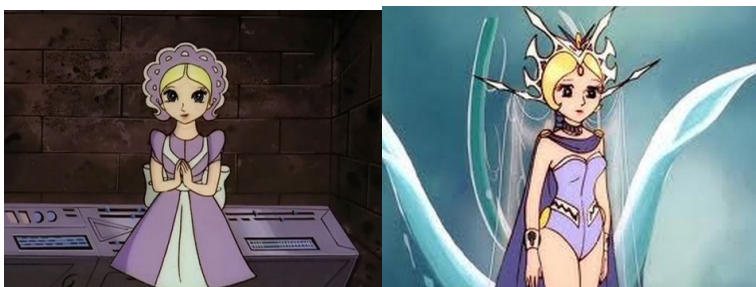
In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing – The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki" Skunk is arrested again by Atom and subjected to futuristic psychological treatment by the suggestionist robot SGT-2 to inhibit his willingness to escape.



Atlas: Robot built by the Earl of Walpurgis, based on the Atom project copied on his behalf by Skunk Kusai, 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. A good friend of Hiroshi Ochanomizu, and like him a supporter of robot civil rights, he welcomes Atom into his class. Turbulent, opinionated and far too blunt, he tends to overreact, jump to conclusions very easily and express himself harshly. A good citizen who loves justice, he does not hesitate to intervene by waving his fists against those

who create chaos. His hobbies are judo and flower arrangements. In his spare time, he still devotes himself to the activity of private investigator, collaborating with Atom and the police; he has a long-standing feud with Skunk Kusai, who often mocks 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 Mitori. 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 is the first to become friends with him. Extroverted and friendly, she wears her hair styled in two pompoms on either side 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.

XXX



Inspector Tawashi: Metro City Police Detective. Unfriendly and gruff, a man of old-fashioned law-and-order, he hates robots, and is extremely quick to blame major disasters on some crazed robots, including Atom if he is nearby, often clashing with Hiroshi Ochanomizu on this point.



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



Black Jack: Real name Kuro Hazama. Seriously injured by a mine explosion at the age of 8, he is saved with a series of surgical operations by a skilled doctor, and decides to follow in his footsteps. He calls himself Black Jack because "Kuro" in Japanese means "black", as in English "black". Unlicensed surgeon by choice, he performs very delicate operations 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.

In the fanfiction "Shin Tetsuwan Atom 3: Pairing – The Adventures of Astroboy and Niki" the bond between Niki and Atom grows and strengthens, until the two spend the night together during the Tanabata's Festival.

STAGE I: FAREWELL TO YESTERDAY'S WORLD

July 8, 2237 – Metro City, Casa Tenma



So I spent the night of Tanabata with Niki, Atom thought to himself squinting while his partner stared at him by propping herself up with an elbow on the pillow. "Good morning," she said softly.

"Niki... Have you been awake for a long time?" asked the robot boy.

"For about thirty-five minutes and eight seconds," she replied, reaching out to caress his face. "Your basal metabolic rate is much higher than mine: you must always keep calibrated and ready for use four atomic rocket engines and four laser cannons, in addition to all your other instruments ... No wonder you need to rest more than I do. Luckily for us, right now the world seems like a quiet place," she said; then she took the index finger of his right hand, slipped it into her mouth and sucked it, while Atom's electronic mind was flooded with pleasurable sensations. "Do you want to start again?" he asked.

"I would like very much, my love," Niki told him, getting out of bed and starting to get dressed, "but you have to go back to your home to change clothes, and then we have to go to school; for the two of us, duty always comes before pleasure... But don't worry: in three weeks the holidays will begin, and then we can be together every day, and night. Promised"

"Hey, there's the two lovebirds!" exclaimed Shibugaki as he saw them approaching the entrance hand in hand. "Good morning Atom, and good morning to you too, Niki," their friend Kenichi greeted them.



"Forgive us... I hope you had fun without us," Astro Boy said, bowing before his companions.

"You don't need to apologize, Atom: after a while we realized that you had decided to spend the evening you two alone," the boy reassured him. "I'm just sorry you didn't see the fireworks..."

"Oh, they must have sparked together, didn't they? Pciù, pciù..." the school bully teased them by mimicking hugs and kisses. "Tell me, Shibugaki, aren't you going to be envious?" said Tamao, adjusting his glasses with a professorial look.

"Mind your own business, you four-eyes!" threatened him, waving his fists and chasing him down the corridor to class. "It's useless... even though they are on the brink to turning fifteen, they still act like children!" sighed Midori looking at them.

While they were busy doing an exam, the loudspeaker began repeating in a shrill voice, "Attention, attention! All lessons and club activities are suspended indefinitely! Let all pupils and teachers return to their homes, and follow government orders! I repeat, all lessons and club activities are suspended indefinitely..."

"What's going on, Master Mustache?" the students of class 3-E asked their teacher curiously.

"I have no idea," Shunsuke Ban exclaimed. "I'm as surprised as you are"

Suddenly the radio inserted in Atom's chest turned on; the astral boy lifted his shirt and opened the lid on his chest. "Atom, you have to come to the Ministry of Science and Technology right away! And take Niki with you! Hurry up!" cried out Dr. Ochanomizu. He did not repeat it twice: he grabbed his girlfriend holding her in his arms, opened the window and took flight at maximum speed.

"We are here, doctor! What happened?" exclaimed the two robots when they arrived. Also in the General Manager's office were Miss Kisaragi, Ochanomizu's trusted assistant; Dr. Tenma and his wife; Hans Berger, the great scientist Niki had brought back to life with a

daring skull surgery after thirty-five years of hibernation; Metro City Police Chief Nakamura and Inspector Tawashi, and they all had dark faces. "It's a terrible thing, Astro Boy: they declared war on us!" replied Dr. Ochanomizu.

"Whaaat? Who? Who declared war on Japan? And why?" said Atom.

"The Tsar of Russia," replied the still distraught man. "We have to go to the airport immediately, I'll explain everything along the way!"

"I'm not going anywhere! I have to notify my parents, my sister Uran..." he objected decisively.

"I sent a car to pick them up... You'll probably find them already there. Now let's hurry, we've already wasted too much time!" his mentor reassured him, pushing them out of the room.

As they sped through the streets of Metro City in a van, Dr. Ochanomizu began to explain the situation to them. "Russia has been the world's pariah since 2022, when then-President Maxim Maximovich Budrin

invaded Ukraine and set it on fire after accusing Ukraine's rulers of wanting to install nuclear missiles on their territory to threaten his country. To induce him to desist, the West launched a series of harsh economic sanctions against his regime, and it was then that Budrin made a terrible decision: to drop an atomic bomb on Tokyo, the then capital of Japan... it was a massacre," he murmured in distress, as Niki covered her mouth with hands, horrified.

"Why did he take it out on the Japanese? What had they done wrong to him?" asked Astro Boy, clenching his fists in indignation.

"Japan had adhered to sanctions against Russia, freezing the reserves of the central bank in Moscow to the tune of two trillion yen," Dr. Berger intervened. "Moreover, unlike the NATO countries, we were not part of any alliance... so we were the ideal target for a coward of his ilk."

"Two centuries have passed since then," Umataro Tenma continued. "The nuclear explosion had occurred

at an altitude of a thousand meters, so the radioactive contamination was minimal and the capital was rebuilt in the same place under the new name of Metro City... As for Russia, it survived international isolation thanks to an iron pact with China, to which Beijing contributes with money and high technology and Moscow with a formidable atomic arsenal; Budrin took advantage of his overwhelming victory to proclaim the rebirth of the empire and be crowned tsar, then died in 2030 designating as heir a complete stranger who assumed his name, and two hours ago his sixth descendant declared war on all the free countries of Eurasia."

"Atom! Niki!" exclaimed Ethanol and Rin Tetsuwan in unison as they saw them get out of the van. "Brother! Good thing you're here!" added Uran, running towards him as Jump hopped between their legs.

"They absolutely didn't want to leave without him," the pilot explained contritely. "I tried to explain to them that we have little time, but..."

"Everything is fine now," Dr. Ochanomizu assured him. "This airplane will go straight to the United States of America. Go ahead, all get on board, quickly!"

"What about you?" asked Tenma in anguish.

"As general director of the Ministry of Science and Technology, it is my duty to contribute to the defense of the country in coordination with other members of the Government," the elderly scientist replied, embracing him. "You are the best minds in Japan, so you must save yourselves... Goodbye, my friend, and take care of yourself"

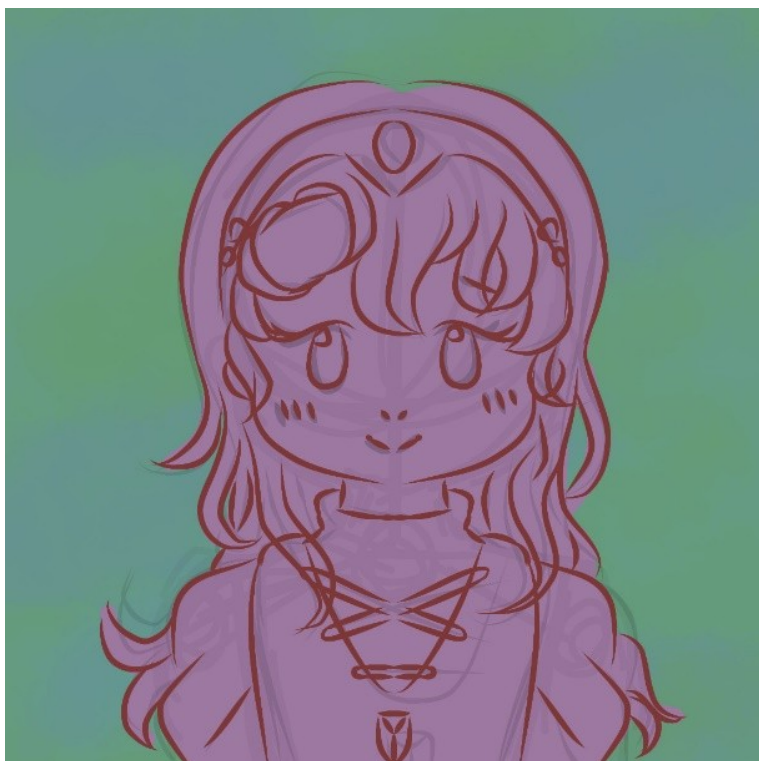
At that moment the scream of a siren tore the air. "Oh, no! They're coming! Hurry up!" exclaimed Ochanomizu.

"I'm staying here," Atom proclaimed firmly. "I will try to slow them down as much as I can, so that you can leave safely"

"Have you gone mad, Atom? Even if you have the power of a hundred thousand horses, you can't do it against an army," Tenma exclaimed. "I'm staying with you!" Niki resolutely stated. "*For better or worse*, remember?"

"I remember it well... and I ask your forgiveness," replied the astral boy, kissing her suddenly; his electronic brain hacked Niki's and put it on temporary standby, and the little robot girl collapsed unconscious. "I entrust her to you," he said to her adoptive father, placing her in his arms, then rocketed westward.

A few seconds later he saw them: they were thousands of humanoid robots, flying in a thick swarm thanks to a rocket engine installed on their backs, and heading towards Metro City. He stopped in mid-air and fired with the machine guns he had in his butt, knocking down some of them; one of them threw itself at him and exploded, and the explosion severed his arm. "Aaahhhh!" he cried out in pain, as ten other androids crashed on him; "Hoshie... Niki..." it was his last thought.



STAGE II: AWAKENING IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD

January 8, 2239 – Bangalore, Indian Raj

The first thing he felt when he came to his senses was a high-pitched female voice: "He's waking up, doctor! We did it!" Did you doubt it, perhaps?" echoed another, more mature woman with an arrogant look.

Atom Tetsuwan hardly opened his eyes and looked around: he was in a laboratory he had never seen before, populated by people unknown to him. The woman who had spoken second bent over him, so he could see her well: she was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, very long blonde hair on an amber complexion, eyebrows and lips thin and oblique; she wore a white coat over purple trousers, and a pink tank top that left little room for imagination. "Hey, boy, do you hear me or have you been enchanted to admire me?" she said, waving a hand in front of his eyes.



"Yes, I hear it and I see you very well," he exclaimed, "but who are you?"

"Let's postpone the presentations until later... Can you move your right arm and clench your fist?" she replied.

Atom raised his arm, and found that it was unusually long and sturdy, far more than he remembered; in any case, he performed the required task perfectly.

"Well," murmured the doctor, "repeat the operation with the other arm, but this time turning it ninety degrees counterclockwise," after which: "Now can you get up, get off this operating table and walk?"

"I'll try," replied the astral boy. He stood up on his elbows, then put his legs dangling, jumped off the table and staggered for a moment, but immediately regained his balance; "Hooray!" shouted two girls who both had light brown skin and black hair, one gathered in a short braid on the nape of the neck, the other half back long and partially covered by a scarf. He looked again at his arms, his legs: he felt *strange*, as if they had slipped him into a stretching machine. The tall, attractive woman approached him holding a large mirror: "Will you take a look?" she asked.

Atom stared at his own reflected image, and for a moment he did not recognize himself: the black hair, straight on the head like two horns, was still the same, but the rest of the body was no longer that of a thirteen-year-old boy; now he was six feet tall, and he looked...

well, it looked... "I look like Tobius at the age of eighteen," he murmured to himself, stunned.

"Who is Tobio? Ah, yes, he is... *He was* the son of Tenma, your creator, wasn't he?" she asked. "You know, while we were trying to rebuild you we had plenty of time to whip through your memory..." she explained seraphic.

"All the time..." he murmured, and in a flash he remembered everything: the declaration of war, the plane that left with his loved ones, the robots that threw themselves on him like suicide bombers ... "How much time has passed? And where are they?" he asked.

"One thing at a time, boy," the woman replied as she introduced herself. "My name is Rakshata Chawla, and I am the director of the Advanced Scientific Research Centre 'Jawaharlal Nehru' in Bangalore in the Indian Raj, which is where we are; these are my assistants, Kagari Savitri and Neha Shankar. As for time, it's been eighteen months since you ended your first life."



"E-Eighteen months?!?," exclaimed the robot boy, wide-eyed in surprise. "What happened to Japan, to the world? And my friends, are they okay?"

"At the present time, the coalition formed by Russia, China and the Republic of Grotia dominates over fifty-two nations of Eurasia, which have been renamed according to the chronological order of their 'pacification,'" explained Kagari Savitri by pressing some buttons and making a colored planisphere appear on a holographic screen. "Japan is called Area 11, and its

citizens 'Odinnadtsatyy', which in Russian means 'eleventh'. As for your schoolmates..."

