

“I DREAM OF HUMANITY”

By Jonathan Padfield

(Created 25/10/99)

PROLOGUE

He remembered it had been raining; the rain had stuck in his mind because it represented his mood. He knew he would be downtrodden; his opinion, no matter how expert, counted for nothing in the face of money. Even as the taxi had screeched to a halt and he had run through the doors, taken the fast lift, and just made it to the meeting before he was fired, he could almost feel his legs giving way, knowing the futility of his task.

He had sat in the meeting with Managing Director Tedashi Hinaku and his *so called friend* Hisao Neitevski. There wasn't much to say as Neitevski crawled and squirmed around the director, at one point even snatching away the report that had taken so much time to prepare, saying "you don't need this" and "the project **will** be ready **on time**".

He knew Neitevski was ignorant about the workings of the project, despite being it's co-ordinator. How could *he* know what was ready? Had he put any time in? No, he'd just collected the credit.

The last straw came when Hinaku looked away from Neitevski and said, "I have scheduled a press conference for six o'clock as a feature on the national news feed, that gives you seven hours to prepare... Be ready, or be fired."

There was no answer to that, he needed his job. Hinaku said, "you may go now."

That was it, he was dismissed without another thought. He remembered looking at that thick, oak door and thinking, "why create something like this? Why bother when all it'll be used for is to make rich men richer?" He vowed, "I'll look for the real point..... I'll look for the soul..."

CHAPTER 1 – THE AWAKENING

Sonoda stared into her eyes, hoping for something back, but ANI couldn't give it – her eyes were closed. Even as they opened, Sonoda knew he wouldn't see it this time. The eyes were unmoist – there was no depth, nothing beneath the surface; just the plain, mechanical lenses he had installed some time ago. Sonoda knew it would come, but more work was needed. This would clearly take time.

ANI opened her mouth as if to say something, but Sonoda pushed it closed. He had not yet completed her language program and, although he was quite confident about her behaviour and emotional programs, he would have preferred more testing time.

Several people from the TV company began to bustle around ANI, combing her long, blonde hair and applying make-up to her face. Sonoda took a step back in order to unplug the power and monitoring cables from the sockets in ANI's arm, revealing her full name: 'Artificial Neuro-Intelligence 2479D', printed above the sockets. Sonoda had wanted to give his android a real name, but he'd been told "you can't name a machine." He was quite happy with his ANI acronym, which had got round the problem.

"Careful," said Sonoda to the make-up people, "she may have mechanical parts, but she's no machine!"

Sonoda really believed this, he was sure that ANI, given time, would become sentient; this had been his own, private agenda when designing her. The company – Digital Eclipse Media Providers – just wanted to show off their new equipment and then exploit 'it' in some entertainment role. That's what this press conference was for – and Sonoda probably wouldn't be allowed to say anything. No, Neitevski would do the talking, he would be better at '*presenting the corporate image*'. Sonoda glanced at the clock, 15 minutes until show time.

ANI's make-up was now finished, and the sockets in her arm covered. Looking her over, Sonoda really couldn't point out any one thing that suggested she wasn't human. ANI had been designed to be aesthetically identical to a human female, her assemblers had certainly done a good job.

14 minutes to go – maybe time for one more nervous trip to the toilet...

Rachel Aoki stared at the broken coffee cup on the floor, this was the fifth one she'd broken in the space of two days. Rachel had to admit to herself that she wasn't very good at waitressing, not least because Mr. Kishiro, the proprietor of the coffee shop she was working at, was screaming this in her ear.

Mr. Kishiro was a short, fat man in his late forty's. When he yelled he gesticulated wildly and covered everything in his vicinity with a shower of saliva. He tended to yell a lot.

"AOKI, THAT'S THE FIFTH ONE IN TWO DAYS!!!"

Rachel stared back at Mr. Kishiro, her eyes wide with anticipation. She knew what he was going to say, this wasn't the first time she'd heard it and it wouldn't be the last. **"YOU'RE FIRED!"**, he screamed. "I can't afford this kind of wastage in cups! What kind of idiot?..."

Rachel had stopped listening, her mind had stuck on the 'you're fired' part and she began to trudge out of the shop. What was she going to tell her roommate, Reiko? How would she come up with her half of the rent? Her parents had always said that she'd never amount to anything, but Rachel had moved to Tokyo anyway. She was only 18 and planned to go to university there, trouble was she could never hold down a job long enough to fund herself. Rachel looked up to the sky, it was cloudless and the sun beat down. Maybe it was superficial, but a blue sky always made Rachel feel better. She decided to put this one down to experience, like the many times she'd been fired before. Reiko would be angry, but she'd help Rachel out until she could find another job. Rachel tossed the apron she'd forgotten to take off on the floor and let down her shoulder length, red hair – this wasn't going to stop her, one day she'd find her calling and then nobody else would refer to her as 'cute' or 'naive' again. Rachel was confident she knew her way around the world, but no one would take her seriously because she had a cheerful outlook on life – what was so wrong with that? Rachel began to walk home, she'd get there before Reiko. Perhaps it'd be an idea to cook her something to soften the blow, yeah, that's what she'd do. Now where had Reiko hidden those cookery books?...

Reiko Tanaki had no idea of the surprises install for her as she left the Police station, she'd already had a hell of a day and any hope she had of it improving disappeared when she saw the taxi of Tomoko Yuki waiting for her at the kerb. Tomoko's car was obscene, it'd been upgraded to the point where the original bodywork was no longer visible. A wing here, a fender there, even the go-faster stripes had several coats of paint. And as for the engine, it was a wonder the bonnet still closed over it.

