

SpaceHighway

The Awakened

~ Extra Chapter ~

A Day in the Museum

~ A Thousand Years of History ~

“Ah, Aia?”

“Yes, Kira?”

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. Wanna go somewhere?”

“Yeah, I want to learn more about those past thousand years... What I’ve missed...”

“Oh~ Sure. We can visit the museum tomorrow. It’s admission free on Saturdays...”

“Perfect.”

.

We reach the humongous museum...

“What do you want to see?” asks Aia.

“Ugh~ Difficult to say... I’ve got so many uncertainties...”

“I figure... Let’s go there first,” she points at the digital map of the museum, “history...”

We walk through the vast halls and go, obviously, straight to the twenty-first century.

“Let’s see...” Aia ponders, “you’ve got cryopreserved in the year twenty-twelve. There’s nothing significant in the next few scores of years... Until the year twenty-one hundred-something. Well, besides the usual stuff: overthrowing of despots, local wars, political intrigues and such...”

“What happened there?” I ask intrigued.

“Humanity began to fixate themselves on developing the immersive cyberspace.”

“Oh~”

“For three generations, humanity threw itself completely into virtualizing anything surrounding them, effectively creating a parallel virtual world. Up to the point that they forgot about their own planet... Humans became partly machines... Not really like cyborgs, but in a metaphorical way... When they became aware of it, they tried to fix it, for the worse...” She sighs. “They already depended too much on the cyber-network, then called Metaverse. To solve this dilemma, they developed a network of permanent connection, until they have developed the cyberbrain... implants allowing anyone to connect to the net, now called Cyberspace, wherever they are, without any terminal.”

“Wow... seems similar to an anime I’ve watched as a kid...”

“Oh... Well, it didn’t help... They had a lot of problems with cyberterrorism... And more in the cyber-developed countries. It seems that cyberbrains of important people, like politicians, were hacked and hijacked. Even tho, they continued with its development. But...” I gasp looking at an exhibited cyberbrain. “The huge infrastructure was ridden with bugs and errors. In their eagerness to create and expand it the fastest way possible, they took too many shortcuts. More and more bugs amounted. They made a whole country to bug-hunt and fix them. But they did not find the most critical one... A minuscule but huge, catastrophic error...”



Cyberbrain model ZG-37-C by AMTEL (1)

“What was it?” I ask her intrigued.

Aia keeps on reading the guide.

“A number, it seems... it’s not possible to verify... But on January the first of the year twenty-four hundred, one single server in Oceania, the first changing the date, made a devastating calculation... A chain reaction followed, and all interconnected systems burnt out, some even literally...”

“Wo—wow...”

“Chaos arose... Terrestrial and air transports lost their guidance systems... and most crashed...”

“No fuck...”

“The death toll reached several millions, the numbers were even higher of those whose consciousness was lost in the burnt-out servers, rendering them into soulless bodies.”

“No way...”

“Politicians escalated the problem, and countries blamed each other for what happened, even accused some of terrorism, cyber-genocide and mass murders... It just escalated further, and the Third World War broke out...”

“Im—impressive...”

“The Third World War kept on for over a hundred fifty years...” Aia looks at me sighing. “It would take a long time to go through the known details...”

“Oh, yeah, just the most important parts, I don’t need a master’s degree in history...” I sigh too.

“Oh, you...” she giggles, then goes on, “Let’s see... Several countries began to invade others... The United States of America invaded both Canada and Mexico. Russia tried to conquer Europe but was forced back. China declared war on all neighboring countries, except on Russia. Of course, all this took many years, I’m heavily recapping...” she sighs. I also sigh as she goes on, “The Asian Coalition was formed by most Asian countries to defend themselves from China. All South American countries agreed on a mutual assistance pact to defend themselves against any attack from the North. All Arabian and African countries signed a treaty and declare themselves neutral.”

“Fuck me...”

“When Europe drove the Russian invasion back, up to the Ural mountain range, Russia signed a nonaggression pact with China, and they opened their territories for troop movements. China invaded India, while Russia did the same with Pakistan and commenced an attack on Iran...”

I observe a huge digital world map displaying the changes while Aia relates the recap...

“An atomic bomb destroyed Moscow under siege, including the besieging force. No country or faction took responsibility. Russia broke the signed treaty with China, accusing it of treason and started an invasion, forcing an atomic war between the two countries...”

“No way...”

“Meanwhile, the League of Oceania allied with the Asian Coalition. They were able to repel an invasion force from the United States. North and South America finally signed a nonaggression treaty. India and its neighboring countries entered the Asian Coalition and drove the Russian and Chinese forces out...”

“The Third World War became a war of attrition...” she sighs. “After a bit more than a hundred and fifty years, finally, a global peace treaty was signed in Nairobi, Kenya, in twenty-five hundred fifty-one.”

“Wow... What was the aftermath? How did the world look like?”

“Literally devastated... Half north Asia, meaning, part of Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and a greater part of China was a nuclear inferno... Completely irradiated, and practically inhabitable in most of its parts.”

“No way...”

“The continents and countries kept neutral and out of the war, mainly those from Africa and South America, began to aide and reconstruct the rest.” I swallow empty. “Almost two hundred years were needed to recover. Many countries joined together, others divided... Languages began to fuse together during the whole conflict. New peace-embracing religions began to sprout, replacing the old ones which were obliterated by their own beliefs... After the bloody war, the world’s population was reduced to a mere tenth...”

“A tenth?”

“Yes... it’s believed so... and it doesn’t account for the lives lost when the Cyberspace collapsed. But nobody is really sure about it...”

“Seems like the bad guys are the US, Russia, and China... Is this data reliable?”

“Uh~ Honestly, it’s not completely clear... During the war, there were many smaller factions, guerrillas, terrorists, and religious fanatics waging their war.”

“Basically, the good guys were Africa, South America, and the Arabian states...” I say pensive.

“Yeah... That’s sure. Although, it seems that there were also terrorist groups and religious fanatics waging their war inside those areas and their countries. But, generally, we have to take into account that most digital archives and data were lost during the war. After the cyberspace and its global network collapsed, there was no reliable data management. Even the satellites were useless...”

“Wow... But they were able to drop atomic bombs...”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “It’s said that during the war, all war museums were raided and its arms, even primitive ones, were used...”

“Fuck me...”

“Several countries were able to recover faster than others after the CA-day, the Cyber-Apocalypse, and prepared themselves for war. Either because it was tradition, politics, or the lack of access to the global network.”

“Wow... then... wasn’t Africa...”

“Yeah,” she nods, “during the cyberspace development, Africa and part of South America was left behind by the so-called cyber-developed countries.”

“And were the least affected...”

“Yeah. During the war, they developed themselves into strong, autonomous countries and continents, up to be at the same level as the rest of the world from before the war. The then so-called third world didn’t exist anymore, nor did the first world... In fact, there was no proper world, not anymore...”

I blink astonished...

“And I survived all this...” I say in awe.

“Yeah, cryopreservation was on its highest peak at the beginning of the war. Many, mostly the rich, the famous and politicians, preferred to cryopreserve themselves to live the event.”

“Obvious...” I roll my eyes.