She did not have time to complete her sentence, because the sliding door opened with a breath and the boys burst into the room shouting "Atom! Atom, you're alive!" as Shunsuke Ban followed them breathlessly. "Well, I was just going to say that these guys and their funny companion have been waiting for your rebirth all this time, watching and praying in our temples day and night," the assistant concluded.

"Funny to whom? Moderate your words, Miss!" the teacher shouted. Atom was not in his senses with joy as he hugged and kissed now one, now the other: "Kenichi, Tamao, Hikaru... thank goodness, you are safe and sound... you too, Shibugaki..."

"Of course," he snorted, even though you could see that he was as happy as the others, "these little snots wouldn't have lasted a minute without me... You took it easy while the world was falling apart, didn't you?"

"When the television spread the news of your death I went to the place to look for you, and there I found the boys who had had the same idea as me" said Master Mustache. "After a few hours we found what was left of your carcass; thank goodness your AI was still intact, even if it had run out of energy; so I put it in a saddlebag and decided to 'borrow' a small ship taking advantage of the hustle and bustle ... I tried to dissuade them from following me, but they didn't want to hear reasons, so we all boarded and headed for the Philippines. From there we moved to Borneo, which as you know is part of the British Empire which we asked for political asylum to; the British took us first to Burma, then here to India, where they attended the local school while Dr. Chawla worked to bring you back to life."

"Better free in exile than slaves in our own home," added Kenichi Shikishima. "Besides, you have always helped all of us, so it was right that we do you the favor..."

"What about Dr. Ochanomizu, and the others who moved to America? Are they okay too?" asked Atom.

"Unfortunately, poor Hiroshi was arrested and deported to Moscow... I don't know what happened to him," the man sighed, getting dark. "The United States has declared itself neutral and so far has not been attacked, so Tenma and the other exiles are safe, but Niki..." then he bit his tongue. "Master, what do you do? We had all decided together not to tell him anything before..." exclaimed Hikaru Hiyama before falling silent too.

"You decided not to tell me... what? What happened to Niki? She is... dead?" shouted Astro Boy in a choked voice, turning to his teacher.

"Worse... much worse," he replied, shaking his head. "She betrayed us"

STAGE III: A HARROWING REVELATION

At those words Atom was petrified. "Not... It's not possible... I can't believe it! I know Niki well, I know her better than I know myself! She would never betray us, do you understand? Never!" he exclaimed, grabbing Shunsuke Ban by the lapel; Dr. Rakshata had to intervene to force them apart. "Calm down, boy! Have you forgotten that you have a power of one hundred thousand horsepower? What do you want to do, kill him?" she rebuked, while his companions watched the scene shocked and pained.

The astral boy tried to regain control of himself. "Please forgive me, master," he murmured, bowing deeply. He put his hand on his shoulder: "Don't worry, Atom: we knew you'd react this way... so we decided to postpone as much as possible the time when you would find out."

"You're wrong," he said stubbornly. "There *must* be a mistake in all this... Niki would never pass to the enemy. You've confused her with someone who looks like her, I'm sure!"

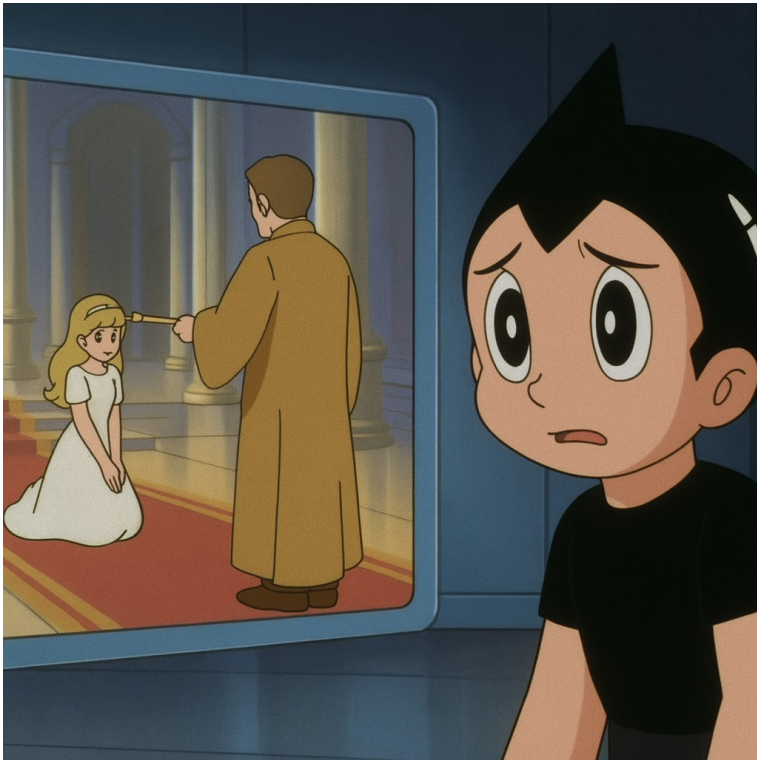
"If we were wrong," sighed Master Mustache, "but unfortunately the news we have received from the United States leaves no room for doubt: six months after her arrival Niki asked and obtained from Dr. Tenma to be remodeled, then she had an expatriation visa issued and boarded a flight to Grotia..."

"To Grotia?" exclaimed Atom, surprised. "Niki has only bad memories of that country! It is there that Dr. Rindolph, her creator, tried to kill her by activating the neutron bomb she carried inside her, in order to get me out of the way... and then, to avoid being killed by the detonation, he tore her to pieces with his own hands! She would never return to that place of her own free will! They must have hypnotized her, or something!"

"That's what we thought too, Atom," Midori interjected, "but Niki's father, Dr. Tenma, assured us that

neither she nor the other escapees had had contact with foreign agents, let alone Grotians... and then we read and listened to that news..."

"News? What news?" The robot boy was disoriented.



"*This* news." Neha Shankar pressed a button, and a series of headlines appeared on the screen; the first of them read: *Today, April 29, 2238, His Majesty Maxim*

Budrin VII awarded Miss Nikita Rindolova the title of First Dame of the Russian Empire, and was accompanied by a video showing the tsar touching with his saber the right shoulder of a young woman with wheat-colored hair kneeling at his feet.

Astro Boy scrutinized her with great attention: she was as tall as he is now, if she had been a human being she would have been about eighteen; but that hair, and those charming brown eyes... she was Niki, there was no doubt! He scrolled through the text, and read another headline: *May 9, 2238 – Today Russia celebrated Victory Day: to attend the great parade in Red Square His Majesty Maxim Budrin VII, accompanied by First Dame Nikita Rindolova, and then again: Yesterday, June 25, 2238, Mrs. Nikita Rindolova, First Dame of the Empire, presided over the launch of the new nuclear-powered cruiser 'Alexander Nevsky' in the port of Rostov on the Don; November 4, 2238 – On National Unity Day, First Dame Nikita Rindolova visited a military hospital in St. Petersburg, bringing the Tsar's greetings to soldiers*

injured in the fight against the rebels, until the last, dating back just a few hours earlier: His Majesty Maxim Budrin VII and the First Dame attended Christmas Mass in the Moscow Cathedral, presided over by Patriarch Pavel...

"No! No, no, no!" he shouted with how much breath he had in his throat as the operating table bent under his blows; Shunsuke Ban tried to console him, but he dodged him. "Please leave me alone," he murmured. Rakshata beckoned, and everyone followed her out of the hall. And at that point, Atom Tetsuwan was able to vent his pain.

STAGE IV:
GREAT PARTY AT THE COURT OF FRANCE

January 13, 2239 – Off the coast of South Africa

"We are about to dock in Cape Town," HMS Carnarvon Captain announced over the intercom. "Finally... I couldn't get enough of being locked in this steel box!" exclaimed Kagari Savitri, stretching, then turned to her colleague: "Lucky you, Neha, who are well everywhere..."

"I only try to make necessity virtue," she replied philosophically. "Given the circumstances, we should be happy just that we weren't intercepted by the Swarm..." 'Swarm' was the code name the Royal Army had given to the army of explosive droids.

"You can take everything away from me, except for two things: my couch and my pipe," said Rakshata Chawla, snuggled up in the sofa, before taking another puff of opium and exhaling a thick cloud of smoke that caused her assistants to cough. "Coff coff! But aren't

asphyxiating gases prohibited by the Geneva Convention?" murmured Savitri in a choked voice. "Please, Atom, tell her something! I talk to you, At..." but he did not deign the slightest attention.

"Are you sad because you had to separate from your friends?" Neha Shankar tried to console him. "We told you: it is safer for them to stay in India, at least as long as the Chinese border is immobile... and then, on this submarine there was not enough space for everyone..."

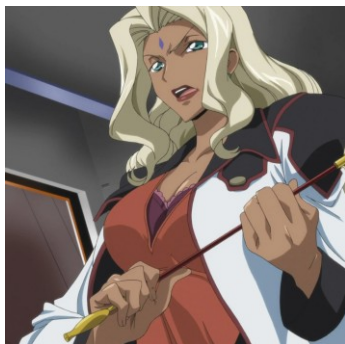
"How naïve you are, my dear," the doctor interjected. "Atom is sad because he's still thinking about his Niki, isn't he?"



At those words the robot boy threw himself on his cot and hid his face in the pillow. "Well, that's how it made things worse! Must you always be so direct, Dr. Rakshata?" the young woman exclaimed.

"He who spares the rod spoils the child," Rakshata said before turning to Astro Boy. "Tell me, are you going to cry over yourself for a long time while Budrin eats one nation after another? The Russian army has already exterminated three hundred thousand Poles, fifty-seven thousand Germans, twenty-five thousand French and one and a half million Israelis; the Saudi royal family has been passed for arms, and every day hundreds of people seek refuge by embarking on sea carts that are mercilessly sunk in the middle of the Atlantic ... I understand that being duped by your girlfriend is hard to digest, but wouldn't it be time to give it a rest and think about serious things? Your friend Rag, the robot president of Gura-via, has been leading an increasingly weak resistance for a year and a half; don't you even care about him?"

Atom gasped, but sadness once again got the upper hand. "Leave me alone," he murmured, but she lifted him up with both hands and slapped him on the cheek. "Listen to me, Atom Tetsuwan!" she exclaimed. "You are the greatest robot in the world; you defeated Pluto even though he was ten times more powerful than you, you saved the Earth from the threat of aliens, you are the defender of the weak, the champion of justice! That's why we gave blood and sweat to give you back a body: because you never backed down when you had to fight for a good cause, because you always put muscles and brains into it, and you never allowed personal interests to prevail over your sense of duty! The whole world is counting on you; do not disappoint us, or may remorse haunt you for the rest of your days!"



It was as if the body of the astral boy had been crossed by an electric shock: suddenly the fog that had enveloped his thoughts for the last four days dissipated. "You're right," he said with a new light in his eyes. "I exist to defend mankind from the forces of evil... I'm Astro Boy"



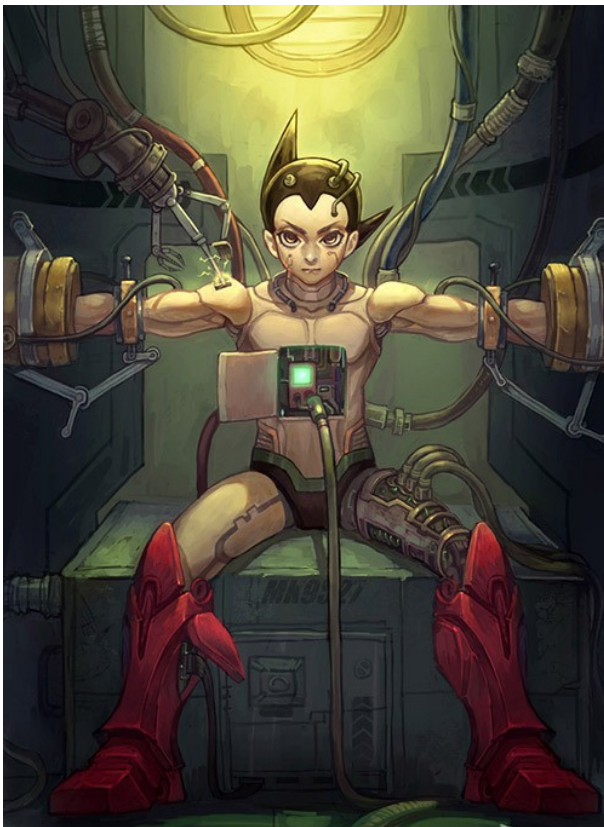
"The great roboticist Rakshata Chawla knocking in front of me... I am truly honored!" exclaimed Lloyd Asplund, bowing theatrically before the newcomers. "I'm sorry I can't say the same, Earl of Pudding," she said.

"Always that nickname... You do it on purpose!" replied the earl with a grimace, then recomposed. "Cecile," she told a uniformed girl, "accompany them to their lodgings, please." She bowed and introduced herself: "Major Cecile Croomy of the British Aerospace Forces. Welcome to the Centre for Joint Force Studies in Johannesburg"



While helping him settle into his room, Atom questioned her. "Your boss, Lloyd... why does the doctor call him Earl of Pudding? Did they already know each other?"

"Oh, yes," Cecile replied. "We've known each other since we were kids: all three of us studied at the Imperial Institute in Colchester, but I'm three years younger than them. And Lloyd Asplund is truly an earl: he was awarded the prestigious Order of the Garter for helping to defend what remains of the Empire with the 'Knights of Nightmare', the piloted combat androids of his own conception. He and Rakshata were on good terms until seven years ago, then something happened... I don't know what, but since then she has been treating him coldly. In any case, professionally they have always had great esteem for each other, so I think they will cooperate without any problem," she reassured him with a smile.



Atom spent the next two days between improvement operations and field trials. "Magnificent, magnificent! The power of the Thousand Ghosts works perfectly!" exclaimed Earl Lloyd. "Not only he can take on the appearance of any individual or living being of any nature and size, but he can also infinitely multiply his

image to confuse the opponent! I did a really good job..." he concluded by fixing his hair with one hand.

That evening, the robot boy spotted Dr. Chawla in the bar with a British soldier. "Rakshata," he was saying, "I've never known a woman as beautiful and intelligent as you... In my dorm there is not enough privacy; what would you say if we ended this beautiful evening in your room?"

