



2046

THE WORLD OF KURO

The concerns of the first half of the 21st century did not really change, but now almost the whole world has them. Energy and ecology became the two recurrent themes, appearing in every debate and the international media, pointing out the worsening climate and the conflicts over energy resources. Emerging countries like China or India did not have the chance to pollute as much as their Western neighbours, international regulations out of the Kyoto protocol having forced them to limit their emissions since 2020. To limit the inexorable deterioration of the ozone layer and the melting of the icecaps, leading to a rise of the sea levels, governments had to concentrate their efforts towards alternative and renewable energies, thus provoking major crises in certain industrial sectors which were loath to forgo their slice of the cake. With planetary warming and many climate disturbances, no population could continue to calmly refute the more alarming reports and to consume resources as they saw fit. Several coastal populations watched in horror several Pacific atolls were threatened by tidal waves. Climate change made some places too dangerous, causing the migration of thousands of people who left their homes to become 'ecological immigrants.'

Luckily, several advances in nanotechnology allowed the creation of new materials, batteries, engines, fuels, biomass and processors, ending the dependency on oil and drastically cutting down greenhouse gas emissions. Despite the pressure of oil-producing countries, these alternative power sources opened

up new markets, allowing the countries that had researched these new power sources to claim much needed profits. China particularly began to re-emerge after years of an economic recession, made worse by a huge population growth and little arable land. Conversely, the Middle-East, already fighting multiple water wars, suffered from the loss of oil revenues as the world moved to cheaper and more sustainable power sources. Even today, despite international programmes of massive sea water desalinisation by complex biotechnological processes in order to aid the poorer populations of the world, Middle Eastern and African countries are still the greatest victims of planetary warming.

Amid multiple regional conflicts seeking to get hold of the few remaining resources, recyclable fuels or arable land; extremist struggles, as well as deepening tensions between India, China and Russia; Japan took on the role of the mediator of Asia. Quite determined to carve out an Asian Presidency, successive Japanese governments endeavoured to maintain a very active diplomacy, not hesitating to get closer to their neighbours. Preferring to make allegiances with China instead of the United States, the Empire of the Rising Sun invested in the Aosis Alliance, an organisation working on several projects to combat and anticipate rising sea levels. Through Aosis, Japan set up numerous partnerships with China. After the building of several coastal dams and the creation of new biomaterials which would consolidate levees in major cities, Japan used its influence to directly insinuate itself into the Chinese space programme. This news immediately thundered amid the Western countries, especially the USA, which quickly suspected Japan of wanting to use China as a military partner. Fears of having Japan rebuild its army in defiance of Article 9 of its constitution, and possibly helping China retake Taiwan, caused violent debates in the halls of the UN. Piqued, the Japanese government removed all its assets

A Two-Headed Government

On May 4th, 2046, the day of the Kuro Incident, Japan was holding elections for the House of Representatives (or Shugi-in). This house, much like the British 'House of Commons' is one of two bodies that compose the Japanese government or 'Diet.' The other is the House of Councillors (or Sang-in) which functions much like the British 'House of Lords.' While the upper House of Councillors was once the domain of Japan's ancient nobility, its councillors are now mainly elected officials, although they serve a longer term than members of the House of Representatives. By tradition, the leader of the political party with the majority of seats in the diet is nominated to be Prime Minister. The post is then confirmed by the Emperor by the Diet. By tradition, it is.

In 2046, all polls pointed towards a very close call between the Liberal Democratic Party (centre right) and the New Komeito party. New Komeito had grown substantially popular during the last five years under the direction of a charismatic leader, Abe Kaemon. Originally founded by Soka Gakkai, as part of his election strategy, Kaemon would sever ties with this popular Buddhist sect, while also refusing any cooperation with the USA or China. Komeito, like the LDP, has always been a party for middle class white collar workers and rural populations (as the political mover behind the state granaries) but also gained favour with the religious community despite having cut ties with Soka Gakkai. Kaemon also managed to extend the party's voting base to the youth and unemployed.