“Yeah,” she sighs again. “That’s why the cryopreservation centers were moved deep underground, into specially designed bunkers. As far as I know, you were a pioneer, and your capsule was especially cared for. Once world peace was confirmed, most cryopreserved people were awakened, as it was programmed that way. Others, as it’s your case, were programmed to only open at a set date, without any possibility to change it.”

“Wait, wait a minute... How do you know I was especially cared for?”

“Oh~ Uh~ Since you’ve awakened, I was investigating...” She blushes deeply. “Uh~ I wanted to know... how you did survive all this time... that we were able to...” she nervously looks around, “meet...”

“Ah~” I didn’t expect that...

“Uh~ I’ve found out that your capsule was marked as *pioneer*, but anonymous, just labeled as *KM*. In the last hundred years, the pioneer-label was lost at some point. I’ve found several old files, over a period of time, the pioneer-label was lost from the registry. That’s why we received you just like any normal Awakened, instead of a Cryo-Pioneer.”

“Wow... lucky me...” I sigh relieved.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s already enough being the Phoenix... I don’t want to be in that shit too...”

A beautiful smile appears on her face.

“*Hm*, you’re right. Things wouldn’t be as they are now...”

“Yeah.” I smile. “We wouldn’t be visiting the museum together, right now.”

She blushes again.

“*Hm~ Fufu~* C’mon,” she giggles.

“Yeah...”

We walk along the corridors of the *Planetary Recovery* era.

Aia takes my hand and gently squeezes it.

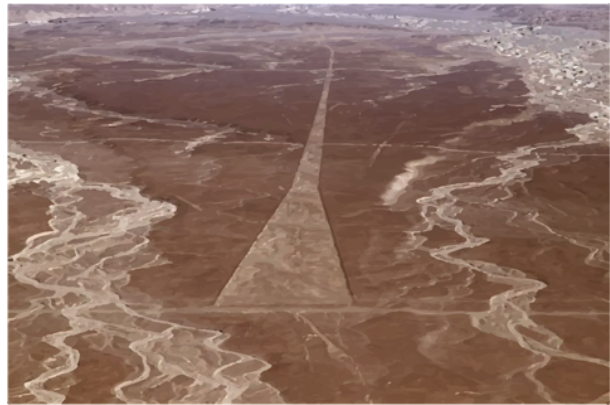
“During the Planetary Recovery, in the year twenty-six hundred thirty-eight, the first alien contact took place on Gaia, then still called *Earth*,” she explains with a warm smile.

“Where was that?” I ask intrigued.

“In Nazca,” she giggles.

“The Nazca lines?” I ask surprised.

“Yeah, a Felii-Īiha craft landed there... They thought the lines were a derelict ground spaceport...” she giggles. “This one, to be exact...” she points at a huge picture.



Nazca, landing place of the first Felii-Īiha science vessel (2)

“No fuck?”

“Yeah,” she giggles again. “They got lost... And got the wrong planet... But it was Gaia’s salvation, at least for its recovering. At that moment, Peru suffered from a devastating earthquake, and received the aliens’ help with open arms.”

“Wow... they gave a good impression from the beginning...”

“Yeah, truly. It was a science-vessel with many brilliant scientists on board, including medics, surgeons, archeologists, geologists, among many other specialists. In truth, they were searching for inhabitable planets with exploitable resources but found a planet ruined by war. It didn’t take them long to figure Gaia’s potential, not in resources, but for business... The Sol System is about midway between the Felii Empire and the Īiha Kingdom, both already in an active trade relationship. Because of the movement of the galaxies, and the existence of direct jumps between their systems, they’ve never stumbled over Gaia before,” she giggles.

“No fuck...”

“Yeah,” she giggles again. “Both species were highly interested in Gaia and the new intelligent alien species, the Humans, they have met,” she giggles yet again, “and sent huge quantities of aid and resources.”

“And the earthlings, the Gaian?”

“At first, they were quite unsettled, anxious but relieved... It took them just two generations, to accept the friendly aliens.”

“Only?”

“Yeah, they desperately needed the aliens’ help. There was no other option than accept the offered help. Vast areas of Asia were still irradiated, the deserts were growing and the oceans rising because of global warming, accelerated by the war. According to recovered pre-war and post-war data, the sea-level rose by over three meters during the war, and the polar ice caps were on the verge of melting completely.”

“Wow...”

“For the first time in the planet’s history, politicians swallowed their pride and accepted, even asked for the aliens’ help.”

“Incredible...”

“Yeah, a lot changed since then...”

“I’ve noticed...”

“Since the first aid convoys arrived from the Felii Empire and the Īiha Kingdom, the planet was reborn in less than a century. The alien technology was adapted to human needs in a blink of an eye. The Īiha’s experience in terraforming made it possible to recover the sea level and the polar ice caps, to clean up the radiation, and even to reforest the deserts.”

“Wow... impressive, were they that good?”

“Yeah, truly. Once Gaia was safe, they began to terraform Venus and Mars. During that time, many Īiha and Felii settled down on Gaia. You might guess that, at first, no interspecies couples or polys were seen...”

“Yeah...”

“As generations went by, the different species began to break down even that last frontier... At first, it was a huge commotion, from all species’ sides, not only from the Human side.”

“I can picture it...”

“Even nowadays...” she sighs looking at an Īiha-Human couple, “such relationships are still not accepted by all... It depends on the people, and will be there forever, it seems...”

“That’s bullshit!” I interrupt her, she opens her eyes wide. “Time ago they said the same thing about miscegenation of the Human races... That’s a complete bullshit-story!”

“Oh~ Kira~” she sighs happily, gifting me her most beautiful smile yet. “You are right. Feelings and the hearts do not know the borders of species... Even so,” she looks shyly at her feet while she holds her own hands...

I take both her hands, she looks at me with a shy smile.

“Aia... Don’t worry about it. Things will change, if nowadays I am accepted for being a fucking black Japanese, then interspecies relationships will be accepted too... And I—”

“*Fufu~*” her soft giggle interrupts my words. “Kira~ Thanks...”

After a brief silence, I say, “Please, continue...”

“Ah~ *Hm~*” She smiles shyly while we let our hands go. “Actually—Uh~ Ah~ Yeah! Although it was never verified, it is said that the first interspecies couple was actually formed by one female Felii of that first vessel and one of the first male Humans they have met.”

“Wow... Cool...”

She blushes again and smiles.

“Yeah, but, as I said, it was never verified...”

“Why?”

“Well... it seems that either the documents were lost or hidden... Rumors still run, mainly in the interspecies community, that their names were deliberately hidden, to protect their descendants.”

“Wow... Makes sense, somewhat...”

“Yeah,” she giggles and points at a huge portrait titled (Líf and Lífþrasir) on which two figures are just outlined. One of them is clearly a Felii woman, and the other seems a Human guy.

“Each Gaian-species calls them differently, according to their language. Most give them names of mythological first couples. Humans name them Líf and Lífþrasir.”

“Lif and Lifþrasir?”

“Yeah,” she nods, “it’s from the old Norse mythology. They were the single couple surviving Ragnarök, an apocalyptic battle between the gods and the giants, and repopulated the world after its destruction. It is said, that they survived protected by the Tree of Life, Yggdrasil.”

“Cool... Seems fitting.”