"Aren't you running a little too much, Sergeant Hewitt?" she teased him. "We've only known each other for two hours and you already want to take me to bed... And then, sorry to tell you, but I'm too old for you."

"You mean I'm too young for you? I'm not a child!" he replied indignantly. "I'm a Knightmare pilot, I risk my life every day... If you don't want to do it out of love, at least do it out of pity..." he begged her.

"Take a cold shower and go to sleep early, so you'll greatly increase your chances of survival," the scientist cut short.

The soldier got up snorting and walked away into the corridor; Atom approached as she guzzled a glass of gin without hurting her. "Is it you, Atom? Give, drink something: with the artificial stomach we gave you, you can also swallow the stones..."

"No, thank you," he declined, sitting down next to the woman. "I'm a robot, and unlike you I don't take any pleasure in drinking and smoking," he said sternly.

She took another sip. "Eh, yes: I smoke, drink and keep company with toy soldiers... I'm really a bad girl. Did you want to talk to me about something?"

Astro Boy fidgeted in his chair. "In a week the Tsar of the Russias will go to Versailles for a party in his honor, and Niki will also be there... I would like you to convince the earl to give me a ride to France."

"What do you plan to do? Break through the door, enter shooting wildly, take your beautiful partner in your arms and take her away on a white horse? We're not in the world of fairy tales, boy... I was hoping that my speech had cleared your head," she replied sarcastically.

"Niki and I were built on very similar patterns, so we always understood each other," he tried to persuade her, "and I'm sure that if I could talk to her, I would bring her back to our side. It is not just a question of love; the fact is that the two of us together are invincible. Please let me try!"

Sigh... if it were so easy to make a person fall in love with you for the first time or again, I would try too, thought Dr. Rakshata staring him in the eye; then she said, "All right, I'll talk to him... but I don't promise you anything"

January 22, 2239 – France (Area 22)

"We are twenty miles from Calais... I'm sorry, but we can't get any closer," explained the captain of the submarine Invincible. "We will launch you towards the coast in a slow-moving torpedo; hide it well, because you will need it to get back on board. We will wait for

you for ten hours, after which we will have to leave, with or without you. All clear?"

"Very clear," Atom confirmed, lying inside the bullet. The lid was hermetically sealed by two sailors, then the torpedo was inserted into the launch chamber and the captain pressed a button. "Good luck, super boy," he wished.

A few minutes later the astral boy was dragging his transport on a rocky beach; he carefully hid it under a large pile of seaweed along with his diving suit and fins, then, dressed in impeccable black tailcoat, he reached the road. Although he was powered by two state-of-the-art self-rechargeable batteries, he didn't want to waste an ounce of energy unnecessarily, so he signaled a taxi to stop. "At Versailles," he said as he boarded.

"It's a good distance, *monsieur*," remarked the taxi driver. "Don't worry, I'm largely solvent," he replied, pulling a large bundle of five-thousand-ruble banknotes out of his wallet.

"When that's the case, make yourself comfortable," the man said, turning on the meter.

During the trip, Atom pondered Lloyd Asplund's words: *"Since the days of Budrin II, Russia's strategic arsenal has been inextricably linked with the physical person of the person in charge; this means that if the tsar were assassinated, thousands of missiles armed with nuclear warheads would automatically be launched on all the cities of the Earth, and mankind would become extinct. It was this infamous move that ensured the survival of the regime for two hundred years; so, Atom, when you're in front of him, you won't have to twist a hair. I'll tell you again: whatever happens, you must never hurt him, for any reason."*

It was certainly not necessary to admonish him in that way, he thought: killing a human being, however serious his faults were, would mean violating the Robot Charter, an idea completely foreign to his mental horizon. *All I want is to get Niki back and come to her*

senses... Then, together, we will defeat the Russians and restore peace, one way or another. I am sure of it.

Three hours later the yellow car stopped in front of the gate of the palace. "Duke Louis-Alphonse de Condorcet" lied Astro Boy by handing the sentry a cleverly forged electronic document, and a few seconds later they were allowed to enter. "To you, good man, and keep the rest," he said to the taxi driver as he got off.

A valet in livery accompanied him to the Hall of Mirrors, where a large number of aristocrats and noblewomen, remnants of the Ancien Régime that the war events had revived after five centuries of mothballs, awaited with anxiety and curiosity the arrival of the illustrious guests. "They say she is the secret daughter of a Grotia scientist, a certain Dr. Rindolph or Rindolov," whispered an elderly lady to her neighbors as he listened to all the speeches with his superhearing.

"I've heard that she's only eighteen... he chose a very young favorite," gossiped another.

"Nah, nah: I tell you how things are," a third came forward, waving a hand. "His Majesty's fifth maid confided to my fourth maid, who immediately confided it to me, that she had observed her changing clothes; so, she discovered that the beautiful Nikita is actually ... a robot"

"Nooo! But what do you ever tell me!" exclaimed the first, bringing her hands to her cheeks and making a kissy face. "But are you sure, Floriane? I mean, how can an ignorant maid be *absolutely* sure that..." a young lady interjected. "How naïve you are, Georgette," she scolded her, covering her face with a fan. "A woman notices certain details immediately..."

"Then I can also get past that: since it is not the Budrin's custom to have children, we cannot compete with a robot," sighed the Baroness of Orleans. "Sorry to disillusion you, my dear," objected Princess Thurn und Taxis sourly, "but with your modest lineage and your

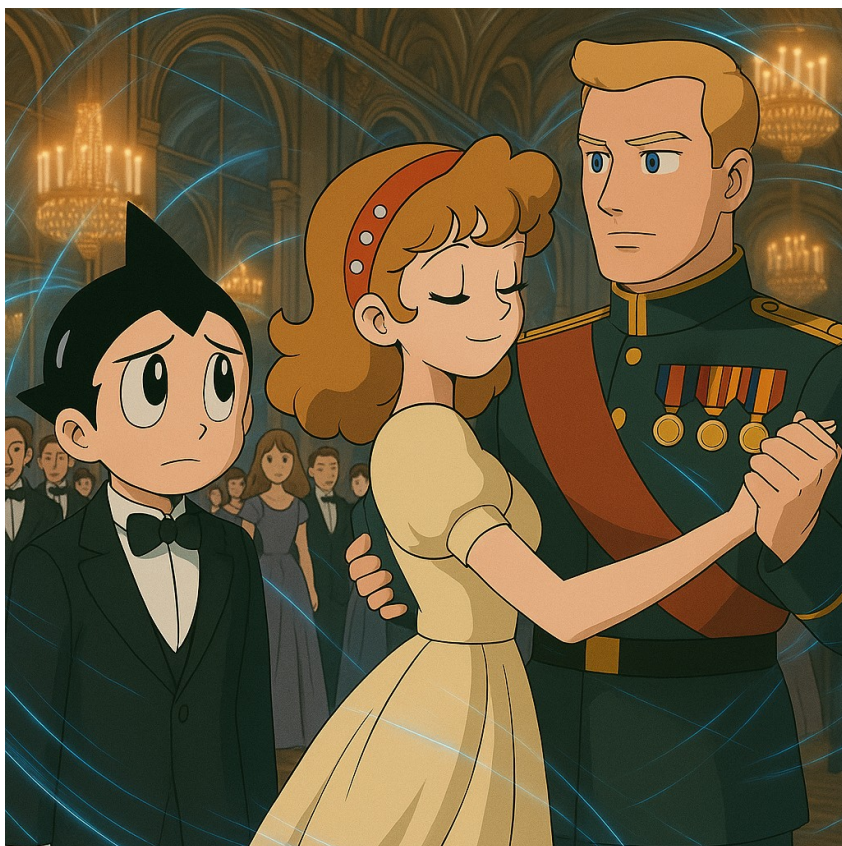
even more modest patrimony, you have *never* been in competition..."

"Shut up, don't be heard!" a man silenced them, when a butler beat a golden mace on the floor three times and loudly announced: "His Majesty the Tsar of All Russias Maxim Maximovich Budrin, seventh of the Name; the First Dame of the Empire, Mrs. Nikita Rindolova; His Excellency Vlad Rindolph, coordinator of Roy Project" and all those present bowed at ninety degrees, as the three made their entrance.

The despot was exactly as in the photos that Atom had studied before leaving South Africa: tall and robust, with ice-blue eyes and few blonde hairs, he advanced with a somewhat rigid posture, as if he had weapons hidden under the high uniform (the robot boy had found with great surprise that his physical appearance was the same as that of his six predecessors, until Earl Lloyd had said to him, "Ever heard of plastic surgery, son? Successful brands always attract admirers and imitators, whether it's a Hollywood diva dead for a hundred years or a

bloody dictator," and it seemed reasonable to him); Dr. Rindolph, on the other hand, had a look of disgust on his face, as if that bath of worldliness made him uncomfortable. *'Roy' in Russian means 'swarm'... He is the mastermind behind the android-kamikazes!* Astro Boy said to himself. *I should have understood it earlier: already three years ago, when he was the commander of the fortress in which I entered to recover the stolen project, his specialty was the robot-guardians without their own will and controlled from a distance.*

As for the woman... the more he stared at her, the more the astral boy became convinced that she was Niki. *What happened to you, my sweet mate?* he wondered as she twirled in Budrin's arms to the tune of the "Beautiful Blue Danube" wrapped in a cream-colored dress, and with a pair of heeled shoes on her feet that made her look even more slender. *You've never put up with heels... What have they done to you, to make you what you have become?*



At the end of the dance, while the First Dame received the homage of the ladies, the gentlemen approached the master of ceremony to be inscribed in her booklet, and Atom, elbowing not a little, managed to get the fourth place. Half an hour later, when it was his turn, he made a deep bow and said, "Milady, will you grant

me this dance?" *If she recognizes my voice, I will have proof that it is really her*, he thought to himself.

She looked at him with an expression of absolute surprise, then his face hardened; she pointed his finger at him and exclaimed, "This man is a hitman. Arrest him!" "What's up with you, Niki? It's me... I'm Atom..." he murmured in pain.

Two guards grabbed him from behind, but he shrugged them off and sent them to fall back on the guests; he took her by the arm urging her "Come with me!", but she shouted "No!" and with a lightning Aikido move threw him against a window. While breaking through the window falling into the void, the robot boy absurdly considered that now he had no doubt: that woman was really Niki ... because a human being could never have had a power of a hundred horses like her.

He fell heavily on the lawn and rolled twice, but got up without any damage. *I must use the power of the Thousand Ghosts, or I will not get out alive*, he thought running to the entrance gate; he assumed the appearance

of an officer and mocked in Russian to the guards "There is an intruder in the garden! Go and search all!", and as they walked away, he lost his tracks. At that moment Maxim Budrin VII, looking out of the broken window, was cursing: "Damn! Who the hell is that guy? No man could ever survive such a fall!"

"He's not a man," Niki replied, looking into the void. "He's a robot, and his name is Atom Tetsuwan." And on hearing her, Dr. Rindolph faded.

STAGE V: *NIKI HOMINI DEA*

As was to be expected, no one turned a blind eye that night at Versailles. "How would you say you missed him? You are incapable!" cried the Tsar of Russia, kicking in the face the chief of French police, prostrate at his feet. The man tried badly to clean the blood flowing from his nose with the sleeve of his jacket: "We beat the area palm to palm, Sire ... but we will keep searching until we find him," he murmured.

"You'll never find him," muttered Dr. Rindolph, crossing his arms. "That damn guy has rocket engines in his legs... by now he could be on the other side of the globe!"

"Go away! Disappear from my sight!" ordered Budrin to the elderly official; and when he had departed: "He came to kill me... doesn't he care, then, that my death would trigger the Apocalypse?"

"It's very likely that he didn't know about it," Niki speculated, snuggled up in an armchair. "I've lived closely with Atom for twenty-eight months, so I think I know his *modus operandi* well... He prefers direct confrontation, in which he can easily prevail thanks to his great physical strength and his stratospheric powers; he also learns quickly from his mistakes and recognizes the weaknesses of his opponents, but has always had poor long-term planning skills, and is very reluctant to fit into a hierarchical organization. This makes him a lone fighter, and therefore dangerous."

"I have to eliminate him before he tries again," the tyrant murmured, biting his nails. "Perhaps, if I had a few thousand Japanese massacred, I could convince him to turn himself in..."

"On the contrary, Your Majesty: you would strengthen his determination to kill you," objected the robot girl. "I suggest instead that you give a speech in the worldview, reminding your enemies of the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, and have it

broadcast on television non-stop for two or three days, as well as publishing it in all the newspapers ... so even a hard-headed like him will understand that it is better to give up the idea. Besides, if I may speak again..."

"It is granted to you," the tsar condescended.

"... it would be appropriate for Your Majesty to temporarily limit your public appearances within the borders of the Russian Federation, where it is easier to ensure your protection," she continued, bowing her head slightly. "For visits to the occupied territories, however, you could assign a person who has your total trust, a lightning rod that attracts the attention of rebels like Atom away from you"

"A person I trust..." he reflected for a moment, then placed both hands on her tiny shoulders. "What more suitable person than you, my dear Nikochka? You are beautiful, intelligent and loved by all, and your loyalty is above suspicion; besides, if that Atom feels something for you, he will never be able to hurt you... Do you want to be my representative until we get rid of him?"

"My happiness is in serving you, Sire," Niki murmured with a deep bow, as Dr. Rindolph looked at her in a grim way.

January 23, 2239, 7.35 pm – Minsk Airport, capital of the Republic of Grotia

While waiting for the Tupolev to finish taxiing on the airstrip, the young maid prepared to welcome her masters: as usual, Dr. Rindolph would have stepped on his head the hood of the raincoat and refused the umbrella that she would have brought him even though it snowed widely, muttering "Think of my daughter, not me"; the Lady, on the other hand, would have shielded herself with a smile and would have said "Thank you, my good Olga ... but I'm a robot and I can't catch a cold, you can, so it's good that you cover yourself." At that point she would have replied "Forgive me, my lady, but I am your maid, and it is my duty to take care of you",

and the Lady would have drawn her to herself concluding "Then let's shelter together: this umbrella is great enough for both of us". Yes, the Lady was really very good as well as beautiful ...

She had been hospitalized for ten months in that hospital in Krakow when her melodious voice had pierced for the first time the tomb in which her mind was buried. "What happened to her?" she asked the doctors who accompanied her as she saw her lying in her bed. "Her home was hit by a fragmentation grenade... we had to amputate both of her legs. Since then she has fallen into a state of deep depression; we feed her intravenously, but at this rate she won't pull through", they replied, icy and disconsolate.