On May 4th, the New Komeito party was technically the winner of the election. Unfortunately, disturbances due to the Kuro Incident prevented the results becoming official. Partisans of both main parties begun fighting vigorously for control, national tensions enhanced by the international accusations and general confusion. The political chaos gradually worsened and arguments between factions over the electoral result only caused more confusion. With Japanese government on the brink of collapse, the leaders of both political parties agreed to rule jointly while the blockade crisis lasted and issued calls for calm within their factions. Behind the scenes, of course, the understanding behind the agreement to joint rule is less polite, and both parties are moving its pieces towards the taking and maintaining of power. However, no faction has the luxury of being able to promote its personal interests too far beyond those of Japan's, since both parties are trying to take advantage of any faux pas committed by the other party. Every politician is desperately hoping not to have to hold out for yet another six months...


from NASA programmes and offered China its best genetics and robotics experts on a platter. This synergy of expertise and dedication, driven by fierce competition with Europe and the USA, ensured that aerospace science, and especially robotics, advanced prodigiously in the east.

Determined to be the first men on Mars, the Chinese negotiated the construction of an international moon base, and on July 20th 2044 a team of fourteen Japanese androids finally landed on Mars to prepare the ground for the coming of the genetically enhanced Chinese 'taikonauts.' Meanwhile, biotechnology, nanotechnology, computer science and robotics never ceased to improve. Left behind by these events, the Western countries had no choice, but to try and follow Japan's lead. Meanwhile, Japan began adapting its society through birth control policies and genetic manipulations. Obsessed with its newfound power through robotics and biotechnology, Japan's ethical laws were often ignored or changed for the sake of progress.

Unfortunately, China's ulterior motives eventually defeated the alliance with Japan. In 2044, right after the launch of Mission 'Ophir Planum' towards the red planet, China allied with both North and South Korea. This alliance became known as the 'Panasiatic Federation,' its mandate being to counter the economic expansion of India and Pakistan. While Japan was also invited to join the Federation (together with Vietnam) Japan refused, based on an ancient, exacerbated rivalry with North Korea. Seeing China's new alliance with North Korea as a betrayal, Japan chose to break all past agreements with China. To make the point that their friendship was over, Japan formed its own alliance with India, offering India military support in their attempts to recover Taiwan. At the same time, the Japanese government reinforced its policies of food and power independence, under the influence of the New Komeito political party, with the goal of utterly breaking all its ties with China and becoming self-sufficient.

This slap in the face caused a disproportionate response from China, including several border clashes. China forcefully claimed the Sendaku-shoto isles from Japan, and armed North Korea so that the North Koreans might respond to any attack by the Nipponese government. For two years, Asia became the focal point of the rest of the world, who watched with concern the growing diplomatic tensions and the entrenched positions of both sides.

On May 4th 2046, after months of angry words and sabre rattling from both sides, the conflict was radically aggravated due to an unfortunate turn of fate. A violent earthquake with an 8.5 coefficient on the Richter scale violently shook the Chinese



eastern border. Given the paranoia and tension in eastern relations, this was analysed by the Panasiatic Federation sensors as being a nuclear strike. Programmed to respond automatically in case of a nuclear attack, the Artificial Intelligence in China's Border Defence Centre launched a nuclear 'response' at its two enemies India and Japan. Two long range several gigaton nuclear missiles began speeding towards both countries before anyone was really aware of what was going on.

The first missile did not fly very far. Suffering a major malfunction it exploded directly over North Korean soil. The explosion caused thousands of deaths, the destruction of all electronic equipment (androids included) and irradiated most of the country. As for the second missile, it reached Japan, but never exploded. Every monitor recorded the missile reach the Japanese archipelago before vanishing amid an unexplained electromagnetic storm. As for the Japanese, who on that day were in the middle of electing a new government, they just saw a bright flash in the sky. This blinding light flashed for only a moment, after which a violent wind appeared, encompassing every island in the archipelago. This electromagnetic storm caused a two-hour short circuit in all Japanese electric installations, frying the control mechanisms of two airliners that were lifting off at Tokyo Airport at the same time. They crashed in a neighbourhood near the landing zone, reducing hundreds of both the airliners' passengers and the neighbourhood's citizens to ashes.