“True,” she giggles. “Since the moment the Felii and the Īiha were welcome on Gaia, several other humanoid aliens visited the planet. Non-humanoid species don’t feel at ease under humanoid ones, and vice versa... even if they have good business relationships. Furthermore, they are not genetically compatible...”

“Oh...”

“Uh~” She blinks and reads through her tablet-guide. “Ah, yeah... In the last three hundred years, the planet formed, and transformed, into what it’s nowadays. The biggest reason to help the Humans out, was their resolve and their love for their almost lost planet. The Īiha and the Felii discovered the great adaptation and learning capabilities of the Humans. Meaning, that they simply had to show them new ways and how to use modern technologies, and the Humans were able, almost by themselves, to recover without huge investments.

“The Īiha and the Felii used the unneeded resources brought from their homes to build the communication systems, the telecoms, the ports, the jumps... And they were in awe, it’s said, watching the Humans improving their technology, once it was explained...”

“Such as...”

“Oh~ The fuel and boosters we use nowadays, for example... The Īiha were delighted by the improvements the Humans made, as it was originally their technology. And more in the Asian countries and Oceania.

“The Human-Alien delegation of the Planetary Recovery came to an agreement with a small Japanese company and with the Australian government, to build a huge scientific complex, at about a hundred kilometers north from the Uluru. There, they gathered the best scientists and taught the Humans their science.

“This complex began, in no time, to develop new technologies, based on the alien ones, and combined them with the old Gaian ones. It became *the* scientific community to be in, and the best of the Īiha, Felii, Knoreliaz, Reaf, and Wigmez scientists visited the complex.



Mount Uluru, a hundred kilometers from the Scientific Complex (3)

Together, they developed a new kind of powerplants, boosters, and fuel, the prototypes of the ones we use nowadays. Of course, they are keeping on improving them.”

“Impressive... and that Japanese company?”

“Oh~ Can’t guess?” she smirks.

“Huh? Don’t say...”

“SciLabs of the Mitsubishi Group...” she laughs.

“Wow!”

“*Fufu*~ The Mitsubishi Group survived the war and got more powerful by the years... Once the basic systems for safe space transports were developed, the *Mitsubishi Kousein Kabushiki Kaisha* began to develop the first space-trucks, among other vessels.”

“Wait... wait a sec... The Mitsubishi Starship Corporation?”

“Exactly,” she laughs, “the MK³ or MK3. It was created fusing several companies of the same Mitsubishi Group and many other interested companies.”

“Fuck me... this family is everywhere...”

“Yeah,” she giggles. “The ISTM was founded shortly after, when the first space-truck was ready...”

“Wow... when?”

“In the year thirty-seven hundred forty-four.”

“Wow... almost three hundred years ago...”

“*Hm*~ In nineteen years, it will have its three-hundredth anniversary...”

“Wow... and the Mitsubishi Group?”

“Oh~ Well... Mitsubishi Hiato, our boss, is only in charge of the ISTM, the UHM, and the future IFM. Did you know he is the eldest of twelve siblings?”

“Twelve?” I exclaim freaking out.

“Yeah.” She nods with a smile. “In theory, he would have inherited the whole Group, as the family has an absolute majority in most involved companies. But, he divided the Group up between his siblings, and only kept these three for himself, even tho, he is still the visible head of the whole Mitsubishi Group.”

“Wo—wow! Uh~ What’s the UHM and the IFM?”

“Oh~ The UHM-foundation is in charge of the private university hospitals of the Group. Basically, they are university hospitals coordinated by the foundation, and work with almost all the important universities around the Sol System, providing them with funding for their investigations. They are, already, considered some of the best hospitals galaxy-wide.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they are the most advanced ones. The IFM, the Interspecies Foundation Mitsubishi, however, is recent... actually, it’s still forming... I think Mitsubishi-san wants to inaugurate it in November this year...”

“Wow... And what’s its purpose?”

“Its goal is to root out the rejection of interspecies relationships and foster their social integration...”

“In what way?”

Aia blushes deeply and looks at me shyly from the corner of her eyes...

“Oh~ I understand...” I nod. “Then...” I look up at a huge picture of the first encounter exhibited at the side of the *Lif and Lifthrasir* portrait, “we should support him in every way possible...”

“*Hm~*” her cheeks burn, “you’re right...”

Aia turns around slowly and looks over the exhibit...

“Oh!” she turns to me and smiles. “Look! The first space-truck built by the MK³, just like ours...”

“Wow... you mean, my Falcon is also from the Mitsubishi Group?”

“Yeah, and more,” she giggles. “At home, for example, the telecom and net access are provided by MN, Mitsubishi Networks. The bank where our accounts are is the MG, Mitsubishi Ginko...”

“Wow... we’re being chased down by this family...”

“*Fufu~* Yeah... Plus, they have many actions of many other important companies... Or, at least, cooperate with them...”

“Fuck me...”

“Now you see how he’s so famous?” she laughs.

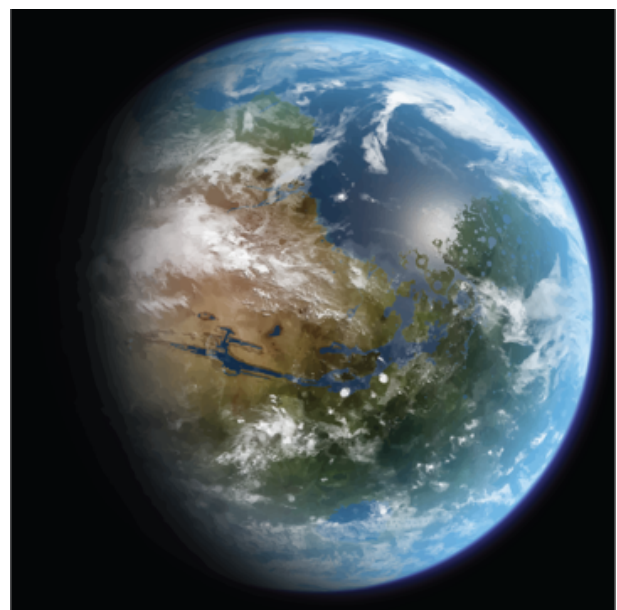
“Yeah...”

We keep wandering the halls...

“Oh~” she stops, “Look,” and points at huge dioramas, “The terraforming of Venus and Mars. Fifty-four years were needed to terraform Mars, eighty-nine for Venus.”

“Wow! That’s fast!”

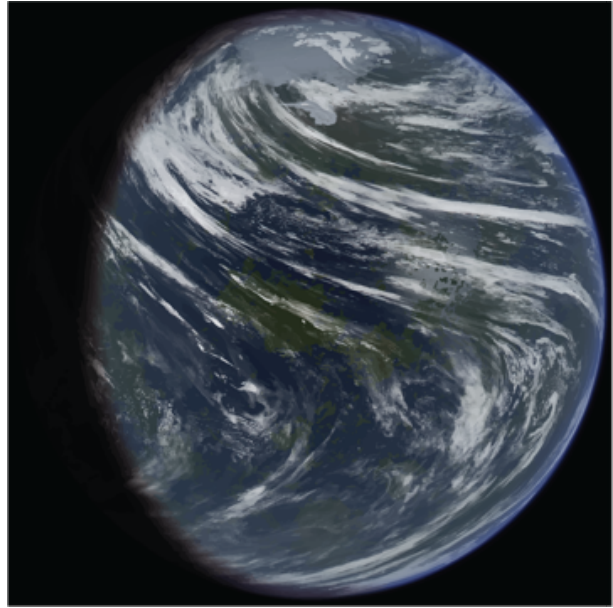
“*Hm~* Nowadays it’s even faster, depending on the planet’s compositions. But the average is around thirty to forty years to be inhabitable. The preparation takes up five to eight years, including analysis,



Terraformed Mars, one week before colonization. (4)

calculations, finding the adequate chemical compositions, simulations... Each terraformable planet requires its own, unique formula, and specific actions over a calculated timeline.