How many times had she heard the same words repeated? *Well done, leave me like that*, she had thought. *I have nothing, I am nothing, I don't want anything anymore; I just want to die...* But that mysterious woman had approached her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She had reacted like a wounded beast: "Don't touch me!" she

had shouted turning around, and had looked her in the face: she had never seen such a beautiful person ... then her voice was raised again. "Father," she had implored, "you are a great roboticist... You could make prostheses and implant them in her, so she would walk again..."



"Tsk" had replied angrily a small and elderly man. "She's just a Polish waste like so many... What do you care about her? Let her die as soon as possible and get out of the way!"

"She is not a waste," the young woman had insisted with sweet firmness, "because I want her to be my maid. Think about it, Father: she would be grateful to you all her life, you would be like God for her... Isn't it nice and pleasant to be someone's God? I ask you please..."

"Okay, okay" he had snorted. "When you look at me like that, I can't deny you anything... I'm going to give the appropriate instructions," he had cut short as he walked away. The beautiful lady had sat next to her, took a plate of soup from her bedside table with her left hand, and asked her, "What's your name?" "Olga... my name is Olga," she had replied.

"Well, Olga: now open your mouth well and eat" she had replied, filling the spoon and putting it to her lips; and she, obediently, had opened her mouth and sent down spoonful after spoonful, while big tears rolled down her face... She felt like the protagonist of those fables in which an angel and a devil contended for the soul of a man before the tribunal of the Most High, and this

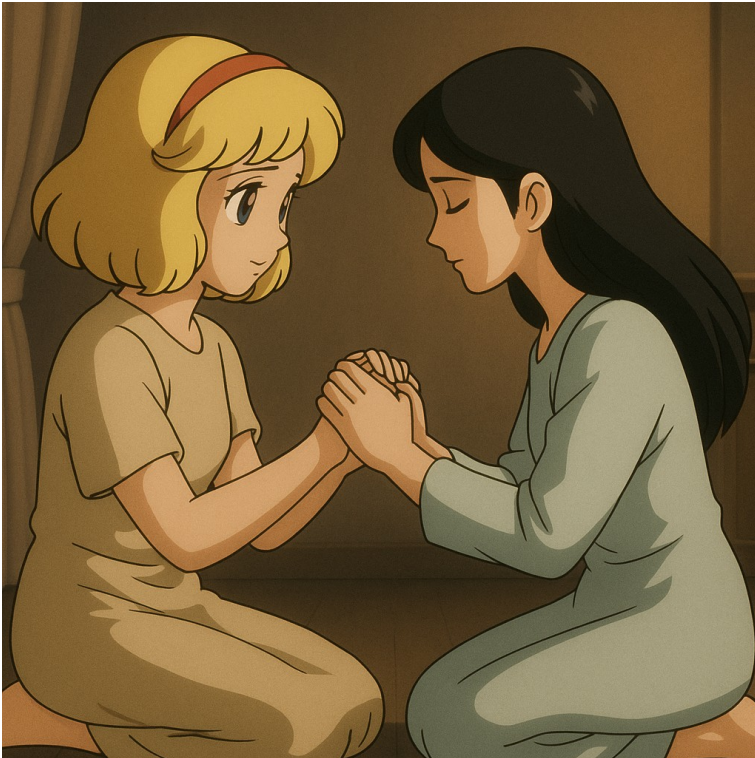
time her guardian angel had won. Now her life had value again; now she was *loved* again.

She had been flown to the Republic of Grotia – a nation she had come to know at school as an enemy of Poland, a disreputable land that produced only prostitutes and spies – and the Lady had held her hand throughout the journey; then, that man of science had subjected her to numerous tests and surgery in which his daughter had also taken part, and two days later he had told her: "On paper the operation is perfectly successful ... now try getting out of bed and standing up."

She had gotten out of bed and staggered for a few moments, then had regained her balance; she had taken a few steps in the large and light-filled room assigned to her, after which she had jumped; she had run, done somersaults, danced laughing and crying like a child, while the beautiful lady beat time with her hands, her eyes full of joy ... Then she had knelt before the doctor, and with folded hands she had said, "From this moment I am your property, your conquest, and your booty. Please, my

lord, tell me your name, that I may imprint it in letters of fire on my soul."

"I just granted a whim of my daughter," he replied. "If you want to be grateful to someone, be grateful to her." Her daughter had knelt in front of her and had taken her hands between hers: "I am Niki" he had told her.



"Then I, Olga Kowalski, do become your liege woman, Niki Rindolph, of life and limb and of earthly

worship," she proclaimed surely, "and faith and truth I will bear unto thee, to live and die against all manner of folks. I swear"

Meanwhile, the masters had just finished descending the ladder. Olga was shaken from her thoughts and went out to meet them; she opened her umbrella and approached Dr. Rindolph, but he stopped her with a nod and muttered, "Think of my daughter, not me." Then she turned to Niki, who shielded herself with a smile and said "Thank you, my good Olga... but I'm a robot and I can't catch a cold, you can, so it's good that you cover yourself." At that point she replied "Forgive me, my lady, but I am your maid, and it is my duty to take care of you"; the Lady drew her to herself, concluding, "Then let us take shelter together: this umbrella is great enough for both of us," and Olga felt once again in Heaven.

"Why did we come to the laboratory right away, even before changing clothes? Is there anything that bothers you, Dr. Rindolph?" asked Niki, seeing his face dark. "Niki, I want you to submit to the Great Detector," replied the elderly scientist, pointing to a plastic chair already well known to her.

She did not bend: she sat down, closed her eyes and said in a quiet voice "I'm ready". Rindolph pressed a button, and metal wires wrapped around the neck, wrists, and ankles of the robot girl; they both knew that if the device determined that she was lying, those wires would transmit a million-volt electric shock and kill her instantly. "First question: who rebuilt you after I tore you apart? And how did he do it, since I had burned your project?"

"Dr. Umataro Tenma explained to me that he had rebuilt me with the collaboration of his friend Hiroshi Ochanomizu, general director of Japan's Ministry of Science and Technology," Niki replied. "He also told me

that he had kept a copy of my construction scheme in his private archive, as he always does with all his projects."

"How can you remember me if you were rebuilt from scratch?" he urged her.

"I wasn't completely *rebuilt* from scratch," she said. "Dr. Tenma explained to me that Atom Tetsuwan had brought my legs with him, the only part of my body left intact; so, when he built me a new body exactly the same as the previous one, he joined it with my old legs, whose nanochips still kept my memories and my identity."

And that fit, too, thought Dr. Rindolph, but he was not yet convinced. "How was your second life?" he asked again.

"Dr. Tenma adopted me," explained the robot girl, and for the second time in twelve months the old man felt a pang in his chest. "He enrolled me in the seventh grade of the Fukuyan Institute, in Metro City, making sure that I was placed in the same class as Atom. At first, I didn't remember anything from my previous life, due to a malfunction of my distributed nanochips; then I

recovered my memory, and I fell in love with him again. Overall, it was a satisfactory period."

"If you were satisfied with your life, why did you leave Tenma and come back to me? Don't you hate me for what I've done to you?" the man continued.

"How could I hate the one who gave me life?" she continued. "Dr. Tenma always treated me well... but deep down he still considers himself Atom's father, and he made sure that I learned to love him again because he wanted *his* happiness, not mine. So, on reflection, I realized that you, Dr. Rindolph, had been more honest with me than Tenma was, and I made my decision."

"One last question: how do you feel about Atom Tetsuwan?"

She thought about it for half a second: for her superfast electronic brain, practically an eternity. "I loved him... but not anymore. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how many promises he made, Atom never considered me equal to him; he always considered me a weak child in need of protection, like his sister Uran.

Even on the day of the invasion, a few hours after he swore that we would be together for better or worse, he knocked me unconscious and loaded on that plane as if I were a burden to be disposed of in order to fight freely... I don't want to be just a nice ornament to admire; I want to be the mate of a man who treats me for what I'm worth, and Atom is not that kind of person. That's why I hate him now, and when I make a decision, I never go back."

Rindolph checked the graphs once again: they contained no trace of hesitation, no second thoughts, and the Great Detector could not go wrong, not twice in a row... He breathed a deep sigh of relief, freed her from her bonds, and helped her up. "Forgive me, Niki," he told her, "I feared you wanted to betray myself a second time, but now..."

"Do you trust me now, Dr. Rindolph?" asked Niki, looking at him with her charming brown eyes; he smiled. "Doctor here, doctor there... Don't be so formal: just call me dad," he chuckled and drove her out of the lab.

"Okay... Daddy," the robot girl replied, smiling at him in turn.

STAGE VI: THE WEAVER AND THE SHEPHERDESS

May 15, 2239 – Germany (Area 21)

"I transport food and kerosene," said the driver to the sentry; he checked the transport documents, then lifted the barrier and the heavy truck entered the military port of Kiel. He stopped at a lay-by, the driver got out and a group of soldiers began to unload the heavy cases. "Come and eat and drink with us, so you will tell us how things are going at home," one of them told him when they had finished placing the goods in the warehouse.

Late in the evening they were all soaking drunk... well, almost everyone: the newcomer had brought with him bottles of vodka of excellent quality and had toasted generously like the others, but he was the only one who was still lucid. He sneaked away from the mess hall, entered the warehouse and opened the cases, from which British Commandos raiders armed to the teeth came out; "Finally! We were about to suffocate to death!" they exclaimed. Together they headed to the hangar that housed

hundreds of Swarm droids ready to be sent to the African front; there they placed a series of time bombs, setting timers to go off after ten minutes, then exiting to return to the truck.

Suddenly an infantryman passing by saw them and shouted: "Alarms! Alarms!" before a barrage of shots sent him to the other world, and a few seconds later pandemonium broke out. "I'll think of them," exclaimed Astro Boy, resuming his true appearance and starting at full speed: he shattered the searchlights with his laser cannons and knocked down the machine gun turrets, while his companions climbed on the vehicle and turned on the engine. The truck headed at full speed towards the entrance, broke the barrier and took the road that led to a beach five kilometers away, while Atom followed them in flight. At that moment a series of explosions ripped through the compound; "We did it! Hip, hip, urrah!" they cheered.

Once there, the men took off their fur jackets, revealing diving suits underneath, and lifted a tarpaulin

that concealed slow-moving torpedoes. They were embarking, when the Russians caught up with them and began to fire; Lieutenant Osborne was shot in the lung. "Damn!" shouted the robot boy lifting their trucks and smashing them to the ground; he put them to flight assuming the appearance of a giant, then joined the others and together with them plunged into the cold waters of the Baltic Sea.

When they were on board the submarine, they immediately realized that the wounded's condition was very serious. They waited for half an hour in front of the infirmary, then the ship's doctor came out and shook his head; some of them began to pray. "It's not right! It's not right!" cried the astral boy, bursting into tears. "He was only twenty-two years old... It's not right!" he repeated.

The squad commander tried to console him: "It's the first time you've lost a fellow soldier, isn't it? I understand how you feel... but know that Osborne was ready to sacrifice his life as you are, as we all are; he died doing

his duty, so I'm sure he left in peace. It's sad to say, but you'll get used to it..."

"You don't understand how I feel at all!" he exclaimed, pushing his hand away. "It's the fifth time I've lost a companion, and I'll never get used to it! I will never get used to the idea of you humans killing each other instead of working together to explore space, to defeat disease, make deserts bloom and make this world a better place for everyone! I am a robot, I have a brain that works according to logic, and this war for me is absolutely illogical, it is meaningless..." he sobbed; then he wiped his face with one hand, recomposed himself and said to them, "Excuse me... I'm going to report" and walked slowly along the bridge.

June 29, 2239 – Timisoara, Romanja (Area 16)

"Please, noble lady, take me as your servant! I am strong, I never get tired, I never complain; I will do

whatever you want! I will wash the floors, cook, iron, polish your shoes and make them very soft... If you really don't want to take me, at least take my son!" the woman implored, pushing a thin, terrified child forward.

"I'll take you both... you will wash the floors, and you, little one, will be my valet" said Niki caressing his loathsome little head, then turned to a soldier of her retinue: "Give them enough food, soap and clean clothes, and bring them to my residence ... and treat them with kindness, I recommend"

"Thank you... Thank you. You are a saint!" she murmured, kissing her hand. The soldier grabbed her by the arm; "Go ahead, move!" he ordered her, but the robot girl stared at him indignantly, insisted in an icy voice "I said *with kindness*" and immediately the soldier snapped to attention exclaiming "Yes, ma'am, my apologies, ma'am!"; after which he turned again to the Romanjan woman and said in a softer voice, "Follow me, please."

"Take me too, I beg you!" called out another of the women housed in that prison camp. "Me too, me too!"

said two others in chorus, prostrating themselves at her feet. "Of course... I'll take you all. You will cook for my guests, you will be a seamstress, and you will clean the windows," she reassured them, smiling.

Dr. Rindolph couldn't shut up anymore; with a nod he invited his goddaughter to follow him to a place on the sidelines, then blurted out: "I mean, Niki, don't you think you're exaggerating? You already have one hundred and fifty servants among males and females, not counting the children... you have more servants in our home than the Tsar in all his residences... what do you do with these others?"

"One hundred and fifty-seven, to be precise," the robot girl lovingly corrected, touching the tip of his nose. "After all, Petronius, the arbiter of good taste, understood everything two thousand and two hundred years ago: 'You have so much, you are worth so much; own something and you will be valued,' he said... and I like to own slaves"

"But at least take high-ranking slaves!" insisted her creator. "The scions of all the noble families of Europe are just waiting for your nod, you know; instead, you choose them among the widows and orphans of the rebels, among the mutilated of war: Poles, Romanjans, Greeks, Macedonians, Albanians, Jews... the scum of the Empire! And feed and clothe them at the expense of their enemy, the one which they would gladly fill the shoes of! But you always do as you please...", and turned his back on her. "They are not scum, they are rough diamonds..." she sighed, but the man had already left.

As the limousine took them to the airport, Niki asked her headmaid to read her a page from the Bible, as she used to do every day; Olga Kowalski opened it and began reading a passage from the prophet Ezekiel. *"For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been*

scattered in the cloudy and dark day. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment... "; then she noticed that her mistress had fallen asleep and looked at her softly: even if she was powered by a self-rechargeable battery (so she had confided to her), sometimes she too needed to rest like human beings. She laid the Bible on the seat and covered the Lady with a plaid, then took up the holy book and read the ending in silence: "*And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the goats.*"

"Thy righteous judgment come, O Lord," she summoned; but in a low voice, because she was afraid that there were bugs in the car.