These were the only victims of the devastating attack. Many citizens weren't even aware of it.

The international community was quick to condemn the actions of the Panasiatic Federation, but China was unapologetic about the incident. It accused Japan of having a secret anti-missile shield, which had been revealed by the unfortunate missile launch. Such a defence could only have been developed to protect Japan from a nuclear exchange, and with such a defence, they must obviously be intending to launch attacks of their own. The grudges and doubts of certain Western countries soon resurfaced, as they also accused Japan of wanting to build a new army and changing the balance of nuclear power with its new shield. In the dreadful political mess, Japan was incapable of either justifying itself or explaining the disappearance of the missile. Unfortunately, without an explanation from Japan, China's accusations began to look like the only possible truth. Japan's position became even more complex due to the results of the Nipponese elections. The confusion and rhetoric over the missile attack prevented a new government claiming a majority in the May 4th election, compelling the country into a kind of forced coalition between two political movements.

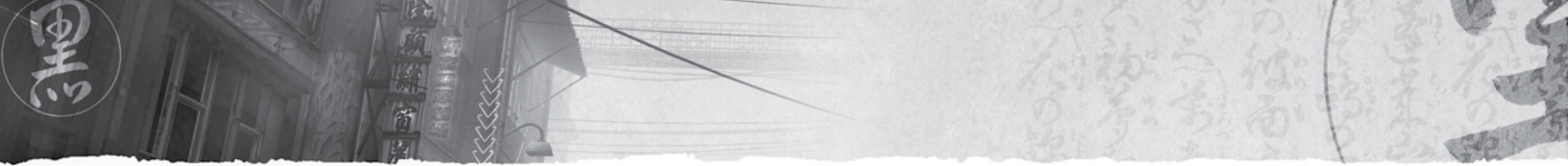
The various opposing countries demanded that Japan give them the shield technology, continuing to believe that it was a means for Japan to protect itself while preparing together with India for a massive attack on the Panasiatic Federation. Incapable of justifying itself and determined not to submit, Japan refused. With the support of Europe and the US, China asked for a UN resolution to force Japan to release this technology to redress the balance of power. After all, if every country had these shield, nuclear war would no longer be a threat and Japan's refusal to offer this technology proved the country to be an enemy of world peace. The UN resolution passed, but Japan still refused to kneel to international pressure. In response, China declared that not only should all nations refuse to trade with Japan, but that an international blockade should be set up to enforce this decree.

With electromagnetic traces still lingering through its territory, and Japan's refusal to accept a thorough survey of its military forces, the Panasiatic Federation further accused Japan of having hidden nuclear weapons. The suggestion that Japan had broken Article 9 of its constitution and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty was enough to convince the rest of the world that Japan was indeed the villain that China claimed it to be. A large flotilla of international ships set sail to blockade the Japanese islands. Further, this new international alliance declared that all air traffic in or out of Japan would be shot down without warning.

The foreign stranglehold on trade has lasted more than six months. During which time rationing and shortage problems have begun to affect the poorer sectors of the population. As had been done in the past, the Emperor renamed Japan's capital, in order to affirm Japan's willingness never to yield before the enemy, and their readiness to embrace a new age. So Tokyo became Shin-Edo.

But for how long can Japan hold out? After one of China's ministers was assassinated by a Taiwanese separatist acting in the name of Japan's liberation, can it be long before tensions hit boiling point again? How far will the foreign forces go, especially China, when after 6 months Japan remains resolute? Will they consider an armed engagement to force Japan's contrition? Is the Japanese government telling the truth when it claims not to know anything about a possible anti-missile shield? In a climate of growing hostility and rationing, how long will the present government hold out before giving way to extremists or submitting to international demands?