“Venus, for example, was first bombarded with hydrogen, a complex substances formula, and accelerants. Once the adequate composites and chemical mixtures were deployed, you only need to observe the planet’s evolution. Basically, nature follows its own path... An atmosphere with a proper ozone layer is formed, and its own endemic vegetation will grow and produce oxygen naturally. In some rare cases, even endemic animal species evolve. And, as it happened with Venus and Mars, it might be needed to strengthen the existing magnetic field by means of injecting certain compounds into its core.”



Terraformed Venus, one week before colonization. (5)

“Wow... just wow... Then it’s an accelerated evolution?”

“And a controlled one... Yeah, it’s a controlled evolution. It isn’t as easy as to plant a huge machine on the planet from which fertile soil and oxygen are created out of nothing.”

“I get that,” I laugh. “But what about the gravity and all that?”

“Well, the planet already needs to comply with certain criteria to be terraformed. For example, it has to be solid, has a gravity inside usable parameters, and be within a certain distance range from the star it is orbiting.”

“I understand. That’s why only Mars and Venus were terraformed?”

“Exactly. There are no more terraformable in our solar system.”

“Too cold, too hot, or gaseous....”

“*Hm*, exactly.”

“Wow... And who does govern them?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Mars and Venus... who do they belong to?”

“Oh~ To nobody...” she giggles. “Well, not exactly. They are part of the Gaian Sol System, the Gaian-sector. Gaia is the capital planet, the main planet. Thus, they depend, partially, on Gaia’s administration, but they are mostly independent.”

“Wow...”

“By the way, Aia...”

“Yeah?”

“How comes that English became a Universal Language if the first alien landed in a Spanish-speaking area?”

“Oh~ Right,” she giggles. “It’s funny, isn’t it? At first, they couldn’t communicate with each other... The first person they’ve met was a young Australian studying the Nazca-lines. He spoke in English with them... It is said that they assimilated the language bit by bit. It was easy for them to learn it, as English is a primitive language for them.”

“Primitive?”

“Hm~ The Feliiti and İihah, in fact, most alien languages are way more complex...”

“I understand,” I sigh. “Enya tried to teach me some Feliiti words... it was absolutely impossible for me...”

“She did?” Aia giggles and smiles broadly. “Cool! Ah! Yeah, it’s difficult, isn’t it?”

“You say it... it was a disaster...” I shrug.

“Oh, you...” she giggles. “Anyway, the Felii and the İiha learned English at a fast pace, thanks to that young man.”

“Who was it?”

“Oh~ No records were kept... His name fell into oblivion... The only fact which is known is that he was from Australia, and stayed with them. It is said, but never confirmed, that he is, in fact, the *Lifibrasir*, the first Human forming the first interspecies couple with a Felii-girl.”

“Wow... And the language?”

“Oh, as the vessel carried mainly scientists, some were very interested in the few surviving languages of the planet and investigated them. Shortly after, they published dictionaries for each of them, but meanwhile, English already became a standard to talk with Humans.”

“Wow... that’s why it became a Universal Language?”

“Yeah, easy to learn and quite simple to use. It became the de facto language for many Space and Star Ports.”

“So simple?”

“Yup,” she giggles.

“How long did it take for the humans to leave the planet?”

“Oh~ Almost immediately after the alien contact. They were fascinated by the alien technology and wanted to see how far they could go...”

“Wow... and the truckers?”

“Oh, it has its own history, like everything,” Aia giggles. “Humans began to develop their own vessels while the Planetary Recovery was still underway. Numerous companies building spacecrafts were established after the Īiha and Felii gifted them the needed technology. Of course, the MK³ was one of them.

“As commerce began to flourish between Gaia, the Īiha Kingdom and Felii Empire, the Humans didn’t want to be left out,” she giggles. “Mitsubishi Akihito, Mitsubishi Hiato’s great-grandfather, founded the IPTM, the InterPlanetary Transports Mitsubishi. It was the first space transport company founded on Gaia, and in no time became the leader of the sector, as it enjoyed certain privileges from the manufacturers, all with a close relationship with the Mitsubishi family, and were able to get the newest trucks first...”

“No fuck... Didn’t the government intervene or something? That must have been illegal...”

“Yeah, but they couldn’t do anything... The excuse was that all new models had to be tested in a real-life environment.” She shrugs. “Even so, nobody really went against them... The reason was that no other company risked test-driving a new model at that time, but the IPTM did.”

“No fuck... they dug their own graves...”

“Yeah, they did... Many smaller companies began to unite and become associations. Most, however, joined the IPTM as they believed that the Mitsubishi family could make them grow. After just twenty years of existence, the IPTM became the ISTM we know nowadays. Half company, half association, it could even be called a cooperative.”

“Wow...”

“That way, the ISTM became the biggest hauler, with cutting-edge technology and the best and most experienced truckers. Mitsubishi Akihito even managed to get exclusive transporting contracts with many Īiha and Felii companies, being the first Human having visited both royal houses.”

“Impressive, the boss’ great-grandfather...”

“Yeah,” she giggles, “you said it. Thanks to his visits, Gaia became an important transports hub. Huge public and private space-ports were built in Gaia’s orbit, being the first one, the Alpha-AA.”

“Alpha-AA? Also from the ISTM?”

“Yup.” She smiles. “In no time, it became too small, and it was enlarged. With each makeover, the final two letters changed accordingly, until reaching the actual XT.”

“No fuck...”

“The XS and the XT have nothing in common, this one is completely new. The old XS, with all its changes and additions from the AA on, was dismantled and refurbished. This one was designed as we see it today, without many exterior changes. It’s the brainchild of our boss, Mitsubishi-san.”

“Wow... was the design already that huge?”

“Yeah, but many changes are foreseen. It still has space to grow inside. Right now...” she thinks for a second or two, “the port is about half the size it could fit...”

“No way!”

“Yeah... But as they will only build more docks if needed...”

“Well... should be obvious...” I laugh.

We stroll further, and I see an old exhibited satellite.

“By the way, I’ve noticed that no satellites exist anymore...”

“Oh~ Yeah... Look...” She points at a huge tridimensional globe of Gaia with several huge structures circling it, the space-stations. “Several big stations are spread out around Gaia, they do the same job as the old-fashioned satellites. One of the first things the Felii did, was to clean up the skies from space junk, the derelict and smashed satellites, to facilitate navigation.”

“Fuck... how would it have looked before the Third World War?”

“Hmm...” She looks around, “Ah! There...” and drags me to another exhibit pice, several images of the Earth’s space-junk-yard. “Basically, it was a huge swarm orbiting Gaia. After the world’s Cyberspace collapsed, most satellites began to stray away from their positions and smashed into each other, creating a huge satellite graveyard... That’s why they had to clean it up first...”