*July 16, 2239 – Union of South Africa, Johannesburg,
Royal Army Joint Force Study Centre*

"Dr. Rakshata... are you sure that these new suits will help us fight better?" asked Toto Thompson and Leonhard Steiner, looking embarrassed at the tight *plug-suits* that wrapped around their bodies. "No, dear ones," replied the Indian scientist amusedly, "but they will certainly help you survive the accelerations, now that we have increased the power by one hundred and forty percent."

"All thanks to the new superconductor at room temperature, the chromium-magnesium-nickel-niobium alloy," Lloyd Asplund considered. "We'll have to find a name for it..."

"I am half Indian and half Japanese, so my opinion is not impartial" intervened Kagari Savitri, "however, since in nature this mineral is found in pink agglomerates as large as cherry petals, and that its properties were discovered by a Japanese researcher who took refuge in

Singapore, if I had the power to decide on the matter, I would call it *sakuradite*"

"I like it, it's poetic and adequate," said Neha Shankar. "Me too... and what does Earl of Pudding say?" added Dr. Chawla mischievously.

"For once I agree too... So, let's toast to the sakuradite! Cheers!" exclaimed the earl, raising the chalice. "Kampai!" replied Kagari as sake, wine, beer and various spirits began to pass from hand to hand.



"We increased the power of the Knightmares, yes... but our production capacities remain limited," Lloyd explained to Astro Boy a few hours later. "To turn the tide

of the conflict we would need to multiply by a hundred vehicles and pilots ... but in all of Eurasia and Africa there are not so many reserves to draw on, and even Australia cannot do more than it is already doing."

"And out of Eurasia?" observed the robot boy. "Couldn't you ask the United States of America for help?"

The Englishman shook his head. "The *Yankee* cousins have locked themselves in their own borders since Donald Trump was elected president for the second time... They don't care about our fate anymore."

"As long as you are alive, you must never give up hope," he reacted. "Please talk to your prime minister, plan a voyage... I want to go talk to their chief! After all I have done to help you, you are indebted to me... Let me at least give it a try!"

"All right, boy, you convinced me: I will speak to Rakshata as soon as she recovers from the hangover, and together we will try to convince the premier," exclaimed the earl, trying to give himself a courage that he did not

have. "If we have to fall, we will fall after firing to the last cartridge."

July 30, 2239 - Washington DC, capital of the Pan-American Union

"If he who starts well is half the work, we are very bad," sighed Rakshata lying on her sofa. "It's been two days since they took us to this Marine base, and they still don't deign to listen to what we have to say."

"We are lucky that they have allowed us to disembark," the earl snorted as the sliding door opened and an officer entered the room. "Corporal Henry Miller. The President will receive you in two hours in the Oval Office, get ready," he said dryly.



Helmut Regis, hundredth president of the United States and fifty-third honorary president of the Pan-American Union, fixed his piercing eyes on the trio sitting in front of him before opening his mouth. "I have listened with great attention to your heartfelt pleadings," he began to say, joining his fingertips to form a triangle, "but now let me tell you our point of view. This great country was founded by the scum of Eurasia: religious

fanatics, adventurers, prostitutes... all people who were nothing in the closed feudal world of the sixteenth century, and who in this land became someone because in the New World, the rules of the old had no value... The United States of America was born to be 'other' than an environment in which the son of a king was destined from birth to be king, and the son of a peasant to be only a peasant: this is our spiritual DNA.

For two hundred years we have attracted millions of arms and minds from every corner of the globe, men and women who fused their cultures and traditions together to become one people, then our arrogance betrayed us: we were convinced that we were Heaven on earth, and that the rest of the world, sooner or later, would inevitably adopt our way of life, and instead we had to see that other nations saw us as smoke and mirrors. If we sent our bombers to hit a rogue regime, they accused us of being cowards who sowed death from the sky, but if we put our boots on the ground, we were massacrers of women and children; when we withdrew from

an occupied country they accused us of disregarding mankind, and when we financed revolts against dictators, of interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign peoples. They did not consider us the solution to their ills, but the source of their misfortunes...

In the end we understood that the root of our misunderstandings lay in the fact that most of mankind was too much in love with their medieval way of life to get along with us: you fear tyrants like Budrin, but you are fascinated by their violence and seduced by their riches... That is why we have given up exporting democracy and dedicated ourselves to increasing our prosperity and well-being. Since then, this course of action has rewarded us, and we do not intend to deviate from it. And now excuse me, but I have other commitments..." he concluded by beckoning two sentries to come closer.

"No, I don't excuse you!" exclaimed Astro Boy, standing up. "You are the greatest military power in the world, therefore you have a special responsibility to mankind, even when other peoples despise you; we do

not do our duty for someone to say thank you, but because it is right this way... Moreover, it is not at all true that you no longer interfere in foreign affairs: were you not the ones who killed Cardinal Sorru, the one who wanted to assassinate an inconvenient writer? And if you are so proud of your lifestyle you should do everything to protect it; or do you believe that thug Budrin will be content to dominate three continents, and will not send his robot-kamikazes to crash into your cities?"

"You have raised three good polemical arguments, I agree," replied the President, smoothing his beard white like his double-breasted jacket, "but, *primum*, between us and the Russians there is a balance of terror that has so far worked perfectly: we do not nuclearize them, they do not nuclearize us, and vice versa; *secundum*, the spokesman of the Holy See officially announced that His Eminence died as a result of an accidental fall while getting out of the shower; and *tertium*, as for the Swarm, at the appropriate time we will take the appropriate

countermeasures, or perhaps we have already done so", smiled slyly.

"What countermeasures are you talking about?" asked Lloyd, intrigued.

"You don't need to know... And with that, we both said everything we had to say," the man said.

"Follow me, please," the first guard called, grabbing Dr. Rakshata by the arm while the other did the same with the earl; Atom was about to give in to despair, then decided to play the last card. "Mr. President, you are not who you say you are," he said in a firm voice.

"How dare you, boy?" burst the commander-in-chief of the United States.

"You pride yourself on being a true American... but in reality you are the seventh descendant of Luigi Regillo, an Italian anti-fascist who in 1928 had to leave his country after trying in vain to assassinate Mussolini, and who at the time of registering with the Ellis Island Immigration Office changed his surname to Regis to be accepted more easily... It is written in your

autobiography, which I have studied carefully in these two days of antechamber. Do you not feel that you owe a debt to your ancestor, to your homeland, to that unfortunate world that needs salvation and cannot give it to itself?" he resumed, getting more and more furious, then he fell silent. *If this doesn't convince him, it's over*, he thought, squinting his eyes.

Helmut Regis was silent for a few seconds, then burst into Homeric laughter: "You're a skilled alliance weaver, boy... have you ever thought of going into politics?" he said after catching his breath, then turned to Asplund and Chawla: "How many Knightmares do you need exactly, with what equipment and within what deadline?"

STAGE VII: DOUBLE SIXES

August 8, 2239 – Republic of Grotia, Villa Rindolph

A group of Russian soldiers were unloading boxes of fruit and vegetables from a truck when the highest-ranking decided to take a break. "Show yourself a little, you... You look good yourself, you know?" he murmured, putting his hands on a servant woman passing by with a basket full of laundry in her hand. "Don't touch me, pig, or I'll call the Lady!" exclaimed the one not at all intimidated.

His fellow soldier tried to dissuade him: "Leave her alone, Ivan... When we return to the city we will find you one of your taste, I pay you in person ...", but the other did not want to hear reasons. "Shut up, greenhorn," he called, turning again to the woman; "Now I'll soften you...". He raised his right hand, preparing to let go of the first slap in a long series, when a young woman six feet tall, whose hair shone in the sun like pure gold, appeared in the vast courtyard: "Stop!" she ordered.

"Who the hell are you?" muttered Ivan, but his two companions grabbed him by the arms and forced him to lie in the mud. "Idiot, do you want all three of us to die?" they said. "Don't you recognize her? She's the First Dame!" Upon hearing that title, the man squinted his eyes in terror, began to tremble like a leaf and hit his head several times on the ground calling "Mercy, mercy!"



"I'll tell you just once," Niki said in a quiet voice behind which the rumble of a thousand thunders could be guessed. "My handmaids, my servants and my valets are not at your disposal; let everyone know! And if any

of you still dare to annoy them, he will be sent to the front with all his battalion. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, ma'am!" the three soldiers exclaimed in unison. "Better for you," the Lady said, turning her back on them and returning to the villa as the soldiers got back to work.

"Did you send all the invitations, Olga?" she asked the trusty headmaid still beaming at the spectacle she had witnessed. "Yes, my lady," she informed her, bowing, "and I have arranged for everything to be ready for the evening of the 15th. By the way, what do you want to be served for lunch today for your father?"

"Nothing, neither for lunch nor dinner," Niki replied, pointing to a contemporary building located a few dozen meters from their residence. "Dr. Rindolph will spend the whole day in his lab, in the company of a 'special guest.'"

"A 'special guest'? Won't he be a prisoner to be interrogated?" murmured Olga Kowalski, covering her mouth with one hand. "Forgive me, I'm too indiscreet..."

"You don't need to apologize, my good Olga," the robot girl assured her. "I don't really know who it is... I just hope my father doesn't have him killed," she sighed, suddenly distressed.

August 5, 2239 – North Atlantic, off the Azores

"I'll never know how to thank you, Atom," Lloyd Asplund was repeating for the umpteenth time as they stood in the mess hall of HMS Victorious. "For the first time since this massacre began, we have a real hope of winning."

"It is not yet time to rejoice, dear my Earl of Pudding," Dr. Raksata warned him. "It will be at least two months before the U.S. Knightmares roll off the assembly line."

"We have to invent something to resist until then," the robot boy brooded, then suddenly: "Of course! Why

didn't I think of it earlier? Dr. Rindolph, he is our lifeline!"

"What do you mean, Atom?" the British nobleman asked him curiously.

"Rindolph designed the Swarm, so he knows all its strengths and weaknesses," he explained. "If we could catch him and make him talk..."

"And how do you plan to convince him, waving your finger and saying 'bad, you were so bad, now apologize'? I made you less naïve, my boy," the woman warned him.

"With the truth serum, my dear Rakshata, even the dead can be made to speak," the earl reminded her as he left the room. He ran across the bridge until he reached the captain and said breathlessly: "We must change our navigation plans, Sir... next stop Kaliningrad"

August 11, 2239 – Republic of Grotia, Villa Rindolph

Niki was inspecting the servants' quarters to make sure her protégés lacked nothing, when she heard her headmaid scolding a small group of children. "Stop throwing a tantrum, act like little men!" she was telling them in a harsh voice.

"No, no and no again!" replied Petruska from the bottom of his eight-year-old. "We will never sing the Russian anthem, much less in front of that monster of the tsar! It's his fault that my mom died!"

Olga Kowalski felt a squeeze in her heart, but her sense of duty prevailed once again. "Don't you want to make this sacrifice even for the Lady? She has been good to you: she has welcomed you into this beautiful and large house, she feeds you, she does not miss anything..." she begged them.

"The Lady pretends to be good, but in reality she is an evil woman," Rebecca said, clutching her rag doll as if it could give her courage. "We all know what the

soldiers call her when they think they are not heard: 'the Tsar's favourite', they call her... and they say it laughing and twisting their faces, like when we talk about whores"

The slap hit her in the face, leaving her dumbfounded. "Why did you beat her? You're bad, Olga, you're bad too!" cried Nino, shielding her little friend.

"Listen to me well," exclaimed the young woman, lifting her skirt in front of the scandalized brats. "These legs were made for me by the Lady's father, because she begged him on my behalf! It is thanks to her that I am no longer a torso lying in a hospital bed; she gave me back life and even more than life, she gave me a reason to live... therefore, if you don't want to do it out of love, you will do it out of force..."

"That's enough, Olga." Niki came out of the dark corner where she had been until then and addressed the children directly: "I don't care what you think of me... but consider this: my power to bring relief to the victims of this war depends on His Majesty's trust in me. That's why I organized a reception: because I want to make a

good impression on him... I intend to take advantage of this opportunity to obtain permission to expand my possessions, so I will have an excellent excuse to give food and shelter to even greater numbers of people. Can you accept this?" she said, holding out her hand to them.

The three stared at her astonished, unsure of what to do; then Petruska murmured "All right... we apologize, Olga, and we will do as the Lady wants... however... now I really want to cry..." "Me too, me too," murmured the other two, their eyes red, swollen from the effort to restrain themselves.

"And then cry, my little ones, cry as much as you want," sighed the robot girl, bending over them and welcoming their sobs into her womb.

"I ask your forgiveness, my lady... I know you have recommended me to treat all your servants with kindness, especially children. But when I hear them say

those horrible things about you, I..." murmured the headmaid as they approached their rooms. She looked at her tenderly.

"The truth, my good Olga, is that you too think about me those horrible things, otherwise they would not cause you so much pain ... Isn't that so?"

I'm like an open book in front of her, Olga thought.

"The truth, my lady, is that I love you..."

"What?" exclaimed the robot girl.

"I love you," she repeated, her cheeks filled with shame, as copious tears rolled out of her eyes. "I love you more than I ever loved anyone, more than my sweet parents and my little brother that bomb took away from me... I love you because you are pure, innocent and good as an angel... That's why I can't understand how you can endure the attentions of that evil being... Between you and him there is the same difference that passes between day and night..."

I always knew I exerted an irresistible fascination on males, humans or robots... but this is the first time I've

received a statement from a woman, Niki thought to herself. "Everything will be fine," she reassured her by wiping her face with one hand and hugging her. "You don't understand what I'm doing now... no one can understand it, but one day you will understand it. Until then, do you want to stay by my side?"

"I do," she promised.

It was just past midnight when the robot girl heard a knock on her door. She got up, went to open it and found four soldiers staring at her with a grim look. "We know that there are little rebels in this house," began one of them. "We can do nothing to you, for you are His Majesty's favourite... but we will take the children and kill them, so they will be an example to others."

At those words Niki's usual haughtiness melted like snow in the sun. "No, please!" she pleaded. "I will give you everything you want: money, gold, jewels..."

Everything, everything, as long as you keep your mouth shut!"