The electric window wound down and Reiko couldn't help wincing as the sun glass-clad face of Tomoko hovered into view – the hair, slicked back with enough gel to provide flexible hold to a field of corn; the sunglasses, which were only slightly more reflective than the hair; and the grin that begged to be punched. What did Rachel see in this idiot? And why was he always trying to do Reiko favours? Didn't he realise that she'd never like him, I mean, she'd made enough cutting remarks.

"Hey, Reiko," said Tomoko. "D'ya want a lift home?"

Reiko walked past the car and down the street, this was becoming like a daily ritual and it would always conclude with Reiko giving in, just to get Tomoko off her back. The cycle began again, Tomoko started the car and began to follow her. He wasn't trying anything untoward, Reiko knew that, he just begged to be liked by everyone and it seemed that she had become an exception to his rule.

"Look," said Reiko, "we go through this every day. You know that I'd rather walk if it means I don't have to share airspace with you!"

"But I'm going the same way," insisted Tomoko. "After a hard day directing traffic, wouldn't you rather ride home in style?"

Reiko stopped, leaned in through Tomoko's open window and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. Now, nose-to-nose with him, she snarled through gritted teeth, "street-level peacekeepers **do more than just direct traffic!**"

Reiko thought for a moment then rescinded her grip, she'd had enough earlier than usual today, she just wanted to get home and have an hour or so off before Rachel came in. If she had to ride with Tomoko, so be it – at least this whole thing would be over.

"You know what," said Reiko, "I'm gonna be the bigger person – I'm gonna let you give me a lift home."

"That's more like it!" said Tomoko, releasing the central locking. "Hop in..."

"There are conditions, though," Reiko gingerly opened the back door, taking care not to dislodge anything. "**Do not** bang on about any new upgrades you've added to this already heaving monstrosity, **do not** comb your hair whilst driving, and under **no circumstances** refer to me as 'babe'."

Tomoko adjusted his mirror, slicked back his hair and grinned, "Hey, don't worry about me babe."

Reiko winced, covered her face with her hands and added another regret to her list.

Thankfully, the journey home wasn't that long and Reiko amused herself by watching Tomoko's in-car digital television. There was a news item on, a monotone, assembly-line newsreader was passing more details about the covert war with Russia, as told by the Japanese government. It seemed that things were going well, the sales of Japanese cybernetic implants were gaining on those of Russian based, American funded genetic enhancements. In response, the Russians had sent some spies to Japan and now Japanese submarines were lining the sea of Japan and the waters north of Hokkaido, to make sure no more got through. Reiko wasn't really interested in this – popular opinion was that you shouldn't mess with your body unless you absolutely had to. Still, it gave her an excuse not to talk to Tomoko.

The car pulled up outside Reiko and Rachel's house, Reiko tried to get out before Tomoko turned the engine off, but no such luck. He was out of the car almost as fast as her. Reiko's fears were realised as Tomoko asked, "can I wait inside until Rachel gets back?"

She replied through gritted teeth, "I suppose so..."

Reiko only went easy on Tomoko because she was pleased to be home – this was the first house she'd lived in that she actually liked. Although the building itself was in need of repair, it was positioned in an area of Tokyo that had, at least for now, escaped the corporate cascade. This meant that when Rachel and Reiko opened their door in the morning they were greeted by a small front garden, a fence and a street, instead of the grey, dank corridor of an apartment building. Reiko made her way to the front door, with Tomoko in tow, and pressed her thumb down on the print-recognition pad. After a short pause the door clicked open and Reiko was confronted by a smell which was, to be honest, *absolutely disgusting*. Tomoko took the words right out of her mouth, “smells like Rachel's home already!” he said. Rachel came bounding out of the kitchen gleefully yelling, “Hi everyone!”, as was her way. Then she realised the bad news she had for Reiko, and became a little more subdued. “Well, the thing is... you see I....”

“Don't tell me Rachel,” sighed Reiko. “You got fired *again*.”

Rachel stared down at the floor, “Yes.... I'm sorry,” she croaked. “I try Reiko, but...”

“What are we going to do with you Rachel?” Reiko's tone suggested she wasn't really that angry, she was kind at heart and knew Rachel did her best, no matter how ineffective that was.

Tomoko interjected, “Whatever it is you're cooking in there – just remember that I already ate, *okay?!?*”

Reiko disappeared into the living room and Rachel shot Tomoko a glare, “*What?!?*” he said.

The first thing Reiko noticed was that the TV was on, so while Rachel had been ‘cooking’ she had in fact been watching television. She tended to do this a lot, and as a result, many of her concoctions became fodder for the dustbin. “Rachel are you sure whatever it is you're cooking isn't ready yet?!” called Reiko.

Rachel ran in, followed by Tomoko, who flung himself down in a chair. “Yeah! Television,” he cried. “But why is it tuned to the National News Feed?”

Rachel quickly snatched the remote, “Don't change the channel – I just want to see the next item.”

“Why?” asked Reiko. “It's only more boring crap about the war.”

“There's another item coming up in a minute, I *really* want to see it...”

“Alright,” Reiko relaxed in a chair the opposite side of the room to Tomoko – a safe distance away. “But if that thing burns, **you're** the one who's scrubbing out the oven!”