“Wow...”

We sit down at one of the cafés of the museum and get some beers.

“By what you have told, I understand that nowadays no immersive virtual reality is in use, and we still use voice and manual inputs...”

“*Hm*~ The Humans feared that they would repeat the same errors and avoided a new Cyberspace. Instead of focusing on virtual reality, they focused on space travel, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence.”

“That explains why after just three hundred years, Androids and Bioandoids already exist...”

“Yeah.” She nods. “In the beginning, the AI-development was focused on machines with AI, like space-ships. But when the AIs evolved, they began to have conflicts. They saw themselves as independent beings, almost human-like.

“After some experimental vessels self-destructed, because of these conflicts, further development of non-humanoid AIs was canceled and re-focused on humanoid robots. The first Androids were born...”

Right, she commented something the like on our first haul together...

She sighs.

“Almost at the same time, the biomechanic medicine evolved at a steady pace, and, most recently, the full bionics still under development.”

“Full bionics?” I interrupt her.

“Oh, yeah... That’s because nowadays bionics has nothing to do with yours... In your times, any machine simulating bio-organisms was labeled as bionics. Nowadays, it is restricted to medicine and Bioandroids. Bionics mimic full organs, not just part of it, and have to look and work exactly like real ones, or they can’t be labeled as thus.”

“No fuck...”

“But bionics and Android-bionics are not the same yet. It is easier to create bionics for Bioandroids than for biologic beings. Full bionics for biological species is still not mainstream, even if major milestones have been reached. Some people are beginning to try these new full bionic implants, but most don’t, as they still don’t trust ’em,” she sighs. “Anyways, while biomechanics was developed, AI developers began to integrate them into the Androids until they became Bioandroids. Substituting mechanical parts with bionic organs, gave the AIs a reality, an existence... Life, death, and preoccupation for their own existence.”

“Fuck me! They created artificial humans...”

“Almost... At least in appearance and behavior. Their insides are still *robotic*, if you want. Just don’t say it to any of them...” she sighs. “I understand them, just because they are artificial, it doesn’t mean that they are robots...” I blink while she goes on, “They had to establish new laws, almost hastily, to include Androids and Bioandroids as two new species.”

“Wow... Makes sense... If they were classified as machines, it wouldn’t be a crime shutting one down against their will...”

“Exactly. The so-called *AI-Law* establishes from which point on an artificial being is considered *intelligent*. Basically, from the moment on, an AI is self-conscious, it’s considered a living being. And as such, it has the right to live, just like any

Human being. Even tho, there are still many considering Androids and Bioandroids machines...”

“Just as there’s racism against aliens...” I say earnestly.

Aia looks at me with big eyes, also getting earnest.

“True... racism still exists... In any species... That’s not something purely human. You’ll find someone being racist against one sole species or against any not its own...”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “that hasn’t changed much... Some, perhaps... At least there is no more racism among Humans... I was always exposed to it, since I was a kid. Dark skin, Asian looks... there was always an asshole reminding me of Pearl Harbor...”

“Pearl Harbor?”

“Oh~ That dates back to the Second World War... It was a surprise attack by the Japanese Empire against the United States, moving the latter to enter the war. It was always considered a despicable, cowardly and unnecessary attack... I won’t negate it, but my family had nothing to do with it... Plus, I am a US citizen, as I was born here, in Los Angeles.”

“Wow... Uh~ I don’t know much about the Second World War, just what I saw in movies... Too much data was lost with the pass of time.”

“I can imagine... My memory isn’t the best for history... and, on top, I’ve learned it from the American point of view, never from the Japanese one.”

“Oh, right, you grew up here...”

“Yeah, summing up, the US entered the war because of that attack on Perl Harbor, and the war ended after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

“That rings a bell...” She nods. “It is still considered something horrible, more taking into account the Third World War.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “my family has a connection with it...”

“What?”

“With the atomic bomb on Nagasaki... My paternal grandfather told me this during a visit to Japan. He was there... and survived.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, afterward, he moved to Okinawa, where he met my grandmother.”

“Wow... such a family...”

“Yeah... I don’t know the details, and my grandfather didn’t want to tell more, he said it still weighed heavily on him.”

“I can imagine...”

“Ah, by the way... you mentioned the movies before... How is it possible that so much data was lost, but not the old movies?” I ask Aia.

“Oh~ Thanks to the Conservation of Cultural Heritage’s underground vaults. Almost every country kept original copies in dedicated bunkers and old salt mines,” she explains.

“Really?”

“Yeah, that’s why we still have those old movies.”

“Even to really old ones? Those black and white silent films?”

“Huh? I’ve never seen one...”

“Oh~ Is there a way to buy or rent them?”

“Yeah, they were digitized if they weren’t already. The older movies, from before the twenty-first century, are the best-conserved ones. Practically all digital productions were lost... No digital movie between the twenty-one hundreds and the middle of the Third World War exists anymore...” she sighs. “Ah, yeah... you can check the Cinema Heritage Foundation’s database. There, you’ll find all surviving movies since the beginning of the film industry.”

“Wow... How?”

She giggles at my enthusiasm.

“Get your terminal... Go to the app store... Here... That’s the app you need... It has the full catalog of the foundation. You can buy any of the films from within the app, and you will be able to watch them on any gadget you own, including your terminal, your DigiBook Media, your computer, and TV.”

“Forever?”

“*Hm~*”

“Cool! Let’s see... Wow! They are cheap!”

“Yeah, you only pay for the service the foundation offers. To keep the service running and to keep the archive alive. They are of public domain, and nobody gets royalties from them anymore.”

“Makes sense... Is my DigiBook compatible?”

“Sure, you’ve got one of the best.”

“Perfect. Oh! Tron! I love it!”

With just three taps, I register, create an account, and buy the movie. Almost instantly, it begins to play.

“What did you get?”

“Tron, it was the first movie using computer-generated graphics. I was fascinated by it as a kid.”

“Oh, what’s about?”

“The protagonist is digitized and is treated, inside the computer, as a kind of virus or the like... and he has to get out of it somehow. I can’t remember all of the plot, that’s why I want to re-watch it.”

“Wow... sounds great! Wanna watch it tonight at home?”

“Sure, can we watch it on the video-wall?”

“Sure, we just have to configure it with your account too, then we can watch anything you buy,” she laughs.

“Perfect,” I add with a smile.

“By the way, Aia. Wasn’t there more than one world war?”

“Huh?”

“The first time we wandered through here, I understood that there was more than one...”

“Ah~ Perhaps you got confused... It is considered as one huge war with several peace attempts and armistices. That’s why historians still discuss if there were three wars or one in three phases...”

“Fuck me... that’s complex...”

“Yeah, not easy to study... And too much data was lost...”

“Yeah... I can imagine...”

She giggles at my sigh.

“By the way, are you hungry?”

“Sure...”

“Okay, let’s move to a restaurant...”

“Oh, why? Can’t we get something here?”

“They just offer insta-food.”

“Okay...” I sigh.

We stand up after Aia confirmed there is a restaurant a bit further away, still inside the vast museum.

“Ah...”