"Money? Gold, jewels?" repeated the soldiers, sneering. "You will give us, of course, and many... but later. Now we want you"

"M-me?!?", she exclaimed, backing away distraught. "B-but I'm a robot, and robots don't have g..."

"And with this? You are still a beautiful woman... Go ahead, undress and let us have fun!"

Niki quivered with indignation, then her defenses gave way. "Okay... but will you spare the lives of those little ones?" she murmured.

"You have our word," said the leader of the quartet. "And now, undress!"

Slowly the robot girl took off her nightgown and dropped it on the floor, then took off her bra and panties; she collapsed and said to them, "Behold, do what you will." She closed her eyes, preparing to feel their lascivious hands searching her body, but nothing happened; she opened her eyes again, and with great

amazement she saw their images merge into one that scrutinized her with infinite pity. "Niki," he told her, then his appearance changed... "A-Atom!" she exclaimed.

"It's just me," he confirmed softly, holding out his hand to her. "I wanted to find out to what extent you had corrupted yourself... and instead I discovered that you remained the Niki of all time, the one who would not hurt a fly and who is always ready to sacrifice herself for a good cause ... Please come away with me, let's go back to fighting for justice side by side as before!"

"Only one thing in me has changed: I don't love you anymore," she replied harshly, covering herself in her chamber robe. "So, if life is dear to you, leave before I call the guards!"

Astro Boy's sweetness turned into blind rage. "It was Dr. Rindolph who brainwashed you, didn't he? But I know the way to awaken you... To extreme evils, extreme remedies" he exclaimed, bending over the robot girl; she punched his chest, but he blocked her arms and

brought his lips close to hers. "No! I don't want to!" shouted Niki.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Olga Kowalski – who was sleeping in the next room, and had been awakened by muffled noises – stepped forward holding a large-caliber pistol. "What have you done to my goddess?" she cried upon seeing that scene; she aimed at his head, fired three shots in quick succession, and the astral boy barely had time to repair his eyes with his arms. Then he pounced on her, grabbed the weapon with his left hand and raised the barrel upwards, and with his right hand he punched her in the stomach; a very weak fist in proportion to his one hundred thousand horsepower, but enough to make her fall gasping. "Don't hurt her!" the robot girl begged him.

"What kind of a guy do you think I am?" he roared before setting off on a rocket. He broke through the ceiling and roof, drew a perfect parable in the sky and launched himself headlong into the laboratory.

"I'll tell you again, Dr. Rindolph: I don't know where Atom is... and even if I knew, I would never tell it. So, if you are not satisfied with my answers, turn the power on and let us end it," Dr. Ochanomizu boldly proclaimed. Suddenly the skylight went to pieces, and a tall, slender figure, with black hair upright on his head like two horns, settled before them.

"It's Atom! Kill him!" shouted Dr. Rindolph to the five soldiers there; they took aim with their laser rifles and fired, but Astro Boy avoided the shots with his superspeed and knocked them out one after the other with kicks and punches, after which he freed his mentor from the coils of the Great Detector and held him to himself full of joy. "I'm glad you're okay, doctor... you recognize me, doesn't you? It's always me, I'm Atom Tetsuwan"

"You've grown up, son... but your voice is unmistakable," murmured the old scientist, heartily

embracing him; then Atom turned to his opponent. "Now you will come with us, Dr. Rindolph... you will have to tell us how to defeat the Swarm, and you will also have to free Niki from the hypnosis which you forced her with to get in league with Budrin..."

"Hypnosis? Ha ha ha!" laughed that one. "You were naïve, Astro Boy: I didn't hypnotize Niki. She hates you of her own free will, because you have never appreciated her as she deserves! And as for the android-kamikazes, know that you can never defeat them, because..."

At that moment one of the droids in question, who had remained motionless until then in a corner, pounced on the Grotian doctor; he tried to escape, but the robot exploded a few meters away from him, and flames and shrapnel enveloped and pierced him, while Astro Boy shielded Ochanomizu with his body.

When the smoke cleared they approached him: he was so badly reduced that he still had little time left. "That ungrateful Budrin... he decided to get me out of the way so I wouldn't reveal Roy's secrets..." he groaned.

"I'm sorry... I didn't want it to end like this," Atom murmured with tears in his eyes.

"You cry for me? I don't deserve it..." he continued in an increasingly feeble voice. "Listen, Atom... when I designed the Swarm, I also conceived a weapon to neutralize it: a computer virus capable of spreading online and knocking out both droids and Russia's entire nuclear arsenal; I called it Medusa, like the monster that petrified with its eyes... I divided the source code into three parts, and inserted them into three microchips that I hid in three female ornaments that I gave to three girls, daughters of three senior members of the Chinese Communist Party: a pearl necklace, a silk and gold hair rubber band, and an emerald bracelet... To take effect, the virus must be injected directly into the central computer located in the basement of Kremlin..."

"Where are those girls? Tell us, please!" pleaded the robot boy.

"Jiang Haoyi knows... he was my favorite assistant, a precocious genius of robotics... now he studies at the

University of Metro City... Find him, Atom, give him this ring of mine with the symbol of *yin* and *yang*, and tell him 'The universe rotates towards the universe', so he will know that I sent you..." and he died.

STAGE VIII: OPERATION RECOVERY

August 15, 2239 – Republic of Grotia, Villa Rindolph

"Was the evening to your liking, Sire?" asked Niki politely to her guest.

"Oh, yes: the food was exquisite, the singers intoned, the servants impeccable... you are an excellent hostess, my sweet Nikochka, your presence alone would be enough to transform even the most humble hovel into a royal palace," murmured the tsar of the Russias, closing the door behind him. "I have to talk to you in private... do you know the story of the founder of my dynasty, Maxim Budrin I?"

"I know what is written in history books and library archives, like everyone else," Niki replied questioningly.

"My ancestor's wife, Svetlana Kabaeva, abandoned him and fled to Switzerland when Western sanctions affected her assets," he continued. "Since then, no Budrin has wanted to marry... but today I have finally found who will be faithful to me for eternity." He pulled

a diamond ring out of his pocket and knelt before her.

"Nikita Rindolova, will you marry me?"

She thought about it for just two seconds. "Yes," she said at last, slipping it into her ring finger. "I'm just sorry my dad can't see us... but I know he would be happy for me. Kiss me," she asked, caressing his face. He stopped her by placing a finger on her lips. "I'll kiss you when we're regularly married, but now I have to think about conducting the next operations. Love is a sacred rite... we can't mix it with anything else."

"I know... but I will burn in waiting," promised the robot girl.

September 5, 2239 – Japan (Area 11), Metro City

"So my master is no longer in this world," Jiang Haoyi murmured, clasping his hands in a silent prayer of suffrage. Astro Boy had come to him after touring the length and breadth of the capital in order to ascertain the

conditions of the population; he had also been to a newspaper library, where he had discovered that Skunk Kusai, his ancient adversary, had escaped once again – the psychological treatment of SGT-2 had not yet been completed – only to be killed three days later in a firefight with the occupiers. "Can you help us?" he asked.

"Xia Zitong, Tang Xuan and Lin Yuan: these are the names of the three girls you are looking for," he said. "All four of us studied in Shanghai, our hometown; and they, like me, are now in Metro City to attend university... I'd say the stars are in your favor, Tetsuwan Atom."

"It's great! Thank you for the information, sir!" exclaimed the robot boy, jumping up with joy. "Now I just have to go into their homes and take the three items..."

"Calm, calm," the young man said, raising his arms. "It's not that simple: unlike me, who am the son of a policeman and a pharmacist, they live in an exclusive

neighborhood, guarded night and day by sentinels armed to the teeth ... not to mention the fact that, if robbed in their home, the occupiers could launch a fierce reprisal against the Japanese. These are jewels received as a gift from a family friend, which they care very much to, so they would not let it fall so easily ... No, we have to convince them to give them up spontaneously."

"You know them well... Are you thinking of anything?" he asked him.

"Actually, yes," smiled the boy. "It is a complex, diabolical and somewhat shameful plan... but it's the only one I can think of right now." He took a small vial and a disposable syringe out of the refrigerator and began to say, "Listen carefully to what you need to do..."

September 6



The girl walked along the sidewalk with grace and levity, unaware of the greedy glances that passers-by young and old threw at her; she wore a pink floral dress that left her shoulders uncovered, a pearl necklace and matching gladiator shoes adorned with a red rose. She entered the apartment building, went up to the third floor and knocked on a door; a child from the apparent age of

eight opened to her. "Good morning," she bowed, "my name is Xia Zitong. Are you Jiang Haoyi's brother?"

"Yes, my name is Kim," he introduced himself and invited her in. "The big brother is in bed with the flu... this night, while he was raving with fever, he spoke of you: 'Xia Zitong, the most beautiful and sweet girl in school', he said..."

"Do you really say? I mean, I didn't think I liked him..." Xia murmured as they entered the room where Jiang Haoyi lay in bed almost unconscious; she touched him on the forehead and exclaimed, "He really has a very high fever... you were right to call me, little one: now I will take care of your brother"

Throughout the morning the girl placed cold water compresses on his forehead and encouraged him to take antipyretics, until the temperature returned to acceptable values. "Are you hungry?" she asked, and when he nodded she smiled and said, "I'm going to get you something in the kitchen."



"Unseasoned rice? Is that all?" she asked Kim in surprise; the child shrugged. "I am little... I don't know how to prepare anything else," replied dispirited. "Are you good at cooking, little sister Zitong?"

"Of course," she replied. "In high school, I had very good grades in home economics, and I was also president of the cooking club." She added to the rice a box of peas, diced ham and two eggs passing them in a pan, then prepared steamed pork ravioli and spring rolls with soy sauce. "Uao! Now I understand why the big brother is in love with you," he exclaimed with stars in his eyes. "Come on, don't make me blush..." said the girl over the moon.

"Everything was very good, Zitong... I'm sure you'll be a great wife," said young Jiang after finishing lunch. She touched his chest hesitantly, then murmured, "You're all sweaty... take off your shirt, I'm going to put it in the washing machine." As she set the washing schedule she brought the garment to her face, inhaled deeply the smell of him and let out a moan of pleasure, then returned to the room.

"Sit here, please," he told her. "Xia Zitong, I don't know how to thank you for taking care of me; you really are an angel... You know, I've loved you since we were in eighth grade, but I never had the courage to declare myself... and now you will surely have a boyfriend more beautiful and richer than me..."

"Stupid... I love you too... I thought I would never hear you say those words..." she murmured hugging and kissing him passionately, then took off her dress and took off his boxers; he unfastened her bra, kissed her on the neck, made her lie down and pulled off her panties, then bent over her...

"It was beautiful, Jiang... I'm happy, and you?" murmured Xia Zitong two hours later. "I too, love... Can I ask

you to give me your pearl necklace as a reminder of this sweet day?"

The young woman hesitated for a moment. "My necklace? It's a gift from a nice friend of my father, I'm very fond of her... but for you I would do this and more," she finally said, placing it in his hand.

September 7

"Good morning, baby: I am Tang Xuan, a fellow student of Jiang Haoyi" showed up a tall and athletic girl wearing a blue tanktop and shorts with white sneakers and having her hair gathered in a very long ponytail. "On the phone you told me that your brother has the flu..."



"She raved all night," Jiang Kim confirmed disconsolately, accompanying her down the corridor. "He was talking about you, little sister... he said, 'One more effort, Tang, a few more meters, the finish line is near...'"

"He was remembering the moment I won the eight-hundred-meter race in the twelfth grade," she murmured, confused and happy. "That year, at the interregional championships, I won the gold medal in all disciplines of the

heptathlon... I'm surprised, I thought I was too unfeminine for him..."



"Did you enjoy lunch?" she asked her fellow student when he had finished eating; she had cooked rice noodles with vegetables, almond chicken and a *hotpot* with mushrooms, spinach and beef. "Very... I've always known that you're as good at cooking as you are on the athletic field," he praised her. "Take off your shirt, I'll put it in the washing machine and I'll get you a clean one," she urged him, and as she set up the washing program, after making sure little Kim wasn't around, she inhaled the smell of his sweat deeply and blushed.

As she handed him the garment, he grabbed her by the arm and drew her to him: "Tang Xuan, I think of you day and night... I..."

"Shut up," she murmured kissing him; she pushed him on the mattress and pulled off his boxers, then took off her tanktop, took off her shorts and loosened her hair...

"I'm sorry to have to leave you so soon... but I have to go train," she said three hours later, getting dressed. "Don't worry, my love... ah, can I ask you a favor? Would you give me your rubber band, as a pledge of our union?"

"I didn't make you so romantic, Jiang Haoyi... You know, a funny old friend of my father gave it to me, but with you it will be in good hands," she smiled, handing it to him.

September 8

"Welcome, Miss: I am Jiang Kim, Jiang Haoyi's brother. Are you Lin Yuan?" the child asked, opening the door.



"It's just me," confirmed a young albino and bespectacled woman wearing a green and yellow dress. "Is your brother very sick?" she inquired worriedly.

"Yes," he admitted, leading the way. "He has a horse fever: think that he spent all night invoking your name ... he said you're the most beautiful and smartest girl he has ever known..."

"Really?" she murmured, bringing her hands to her face. "I thought I was invisible to his eyes..."

"Did you say anything, little sister?" the little boy asked. "No, nothing... Now I'll take care of your brother," said the embarrassed girl.

She spent the whole morning washing his back and chest with a sponge soaked in cold water, then prepared seafood noodles, Peking duck – her specialty – and a rich fish soup. "Everything was good, my sweet Yuan," the boy said when they finished.

"I'm going to put your shirt in the washing machine and I'll be right back," she said; she set the washing schedule, opened the hatch, and before putting on the sweaty garment she brought it to her face, breathing in the smell and moaning with pleasure. She didn't know that Atom Tetsuwan, in his illusory disguise, was

watching her stealthily. *At school I studied that the pheromones contained in male sweat are strongly aphrodisiacs, and can even synchronize the hormonal cycle of a group of women who breathe it at the same time... but moving from theory to practice is quite another thing, he reflected in amazement.*



"Lin Yuan," murmured Jiang Haoyi stroking her hand, "I always thought you were the smartest and

sweetest girl in the world... would you like to be my life partner?"

"Yes, I do," said the girl, putting her glasses on the bedside table, then took off her dress and lay down on the bed...

"Now that we are a couple," said the boy four hours later, "I would like from you a token of love: your emerald bracelet... I promise you that I will take great care of it, and I will never take it off..."