But what really happened on May 4th 2046, the day on which the event that Japanese now call the Kuro Incident took place? In a country where great questions have been answered and advances made, where biotechnology has compartmentalised



society, where androids walk besides men, where food is cloned, and where nanobots float in your blood, this is not a question that Japan can answer. Meanwhile, her borders are blocked by countries demanding an answer to this very question. But there is still no answer forthcoming.

Now Japan can only count on its own resources in order to subsist. Power failures constantly remind the population of the consequences of the Kuro Incident, made worse by the impossibility of trade or communication with the rest of the world. But while most Japanese watch the ships that prevent them from leaving or anything entering, others realise that something else has changed.

The Kuro Incident somehow opened the door to strange, unexplained phenomena. Even as the 'Wind of the Gods,' as the continued meteorological unrest has become known, still rages over the Archipelago, creating storms, rains and typhoons, most of the inhabitants of Japan are only worried with what they will do tomorrow, but others understand that they are now shut in with the dark. For some there is no longer any doubt: the spirits have returned, and they do not appear to mean well...

THE WHISPER OF THE KAMIKAZE

"Seeing is more important than watching, the rule is to see without seeing, to perceive without fixing our attention, to sense and not parry or respond to an attack, the inner eyes are the ones that see."

-Miyamoto Musashi

A Country of Rites

Japan was always followed many spiritual beliefs, some deeply ingrained in the population. In the same way that the Shinto religion is part (almost unconsciously) of the country's culture, these beliefs are ubiquitous among the Japanese population influencing, in an often intimate fashion, the relationships between people. Most of these superstitions are concerned with that most important of taboos: death. Coming from centuries-old beliefs connected to the diseases carried by corpses, this taboo is still present nowadays and gives birth to many fears. Similar fears arise from the taboos concerning blood which stem

from the bleeding at birth. In Shinto, the soul of the deceased is stained by his own death, and only purification rites can allow it to forget its wrath and become benevolent. Thus all of the individuals that have to 'work with death' (from coroners to slaughter-men working in abattoirs) are sometimes considered to be different to the majority of the populace who do not. It is as if their close contact with death has made them unclean. Even in 2046, many of the rights held by Japan's population are unofficially denied to these people. Some banks even refuse to open accounts for them.

Among the many Japanese superstitions, a notable one is the unease concerning the numbers 4 ('shi,' pronounced the same way as death) and 9 ('ku,' which also means suffering). It is useless to look for a parking space or a hotel room with the number 4, there are none. There are also no brands of car or any devices with 4 in their signs. It is also unadvisable to sleep with your head turned north (this is the direction in which the dead are buried), to put your chopsticks in your rice bowl (a reference to the funeral rite) or not to hide your thumbs when passing beside a hearse or a graveyard.

Even if the population only occasionally visit the temples and shrines, and rarely show an overwhelming belief, most people still follow the old rites and traditions as familiar habits. Everybody has Shinto lucky charms at home, such as a protective wooden arrow. Shinto festivals (or Matsuri), of which there are several throughout the year, are simply seen as popular festivities. Few insist that they really believe in spirits, the kami or even the afterlife. Even though, since the Kuro Incident, unexplained things stalk out of the shadows, everybody prefers to ignore them and put their faith in science or more mundane theories.

A World of Silence

Six months later the question remains: what happened on May 4th, 2046? By what miracle did the Panasiatic Federation missile vanish into thin air, leaving behind only a few electromagnetic disturbances? Today, most of Japan just watches the blockade and doubts the good faith of either its government or of the international community. The rest silently watch with growing dread the strange occurrences that keep happening across the archipelago. Those who have not yet had such encounters themselves do their best to dismiss the reports. They reason that nothing that can drastically change their lives is as obvious as the international pressure of the blockade and the everyday hardships it causes. After all, it is easy to ignore the strange incidents when they are just some short lines in the corner of the newspaper downloaded into a flexible screen.