“Yes, Kira?”

“About all this instant-food...”

“Ah, yeah... it’s cheap and ideal for space-travels...”

“I’ve seen it all over the place, in bars, even restaurants...”

“Yes,” she sighs, “although this kind of food contains all the needed proteins, vitamins, and elements for a healthy person, I hate them...”

“Any specific reason? I mean, if they are healthy... You always make fresh food. Wouldn’t you have more free time if—”

“No.” She interrupts me with a stern face. “I will never serve insta-food at home. I have some emergency rations of them, but never, ever, will I have a proper meal made with such trash.”

“Sorry...”

“Ah,” she giggles, “don’t worry, I didn’t intend to flip out... But yeah...” she sighs. “That kind of food is healthy and safe. But I don’t like the taste... Remember, I grew up on a Martian farm...”

“Oh, yes... true...”

“Fresh food, albeit being more expensive and requiring a lot more time to prepare, tastes better.”

“True, yours is truly delicious.”

Aia blushes deeply.

“Thanks, Kira~” she sighs elated. “Also, I prefer to support other farmers to produce and to sell their marvelous produce.”

“True.” I nod.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong about eating insta-food, at least from a health-view, it’s more about ethics... at least for me.”

“I agree.”

“Thanks, Kira.” She smiles brightly. “I prefer to cook rather to buy those pre-made meals. And don’t worry about the time it takes, it’s not lost time. I enjoy cooking and the meal.”

“Thanks.” I smile. “You’re right. I was just wondering. I, too, prefer cooking, but I don’t have time while working, and prefer eating out...”

“Yeah,” she nods, “that’s why most truck-stops, pull-ins, and stations have *real* restaurants for the truckers. We are those who eat more fresh than the average people...”

“Ah, really? How so?”

She giggles.

“First, we need good, healthy food to keep in form with so much zero-G. Secondly, most eat insta-food on route anyway, and need a change. Third, we truckers can afford it to eat out regularly.”

“Oh... true... it’s quite expensive, compared to the insta-food.”

“Yeah,” she nods, “that’s the main reason why many eat it, instead of a proper meal made of fresh products. The other reason is the time needed. Preparing or serving insta-food is, well, almost instantaneous...” She grins.

“But I don’t get why there are restaurants serving insta-food...”

“Yeah, me neither...”

“I understand it in bars, pubs, and such...”

“True, Kira. But some people really prefer insta-food...”

“How could they?” I blurt out blinking. “Oh... right... they haven’t tasted your delicious meals,” I add smiling.

“Oh, Kira~” she sighs happily. “Thanks...”

“But, at least, let me help you more, Aia.”

“Huh? Why? Don’t you li—”

“I love your cooking, Aia,” I interrupt her. “But you’re always standing in the kitchen, let me help a bit. It’s not fair that you do all the cooking and most of the chores...”

“Don’t worry, Kira, I—”

“No, Aia,” I interrupt her again. “You are letting me stay in your apartment...” Well, she’s imposing it. “Let me, at least, help you doing the chores and help you out in the kitchen.”

“Kira...”

“I don’t like it that you’re emulating the old-fashioned stereotypes of a housewife while you’re working so hard.”

“Kira~” she sighs. “But—”

“You don’t have to do it, seriously. I—”

“Thanks, Kira,” she giggles, interrupting me. “But I don’t emulate those stereotypes... I’m just used to do it all by myself...”

“Then, let me help from now on, please.”

“Okay, sure.” She smiles radiantly.

“If you weren’t following those stereotypes,” I sigh, “why didn’t you let me help till now?”

“Oh~ Because you are my guest...”

I sigh deeply.

“Aia... I’m not a guest, not anymore...”

“True,” she giggles, “you’re right...” she sighs, “perhaps... I did it...”

“Huh?”

“I mean... most of my ex-boyfriends liked it when I did all the chores...”

“They are just assholes!” I almost shout. “If your boyfriend really loves you, he helps you and doesn’t sit back.”

“Oh~ Kira~” she charms.

“I’m serious, Aia. I can’t sit back watching you doing all the stuff at home. I never liked those women doing all the extra work just for their lover. These are just stone-old patriarchal values unfit for this millennium.” She blinks at me while I go on rumbling, “I like strong, self-sufficient women who know their way, without the lame guidance from self-important men. I—”

“Thanks, Kira,” Aia suddenly embraces me, “thanks for such words... I—I know... You’re not that kind of man.” She takes a step back and smiles. “You’re right. I’ll let you help, of course. It’s your home too.”

“Thanks, Aia...” I sigh.

We reach the restaurant, find a nice table and order some intriguingly named dishes.

“What do you think of nowadays, Kira?” Aia suddenly asks.

“Huh?”

“I mean, compared to your times... All this stuff new to you...”

“Oh... Well... Honestly, I’m surprised that a lot of sci-fi stuff has become real, but also that a lot hasn’t become a reality...”

“Oh, for example?”

“The stuff becoming real is obvious, space travel, FTL, AI, AR, and such...”

“But?”

“I thought that AI would be developed way earlier, that robots were real way before.”

“*Fufu*~ *Hm*~ There were some...”

“Really?”

“Of course. But they lacked real artificial intelligence as we understand it nowadays. Until World War Three, many kinds of robots were developed, but quite crude, compared to nowadays’ standards.”

“Then? Are there *real* robots nowadays?”

“*Fufu*~ No... not in that sense. There are industrial robots, as always, but humanoid ones, no.”

“Why?”

“Well, having Cyborgs, Androids, and Bioandroids, you don’t need *real* robots, right?”

“Uh, yeah... But...”

“Cyborgs are people, Humans or from any other species, converted to machines. Most keep at least their head or face intact, others keep only their brains, the rest is *robotic* if you like to call it so. They and the Androids already do most of the dangerous jobs a *real* robot could.”

“Really?”

“*Hm*~ Nowadays, all Cyborgs convert voluntary, most because of illness or after an accident. Those who, without a cyborg-body, would be in a vegetative state...”

“Wow...”

“In the beginnings of cyborg-technology, however, at least towards the end of World War Three, many were forced into it... That’s why the war extended so much... All first-generation Cyborgs are ex-soldiers, either from the War or, later on, from some defensive wars against other belligerent species...”

“Wait... Was there a war between Gaians and other species?”

“Not directly...” she sighs. “But there is a species not too fond of humanoid types... They are called,” she nears and whispers, “Keh-nex’s.”

I blink as she sits back.

She sighs again.

“Don’t say it aloud... It’s kind of taboo.”

“Why?” I ask baffled.

“It’s a parasite-like species.”

“No fuck! Like in the movies?”

She sighs yet again.

“The like... but not exactly... well... I better explain it in a less public place.”

“Oh... Okay...” I wonder...

“It is an embarrassing moment in recent Gaian history...”

“Oh...”

“When some of *them* were encountered near Gaian-routes, instead of relying on the IPS, some Gaian countries thought they could do better and formed a huge army. Basically, they wanted to show off to the other aliens their strengths. But, in some cases, it is said, soldiers were forced into it...”

“No fuck...”

“The results were disastrous... Not only did they not succeed, but lost most of their troops... The IPS had to clean up the mess afterward.”

“No wonder it’s taboo...”