"How cute you are... of course," exclaimed Lin Yuan, pulling it off her wrist. "A family friend gave it to me, begging me never to part with it... but I gladly give it to you, in exchange for your heart" and kissed him once more.

"I confirm: it was a diabolical and shameful plan ... but effective," Astro Boy said after she left. "I'll get back on our submarine in two hours... How can I repay you, Mr. Jiang? If you want to leave the country, we can give you a ride to India or South Africa: there a roboticist like you would be of great help..."

"Sorry, but I like the quiet life," he declined while injecting himself with an antiviral. "Not everyone is born a lionheart... In any case, I wish you success."



STAGE IX: MOTIONS IN THE EMPIRE

September 25, 2239 – Republic of Grotia, Villa Rindolph

That morning Niki wore her usual and most beloved outfit: a red headband with small pearls and a red gem in the center, and a red long-sleeved dress, with a white apron and red slippers. "I have gathered you together to make an important announcement," she began, addressing her numerous servants. "As you know, on October 13 I will marry His Majesty the Tsar of All Russias, so tonight I will move to Moscow for the preparations of the ceremony. As a prenuptial gift, His Majesty granted me the power to free slaves... power that I will exercise now: from this moment you are all free people"

A buzz rose in the large hall, but the robot girl continued unperturbed. "In half an hour, buses will arrive here: they will take you to Minsk airport. There each of you will receive new documents, an expatriation visa for the United States of America and one hundred thousand dollars. Please treasure your freedom... Goodbye,

goodbye and thank you for everything," she concluded with a deep bow.

9/30/18



"My lady... Is it therefore for our good that you have accepted this unjust marriage?" murmured Olga Kowalski, bursting into tears; the others were crying too, from children to adult men. "You have sacrificed your life,

your happiness and your honor for us, and you even thank us? We can never thank you enough..."

"Things are not as simple as they appear, my good Olga," said the robot girl, hugging her tenderly and stroking her hair. "I would have married the tsar with or without you... but I'm glad I was helpful, even if it was like pouring a teaspoon of sugar into an ocean of suffering."

"You have done everything in your power, Mrs. Nikita, so you have nothing to reproach yourself," a Basque elder interjected. "A teaspoon of sugar won't make the ocean sweet, but it certainly makes it infinitely less salty"

"You are, and always will be, the best mistress that a humble servant like me can ever have," proclaimed the young Pole girl.

"You are nobody's servant... You were born free, and freely you must live and love," she corrected her. "And I'm nobody's mistress: I'm just a robot, a robot called Niki."

"So, thank you, Niki," Olga murmured, kissing her hand.

October 2, 2239 – Union of South Africa, Cape Town, Dock 4

"Got it right, Atom? When you are in the mainframe room you just have to position yourself in front of a USB socket, raise your right arm, and the cable will click out of your wrist connecting to it; the inoculation of the virus will start automatically... Stay plugged in for at least sixty seconds, after which the system will start collapsing," Lloyd Asplund explained for the umpteenth time.

"I understood very well, thank you," confirmed Astro Boy as he prepared to board the submarine at anchor. "Tell me, when this war is over, Budrin and his loyalists will be tried and executed?"

"Most likely, yes," the earl confirmed. "It will be a trial similar to the one that took place at the end of the

Second World War against the Nazi hierarchs, or like the one against the Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein ... all the servants of the tsar who have not committed suicide in the meantime will have to pay for their crimes."

"Niki too?" he insisted, in a trembling voice.

"It's inevitable," Dr. Rakshata replied. "She followed him in the hour of triumph, she will follow him even in defeat"

"Without her, my life will no longer have any meaning... so I'll kill her myself, and then I'll kill myself by destroying my AI with a laser shot," swore the robot boy with his right hand on his chest. "If the world needs a new Astro Boy, you can always build it using my project, so it will have the same strength and powers as me"

"But it will never have your big heart, Atomu-sama," Kagari Savitri proclaimed with emotion, and everyone bowed before him to pay his last respects.

October 12, 2239, 11.15 am – Union of South Africa, Johannesburg, Royal Army Joint Study Centre

"Earl Lloyd, a group of ten... no, twelve Swarm has broken through the last line of defense and is heading here! Arrival time: forty-four seconds," exclaimed Cecile Croomy, distraught.

"Where are Thompson and Steiner?" asked the British nobleman from the cockpit.



"They are defending residential neighborhoods," was the reply. "Then it's over," murmured his head, making the sign of the cross.

An explosion shook the compound and broke through the roof, and a large steel beam fell towards Dr.

Chawla. "Rakshata! No!" cried the earl, throwing himself on top of her and shielding her with his own body.

When he awoke, the first thing he saw was her tearful face. "What happened?" he murmured.

"A miracle," replied his assistant as she stood at the foot of the bed. "When it looked like they were going to overwhelm us, the Americans finally arrived... three thousand Knightmares *made in the USA* armed with mass hadronic cannons. You should have seen them, they shot down all the android-kamikazes in less than a minute! Without the protection of the Swarm the Russians had to retreat, and now they are barricaded in Khartoum, but they are surrendering little by little... Well, now I think it's better to leave you alone for a while" and left the room.

"You're stupid... a big, big stupid," the doctor exclaimed, punching his chest. "How could you risk your life for someone who mocks you at all times?" "You were beautiful..." sighed the earl. "What?" she murmured.

"We were five years old; it was our first day of school, and you wore a fiery red *sari* edged with gold... That's when I fell in love with you... I waited until I came of age to declare myself; that day I came to you with a large bouquet of red roses, but you threw it to the ground shouting 'Go to hell!' and ran away in tears... then I realized that I had no hope... and in fact in these years I have seen you flirting with many men..."

"You didn't understand anything, neither then nor after," the woman told him, taking his face in her hands. "That day I was upset because my mother had just told me her intention to divorce and remarry: she always had bad timing ... and what I had in recent years were simple 'snogs' to make you jealous ... Nothing but 'Earl of Pudding': you are the only real man in my life..." and kissed him.

October 12, 2239, 7.30 pm – Between Moscow and Beijing



"Those damn *Yankees* have abandoned neutrality... we will have to teach them a hard lesson, but to do so we need you to increase the production of the Roys and invade the Indian subcontinent, so as to overwhelm the British defenses", exclaimed the tsar of all the Russias frowning in front of the holographic screen.

"Our assembly lines are already at their maximum, Budrin" objected Li Tsiao-tung in connection from the Forbidden City, "and as for invading the Raj, it is not in

our strategic interests: after reconquering Taiwan our historical territory is complete, we do not have expansionist aims but only commercial"

"I knew you would answer like this... It means that your power apparatus needs to be *aligned*," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked another Politburo member anxiously, when the door suddenly opened and a group of heavily armed Russians entered, accompanied by three explosive droids. "You will be taken to Moscow to be executed after my wedding, but you will not be alone: your children will join you soon," he sneered and closed the communication, as CCP leaders began to understand that a tyrant can never be trusted...

October 13, 2239, 8.00 am – Japan (Area 11), Metro City

Xia Zitong hardly lifted her face from the toilet and wiped herself with a towel: those morning nauseas were

becoming more and more annoying, and he had not been heard anymore... The bell rang several times: "I'm coming, I'm coming!" she exclaimed as she went to open it. She was a Caucasian girl from the apparent age of twelve who held a case for Amati violins. "I'm lost," she whipped in Mandarin, "could you call the police, please? I want my dad..."

She must be the daughter of a diplomat... "Of course, little one... come in in the meantime. Are you hungry?" she said, smiling at her. At that moment, four grim looking Russian soldiers stood in front of her. "Xia Zitong, you are under arrest: follow us without resistance, or we will kill you immediately!" announced the commander.

"What do we do with this brat, Captain? Shall we take her away too?" asked one of the soldiers. "Of course: one more, one less..." he was answering, when the brat hit him in the face with the heavy case killing him instantly; then she opened it, pulled out a P90 machine gun and began shooting madly at the other soldiers

riddling them with bullets; the last one barely had time to plant a blow in her right shoulder before being mowed. "Here Henrietta, the trout is in the oven," she said in a microcommunicator attached to his ear.



The young Xia was speechless. "You're losing blood... Does it hurt you?" she murmured.

"I don't feel pain... and the bleeding will soon stop. Apart from the brain, the rest of my body is bionic," the little girl assured her. "Now follow me without making a fuss"

They took to the streets; Henrietta smashed through the window of a car, opened the door and seated Xia in the back, then drove and plunged into the chaotic traffic of Metro City.

The door crashed, and three soldiers broke into Tang Xuan's home shouting, "You're under arrest!" *Damn! Just now that I am not feeling well*, she cursed silently; she tried to escape, but one of them grabbed her by the arm and twisted it behind her back causing her to scream in pain. "Be good, whore!" they told her.

As they dragged her out of her home, a muffled noise was heard, and the head of the first of them exploded like a balloon. "They shoot at us!" shouted another, pulling out his gun, but fell soon after; a girl about fifteen with blonde hair and amber skin lashed out at the third soldier and pierced him in the abdomen with the

bayonet of a rifle as long as her, then spoke in a micro-communicator: "Here Triela, the salmon is in the oven"



"Salmon to whom?" exclaimed the young Chinese woman, but she stopped her with an imperious nod. "Now your life depends on me. Shut up and follow me," she told her.

Once on the street, Triela broke the lock of a car with a penknife, got Tang into the back and told her to crouch in the back seats, and drove away.

They left the capital and slipped into a country lane; after ten minutes they saw a car in front of them. "They found us!" exclaimed Tang Xuan, fearfully. "Don't worry, she's on our side," the unknown savior assured her, continuing to drive.

Lin Yuan was leaving her home when she found the road blocked by two soldiers. "You are under arrest by order of His Majesty Maxim Budrin VII," they told her.

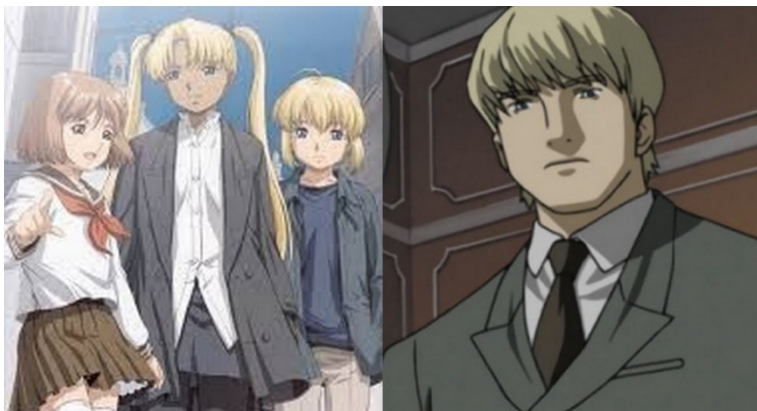
"My father fell out of favor, didn't he? I knew it would happen, sooner or later..." the young woman sighed, bringing a hand to her belly. Suddenly two shots were heard, and the Russian military fell without even realizing they were dying. She looked around: a blonde boy dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and a brown suit came out from behind a car holding a sniper rifle, approached her and said in a high-pitched voice in a microcommunicator: "Here Rico, the mullet is in the oven"



"But you... are you a boy or a girl?" asked Lin Yuan, adjusting her glasses on her nose. "I wear men's clothes because they're more practical, but I'm a girl like you," smiled the other. "Now get in the car and stay down"

Once out of the city they joined two other cars, traveled about fifty kilometers in single file and stopped in front of a house located on top of a hill; inside they found waiting for them a tall and robust man with blonde hair and another male figure wrapped in a black cloak and with a scar on his face. "Henrietta reporting, sir: mission accomplished" said the first puppet in English; "Triela reporting, sir: mission accomplished" added the dark-skinned blonde; "Rico reporting, sir: mission

accomplished," concluded the tomboy. "Good... very good," John Cross replied smugly.



"Are you British? What do you want from us?" asked Xia Zitong.

"From this moment you are under the protection of the government of the United States," replied the man, "and you will remain like this until the legitimate government of this country has been reconstituted"; then he turned to the host: "I thank you for your hospitality, Dr. Black Jack, and I assure you that you will be adequately rewarded."

"I would be amazed otherwise," snorted the unlicensed surgeon. "Even if I don't have to use the scalpel

for me this is a full-blown operation, and I only work for those who pay me the right amount, you know"



"Have I understood correctly? Have the Americans allied with the Japanese against the Russians?" reflected Lin Yuan. "Why the three of us? What's special about us?" asked Tang Xuan. "We have received an explicit request from a mutual acquaintance of yours: Mr. Jiang Haoyi," replied the American, lighting a cigarette and walking away.

"Jiang Haoyi? How tender... then he remembered his girlfriend!" exclaimed Xia Zitong, her heart-shaped eyes. "Hey, cute, look you're wrong: Jiang Haoyi is *my* boyfriend! I looked after him when he had a fever, I

cooked for him, and then we joined our bodies and souls," Tang Xuan defiantly replied. "Whaaat? It's not possible... He made love to me, and I'm pregnant now..." resumed the first; "But what do you say? I'm expecting a child from Jiang..." insisted the second one.

"I took care of him on September eight, I remember it well," Lin Yuan said. "After having lunch together, I became his..." "I was with him on seven," Tang Xuan murmured astonished. "I the six," Xia Zitong said.

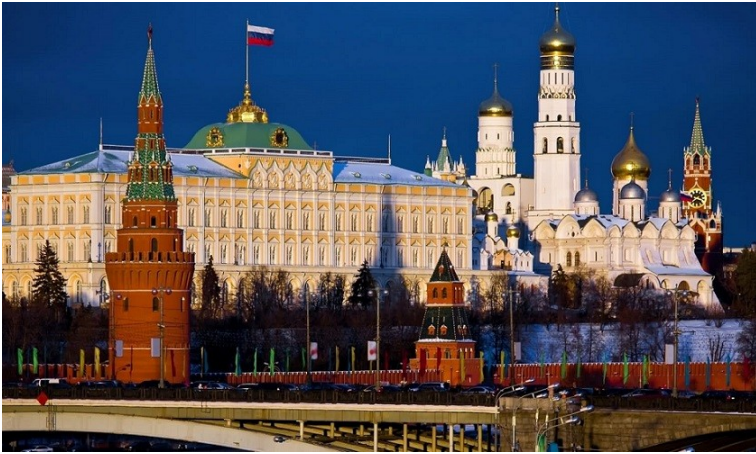
The three women looked at each other, then Tang Xuan shouted, "Where is that bastard? I want to choke him with my hands!" and threw herself against the door, but was restrained by two marines; "Take your hands off me, let me pass!" she shouted in vain. "Oh, Jiang, how could you? If you had betrayed me once, I would have forgiven you, but not twice..." muttered young Xia. "It was too good to be true," Lin Yuan sighed.