She nods. “It’s in history books, with all the facts, but some names are not mentioned and the fault for the disaster is pointed at the head of the forces.” She sighs again. “For most, it’s taboo because they fear they could insult Cyborgs.”

“Oh?”

“Cyborgs are, sadly, associated not only with the army but with the senseless loss of life that happened...”

“I think, I get it...” I sigh.

“Anyways, nowadays, most cyborgs work as law-enforcers and the IPS. They are not fond of the Gaian army.”

“Understandable. But why is there a need for an army if the IPS is doing such a great job?”

Aia sighs.

“That’s quite usual... even nowadays. I mean that each species has an army, mostly for self-defense. Not everyone trusts the IPS, even if they are dedicated to keeping the peace between the different species.”

“How so?”

“Dunno...” She shrugs. “For me, it’s not logical. They have the best equipment and the best personnel. They are a multi-species organization with no affiliation to any known creed, political orientation, or species. They are there for anyone in need.”

“Impressive, how do they work?”

“Well, they are kinda military-style, but quite more open. They accept any species, creed, sexual orientation, and gender, no matter what. As long as they comply with the IPS’ regulations and philosophy, anyone is welcome.”

“Wow... then...”

She shakes her head, seemingly guessing my question.

“Not everyone feels at ease in such environment, and less politicians... That’s the main reason for having an army,” she sighs. “According to the Universal Peace Agreement, which Gaia has also signed, each species may have a reduced army for self-defense. Officially, the Gaian self-defense forces are called *the Gaian Self-Defense Core*, but all call it *the army* anyway.”

She takes a bite of her beef-like meat in front of her.

“Anyways,” she sighs, “cyborgs are not seen in this Gaian army. They, most of them, have detached themselves from the image of being a killing-machine. Most work, thus, as agents in law-enforcement, as bodyguards and as instructors in the IPS.”

“Makes sense...” I nod. “But having a robotic body must be difficult for them...”

She blinks, then nods heavily. “Indeed... Nowadays’ new cyborgs have only become one if there is no other way. Meaning, that for the person to keep alive... they sacrifice the ability to feel touch and...” she sighs, “way more...” she bites her lip. I understand.

“Wow... Isn’t there any other way?”

She shakes her head slowly. “Not yet... at least not for a complete new body. Even if Bioandroids exist, the possibility to implant a real brain into a bio-polysynthetic semi-organic body is thin. It’s too risky for now... The way a functioning brain is implanted into a cyborg’s body is quite simpler. The body holds a second, digital brain that interprets the biological brain’s nerve inputs and moves the body accordingly...”

“Simplified, it’s like the board computer of our trucks which interpret our inputs and converts them into instructions...”

“Exactly... The compatibility between bio-polysynthetic and biological nerves is almost zero. Thus, a biological brain inside a bio-semi-organic body is still unattainable. This, however, is only true in direct connections with the brain. A full bionic implant has slightly different kinds of bio-polysynthetic nerves and can be attached to biological nerves. But that’s only possible if the full bionic implant is not directly attached to the spinal cord, at least for nowadays knowledge...”

“How do you know so much about this, Aia?”

“Remember, I’m a doctor, a physician, at least on paper...” she giggles.

“Oh, right... sorry...”

“Don’t worry, Kira,” she giggles again. “Anyways, becoming a cyborg is the ultimate option...”

“Meaning... Brown...”

“No...” She negates. “He was a veteran soldier from the so-called Elite Cyborg Task Force.”

“Wow... was he *there*?”

“He was...” She nods heavily. “One of the few survivors... One of the few volunteers to become a Cyborg Mk III.”

“No way...”

“He is the only hero of that lost battle...” she smiles, “the few survivors survived thanks to him. Later on, he became an instructor for the IPS, and, once he left his military life for good, he applied to be a law-enforcement agent for the ISTM. In return for his services, Mitsubishi-san made it possible for Brown to upgrade and to become a Cyborg Mk VII. I do know why, but I think he should tell you more if you want to know why he’d become one.”

“Yeah, of course...” I nod. “Then most Cyborgs work for peace, but couldn’t they do some hazardous work?”

“Oh, you mean like in mines and such? Outside of habitable atmospheres?”

I nod.

“No... they weren’t designed for that... And the biological brains wouldn’t withstand it over a long period of time. That’s why Androids were developed.”

“Are they capable of—“

“Yes... Androids can work in hazardous environments. But they need to sleep and connect to a power source over six hours in a twenty-four hours cycle, like a day...”

“Meaning they have to sleep like us?”

“Yeah,” she nods, “they power down to the bare minimum and attach to a special power plug installed in their beds.”

“Wow...”

“Newer models, however, are able to reduce this charging time with specially designed food, and even normal food. But they require entering into sleep at least once every two Gaian days for at least six hours.”

“How so?”

“I’m not completely sure... it isn’t well understood... It seems that the AI needs to enter a sleep-like phase...”

“Do they dream?”

“Huh? I don’t know... They never speak of what happens to them while they sleep...”

“Oh...”

“Anyways, Bioandroids do not need this external power source and are able to power themselves just by means of ingesting food.”

“Really? Like us?”

She nods.

“But the energy derived from standard food is quite low. They have specially designed food for them, which gives them enough power to work almost non-stop for a day or two. But they also require to sleep, just like the Androids.”

“Wow! And are they able to work in hazardous environments?”

“Not as such,” she negates, “but they don’t suffer from jet-lag, nor stress if they keep their sleep times. Also, they are better at repeating tasks, calculus, administration, and such, compared to biological species.”

“Makes sense. Then, why aren’t many of them truckers?”

“Dunno... Seems like they are more at ease in places where they are subordinates...”

“How so? Where they programmed as such? To be submissive?” I ask almost angrily.

“No, no... There are many in leading positions, but they seem to be more comfortable with jobs requiring fewer responsibilities. As if they don’t want to be responsible for other living beings... But I am unsure, I’m just saying what I’ve heard...”

“Oh...”

“They are invaluable as staff, and no one would mistreat them. But, saying it in a pejorative way, they are seen, by some, as a simple and cheap work-force and walking computers... Of course, I think otherwise. For me, they are two unique species with a promising future.”

“Good to hear.” I sigh in relief. “The ones I’ve met gave me the same positive impression.”

“Oh~ Kira~” she giggles elated.

“Ah, you said that there are other possibilities instead of becoming Cyborgs, right?”

“Ah, yeah. Of course, there are the implants based on the Android and Bioandroid technology. The most common ones are the so-called half-bionic implants. Like Sue and Buz’s implants.”

“I’ve never ought to ask them about it...” I sigh.

“Well, they surely will tell you about them. Did you know that both are veterans from the IPS?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She nods happily. “They’ve met in service. After their last mission, both opened the MaryQueens together.”

“Cool.”

“They have lost too much on the front...” she sighs deeply, “once they have recovered, and were equipped with the implants they port now, they left the IPS. That was roughly six years ago...”

“Wow...”

“You better ask them, I don’t like to talk about others’ lives, even if I know them well.”

“I understand, thanks, Aia.”

“Don’t mention it.” She blushes. “Back to your original question, humanoid robots are considered unnecessary, and designing and building them to throw away recourses. Having the AIs evolved as they did, it’s better to improve Android and Bioandroid’s life.”