"Double the surveillance on the entire perimeter, and notify me immediately if messages come from

Washington," John Cross ordered his attendant. "We hope to survive until tomorrow"

STAGE X: ORANGE BLOSSOM

October 13, 2239, 5.00 pm – Moscow, basement of Kremlin



"Who is there?" exclaimed the two soldiers, hearing footsteps in the corridor, then relaxed: it was the Patriarch of All Russias, dressed majestically and with a silver crosier in his right hand, accompanied by a beardless cleric carrying a silver censer.

"Children of the Fatherland, bow down to receive the blessing!" he said in a powerful voice, and the two immediately obeyed, kneeling one on his right and the

other on his left. Pavel placed his hands on their heads and made them collide with force; he laid them on the floor, then the priest and the cleric disappeared and Atom Tetsuwan destroyed the control panel with a laser shot by opening the heavy metal portal.

He entered the hall plunged into darkness and turned on the spotlights placed in his eyes, but suddenly he found himself a prisoner in an impenetrable force field. "Damn!" he shouted, banging his fists against the electromagnetic wall.

Dozens of lights came on, and camera operators came in with shoulder cameras and jimmy-jibs *made in China*. "You have fallen into my trap, just as your ex-girlfriend had predicted," the tsar grinned as he entered, followed by the real Pavel and the First Dame in an elegant white dress with a long train, in her hands a bouquet of white roses. "Remember your promise, Maxim," she said. "He must remain alive to be a witness at our wedding... after that, you can do whatever you want with it."

"You have to hate him very much, to want to humiliate him like this... I'll grant you," he confirmed.

"Budrin, damn killer!" shouted Astro Boy. "You'll never win... and even if you manage to conquer the whole world, sooner or later you will have to die, and you will not be able to take anything to your grave, not even this woman you now say you love..."

"You're poor naïve, Atom," Budrin replied as he approached his prison. "You don't understand... no one, not even Rindolph who was a genius, ever came close to the truth... I will never die, because I have existed for two hundred years and I will continue to exist forever!"

"Are you crazy? No human being can live that long... unless..." murmured the astral boy.

"Stupid, look at me! Look at me all! Ha ha ha ha!" laughed the tsar, spreading his arms and clenching his jaws; his clothes caught fire, his skin melted like wax revealing a shimmering body of titanium steel. Atom was stunned: "You... You're a robot!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," admitted the tyrant. "I couldn't let the passage of time defeat me... so, thanks to the money and technology of the Chinese, the scientists at my service made a copy of my mind and transferred it to an AI. This great computer is just a conduit: I control all the Roy's droids, and also the strategic arsenal. I, Maxim Maximovich Budrin, the one, the only and the inescapable!" Then he turned to Niki: "Now that you know who I really am, do you still want to marry me?"

"Whether you're human or robot, my feelings don't change," she replied unperturbed. "Besides, I've always wanted to ride with a winner"

When he heard those words, the robot boy was stoned. *It is not possible!* he thought. *Or is it?* "You won... without Niki, my life no longer has meaning," he murmured, slumping and bursting into sobs. "Well... let's proceed, Your Eminence," Budrin exulted to the Patriarch.

"No!" he shouted, pointing his index finger at the tsar. "I served you faithfully because I believed you were

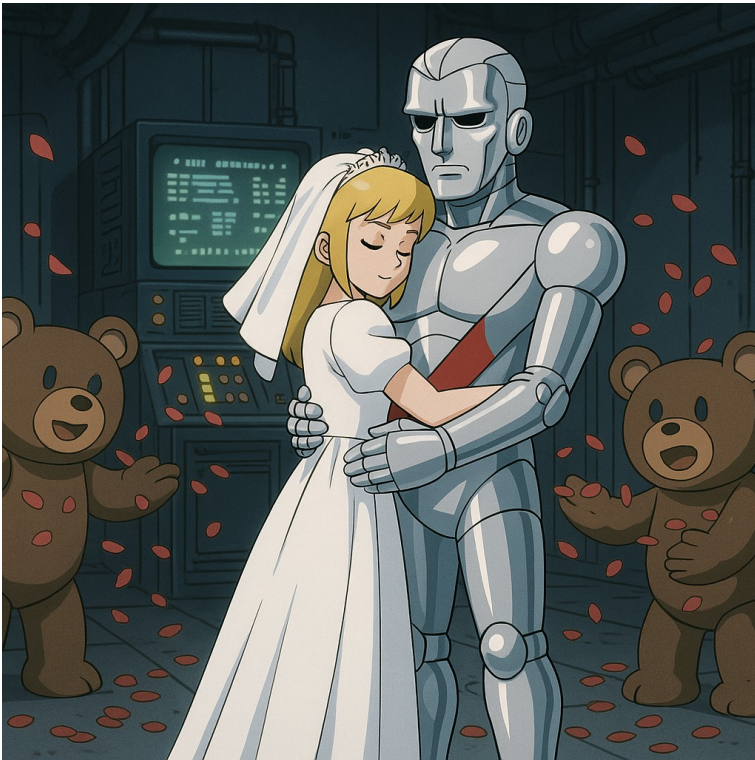
a man of flesh and blood, and that you wanted to save the people from the technology and poisons of the West; for this reason, I have blessed your killing machines and I have also consented to this charade of marriage without carnal conjunction, but now that I know that you are a monster, I will no longer obey you! I, Pavel, Patriarch of All Russias, cast anathema upon you, and release every son of Holy Russia from the obligation of obedience to you!"



"Too bad for you," hissed the despot; two droids with the faces of Misha Bear raised their rifles towards him and fired and killed him instantly. "As supreme head of the Empire I also proclaim myself head of the Church, so I myself will celebrate my wedding. And you, keep

filming!" he barked at the frightened technicians. "I, Maxim Maximovich Budrin, want to marry Nikita Rindolova. Nikita Rindolova, do you want to marry the present Maxim Maximovich Budrin?"

"I do," Niki replied.



"I declare that we are now husband and wife... and at last I can kiss my bride," said the one triumphantly, approaching; she wrapped her around his neck with her

white arms and kissed him. They remained united for a minute, sixty very long seconds during which the androids threw rose petals around and everyone fell silent, because there was nothing more to say; then sparks and black smoke began to sprout from the mainframe, as alarm sirens went off one after another.



"What's going on? I lost control of the nuclear arsenal... and now Roy too!" shouted Budrin as the force

field holding Astro Boy captive dissolved. The distraught tyrant brought his hands to his head, but these came off falling to the ground in a thousand fragments; "Nikochka... you also betrayed me..." he murmured, then it was but a pile of dust.

"How ironic," Niki said sadly, approaching the remains of the former ruler of Eurasia. "The most evil and ruthless person in history, sacked by the oldest desire in the world: to love and be loved"; then she began to sing a poignant song: *"I need so much love, oh my God/Of a woman, a man and a dog/Love of God, ooh ooh ooh/There's so much need for love in this world, oh my God/Oh my God/Ooh my God"* and after finishing she remained silent.

Atom bypassed the forever inert droids and took a step towards her. "When I heard you say that phrase, I remembered that you had used it during a secret mission, in which you had infiltrated a gang of truck thieves ... So, I decided to play the game. As you can see, I too can lie well when I want"

"Compared to me you are still an amateur, my dear Atom," she replied smiling; she took off her wedding dress, revealing her usual outfit underneath, and in turn took a step towards the robot boy. "No one has ever been seen sobbing like a child without shedding a tear... fortunately for us Budrin was distracted by Pavel, peace be with his soul, otherwise we would have seen it bad"

"How did you know he was a robot?" he asked her, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Americans told me," explained the robot girl. "When the plane that was taking us to the United States crossed the meridian of the date change, the androids chasing us stopped working and fell into the ocean like lamps... at that moment we realized that they had erected a barrier of some kind to protect their continent. So, when we landed, I asked to talk face-to-face with their president, and together we agreed on the 'Stay Behind' operation: I would have to infiltrate behind enemy lines, earn Budrin's trust, seduce him with my charm to the point of inoculating him with my sweet poison"



"So, Americans knew everything... but for how long? And why didn't they intervene sooner?" he asked indignantly.

"They've always known," Niki replied. "They had also built a faithful copy of the Great Lie Detector, which I trained for forty days in a row with; but, faithful to their line of non-intervention, they limited themselves to observing from afar the technological advancement of the Empire and setting up countermeasures, thanks to the information collected by infiltrators ..."

"Jiang Haoyi?" he ventured.

"He and many others before him," the robot girl confirmed. "Their goal was to maintain the balance between East and West indefinitely, but Budrin's boundless ambition forced them to take a clear stand, for the first time after two hundred years of isolationism."

"That Regis is just a devil of a man," the astral boy noted. Another step of him, one step for her... "But why didn't you tell me anything? I could have helped you..."



"At first we thought we had lost you forever... Then, when I saw you again, I realized that, in order to deceive the tyrant and all his henchmen, I had to deceive you too, as I had already done with my closest friends. So, that

night in Versailles, I decided on the spot to denounce you, and knowing that you would try to take me away with you, I made you fall out of a window so that you could escape. I was only honest that I had forgiven Dr. Rindolph, everything else was just a noble lie... but what I performed with you was the most painful play of my life..." murmured the robot girl shrugging.

"Oh, Niki!" exclaimed Astro Boy, taking one last step and hugging her. "Niki Tenma" he then said "I have no villas and castles to give you, I do not even have a ring ready to put on your finger ... I don't know if it's in good taste to tell you now, and I can't even kiss you, until they remove Medusa from your AI... and I know that my instinct to protect you will clash again and again with your desire to stand by me as an equal, but I ask you anyway: do you want to marry the present Atom Tetsuwan?"

"I do," she said softly, reciprocating the embrace. "And you, Atom Tetsuwan, want to marry the present

Niki Tenma, proud feminist and unrepentant manipulator?"

"I do," he replied, girding her knees and lifting her up, as the cameramen erupted in thunderous applause. "You were great, guys!" the director told them through his headphones from the state TV headquarters. "We made the scoop of the millennium!"



July 8, 2240, Liberation Day – Japan, Metro City, Peace Park

By that day Atom and Niki had become planetary celebrities; after many rejected offers, an American record company had paid two billion dollars cash to buy the rights to the song sung by the robot girl, and she had used them to set up a foundation dedicated to the care and psychophysical rehabilitation of the mutilated and disabled of war with the help of the Asplunds. ""Some malignant had questioned the foundation was named after Vlad Rindolph ... don't you find it inappropriate that the name of the designer of the explosive droids, which have caused so many victims, is associated with your charitable work? In the light of the decisive contribution that you and your husband made to the success of the conflict, you could have called it the 'Atom & Niki Tenma Foundation'..." the journalist asked, handing her the microphone.

"*Au contraire*," the robot girl calmly said. "When I saw him masterfully operate on a young woman with amputated legs, I realized that he had studied medicine. I examined his file at the Grotian Ministry of War, and discovered that he had served as a military surgeon during the conflicts in Central Asia: he had devoted himself to robotics because he could no longer stand the sight of blood and mangled bodies... This is why I wanted to name the foundation after Dr. Rindolph: so that the good he did in life, however little it may be, may not be buried with his bones, but alive and bring forth fruit."

While walking through the park they met Inspector Tawashi: he and Chief Nakamura had been placed on forced leave during the occupation, but had now returned to their old duties. "Hello Atom, hello to you Niki," he greeted them; the events of the last three years had made him more jovial.

"Hello, Inspector," Niki said. "I bring you the greetings of Giuseppe Napoli, the Italian writer: you remember him, don't you? He wrote me a long email, in which

he says that the film based on his book has had a great success with critics and audiences; he settled in a residence in Los Angeles, then one day he met Janine, the production secretary who lived downstairs, on the stairs. They started dating, and three months ago they got married."

"Secretaries with glasses always have their charm," the policeman observed. "Well, now I have to take care of the security of the festivities... Good evening"

"Mr. Jiang!" exclaimed Astro Boy, noticing a familiar figure. "How long have we not seen each other... but why is you wearing that raincoat and sunglasses?"

"Ssst, for heaven's sake! You didn't see me, didn't you?" whispered Jiang Haoyi as he looked around, when a high-pitched female voice paralyzed him. "Xi-Xia Zitong, what a good wind..." he murmured embarrassedly.

"Storm wind!" she cried, handing him a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. "This baby is your son, he was born a month ago!"

"This sissy is your daughter, too, you damn serial ejaculator... I named her Huan Dan, after your mother," Tang Xuan added as she approached them.

"And Xiao Ming and Xiao Hong are your children, too," Lin Yuan interjected, showing two heterozygous twins. "You can't keep keeping your foot in three shoes, Jiang Haoyi... when will you assume your responsibilities?"



"I mean, choose just one of the three of us!" they shouted in chorus as the two robots walked away in a sly. "Who do you think he will choose in the end?" Niki asked her husband.

"I don't know," Atom replied amused, embracing her. "I only know that I chose you... and I will continue to choose you every day and every night, forever. And you, my love?"

"I too... forever," she confirmed, kissing him passionately as the setting sun gilded their faces and bodies. One child, one of the four sons of a Yokohama truck driver on vacation with his family, shouted excitedly: "Daddy, Daddy, look! They're Atom and Niki, the famous ones on TV!"

"Really you're wrong, my little one," his father smiled at him. "They are two young people who look like them... imagine if the real ones are so beautiful!"

What does it mean " I will make him an help in front of him"? If the man deserves it, the

*woman will be a help to him; but if he doesn't
deserve it, she'll be against him.*

(Talmud)

END (really, this time)



INDEX

Warning	III
<i>Who's Who</i> : Brief guide	
to the characters of "Tetsuwan Atom"	VII
Stage I: Farewell to Yesterday's World	1
Stage II: Awakening in the Brave New World	13
Stage III: A Harrowing Revelation	21
Stage IV: Great party at the court of France	27
Stage V: <i>Niki Homini Dea</i>	47
Stage VI: The Weaver and the Shepherdess	63
Stage VII: Double Sixes	81
Stage VIII: Operation Recovery	99
Stage IX: Motions in the Empire	117
Stage X: Orange blossom	137

I hope you enjoyed this work.

If you want, you can leave your comment at this mail:

mail@stefano-carloni.it