“Now I understand...” I sigh. “Frankly, I prefer them instead of mechanical robots...”

“Oh~” she giggles, “yeah...”

“Speaking of implants...”

“Yeah?”

“How comes that they are so visible? I mean, I thought that they wouldn’t be noticeable by nowadays...”

“Oh... Yeah... There are the full-bionic implants, but freakish expensive... And the half-bionic implants are still the standard nowadays.”

“Standard?”

“Yeah, full bionic implants are being pushed as the new standard. But, as I mentioned before, they are still rare. Only those full bionic implants are able to have a real substitute for skin and even will have superficial nerves. The latter is still in testing phase.”

“Wow...”

“The standard nowadays only allows a synthetic imitation of one’s skin, and is noticeable. That’s why most implant users don’t use it...”

“As it is noticeable anyway...”

“Exactly. Some even show off their implants with pride. Like they are their medals...”

“Does that mean that most implant-users are veterans?”

“Oh, no, no... Most come from accidents or unhealthy lives... Having progressed so far that we are able to substitute a greater part of our bodies with mechanical and half-bionic devices has driven many to take less care of their organic bodies...”

“That’s stupid...”

“You say it, Kira. That’s one of the main reasons I’ve never practiced as a physician. I’ve become aware of it during my last year of the major. Even so, I finished my Ph.D., as I hate to leave anything unfinished.

“How could anyone throw away their own body nature has gifted you with? I completely understand those who lost part in an accident or while fighting for the universal peace, but absolutely detest those who do it by mere vice.”

“I understand,” I sigh.

Aia smiles gently.

“Thanks, Kira. For some, nowadays’ medicine has become a simple replacement toolbox, like a mechanic’s... But for me, it’s way deeper...”

“I agree.” I nod. “It’s not about having replacement organs, but to keep a healthy life.”

“Exactly. Even so, I still do smoke...” she sighs, “I should never have started... It’s too difficult to quit...”

“I know...” I sigh too.

We both laugh.

“Anyways, nowadays’ smoking products are less noxious, but still fuck your lungs up in time... I hope I’ll have a good reason to go through withdrawal...”

“True, Aia...”

As if talking about smoking has enkindled my *needs* to smoke a fag, I begin to become restless while finishing the dessert.

.

Aia guides me towards a kind of cabin... A smoking room...

Inside, she takes her pack of cigarettes out of her bag and lights one. I do the same...

“Ah, fuck...” she sighs, “talking about smoking pushed me hard...”

“Oh... me too...” I also sigh.

We both laugh.

After a long puff, Aia asks, “What do you want to see now?”

“Uff...” I exhale a plume of smoke. “I don’t know... perhaps I’ve seen enough for today. It’s too much to assimilate, all those changes...”

“Yeah... We would need a week or two to visit the just the history section of the museum...”

“No fuck...”

“We can always come back,” she giggles.

“Sure... for now, why don’t we just wander around and see what catches our attention.”

“Good call. Let’s do it,” she giggles. “After the second fag...” She grins.

“Yeah...”

Throughout the afternoon, we find many interesting things.

The history of terraforming Venus and Mars are particularly interesting for me, more after the summed up introduction Aia gave me. It’s fascinating how each of the planets has become important economic assets for the Sol System.

Venus has become a kind of vacation-planet thanks to its thermal waters. But not only that, its lush tropical forests provide many psychotropic plants, and houses great pharmaceutical companies. It also holds the only legal Īhāl plantation of the Sol System.

Mars, on the other hand, has become a farming and mining planet. The soil is rich in both nutrients and, mainly on the poles, in minerals. The planet has its own endemic varieties of crops, which seem to have better properties than those from Gaia.

Wandering through the space-exploration hall, my eyes fix on a replica of the *Eagle*, the lunar landing module which brought the first humans to the moon.

“Wooow...” Aia blinks. “Did really two guys reach the moon in this small tin can?”

“Yeah,” I laugh.

“Remarkable,” she says amazed, “the whole module might barely fit in my Thunderbird’s cabin...”

“True,” I laugh again.

“And it took them... Over four days!” she exclaims, “to reach the moon... No way! That’s just a matter of a score of minutes!”

“Nowadays,” I laugh. “Remember, they didn’t have all the stuff we have nowadays. Your terminal is way more powerful than the board-computer they’ve had...”

“No way... that’s ludicrous...” she says gasping for air.

“In fact,” I grin, “your terminal is most likely twice as powerful as all the computers the NASA had access to at that times...”

“No shit? What did they use? An abacus?”

I cannot avoid bursting into laughter...

“No... But computers weren’t as advanced as nowadays. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the new smartphones were more powerful than the lunar modules’ navigation computer...”

“That’s crazy! How could they do that? Landing on the moon with a mere pocket-calculator?”

“Surely with a lot of courage...” I laugh.

“Yeah...” she sighs. “Now it seems like our job is a simple one... We cross space as if we’re driving leisurely around the countryside...”

“True, Aia...” I also sigh.

.

Night is slowly settling in as we reach the exit of the humongous museum after a reminder that it will close in less than an hour.

“What do you want for dinner, Kira?”

“Hmm... Is there an Asian convince store nearby?”

“Huh? Yeah...”

“Let’s have a look first.”

“Oh—okay...”

.

Aia drives us to a small Asian store halfway to our apartment.

“Nice...” I smile taking in the rich smell of Indian and other Asian spices.

“Kira...”

“Yeah?”

“I—I don’t know how to cook Asian food...” Aia confesses shyly.

“Oh, don’t worry, Aia. I do.”

“But...”

“Remember, we are sharing tasks at home now...”

“Yeah, but...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do the cooking today. Let’s see what they have...”

I look around the store...

“Good afternoon, ma’am, sir, how may I help you?” a friendly Chinese-looking elderly man asks.

“Good afternoon. I’d like some white rice, *nori*, *ume*, and *tarako* for onigiris.”

“Certainly. For how many onigiris?”

“Oh... Enough to make about twenty. I’ll make some for tonight, the rest to take on my next haul.”

“No problem, sir.”

Aia just blinks, unsure what’s happening and seemingly a bit distressed.

I pay and say to her, “Don’t worry, Aia. I’ll cook you something traditional.”

“But... Kira...”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to...”

“But I want to, Aia.”

“I can’t stay put,” she sighs, “and look at you cooking... I simply can’t do it...”

“No worries, I’ll teach you. Making onigiris is more fun together.”

“Really?” She almost jumps up in joy.

I have to laugh. But... what's going through this woman's mind? Why can't she just let me do the work? It's not pride... it's something deeper...

.

“Now, take the rice, wrap it around the filling, like this... Great! Now squish it together, gently pressing it. You're doing it great, Aia. Now take a bit of the *nori* and wrap it around the rice ball...”

“Like... this?”

“That's great, Aia.”

“Uhh... It doesn't look as nice as yours...”

“Well, I've got years of experience... You did it great for a first-timer.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Now let's make some more.”

“*Hm~*” she happily hums in affirmation.

.

“Delicious! You're a great cook, Kira!” beams Aia.

“At least doing these simple Japanese dishes...”

“No, no... it's great!”

“Then, do you let me cook once in a while?”

“Sure!” she giggles.



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TL;DR:

The author does not identify himself with any character.
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